

Title: Resonance

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

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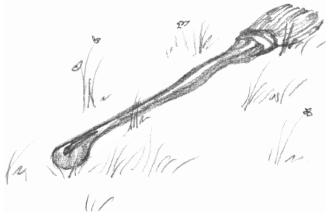
Author's Notes:

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

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

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

Two sequels have been written: Revolution and Resolution.



Chapter 1 - Year Six, Easter

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

--Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

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

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

"More tea?" Ron asked him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Harry!" Hermione whispered sharply, chastising him.

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hagrid!" Ron pounded on the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," Ron said, his voice breaking.

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

"Where is he?"

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

"Hagrid?" Ron insisted, pained.

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

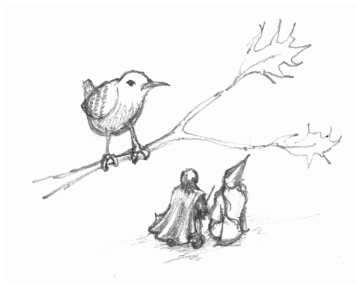
"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't think . . ." He frowned miserably.

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

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

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

Face scrunched up, Ron stomped after Hagrid.



Chapter 2 - A Long Bitter Night

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

"Unless there were more than two of them."

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

They charged over to him. Dumbledore crouched beside him and said, "I am every so pleased to see you, my boy." He brushed the paint flecks from Harry's cheek with his age-rough hands. Many sets of leathery wings flapped overhead, breaking branches in their path. "Severus, see if you can get into this place. It is too late to head back tonight."

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

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

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

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

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

"Severus, give me a hand with him."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry grinned lightly at his headmaster through his many aches.

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

"Most impressive, Albus," Snape said.

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

"Harry," Dumbledore chastised him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Potter? What spells were used on you?"

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

"Crucio?" Snape asked.

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

"Perhaps some of the potion?" Dumbledore suggested.

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

Harry floated in and out of awareness over the next few minutes. Chills alternated with waves of feeling drastically overheated and suffocated. He imagined he was feverish and lying in his cupboard under the stairs with his Aunt Petunia

complaining about the difficulty he was causing. He dreamed he was lying on the cricket pitch after falling from his broom, icy rain drenching him, his friends shouting from the stands to warn him of the dark figures hovering threateningly at the perimeter.

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

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

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

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

"It should not be affecting his breathing," Snape muttered. He tilted Harry's neck back and ran his thumb beside his windpipe. Harry fought his grip and twisted to bury his face in Snape's robe as another sob wracked him. Snape's arm went lax as realization struck.

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The curse?" Snape asked in surprise.

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

"What did you shout?" Snape asked carefully.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not precisely," Snape admitted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry couldn't bring himself to argue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fearful now, Harry tried desperately to see either of their faces. Only colored explosions swam in his vision as Snape slipped an arm behind him and pulled him upright. "Try to stand," he ordered, as he pulled Harry's arm around his shoulder and held him up fast with his left. Harry grabbed a handful of his own cloak against Snape's back and tried to stop shaking.

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

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

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



Chapter 3 - St. Mungo's

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What was used on him?" Shankwell asked.

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

The Healer shook his head and took out his wand. He held it over Harry's chest and pulled his chin over toward him. "Great Merlin, it's Harry Potter," he said in surprise. Harry gave the man a vaguely disgusted look. At that, the wizard suppressed his surprise and tapped Harry's chest. Tingles ran over Harry, racing to his fingertips and back to the wand. His arm twitched yet again, making him frown in frustration. The Healer put his hand behind Harry's neck and touched each of his fingertips with his wand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry thought he could manage if he felt like this. He opened his eyes and discovered with a start that he was clutching Snape's hand. What he could see of Snape's expression through his hair looked dark and fierce. Harry pulled his hand free and rolled onto his back. The other witch was dabbing plaster on the last burn on his ankle. They felt much better as well, although the dried mixture pulled when he moved his feet. Another potion was pressed into his hands. As Harry, relieved to have full control of his hands, pulled it toward him, Snape leaned close and looked into the wooden cup.

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

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

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

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

Snape shook his head.

"Can I leave?" Harry then asked.

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

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

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

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

"Shankwell," Harry replied.

"Do you have his release form?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Apparently not," Snape said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where is Ron?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

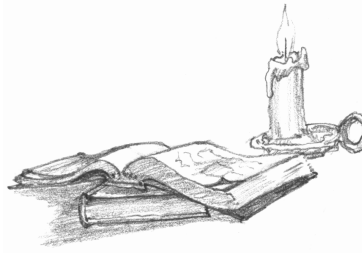
Dumbledore called Harry over as they all stood up when the meal was over. The old wizard put a hand on his shoulder and leaned down to say, "Madame Pomfrey wants to be certain you return to the hospital wing for the night."

"Yes, sir."

"And how are you doing?"

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

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



Chapter 4 - Restless and Sleepless

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Leave him alone," Ron said stiffly.

"I was only kidding him," Cho said.

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

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

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

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

"Like what kinds of transfigurations?" Dean asked.

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

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

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

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

"You can work on that," Harry said.

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't think so."

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

"They tortured me for hours," Harry said.

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

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

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

"No."

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

Harry scoffed at that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He is capturing a wizard who knows."

"Does Dumbledore know this?" Harry demanded.

"Yes, Master."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry related the whole thing for him.

"Blimey. The Dark Lord-"

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

"It just sounds better than-"

"His name is Voldemort," Harry said harshly.

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

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

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

"Thanks, Ron," Harry retorted sarcastically.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Go," Snape ordered him.

Ron ran off to catch up to his friend.

* * *

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

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

"Good job, Harry," Neville said.

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

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

* * *

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

"Mr. Potter!"

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

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

"Harry?" Hermione asked in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course."

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

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

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

"Hermione said Snape gave you a potion."

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Chapter 5 - Meeting Destiny

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Voldemort is downstairs."

"Shit!" Someone exclaimed as everyone gasped.

"Harry, you were dreaming," Hermione insisted.

"Maybe, but it didn't seem like it. I think he is standing in the frigging Entrance Hall. Get everyone together." Harry stalked past her without really looking at her and pushed open the Fat Lady. He couldn't remember being this frightened before. Even in the graveyard, he had only to worry about himself. Every last thing was on the line now--the entire wizarding world.

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

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

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

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

They stepped quietly, the shuffle of their robes the only sound until Ron breathed, "Great Merlin," when they made the top of the grand staircase which led down to the Entrance Hall. All of the students raised their wands, some shaking more

than others. Harry stepped forward enough to see down into the ground floor. A ring of hooded Death Eaters surrounded a tall central figure looking oddly as Harry had expected them. This confirmation made him feel strangely calm. Voldemort stood with his hooded head turned up to them, red eyes glowing even in the bright light from the open doors to the outside.

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

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

Harry looked up again, bolstering himself with a determination to not let them down. He blinked and hesitated on the next riser when he saw Voldemort take a very small step backward. The ring around Harry paused with him. Heart racing, Harry remembered the battle at the Ministry. He narrowed his eyes at Voldemort's red ones and relived that ache of wanting to see Sirius again. This time it was unmistakable. Voldemort turned with a shift of his shoulders.

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

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

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

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

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

Harry tried to close his eyes, but they snapped open again. Hermione called his name in concern. He didn't have much room to think in his own mind; memories of Snape's cruel treatment seemed to be tangling up his own force of will. Voldemort took a confident step forward raising his wand at Harry and began to speak something most certainly fatal. With a whimper of utter reluctance, Harry remembered. He remembered that night in the abandoned manor house--the first and only time in his life he had woken up in someone's arms.

Voldemort's entire body jerked at that and Harry suddenly could breathe. He remembered the ache at hearing Snape's concerned voice. That terrible moment when his teacher blew across the tea to cool it for him. Voldemort's wand slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor. Harry barely heard it over the shouting. He raised his wand then. The emotion in him had reached some kind of breaking point, and he imagined himself as a shaken butterbeer bottle. Fleeting, wondered if he could hate Voldemort enough to kill him. Forbidden curses required force of will; Bellatrix had told him that,

and he expected she would know. But he couldn't risk any hate or Voldemort would have him then for certain. The evil being before him was straightening his angular self, raising his bare, white, boney hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

"No," Harry quipped, recovering himself.

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

"Yes," Harry replied.

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

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

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

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

"Did you do this?" Tonks asked Harry.

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

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

"What?" Harry blurted, stunned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir," Harry acknowledged quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"From what point?"

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

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

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

"A nap?" Percy asked in disbelief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry went on. "After Voldemort fell, Bellatrix was the only one to stay put. She went crazy, started spelling me with blasting curses, but Neville and Professor Snape stepped in the way. The other students chased after the escaping D.E. so those two were the only ones left. After that, Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore came in the front door." Harry shrugged to indicate he was finished. He sipped his tea and waited, hoping there weren't any questions.

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

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

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

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

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

Harry nodded, hiding his relief with great effort.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell that to Professor Snape," Harry said.

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

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

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

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

"No," Harry replied.

"Not at all? Not a scratch?"

Harry shook his head.

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

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

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

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

"Haf you used it before?"

"No."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bad news," she said. "We didn't get all the D.E." She sighed and pocketed her wand. "Seems Pettigrew was sent to Azkaban to release the servants we had already. He succeeded but not in time for them to get here, or they decided not to come."

"That means Mr. Malfoy is loose too?" Harry asked, resisting looking behind him even here in the hall of the castle filled with Ministry wizards.

"Everyone we caught at the Ministry is loose now. It's a fair trade, really. We'll take it in an eye-blink, but it's unfortunate." She and Dumbledore shared a look that Harry was too tired to study closely.

"I'm going up to my dormitory," Harry said, as he stepped away from Dumbledore's supporting arm toward the stairs. He hesitated--he was out of potion. Maybe he didn't need it now. His tired brain couldn't decide. The top of the staircase was packed with wide-eyed students. Deciding he would sleep no matter what, Harry went up. A path parted through the students as he approached. Hands reached out and brushed his robe as he passed.

"Good going, Harry." "Thank you, Harry," quiet voices said as he made his way through the crowd. He glanced around himself. He knew most of the faces there, if not the names, but a wide gulf had opened between them that staggered him in his current state. Smiling faintly to cover, he kept walking. Some followed one or two corridors, then decided to return to watch the Ministry at work.

"Harry!" Hermione rocketed out of her chair and hugged him as he stepped into the common room.

"What are you doing up here?" Harry asked.

"Avoiding Percy," Ron said. "That and Tonks walked us here from the Dispensary with a sharp comment about not seeing us in the way."

"He's your brother," Ginny pointed out.

"So why are you here as well?" Ron asked his sister.

"You didn't get hurt at all?" Harry asked them.

Ron held up a bandaged arm and then a bandaged ankle. "Treated and released," he said. "Hermione had tentacles for hair but that was easy to fix. Ginny, well, she can tell you if she wants. She'll kill me if I do."

Ginny had turned bright red and stared at the ceiling.

Harry swayed slightly. "My nap got interrupted," he said, then giggled. "I need to go back to sleep," he added in full seriousness.

"We'll wake you for the party," Ginny said.

At the base of the stairs, Harry turned. "What party?"

"There has to be one," she insisted.

"Sure," Harry murmured. "As long as it is at least three hours from now."



Chapter 6 - Aftermath

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

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

"Professor," Harry said a little sleepily.

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

"What time is it?"

"Six-thirty."

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

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

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

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

Harry scratched his head and went to his trunk. He pulled out his black dress robe with the satin collar and cuffs and his toiletry kit. His body was moving on automatic. At the door to the dormitory, he turned suddenly. Rubbing his eyes, he asked, "Voldemort is gone, right? I didn't just dream that?" He readjusted his glasses as he peered up at her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ma'am?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry was glad to see no one hissed this time. Someone shouted, "Here, here." It sounded like Hagrid. Harry looked around to try to find him, figuring that should be easy. A sea of ecstatically happy faces met Harry's own as he scanned the crowd. At a table on the right, Hagrid sat talking with Mundungus. He winked at Harry when their eyes met.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry took this cue and started devouring his plate.

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry blinked at him in surprise. "Victor?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Please, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A minister is," Dumbledore pointed out mildly.

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

"Yes," Harry replied dryly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, definitely."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Halfway through his mug of mead, feeling sleepy and overwarm, the fireworks finally finished. Everyone clapped for a long time. Harry wondered if the many distant figures moving around the side of the lake could hear them. The figures flashing in and out of the firelight made him catch his breath. It reminded him of the things moving around in his green-hazed vision.

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

* * *

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

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

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

Much conversation followed this announcement.

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

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

Harry took it and gaped at the photo below the two-inch-tall headline of "Voldemort Defeated!" It was a black and white image of himself standing over Voldemort's body, taken from the level of the outside steps, so it looked slightly up at him. At first he thought the image wasn't moving, then he realized that the hem of his robe shifted as though in the breeze. "I didn't see a photographer," Harry said thoughtfully.

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

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

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

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

"You are," Ron said in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ron is Gryffindor captain," Harry pointed out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell everyone else that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

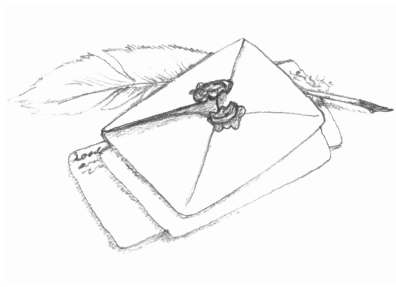
"One is . . . similar," she said. "The other just exceptionally well written."

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

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

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

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



Chapter 7 - Unexpected Offers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

"Hermione," Harry said, chastising her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reluctantly, Harry admitted, "Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

Harry shrugged. "Your House, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Potter," Snape threatened to make him continue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry laughed. "I hadn't noticed."

Snape uncrossed his arms and rested his hands on the desk behind him. "Regarding this vision. It appears very organic, correct?" At Harry's nod, he continued. "I do not know what it is, but I suspect it will dissipate if left alone. It is worrisome that you *felt* it more the second time. That implies to me that you are capable of sustaining it, even if you don't know what it is."

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

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

Harry sighed. "I'll try."

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

"Yes."

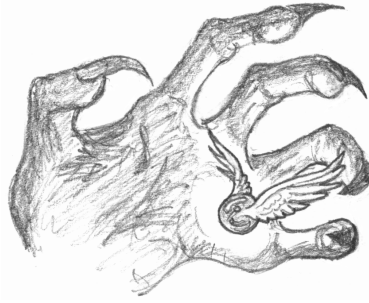
"If it happens again, Professor McGonagall wants you banned from the Quidditch match."

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

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

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

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



Chapter 8 - The Big Match

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

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

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

"Yeah."

"Nightmare?"

"Yep."

"Have any more potion?" Ron suggested.

"No," Harry said.

"Too late to get more?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And?" she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Snape's entire demeanor changed. He straightened and gave Harry a long look before gliding back into his office. Harry and Neville stepped just inside the door to wait. Snape closed a low cabinet and examined a small bottle in his fingers. Harry could see a large grimoire open on Snape's desk. Two lamps were lit to read by. Snape stepped back over with the bottle held out, then retracted it at the last moment as if reconsidering.

"Mr. Longbottom, leave us alone for a minute," Snape said, putting his hand on the door.

Neville glanced at Harry to verify that this was all right, then stepped out. Snape shut the door and kept his hand on it. "What is in your nightmare?" he asked.

Rambling in a tired way, Harry replied, "I'm being chased through a world a lot like the vision, which I haven't had again, by the way. But it isn't the same, really. I think I am just dreaming something like the vision. But I won't fall back to sleep, and I sorta want to be awake for the only Quidditch match of the year." He waited as Snape studied him with his dark eyes. Harry wondered idly why McGonagall hadn't asked what his nightmare was about or worried what his strange vision meant.

Snape held out the bottle.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said honestly as he pocketed it. "It isn't going to be much fun anyway--McGonagall insisted on adding a sticking spell to my broom." Harry immediately thought better of that. "Please don't tell any of the students in your house, sir. I'd never hear the end of it," he added tiredly.

Snape shook his head once. "No one has probably told you this, Potter. But there are those who are certain the remaining Death Eaters are determined to take revenge upon you."

"That wouldn't be too surprising. What else do they have?" Harry thought for a moment. "But we are still having the match. Why?"

Snape raised a brow at him. "Because Dumbledore is determined to cheer you up. That and forty Ministry wizards will be there on guard. I think they are actually hoping the event will draw out the remaining seven, although personally I would consider it a very unwise way of going about it."

Harry tried to imagine Pettigrew showing up at the match, his metal arm glinting in the sunlight. It didn't seem very likely.

Snape went on. "The insistence on the sticking charm probably has less to do with your propensity to phase out than the inherent risk of getting hit with a spell at a great height."

Harry thought that over. "You are being nicer to me," he commented. At Snape's doubtful look, he added sadly, "All I've ever wanted was to know what was going on."

Snape crossed his arms and straightened his shoulders. "I am not one to bury truths simply because they are unsavory or negative."

Harry started to reply then thought better of it. Instead, he reached for the door handle to leave.

"Yes, Potter?" Snape challenged him, quickly putting his hand on the door to hold it closed.

"I was going to say that you look for the unsavory and negative, but I wasn't sure if that was a fair thing to say, so I wasn't going to say it," Harry explained. "Sir."

Snape removed his hand and re-crossed his arms. "You would best go if you are going to get much sleep."

As Harry opened the door, he muttered, "Thank you, sir."

Neville stood, leaning against the far dungeon wall. He pushed away from it as the door opened. "Professor," he said quietly.

Snape gave him a curt nod and closed the door. At the end of the corridor, Neville asked, "What did he want?"

"He wanted to know what my nightmare was about," Harry explained, feeling hurt again by McGonagall's reaction to his asking her for help.

"Did he know what it meant?"

"Not that he said. I don't think it means anything except that I'm keyed up for the match." Harry fingered the bottle in his pocket as they walked, reassured by the distinctive shape of the warm glass.

* * *

The crowd cheered as they flew out onto the pitch. They especially cheered when Harry's name was announced, making him think that more visitors were in the stands than normal. The seats did look rather full. Harry paced Malfoy around in a wide circle as Madam Hooch gave them all the usual warnings. For once, Malfoy remained silent as he looked over the players on both teams, his mouth grim.

The whistle blew and the players flew into position. Huffindor, as they had called it during practice, went on offense first. Ginny and Zac looked like they would reach the goal posts easily until a Bludger, hit by Parkinson, struck the front of Ginny's broom, spinning her around several times. Zac's pass to her, just before, flew wide to be picked up by a Ravenclaw chaser.

Harry took his eyes off the game to check Malfoy's location. The other boy circled lazily, eyes alert. Harry took up the same stance, a half turn around the pitch. The crowd rose to their feet as the opposition scored. Minutes later, Zac put one through as well, tying the score. Harry glanced up at the lake as a breeze ruffled his hair. He really hoped the game went on a good long time. If he saw the Snitch and Malfoy didn't, maybe he would just pretend he hadn't.

Harry passed behind the goal posts as Ron made a save on the center, which unfortunately went right back into the hands of a Slytherin, who tossed it behind his back and through the left hoop. Harry returned to looking for the Snitch.

Malfoy made a dive. Harry changed course but not severely, refusing to be fooled. Apparently it was nothing or a dodge, because the blonde boy returned to his earlier altitude. Harry watched Malfoy as he climbed; he was too big to be a seeker, really. He probably would not be next year. Maybe he wouldn't be on the Slytherin team at all. That thought cheered Harry quite a lot.

The game went on. It was sixty to thirty against. The crowd had quieted, chants gathering steam only occasionally. Malfoy seemed to be getting anxious: he circled faster, looking around himself with more turns of his head. Harry, though he wasn't impatient yet, could not just let Malfoy win. He cut Malfoy off and took up a position just ahead of him. Malfoy zipped past him with a nasty look, brushing Harry's shoulder with the tail of his broom. The bristles were sharp and tore at his sleeve and rasped his skin. Annoyed, Harry considered ducking under Malfoy to pass again. He didn't get the chance; a green haze filled his eyes, making it hard to see. Harry curved away sharply, making the opposing Seeker turn to see why.

Harry circled in the opposite direction, occluding his mind to shake the vision, grateful now that he didn't have to worry about falling from his broom if he lost himself to it completely. A cold wind lifted his scarlet cloak, making him shiver. It felt like a breeze from deep in the forest. He turned again at random, crossing the pitch the short way to pace beside Malfoy as he circled. Dimly, he heard the crowd cheer another goal. Another breeze chilled him, and this time it didn't feel so much from the forest as from a crypt.

Heart pounding fiercely, Harry looked out across the lawn toward the forest, green haze coming and going from his vision. Malfoy cut him off. Harry dodged instinctively to avoid him. In his mind, the black spiked ball was very close, reaching hungrily with its limbs as though to enclose him. With great effort, Harry drew in a breath and shook his head.

The crowd was shouting. Harry saw Malfoy turn suddenly to cut him off again. The Snitch hovered just on Harry's right, its gold fluttering wings penetrating the veil over his vision. He started toward it, his limbs felt numb and cold as he stretched out his hand. The Snitch dodged farther right, increasing Harry's advantage. Malfoy ducked down to get around Harry, betting the Snitch, already high, would dart lower.

Fear gripped Harry in that moment as he realized his green vision corresponded to the real world and that the spiked shadow was behind him, for real. He turned his broom sharply the other way and stared out over the lawn leading to the forest. It was closer yet, approaching from that side.

"Oh, no," McGonagall said, putting her hand over her forehead. "We shouldn't have let him play."

Dumbledore murmured a spell and stared intently at Harry.

The crowd roared and groaned. In the back of his mind, Harry assumed that Malfoy had captured the Snitch. It felt to Harry like the world was ending, but not because of the match. Shaking now, Harry raced to the top box. "Something is coming," Harry shouted and pointed toward the forest.

Dumbledore moved to the front of the box. "Harry, what is it?"

"I don't know. Get everyone inside, sir. Hurry." His hands visibly trembled as they clutched the broom handle.

Dumbledore didn't hesitate. With a Sonorus charm, he announced that everyone was to evacuate to the castle immediately. The ministry wizards gathered below the box. Tonks yelled up to Harry, "What is it?"

Harry gasped and glanced fearfully over his shoulder again.

"Harry, get inside, now," Dumbledore ordered him.

Shaking his head to clear his vision, Harry recognized the grip on his heart. The teachers were at the edge of the box now, cajoling him to move. "I feel it," Harry said. "Do you?"

The teachers shook their heads. "Harry!" Dumbledore shouted at him, angry now.

In his vision the ball now appeared as hundreds of separate things, each moving forward, forming a streaming pack. Glowing points of light appeared here and there. He wondered what they were. Ron and Ginny came alongside him then, hovering easily. Harry pulled out his wand. "Dementors," Harry said.

Everyone looked to the empty lawn where Harry pointed. "How many?" Ron asked.

"All of them," he replied darkly.

The stands were half empty. Harry watched the line of people moving toward the castle doors. The black figures separated, spreading that way. "They aren't going to make it," Harry said. He felt freed up now, less numb. "They are supposed to be after me, but they are getting distracted."

Ron and Ginny zipped off, collecting a D.A. member each off the stands and flying to the line now running to the castle. Tonks and the ministry wizards saw this as well and instructions went out to protect the path to safety.

"Harry," Dumbledore said in a stern tone as he leaned over the edge of the nearby railing.

Harry looked Dumbledore in the eye and shook his head. He flew the other way, trying to draw the Dementors off. He could see them in his mind, and apparently now others could feel them because some were starting to panic. Ron, Ginny, and ten other D.A. members had lined up over near the steps. Patroni circled them. Harry could see dark figures shifted to avoid them, but there were far too many Dementors, more than Harry imagined existed. Ministry wizards joined the students. They appeared to be arguing.

Some of the Dementors had fallen for his ruse, but most hadn't. Harry swooped down and landed near the lake, as far from the castle doors as he could get. The black swarm in the green world shifted toward him nearly as a whole. Harry's limbs went numb again immediately. He readied the Patronus charm in his mind, but held off; he wanted to attract them, not repel them.

The teachers were coming across the lawn after him. Snape caught up with him first. He started to chastise Harry, then paused and looked around himself in concern.

"Feel them?" Harry asked. "There are hundreds of them."

"Your vision?"

"Guess so," Harry answered. "You should be helping with the crowd. I can get away on my broom," Harry said as McGonagall, Sprout, and Dumbledore joined them. He may have been lying; he couldn't feel his fingers holding the broom handle. "Now we're all surrounded," he argued.

The teachers had their wands out; they turned slowly, checking for any targets.

"They're waiting for something," Harry said. The crowd was almost all inside the castle now. "Do you have a really good Dementor spell, sir?" he asked the headmaster. Dumbledore didn't reply, just moved his head as though listening for something.

Deciding it was almost too late, since he could no longer feel his hand clutching his wand, Harry cast a Patronus. The stag immediately faltered, kicking up on its hind legs. McGonagall followed suit--a tiger joined the stag, stalking hunch-shouldered in a tight circle around them. Snape held his wand before him, but did not cast anything. Harry wondered if maybe he was not capable of it.

"Harry, I need to see them," Dumbledore said. He lifted Harry's chin with his finger and stared into his eyes. After a breath, he said, "My dear boy, I cannot believe you placed yourself here, given what you see."

"I was trying to draw them off," Harry explained, pointing at the crowd now trickling in the door, some being carried.

"Yes, but Harry, you should have some desire for self-preservation." Cold swept through them all at that moment. "My friends," Dumbledore said to the teachers, "we are in serious trouble here."

The teachers looked very alarmed at that.

"They want me. Just go," Harry said, stepping back away from them. His back prickled with cold as he did this; hope drained from him. Sprout and Snape grabbed hold of him and pulled him back into the middle of their small circle. They did not let go. Harry had thought his arms were numb, but pain shot through his wrists from their tight grip.

The Ministry wizards were splitting up now. Some stayed to guard the doors and many started in their direction, but hesitated. "I don't want anyone to get hurt," Harry muttered, watching Tonks in the group fighting in their direction as though invisibly repelled.

"What are they waiting for?" Snape snarled. "If there are so many of them . . ."

The air wavered in grey wisps as though the Dementors considered becoming corporal. Harry froze. "They're confused," he whispered. He closed his eyes, trying to find the figures in his mind.

"Harry, be careful," Dumbledore warned him.

The wind in his mind sounded this time like harsh breathing. The teachers around him gasped and he felt them shuffling in closer. Harry did not dare open his eyes--he had a hold of something in his mind, something very hungry. He felt betrayal as well from the mass presence. "They were promised a feeding," Harry said. "They don't understand their instructions anymore."

Hands fell on Harry's shoulders and held them. "Keep your eyes closed, Harry," Dumbledore ordered. Harry heard shouting in the distance and spells being cast. The press of bodies around him grew tighter, which blocked the cryptic breeze from reaching him, although he could smell it. "Can you make them leave?" Dumbledore asked. Harry could hear in his voice a straining to make that question sound reasonable.

Harry grinned painfully, "How would I go about that, sir?" The combined sound of hundreds of Dementors all pressing in close, lungs rattling, bones clunking, made Harry squeeze his eyes shut harder. He didn't need to see it, he could imagine it well enough.

"Renegotiate," Snape stated.

"I already offered them me in exchange for you, but you wouldn't leave," Harry quipped. His fear had grown old and no longer gripped him so tightly, leaving him reckless.

"Not acceptable, Harry," Dumbledore said in a hard tone. The sound of the ministry wizards battling toward them grew louder.

"I've had to say we aren't with them," Harry pointed out.

"Good plan," Sprout offered shakily. Harry had never heard her frightened before.

Harry delved into the vision again, using his anger growing up with the Dursleys to enter it. He sensed an offer to consume these Muggles in revenge and denied it, reflexively afraid to even dwell on the possibility, even fancifully. The web, active and surging during the offer, fell quiescent, waiting. Harry realized they had more patience in them than he would have imagined. Not today, Harry thought at them, trying to seem authoritative. He had a feeling they had stopped to negotiate because they sensed Dumbledore may have the power to give them something more, or that he did.

Harry relaxed a little more and tried to feel his way through the vision. The Dementors found his access to their web interesting. Only the Dark One had spoken to them thusly in a very long time.

"What are Dementors?" Harry asked.

"What do you mean?" McGonagall asked.

"Are they real, I mean natural?"

"They are a very old wizard creation, Harry. Magical guards spawned to protect treasure in ancient times." Dumbledore provided this. Harry could hear fatigue in his voice. The ministry wizards sounded farther away.

"I'm going to try something, in that case," Harry said.

"Be very very careful, my boy." Dumbledore's hands tightened on his shoulders.

Harry reached out in his mind and reconnected one of the broken strands before him. The web shuddered and glitter flashed around it. Something shifted in the real air around him as well.

"What did you do, Harry?" Dumbledore asked carefully.

"I'm negotiating," Harry said slowly. "Can you call off the Ministry?"

* * *

"Harry?" Hermione's voice roused him and he opened his eyes to the darkness of the hospital wing.

"You are insane, Harry," Ron said earnestly. "Completely effing insane."

Harry laughed at him as memory flooded through him. "I couldn't think of anything else to do," he said in a hoarse voice.

"What *did* you do?" Hermione asked. "The Dementors just left. *Poof!* And the teachers had to carry you up here."

Pomfrey stepped over, glanced over him, and walked out. She stepped down the corridor, down the stairs and into the staff lounge. "He's awake," she stated to those assembled.

"Lucid?" Dumbledore asked.

"Rather," she replied.

Dumbledore shook his head in amazement and rose to his feet. The staff followed him out and up to the dispensary.

Harry looked up as they entered and came over. Most of them hesitated too get close, or seemed to. Dumbledore stepped up beside the bed next to Hermione. He sighed when he saw Harry's bright eyes. "So, Harry . . . what happened?"

"I gave them something so they would leave," he replied factually, then cleared his rough throat.

"What did you give them?" Dumbledore asked in his usual calm curiosity.

Harry glanced around at the other faces; they looked more perplexed by him now than they had after he had killed Voldemort. "Um, I'm not sure how to explain it. And . . . I'm not sure it was a good idea . . ."

Dumbledore shot him a very intense look, then calmed. "We were afraid, Harry, that you had still given them yourself."

"I didn't need to. And I've cut myself off from them, so I can't see them anymore. That's the last thing I remember." He wrapped his arms around his middle as he remembered the moment they sensed his intent. Their icy minds had tried to grab hold of him; he had severed the web attaching him just in the nick of time.

Dumbledore studied him. "Everyone," he said, "please leave Harry and me alone."

With a few backward head turns, the staff departed. Dumbledore gestured at Hermione and Ron to follow. "He already told us," Ron protested.

Gently, the headmaster said, "Out with you anyway." When the room was clear, he moved to sit on the edge of the bed. "We continue to underestimate you, my dear boy." He shook his head slowly. "I never imagined so many Dementors in one place, especially never imagined surviving being surrounded by them. They truly wished to leave nothing to chance when they sent them after you during the Quidditch match."

"It was some kind of bonus deal for them--all of those victims," Harry said. "The deal was, me first, then they could take what they wanted." He waited for Dumbledore's response and went on when none was forthcoming. "Voldemort had be-

come one of them in a way by tapping into their joined minds. That is what I was seeing. He punished them until they did what he wanted. Tore the web of their minds apart, which made them crazier I think, or at least more desperate." He paused again. Dumbledore sat patiently without comment.

"I fixed the web that I could reach. That was the deal," Harry said quietly.

Dumbledore raised his chin in surprise. "You were screaming at the end, Harry. Did you know that? Right before you passed out and the Dementors disappeared."

Harry flushed and cleared his throat again. "No, I didn't know. I barely got away from them. They grabbed me as I cut the strands connecting me. It was horrible, like having my soul turned to ice crystals."

"You seem all right, now."

"I feel the same as I did." He shrugged. "At least those visions will stop."

Dumbledore straightened his robes and sat back. He patted Harry's arm and sighed. "We should discuss the summer, Harry. Despite your continued cleverness, we are concerned about your safety. We want you to stay here at Hogwarts until the Ministry has apprehended the remaining Death Eaters."

"I don't have to go to the Dursleys?" Harry asked excitedly.

"In the past, we have not been here to keep watch. But with Voldemort gone, we can be more flexible. As well, the spell's effectiveness is in question with regard to your aunt's house since it was a binding upon Voldemort himself and, by proxy, his followers."

Harry felt very relieved. With a sly look, he asked, "Can I write them the letter that says I'm not coming back?"

The headmaster pulled his robes together and stood. "If you can behave yourself while doing so . . . of course."



Chapter 9 - The End of Year Six

Harry was released from Pomfrey's clutches at breakfast time, and before heading down, he had to rush back to his dormitory for a clean set of robes. By the time he had changed, the corridors were nearly empty. He came up behind Dennis, hoisting open the door to the Great Hall with some effort. Harry helped from behind and gave the younger Creevey brother a smile. Dennis nearly fell over when he saw who was behind him. He stepped aside with his mouth open and watched Harry pass. "Dennis?" Harry asked the boy. The whole large room quieted and everyone, it seemed, turned to watch him come in. Harry only now realized his mistake; by being late, he had made an entrance.

The expressions of his fellow students had shifted to quiet awe or even fear from the ecstatically impressed they had been before. Shaking his head, Harry stepped along the table to where his friends were and sat down.

"Good to see you, Harry," Ginny said when Harry greeted them all.

Plates of food appeared. The hall was a long time returning to a normal level of conversation.

After breakfast Harry took himself away from his friends to write his letter. He had originally planned on mailing it, but owl post would make more of an impression and it would arrive in time, since the train left tomorrow morning and they presumably would be expecting him. He pulled out parchment and quill and began.

*Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia,
I am writing to inform you that I won't be returning for summer holiday. I have destroyed Voldemort so I am no longer required to seek refuge with you for protection.*

He grinned at that opening. It was succinct, just the way his uncle liked it.

I don't expect to be needing anything from you in the future. I probably should thank you for the shelter and meals, although I find it hard to do that. Mum would have been disappointed, I'm sure, if she knew how low you managed to keep a bare minimum of care.

He reread the last sentence. It was as tactful as he could be while still saying what he absolutely had to; it would kill him to not say anything. He burned with an undeniable desire to put them in his past and that required getting beyond these statements.

Remember me to everyone, especially Aunt Marge.

Harry grinned maliciously at that and signed it.

* * *

The leaving feast was a loud affair. Harry declined sitting at the head table when Dumbledore offered it. He much preferred to sit with his friends before they departed on the morning train without him. His fellow students still seemed annoyingly reverent around him. Harry didn't believe Dementors were worse than Voldemort, but everyone else definitely thought so.

Dumbledore stood up and clinked his glass for attention. "Good evening to everyone. It is time to wrap up another school year. I don't think we've had a more interesting one since our Founders passed on. First off, after much complaining by the students, we have decided to award the cup based on merit points alone, so we are celebrating Ravenclaw's first house cup in over fifteen years." He waved his wand and blue banners bearing an eagle unfurled from the ceiling across the Hall. The Ravenclaw table erupted into cheers and much back beating.

Ron leaned over and said in a cheated voice, "What, he didn't give Gryffindor a thousand points for destroying Volde-mort?"

"Everyone helped with that, Ron," Harry said offhandedly.

"We also have . . ." Dumbledore went on as he picked up a looped ribbon with a medal attached and glanced at it briefly. "Not one . . ." He lifted another identical medal and draped both over his gnarled hand. ". . . but two awards for special service to the school for . . ." He pretended to read the name off the medal. ". . . one Harry Potter."

Even louder cheering broke out, startling Harry. Ron and Hermione pushed him out of his seat and gave him a shove toward the front of the hall. Students reached out to slap his arms as he walked up. He mounted the platform beside the headmaster and stared at the edging on the old wizard's bright blue robes as the cheering continued. Out of the side of his eye, he could see the teachers behind the table all standing and clapping as well.

Dumbledore draped each medal over him. They felt heavy as they bumped his breastbone. Harry held one up to look closer. It had his name inscribed in a flourishing script. "Thank you, sir," Harry said as he finally met the headmaster's gaze and accepted the offered handshake.

"You deserve much more, Harry," Dumbledore said. He patted Harry on the shoulder and gave him a nudge in the direction of his seat. "Unless you have something to say?"

"No, sir," he replied quickly. As he walked back to his seat, the Gryffindor table remained standing until Harry sat down. "All right. That will get annoying if it continues," he commented loudly.

"One for the Dementors, I take it," Ron said with his mouth full, as he eyed Harry's medals.

Harry slipped them off. Hands reached out to look at them. He handed them away without care and served himself mashed potatoes. Had he been looking at the staff table at that moment, he might have seen Professor McGonagall elbow Professor Snape.

* * *

The next morning, Harry waved the train away from Hogsmeade station. It felt very strange to do so. As the train rounded the bend and disappeared, except for the plume of steam blooming over the trees, Harry headed back up to the castle with Hagrid.

As they rounded the lake with Hagrid taking extremely slow steps in deference to Harry, the half-giant said, "I have teh go inter Diagon Alley for some things. I asked Dumbledore if'n I can take you along. But he said 'no.'"

"Thanks for asking, though," Harry said.

Hagrid put a hand on Harry's shoulder as they walked. "You amazed everyone this time, Harry. You really did."

"Why? Voldemort was much worse. Why is everyone so impressed by the Dementors? I don't get it."

"I think it was a matter o' being tha' on top o' He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named tha' is getting teh people. They don't know what teh expect nex'. Everyone knew you could do in the other bloke--you'd done i' before. No one saw this one coming."

Harry hung around with Hagrid for a while as he re-sewed his massive boot, watered the pumpkin patch, and mixed meat scraps with chicken blood for the Thestrals then set the buckets of it in the sun to ripen and congeal.

Hagrid wiped his bloody hands on his thick leather apron before pulling it off. "Well, Harry, gotta run. I's lunchtime anyway--yeh best be getting up to the castle."

Harry studiously avoided glancing at the dark buckets again as he departed since he was hoping to enjoy lunch. The lawn was teeming with crickets as he walked and the sun was even warmer today than it had been all school year. That seemed promising.

The Great Hall was alight inside from the tall windows. A few owls were just flying back out the upper open panes as Harry made his way to the end of the Hufflepuff table where the staff were seated. A place seemed to have been saved for him at the end, beside Dumbledore and across from McGonagall. With casual hellos all around, Harry slid onto the bench. Everyone was already eating, so he served himself a small chicken pie and ignored the salad and pea soup. The filling of the pie was hot, so he nibbled along the crust before dropping it back onto his plate to cool.

"Are you going to find things to occupy yourself without your friends here?" McGonagall asked.

"I expect so, Professor," Harry replied flatly. He wasn't feeling too congenial about her still. A subtle shifting happened around the table as though everyone sensed his mood. Harry realized that, while the subtle went completely unregarded by his friends, the teachers were acutely aware of it.

McGonagall eyed him, then went back to eating her soup. Snape leaned forward from two seats down and asked airily, "Nightmares all over, Potter?"

Harry paused in cutting into the hard crust of his pie with the edge of his fork. Last night hadn't been dream-free by any means. The same hazy world with a few slithering shadows had woken him twice despite whatever potion Pomfrey had forced on him, but no web and no wind. "Not exactly," he said thoughtfully.

Groans, sighs and one dropped fork accompanied this revelation. "Should I simply have said 'yes'?" Harry asked the headmaster.

"Not if isn't true," Dumbledore replied as he gave his staff a disapproving once-over.

"You have something else for us, Potter?" McGonagall asked with more than a hint of chastisement.

"I don't know, ma'am," Harry replied quietly. He took a bite of his pie despite not feeling very hungry anymore. After finishing half, he really wasn't hungry. He stood up. "May I go, sir?" Harry asked the headmaster.

"Of course, Harry."

He walked quickly out of the hall even though he had no place to be. His footsteps echoed much more than usual. On automatic, he started up the Grand Staircase and headed for the Gryffindor tower. In the middle of the corridor, he changed his mind. He had an inkling that McGonagall was going to come looking for him, at least part of him hoped she would, even though he didn't feel like talking to her. He ran through the list of likely places she would look next, like the library and courtyard. Turning around, he headed for the staircase to the dungeon.

The dungeon corridors were studiously quiet and cool, even on such a warm day. Harry wandered all the way to the end, past the classroom and the entrance to the Slytherin common room. He had never come down this far. Around the corner were more doors that had no labels so he assumed they were storage. A tall, dusty, glass trophy case sat at the turn in the corridor. On the top shelf was a large mahogany plaque with small gold fixtures for every year Slytherin had won the house cup. This was a Slytherin-only duplicate of one in the trophy room that Harry himself had been forced to polish during various detentions.

Harry bent over to peer at the other awards on the lower shelves. There was a medal from 1423 to one Mathias Prior from a town in Hungary for removal of a plague of fire locusts. Harry thought the Slytherins were stretching it a bit if that was the best they could scrounge up. Beside that was a row of trophies for best in show at a biannual 1600s Quid-ditch festival. Harry wondered if they still held it; that sounded like fun. On the end, partially behind the base of the last trophy, was a medal for special services to the school. The name, inscribed in staid block lettering, was Tom Riddle.

"Goes to show," Harry muttered to himself. As he crouched to study the very bottom shelf, footsteps sounded in the preceding corridor. Harry held still as he heard a door open and the footsteps fade. The door didn't close. He assumed it was Snape going into his office. If he didn't close his door, Harry might have to sneak past with a Disillusionment spell when he wanted to leave.

The bottom shelf held two short silver staffs with large gems on top. They didn't appear to have any labels. More footsteps approached and stopped.

"Have you seen Potter?" Harry heard McGonagall say. He held his breath to listen better.

"No," was the reply just audible from inside Snape's office.

"If you see him—"

"In the extremely unlikely event of him showing up in my office, I will certainly do so," Snape interrupted blandly. He sounded unhappy at being disturbed. Harry's lips quirked at the thought of showing up right after McGonagall left.

"Apparently, he has a bee in his bonnet about something," McGonagall commented in an annoyed tone.

"That is . . . phenomenally caustic," Snape said, making Harry's brow furrow until he heard the dull thunk of a bottle being put back down. He grinned a bit more at hearing McGonagall getting the same treatment from the Potions master as any student.

"I've looked everywhere likely," McGonagall said, half to herself.

"I doubt he has left the castle. He seems to have learned something akin to obedience in the last few months."

Harry growled at that and tried to think of ways to prove that wrong in the coming days.

"Albus seems to think it critical that I speak with him," she sighed, sounding like she had other things to do. Harry frowned, feeling stung yet again.

"It is unusual for you to have a problem with Mr. Potter," Snape observed.

Her feet paced the length of the room and her voice was harder to hear. "I think he is angry that I turned him away the night before the match. Wanted me to come down here to get a potion from you." She said this as though it were very difficult to believe.

"He did come down," Snape commented. "He didn't tell you why he needed it?"

"Said he was having a nightmare," she said dismissively.

"Yes," Snape said in an oddly mild tone. "I believe that was the one where he dreamed he was trapped in a web of the Dementors' minds."

In a defensive tone, she said, "How was I to know he was dreaming about that? Goodness . . . he told you?"

"I asked. And I feel compelled to point out that his dreams are usually significant. I was reading Diogenes' *Treatise on Visions and Other Disturbances of the Conscious* when Potter knocked. I was trying to find a reference to web-like visions." Harry blinked at that, remembering the large grimoire.

McGonagall countered, "What was I supposed to do? Usher him into my office and give him a cup of cocoa? Pat him on the head and insist it will be all right?"

Harry, tired of crouching, stood up and stared unseeing at the house cup plaque. McGonagall ranted on. It sounded as though she was pacing in shorter laps. "Just as well the boy doesn't have parents--the things that happen to him . . . the worry alone would kill anyone. He faced down Voldemort for Merlin's sake. He doesn't need to be coddled. I assumed if I asked him his dream, he wouldn't tell me anyhow."

Snape spoke then. "His dream would not have been significant to you, since I am quite certain he didn't tell anyone but myself about his vision. I was rather surprised to find that no one had spoken to him at all, not even his Head of House." There was silence for a long moment before Snape continued in a slightly harder tone. "Minerva, he attacked the Dark Lord, *with his mind*. I cannot conceive of it. That is akin to bathing in maggot-infested rotting flesh."

Harry straightened in surprise then thought, *It wasn't that bad*.

Snape was still going. "After this, the boy mopes around the castle, clearly hurting, and when I pull him into my office because he is having a vision in the middle of my class, I find that no one has spoken to him about the battle, let alone his visions." Harry held his breath again, his emotions confused.

With a hint of accusation McGonagall asked, "Did you?"

"It isn't my place. As well, it isn't even slightly within the realm of my abilities."

McGonagall sighed. "I guess Albus should have done it. He mistakenly believes Harry needs extensive space to work things out on his own, and I don't think that's true. Maybe it was never true. He persists in his belief that, if the boy has a problem, he will come to him."

Yeah, if I knew the password, Harry thought.

McGonagall sighed. "I just thought it ridiculous he couldn't come down and retrieve his own potion." She paused. Footsteps scuffed across the floor. Harry envisioned her confronting Snape. "You are one to talk about how he should be treated. You are the one who has made certain the boy cannot stand the sight of you."

Harry strained to hear Snape's response, but nothing was forthcoming. His shoulders drooped in disappointment.

"Well, if you do see him," McGonagall repeated in frustration as footsteps sounded in the hallway now.

Harry waited what seemed like a long time, but was probably only ten minutes, before he ventured back around the corner and peered in Snape's doorway. His teacher sat at his desk, one finger pressed against his forehead as he sorted through a stack of parchments. He showed no reaction as he glanced up at the doorway. "Potter," he said flatly in a sort of greeting.

"Sir," Harry said, thinking quickly of a topic. "You shouldn't have exams to mark," he said in reference to the parchments.

"No. One advantage of the headmaster's rather generous edict." He picked up the top sheet and squinted at the heading. "I have been sent the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. Potions essays from Durmstrang. Seems they lost the three wizards qualified to grade them in a battle with some of the Dark Lord's supporters."

"Oh," Harry said. He had already started to forget about that for hours or even a day at a time.

"Professor McGonagall is looking for you, by the way."

"Oh?" Harry said again, this time in forced surprise. He glanced around the room. "Guess I should go see her," he said a little reluctantly.

Snape was leaning over the parchments, which made his hair fall over his eyes. He looked up at Harry through it. "Still having nightmares?"

Harry shrugged.

"Meaningful?"

"Don't know, sir."

Snape dipped his quill and made a notation on the top parchment. "Let me know if you need more potion."

"I will, sir," Harry said, his emotions confusing him more. He stepped to the doorway. "I'm dismissed, sir?"

"You came in voluntarily, as I recall," Snape pointed out evenly.

"Right. See you at dinner, Professor."

Harry wandered slowly up to McGonagall's office. Her door was open as well. He wondered if that were always true when the students weren't around. Maybe it was just to get a better breeze from the window. Knocking on the doorframe brought her head up from the filing drawer she had been bent over.

"Mr. Potter, come in."

"I was told you wanted to see me." Harry hoped she had told more teachers than Snape.

"Yes." She put the folder she had pulled on top of the cabinet. "Close the door and have a seat." As Harry obeyed, she sat at her desk and clasped her hands before her. She looked more tired than he had noticed at lunch, making him feel kind of bad. He should have just answered her in an ordinary tone, and none of this would have happened. She said, "I apologize for my comment at lunch. You certainly would prefer, I know, to be free of disturbing dreams. And should you need us, we will most certainly be here for you."

Harry looked down at his hands. He felt a strange tug of war between wanting to not need them at all and wishing they would pay him a little more heed.

She went on. "The other night, had I known you were dreaming of real Dementors, I would have . . . well, I don't know what we would have done for you. But something . . . we always seem to come up with something. I certainly wouldn't have sent you off so harshly." Her shoulders fell as she finished. When he didn't respond, she prompted, "Harry?"

"Ma'am?"

She waited, then said, "And you are still having nightmares?"

"Yes," Harry replied softly.

"Do you want to tell me what is in them?"

Harry deciding that she might as well know, plunged in and said, "I'm wandering through this green haze and these shadows are--I don't know if following me is quite right--hunting me, maybe. They were there before when I was seeing the Dementors' web, but that is gone now and this isn't." She didn't have a response. Harry added, "With Professor Snape's potion, the dreams don't wake me as much, so they don't really matter."

"I suspect they still matter," she said, then added in a strained voice, "But I don't know *how* they matter."

Harry realized at that moment that much of his teachers' attitude toward him was borne of helplessness. They didn't want to deal with him because they didn't know what to do, not because he was an annoyance they would rather be free of. That made him feel a little better. He leaned forward in his chair and propped his hands on the armrests. "I'll let you know if they change or if they start to make some kind of sense," he said, hoping it would get him away.

"You do that, Harry," she said gently. She looked around herself and then reached for the file on the cabinet and opened it up. "You may go," she said when she realized he was waiting for a dismissal. She too didn't seem to think he needed to stick to protocol.

Now that he didn't need to avoid McGonagall, he headed to the tower. The common room was quiet, the grate dark. It was going to get very boring and lonely here, he realized. At least at the Dursleys he had tormentors for company. He went up to his dormitory. All of the beds but his own had been stripped of bedding and only one trunk sat at the foot of one bed, his bed. The sight was a little daunting. Over holiday break when he was here, his roommates' things still remained.

Deciding to write his friends, he pulled out a quill and a stack of parchments. Writing careful letters to every one of his friends required nearly all of the time until dinner.

He headed to the owlery, where the school owls were settled in large numbers since they were unneeded. Harry gave Hedwig Hermione's letter and coaxed eight other school owls down for the others. As the birds flew off, Harry hoped his friends didn't think it pathetic that he had nothing better to do than write them the same day they had left school. His next thought was, he hoped they all weren't so busy with summer family things that they didn't have time to write back. Harry sighed as he stared at the shafts of evening light coming into the dusty air of the owlery. He wished he had summer family things to be doing. Wished it a lot.

As he walked slowly back to the tower, he regretted not keeping Hedwig for company. He could have put her cage in his dormitory without bothering anyone.

Harry lay on his bed, staring at the inside of the canopy until the clock read six for dinner. He didn't really feel like sitting with the teachers again, but he was hungry and there wasn't anything else to do. If he didn't show up, he worried what they would think. Maybe they wouldn't notice since it wasn't subtle enough.

Rubbing grit from his eyes, he stood up. After stopping in the boy's toilet to wash up and comb his hair down, he headed for the Great Hall. The teachers were arranged almost identically as they had been before, except Tonks occupied the seat he had had earlier. He greeted the Auror warmly and received a tight hug in return. "So good to see you, Harry." She returned to her seat and her conversation with Dumbledore. Harry wandered down to the end across from Hagrid and Filch and beside Trelawney.

Harry ate quickly, stopping only to answer Hagrid's attempts at conversation. As he stood to leave, Dumbledore said, "There is pudding, Harry."

Harry took this as a strong request to stay, since there always pudding. He sat back down, flushing under the attention he had attracted with his attempted early departure.

"I hear you are having prophetic dreams, my dear boy," Trelawney said quietly. "You certainly haven't shown much promise in class, but the Sight can manifest at any time."

"They haven't been about the future, Professor, just the present."

"Ah," she said, as though that diminished his dreams considerably.

Harry had to stop himself from tapping his fingers on the table. The problem with staying for pudding was that he had to stay through everyone else finishing dinner.

"Hope yer stayin' out o' trouble," Filch said, pointing his knife at Harry--not an ordinary butter one-- but a very sharp, folding, bone-handled one he kept in his pocket and was using to cut his meat.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, feeling a little beaten down by being here.

"Ah, you'll settle in all righ', Harry," Hagrid said. Harry, never one to let Hagrid down, nodded that he agreed, even though he didn't. He couldn't get visions of all the other students--home with their parents, planning trips, playing sports, visiting friends--out of his head. His chest felt tight if he let himself dwell on it for long.

"At least I'm allowed to consider it home now," Harry commented to himself. A few eyes shifted over to him at that; Snape's dwelled on him a little longer than the others.



Chapter 10 - The Request

Harry explored the castle over the next few days. He discovered a large wooden box of blue wombats in an attic, thought of telling someone, maybe Hagrid, then decided that, since they looked pretty happy, Hagrid was probably responsible for them being there. He also discovered a secret passage that wasn't on the Marauder's Map. It led from the sixth floor landing via an old staircase and narrow passage to the Defense Classroom. One of the panels on the back wall turned open in the middle with a simple unlock spell. Harry didn't know what use it might have, but it had potential. He locked the panel with a much better locking spell before leaving the room.

This led to him pulling out the Marauder's Map to try to figure out how to edit it. His dad had helped create it while he was at school; certainly Harry could work out the magic given enough time. And time was what he had. He wrote Hermione and then, thinking more, Fred and George, to ask if they had any ideas on where to start.

While he waited, he went to the library and started reading. He read through dinner apparently, because he got to find out what happened when he did not show up for a meal. The door to the library opened suddenly and Professor Sprout put her head in, started to pull it back, then stepped in. "Mr. Potter, there you are."

Harry looked around as if that didn't make any sense.

"Just wondered where you'd got to since you weren't at dinner."

Harry glanced at the clock in surprise. "Lost track of time, ma'am," he explained.

"Very good," she brightened upon hearing that. "Well, carry on. Oh, you do know how to get to the kitchens if you want something later?"

"Yes, thank you."

She smiled at him and departed. Harry went back to reading a very interesting book on paper intelligence spells. It didn't provide anything about the Map, but he was starting to think that this book was probably the one Tom Riddle started with when he created his diary.

Harry lit a lamp and kept reading. He had had to pull over a few lamps from the other tables; it seemed like the bright days outside made it harder for him to read at night.

"Interesting reading, Harry?" Dumbledore's voice came from the darkness. He had not made a sound coming in.

"Yes, it is." Harry glanced around at the rather significant pile surrounding him. It would be hard to pretend he was reading idly.

Dumbledore stepped over and peered over his shoulder, tilting his head up to look through his half-moon spectacles. "Hm."

"I was curious how Tom Riddle created that diary," Harry said.

"Thinking of creating your own?" Dumbledore asked amiably.

Harry laughed lightly. "No sir. Just curious."

"Well, Harry you are free to keep whatever hours you wish, but given the propensity for boys of your age to keep rather late hours, you might want to at least attempt to sleep at a reasonable hour."

Harry glanced at the clock. It was just after eleven. "Yes, sir."

Dumbledore patted Harry's shoulder and departed. Long after the door to the library closed, he could feel the spot on his shoulder where the old wizard had touched him. Feeling unsettled, Harry stacked the books neatly and put a note on them for Madam Pince, even though she hadn't been at meals.

He slept well that night and woke feeling better than he had in a while. He didn't like using the potion every night: that seemed like a cheat. Reading himself into exhaustion made for a good alternative.

* * *

Harry stalled on figuring out the Map; he was too afraid to damage it to try anything really experimental. He needed to figure out a way to make a new one and that would take a lot more reading, from which he needed a break. Bored again, he wandered down to the dungeon without really thinking about where he was going.

Snape was brewing something in his office. It smelled like lemon balm. Harry knocked on the doorframe when it looked like an opportune moment. He didn't think it a good idea to startle Snape, although it occurred to him that he had never seen that happen.

"Potter," Snape said in a kind of greeting.

Despite his teacher's tone being neither inviting nor dissuading, Harry stepped in and went over to peer in the cauldron. Ground pearl dust was added in a steady stream while the liquid boiled. It turned a swirling pink.

"What is that?" Harry asked.

"Amorphous Solution."

"Oh." That was an ingredient they had used for one potion near the end of the last year.

Harry considered asking Snape if he knew anything about parchment intelligence spells but decided against it. Snape had not only seen the Map, but had been insulted by it. He might realize why Harry was asking. "You're making a lot of it," he observed to make small talk.

"There is a lot of brewing I would like to do over the summer since it looks like I will be here."

"Normally you wouldn't?" Harry asked.

"Of course not. You may enjoy considering the school home, but I do not."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "I don't enjoy it. I don't have any choice."

"One almost always has a choice," Snape stated as he drew out the stirring stick and wiped it with a rag.

Harry thought about that. He could, he supposed, consider the Burrow as his home instead. The Weasleys had certainly urged him to do so in the past. It didn't seem like two weeks in one place over sixteen years would quite qualify. Grim-

mauld Place might qualify if it had not been auctioned to some wizard from Edinburgh who may or may not have managed to remove Mrs. Black by now. He refused to go back to thinking of Privet Drive as home. He would consider any place before that.

"Gave you rather a lot to think about, apparently," Snape commented.

Harry looked up from staring into the burner flame below the cauldron. "Yes, sir," he agreed, feeling empty inside. He headed for the door, still thinking.

"Potter," Snape said, halting his departure. When Harry turned, he asked, "Still having nightmares?"

Harry nodded.

"You are not out of potion?"

"I don't use it every night," Harry explained.

"That is of course, your choice," Snape said.

* * *

Harry had a realization that night as he sat on his bed, running the Map through its paces. He had stared at the introduction so many times that he had ceased to read it. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs it listed. The thought that Pettigrew had touched the Map at some point made Harry feel unclean. But it had also been his dad's, so that overrode his desire to destroy it in a fit of pique. Padfoot and Prongs could not help him anymore but Moony might be willing to.

Heart beating a little fast, Harry pulled out a parchment and quill and wrote a letter to Lupin. He had not seen his former teacher since the Voldemort Demise Party. He had a lot to tell him, so the letter went on a long time before Harry got around to asking for help with adding a secret passage to the Map. Since he kept Hedwig in his room now, he sent the letter off right away. Hedwig gave him a friendly nip as he held her at the window. He supposed it was because she much preferred deliveries at night.

His response arrived at lunch the next day. Seeing the return address, Harry tucked the letter in his pocket rather than risk someone reading about the Map over his shoulder. He cut his lunch short and headed off with a wave at Hagrid, mostly to make sure no one thought he was testy about something.

In his room he opened the letter. Lupin's first paragraph was filled with a long series of grateful statements about Harry's success against Voldemort. He told Harry that he was working with Gringott's part time, but he couldn't say what his work was exactly. Following this he explained in detail what he knew of the Map, seemed eager to do so. He attached a list of book references, apologizing that he knew there were others Harry would need and, if he remembered them, he would pass them along.

Harry reread the letter, then quilled another one, asking specifically how easy it would be to damage the Map while he worked on it, or should he start again. Lupin's insistence that his dad and Sirius would be thrilled to know he was keeping it up to date, as amending it was something they had been diligent about, made Harry's heart twist as he wrote out the reply.

With a heavy heart, Harry sent Hedwig back off. He lay back on his bed and stared at the canopy for a lot of the afternoon.

Eventually, the list of references got him curious enough to return to the library. He had found some of the right books but not the right chapters. He settled in to read, facing the clock, so as to not miss dinner again.

* * *

"Moving?" Harry asked a few days later as he encountered Professor Snape hovering a trunk down the fourth floor corridor. Harry immediately answered his own question. "Ah, Dumbledore finally let you have the Defense teaching job."

Snape gave him a look that dared him to make further comment. Harry just shrugged. "Hermione will be disappointed, I think." He followed along as Snape took the empty trunk back to the dungeon. "Are you going to last more than a year?" Harry asked with extra innocence.

"I do intend to," Snape commented.

Harry had to walk fast to keep up once they were down the stairs. "Are you good at teaching Defense?" he asked honestly. "I need to score well on my N.E.W.T.s"

"What do you need those for? Supreme Ruler of the Wizard Universe does not have a N.E.W.T. requirement," Snape commented levelly.

Harry brushed that off. "No, but the Auror's program does."

They had reached the dungeon. Snape stepped into his office and opened the trunk in front of the next full bookcase. Harry wandered over to the low cabinets along the right-hand wall. An entire row of cauldrons bubbled away on the tops of them. "You have been busy, Professor."

"Those are the long-brew potions needed for the school's stocks. While school is in session, it is very difficult to successfully brew them; something or someone," he sneered, "inevitably happens to them." He had packed the remainder of the books away and started in on other items from the shelves. Breakables were wrapped in rags before being placed atop the books.

"Misthria Potion?" Harry asked as he watched a gold-flecked liquid simmer in a brass cauldron.

"Yes," Snape replied, a little surprised. He watched with hooded eyes as Harry walked down the line, peering into each.

Running feet brought both of their heads up to the doorway. Trelawney, trailing a diaphanous shawl, stopped breathlessly in the hallway outside the door. Upon seeing Harry, she smiled sweetly and composed herself. "Severus," she said in a friendly voice as she leaned lightly on the doorframe, "you are needed upstairs." Snape stepped over to her and, after a brief hesitation, stepped around her and away. "How are you, Harry?" she asked as though they were neighbors talking over a fence.

"Fine, Professor," Harry replied carefully.

She caught her breath and looked around the room casually. "I can't wait to meet the new Potions teacher. Can you? Greer I think her name is."

"Is she as nice as Professor Snape?" Harry asked.

"Uh," she said thoughtfully and then giggled almost girlishly. "That's a good one. One would tend to assume maybe a little nicer."

Harry turned back to the cauldrons, hoping she would go away. He was always a little worried she would start prophesying again at any moment. She only ever did that when they were alone together.

"Well, I'm sure I'll see you at lunch. Bye for now."

Harry sighed and shook his head. Beside the next potion a book lay open. Harry perused the instructions and peered into the cauldron. The next step called for linden bark threads. A small basket of them sat on the shelf below. They were to be added as soon as the potion boiled clear. It sure looked clear to Harry, who felt pretty confident he could spot that.

He listened and didn't hear any footsteps. Shrugging at the thought that the potion would be ruined if he *did not* add the ingredient, Harry started dropping threads in, one at a time, as it said.

"Really, it is nothing," Dumbledore was saying as Snape entered the Great Hall. McGonagall was in the middle of helping the headmaster up. "Just a moment of unbalance."

Snape crossed the room in an instant, taking Dumbledore's other arm. "Hospital wing?" Snape asked his colleague.

"Really, I must insist that is too much," Dumbledore said.

"Yes," McGonagall answered Snape in a hard tone.

On the fifteenth thread a deep emerald bloom spread from the thread throughout the liquid. It was a very nice color. Harry dampened the burner like it said and read the next step. The mixture was supposed to be thickened before it cooled. Harry realized that he recognized it now. It was the insect bite ointment Pomfrey gave out in little tins. Harry looked around on the shelf below and didn't see any gelatin, agar, or anything like that. The other stocks were being rearranged, so if there had been an organization scheme, he was not likely to pick up on it now.

He wandered over to the cabinet that was still left undisturbed. On the top shelf was a dusty jar of tapioca beads. Still hearing no footsteps, he took down a clean mortar and pestle, ground a handful of beads into fine powder, and stirred it slowly into the cooling liquid. He stopped when it was about halfway thickened to what he remembered the ointment to be, figuring that it would set more when it finished cooling.

He moved the cauldron to a worktable, sat on a stool and stared at it with a faint frown. He couldn't very well just leave it like this. Even though he was pretty sure that if it set up in the cauldron it could be reheated and poured out, the incompleteness of it bothered him. He looked around for any empty shallow tins with screw-tops like Pomfrey had. The side door to the supply room stood ajar, which was not normal for Snape. Harry peered inside and saw what he needed between stacks of filter paper and empty one-dose vials.

Using bundled rags to protect his hands from the heat, Harry poured the green glop out evenly into four large tins and set them apart to cool on the work table. He stared at their glistening jewel-like surfaces, and waited.

"What happened?" Pomfrey asked as the trio entered the hospital wing trailed by the Divination teacher.

"My staff is overreacting," Dumbledore stated as he was lowered onto a bed. "A mere moment of disorientation is all."

"He fainted," McGonagall supplied.

Trelawney stepped to the end of the bed, jingling softly as she shifted nervously from foot to foot.

"Well, I think we'll keep you here overnight, Professor," Pomfrey said as she checked his pulse.

Dumbledore graced them all with a chastising look but gave in.

Harry was just deciding that the tins had cooled enough. He wiped out a lid with a clean rag and touched the side of a tin to see how much it jiggled.

"Potter?" Snape said as he stepped in the doorway. His gaze shifted from the empty spot on the side cabinet back to the work table. Brow drawn low, he stepped over and lifted a tin to look across it. "Hm, what did you use to thicken this?"

"Oh," Harry fidgeted once. "I couldn't find anything but the tapioca." He gestured at the tall cabinet. As Snape eyed the ointment again, Harry added quickly, "I thought it was nonreactive in this case."

Snape's dark gaze slid over to him at that. "It is. It seems to set the color better as well." He put the tin down and pushed it over. Harry waited to be yelled at. When nothing but a close look was forthcoming, he put the cleaned lid on that tin and pushed it to the side. As he started to wipe out the next lid, Snape said, "Are you bored, Mr. Potter?"

Harry swallowed in relief. "Yeah, I guess so."

Snape stepped back over to his trunk. "Many of the potions are rather basic, if you truly wish to assist." Harry brightened. "Do try to practice somewhat better technique than you usually manage in class."

"That's easy when you aren't hovering around waiting for me to make a mistake," Harry commented, then held his breath.

Snape looked up from continuing to pack breakables. "Is that how you explain your rather extraordinary O.W.L. performance?"

"Yes."

* * *

"Where's Dumbledore?" Harry asked when they sat down to lunch.

"He is on a small holiday," McGonagall supplied.

"He could use one," Harry said stridently as he assembled a roast beef sandwich for himself.

"Yes," McGonagall commented emphatically, sounding a little put-out herself.

Harry stared at his sandwich for a long moment before reaching for the horseradish.

* * *

"Professor, can I speak with you?" Harry asked after he knocked on the doorframe of McGonagall's office.

She was sorting through a large stack of parchments. "Of course, Mr. Potter. Come in."

Harry sat down in one of the visitor's chairs. Mice ran around in the cage above his head. He waited for the burst of noise to stop before he took a deep breath and asked, "No one is usually here right now, are they?"

She sighed, "No. Not usually."

Harry slouched and said, "I feel bad making everyone stay on my regard."

"Harry," she said sharply. "I'm sorry for the implication I made earlier. It is truly not a problem. We would be ten times busier and under a hundred times more stress if you hadn't finished Voldemort off for us. If we forget that for a moment and imply that you are any kind of a burden, whatsoever, then we are sorely in the wrong."

Harry frowned and stared at his feet.

"Has anyone implied that besides my slip at lunch? Has Professor Snape?" she asked suspiciously.

"No, ma'am. He seems happy to be moving his office."

"Yes, I can imagine he would be." She straightened a stack of papers that threatened to slide off the desk. "For myself I am taking care of things that I would be doing just before the year begins anyway. Getting it done now means having less to do later. I expect the Ministry will have managed to round up the remaining D.E. in short order, and we can all do as we wish then. If not, I will personally hunt them down myself."

"Can I help?" he asked eagerly.

"Harry, you have done far more than your part already. Take a rest now."

Harry sighed and felt the walls of the castle closing in again.

* * *

Harry spent the rest of the day with this notes from the references. He had prepped a piece of lambskin parchment with the spells he had found in the second book. But he could not decide exactly what he wanted the sheet to do. The little word animation at the beginning of the Map's activation amazed him when he broke it down into its components, unless it was a single more complicated spell that took care of the many small details. He sighed. He had found a book that described how the scoreboard at the Quidditch World Cup worked, but most of the complication with that had been the ability to constantly update it from several locations. Harry wanted something that had some smarts without further intervention.

On a separate piece of paper, he made sketches of Hedwig in several poses. He took a deep breath and used a duplicitous spell to copy one to the smart parchment. He then tried to get it to show when he tapped the parchment and said, "Hedwig". The image seemed to have disappeared completely. With a frustrated sigh, he read through his notes again and wished Hermione were there. Maybe he could get Lupin to visit and show him, he thought, as he pulled out a volume from the stack, pushed up his glasses, and sat back to read some more.

When he reread the text after a few spell attempts, much more of it made sense. He supposed he would just have to keep trying and reading until it worked. It must have been easier for his dad, he had three friends to help him. Or maybe his father just had been better at magic.

* * *

Snape stepped into the dispensary carrying a smoking stone cup. He set it on the stand beside Dumbledore's bed, careful to do so quietly.

"Severus," Dumbledore said, not asleep as he first appeared. "Have a seat; I have been thinking and I want to speak with you."

Snape went over to the next bed and picked up a chair. "That is a downside to your incarceration here," he commented.

Dumbledore laughed. "My dear Severus, you can always be counted on to speak the truth--as you see it anyway. I wonder if you'd permit me to do the same?"

Snape sat back with his hands clasped over his abdomen. "If you wish," he replied tediously

"This little setback came upon me unexpectedly. It makes me very concerned that I have somewhat less time than I thought. As well I am even more relieved to have certain critical things taken care of." He reached over to the night stand for his glasses and perched them on his nose. "After a hundred and sixty years I have to remind myself that I cannot possibly take care of everything personally." He steepled his fingers and sat silently for a long minute. "I want you to consider something for me, Severus."

"Consider, meaning it is not an instruction you are giving me outright?"

"I would never make such a request outright." He looked Snape over. "You have come a long way, Severus," he observed.

Snape *hmf*ed and exuded vague insult.

"Realize, it is the only reason I am asking this of you."

"It is just for my consideration?" Snape repeated. At Dumbledore's nod, Snape asked tiredly, "What is it?"

Dumbledore's eye twinkled as he said, "I want you to consider adopting Mr. Potter."

Snape's eyes widened in dismayed disbelief. "You must be joking, Albus."

Amiably, Dumbledore replied, "No, Severus, I am not." When Snape shook his head, Dumbledore said kindly, "Think about it longer than that."

"There is nothing to think about!"

"Severus . . ." Dumbledore hesitated. "Here is where you are granting me the right to state things as I see them." He waited for Snape to calm down and sit back again, artificially relaxed. "I saw that boy bring out a side of you I did not imagine existed."

Snape frowned fiercely and looked away down the long side of the wing.

"Yes, I know what you are thinking. But I know you saw him bring down the most powerful wizard in the world with precisely that set of emotions."

Snape scoffed. "What you don't know, and what Mr. Potter skipped telling the Ministry, is that I almost made him fail at it."

"Hm . . . you underestimate Mr. Potter."

"And you underestimate what happened," Snape came back. "Your request is absurd," he said angrily. He did not meet Dumbledore's gaze. "I certainly hope that is the only request you have of me." He stood up and shifted the chair out of the way.

"Yes, Severus, it is," Dumbledore stated kindly.

"You should drink that within the next hour or so," he said, indicating the potion beside the bed.

"Thank you," the headmaster said sincerely.

With a deep furrow to his brow, Snape stalked out of the wing.

* * *

"Do you need any help today?" Harry asked from the doorway. He almost didn't--Snape seemed miffed about something as he sorted through the shelves of potions that surrounded the room. At some point, Harry apparently had learned the subtle difference between everyday Snape orneriness and real anger.

Snape looked up and considered him a long moment with an unreadable expression. "There is not much to be done today." As Harry's face fell, he added, "But the burn plaster will need to be finished tomorrow, if you want to familiarize yourself with the instructions for it at this time."

Harry stepped in and accepted the potion manual. He flipped it open and glanced at the relevant pages before closing it around his finger at that spot. He hesitated, undecided about whether to stay or go. Snape went back to his task, which involved evaluating each bottle of any age at all. He looked intent on it.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said and slipped out the door.

* * *

Harry tossed fitfully in his four poster and with a groan, woke up. Grey light filled the tall windows. The dark shadows from his dream faded only slowly, taking with them his panic to escape them. He got up to use the lavatory and didn't feel like sleeping anymore. He turned up the lamps, sat on the floor, and sorted his chocolate frog cards. The one of Dumbledore winked at him and he picked it up and read the back of it for the hundredth time, remembering the first time he had read it on the train on the way to his first year here. That moment seemed ten lifetimes ago. Flamel's name made him wonder suddenly if Dumbledore hadn't also been using the Philosopher's Stone to make elixir. The thought chilled him.

* * *

Two days later, Dumbledore returned to dinner.

"Did you have a good rest?" Harry asked him.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as he replied, "Yes, my dear boy, I did."

Harry served himself two chicken legs and a jacket potato. McGonagall spooned a serving of peas beside it. Harry frowned at her but didn't say anything. Sprout was back today. She explained to him about the regular care everything needed. Harry felt better that at least she was here by choice. Hagrid beside her also was. That just left McGonagall, Tre-lawney and presumably Dumbledore there only to protect him. He felt better when he realized this.

After dinner, Harry sat in the Great Hall before the fire, reading the potion manual Snape had given him. It had recipes for all the basic medicinal potions the school used. Harry was fascinated by what went into some of the things he took for granted. The fire lulled him with its heat. After a while, eyes heavy, he set the manual aside and put his head down on his arm.

Shadows that shifted from distinct hooded outlines to smokey, snaking wraiths tracked Harry through a looming forest of dead trees. Tired of running, Harry stopped and faced them with his wand held at ready. They faded out, reappearing in the distance, moving from one trunk to the next, out of range, waiting. He let his wand hand rest at his side in frustration and impatience. Suddenly, the leaves stirred right at his feet and a shadow loomed up in front of him.

"Potter?"

Harry jerked awake and stared at Snape, leaning over the table before him. Breathless from the panic in his dream, he took a moment to recover.

"Nightmare?" Snape asked almost accusingly.

Harry rubbed his hair back and forced his breathing to slow. "Yeah," he admitted, amazed at how much his heart raced. He stretched his stiff neck in a bid for normalcy. "What time is it?"

"Nine thirty."

Still unbelievably sleepy as well as jittery, Harry stood up with the aid of the tabletop. "I guess I should go up to the dormitory," he mumbled.

"Do you want this?" Snape held out the potion manual.

"Yep, thanks," Harry said a little more coherently. He took the book and left the Great Hall.

Up in his room, he sat on the bed and tried to shake the fear that gripped him. That was the second time that had happened--that the shadow looming close in his dream was actually Snape in the waking world. He hadn't wanted to believe that the shadows were anything more than the invention of nightmares, not real. He changed and slid into bed and tried to recapture the utter exhaustion he had felt just minutes ago.

When Harry entered the dungeon the next day, Snape immediately reached into his pocket and held out a small bottle. "Here," he said.

Harry stepped over and accepted it. "Thanks," he murmured and put it in his own pocket.

"I'm surprised that you still need it," Snape commented as he flipped page by page through a thick book on his desk.

"I'd like not to," he admitted, reading upside-down as Snape's finger traced a set of potion ingredients on the page before flipping to the next. He wanted to ask Snape if what he suspected was true, but didn't know how.

"Care to cut up ingredients?" Snape asked. "Not the most interesting task."

"Sure," Harry said. He took the long wild carrot roots and knife to the worktable and set to cutting them so the fibers were as close to a quarter inch long as possible.

Snape came over a little later and scooped up a small pile of them. "Have you determined if there is anything significant in these dreams?" he asked. "I only ask because this is often the case with you."

Harry shrugged. He would feel better if he told, he thought. "I'm being chased, hunted more like, by black shadows."

"Hm," Snape replied. He took the roots to the first cauldron and dropped them in.

Heart pounding a little, Harry said quietly, "I can't count them, I don't know if there are seven of them."

"Or eight, or even twenty-six for that matter," Snape commented levelly. He stirred a second cauldron before stepping back over and looking down at Harry. "More than symbolic, Mr. Potter? These shadows?" he asked.

Harry dropped his gaze and went back to peeling and cutting.

"You apparently have reason to believe they are," Snape went on. When Harry didn't respond, he said, "Have you spoken with the headmaster about this?"

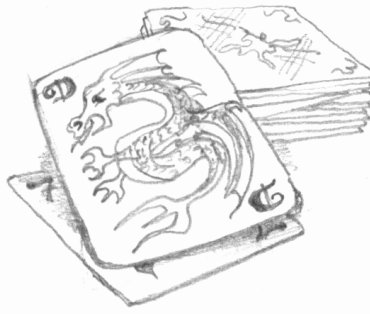
Harry shook his head. "Think I should?"

"I think he may have some insight to offer you," Snape said as he sorted through the remaining ingredients, throwing away the dry ones.

Harry didn't feel like bothering Dumbledore with it. He went back to his careful cutting. Moments later, he said, "I wish the Ministry would hurry up and apprehend them, then it wouldn't matter. The way it's going, I'll have to get them myself."

"I even catch you attempting that, Mr. Potter . . ." Snape said harshly as he leaned in close, making Harry lean back. "You will have detention with me every day from now until you complete your N.E.W.T.s."

Harry blinked in shock at the vehemence in his teacher's voice. Snape spun away back to the cauldrons and for a fleeting moment, Harry thought Snape too had surprised himself. "Yes, sir," Harry replied automatically, sounding oddly like he meant it.



Chapter 11 - Fame if not Fortune

The dormitory had started giving Harry that closed-in feeling, so he took one of the parchment spell books down to the Great Hall to read. It was an innocent enough book titled, *Witch Writing*. It was short on theory, but it had a lot of examples and ideas, mostly for dolling up letters to friends.

It was only an hour before lunch, so Harry took up a spot near the far end of the Hufflepuff table. A basket of chocolate frogs sat in the center of the area where the staff usually ate. Gradually, the staff came in and sat and talked over tea beforehand. Harry, feeling peckish, took one of the yellow, five-sided boxes out of the basket and opened it, coming down with an odd sense that everyone was watching him. Looking up, he found faint smiles from around the table, which was a little strange, although it shouldn't have been worrisome.

The dark brown frog hopped over his book and climbed his hand. Harry raised his arm automatically to make it harder for the magical frog to leap away. It froze in a climbing position, clinging to his pinky. Trying to ignore his sense of unease at the teachers' behavior, Harry broke off a leg and went back to reading as he ate it. He could have sworn the table relaxed a little as he did so.

Dumbledore arrived and so did lunch. Harry put his book aside, set the remainder of the frog on the edge of his plate, and made himself a sandwich. Lunch was unusually quiet, adding to Harry's growing edginess. He was getting a lot of glances too, he was sure, although it wasn't something he usually paid much heed to.

He finished his sandwich and his frog. His plate disappeared so he reopened his book. He reached over for the yellow package beside the book and felt a ripple run through the table, not unlike the one he had caused in the Dementors. He glanced around at everyone and received the same faint smiles. If they were trying to make him crazy, they seemed to know exactly how to go about it. Suppressing a sigh, Harry idly pulled out the chocolate frog card and crumpled the package as he tried to find where he had left off in the chapter on cartoon spells.

The first thing Harry thought was, he did not have this card, as the picture was not a portrait and all the ones he had were. He gave it his full attention then and froze. On the card was a color version of the picture from the Ministry of him standing over the crumpled body of Voldemort. As he stared at it, the breeze disturbed the hem of his robe in the picture. The look in his eyes was even stranger with the bright green of them piercing through.

He moved his thumb to see his name printed fancifully on the bottom border. Chagrined, he looked around the table. At least he now knew why everyone had been behaving so strangely. "This isn't a joke, is it?" At Dumbledore's shake of his head, Harry looked at the card again. He flipped it over. On the back it read *Destroyer of Voldemort* at the top, as though it were some kind of honorary title. In the biography was written: *As an infant, survived an attack by Voldemort that killed his parents. Defeated the selfsame dark wizard sixteen years later. Famed as well for the expulsion of over two hundred Dementors from the Hogwarts Quidditch grounds. Won the Tri-Wizard Tournament of 1994.*

"Better not do anything else," Harry quipped. At the questioning looks he explained, "No more room on the card." He put the card into his book as a page marker and stood up.

Dumbledore gestured that he should take the whole basket.

"Those are all the same?" Harry asked.

"The company sent them over," the headmaster replied.

With an odd reluctance, Harry reached over for the basket and took it up by the handle as he departed. When Harry was gone, Dumbledore steeped his fingers before him. "If I could do just one thing this summer holiday it would be to remove that boy's melancholy."

Snape sat back and crossed his arms. "It would undoubtedly help if he ceased to have nightmares."

"He is still?" Dumbledore asked in surprise.

"Yes," McGonagall replied. "Though who knows what they mean."

Snape sat straighter. "Potter believes he is seeing the remaining Death Eaters hunting him, which is not impossible given that he inherited another vision of the nonphysical world from the Dark Lord."

"I am afraid there is more to this than poor sleep," Dumbledore said as he stood up.

* * *

Harry sat on the floor beside his bed, staring out the window at the castle grounds. He had his entire stack of chocolate frog cards on the floor beside him. The Destroyer of Voldemort one had the highest series number and there was no gap between himself and Marigold the Malevolent, so he assumed they had only issued one new card. It was odd to imagine future Hogwarts students trading it on the train to school; they would get entirely the wrong impression from the text on the back.

He gazed out the window again. Harry had sat in this precise spot six years ago the night after he had arrived on the train the first year. His emotions now couldn't have been farther from what they were then. Back then he had been painfully hopeful and so happy to have been rescued from his relatives. It occurred to him that it was easier to be happy when things were simpler.

Dumbledore sat down on the bare bed beside him where Ron usually slept. As usual, Harry hadn't heard him enter. Dumbledore's eyes looked very pale blue in the sunlight. "You deserve the chocolate frog card, Harry." Harry took a deep breath and stared outside again. Dumbledore went on, "It is unproductive, if not harmful, to continually wish for things that are impossible to obtain."

Harry dropped his eyes and looked at his hands, pulled halfway into his sleeves.

"Come here, my boy," Dumbledore invited. Harry stood up and sat on the bed beside the old wizard. Dumbledore put an arm loosely behind Harry and said, "Our pride is not enough for you, apparently."

It wasn't, Harry thought. It only served to remind him of what he was missing.

Dumbledore went on. "We *are* very proud of you," he said, patting him on the arm. "You have a whole year of school ahead of you, as a Seventh-Year, no less. Top of the pack. A whole season of Quidditch. You are looking forward to that, I expect?" He waited for Harry to nod. "And your marks the last term were most impressive. I expect you can earn your way into any program you wish to enter. We are all very aware that you do not intend to influence your way in."

"I don't want anything from Fudge."

"*Minister* Fudge, Harry, and you are not obliged to accept anything from him." After a pause, he said, "You have been writing to your friends?" Another nod. "And working on some project of your own with parchment spells. If you need any help, I, or any teacher, would gladly give it."

Harry pulled away and removed the Map from the drawer beside the bed, marveling in part of his mind that he was going to show this to the headmaster of all people. He grinned a bit at what his father would be thinking if he could see him now. "I want to edit this," he explained, "but I'm having a hard time figuring out how." He sat back down, unfolded the Map, pulled out his wand, and activated the parchment.

"My, my," Dumbledore said as he put on his spectacles and peered at it.

"I don't want to damage it, so I've been trying to make something similar first, but it's really hard. I'm thinking that my dad was much better at magic than I am."

Dumbledore handed the Map back. "That is possible, Harry. He managed the marks you have now without seeming to work at it. But I am certain you are much more clever, especially when things are most dire, if that is any consolation." Dumbledore rubbed his hands together. "Do you have a blank parchment?"

* * *

Harry sat in the Great Hall in what had become his usual spot. Ron had sent him a deck of wizard cards and a book of games to play on his own. At first he had been a little insulted, but boredom drove him to try it out and he was getting more amusement out of it than expected. Most of the games required careful strategy. Some of the cards aged after they were dealt and changed value. Some cards reacted to the presence of other cards and changed predictably or randomly depending upon the game.

The post owls arrived. One dropped a letter in front of Harry. Another three, flying together, dropped a package on the end of the table in the spot for mail when the recipient wasn't around. Harry read his letter from Hermione. She was really good about writing immediately when she got Harry's letters. Harry took out a quill and wrote a reply on the back. He told her about his ongoing shadow-filled dreams and his frustration at still being stuck at school.

The school barn owl, used to this routine from him, waited for him to finish. Harry gave the letter back to it and it took flight, scattering the nut shells from the bowl on the table. Snape stepped in and looked at the package before picking it up. He untied it as he came over and looked over Harry's shoulder. "Red seven-flint on the black obsidian," he said.

"That will turn the nine into a dragon and I'll lose," Harry said. He picked up the seven-flint and held it near; the other card flickered threateningly.

"Haven't you already lost, then?" Snape asked.

"No, I have the deck in novice mode."

Snape tossed the brown paper from his package aside; it disappeared before it hit the floor. "Potter, I can't imagine you doing anything in novice mode," he commented as he flipped through the stack of books in his arms.

Harry, spying the title of one, asked, "What are those?"

"Potential texts for Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Harry half stood by kneeling on the bench seat and looked at the pile more closely. "Can I see one?"

Snape selected one and handed it over. Harry leaned on his elbow and flipped through it. "Which year is this for?" he asked doubtfully.

Snape considered him, "What is wrong?"

Harry frowned lightly. "We've done-" he stopped and flipped to the table of contents. He listed spells under his breath, "Grand flecture, Whistler, Frompten, Polarized blocking. Those four," Harry said, pointing. "We haven't done those."

"Haven't?" Snape took the book back and glanced at it. "Potter, I have Grey's syllabus--you have only covered two of this list."

Harry shrank down a little, half expecting an outburst as he said, "Not in class. In D.A."

Snape raised his chin before he turned on his heel. "Come with me, Potter."

Harry stood up and followed, figuring it was all right to leave his game as it was, although by the time he came back the cards would be different anyway. Snape led the way up the stairs and down the corridor to the Defense classroom.

"In here," Snape pointed.

"Am I in trouble, sir?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"Not if you are telling the truth," Snape replied. He went to the front of the classroom and stepped up onto the platform.

Harry stepped up onto the other end. "Can't you just tell by looking at someone if they are?"

Snape froze at that. He raised a brow and replied softly, "Usually." He pulled out his wand. "First spell is a Titan Block. Let's see it."

Harry took out his wand and thought a moment. "Are you going to spell me with an attack to bring it up against?" he asked, thinking that would make sense. He was used to that from D.A.

"What if I told you you have a persecution complex?" Snape said sharply.

"If I insisted I didn't, wouldn't you think I was overly optimistic?" Harry retorted.

"Point taken."

Harry cleared his throat and tried not to grin. Finally he put up his wand, mostly because Snape looked impatient with him.

"Ready?" At Harry's nod, Snape said, "*Figuresempre!*"

Harry put out both hands, palms outward, his wand hooked under his right thumb. A shimmering orange dome flared, absorbing the incoming curse.

Snape pulled the book out of his pocket. "Next is Grand Flexture; you said you didn't know that one . . ."

"Can you show me?" Harry interrupted.

"Why not, Potter." Snape said in resignation and stepped over to him. He held out the book. "It is a spell to repel anything physical around you. Timed correctly, you can avoid being struck by something, or many things, thrown at you. Or, you can use it to force a path through something moveable, like brush, or even people, should you be in that much of a hurry."

Harry grinned at that and wondered if Snape were really trying to make a joke. He took the book and read through the description quickly. "Can you do it once?"

Snape moved two heavy stone pedestals onto the platform and placed a wooden block on each. He stood between them and, holding his wand straight up, said, "*Hovequanta.*" The blocks flew in opposite directions away from him.

Harry set the book down on the floor, picked up one of the blocks and placed it back on the pedestal. Snape did the other and stepped out of the way. Harry stepped into position and thought a moment. The book said the spell felt like a globe

expanding in sections away from the caster. He took a deep breath and holding up his wand, spoke the incantation. The block on his right moved to hang half off its pedestal; the other didn't move.

Harry put the one block back into position and tried again, thinking harder about a globe sectioned longitudinally like in the picture. Both blocks flew off their perches. "Huh," Harry muttered as he moved to pick them up. This was a heck of a lot easier than making parchment write on its own.

Snape shook his head at him.

"That wasn't right?" Harry asked, concerned since he thought he had succeeded that time.

"It was acceptable," Snape said evenly.

Harry jumped over and scooped up the book. "What's next?" he asked eagerly.

An hour later, when they had gone through all of the spells, Harry jumped down from the platform. The stack of other years' texts lay on a desk in the first row. He picked up one and thumbed through it. "Which is the Sixth-Year?"

"I have a question for you first," Snape said. "How many students know the spells you know? Not counting the four new ones, obviously."

"It varies. Not everyone came to every session of D.A."

"There were nineteen students on the staircase the day of the battle. Safe to say they all do, correct?"

"Yep, that was pretty much the core. Some of the younger ones we made stay behind." Harry picked up another book as he talked. That one looked like first-year, or he hoped it was. He didn't see Snape's thoughtfully surprised expression as he said that. Harry said, "There were probably forty-five who came to most sessions."

"Forty-five?" Snape echoed in surprise.

"And another fifteen who came depending upon the topic. Easy stuff that is really useful brought in the most students."

"Such as?"

"Basic counter-curses, spell detection, stuff like that. Which one is the Sixth-Year?"

Out of his pocket, Snape handed over another book and watched Harry as he perused the contents.

"If I am out sick, you can simply teach the class," Snape muttered.

"What?" Harry asked, distracted by the book.

"Nothing, Mr. Potter."

"I don't know this one," Harry said brightly, pointing at one halfway down the contents.

"It is also referred to as a Banana Peel."

"Oh, I do know that one, then." Harry snapped the book closed and handed it back.

"Hm. You are making me realize that I need to rethink this. At least for the upper levels."

"Sorry, sir," Harry said sheepishly.

"Do not apologize, Potter," Snape retorted. "You needed those students. Not a single one lost their life. I would not have imagined that possible--not against some of the wizards I know were there. We shall have a more interesting class than expected, that is all. With Dumbledore's permission, perhaps we can do some advanced offensive spells as well."

Harry's head snapped up with acute interest.

Snape set the books on the desk and straightened the chairs. "Remember what I told you," he threatened.

"Yeah, detention for the rest of my life, or something."

"Precisely," Snape stated as he strode past him to the door. As he opened it, he said, "You still have a few hours before dinner. Perhaps you should wander up to McGonagall's office and finish your last year's lessons with her as well."

Harry scoffed. "Her class is hard. I'm not very good at Transfiguration. Hermione is."

"Disgusting having friends like that, isn't it, Potter?" Snape commented.

* * *

One day, as Harry sat in the Great Hall building a card house out of his wizard pack, McGonagall stepped in and said, "Potter, I really do think you need to get out. Come with me."

Harry jumped up and followed her across the Entrance Hall and down the steps to the lawn. "Are you my only escort, Professor? Headmaster said two to leave the castle."

She slipped on her traveling cloak as they walked. "From what Professor Snape tells us, you qualify as your own escort. As well, several Order members are in Hogsmeade today. Come along."

They walked down the lawn. Harry was grateful that only a few figures loitered at the gate. He and McGonagall approached and the figures started to take interest in them. As they drew closer, they started calling out his name excitedly. Harry's steps faltered. McGonagall slipped an arm through his and pulled him along. "There are only four of them," she admonished.

An old wizard shook Harry's hand vigorously as soon as they passed through. A woman with her two small children bent down and said. "Look, dears, it is the famous Harry Potter." The tow-headed children clung to their mother's skirt and stared at him with wide-eyed, unblinking gazes.

McGonagall steered Harry through. "Just out for a butterbeer. Excuse us, please."

On the high street, people turned and gaped at him. Quietly, Harry said, "You are reminding me of all that is good about the castle."

"Relax, Harry. Everyone else is *now*." She tugged open the door of the Three Broomsticks and gestured for him to enter.

"Blimey, it's 'arry Potter!" someone exclaimed, and the room broke from quiet murmurs to shouting and chaos. Everyone got up from their seats and came over. Madam Rosmerta came out from behind the bar and seated them at the best table near the bar.

"Two butterbeers, please," McGonagall said, completely unshaken by the goings on around her.

Harry shook everyone's hand and a few people's twice. Eventually, after much back pounding and expressions of worship, the crowd settled back at their own tables, although the conversations were much more raucous than before.

"You survived," McGonagall said as she poured her bottle out into a mug.

Harry made a noise that indicated it had been a close call.

His teacher leaned forward and asked, "How are you doing, Harry?"

"I'm doing all right, Professor. A little bored."

"You're spending a lot of time in the dungeon," she observed.

"Sna- Professor Snape gives me things to do."

"It's a little surprising, is all. You two haven't got along well in the past and during meals it seems as if that is still true."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Does it?"

She took a gulp of her mug. "Well, if you aren't noticing maybe it is my imagination."

Halfway through their butterbeers--which Madam Rosmerta insisted were on the house, forever--murmuring behind them started to raise alarms with Harry. He settled back in his seat and tried to listen in. Moments later, in badly tuned voices, an old drinking song started, although the lines had been changed. Harry listened with growing bemusement as the lyrics roared out with much shouting.

*I'll sing thee one, ho
green glow the wizard, ho!
what is your one, ho?
one is gone destroyed and gone and ever more shall it be so
I'll sing thee two, ho
green blow dark wizard, ho!
what is your two ho?
two and twenty wanders boys spelt on his head, oh
one is gone destroyed and gone and ever more shall it be so.*

Harry sank down in his seat with his mug. "At least they made it into a group effort," he offered.

"Well, this must be my lucky day," a familiar voice said from behind them. Rita Skeeter stepped over and started to pull out a chair at their table.

"Ms. Skeeter," Harry said a little less than welcoming.

"Please, have a seat," McGonagall said, getting a sharp look from Harry.

Skeeter took out a pad and a normal quill this time. "Anything to say, Mr. Potter? You have been quite the recluse."

"He is being protected from the remaining Death Eaters," McGonagall pointed out factually. Skeeter made a note of that.

"No more attempts on your life, Mr. Potter, since the Dementor incident?"

"No," Harry replied. "Not that I've been informed of, but I'm not informed of much; you must realize." He sipped his butterbeer and watched her write that down. He didn't look over at his teacher.

"Plans for the future?" Skeeter asked without looking up from her writing.

"Still deciding. I have a whole year to figure that out." Working with Fudge, if he were an Auror, was starting to seem unsavory, even if working with Tonks still sounded like fun.

"Glad to have Voldemort gone?"

"Thank you for using his real name," Harry stated. "And yes, very much so."

"But you aren't free to move about as you please because the seven are still loose, correct? You're still a prisoner?" Skeeter asked this in a tone that sounded mild, but really wasn't. Harry wondered in concern what she was really trying to ask, at the same time as he was glad that someone else recognized his situation.

"No, I can't go out without an escort, but Hogwarts isn't a prison--it's my home, as it has been for six years."

Skeeter glanced at McGonagall before she asked Harry, "What do you think your parents would say if they could see you now?"

Harry was very grateful that Skeeter didn't have her Quickquotes quill because this time his eyes did feel a little warm. "I don't know," he replied flatly. She had cut right to the heart of what was bothering him.

"Mr. Potter, you may make up whatever you like. What would you want them to say?" Skeeter waved to Madam Rosmerta for a pot of tea.

"I didn't know them," he insisted, staring into his butterbeer as he grappled with himself.

"Move on to the next question, Ms. Skeeter," McGonagall interjected.

"You knew them," Skeeter pointed out to her. "What do you think they would say?"

Harry looked up at his teacher as she sat back and thought that over. He tended to forget that many of them had known James and Lily Potter at least as students if not from the Order. McGonagall had, as well as Dumbledore, Flitwick, Hagrid, Lupin, and even Snape. It gave him a flash of anger to think that he was the only one who *didn't* know them.

McGonagall sighed. "It is a long way to think back." She glanced at Harry with a sympathetic expression. "They were very intent on defeating Voldemort and didn't hesitate to get into fierce, dangerous battles with him and his followers whenever they tried to extend their power. It was not the best of circumstances in which to try to raise a child. But like the Longbottoms, I think they felt that they needed something to pin their hopes on. We are all very grateful now that they did." As she said the last, she stared evenly into Harry's eyes.

"Do you still miss them?" Skeeter asked Harry.

"I miss not having parents," Harry replied flatly. He finished his butterbeer and set the mug down. He easily imagined all the other students practicing Quidditch in their yards, taking holiday, waking up late to breakfast with their families.

"Must be difficult," Skeeter commented as she looked over her notes. "No particular future to look forward to and a dark past to keep you company."

Harry hoped the article didn't read like that. "I have plans, I just don't feel like sharing them."

"How about off the record?"

"Is there such a thing with you?" Harry asked.

She put her quill down. "There is now."

"What's with you, anyway?" Harry asked, curious about her good behavior.

Skeeter hedged by topping up her tea cup. "I'm on a very short leash. Finding you here is my big chance to move up again. Plus, I'm still under a cloud of blackmail, am I not?"

"I suppose you are," Harry said. "The deal didn't include Voldemort."

"What is this?" McGonagall asked sharply.

"It wasn't me," Harry insisted.

"It wasn't him," Skeeter confirmed. "Another of your students is presently blackmailing me to not write anything unfavorable about dear Mr. Potter, although that isn't hard to follow as he is all the rage at the moment and anything negative would get the *Prophet* flooded with angry howlers. It is blasted hard to work when that is going on," she complained as an aside. "Well, I do appreciate your time." She stood and put away her pad and quill. "Nice to see you again, Ms. McGonagall."

When the door closed after her, McGonagall leaned in and said, "Am I to understand that one of your friends is blackmailing a *Prophet* reporter? To your benefit?"

"Don't you remember all of those awful things she wrote about me during the Tri-Wizard Tournament?" Harry asked.

"No," she said firmly. "Who is this student?"

"You have to ask? Who is smart enough to pull that off?" Harry said.

"Hm," McGonagall growled.

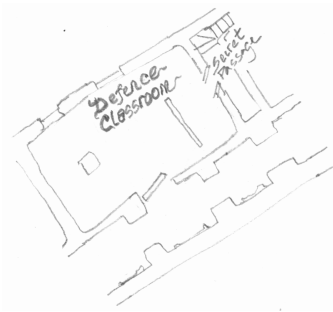
"Skeeter wouldn't have got into trouble if she hadn't been breaking serious wizard law. That is what we have her on, and that's why she's behaving."

"What law is she breaking?"

"As long as she's holding up her end, I can't tell you," Harry pointed out and felt a bit of justice in it.

"Are you in deep anywhere else that we should know about?" She asked a little smartly. "We are only charged with your continued safety, young man."

"Are you finished with your butterbeer, Professor?" Harry asked, very ready to leave.



Chapter 12 - The Offer

Days past. Harry ignored the *Prophet*--he had no desire to read the other side of the interview with Skeeter. He learned how to charm parchment to do some interesting things, but he didn't know how the Map knew where everyone was. He managed to make a copy of the physical part of the Map with his additions and even gave it modes where it showed just a normal map of the school with the current classrooms labelled or with an additional charm, it showed the secret passages, including the one to the Chamber of Secrets that Harry also realized the old Map lacked.

He made two more copies and sent them off to Ron and Hermione, feeling anxious about their replies after he did so.

His friends didn't reply by the next day, making Harry realize that he needed something else to occupy himself. There weren't any potions to work on. Bored, Harry wandered the castle and the bailey. He wondered if he should start up a new hobby, like sketching, or violin, or anything. The bailey was too small for much flying which was a shame as the weather was beautiful, but then again the sun was shining like this the day Voldemort showed up. If the Ministry would just catch the remaining Death Eaters, he could go flying again around the much larger outer grounds.

Feeling frustrated and caged, Harry sat beside the fountain and rolled up his sleeves to get some sun. He tried to imagine what Voldemort's remaining followers were doing right now. They didn't seem particularly close in his dreams. He hoped that meant they didn't have any good plans after the Dementor one failed so brilliantly.

* * *

That night, Harry woke jarringly, shaking with chills. He jerked the drapes aside and turned up the lamp. His own breathing sounded harsh and urgent in his ears. The sight of the curved walls of the dormitory calmed him somewhat. He pulled his legs against his chest and hugged them while he waited for the remainder of his distress to fade.

Remembering Pettigrew's falsetto words of reassurance from the dream, he started shaking again. Wormtail had been leaning over him, stroking his forehead about where his scar was. Harry felt a bit as though vomiting might improve his stomach. He grabbed his robe and shrugged into it as he stumbled down the steps. The Fat Lady slammed closed as he stepped out into the corridor.

By the time he made it to the boy's toilet, his stomach had calmed even though his shivering hadn't. He ran the water hot and held his hands under it a while before washing his face. Feeling better, he walked back to the common room and sat on the couch. The clock read three-thirty. The room was utterly silent. Harry really wished he had someone to talk to, as he wondered tiredly what had brought on this new dream. He toyed with the notion of going to Dumbledore, but the thought of him coming to his office door with an expression like McGonagall's dissuaded him.

When his eyes tried to fall closed, he went back up to his dormitory room, took a large sip of potion, and crawled back into bed.

Harry woke when the light came through the window since his drapes had not been re-closed. He rose, fuzzy-headed, thinking that a bath sounded like a treat, and that he would have to do it before the day heated up, or it wouldn't be as pleasant.

Harry's bath made him late for breakfast. As a result, everyone finished before him. Sprout and Hagrid hovered a bit over coffee before moving on and leaving him alone. The Hall became as quiet as the common room had the night before.

Harry wished in vain for some kind of distraction, but the day oozed by slowly, mind-numbingly.

That night, Harry took the potion before lying down at ten. Early, but then a good long rest was what he wanted most in the world. Exhaustion pulled him easily into sleep as he snuggled down between the covers.

* * *

Harry was cold--so cold he could barely move. He looked around himself groggily. The air was foul and dank. He was looking at the edge of something woven, like a basket or a coarse sack. Eventually, a figure approached and reached out to him. It was Pettigrew again. Harry tried to jerk away and managed to turn his head. It made him dizzy to do so. A hand stroked his forehead as Pettigrew chanted vague phrases of comfort. Harry jerked away from the hand again and caught sight of thick snake coils surrounding him.

With a cry of surprise, Harry tumbled out of bed. He crawled, gasping, to the center of the floor on clumsy limbs that felt alien to him. He huddled there and waited for the panic to ease. His stomach rebelled. He swallowed hard several times since he didn't feel capable of making it down to the toilet.

When he finally came to himself, he looked at the clock which read fifteen minutes before five. Almost morning. In fact, the sky looked to already be brightening. The thought of imminent daylight and company at breakfast soothed his rattled nerves enough to give him strength to get off the floor.

Harry sat through breakfast in near silence, giving one syllable replies to Hagrid's attempts at conversation. As badly as Harry longed for company, he didn't actually want to participate in it. He also wasn't very hungry, although he drank a lot of orange juice and coffee. Harry was still pushing his scramble around on his plate when everyone else got up to leave. He peered into his empty coffee cup, only vaguely aware of the movement around him.

At the door to the Great Hall, Dumbledore paused to look back at Harry, who sat with unusually bad posture on the far end of the long table. The headmaster stepped out and let the door close. "Severus," he said to the retreating backs of his teachers. When Snape looked back, Dumbledore gestured with a tilt of his head that he should return.

Snape came back down the steps and over to the old wizard. Dumbledore said quietly, "Talk to the boy; something is bothering him unusually so." When Snape raised a brow in surprise, Dumbledore added, "I am not unaware where Harry has been spending most of his time."

Snape huffed. "Why do *you* not speak to him?"

The old wizard sighed as his gaze focused beyond the wall. "Because he will not have me to rely on forever." He tossed his head at the door to the Great Hall to urge Snape back in.

Snape shook his head, pushed his hair back and opened the door. Potter still sat near the far end of the Hufflepuff table, looking more forlorn than usual. He didn't stir as Snape approached. Frowning at his own discomfort, Snape sat on the bench beside Harry, facing outward.

It required nearly a minute to conjure up words and an appropriate tone of voice. "Did something happen?" he asked factually.

Harry jumped lightly as though, as unlikely as it seemed, he didn't realize Snape was there. Harry cleared his throat and replied, "Potion stopped working."

"It does not completely eliminate dreaming, that is why it is safe to take regularly," Snape explained. "Are the shadows moving in?" he asked, suddenly concerned.

Harry shook his head. "Different dream." He didn't elaborate.

Snape watched the boy's hands rubbing over each other as though to warm them, even though the Hall temperature was quite comfortable. "Does this other dream lead you to believe that you are in danger?" he asked, being as specific as possible.

Harry considered that before he shook his head.

"If it does, you will inform someone immediately?" Snape half asked, half ordered.

"Yes," Harry replied faintly. He hadn't looked up from his barely touched plate of breakfast.

"The dream has removed your appetite?"

Harry nodded and swallowed hard as though to demonstrate his nausea.

Snape stood, having run out of issues to discuss. He watched Harry push his plate back to make room for his elbows on the table. The boy put his head on his hands, looking rather defeated. Snape departed, unwilling to probe further.

Dumbledore visited Snape's office about an hour later. "You spoke with Harry?" he prompted.

Snape put down the crate of marble blocks he was sorting through for student spell practice. Many were cracked or had serious burn marks. "He is suffering from a new nightmare."

"Did he tell you what was in it?"

"No, and I didn't pry. Unless it is critical to, it seems unnecessary," Snape went on, although he felt a bit like he was post-justifying.

Dumbledore stepped over to the desk. "I am concerned the dream represents some real danger to him."

Snape replied, "I asked that specifically. He says it does not."

"Hm," Dumbledore muttered as he picked up one of the cracked blocks of pure white marble and examined it.

Snape commented, "I think if we are willing to trust his retelling, we should be willing to trust his interpretation."

Dumbledore set the block back down. "I want you to keep an eye on him for the next few days."

Snape studied the headmaster a little suspiciously. "Meaning?"

"Speak to him if this continues. Check on him, make certain he is sleeping, because clearly he is not doing so regularly."

Snape blinked in surprise and gave Dumbledore a dismayed look.

"Severus," Dumbledore said congenially, "it is very little to ask, especially compared to what has been asked of you in the past. I have worked hard to keep him unattached to me. Now, when my immediate future is even less certain, I do not wish to tether him to me more than he has managed on his own."

With a frown Snape turned away to pick up another crate of blocks to sort. Dumbledore hovered a moment before he departed, as though to verify Snape wasn't going to protest further.

* * *

The dream woke Harry just after midnight, which wasn't surprising considering he had crawled into bed at nine. He stumbled from the room again, unable to resist the need to satisfy his urge to flee if only from one room to another. The common room was its usual silent self as he dropped onto the couch. He stared at the bookshelves and wondered what he was going to do.

* * *

It was two when Professor Snape headed up to the Gryffindor Tower. As he approached the end of the dark corridor where the portrait guarded the entrance, he huffed his annoyance at this task. The house passwords were all set identically for the summer and the Fat Lady opened to *Periwinkle*. As he stepped into the common room and eyed the staircases to the dormitories, it occurred to him that he didn't even know which floor the boy slept on. There were only seven floors to search, he thought in further annoyance.

It wasn't until he stepped across the room that he noticed the figure in striped pyjamas curled on the couch before the empty hearth. He turned one of the lamps up slightly and considered the still form. At least Potter was asleep--that simplified his task, but it was a tense sleep, not normal and probably not restful. The boy even appeared to be shivering although the room felt pleasantly warm from the sun-baked stones of the tower. As well, the crocheted throw pillow his head rested on would have only seemed comfortable to a monk from an exceptionally strict order.

Snape surveyed the room. The houses all had spare bedding accessible somewhere. He tried one of the wardrobes--it contained games and sundries random. The next one had games as well but the top shelves had pillows and blankets. He pulled down one of each.

Using a transpose spell to avoid disturbing Potter's sleep, he swapped the pillows before covering him. Potter still shivered. Snape was beginning to be somewhat curious what this dream was. He went to the hearth and opened the flue before lighting the logs that were stacked decoratively on the grate. The room didn't need the heat, but the fire would provide more than one kind of warmth.

* * *

Harry woke up early the next morning. His first thought was that his memory of leaving his bed again must be mistaken as his head was on a very soft pillow. That was, until he opened his eyes and saw the common room. He fingered the blanket and noticed the black remains of a pile of logs glowing in the hearth. Sitting up and scratching his head, he wondered at that. If Dumbledore or McGonagall had come in, though they would simply have woken him and sent him back to his bed, he was certain. Maybe Dobby had done it, he considered, or one of the other house-elves. He stretched and, feeling better than he had the morning before, went down to wash up.

At breakfast no one paid him any more attention than usual, leading him to assume the house-elves had bedded him down. He relaxed at that notion and forced himself to eat enough to cover the burn in his queasy stomach.

Harry wandered the castle most of the day, because if he sat still he felt chilled and sick again. His friends' replies arrived and out in the sunshine, on a bench beside the keep, he read them. They were impressed with the maps. Hermione offered a few possible ways the Marauder's Map knew where everyone was although she had to admit they were unlikely to really work. Ron was visiting his brother in London and his letter had a return address there. He described a little of what he had seen in the city in a way that made it clear he was holding back to not make Harry feel bad.

A chill overtook Harry at that moment. He folded the letters haphazardly and stuffed them into his pocket as he stood up to walk around the bailey perimeter yet again.

That evening, exhaustion drove Harry to his bed. Nothing short of nodding off in the library three times in a row could have done it. He took a sip of potion before pulling the covers up with painful reluctance.

His unease was more than justified. His dream this time was a confused blur of bloody white fur, animal panic, and an odd gulping swallowing of something still struggling ever so slightly, although part of him seemed to find that quite satisfying.

Harry fell down the steps to the common room and immediately vomited the little dinner he had eaten. He rubbed his mouth on his pyjama sleeve and suppressed the sob that tried to follow.

"Potter?" a voice asked as someone stepped in through the portrait hole. Harry looked up in surprise as Snape turned up one of the table lamps before coming over to him. "You are unwell. Let us get you to the dispensary."

Harry managed with some assistance to get to his knees. "No, it's the dream," he explained as another bout of shivering overcame him. Snape pulled out his wand and Scourgified the mess before stepping away. Harry watched him step straight to the corner wardrobe and pull down a blanket. Surprise at the implication of that erased Harry's fear. Dazed, he let himself be wrapped up and pulled to his feet.

Harry stepped toward the portrait hole and out, with Snape keeping a grip on his arm for support. Harry insisted on stopping at the toilet.

As he leaned on the sink to wash up, Snape said, "You are certain you are not ill?"

"It's just the dream," Harry insisted. He bent down, washed his face, and rinsed his mouth before washing the edge of his left sleeve. As usual, the warm water was a blessed relief to his panic. Finished, he finally had to turn it off. He glanced at his dripping face in the mirror and shivered again, despite the warmth of the room and the steam still rising from the basin. He tugged the blanket tighter around himself and held it with his left hand. He felt dizzy so he leaned heavily on his right, propped on the sink edge.

"She's cold," Harry explained. "He doesn't know to keep her warm."

Beside him, Snape straightened and said in a very serious tone, "To whom are you referring?"

Harry closed his eyes with a wince and replied, "Nagini."

Snape grabbed Harry's arms and steered him to the bench along the wall where he sat him down. Crouched before him, Snape said, "Occlude your mind, Potter. Now."

In a tired voice, Harry said, "I've been trying--I can't."

"Look at me," Snape ordered.

Harry raised his eyes to his teacher's unnaturally dark ones.

Snape said, "Put your emotion aside, Potter. You know how to do this. Force her out."

Harry shook his head. "I don't know if it's me or her."

"It does not matter," Snape said in a sharp tone. "The result is the same."

Harry forced himself above the sickening fear. He organized his thoughts with no little effort, concentrating on the discomfort the tight grip Snape caused his left wrist. Like a switch being pulled, the second existence went away. Harry blinked in surprise, fearful it was just going to jump back again in the next moment. After a minute of relief, his shoulders fell as he relaxed.

"Better?" Snape asked snidely.

Harry nodded and accepted the towel that was handed to him. He dried off his face and patted down his damp sleeve. With a hint of impatience, Snape held Harry's arm out and used a drying spell on his sleeve.

"Thanks," Harry muttered. He had left his wand beside his bed and he wasn't very good at that spell anyway.

"You should return to your dormitory," Snape commented.

Feeling almost himself, Harry stood up, hugging the blanket around him for moral support.

As he escorted Harry back to the Gryffindor common room, Snape said, "Do not fall asleep without Occluding your mind first."

Harry nodded and stopped at the base of the stairs to the boy's dormitory. "Thank you, sir," he said honestly.

Snape didn't reply beyond tilting his head to the side.

* * *

Harry's previous uneasiness around Snape returned with a vengeance. He delayed going down to breakfast so that he would have to sit on the close end which was usually where Hagrid, Sprout, and Filch sat. Through breakfast he occupied himself with steering a reluctant Hagrid toward the topic of wombats, and avoided looking over at the occupants on the end of the table.

Feeling better than he had in days, Harry went back to his reading about parchment spells. Several times he thought of taking a break and checking if Snape needed help with anything; each time he vetoed the idea immediately.

Occluding his mind before falling asleep worked well to keep his mind from wandering, and after a few days, he didn't even have to think about it consciously. Safely separated from the horror of it, he thought back to the dreams to try to remember if there were any clues to Pettigrew's location. Other than being in a cellar, he could not recall any.

Harry fell back to his previous routine, fearing that he was going to spend the entire summer at Hogwarts. Pettigrew didn't seem to think he was in any danger, which didn't give Harry much hope. His notions of visiting Ron in London or the Burrow were now seeming to be only so much fantasy.

* * *

At dinner one evening the next week, Dumbledore observed, "It is almost your birthday, Harry."

Harry glanced up at that and thought about it. It was July eighteenth. A month of the summer was gone already.

"I think perhaps a small party is in order," Dumbledore continued. "Why don't you invite a few close friends--not as many as I invited last time if you please. You can have the Great Hall for that evening."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, feeling a bit honored by the offer. "I'll do that."

* * *

Harry used one of his new parchment spells to make up invitations. At first he was going to make them very elaborate, then decided all that showed was he had way too much time on his hands. He went instead with a simple animated flourish at the bottom.

Hermione wrote back the next day, accepting his invitation and asking if she could bring her parents as Ron was bringing his whole family and she wanted them to meet again. She also made some suggestions about his new Map and thought it was coming along nicely.

Harry wrote again to Neville, telling him to bring his grandmum. Neville replied the next day, sounding surprised to be invited, which made Harry think he needed to try harder with his shy friend.

* * *

The day before Harry's seventeenth birthday party arrived. He got up early and asked McGonagall if she would take him to Hogsmeade to get favors. She seemed to have much less to do now that they had all been there for so long.

As they entered Honeyduke's, someone gasped and everyone turned to stare. Harry put his head down and looked around the shelves, determined to not be affected. He was uninspired though. Up at the counter he said to the clerk, "Anything new and interesting? I need party favors."

The lady in a pink striped apron said, "We have you on a chocolate frog card."

"Newer than that," Harry said, trying to sound easy-going. "A little tacky to hand those out at your own party."

"There isn't anything newer than that. And I'd hand them out at my party, especially if they had me on them. Oh, except these." She pulled out a box of red, shiny-wrapped sweets. "The wrapper is grain and sugar, so you can eat that. And inside each is different. All of them are fruit flavored and they turn your eyes the color of that fruit. Low-key, but tasteful."

She rang him up for those and as he reached for his package, she said, "Can you sign this for me?" as she held up his chocolate frog card. "Headmaster Dumbledore signed his," she pointed at the card pinned behind a sheet of glass on the wall behind her. Harry had never noticed it there and it looked like it had been there a while, given the amount of dust on the glass.

Harry shrugged and she happily slid the card over to him as well as handed him a never-out quill. When he gave it back, she stared at it a long moment before smiling at him and turning to slip it behind the glass next to Dumbledore's.

* * *

Late that evening, Harry stepped into the Great Hall in search of a snack, and stopped just inside the doorway. A massive pile of presents had been stacked on a table near the fire. Since it was his birthday coming up, he feared they were all for him.

"A bit startling, isn't it?" Snape's voice came from behind him.

"Those aren't for me, are they?"

Snape ignored the question and stepped over to the table. "Professor Sprout has been intercepting the owls bringing these over the last week. The piles are sorted into people you might know . . ." He picked up a long narrow box. "Such as Victor Krum. And complete strangers." He gestured at the larger pile on the end.

Harry gaped at the varied and colorful packages. Some of the wrapping had wizard pictures on it with little moving scenes. "Well," Harry said quietly, "this makes up for a lot of birthdays with absolutely no presents." He reached out and picked up a strangely shaped box with maroon and gold wrapping. Curious, he shook it and then glanced at the tag. Alarmed, he set it back down gingerly at full arm's length.

"What is it?" Snape asked.

"Fred and George," Harry said and breathed out in relief when nothing untoward sprang out of it.

"I would imagine that nearly everything a seventeen-year-old wizard could want is somewhere in this assortment."

"Yep," Harry agreed, trying to keep the restlessness from his voice as he eyes roamed the pile. Some of the larger boxes from total strangers worried him. Fortunately, none of them appeared to have air holes. He stepped around to the other side, stopping beside Snape. "Do I have to write thank you notes for all of these?" Harry wondered aloud.

In his driest voice Snape replied, "Having never faced this dilemma, I do not know. Perhaps if Mr. Lockhart were here, he could tell you."

"Having spent detentions helping him answer his post, I think I know what his answer would be." Harry sighed. The presents felt like a burden now, like a pale substitute for something more meaningful.

"There is perhaps one thing you still wish for that is not here," Snape stated as he picked up a silver-wrapped box, looked it over casually, and set it down again. Harry looked up at him in question as he went on, "A home besides this castle, perhaps?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, thinking that he *would* like to leave at some point.

Snape put his hands behind his back and appeared to bolster himself with a small frown. "It is not too late to be adopted, for example."

Harry laughed lightly. "Oh, you mean those twenty-seven offers of adoption McGonagall sorted through?"

"There were that many?" Snape asked sharply, surprised.

With a shrug Harry replied, "More than last time, according to her. She thinks it's because I'm less hazardous now. I'd like to think that's not true," he added, a little put upon. He looked over the piles again and sighed faintly.

"Don't want to take any of them up on their offer?" Snape asked.

Harry shot him a look of humored disbelief. "Not really."

Snape advanced a half step closer. "Any particular reason?"

"I don't know any of them . . ." Harry stopped. His brow furrowed as he tried to find words to explain. He couldn't deny that, in a fanciful moment or two, he had entertained the notion of being adopted by Lord Frelander, if only because it would mean hanging out on a nice estate instead of here at the castle for the rest of the summer. In reality the idea was awkward and strange, and he sensed that it wouldn't really address that deeply buried longing. With his hands Harry gestured that he couldn't explain.

"What if someone you knew very well wished to?" Snape asked evenly. "Someone who understands what has happened to you over the last six years."

Harry hesitated answering. Thinking about it meant opening up those buried memories again and since his life didn't depend on it, he really didn't want to; it threatened only to breathe new life into that tangle inside him. They both stood in silence for a long minute. Finally, Snape stepped closer still, making Harry look way up at him.

Quietly, Snape said, "Myself, for instance."

Harry blinked at him. "What?" he asked loudly. The question echoed in the vast hall.

"I think we know each other rather well," Snape said.

After a long stare of disbelief, Harry said, "You aren't joking--are you, sir?"

"Have you ever known me to joke?"

"Not about something like this." Harry thought about it more. "Maybe not at all. No, that's not true," Harry corrected himself. He was scrambling for time to think. "I thought you hated me," he said.

Snape straightened at that. "Have I given you that impression at all in the last three months?"

"Uh, no. I guess not." He swallowed hard. "I don't . . . You . . ."

Snape backed up a step and put up his hand to halt Harry's speech. "You certainly don't have to answer now. And there is no time limit on your answer."

"I'm seventeen tomorrow; isn't that a little old to be adopted?" Harry pointed out.

"By wizard law, one can be adopted up to the age of financial independence, considered to be the average age to finish an apprenticeship, which is twenty."

"You've, uh, researched this," Harry observed. Snape returned a look that said, *of course*. Harry stared at his hard angular face again, trying to slow his fast circling thoughts. "You are seriously offering this?"

"I have been thinking it over since the end of last term."

Harry frowned and stated darkly, "This is Dumbledore's idea."

Snape held up one finger. "His idea, but not his instruction. He made himself very clear on that point. And I admit, the idea was . . . quite startling at first."

"But he talked you into it," Harry suggested quietly.

Snape suddenly stepped forward again. "*You* talked me into it, Mr. Potter," he said sharply, stunning Harry. "Every time I, rather surprisingly, looked forward to your company in the dungeon. Every time I showed you a spell and, no matter how complicated it was, you required only at most three or four tries to produce a reasonable replication of it, and I would think to myself how proud any wizard parent would be of you."

Harry dropped his eyes to the stone floor as the gap inside himself twisted around like a snake.

Snape went on, "I do not offer this simply out of gratitude, in case you think that true." Harry continued to stare at the floor and didn't respond. Softly, Snape said, "Consider it, Harry. You certainly know where to find me." With that, he turned and stepped away.

Harry felt a bit like he did staring down at Voldemort's body, as though someone had taken his heart out and haphazardly stuffed it back in upside down. He stood in the vacant Great Hall for a long time, watching the flames make his shadow flicker across the uneven floor.



Chapter 13 - Acquiescing

Harry remained in his dormitory through breakfast. He had woken with an overwhelming desire to reorganize his possessions. There was a box in the far corner of the common room of things people wanted to give away. Harry dumped a few things in there and threw some others out. Around eleven, too hungry to avoid it, he went downstairs. The party was scheduled to start at three; that gave him plenty of time to see to any last-minute preparations.

When Harry returned from the kitchens to the hall with a plate of food, he found the teachers seated in their usual place. Unable to avoid sitting with them, he walked the length of the room. He set his plate down on the end, across from Dumbledore.

"Good morning, Harry," the old wizard greeted him warmly.

"Morning, sir."

"Sleep well?"

He shrugged. "Mostly." He had had very strange dreams about the Dursleys and his parents, though the details were escaping him now.

As Harry poured himself some pumpkin juice, Dumbledore said, "I hope you don't mind, Harry, if I give you my gift now. I'm not certain how long I can join the party for later." He pulled a long slender box out of his pocket.

Harry put down his fork and accepted it. "I don't mind, Professor."

"Harry, you of all people have earned the right to call me 'Albus.'"

"Uh," he hesitated. "I'd have to work on that, sir."

McGonagall, beside Dumbledore, put her hand over her mouth to hide her grin.

"Only if you wish to, of course," Dumbledore said amiably.

Harry lifted the box top to reveal a dark peach feather quill with a gold tip. "Wow," he said, "thank you, sir." It was clearly a feather from Fawkes. The tip didn't have a well. On a hunch, Harry wrote on the inside of the box with it. The never-out charm wrote in continuously sparkling gold and peach ink. "Thanks. It's wonderful." He carefully boxed it back up and set it well out of range of his plate and juice.

Hagrid reached into one of his great pockets and brought out a smashed box and handed it over. "Can' compete with the las' one, but here yer are."

"Hagrid, you are talking to someone who used to get old socks for Christmas and no birthday presents at all, so I am pretty easy to please." As he said this he realized that maybe he shouldn't have with Dumbledore right across from him.

He concentrated on the difficult unwrapping job, made worse by much knotted string, and tried not to flush. Inside were a pair of rabbit-lined gloves.

"Maybe a lil' more of a Christmas present, but they're the bes' I could think of. Made 'em myself."

"They're great Hagrid. They'll be useful for practice in the autumn."

McGonagall and Sprout had fetched their gifts from the pile across the room and presented them. Harry's plate grew cold while he opened them and they joined his small pile. McGonagall gave him colored sheets of reusable parchment and Sprout an ever blooming flower in a glass bulb to put in the window of the dormitory. The rose scent of it hovered around him, even after he had re-closed the box.

"Severus," McGonagall said airily, "didn't you get Harry anything?"

Harry paused in pulling his plate back, an unexpected defensiveness rising in him. "He gave me his present last night, Professor," Harry said, pleased with how even his voice sounded, given how much his heart broke from its usual rhythm.

Dumbledore looked closely at Harry before he leaned forward to look down the table at Snape. The headmaster then gave Harry a knowing look, and Harry twitched his lips in confirmation.

"Do we get to see it?" McGonagall asked eagerly. "In all the time I have known him, I don't think Severus has ever given anyone a present. No matter what the occasion."

"Uh," Harry started. He glanced at Dumbledore for support. In measured speech Harry finally explained, "I haven't accepted it yet . . . so there isn't anything to show."

McGonagall's brow furrowed deeply as she tried to figure that out. Harry expected her to ask more, but she didn't. He wondered if Dumbledore had nudged her under the table. Harry kept his attention on his plate the rest of the meal; he wanted his thoughts kept private while they churned.

* * *

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley gave Harry a hug when she arrived at the door. Ron, Ginny, and the twins tramped in behind her, each patting Harry on the arm as they passed, presents in hand.

"Thank you for coming," Harry said. "And I said, no gifts. You'll see why inside." He led them into the Great Hall. Hermione jumped up and greeted Ron and the Weasley parents warmly. Harry offered butterbeers all around. "We are still waiting on Neville and his grandmother."

"Small party," Neville commented from the doorway.

"Hi, Neville." Harry stepped over to him and took the large wrapped box from him with a shake of his head. "I was ordered to keep it small after the last one."

"Oh, yeah. I can imagine."

Fred held up his bottle of butterbeer. "Congratulations Harry. Never would've believed you'd make it to seventeen."

"Here here," Mr. Weasley, echoed. "To Harry."

Harry rolled his eyes as they all raised their bottles. "We had enough toasts at the last party," Harry insisted as he straddled the bench. The others joined him around the Gryffindor table and soon, loud conversation filled their side of the hall.

"How are you making out here?" Hermione asked.

"Bugger to be stuck here," Ron commented. "When is the Ministry going to catch those blokes so you can come visit us?"

"It could be more interesting, but it isn't so bad. It isn't the Dursley's," Harry stated emphatically as he cut himself another piece of cake.

"There is that," Ron agreed. He glanced over all of the gifts again. "I can't believe all of these presents," he said for the third time. "Wonder what is in 'em all?"

Harry put his plate and fresh piece of cake down. "Let's find out!" he said and jumped up from his seat.

He and Ron tore into the boxes, revealing a mostly ordinary assortment of wizard gear along with a few Mugglish cross-over things like t-shirts with magical pictures on them. Every time Ron expressed a liking for something, Harry gave it to him. Ginny, catching on to this, helped out as well. By the time they were finished, the table was a disaster of torn wrapping, open boxes and teetering gifts.

"So you ended up with Krum's autograph anyway," he said, looking over a heavily marked Quidditch bat.

"So, he and I are even, then," Harry said. He stood up to get another butterbeer. Ron gathered up his goodies and brought them over to mess with them. Hermione was discussing Muggle relations with Mr. Weasley. Mrs. Weasley and Neville's grandmother seemed to be plotting Neville's future together. Harry looked at his friend in concern, but Neville seemed more interested in the flowerless chocolate plant Harry had received.

"You are definitely the right lady for the job," Arthur was saying to Hermione.

"I think I need Muggle expertise though to have a private practice, like law or policy." Her eyes glowed eagerly as she spoke. "I'm going to apply to some Muggle programs this autumn. I have piles of brochures but I don't have them with me. I'd be interested in your opinion."

"Have you looked at Waxman's Medicinals?" Molly was saying. "They have a farm and greenhouse not far from the Burrow. One of several, I hear."

Neville looked up in interest at that. "Do you think they have internships?" he asked.

"Certainly worth checking," Molly said.

Harry felt cold as he listened. Other than his sometime notion of becoming an Auror, he didn't have any real plans. Thinking he would find some commiseration, he said to his best friend, "What are your plans, Ron?"

Ron began putting away the advanced wizard chess pieces that were refusing to battle outside of a real game. He said, "Bill says he'd have me on as an assistant at Gringotts to see how I liked it. He said just getting around that place is an adventure." He shrugged. "I think I'll give it a try. Sounds interesting at least. Even get to train security Trolls every now and then," he added with an odd smile.

Harry pushed his third piece of cake around with his fork and frowned to himself. He couldn't imagine what else he would do other than become an Auror, and whatever it was, it sounded like he was going to be doing it alone. He sighed and finished off his luke-warm butterbeer.

"I'm going to take my parents on a quick tour," Hermione said brightly many hours later as the gathering broke up and moved to the doors. "I'll come back down and say goodbye, Harry," she added as they disappeared around the corner.

"We had a nice time, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said kindly, patting Harry on the shoulder. "Hopefully you can come and stay with us soon."

"Happy birthday, Harry," Fred or George said as they departed. The other Weasleys echoed this as they shuffled out into the Entrance Hall. Harry hung back and, as their footsteps faded, returned to the table. The large front door to the castle boomed closed. Harry stood before the mound of open boxes and random gifts.

Halfheartedly, he pulled a larger box free and began digging around for items to load into it for easier transport to the dormitory. The sudden silence of the room pressed in on him and, when the next item, the official Bulgarian Quidditch bat signed by the team, wouldn't fit in the box, he set it down on the floor beside it and dropped down on the bench, facing the fire. The crackle of the flames was the only sound in the large dark space around him.

Harry wondered at the oppressive feeling in his chest. Discussions about the future had left him feeling uneasy rather than excited as it clearly had his friends. He deeply wished he felt the way they did but didn't know how to find his way there.

A shadow shifting in from the left brought Harry's attention up from the dwindling fire. "Sir," Harry said when he recognized the tall figure.

Professor Snape lifted a stray lid on the pile. "I do believe that you have not even managed to open them all," he stated dryly.

"No," Harry agreed then wondered if Snape were hinting at something.

"You gave most of them away," his teacher went on, as he held an empty velvet-lined box from Flourish & Blotts.

"Tried to," Harry said. "Hermione took that one."

"Ah," Snape said.

"Did you want it?" Harry asked, a little surprised.

"Hm." Snape put the box back down.

Grinning faintly now, Harry turned back to the pile. "There was another box like it with the same store wrapping." He dug around to the bottom and pulled out a weighty, silver parchment wrapped box. With well-practiced movements, he pulled away the wrapping and opened the lid to reveal another dark gray desk journal with gold edging to the pages. After flipping it over, Harry observed, "You are in luck, this one isn't embossed with my initials. Hermione didn't seem to care that the other one was." He held it out to Snape.

"You are certain you do not want it?" Snape asked as he accepted it and flipped through the pages once.

"Carry that in my backpack all next year? I don't think so."

Snape closed the journal and set it on its edge. "Thank you," he stated levelly.

Hermione's voice issued from the Entrance Hall, still giving statistics and history at a rapid clip. Her parents followed her in and back over to the party table. "Well, Harry, we should go."

Harry stood up and gave her a casual hug. "Thanks for coming. Thanks for the books."

She started to turn away. "Hopefully I'll get to see you at Ron's before school starts." As she stepped between her parents to leave, she hesitated and looked back at her father when he did not immediately move to follow.

Mr. Granger looked from Snape to Harry. "You all right left alone here, son?"

"Yes," Harry replied automatically. His brow furrowed as he tried to figure the man out.

Hermione stepped back over. "This is one of our teachers, Dad, Professor Snape."

"Oh," he said and looked Snape up and down another time.

Understanding now, Harry glanced up at his teacher. In his long cloak with high collar and the dim firelight coming from floor level, he did look rather menacing, and, as usual, he wasn't trying not to. Harry felt that surge of defensiveness again, stronger this time.

Hermione's mother patted Mr. Granger's sleeve. "Come on, Hon. I'm sure they wouldn't hire anyone, uh, dangerous."

"Hire anyone who would try to kill Harry?" Harry suggested with such sarcasm that Hermione had to cover her giggle. "Can't imagine that," he finished a little bitterly.

"Poor, Harry," Hermione said in overdone sympathy and giggled again.

"Why are you laughing, dear?" Hermione's mum asked, alarmed and chastising.

"Ehem, uh, nearly every Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we've had has tried to kill Harry," she explained making her mother look more alarmed.

"You know," Harry said, turning his head to look back at Snape, "as much as you didn't like Dumbledore hiring Lupin, at least he didn't have it in for me."

Snape crossed his arms. "You don't recall running across the lawn away from a werewolf, Mr. Potter?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, he didn't spend months plotting my death. That was an accident."

"Hm," Snape muttered noncommittally.

"Harry," Hermione said, "if you define it as danger to Harry--you have to count five of the Defense teachers."

"So, Professor, do I have to start worrying about you as well now?" Harry turned his head over his shoulder to ask Snape.

"You're teaching Defense next year?" Hermione asked sharply, sounding very concerned. "Who's teaching Potions?"

Snape replied, "A woman by the name of Gertrude Greer has accepted the position. I know her only by reputation. She is expected to arrive tomorrow, in fact." He gave Hermione a challenging look.

"I was looking forward to seventh-year Potions," she explained with a hint of a whinge.

"I don't mean to disappoint, Ms. Granger," Snape said airily.

"That's all right, sir. You should teach what you want to teach. It's just that we need Potions more than Defense now . . ." she trailed off. After a pause where her mother pointed out the time, she added, "We really should go." This time her parents followed her out of the hall. At the door she paused. "Bye, Harry," she said as her mother put a hand on her shoulder to keep her moving. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," Harry replied.

The sinking feeling started again as the outer door closed, reverberating through the vastness. Harry distracted himself by picking up another larger box from the floor and putting gifts into it, tossing the smaller empty boxes into the hearth.

"Do you want help?" Snape asked.

Harry hesitated before replying, "Sure."

They managed to pack everything into three large boxes. Snape handed Harry each of the last few unopened packages revealed at the bottom. Harry sighed and ripped them open, adding a ninth hat, a third broom compass, and a very soft scarf in Gryffindor colors to the last box.

"And this one," Snape stated softly as he pulled a small, slender box from his pocket and held it out. "In case you cannot accept the other one."

Harry stared, unmoving, at the box in Snape's hand. He had been merely sinking before--now he was plummeting.

"Harry?" Snape prompted him.

"You don't have to do that," Harry said, voice a little thick. Walls that he hadn't known were surrounding him seemed to have crashed in on him. "You don't have to do any of this." The flare of the hearth faded out at that moment, leaving the boxes and wrapping as glowing filigrees of ash.

Still holding the box out, Snape thought a long moment. "I find myself wanting to," he said quietly; too quietly to give away his tone.

Harry took the box and held it, unable to open it. He was certain he would lose his tenuous control if he did. The scene of minutes ago, of Hermione leaving with her parents, replayed again in his mind. He had never lost that ache of jealousy, of hopeless bitter longing, could conjure it now if he thought it useful.

"Are you sure about the other one?" Harry heard himself ask.

"I never do anything without due deliberation."

Harry still held the box lightly in his fingers. It was a little heavier than he thought it would be from the size. "No, I don't suppose you do," he commented, stalling for time to try to pin down the emotion churning in him. It felt like fear, but that didn't make any sense.

His internal struggle must have reflected in his face because Snape said, "I don't mean to distress you. My offer has apparently rendered you too vulnerable."

A measure of control returned to him as Snape said that, making Harry wonder if half the fear hadn't been of Snape recognizing what was happening to him. "You already did that," he commented and finally raised his eyes. "That is how I finally defeated Voldemort, you know." At Snape's intense expression, Harry went on. "You thought you'd made a mistake, breaking my concentration. I thought you had too," Harry explained, his heart racing as though it were happening all over again. "But he'd Occluded his mind too much--I couldn't get at him anymore."

"The Death Eaters were regrouping and I looked around and saw you. All of these confused emotions came out and Voldemort latched onto the hate. He came straight at me with it, so certain he knew you, so certain he had me." Harry paused and shook his head. He was breathing faster now as well. "I didn't have any choice--I had to pull out everything I'd felt at the abandoned manor. I had to relive all the memories I'd been avoiding because I couldn't stand to realize I'd been needing something that badly that I couldn't have." Harry's voice cracked at that. He paused to catch his breath and calm the burn in his eyes.

Snape gave him a moment and then observed quietly, "That most certainly would have done in the Dark Lord."

"He'd staked everything on that surge--hadn't left himself any way to back out of it. The memories did startle him rather a lot," he commented, attempting a lighter tone.

"I had been rather curious, but you'd avoided filling in the details to the Ministry, and I had no right to pry if did you not wish to discuss it."

"You deserved to know," Harry said tiredly. He didn't know where to go from here; numbness had seeped in where everything had churned injuriously before.

"Harry . . . you can have it, you know."

Harry closed his eyes and floated a moment. When he opened them again he could feel that his expression was unduly pained so he closed them again and held them that way. Snape stepped close, his robes swishing over the sound of the fire. After a long pause he put his left hand lightly on Harry's shoulder blade. Clenching his eyes tighter, Harry leaned forward and rested his forehead on Snape's chest. They stood that way for a long time, until Harry's breathing slowed to normal.

"What do you think?" Snape asked as he stroked Harry's back once, very lightly, fingers uncertain. After a long pause, Harry nodded. Snape caught his breath. "Are you saying 'yes?'" he asked, a little startled. Harry nodded faintly again.

Taking a half-step back and drawing himself up, Snape said in an unsettled voice, "Happy birthday, Mr. Potter."

* * *

The next morning, the teachers sat in a staff meeting. "I must say," Dumbledore began, "that having more time over the summer with this many of you here does make preparations for the coming year go easier. Although I am certain you would like to go home at some point."

"Harry did apologize for keeping us here," McGonagall said. She sat back in her chair with her datebook open in front of her.

"I do hope you dissuaded him from his concern?" Dumbledore asked.

"Oh yes. I pointed out how much busier we would be if he hadn't disposed of Voldemort. He seemed to accept that."

"Thank you, Minerva. He doesn't seem willing to voice his concerns to me."

A silence fell. Snape sat hunched, flipping his quill over in his fingers repeatedly.

"Yer antzier than a sack of fire beetles, Severus," Hagrid said from the end of the table.

Snape started at his comment, dropped the quill on the table, and sat back with crossed arms. Dumbledore looked him over once. "Everything all right, Severus?"

"Yes. Why shouldn't it be?" he retorted stiffly.

"You are behaving oddly," Dumbledore said gently.

"More so than usual," McGonagall added teasingly.

Snape glared at both of them but refrained from comment. Dumbledore shifted smoothly onto school business.

At the end of the short meeting, all but Snape stood up. "There is something I should discuss with you," Snape said to Dumbledore. The rest of the teachers paused and looked at him before continuing out of the room.

"Everything is not all right, I take it?" Dumbledore asked when the door closed.

Snape again flipped his black quill feather across his fingers nervously. "He said 'yes'."

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "Already?" At Snape's nod he added, "I would not have imagined that." The headmaster stepped to the window and looked out for a long minute. "It concerns me."

Snape rubbed his chin in thought. "I think it need not. Bringing the Dark Lord down forced him to admit things to himself that he would not have otherwise. I believe he had less to think over as a result."

"Well then, congratulations are in order," Dumbledore said. At Snape's dubious expression, he shook his head. "You do seem unsettled . . ."

Snape collected up his parchments, rolling them tightly. "I may have thought the likelihood to be lower than it actually was when I was deliberating."



Chapter 14 -- Forms and Filings

Harry walked through the day in a daze. He didn't have any place he had to be or anything he had to do, which was unfortunate since he really could have used something to occupy his mind. His mind vacillated between stunned and hopeful. He was in a hopeful mood when he encountered Snape in the corridor that afternoon. His eyes must have given him away because Snape straightened sharply when their gazes met.

Recovering quickly, Snape said, "There are some arrangements to be made. If you are going to be available on Wednesday--"

"You think I have someplace else to go?" Harry asked.

"There is that. I have asked a solicitor to come . . . are you ready for this, Harry?" Snape asked.

Harry swallowed hard. "Yes, sir. Just a little fast."

"Do you want more time?" he asked levelly.

Harry thought a long moment. "I don't think that will make any difference." He looked down at his hands folded around themselves. "I'm still getting used to the idea."

"You may certainly have more time to do so, should you wish."

With a shake of his head, Harry said, "I don't need it. I'm not going to change my mind." Indeed, he had latched onto the notion more fiercely than he had believed possible, imagining giving it up gave him a sick feeling.

"Wednesday then. In the morning after breakfast, in my new office."

"All right."

They both stood still without any inclination to move on. "Would you care to help me test the efficacy of some old potions from the stocks?"

Brightening instantly, Harry said, "Yes."

* * *

Later in the afternoon, Harry sat alone in the Great Hall reading a Muggle paperback book Hermione had sent by owl that morning. It wasn't holding his attention as well as he had hoped; so, when the front doors of the castle opened and closed and hesitant footsteps sounded across the Entrance Hall, Harry looked up at the doors with some interest. A

woman with short brown hair and maroon robe came in the first set of doors, stopped, and glanced at the ceiling in surprise.

Eager for a distraction, Harry put down his book and stepped over to her. "Are you Gertrude Greer?"

She pawed through a large purse slung over her shoulder. "Are you the welcoming committee?" she asked without looking up. She apparently found the parchment she wanted; it had the school seal on it. She read it over quickly, her lips moving faintly.

"I guess I am now," Harry responded. "Do you want me to show you to your office and classroom?"

She put the parchment back away, stuffing it in at random. She turned back to the Entrance Hall without answering his question. "I came on an earlier train in case they didn't have room for my trunks on the fuller afternoon run," she explained in a tone that assumed he would care. In the outer hall stood five very large vertical trunks looking like menacing wardrobes.

"Maybe I should let you move those," Harry said, imagining them filled with dangerous ingredients and delicate instruments.

She muttered a hover charm of sorts and the trunks lifted in unison like a platoon and followed them across the hall.

Down in the dungeon, Harry was glad Snape wasn't around. A few cauldrons still bubbled on the benches against the wall. Greer slipped her gloves off and circled the room, glancing into the cauldrons as she passed.

"So what do you teach?" she asked as she opened a trunk and pulled out her desk set.

Grinning, Harry said. "I don't. I'm a student."

Still self-absorbed, Greer opened the drawers of the desk and began arranging her things in them. The scene bothered Harry somehow and he tried to shake it as silly.

"I read the school rules; students aren't allowed to stay for the summer," she stated in a nearly Umbridge-like voice.

"I think the headmaster made an exception," Harry said easily. He turned from her and walked over to the cauldrons. The Draught of Isis was turning a nice fuchsia color which meant it would be finished before tomorrow. He stirred it a few times, bringing a cloud of debris from the bottom.

"I wouldn't touch those if I were you," she snapped at him.

"Your dungeon, ma'am," Harry said, again feeling uneasy about that notion, as though he had something unfinished here that now never could be.

She shut one of the drawers loudly and opened the cabinet behind her, usually locked because it held restricted ingredients. Snape must have left it unspelled for her. "If the headmaster lets the rules be broken so easily, that doesn't bode well for my getting along with him, I must say." She seemed to be thinking aloud to herself, but it still made Harry narrow his eyes at her.

"Then I am glad you are not the headmistress, ma'am," Harry said. "I don't fancy being hunted down and killed in revenge by Lucius Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew. Although I admit, being here restricts me from doing the same."

She froze, her hands wrapped around a stack of files. "You're Harry Potter," she said with a momentary grimace. Her eyes finally sought out his scar. She shook her head and put the files in a box on the floor. "I suppose if exceptions are going to be made. . . ."

Harry stepped toward the door. "They do tend to happen for me," Harry admitted, thinking ahead to the next one he could annoy her with. "I'll leave you to your unpacking, Professor," he said.

* * *

At dinner, Greer stepped in just as everyone took a seat. Harry sat down across from Snape, realizing too late that there was an empty spot to his left, across from Dumbledore. With so few people, it was difficult to box himself in. Greer stepped over to that seat and shook Dumbledore's hand before sitting.

"Gertie, if you had owled that you were early I could have made certain you were met at the station."

"It is no matter, I am accustomed to handling my own trunks."

Dumbledore went through introductions. Greer turned from the last one, Hagrid beside her, and rubbed her hands together as though overexcited by the food on the table. At least she didn't wear flowered things the way Umbridge did, Harry thought. "Mr. Potter was kind enough to show me to my office when I arrived," she said in a saccharine sweet voice.

Harry gave Snape a flash of dismay. "The Isis is almost finished, by the way," Harry remembered to mention to him.

"It is about time," Snape replied, as though the potion had it in for him. Greer looked between them calculatingly. "Mr. Potter has been assisting me in preparing the long-brew potions I took the liberty of starting before your arrival. During the school year, it is much more difficult to brew them successfully."

"You should use the second floor girls toilet, it's worked well for us in the past," Harry commented in a tantalizingly innocent tone. No other conversations seemed to have started as everyone served themselves.

"And what may I ask were you brewing?" Snape said.

Harry drank his pumpkin juice to stall. "Ask me in a year when Hermione has passed her exams."

"Something dangerous?" Snape went on.

"Was for her." Harry poured himself more juice. "She accidentally turned herself into a cat." The memory was far enough removed that he found it quite funny now. When he stopped laughing, he pulled the plate of chicken legs closer and selected two.

"What is wrong with this toilet?" Greer asked, slightly concerned.

Harry sensed that she really disliked anything that might not be orderly and predictable. "Moaning Myrtle is the reason no one goes into it," Harry commented. "She's a ghost. . . . You didn't go to school here?"

"I attended Durmstrang," she said in a tone that closed that topic.

More annoyed with the woman, Harry said, "Myrtle is harmless. Other things in there aren't so." He caught Dumbledore's gaze, which held equal parts disapproval and mischief.

"Why are such things left for the students to stumble upon?" Greer asked bluntly.

"Oh, well, this one was left by one of the school's founders, so it is a little hard to remove." In as ordinary of a conversational tone as Harry could muster, he added, "Although the Basilisk is dead now; someone put a sword through its head."

Snape broke in. "It does not pose a threat to you, Ms. Greer. Or to anyone who does not speak parseltongue." He gave Harry a dark look.

"Well, I certainly do not!" she said, insulted.

Harry jumped a bit at her reaction. As he settled down and adjusted his napkin, he muttered quietly, "Nothing wrong with that."

"Nothing wrong with it, Mr. Potter?" she asked him in sharp sarcasm as though he had done something wrong during class and she desired to make an example of him. "Only the darkest wizards are Parselmouths, Potter, or didn't you learn that in this school of bright windows? Perhaps you still have a few things to learn, eh?"

Harry stared at her. In a soft voice, he said, "I have lots. I have to take N.E.W.T.s." This comment brought forth wide grins from McGonagall and Sprout. Harry took a bite of mashed potatoes, which were staying warm on his plate somehow. He wondered who was doing that for him. "And I have heard that about Parselmouths, ma'am. In school. Second year."

Sprout and Hagrid looked at the ceiling at that moment. Harry mulled over whether to pop it on her now or save it for later.

"Well, that *is* good to hear," she calmed down considerably as she said this.

"All dark wizards, ma'am?" Harry asked when the table remained silent as though to give him an opening. "Or, all Parselmouths are dark wizards? I just want to make sure I have this straight."

Flustered by his sudden stupidity, she frowned and said, "I'm certain there have been dark wizards who weren't, many in fact. But there has never been a Parselmouth who wasn't." She waved her fork at him as she spoke with strong emotion.

"Do they have to register somewhere? You know, like Animagi?" Harry asked her with an honestly curious tone. He glanced again at Dumbledore, who continued to eat calmly. Harry kept expecting a small shake of the head from him, telling him to stop it.

"They should have to," she blurted out. "Fortunately for all of us, they are incredibly rare."

"Ah," Harry said as though this cleared the topic up completely and it could be dropped.

As Harry ate then in silence, McGonagall caught his eye and gave him a disappointed look. Harry shrugged lightly at her. He had to take an entire year of Potions with this woman, after all.

"I hope you settle in easily here, Gertie," Dumbledore said as he waved his plate away. "If there is any way any of us can assist you, please don't hesitate to ask."

"I'm certain I'll be fine," she said primly, now sounding like Aunt Petunia.

As Harry finished his lunch, all he could think of was he hoped Hermione didn't take a liking to this woman; otherwise he might not make it through his three last terms of Advanced Potions.

* * *

"I am curious, Mr. Potter," said Greer as she encountered Harry in the corridor. Harry had unfortunately chosen that moment to check inside the suit of armor that always seemed to be humming to itself. "Didn't they give you any kind of a job to do around the castle for the summer? I have only been here two days but you seem to have no profitable activity to occupy yourself."

"Um," Harry began. "I'm only guessing, Professor, but I think the other teachers feel that offing Voldemort was worth a summer of unprofitable activity."

"Hmf," she breathed and strode away.

Harry wondered if he went down to breakfast now he could avoid her for the rest of the day or at least for the morning. Willing to eat alone in exchange for not seeing her for a while, he headed straight down to the Great Hall.

As it turned out, he didn't need to eat alone. Snape paced in vague agitation along in front of the head table. Concerned, Harry asked, "Everything all right, sir?"

"Yes," Snape muttered. As Harry took a seat at the end of the Hufflepuff table, his teacher ceased pacing and sat across from him. "You are up early," Snape observed.

"I went to sleep early. I think I'm bored. That and I was hoping to avoid eating with the Dragon Lady."

Breakfast plates appeared on the table. "You are not enamored of Ms. Greer?" At Harry's doubtful face, he said, "Perhaps you would be willing to leave with me after the hearing."

"You think Dumbledore would let me go?"

"I expect, Potter, that no one, Death Eater or otherwise, would expect to find you at my house."

Harry grinned at him, "Probably true."

"Excuse me, Mr. Potter, *our* house," Snape corrected.

Harry's eyes glazed as though he stared at something well beyond the side wall of the hall. A home to go to that wasn't the Dursley's. That thought was going to take some getting used to.

"Potter?" Snape prompted.

Harry looked at his plate as he pushed his scramble around with his fork. "I was just thinking how nice it is to not be at the Dursleys. I like regular meals and not being beaten up by my cousin." He fell silent, flushed in embarrassment.

"That bad?" Snape asked with a touch of his usual snideness.

"I think if you'd asked me to come home with you for a previous summer--I would have, just to avoid them."

"Quite bad, then," Snape stated dryly, making Harry smile.

After breakfast, Snape left to meet the solicitor in Hogsmeade. Harry wandered slowly up to the Defense office. His hands were cold and his heart raced. He stared with much more attention at the portraits on the wall as he went, as a way of stalling. They all paid him more attention in return.

"Prithee!" a knight in one of them said. "Have you seen my horse?"

Harry shook his head. "No, sorry." As he turned the corner, the knight was yelling, "She's a bay. Sixteen hands. Let me know if you see her!"

At the door to Snape's office, Harry stopped for nearly a minute before managing to reach for the door handle. The office was bright inside at this time of day. Books lined the walls now, half of them potion-related. He stared at the pensieve up on the shelf and tried to assemble in his mind how he had arrived at this strange point. Voldemort seemed in the distant past compared to the seesawing of his emotions right at this moment.

Sooner than Harry had hoped, the door opened. As he turned to it, Snape stepped in. He looked pleased to find Harry there, drawing a sheepish smile from Harry.

The solicitor was a woman with short, stiff, auburn hair. "Mr. Potter," she said sincerely, "very pleased to make your acquaintance." Her auburn eyebrows bounced as she talked. "May I take this chair?"

"Of course, Ms. Kranden," Snape replied and sat behind his desk.

She pulled the chair up close to the front of the desk, opened her briefcase and pulled forth a thick assortment of parchments. "Now, since you are of age but under twenty, we can perform a custodial adoption or a successory one." She waited for Snape to reply.

"Successory adoptions are still allowed?" Snape asked.

"Anything you can get the council to approve is allowed." She finally found the sheet she was looking for. "One was authorized just two hundred years ago or so. The Nigellus family, I believe."

Snape leaned back in his chair, "Custodial, I should think."

Kranden pulled out a quill and dipped in the inkwell on the desk before filling in the date at the top of a long parchment form. "Given your age, Mr. Potter, and that no one would question your ability to attend to your own interests, you can in theory break from Mr. Snape at any time, just as one could from natural parents once one is of age."

"I understand that," Harry said.

She looked between the two of them. "Purely symbolic adoption, really," she commented as she filled in the names in the blanks buried in the middle of the first paragraph of highly stylized script. Her writing stood out as cold and factual.

Snape stared at his fingernails and stated quietly, "Symbols are important."

"Of course. I don't disagree," she replied automatically. She shifted the parchment up and scanned the intervening text quickly. "Now, Mr. Potter, you have no living immediate family?"

"No."

"Relatives? Godparents? Anyone who might contest this?"

"I have an aunt and uncle--"

"Ever co-habitate with them?" she interrupted.

"My whole life."

She looked up and considered him. She pulled out another form and made a note on it. "We'll have to get signatures from them. They never officially adopted you, I assume?"

"Not that I know of. I doubt it."

She frowned at the parchment in her hand. "The council is not going to like that. Can you bring them in to witness that they are willing to release you? It'd be very time consuming to go through a separation before the adoption. You might be twenty by then."

"They hate wizards," Harry said. "You'd have to trick them into it somehow. They hate *me*, for that matter."

Kranden tapped her finger on the desk as she thought. She frowned as she reread the second parchment again.

"They starved me. They made me live in a broom cupboard. They put bars on my windows to keep me from leaving for school," Harry explained, exasperated by the thought that Vernon and Petunia could still interfere with his life.

"We'll make a case for abused and neglected then," she said softly as she wrote out a note on the margin of the parchment.

Harry kept his attention firmly on her writing; he couldn't bring himself to meet Snape's gaze. "They'd sign anything you gave them if it meant they never had to see me again," he added.

"We'll start with that route then. If we can convince them that your relatives are wizard-averse Muggles, they may forgo the witness requirement. If not, we'll take the neglect route."

She made her way down the parchment, filling in each of the blank lines with her small, precise writing. She used a complicated spell to duplicate the parchment into five copies. Finally, she said, "Sign here," to Snape as she turned the identical stack around to him.

Snape pulled out his usual raven quill and signed the top copy. Harry leaned back in his chair as he watched, feeling dizzy. As Snape flipped up the bottom edge of the parchment, he gave Harry a glance, then lowered his brow at Harry's expression of distress. Harry forced himself to breathe deeply and felt a little better. After a long pause of consideration, Snape returned to his task.

The completed stack was turned toward the solicitor and she carefully straightened them before turning to Harry. "Mr. Potter, you do understand the ramifications of what you are entering into?"

"Yes ma'am."

"All right, then." She dipped her own quill again and signed each of the copies with practiced speed. She set the quill aside and straightened the sheets yet again. "We need two more witnesses to Mr. Potter's willingness. The witnesses need to have long-term familiarity with him."

Snape stood and gestured for them to move to the door. "The headmaster will most certainly be willing."

They stood in the headmaster's office as Dumbledore glanced over the long parchment with his head angled back to see through his half-moon spectacles. With deliberate motions, he arranged the stack before him and turned to Harry, who stood back from the group. "Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"Sir?"

"All right, Harry?"

Harry shrugged and then forced his demeanor to brighten against an unusual panic that tried to grip him. It receded as he looked into the old wizard's gentle, knowing eyes. "Yes, sir," he answered with confidence.

Dumbledore pulled out a peach-colored quill and signed each of the copies before handing them back to Kranden.

The three of them departed and Harry glanced up as he closed the office door behind them. Dumbledore's expression as he sat with his hands folded before him on the desk was more at peace than Harry had ever seen. He gave Harry a satisfied smile and a nod.

As he followed the others down the escalator, Harry felt that he might have done this just for Dumbledore, had he known what it meant to him. At the bottom, as the gargoyles leapt back into place, Snape stood in thought. "Professor McGonagall?" he suggested.

Harry shrugged and said to the solicitor, "If she thinks we are playing a practical joke on her, will that reflect badly on us?"

Kranden cleared her throat. "I'm not the council; I'm just here to help with the paperwork."

"McGonagall then," Harry said. As they walked toward the staircases, Harry started to grin as he imagined his Head of House's reaction.

At her door, Snape knocked and stepped in. "I am in need of a favor, Minerva, if you have a few minutes."

"Certainly, come in." She marked her page in the large book in front of her and closed it. Harry stepped in behind Snape with the solicitor trailing behind.

"Do you want to explain first?" Harry asked as he stopped just inside the office.

"No, Mr. Potter, it is all right." He took the parchments from Kranden and held them out to McGonagall. "I need you to witness these, if you would, after the solicitor asks you a few questions."

McGonagall accepted the parchments and adjusted her glasses. Her face fell into shock as she read the first paragraph. She looked at the solicitor, then Snape, then finally at Harry, who sighed at her expression of stunned dismay. She dropped the stack down on her desk and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Just a moment. I want to talk to one of you," she pointed between Snape and Harry, "alone first."

Snape and Harry considered each other, unable to determine who should stay.

"Potter, you stay," she said impatiently. The others stepped out and closed the door quietly. She started to speak and then stopped. After another glance at the parchments she shook her head. "This had to have been Albus' idea," she said in dismay.

Harry stiffened at that. A little coldly, he said, "He suggested it originally, but that's all."

She frowned and rubbed her eyes tiredly after setting her glasses aside.

"All you have to do, Professor, is witness that you believe I am doing this willingly," Harry explained in a hard tone.

"Well, Harry, I can tell you are serious about this," she said. "Are you doing this willingly, or to please Dumbledore?"

"I honestly didn't realize how much this pleased him until five minutes ago."

She considered that and sighed as she again perused the top parchment. "Some things cannot be recaptured, Harry," she said wistfully.

Angry and hurt now, Harry replied stiffly, "And some things can."

"Harry," she said gently. "I will sign these for you--I don't mean to imply that I won't. And I do wish for you to find what you clearly feel you are missing." She clasped her hands together, leaned back in her chair, and considered him with a sad expression. Quietly, she said, "The night Albus dropped you at your aunt and uncle's house, I begged him not to leave you there. I am certain he did not realize how poorly treated you would be. But he insisted you grow up in isolation from your fame. Turns out he had other reasons as well that he didn't share at that time."

"I know them now."

"Any of us would have taken you then. Any of us would take you now."

Harry fidgeted a little. "I don't think you understand me as well as Severus does."

She sat forward and put on her glasses. In a lilting tone, she said, "Perhaps not. But had I known you were in the market for a replacement parent, I would have liked a chance to apply." When Harry smiled at that, she went on, "When I ask you if there is anything you need, I do mean it." She considered him. "Clearly what you need is permanence. Call them back in." She waved at the door.

"Are you certain bringing Mr. Snape along is a good idea?" Kranden asked Harry as they waited on the castle lawn. Snape was stepping down from the main doors, still out of range of hearing. "If they dislike wizards . . ."

"Are you kidding? All the better. They'll think I'm going to be miserable. They'll sign in an instant."

Snape wore a Muggle outfit of starched white shirt and dark trousers. The cuffs and collar of the shirt were far too wide for current fashion. Kranden had done a better job, wearing a straightforward, conservative wool jacket and skirt. "Shall we?" she said as they congregated.

They Floo into the nearest wizard enclave and then walked to Little Whinging. The sun was shining brightly and the wind was gentle. "You owled them, correct?" Kranden asked as they approached the drive.

"I used Muggle post, but yes. I didn't tell them the time; otherwise, they wouldn't be there when we arrived," Harry said.

The neighbor lady looked up from her weeding at Snape and gaped. Snape gave her a narrow-eyed look in return. Harry waved at her and said hello in his most friendly manner. Her pinched face looked more confused by this, mincing over to inspect her hedges in order to follow their progress up the pavement.

The door opened as they approached the step. Vernon held open the door and scowled, "Figures the neighbors'd see you. I don't know what you want, but you better make it quick."

"You didn't inform him of the purpose of this visit?" Kranden asked Harry.

"All I told him is that he'd be rid of me for good after this," he explained, as they followed Vernon Dursley into the house.

Petunia stood in the kitchen doorway with her arms folded and a sour look on her face that faded to fearful as Snape stepped past her with a dark glance. In the living room, Vernon took a seat in his regular chair without inviting others to sit. Snape followed into the center of the room and turned in a circle to look over the place; Vernon gave him a distrustful huff through his mustache.

"Thought I heard somethin'." Dudley, now as tall as Vernon, sauntered into the room. He walked menacingly over to Harry, who stood his ground and stared up at his older cousin. "Didn' think you were ever comin' back, Pottier."

"Just couldn't stay away," Harry retorted dryly.

Dudley gave Kranden a lewd appraisal then turned to Snape and froze. Snape, even in his approximation of Muggle clothes, looked like a wizard and, with his current fierce expression, not a very nice one. His black eyes and hooked profile stood out starkly in the frilly decor of Petunia Dursley's home. Dudley took an unconscious step backward and swallowed hard. "Who's that?" he asked the room uncertainly.

"My teacher," Harry replied casually.

"You let a wizard in here?" Dudley demanded of his father.

"I told them to make it quick," Vernon insisted.

"What do you want?" Petunia asked from the entry to the hallway. Her eyes darted fitfully between each of the guests in her house. Her prim voice contained barely controlled fury.

Kranden set her briefcase on the low table and pulled out a parchment. "We are here to ask you to sign a document stating that you are willing to relinquish your status as Harry's guardians." She held the parchment out toward Vernon.

Vernon accepted it with a snort through his mustache. He didn't look at it, just stared at Kranden. "Why?"

"It is mostly a formality, but it simplifies our other filings." She sized up Vernon before explaining, "Professor Snape, here. . ." She gestured at the man behind her. ". . . is making an application to the Wizard Family Council to adopt Mr. Potter."

"What?" Dudley sputtered, attracting Snape's quiet, intent gaze. He shut up immediately and backed up another step. "He can't spell me without taking out his wand, can he?"

"Yes, he can," Harry supplied confidently.

Dudley, sweating now under the piercing black look, backed up beside Petunia, stanced to make a run for it. "You're not going to let Harry do this?" he asked his mum.

Petunia's eyes narrowed. "We certainly don't want him back, ever."

Kranden stepped up to her instead with another copy of the parchment, pulling a Muggle pen from her inside breast pocket. "Sign here, then," she invited.

Petunia held the parchment and pen, one in each hand and considered Snape. "What do you know about this man?" she asked.

"I have a copy of his vitae," the solicitor offered, gesturing at her case. "He has taught at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for the last--"

"Don't mention that wretched place to my wife," Vernon interrupted angrily. He hefted himself out of his chair and stepped up to Snape. With narrowed eyes he said in a low voice, "I've heard there are good wizards and dark ones. You look like a dark one to me."

Snape didn't react, just studied Vernon closely. "And that would matter, how?" he calmly retorted.

"Seems a little strange, Potter losing everything to dark wizards, and all." He looked suspicious now.

Snape's eyes narrowed as he crossed his arms and drew himself up straight. "I do not know, or care, frankly, how you might choose to classify me." He stared through Dursley in silence before stating, "What I can tell you that I am a strict disciplinarian; any misbehavior in my presence is punished most severely. Harry's summer has been spent in long hours of extra readings, lessons, and menial tasks that I set him to; I do not tolerate wasted time."

Vernon grunted approvingly and turned to take the parchment from Petunia. Harry backed up against the wall to get out of his way. "So why did *you* agree to this, boy?" Vernon mockingly asked him.

Harry hesitated before replying, "He asked me."

"That's all it took?" Dudley asked in disbelief.

Harry shot him a dark look, pained to find too much truth in his response. "It's nice to be wanted."

On the way back down the front walk, the solicitor switched her case to her other hand after shaking Vernon's. After the door closed hard behind them, she said, "You lived here your whole life, Mr. Potter?"

"They were behaving better today to keep up appearances," Harry assured her.

"I cannot imagine," she said.

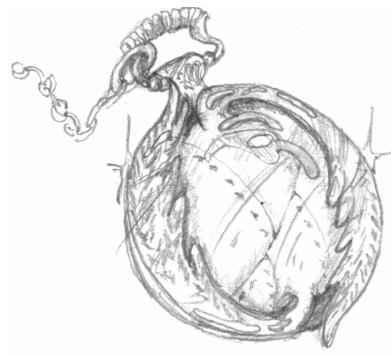
Harry leaned forward to look across at Snape. "You didn't mean what you said, did you, sir?" he asked, worried.

"Potter, as far as I am concerned, you have earned the right to a frivolous existence living off of others' pathetic gratitude. I would not recommend it, nor encourage it, however."

Harry let go of a deep breath in relief. "I suspected that you were just saying what he wanted to hear." He shook himself theatrically. "Legilimency with Vernon Dursley, brrrrr."

"The lengths I am willing to go to, Potter," Snape commented in a airy, suffering voice.

"I am not hearing any of this," Kranden said as they turned off Privet Drive.



Chapter 15 - A Home

The door to the Wizard Family Council room opened and an old witch with a small girl in hand stepped out. She bent and spoke reassuringly to the child. Harry stood patiently waiting for their turn. At the moment he was just grateful to have made it through the Ministry Atrium in one piece. The receptionist who registered his wand stared at him in silent shock for over a minute before he handed it back. By that time the entire Ministry, it seemed, had gathered 'round to shake his hand and thank him. When they had finally escaped, Snape had commented, "You have not been very visible; it is true." Harry had been relieved by that, since he had not been certain how Snape would react to such a scene.

Fortunately, the hearing room was in an out-of-the-way corner on the second floor below ground. Harry'd been worried about running into Mr. Weasley. Since he hadn't owed Ron with the news, he wasn't keen on making up a story on the spur of the moment, especially not in front of Snape.

Kranden gestured that they should enter. As they stepped inside, a witch seated at a small desk off to the side said, "Next we have the application hearing for Severus Snape. He is applying to adopt one . . . Harry Potter." The witch scowled at the paper and looked up at them in surprise. The members of the council sitting in elevated rows at the far end, murmured among themselves and perked up considerably.

As the three of them approached the podium facing the council, the murmuring stopped and all the council gazed at Harry with amazement. Kranden ignored this and took out the sheaf of parchments. She unwrapped them, kept one copy of the long form for herself and handed the others over to the council secretary. "Good morning, members of the council, I am Felicity Kranden. I am assisting Mr. Snape in this application." She went on to explain their application in legalese. Harry stood beside her with his hands clasped extra casually in front of himself. That panicky feeling was trying to build again and he did not want it to show.

Finished with her statements, Kranden stepped back and waited patiently as the secretary handed the forms over to the council chair after registering each document. "Any of them can ask questions now," the solicitor whispered.

After looking over each sheet, at least momentarily, the chairwitch leaned forward. "Mr. Potter," she began with a quizzical expression, "this is a bit unexpected." She cleared her throat and sipped from a teacup before continuing. "The first question that pops into my head is, why now? Why not while you were truly underage and in need of a permanent guardian?"

Harry moved to the podium and glanced at Snape in question.

The chairwitch said stridently, "Do not look to him; I want to hear *your* answer."

"Sorry, ma'am," Harry said. "It is just that there are some things Albus Dumbledore didn't want anyone to know and it is hard to remember that they don't matter anymore." The gazes of the council grew even more interested. "You see, Dumbledore put a spell on my mother's sister's house to make me safe from Voldemort while I was there. I had to consider it my home for the spell to keep working. None of that matters now." He started to step back and then added, "That is why now, rather than earlier."

More murmuring ensued. It quieted as the chair said, "And your mother's sister has provided a signature I see, as well as your uncle. Is there a reason they are not here in person?"

"They hate wizardry, ma'am," Harry supplied.

Kranden stepped up beside him. "I know my comment isn't necessarily relevant, but for what it is worth, I will strongly attest to that."

An old wizard in the back row said, "You have survived well enough, it looks to me. Seems like sticking with blood is the best thing."

Kranden stepped up again. "If I may." She pulled out another parchment and handed it over to the secretary. "This is just a partial chronicle of Mr. Potter's treatment by the Dursleys."

The parchment was subjected to the same procedure and eventually passed to the senior member, who frowned at it. "Locked in a cupboard, Mr. Potter?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry admitted with difficulty.

"Manhandled? Were you every seriously injured?"

"No, ma'am. Repelling magic usually kicked in before then." The council peered down at him now in dismay and sympathy. Harry deeply regretted being there.

"Starved?" she went on, reading the list. "For how long a time?" she asked in an annoyingly factual voice.

Harry sighed painfully then jumped lightly as fingertips brushed the back of his arm. He angled his head and determined that it had to have been Snape. Bolstered by that gesture, Harry replied, "Not usually more than two or three days. My friends were sending me food packages by owl, but one summer my uncle bolted the window closed. And another summer the Malfoy's house-elf charmed my uncle's neighborhood to prevent any owls from approaching."

"Why?" she asked honestly.

"It is a long story, ma'am, and not really relevant," Harry commented.

The chairwitch continued to read the list. "Let's see, basically the rest is a long list of general neglect incidents." She stared at Harry. "You are telling me that Albus Dumbledore, whom I know very well to be a kind and compassionate man, left you in this household for years, knowing this?"

Harry said slowly, "It turned out that there wasn't any choice, but I also didn't explain to him very well why I didn't want to go back."

"Well, that is something we are very familiar with here, I'm afraid." She put the parchment aside. "Anyone opposed to dispensing with the witness requirement?" The secretary looked over the council and made a notation when no one raised their hand. The chairwitch then pulled the long application out again. "Ms. Kranden, this is a standard form, I take it. Right of board, abode, inheritance, all that? Nothing untoward buried in here?"

"No, ma'am. It is standard." Kranden stepped back and waggled her eyebrows once at Harry and Snape.

The witch on the left of the chairwitch leaned over and whispered something that made the chairwitch's brow furrow deeply. "You are certain?" she asked her fellow member and received an emphatic nod in reply.

"Mr. Snape, if I may?" she said. Snape stepped forward beside the podium and took on a pose of attentiveness.

"Is it true you were a Death Eater, Mr. Snape?" she asked in a very serious tone. Gasps sounded around the room.

"Yes, that is true," Snape replied evenly. Harry saw Kranden blanch before her professional face reasserted itself.

The chairwitch seemed to be at a loss for words. She finally managed to say, "Why in Merlin's Realm would we allow a former Death Eater to adopt anyone, let alone Harry Potter?"

Snape opened his mouth and Harry put up his hand to stop him. He felt a renewing anger pumping through him. "There are seven Death Eaters on the official Ministry wanted list. I can name them for you if you wish. You know as well as I that Professor Snape's name is not on it. Otherwise, I would assume we wouldn't have been able to waltz through the Atrium as we did."

"It speaks to his character," a younger wizard on the council said.

"That he put himself at risk spying for Dumbledore?" Harry asked the man. The wizard's face puckered at that.

"Is that what you were doing, Mr. Snape?" the chairwitch asked.

"Yes."

The chairwitch's eyes locked onto Snape's. "That is why you joined He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named?"

"Yes," Snape replied again. Harry forced himself to remain casual at what he knew was a lie. Snape spent years fooling Voldemort, certainly he could handle one Family Council Chairwitch.

"Can't penalize him for that," the old wizard in the back stated. "Someone had to take a stand."

The chairwitch frowned deeply. "Mr. Potter, do you trust this wizard?"

Taken aback, Harry replied. "Of course, ma'am. I wouldn't have said yes to his offer if I didn't. He's saved my life several times."

"How many?" she asked.

"Um, I don't have a count. Well, let me see . . . the broom incident was probably the first time."

"I doubt you would have been killed. Just maimed," Snape commented blandly.

At the expressions on the council's faces, Harry elaborated. "Another teacher, Quirrell, was trying to get my broom to throw me in the middle of a Quidditch match. Professor Snape used a counter-curse to stop him."

"What happened to this Quirrell?" the chairwitch asked.

"Oh, he disintegrated when he touched me while he was trying to get the Philosopher's Stone." Harry shrugged. "Having Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head turned out to be a bit of a disadvantage." He waited for their expressions of shock to neutralize. He hated to say the next part, but he did it anyway. "There was the time he stepped between a werewolf and me and my friends. And then four months ago when he and Dumbledore rescued me after two Death Eaters tried to get even for my helping get Lucius Malfoy arrested." The litany was draining him. With a sigh he added, "And again during the final battle when Bellatrix Lestrange came at me after Voldemort had fallen."

The old wizard in the back grunted. "Wanda, I think we should just give this boy whatever he wants. He wants to be adopted by an ex-Death Eater, I 'spect he can handle it."

The chairwitch, appraised Harry. "You want this Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said with assurance.

She glanced over the application again. "Does anyone have any objections?" No one did. She held the parchments out for the secretary to pick up. "Register these, please."

The secretary embossed each copy and brought all but one back to the solicitor. "You are all set, dear. Have a good day."

In the corridor, Kranden leaned over to Harry. "Nicely done."

"Thank you, ma'am. It wasn't as easy . . . as it should have been," he commented tiredly. His usual lack of sleep was wearing on him now. He needed lunch and tea.

"You need a break from things, I believe," Snape stated as they waited for the lift.

"When can we leave for your house?" Harry asked as they stepped into a mercifully empty lift. "Our house," he corrected himself. "Merlin," Harry breathed, still adjusting to that idea.

* * *

Harry spent the evening packing his trunk in a kind of daze. He had a hard time closing it and had to sit on the lid and bounce a few times to latch it. After he finally managed to, he noticed the bedspread and some other things that he would like. He'd have to borrow a second trunk.

Not sure where to find one, Harry headed down to McGonagall's office to ask. She looked up from her own packing when he knocked on the open door. "Do you know where there's a spare trunk I can borrow, Professor?" he asked.

She stood straight and thought a moment. "In the north wing attic, I believe, are some old unclaimed trunks." Before he could head off, she said, "Excited to be leaving for Severus' house?"

Harry smiled. "Yes, ma'am."

She shook her head. "I wouldn't be," she commented quietly in a tone of disbelief, although she smiled as she said it. McGonagall moved her hands to her hips as she considered him. "Good luck, Harry," she said sincerely.

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm not going to be gone long, so hopefully I won't need it," Harry pointed out before heading off to the attic.

He did indeed find several dusty trunks, one with a very nice blue satin lining. He hovered it back down to the dormitory and set about repacking. It was going to be nice to set up his things without having to hide everything wizard related. He looked forward to that, and to his own space that didn't feel grudgingly loaned or borrowed. As he and his dormitory mates had aged, their tower room had begun to seem cramped.

The next morning, Dumbledore saw them off personally. Harry shook his hand as they stood on the steps to the castle. The headmaster seemed to be aging faster now, making Harry anxious to look at him. "We'll be back in three weeks, sir. According to Professor Snape."

Dumbledore smiled and touched the top of Harry's head fleetingly. "Have a good rest, Harry."

Harry hovered his two heavy trunks down the lawn behind him while he carried Hedwig's cage. He followed Snape, who had just one satchel. "Need assistance with those, Mr. Potter?" he asked pointedly.

"No, I've . . . It's going to take me some time to get used to calling you 'Severus'," he said.

"Apparently."

They boarded the afternoon local train and found an empty compartment. Harry dragged his trunks inside and sat across from Snape at the window. He thought momentarily about hovering the trunks up to the rack and then decided that their present location in the middle of the floor would dissuade anyone from joining them.

With a hiss, the train started out again. Hogsmeade disappeared around a bend in the tracks and the trees closed in. Harry stared out at the mountains sliding by until the trolley came up the aisle. He jumped up and opened the compartment door. "Want anything?" he asked Snape.

"Tea would be nice, if it is hot."

"Two cauldron cakes, a chocolate frog and a tea," Harry said to the pink-frocked lady.

"Oy!" she exclaimed upon seeing him. Harry put his finger to his lips and she snapped her mouth closed and winked at him. "That will be eight sickles and a knut, Dear." Harry reached into his pocket and handed over the coins. He piled the cakes in his left arm and took the teapot with his right. The lady patted him on the head. Harry managed a false smile before turning and letting the compartment door slide closed.

"Oy," is right," he commented as he handed the teapot over.

"Your public persona is most interesting," Snape said. He unscrewed the metal lid and poured the tea out into it.

"What does that mean?" Harry asked as he unwrapped a cake.

"Do you expect to be treated that way?" Snape asked snidely. "Patted on the head?"

"No," Harry answered vehemently. "I get treated as though I'm thirteen or fourteen or something."

Snape sipped his tea and considered him. "Your small stature is partly to blame for that."

Harry frowned and sat back with his snack. A village came into view. The fields were radiantly green with pale dots of grazing sheep. After the second cake was gone, Harry opened the frog and let it hop onto the narrow shelf below the window. It tried to hop up to the open window, but Harry grabbed it in time. It solidified in that leaping pose as he sat back with it. He nibbled on one leg and worked the card free of the package. It was Dumbledore. The figure considered him with a tilt of the head, then stepped out of the frame. Chest constricted, Harry set the card on the shelf and tossed the box in the rubbish bin beneath the window. Snape lifted the card and glanced at it before replacing it between them.

Comfortably full, Harry turned sideways and put his feet up on the seat. As he curled his arms around himself, he asked, "How much longer?"

"Forty-five minutes."

Harry leaned his head sideways against the back rest and closed his eyes. The movement of the train lulled him into a light doze. The next thing he heard was Snape saying, "We are here."

Harry sat up and stretched his cramped neck. The wooden sign on the station read Shrewsthorpe. Snape had already hovered one of the trunks out. Harry grabbed the other and the cage and followed.

On the platform, Harry looked around. The sun made the village vibrant. Snape had said it was a half-wizard village. Harry couldn't tell it wasn't all Muggle by looking at it, other than that things looked a little old and outdated. He watched Snape hover one of the trunks along to the steps and decided that it was okay to do the same.

They walked down the road. The houses closest to the station were fieldstone with lots of white cement. Beyond that they were a little newer. Snape unhooked the gate in a low stone wall and stepped into the garden of an older house. Harry hovered the trunk through the gate and looked over the place. The mortar and face were rough where the whitewash had

worn, the garden was a bit wild, the dark roof peaked steeply with tall narrow chimneys. It had an air of existing well past its expected era. It was about as far from Little Whinging as Harry could imagine.

Snape didn't seem to be looking for an opinion. He opened the heavy wooden door and led the way along a narrow corridor into a main hall that seemed much larger than the place looked on the outside. The hall opened up to the next floor with a dark wood railing over wrought iron posts around the edge. Harry peered into the drawing room and tried to glance into what looked like a library before they headed up the stairs to the first floor. At the end of the upper hall, Snape opened the door and stepped inside. The wide boards of the balcony led to the stone floor of a bedroom.

"Your room," Snape said as he let the trunk hover to the floor inside the door.

Harry looked around. The walls were plastered bright white with the dark heavy beams of the ceiling exposed. A massive hearth filled a third of the right-hand outer wall. The window was small. Harry stepped over and looked out at the garden and the road. Two children on bicycles rattled past, apparently racing each other. He turned back to the room and ran his hand over the thickly restrained bed post. It was all his.

"It's great, sir," Harry said honestly. It didn't remind him of the Dursleys one little bit.

They stood considering each other for a long silence, which Snape finally broke by saying, "I expect dinner will be in an hour or so."

Harry nodded and, spying the wardrobe, went over to it and opened its doors. As he hovered his trunk over, Snape left him to his unpacking.

He hung his clothes in the wardrobe. There wasn't much of any other storage. He hovered his trunks beside each other on the far wall, one under the window. The room, even in the summer, was chilly. Harry changed robes to a thicker one and opened the other trunk. The night stands had small drawers and shelf space under them. He sorted through his stuff for things he would want out. His Quidditch books he set on the bed to put out, then put them back in favor of two textbooks for next year.

He found one of the quilts he had received for his birthday. With relish, he spread it out on the bed. It was orange and maroon with little lions here and there on the fabric. Not quite the Gryffindor symbol, but close. He dug in the trunk again and found the photo album. He carefully lifted it out and took it to the far side of the bed to put it in the night stand. Instead of putting it away, he couldn't help flipping through it. Knowing it was a mistake didn't stop him either. The photos of his parents holding him and waving made him feel more ambivalent than he had ever felt. He shut the album a little hard and put it away.

A knock sounded on the doorframe. Harry jumped at it and turned. "Dinner?" he asked.

A chill passed over him as he followed Snape out of the room and down the balcony; he felt as though he had woken from a dream to find he was living someone else's life. It reminded him of when he had first arrived on Diagon Alley with Hagrid and discovered that everyone knew him and knew more about him than he himself did.

With impatient movements, Snape sat at the dining room table. His hair fell before his face as he did so. Harry sat across from him, pulling his chair up close to the table. A moment later a house-elf stepped in with a large tray of covered dishes. As his large eyes fell on Harry, he hesitated in setting the tray down.

"Tidgy," Snape said, "this is Master Harry, you will give him the same obedience as myself."

"M . . . Master Harry?" Tidgy recovered and quickly placed the dishes on the table, removed the covers and with a deep bow said, "Anything else, Masters?"

Harry wouldn't have minded some pumpkin juice, but he couldn't bring himself to request it. He shook his head instead. Snape eyed him with a tilted gaze. "Bring Master Harry pumpkin juice."

The elf bowed and quickly departed.

"Are you reading my mind?" Harry accused him.

Snape scoffed. "I do not require Legilimency for that. I have seen you drink it with every meal for the last six years."

"Oh," Harry said and realized he should relax. "Sorry," he added quietly.

Snape served himself potatoes and peas. "Not hungry?"

Harry started. He had been focusing on calming down as the food steamed before him. He stabbed a piece of roast chicken. "Smells good." As soon as his plate was full he started eating. It wasn't quite up to Hogwarts's standards but it wasn't bad and there was a lot of it. Tidgy returned and gingerly placed a glass beside his plate. "Thanks," Harry said automatically.

Snape's fork and knife hit his plate a little hard as he set them down suddenly. "Potter," he scolded in disbelief, "one does not-

"Potter?" Tidgy interrupted in a frightened squeak. "Master is Harry Potter, sir?" The elf backed up a step as he realized his other error of decorum.

Snape gave the elf a disgusted look which made Harry grin. With a dark look Snape said, "Tidgy, you may GO." After Tidgy backed out of the room, gaping at Harry, Snape said in a low voice, "One does not thank a house-elf merely for fulfilling their duties. One does not thank them at all, in fact."

"Hm," Harry uttered, unconvinced.

* * *

Tired from traveling and the oddness of settling into the house, Harry gave up on organizing his things and got ready for bed. He hung his clothes up and slipped into his pyjamas. The stone floor was cold. He tiptoed over to the wardrobe and took out the slippers that Hermione had knitted for all of them last Christmas. They were gold and maroon with pointed toes and leather bottoms. Her knitting had improved, even Ron had been forced to admit. He jumped up onto the bed and reached way down to set the slippers on the floor for morning.

The strangeness of this new place made him uneasy. He frowned as he considered that this was probably going to make his nightmares worse. He sighed as he turned down the lamp and darkness filled the room. He snuggled down under the soft covers and closed his eyes.

Snape, not hearing anything from the boy's room for a while, stepped down the balcony and looked in. The door was open and the chandelier behind him cast warm light across the floor, illuminating a pair of maroon and gold footwear beside the bed. Upon the bed was a matching quilt. Snape wondered in that moment what had possessed him that he had adopted a Gryffindor. Arrogant and unthinking they were, he thought darkly to himself.

He stepped silently into the room. Harry was fast asleep, curled on his side facing the door. His dark thoughts escaped him, as Snape found himself hoping that the change in environment would mean a reduction in the boy's nightmares. Being away from the very place where he had confronted Voldemort for the last time couldn't hurt.

* * *

Harry woke with the grey light of dawn lightening the room. He was stiff with long sleep so he considered that he should get up. Grateful for the slippers, he padded across to the bedpost to pull down his robe. Snape's door was closed as he passed it quietly.

Yawning, Harry wandered around the ground floor. There was a library across from the dining room. He found a book on lamination spells and settled into a lounge. Three pages into it, Tidgy appeared with a tea tray which he placed on the table beside Harry. As the elf bowed low, Harry said, "Thanks."

"You a very great wizard," Tidgy said in a wavering voice, "to be thanking a mere house-elf." After a fidgeting pause, he went on in a whisper, "I don't want you to have trouble with Master, Master Harry. Not for sake of me."

"Don't worry about that," Harry assured him. He took a chocolate covered biscuit, noticing Tidgy noticing which he preferred. Tidgy bowed again and backed out of the room.

A while later another voice came from the doorway. "You are up early." Snape stepped in and poured himself some tea which he drank in one gulp.

"I went to sleep early," Harry commented with a shrug.

"Sleep well?" Snape asked. He had started for the door and stopped to ask this.

"Yes."

"No dark shadows?"

Harry thought a moment. "No. Not that I remember," he said, surprised.

"Good," Snape said. "If you do, let me know."

"Immediately?" Harry asked, half-joking.

"If it seems appropriate to do so. If you ever feel unsafe, certainly. I want you to feel secure here; it is the least that should be provided for you."

Harry considered that, feeling a twinge. "Yes, sir."

"I will have Tidgy start breakfast," Snape said before he stepped back into the main hall.

As Harry joined him in the dining room a few minutes later, Snape looked him up and down sharply. "Such Gryffindor gear," Snape commented at Harry's maroon robe with a crest on the pocket and his Hermione slippers.

Harry paused in sitting down. He hadn't thought about that. This was just his stuff. "Does it really bother you?" he asked in surprise.

Snape huffed. "Gryffindors in general bother me, yes."

"I can get other stuff." Harry shrugged as he replied. "This is just what I have."

Breakfast arrived and Harry took a piece of toast and started buttering it. Tidgy departed with a low bow. Snape hadn't replied to that offer. Feeling a little unsettled, Harry added, "Maybe you'd feel better knowing that the sorting hat wanted to put me in Slytherin." Harry said this as Snape's teacup was halfway to his mouth. He froze that way and gave Harry a very surprised appraisal.

"You turned it down?" Snape asked, truly curious sounding.

Harry thought the explanation to that was obvious, but maybe not so much in this company. "I'd met Malfoy and didn't particularly like him. I'd met Ron on the train and he was the first friend I'd ever met. So I talked the hat out of it."

"That is not supposed to be easy to do."

Harry added jam to his toast as he said in alarm at the memory, "Yeah, it kept insisting how great I'd be if it put me in Slytherin." Harry shuddered and bit into his toast.

Snape sat back and crossed his arms to give Harry a long look. "I have to admit, Potter, it does make me feel better." After thinking further, he mused, "Wonder what it meant by 'great'."

Harry put his toast down and wiped his fingers. He poured himself tea and sipped it cautiously. "Before the final battle when my dreams were getting very . . . strange . . ." Harry fidgeted as he remembered those awful nights. Snape still sat back, considering him. "When it seemed sometimes like . . . Voldemort was trying to bribe me to join him . . . Who knows?" Harry shrugged. "There were minutes in a row where it seemed worth it, just to get it all to stop."

"What was he bribing you with?" Snape asked as he returned to his breakfast.

Harry shook his head. "I don't really want to talk about it," he said. The heart rending memory of his mother calling, wondering where he was, still chilled him as much as the Dementors' last stand did.

Snape didn't press the question.

After breakfast Harry went back to his room to finish unpacking. He was basking in the notion that he could actually leave things here when he departed for school at the end of summer.

In his old trunk he found a few old robes that he simply banished away because they were too small. Underneath on the bottom were a bunch of random things that hadn't been touched in a while, like his Sneakoscope. If it hadn't been a gift, he'd have just been rid of it. His First and Second Year textbooks he shelved in the back of the wardrobe with the later ones in front on the high shelf. They hadn't been given summer assignments this year in yet another celebratory gesture, so Harry hadn't kept his texts in any order. Lining them all up by year like that was satisfying. They felt like trophies that way.

He banished a few other old things and then lifted out a few old Hermione hats, uncovering the silver mirror in the corner on the very bottom. Harry stared at its cracked glass as a kind of agony took hold of his chest. He reached in and lifted it out. The silvering was corroded more where the glass had broken. Unthinking, he ran his finger along one of the breaks, drawing a line of blood along it as the edge bit his skin.

The sting in his finger resonated with the pain in his heart. Uncontrollably furious with himself, he kicked the trunk before him several times until his foot throbbed.

"My goodness, Potter," Snape said levelly from the doorway.

Harry stopped and hunched over, cradling the silver frame against himself.

Snape went on, "I don't know whether to scold you or simply ask what is wrong."

Harry brought himself under some control and backed up to sit on the bed with his back to the door and Snape.

"Are you quite finished?" Snape asked.

"Yes," Harry replied snappishly. Snape's unaffected tone made him want to fling himself out of control, but he resisted it.

After a long pause Snape approached and said, "May I ask what is wrong?"

Harry adjusted his arms around the mirror to hide it. "I don't want to talk about it," he said quietly, forcing his voice to come out approximately normal.

Snape stepped closer to the trunk. "You never opened it," he observed in an oddly easy tone.

The comment utterly chilled Harry. He wasn't facing Snape, he thought frantically, how did he know what was haunting him? Harry watched his new guardian reach into the trunk and lift out the small wrapped box he had given him on his birthday. Harry had forgotten completely about it. It must have fallen out of his pocket when he had put his robe away. Numbly, Harry accepted it as Snape handed it to him, now.

With the mirror face down in his lap, Harry unwrapped and opened the weighty box. Inside was a gold pocket watch with the cover embossed to resemble a snitch. Silver embossed wings arched fancifully around to frame the edges.

"It's beautiful," Harry said in amazement. The cover popped open when he pressed the tab on the bottom edge. The face was white with flourished numbers in maroon.

"Nine fifty-two, I believe," Snape stated.

It took Harry a moment to come to himself and realize he should set the time. He pulled the stem and dialed to the correct time, then wound it some so it would run. He closed it and admired its shape again. "Thank you," he said, feeling undone. He wondered if he ever again would trust his emotions to stay put.

"Do you need anything?" Snape eventually asked.

Harry finally looked up at him, at his intent dark eyes. "No," he replied, feeling calm now although his heart still ached. "I think I'm all set."



Chapter 16 - It's Always Calm

The next few days in the house in Shrewsthorpe passed unremarkably, considering. Harry finally had his things arranged in his room. Hedwig had adjusted to her surroundings and came back more quickly when he let her out to stretch her wings. When he awoke, the room ceased to surprise him.

"Are you settling in all right?" Snape asked him one morning.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied. It occurred to him that they didn't talk very much, just sat in silence, though it wasn't awkward at all. "Should we be having more conversation?" Harry asked.

Snape thought a moment. "If you wish to have one, simply start one."

Harry smoothed the butter on his bread more than necessary. "I just wondered if it was too quiet."

"There is no such thing," Snape insisted. "Not after ten continuous months at Hogwarts." He handed Harry the hazelnut butter. "Not to give you the idea that I am against a conversation now and then."

"It is amazingly quiet here," Harry observed. He bit into his bread and tried to think of something to talk about. Hedwig flew in at that moment and dropped a letter before heading off again. "I think she likes it here. She's out a lot more."

"The open fields and the grain storage have far more vermin for her to hunt than the dense forests around Hogsmeade," Snape commented.

"That is probably why she doesn't insist on table scraps." Harry turned his letter over; it was his annual Hogwarts letter. He tore it open and glanced past the usual welcoming paragraph to the supplies list. "I don't suppose I can go to Diagon Alley?"

"You cannot be seen, Harry. Even the Floo Network is not considered safe for you--that is why we took the train." With movements of vague annoyance, Harry folded the letter and put it in his pocket. Snape watched him and said, "Have patience. The Ministry is working hard to get them."

Harry nodded and, with less appetite, went back to eating breakfast.

Later that afternoon, Harry had a reply for Hermione ready in an envelope, and no owl. He stood at his window and looked out at the grey sky and damp pavement outside. During the day, lots of autos and bikes and walkers went past. Harry's attention was caught by a bright yellow slicker walking on their side of the road. The person threw back the hood of the coat, allowing wavy dark brown hair to fall behind her.

The girl looked to be his age with a pert nose and dark eyes. Harry watched her make her way up the road. As she came alongside the gate to their garden, she glanced up at the house and apparently saw Harry standing at the window because a flash of consternation crossed her brow. She put her head down and walked faster. Harry stepped back from the window. He understood how it felt to be watched and certainly didn't want to bring that feeling on someone else.

* * *

Harry's new routine began to feel mostly normal, although he found himself fidgeting fiercely during moments when he considered everything all at once and felt startled by it all. In the morning this often happened when he looked about his new room and it happened this morning. Hedwig fluffed herself and put her head under her wing, apparently believing it too early to rise. Even though it was early, Harry felt almost too well rested; he hadn't had a single dream of dark shadows since arriving. This led him to believe that they were figments of his post-Dementor uneasiness, rather than actual visions. He was glad to be rid of them, whatever the reason. He put on his dressing gown, stretched, and headed downstairs.

Breakfasts still felt odd in the closer space of the dining room in contrast to the high ceiling of the Great Hall. While Snape read the *Prophet* Harry looked about the room, trying to make the room feel familiar, even the unusual objects on the mantel such as the slender, engraved silver vase and the blackened wooden box with little drawers on three sides. On the other wall, the windmill turned slowly in the dark landscape painting.

Harry sat back when he had finished and Tidgy came in a moment later to collect his plate. As the elf departed, he bowed at Snape. Harry wished he did not do that. Even after a week, Harry wasn't used to it and suspected he would not ever be. Wishing he could go outside to look around, especially since it was a sunny morning, he propped his head on his hand and stared at the turning windmill.

Snape's voice interrupted his somewhat melancholy musings. "Is everything all right?"

Harry straightened and clasped his hands before him. "Yeah. Just, uh, a little bored. If I use an obsfucation charm, can I go out for a bit on my broomstick?"

"It would be best if you did not. Such a charm will not fool all of those wishing to find you." He spoke sternly but Harry didn't feel it as correction, but as something else he wasn't used to--protection. He gave up his imaginings of a quick flight of exploration. Thinking ahead of the long day inside, he must have sighed aloud because Snape said, "Perhaps I can show you a few spells?"

Harry brightened. "I'd like that."

"Go and move the items in the hall aside to get them out of the way, if you would."

Jumping up eagerly, Harry went to do this. The hall didn't contain very much-- just a padded bench that angled up at the ends, a tall oil lamp, a small tall table, and a large rug. Harry hovered all this aside beside the door to the drawing room. The resulting open space appeared perfect for dueling. Harry was pacing it off when Snape stepped in.

"Not quite large enough," Snape said, sounding amused.

Harry found himself smiling. "What good spells do you know?"

Snape stopped in the center of the floor. "All kinds. What would you like to learn?"

Harry thought that over. "You know. Something I've always wanted explained--why can't a wizard levitate himself? It'd be very useful. Professor Flitwick insisted it wouldn't work on yourself, but why won't it work on, say, my shoes, with me in them?"

Snape crossed his arms, looking smug but amused at Harry who was studying his footwear. "It isn't simply that the spell will not work on the caster. It is more complicated than that."

Harry wasn't entirely listening. "When I hover something else and then step on it; the spell still collapses. But if someone else hovers it, well, someone like Hermione, lots of others can step on it."

With a flick Snape hovered a small battered step stool from the kitchen and let it rest on the floor before Harry. "Levitation is a spell of gravity. It is deeply entwined with gravity. The caster must be rooted on the ground to successfully cast

it. If you were to levitate that stool . . . " Harry did so, holding it a foot above the floor. Snape went on, "As soon as you step upon it, you are no longer rooted to gravity. You can not push against gravity to retain the hover. Do you understand?"

Harry put one foot up on the floating stool, it twisted sideways, mostly because he wasn't maintaining the spell well while moving around. When he started to pick up his other foot, as soon as his weight began to lift from his lower foot, the stool sank in response. "Huh," Harry muttered, backing away and letting the stool rest on the floor.

"Come over here and I'll demonstrate it another way," Snape suggested. "You clearly have the levitation charm mastered. Given that you had six years to do so . . . one would hope that you would." He backed up a step. "In a moment I want you to try levitating it again. *Wingardium Leviosa*."

Snape was pointing his wand at Harry, who drifted upward and couldn't help trying to reach down with his toes, only to be lifted just out of reach. Harry glanced around, he wouldn't mind being this tall, he thought. Snape said, "Go ahead and try to levitate it now."

Harry twisted in the air to give it a go. The stool refused to budge, even on several tries, and indeed the spell didn't feel right. The floor met his feet and the stool jumped into the air. "So you're saying even if someone else levitates me, I still can't make it work."

"Correct."

Harry rested the stool back on the floor with a *thunk*. "I understand." He went to pick up the stool to take it back down to Tidgy. With it tucked under his arm, Harry asked, "So, what if I'm on an aeroplane and I'm trying to hover something on the same aeroplane?"

"I have to confess to never having been in such a contraption." He sounded pleased about that.

"Oh. Neither have I . . . but I wouldn't be on the ground in that case, so, would the spell work?"

Snape looked honestly uncertain. "I don't know," he answered reluctantly.

Harry started past with his burden. "That's okay. I still understand why it doesn't work."

* * *

The silence of the house was most acute at night. The road, so close to the house as to present a hazard to traffic, carried few automobiles after dark. Harry listened to the rush of blood in his ears as he drifted off to sleep.

Harry awoke with a jolt a few hours after falling into hard sleep. He wasn't certain what had awoken him; he thought perhaps he had heard something. His heart raced as he listened, straining in the silence around him. Harry had experienced too many incidents of paranoia that had saved his life to fall back to sleep, even in a quiet house. He picked up his wand, slipped out of bed, and padded to the door. Silently, he pushed it open and stretched his ears to listen. The clock in the library ticked just at the edge of hearing.

Especially if you feel unsafe, played in Harry's mind as he considered that he should just go back to bed. Not following instructions had led Harry to more pain than he cared to recall. Before he could change his mind, he stepped onto the balcony and along the wall to Snape's door. He listened as he stood there . . . still no sounds. It occurred to him then that Tidgy might have been working on something. But Harry hadn't heard him any other night.

Harry carefully turned the handle to the bedroom and stepped inside, taking the inside handle in his other grasp and letting it close and relatch in near silence. Halfway across the floor he whispered, "Severus?"

The form on the bed started instantly. "Harry?"

"I heard something," Harry said quietly.

Snape tossed the covers aside and, with his wand in his hand from the bedstand, stepped over to him. "Stay here."

Harry disobeyed and followed him to the doorway. Snape opened it and looked out. He tapped his wand on the door-frame. Faint blue sparkles spread along the wood down to the floor and, a moment later, out across the walls of the hall. As they framed the corridor leading to the back entryway, the sparkles dipped to red. Snape stepped back suddenly, pushing Harry back with his arm. They both stood there for a long moment, their breathing the only sound.

"How many?" Harry whispered very quietly.

"Several." He pushed Harry back farther. "Stay here."

"Not a chance. They don't know I'm here--draw them out and I'll hit them." Harry spelled his hands and knees with a murmured Gecko charm and ducked past Snape, who, in the inky darkness, reached out for him too late. Before he could be grabbed again, Harry climbed up the wall and over the ceiling along one of the dark beams. He lowered himself quietly into the far corner of the opposite balcony. In the dim light he could see Snape's form in the doorway, ducking down. This was a good setup--he could feel it.

Nothing happened for several breaths. Harry's mind raced. If he were attacking, he would come up under a cloak. Harry whispered, "*Accio cloak*," as he pointed at the steps. A grunt sounded from there and a struggle started with black limbs appearing and disappearing. Harry incanted a binding curse and a half-covered figure toppled down the stairs and lay still. Another figure moved across the floor and bent over the first. Harry, feeling less generous, fired a blasting curse this time.

This was a mistake because the blue line of the spell gave away his location. He leapt to his feet and, bent low, scuttled toward the other end of the balcony. A blast came up through the wood where he had been crouched, throwing wood chips and heat at his back. Harry stopped in the middle of the balcony, in case the other end was too obvious. His heart continued to beat rapidly from the near miss.

Snape fired something from the doorway of his bedroom and an exchange of spells ensued. Now they would know that there were two of them, Harry thought with a frown. A curse hit Snape in the shoulder, spinning him back against the door. "Severus," Harry breathed. When Snape didn't reappear in the doorway, Harry panicked. He spelled his hands, feet and knees again quickly and scurried up the wall and over the ceiling.

"What is this?" a deep voice asked from below. A spell struck Harry as he sped across, breaking the Gecko Charm. He fell away from the high ceiling and hung suspended. A twist of his body gave him a dim glimpse of Snape pointing his wand at him, presumably using a hover charm. Directly below him, a Death Eater raised his wand. He could see his teeth glinting in the spare light from the window as he took a breath to speak another curse.

Thinking quickly, Harry waved his wand to cancel out the hover charm. He landed, relatively softly, on the pudgy man about to spell him. The dark wizard hissed and grabbed Harry by the hair and they started to scuffle on the hard floor. Harry was about half the other man's weight, so in a moment, the wizard was on top, arm cocked to punch him.

"Well, well, well," a familiar voice said from the nearby doorway. Harry looked up at Lucius Malfoy striding slowly over to them. The man, Harry assumed it must be Mulciber, leaned back with a sadistic smirk. "Imagine finding you here, Mr. Potter," Malfoy said with a tone of anticipated pleasure. Harry could only see his light-colored eyes surrounded by the halo of his long hair. He raised his wand, Harry saw the disk of green flash around Malfoy's feet. Mulciber's weight was on his legs, he couldn't twist in time to reach it. The words were just forming on Malfoy's tongue. Harry shouted and grabbed Mulciber, desperately twisting them both over onto the floor. Green flashed everywhere around Harry, prickles of pain spiked along his arms where he clutched the man's soft upper arms.

Harry heard Snape shout, "*Expelliarmus!*" and Malfoy cursing. "Harry?" Snape asked in concern. With a grunt, Harry pushed the limp weight of Mulciber off of him with ominously tingling hands.

"Merlin, I hate that spell," Harry muttered and he heard Snape exhale in relief. Harry felt around the floor for his wand. When he had it in hand, he stood up beside his guardian. "Did we get all of them?"

"Yes." Snape put a chain binding charm on Malfoy, knocking him back to sit against the wall. "Can you keep an eye on him while I summon assistance?" he asked Harry. With his wand free he waved the chandeliers up brighter.

"Sure," Harry replied and raised his wand to point it at the blonde man. Snape stepped away quickly.

In a tired voice Malfoy said quietly, as his head lolled against the wall, "What are *you* doing here, Potter? We thought we'd have a little fun punishing our traitor . . . didn't expect to find you. Really didn't expect to find you. Couldn't find you, in fact."

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry said and rather enjoyed saying it.

In a taunting voice Malfoy said, "Wouldn't have expected you to be anyone's plaything."

"What are you talking about?"

Malfoy chuckled. "Of course, of course," he said in a patronizing voice. "You are probably potioned to not remember. Pathetic, but it does have certain . . . interesting possibilities."

"Shut up," Harry repeated with more force.

Snape came back out of the library. "The ministry will be here shortly." He raised his wand at Malfoy. "Check the one by the steps."

"Which one?"

"The one that isn't dead already."

Harry, with a grimace, stepped over to the two forms on the floor at the bottom of the steps. The one tangled in the invisibility cloak lay with his head at a very odd angle. The other had a broken nose and was also in a chain binding. "Doesn't look like he is going anywhere."

"Find their wands if you can."

Harry found one on the floor. The other may have been tangled in the dead man's cloak. As he searched, he heard Malfoy taunting Snape. "Was he your reward for turning against our Lord?"

"You didn't add a binding curse to his mouth?" Snape asked from across the room.

"I was finding his stupidity entertaining," Harry replied as he lifted the edge of the cloak where the man's hand was trapped under his thigh. He found the wand there and, biting his lip, slid it out. He brought them both back over.

Snape took them in hand. "I'm not taking any chances. Unlike you, Potter," he snapped harshly. Harry hadn't heard that tone in a long time; he cringed from it.

The outside door opened and Tonks, Shacklebolt, and another wizard stepped out of the entryway, wands out. They relaxed as they took in the scene.

"Lucius Malfoy," Shacklebolt said. "How very good to see you."

Malfoy growled at him.

"One of these is dead . . . Rookwood it looks like," Tonks said crouching next to the half-invisible Death Eater beside the last step.

The other Auror pointed at the struggling wizard chained beside the stairs. "I'll take him and come back."

Tonks stepped over to them. "Where is Pettigrew?" she asked Malfoy.

The blonde man laughed a little crazily. "As if I would answer questions from a freak like you. Freaks like you." He looked around at them all. "You are an insult to wizardry--you disgust me."

Harry crouched before the other man. "Too bad you missed the show, Malfoy. You know, the one in the Entrance Hall at Hogwarts. Twenty-two D.E. and nineteen students aged thirteen to seventeen . . . guess who won?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed in fury. "Gloat while you can, Potter."

"I will, thanks. I got what I wanted; Voldemort is dead." Harry thought a moment. "That name doesn't have any power anymore, does it. Vold-e-mort. Just doesn't have the dark ring to it that it used to have. Sad, isn't it?" he asked mockingly.

Snape stepped over and patted Harry's shoulder. He looked up and Snape shook his head lightly. Harry took the hint and stood up and got out of the way. The Auror Harry didn't know returned and Shacklebolt took Malfoy away. The relay of prisoners and bodies continued until it was just the two of them and the Aurors.

"Well, he made a lot of threats regarding Pettigrew. Could be empty but we'll stand guard for the night and spell the place in the morning," Shacklebolt said. He and the others followed Snape's gesture for them to retire to the drawing room. Tidgy showed up with tea, shaking so the cups rattled. Harry took the tray before an accident happened and set it down, ignoring the dark look from Snape as he did so.

"You are in trouble, Potter," Snape said.

"Yes, sir," Harry said as he poured tea.

"I have to think of an appropriately severe punishment."

"Yes, sir," Harry repeated.

The Aurors looked between the two of them. "Kind of surprised to find you here, Harry," Tonks said.

"I live here," Harry said as he handed her a cup of tea on a saucer.

"You do?" she asked, confused. She looked to Snape for confirmation and received a raised brow in reply.

"It isn't generally known," Harry said, "but Severus adopted me."

Tonks dropped her cup and saucer. The noise of it smashing grated on Harry's nerves. The Auror cleaned it up with a sweep of her wand. "Adopted?" she choked. "You're kidding, right?" She looked between them. Harry gave her a hard stare. "All right, that was the wrong thing to say." She shook her head and breathed, "Wow."

Harry sat down and poured himself some tea, wishing it were mulled mead.

"When did this happen?" she asked, her voice forced into something conversational.

"August second," Harry said.

"Well, congratulations, Harry." She said automatically as she poured another cup for herself.

"Thank you," Harry said, trying to sound equally conversational.

Tonks looked at Snape over the rim of her new teacup, then blinked rapidly in disbelief.

Shacklebolt leaned forward. "This is Tristan Rogan, by the way," he said, indicating the other Auror. "I should have done introductions."

They each shook hands with Rogan. "Thank you for getting rid of Voldemort, Mr. Potter," Rogan said.

"No problem," Harry quipped.

"Who killed who in there?" Shacklebolt asked.

"I chained up Lucius and the other one. Harry did the other two," Snape stated.

"The two dead ones were Harry?" Tonks asked. She turned to him. "Getting a little rough, aren't we? Don't go for a Killing Curse as your first resort."

"I didn't," Harry said defensively. "The one on the stairs I put a binding curse on and he fell, got tangled in the invisibility cloak as well. Must have broken his neck tumbling. Malfoy used a Killing Curse on me and I ducked under Mulciber to avoid it. My hands are still tingling," he said, a little peeved, and held them up to look at them. They looked normal at least. "I would have blocked it, but I couldn't reach his feet--my legs were trapped."

"What?" Shacklebolt asked.

"The Killing Curse, when-" Harry stopped as he saw Snape shake his head. "Why can't I say?"

"Ask Dumbledore. He didn't tell the Ministry what happened--I assume he had his reasons."

Harry rolled his eyes. Rogan said tiredly, "I thought this Order business was over."

"It is," Harry said. "Or if it isn't, I wouldn't know anyway."

"It just sounded like you had a counter to the Avada Kedavra," Shacklebolt said.

"I do," Harry said with a challenging look at Snape. They all turned to him. "Well, I have something that worked once."

"When?" Tonks asked.

"A few months ago."

"I'd like to see it," Shacklebolt said.

"And therein lies the problem," Snape said dryly and with some anger.

Harry wondered if Dumbledore had kept quiet to protect him from some kind of spell experimentation. Shacklebolt interrupted his thoughts, "We wouldn't use it on him!"

"Then you cannot test it," Snape countered.

"We'd still like to hear about it," Tonks said.

The discussion went on through the night. Harry did explain how he'd countered the Killing Curse, even though Snape didn't recommend doing so. He was disappointed that they didn't think much of his description of what he did. Darkly,

he thought that, for anyone else, surviving it would have been impressive enough. For him they thought it rather unremarkable.

When the sun finally lit the room, Harry couldn't keep his eyes open. More of the same tea he had consumed all night was not going to help. As badly as he wanted to watch the Aurors work their protective spells, Harry couldn't keep his eyes open for more than the interior ones. He finally followed Snape's repeated advice to go to bed.

By the time Snape woke him, the Aurors had left. Snape bent over him and shook his shoulder to rouse him. "Wake up, Potter; it is very late in the morning."

Harry blinked at him. He had only slept fitfully. His hands still ached. He clenched and unclenched them to relieve it.

"Get up now," Snape insisted, reminding Harry of his Aunt Petunia, which reminded Harry that he was due some kind of punishment. He sat up, rubbed his eyes and found his glasses. "The Aurors insist that Pettigrew cannot enter the house, nor even approach it now," Snape explained.

Harry's stomach complained about being empty and sour from the tea. "Do you have anything for a burning stomach?" Harry asked.

"Of course." Snape departed and returned a minute later. He gave Harry a swallow of a purple, creamy potion in a tea-cup. It made his stomach feel better as soon as it slid down that far.

"Thanks," Harry said as he handed the cup back. "It's working already." He tossed the covers aside and stretched to try to get his body moving.

"I will expect you downstairs shortly," Snape said as he departed again.

Harry gathered clean robes and went down to the bath beside the kitchen. When he came out, freshened and more awake, he found Snape in the drawing room, writing a letter.

"Sit down, Potter," Snape said, indicating one of the chairs still around the small marble table from last night.

"Uh oh," Harry commented. At Snape's questioning look, he explained, "You always use my last name that way when you are angry with me." He turned one of the chairs to face the small desk and sat down.

"I am." Snape bent his head to the letter. Harry fidgeted as he waited. He wondered, if he complained about his aching hands, could he delay his punishment. His forearms ached too, now that he thought about it. He closed his eyes as he remembered that horrible green flashing. That reminded him of the memories of his mother screaming that the Dementors drew out of him. That made him feel slightly unwell and achy more places than his hands.

"Potter?"

"Yes." Harry didn't look up at him; he didn't want to risk his current thoughts being snagged from him.

"You look as though you are punishing yourself," Snape observed.

"Not intentionally," Harry said flatly. "I'm just remembering all the times I've seen that awful green light."

"That would be a form of self-torment, at the least," Snape pointed out. After a pause, he went on. "You disobeyed me, at a time when your safety, and more likely your life, was at risk. I will not tolerate that."

"You wanted to take them all on alone?" Harry asked.

"I was in a good position to do so. As well, the house is spelled in ways you do not know. It was on my side as well, but not after you were mixed in with the others."

"I didn't realize that."

"Why did you so unwisely try to cross back over?" Snape demanded.

"You were hit," Harry said defensively.

"Not severely."

"It looked it from where I was."

Snape crossed his arms. "Altruistic or not, it was a stupid thing to do. You had lost the advantage of stealth."

"I wasn't thinking; I admit that," Harry said, chastened. He had panicked in a fundamental way he hadn't in a long time.

"You need to control this hero complex of yours," Snape said. Harry just frowned in reply. "I admit, I cannot determine a good way of punishing you for your disobedience. The normal things, bed without dinner, restricting you to your room, restricting your access to your friends, seem unduly cruel given your past treatment by your relatives."

"I also considered simply transfiguring all of your Gryffindor things into Slytherin ones, but after hearing you speaking to Malfoy last night, I feel that would be merely symbolic." He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I ask you to tell me that you will not repeat what you did."

"I can't do that," Harry said.

"No?" Snape countered sharply.

"How can I let you face four Death Eaters alone? What if something happened to you? I'd end up having to deal with them anyway. Alone." He drew in a breath past a tight chest. "I can't lose anyone else," he confessed with a catch in his voice. His eyes were suddenly burning.

"Harry," Snape said. He stood up and came around the desk. After a moment's deliberation, he touched Harry on the shoulder. "All right, you may help, should there be a next time, BUT only at my direction."

Harry nodded, blinking to control the heat in his eyes. Snape stepped away, apparently dropping the issue.

* * *

That day, letters came in from his friends, redirected from the castle to home. He knew he should write them back today, but he couldn't think of anything to write about except what had happened the night before, and he wasn't supposed to tell anyone about that. Instead, he passed the time reading an account of taming wild dragons he had found on the miscellaneous shelf in the library, hoping it would give him something to talk about with Hagrid. Finally, dinner came around. Harry ate slowly to draw it out.

As Tidgy cleared the plates, Snape said, "Hopefully this evening will be quieter than the last. It was good that you woke me. I did not hear what you did, obviously. Do not hesitate to wake me in the future, for anything that disturbs you."

Harry nodded and finished his pumpkin juice. He wished the clock would move faster so he could reasonably go to sleep. He wished he had something meaningful to pass the time. "Do you have a copy of the text Greer is going to be using?"

"I do not know what text she intends to use. I have several Seventh Year texts if you would like to read them."

Harry stood up. "I would. I need something to do."

Snape told him where to find them in the library and Harry curled up on the lounge and tried to focus on chapter one of each book. After two hours, Harry decided this was a good way to study. The important points were repeated in each book, so he didn't have to figure out what they were on his own, which made reading a lot faster and easier.

Finally it was ten o'clock. Harry put the books back where he had found them and said goodnight to Snape in the drawing room.

After the previous night, his body didn't want to relax, even though his brain was exhausted. He didn't have any potion here since he hadn't needed any. If he had any left from Hogwarts he hadn't seen it when he unpacked. Harry turned onto his side and forced the tension out of his neck.

With a groan Harry woke a third time from fitful sleep. Persistent shadows paced him through a long hall that vaguely resembled the one downstairs except miles long rather than thirty feet. Exhausted beyond reason, Harry slipped on his robe and slippers and went down the balcony. He paused outside Snape's door. By going in he was changing things, he knew. This wasn't the same as thinking something was wrong externally; this was needing help and asking for it from an adult trusted with his care. He wasn't used to this at all and it made him very uneasy.

Deciding he needed the potion more than his pride, he knocked on the wood in front of him. After a moment, a voice told him to enter. Harry did so. The room was very dark. He stepped in what he judged to be halfway. "I'm sorry, Severus, but I can't sleep."

He heard Snape sit up. The lamp flared to a pale glow. Snape was rubbing his eyes. "Come here," he said. Harry stepped over as Snape stood up in the long shirt he slept in. He used the bed for balance, making Harry realize how tired he must be as well.

"I'm sorry," Harry repeated.

"Don't be. Sit down, I'll get you something."

Harry sat on the edge of the bed and waited longer than it took for the stomach potion. Eventually, Snape came back with a teacup half-full of his usual sleeping potion. "I checked the spells; everything is secure," Snape said as he sat beside Harry. He rubbed his forehead as he held out the cup. Harry drank it down and handed it back. "I assume your nightmares have returned," Snape said.

Harry hung his head. "Yes. But I think I've figured it out."

"What is that?"

"Malfoy said they didn't know where I was. Now they do. The dreams stopped when they didn't."

"Interesting theory," Snape said doubtfully.

Harry shook his head. "Not a theory," he argued groggily. "I know that's what the shadows are. You're one of them," he added reluctantly.

Snape closed his eyes a long moment. "I am very sorry for that, Harry," he whispered.

Rambling, Harry explained, "When you wake me . . . in my dream there is a shadow very close, and then you wake me and you are right there." Harry swayed as he gestured with his hand.

Snape put an arm behind him to lower him back to the bed. By the time he was horizontal, Harry was out. Snape studied his sleeping face before he said, "You cannot know how sorry I am." Then after a pause, "What have you done to me, Potter?" He freed his arm and sat up. He shook his head with a huff of self-disgust and pulled out his wand to hover the boy to his own bed.

When he had settled Harry in and covered him, he stared down at him by the warm lamplight. He had given the boy a double dose and did not expect he would wake up again. He left the lamp up a little, just in case.

* * *

Harry yawned widely and rubbed his disoriented head as he entered the dining room the next morning. As he sat down, he had to use his hands on the table for balance.

"I gave you quite a bit of the potion last night," Snape commented.

"Is that why I feel like this?" Harry asked, rubbing his eyes to coax them to stay open.

"Undoubtedly. It will wear off in a few hours," Snape said conversationally as he read the *Prophet*.

Malfoy's insinuations played through Harry's mind but he dismissed them.

"Would you like this?" Snape asked as he held out the newspaper.

"Am I in it?"

"Remarkably . . . no."

"Yeah, sure." Harry accepted it and read the text of a speech given by Fudge where he took credit for his Aurors apprehending four of the remaining free Death Eaters. Harry shook his head, but felt a little relieved at the anonymity.

* * *

The next day, Snape said, "I need to go to a meeting at Hogwarts. I don't want you left here alone; you should come with me."

"You said Pettigrew couldn't get in."

"Nevertheless . . . "

"You are worrying too much, sir," Harry criticized as he put his quill down from taking notes from the Potions texts. Snape seemed to take affront at that. Harry went on, "You said, and the Aurors said, that the other two D.E. are not consequential and probably aren't even with Pettigrew."

Darkly, Snape said, "I think you want him to show up, Potter. So you can do him in."

Harry looked down at his parchments. "Well, you said I couldn't go after him . . . "

"Revenge is not what you think it is."

Harry didn't look up at him. He pretended to go back to his notes.

With a dismissive tone, Snape said, "Very well, I will trust the Auror's spelling and assume that if it fails you will call for help, NOT try to handle it yourself."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, although he didn't look up as he did so, afraid his lie would show for certain.

In a darker tone Snape said, "And if not, then you will suffer the consequences." He stalked off with a swish of his robe.

As he heard the sound of the Floo powder canister scrapping on the mantel, Harry almost called him back. He had disappointed Snape and found himself hating to do that. He pulled his wand from his pocket and placed it on the desk beside his parchment as he went back to his notes.

An hour and a half later, Snape returned. Harry hadn't even moved. "Good meeting, sir?"

"Good enough. No opportunities for revenge, I assume?"

"No," Harry admitted, wishing this topic would get dropped.

* * *

Days later, Harry watched the yellow slicker go by again while he was looking for something in his trunk. He was careful this time to stay far enough from the glass so as to be invisible. The girl glanced up at his window and didn't see him, apparently because she continued by at the same pace. Harry wondered who she was. He envied her freedom to walk along the street. He slammed the trunk lid down hard in anger then sat on it until he had himself under control.

Pettigrew. Wormtail. He hated him now. Harry didn't want him in Azkaban, he wanted him dead, preferably after a bit of pain and some of that pathetic sniveling fear of his. Realizing that everyone from Dumbledore to Sirius would be alarmed by his fantasy, he stopped it and stood up.

* * *

Harry sat back on the lounge in the library and wrote to his friends after rereading their most recent letters. Snape sat at the very small table in the corner, taking notes out of a book almost too heavy for the table's spindly legs. Harry reviewed the letters, folded them up and set them aside, not feeling energetic enough to go fetch Hedwig from his room. His eyes weren't focusing well; he rubbed them hard which made them ache more.

The clock read just after six. Harry wished it said a little later, he was feeling rather tired even though he had not done anything strenuous all day. For no particularly good reason, he felt like he had played back-to-back Quidditch matches, long ones. He slouched in his chair and mindlessly rearranged the piles of letters.

"It is dinner time, I believe," Snape said easily. He stood and set aside the large book he had been reading.

Thinking of food made Harry feel much worse suddenly. "Uh, I think I'm not very hungry," he said. He disinterestedly stacked the letters and set a book on them as a weight. He rubbed his eyes again, more gently this time.

"You are certain?" Snape asked.

It made Harry woozy to even consider it. "Yeah." He pushed himself to his feet using the lounge back. "I think I'll just go up to my room." The floor tilted a little, but he made it to the door. Snape followed him across the hall. At the bottom of the staircase, Harry hefted himself up a step using the handrail. Focusing his eyes had grown more difficult as he walked, but he resisted rubbing the aching things yet again. Snape took hold of his left arm and turned him back. "Are you feeling unwell?" he demanded.

Harry recoiled from his tone and had to take a step backward up the stairs to keep from falling. "I'm all right," he insisted. He tried unsuccessfully to straighten his back. "I'm tired, is all." Even standing up a step, he was not up to his guardian's height. Snape leaned closer and looked him over. He still had a hold of Harry's arm. "Really," Harry insisted. "It's nothing." He was feeling weak despite his assertions and he dearly wanted to go to his room.

Snape's eyes narrowed as he studied Harry. He tossed his hand free of his long sleeve and raised it to Harry's forehead.

"It's not--" Harry mumbled.

"You are feverish," Snape stated. He released Harry's arm with a push to urge him upstairs. "Go to your room, then." He stepped away with a flare of his robe and headed down to the toilet beside the kitchen.

Anxious, Harry watched him disappear. He could only force himself to move by degrees. Finally, he turned to continue, an undefined ache of worry in his chest. At the top of the steps, Snape caught up to him.

"Come along," he said, retaking his arm. "I found an antipyretic. It will make you feel better, at least."

Harry was led to sit on the edge of his bed. He could not find the strength for anything, so he waited mutely. Snape poured a blob of thick dark liquid into a small glass of water and handed it to him. "Drink it," he commanded levelly.

Harry put it to his lips and forced himself to swallow past a wave of nausea. Between sips he watched Snape recork the bottle and set it on the night stand along with a fresh jug of water and a cloth. Harry held the tainted water before his mouth and stared out at the dimmer main hall. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"You're what?"

Harry's lips moved mutely a few words before he repeated, "I'm sorry." He thought about drinking more of the dilute medicine, but he could not imagine swallowing around the anxiety tightening his throat. He held it out for Snape to take it back.

"Finish it," Snape said firmly. Harry tried to obey. His guardian paced away, rubbing the bridge of his nose. When Harry eventually set the empty glass aside, Snape asked, "Why are you apologizing?"

Harry thought that over and hesitated replying. He rubbed his eyes carefully and said in a quiet voice, "I don't mean to be a problem."

Snape froze with his hand pushing back his long hair. "You aren't. Have I given you that impression?" he asked in disbelief.

Harry could not find a response. The question had confused him. The hard tone and the words clattered together in his brain. "I just--" he stopped. He felt dizzy now and he could not understand why Snape wasn't angry with him, or was, but in some incomprehensible way.

"Lie down and rest; I'll check on you in an hour or so." When Harry did not comply immediately, Snape said, "Harry," in a firm tone.

That jarred him into moving, a bit like an automaton, to kick off his house shoes, pull off his glasses and lie on his side. The room did not cease to spin, it just did it sideways now, which was almost worse. Harry closed his eyes to block out the unstable view of his room.

Snape returned an hour later. With the heavy clouds was dark outside now, so he turned up the bedside lamp. Harry lay in his day robe, half curled on his side. A sheen of sweat coated the boy's face and he looked pale in the warm light. Snape pressed his hand to the damp forehead and found Harry was even warmer than before. Snape frowned, thinking that he had had too much faith in the potion he had given him.

"Harry," he said, shaking one boney shoulder.

Harry made a small noise and rolled onto his back. One hand clawed weakly at the damp robes clinging to him. He cracked his eyes and squinted at Snape, brow furrowing.

"How are you feeling?" Snape asked. Eyes unnaturally bright, Harry blinked at him without replying. Snape straightened. "I'll contact a Healer; you may have something more serious than an influenza."

Harry shook his head clumsily. "Doctors are expensive," he mumbled.

"I would not summon you a doctor; a Healer would be much more effective," Snape commented.

Harry's eyes moved around the room, squinting hard. He then looked at Snape in confusion. After swallowing hard, Harry said, "Professor?" in a way that made Snape suspect he had lost track of the here and now.

"Yes, definitely a Healer." Snape stood quickly. "Don't move."

Harry looked like he wanted to say something, but Snape did not give him the chance. Before the hearth, he hesitated contacting St. Mungos, and considered instead contacting McGonagall and having her find Madame Pomfrey. The high likelihood that they were both out of the country, led him to request the hospital after he tossed in the powder.

The hospital greeningwitch insisted that someone would arrive within fifteen to twenty minutes. Snape straightened his tall frame and went back up to the boy's room.

Harry was half sitting, leaning over to pour himself some water. Snape intervened, taking the jug from shaky hands. He filled the glass and held it out. Harry looked at him uncertainly before accepting it. Snape stood beside the bed as Harry thirstily drank it down, then took the glass back. Harry adjusted his glasses and looked around the room with blood-stained eyes. Snape soaked the cloth in water from the jug and folded it in thirds. He held it in his hand. "Harry?" he prompted.

Clearly disoriented, Harry looked up at him. "Where?"

Calmly, Snape replied, "You are home." When this only increased Harry agitation, Snape said, "It's all right, Harry, you are ill and not yourself." He held out the cold, damp cloth. "Put this on your forehead, it should make you feel better."

Biting his lip, Harry accepted it and removed his glasses to press it over his eyes. Snape thought he could see Harry's shoulders relax as the cold made itself felt. The sight again of Harry's sweat-soaked robe sent Snape to the wardrobe for a set of pyjamas.

Setting them on the bed before Harry, just as he was readjusting his glasses, startled the boy. He looked sharply up at Snape.

"Harry," Snape said, trying to reassure him. "You are feverish. Trust me for a short while until you feel better."

Harry swallowed hard again and thought that over. It occurred to Snape that depending upon how disoriented Harry was, there may be no basis for trust. He hesitated while he considered how best to proceed. As he mulled over this odd dilemma, Harry felt his robe front and reached for the clean clothes. Snape stepped back to give him a little space. He hoped the Healer wasn't too long in coming.

Changed, Harry clumsily crawled under the duvet and dropped back onto his pillow. Snape returned to his side and rewetted the cloth.

"I don't. . ." Harry began as Snape tugged off his glasses before laying the compress across his forehead. Snape chose to disregard Harry's confusion this time.

"The Healer will be here in a matter of minutes. Relax."

Surprisingly, Harry seemed to accept that. He reached up and adjusted the cool cloth before closing his eyes. Snape brought an old straight-backed chair from against the wall and sat beside the bed. Minutes later, Harry's eyes snapped open. His alarmed gaze took in the room. He reached a hand out before him as though expecting to touch something that was not there. More confused by encountering only air, Harry's arm dropped to the bed. "No spiders," he observed.

Snape did something unwise then. Unable to resist his curiosity; he leaned over and caught Harry's gaze and pried his mind open. He had a vision of a cramped space, light leaking in only in streaks. A woman's voice in a difficult tone was scorning him for the inconvenience he was causing everyone. Harry's fevered brain couldn't manage anything more than pathetic apology.

Snape closed the Legilimency down, reeling and nauseous from Harry's hallucinatory mind. It took many deep, cleansing breaths before he fully returned to himself. Pushing the chair aside, Snape moved to sit on the bed. He took Harry's arms in his hands and spoke his name. "You are not with the Dursleys anymore--you are with me," he stated. When this again caused more confusion in Harry's eyes, Snape released him and sat back with a huff. As compelled as he was to attempt to explain, he imagined the futility of it. Depending upon where Harry was, he may be incapable of understanding. "Just be calm, Harry," he said. "You aren't in your cupboard." A stab of something went through Snape as he said that, surprising and dismaying him.

Harry's bright eyes looked around, dwelling on the large stone hearth. "This'sa nice room," he slurred.

Snape raised a brow. "I'm glad you think so."

Harry's lips moved in silence before he said, "You're being really nice to me."

"I do try . . . to do so. Now."

The sound of the door knocker rescued him from further explanation.

A middle-aged wizard stood in the doorway. Snape barely heard his introduction of himself before he hurried him in and up the staircase. "He has been feverish almost two hours. I gave him an antipyretic to no effect." Snape realized he was rambling and forced himself to stop.

The Healer stepped over to the bed, set his battered leather case on the floor, and sat on the edge. "Hello, son. Not feeling so well, I hear," he said in a friendly tone.

Harry shook his head in agreement. "Who are you?" he breathed in a bit of a challenging tone.

"Healer Redletting." To Snape he said reassuringly, "There is something virulent going around." He pulled out his wand. "Open wide."

Harry opened his mouth and was spelled in a way that made color radiate all around the inside of his mouth.

"Any trouble breathing?" he asked. When Harry didn't reply, Redletting turned to Snape, who shook his head. He used a few more spells then sat back in thought. "I would have thought it was Bostick Influenza, but it doesn't look like it."

Snape found himself immensely disliking the man's indecision. Harry fingered the compress on his forehead as though noticing it for the first time. "I knew . . . I knew they wanted revenge," Harry stated knowingly.

"Did you?" Redletting said matter-of-factly before giving Snape a questioning look.

"He has been a little delirious," Snape explained easily, although he hoped Harry did not feel the need to talk too much.

"Apparently," the Healer agreed. He removed two vials of silvery liquid from his bag. He uncorked one and used a spell to charm a drop of blood out of Harry's finger without pricking his skin. The drop fell from Harry's unmarred fingertip into the vial.

"He still wants to kill me," Harry commented.

"Who does?" Redletting asked as he repeated this with the other vial.

"There isn't anything else left," Harry went on, ignoring the question.

Snape rubbed his chin and met the concerned, bordering on suspicious, gaze of the Healer. Redletting tightened the corks on the vials and shook them a moment before holding them up to look through them at the lamplight.

"He killed mum and dad, why not me?" Harry went on. Snape stepped around the bed to the other side as Harry said, "He can't if I kill him first."

Redletting swallowed hard and gave Harry a disturbed look. He looked reluctantly up at Snape as if afraid he perhaps now knew too much. Snape sighed and reached over to pull the compress aside. He had to gesture with his head to get the other wizard to look down at his patient.

"Yah!" the man said, startled.

His reaction startled Harry as well, making him roll away to escape. Snape sat down and pushed him back. "Professor?" Harry said in confusion.

"Great goblins," Redletting blurted.

"That is why he speaks so," Snape stated. He narrowed his eyes at the Healer. "Perhaps the Mistrapherian has finished," he prompted.

"Huh? Oh." Redletting held up the vials. "Ah, it is Bostick. Bad case of it." He rummaged around in his bag a moment as he said, "Raised Muggle, though, right? That lack of childhood exposure to Diabolvirus makes adult cases much harder." He pulled out two bottles and poured some of each into the water glass.

"Here you are, Mr. Potter," he said as he handed it to him. Snape considered then abandoned his notion of assisting Harry with the cup. Harry sniffed it doubtfully before taking a sip.

"The *Prophet* has been complaining about not knowing where he is," Redletting said.

Lowering his brow, Snape demanded, "You will not be saying, correct? As you heard, his life *is* in danger."

Redletting sat straight. "No, of course not," he said nervously. Snape decided the man was telling the truth. He considered using a memory charm on him but if he needed to contact him should Harry not recover, that would make it difficult. Redletting indicated the two bottles on the night stand. "One more dose in four hours and he'll be completely recovered."

Harry had finished the cup and held it out. "Good boy," Redletting said as he accepted it. Harry's eyes darkened and narrowed to such a degree that the Healer stood suddenly. "Well," he muttered as he picked up his bag. "I'll be going then."

Snape followed him downstairs. In the entryway Redletting paused and pulled a blank parchment pad from his pocket. He muttered a charm and the bill appeared on it. He tore off the top sheet and handed it over. Snape squinted at the illegible writing before pulling his coin purse from his cloak pocket. He handed over a galleon and four sickles.

"Do contact me if he isn't himself by morning," Redletting said as he stepped out. He turned and said, "And do tell him I was very honored to meet him."

Snape nodded him out. Back upstairs Harry was sound asleep. The color had returned to his cheeks and the sheen had dried from them. More tension than Snape realized had built in him, drained upon seeing those signs. He turned the lamp down and left.

Four hours later, Snape reluctantly roused a very heavily sleeping Harry. "How are you feeling?" he asked as he sat on the bed.

"Better," Harry breathed. He accepted the offered cup of medicine and took a gulp. "Throat's a little sore," he commented hoarsely.

"No confusion about where you are?"

Harry froze with the cup to his bottom lip. "No," he answered carefully. "Was I confused?"

"Rather," Snape replied dryly.

"Oh," Harry said. "I hope I wasn't too much trouble."

Snape remembered Harry's uneasiness around him which contrasted starkly with his current relaxed posture. "No trouble. You worried the Healer with your dark talk of revenge and killing, but I explained."

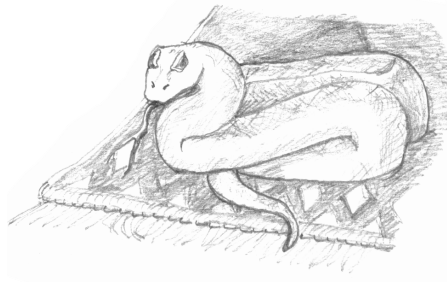
"I what?" Harry asked. He then frowned, as though upset he had been taken in. "Right," he commented.

Snape's look was intent, but he did not argue, simply set the remaining medicines aside and left Harry to sleep.

* * *

Harry realized that the girl in the yellow slicker went by at three-forty every day. He started making a point of being at his window at that time. He only ever saw her go in one direction. As unproductive as it was, he spent time wondering if she were walking in a loop or just going back after dark when he rarely looked out. He looked for clues to whether she was a Muggle or a witch and couldn't decide from what he saw. Weighing the two, he found reasons to wish for one or the other.

He considered sitting out in the garden at that time, but he wasn't supposed to go out. Frustrated, he started practicing Transfiguration spells using his Sneakoscope, which quickly rendered it even more inoperable than it had been before.



Chapter 17 - Unannounced Visitors

At breakfast one sunny morning, Snape said, "I have another meeting this afternoon. Do you think you can manage to behave yourself for a few hours?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

"You have been very quiet," Snape observed.

"So have you," Harry countered with a light grin.

"True."

"I thought you preferred that," Harry reminded him, just to make conversation.

"In general, yes. Do not use that as a reason to be silent." When Harry shrugged, Snape went on, "I realized this morning that we have only nine days remaining before I need to return for the next school year. I will expect you to return with me at that time." He said this in a tone that left no room for argument. "I will not have much time after that."

Harry took a deep breath. He hadn't told anyone what had happened. It wasn't the kind of news he would usually keep from his best friends. When he did tell them, he would have to explain why he had waited so long. That was assuming Ron hung around long enough to listen to that.

"I'll go back with you *then*, sir," Harry said. "I don't have much desire to be around here for long alone." As he said this he thought of the girl in the yellow slicker and wondered if that were really true.

As he departed, Snape repeated that Harry should call for help with the Floo at any sign of trouble. "Yes, yes," Harry said, "even if Pettigrew bows to the floor and begs me to kill him. I remember from last time."

Alone in the house, Harry sat back on his bed with the eminently practical writing tablet from Fred and George. It had a never out kind of charm for parchment and a spill-proof inkwell. He dipped his quill and addressed a reply to Hermione's last letter. Even though he hadn't said anything in particular to her, because he kept thinking he should explain things in person, she commented about how happy he sounded. Harry grinned as he reread her letter again and thought about what to say in return that didn't include anything about his current digs, which were still supposed to be secret.

Halfway through his long reply, the door knocker clacking downstairs. This pulled Harry out of his thoughts and he imagined the girl in the yellow slicker standing at the door. He put his things aside, jumped off the bed and peered out the window. A tall man and a younger woman stood outside. Harry easily recognized the nose on the man; although the slight greying around the temples was different. He rushed downstairs, stopping in the kitchen. "Tidgy? Can you make tea, please?" Harry asked the house-elf.

Tidgy's eyes filled to near overflowing instantly. "Of course, Master Harry," the elf said in near ecstasy.

Shaking his head in disgust, Harry went quickly to the door and swung it open. The occupants of the garden turned to him and turned from curious to rather surprised. "You must be Shazor Snape," Harry said to the man. The woman, from closer view, wasn't as young as he had thought, but wore makeup as though she were.

"And you are . . . Harry Potter," the man said, stunned. His voice wasn't as low as Severus' and his jaw line was rounder, but otherwise they were identical.

Harry stepped back. "Do you want to come in?"

"Is my son here?" Shazor asked warily.

In a casual way Harry replied, "He had a meeting at Hogwarts. He should be back anytime."

As they stepped into the hall, Shazor looked up in alarm at the hole burned in the balcony and the other burn marks on the walls. Harry realized only then how they must look; he didn't even notice them anymore.

"I'm so pleased to meet you," the woman said earnestly. Harry knew from some previous careful questioning that this must be Shazor's second wife. "I'm Gretta, by the way."

They shook hands and Harry led them into the drawing room. He gestured for them to sit and took a seat himself around the marble table. Gretta smiled at him again as though pleased just to be there with him. Shazor sat rigid, looking critically around the room.

"How are you doing after that nasty fight with He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named?" Gretta asked him.

"I'm doing fine, ma'am. Thank you."

"It is such a relief having him gone," she breathed. "So much trouble just a few bad wizards can create." Harry nodded in agreement.

"Gretta," Shazor said stiffly, "I am sure he does not want to speak of it."

"I am all right with speaking about it, sir," Harry said in a friendly manner. Indeed, he had been spared this for quite a while.

"Such a nice young man you are, dear," Gretta said affectionately as she patted him on the knee.

Tidgy came in with the tea, setting the tray on the table and bowing. "Thank you, Tidgy," Harry said as he started to pour. Tidgy looked as though he might burst into tears. He bowed very low and rushed from the room. Harry steadfastly ignored the looks of total shock he was receiving from the two guests.

They all sipped their tea. After a polite pause Shazor said, "I am wondering why you are here, Mr. Potter."

Harry looked into his cup and decided which tactic to take. It was Severus' place to explain things, he supposed, and he was really not certain what this man's reaction might be. "I was bored of living at my school." Thinking more explanation was in order, he added, "My headmaster didn't think anyone would imagine I'd be here."

"You are hiding?" he asked with an edge.

"Yes," Harry admitted, "from anyone who might want revenge on me."

Shazor arranged his robes and sat back down. "Perhaps given who you are, Mr. Potter, you can answer my questions." At Harry's shrug, he pulled out a copy of the *Prophet* from a few days ago. "I am curious if my son is at risk."

Harry accepted the paper and glanced at the headline: *Ministry to seek out every last Death Eater and Associate of Voldemort*. He handed it back. "Why would he be?" Harry asked. "He--"

Shazor interrupted as he tucked the paper away, "Perhaps you are not the right person to speak with."

Calmly, Harry said, "I know he used to be a Death Eater, but the Ministry knows that he has been helping Albus Dumbledore for twenty years or so."

"He has?" Shazor asked. "How do you know that?"

"Because Dumbledore believes it," Harry said simply. "There are only three Death Eaters left free."

"Counting my son?"

Harry sat back with his cup. "I don't count Professor Snape."

Shazor relaxed at that and then with a furrowed brow asked, "May I inquire what happened in the main hall?"

"The hole?" Harry thought a moment. "I'm not sure, but I think that was Lucius Malfoy." He sipped his tea calmly.

"There was a fight here?"

"It mentions it in that article, I think," Harry explained. "Though it doesn't say where it happened."

Shazor took a biscuit from the open tin on the tray and examined it rather than eating it. "So you do not think there is any risk of the Ministry arresting my son?"

Harry took up a biscuit as well and munched on it. It was ginger flavored and very good. "The night of the attack, we sat around this table with Tonks, Rogan, and Shacklebolt until morning. They are Ministry Aurors," Harry clarified. "They had lots of opportunity to take him away if they'd wanted. They don't seem to have any interest in him. Quite the opposite--it was more like a reunion."

Shazor took that in. Harry was just topping up their tea when the Floo flare sounded in the dining room. With some trepidation Harry held still as footsteps came toward the drawing room. Severus stopped in the doorway and took in the scene with surprise that fast converted to resignation. "You did not inform me that you were coming," he criticized his father.

They all stood up in greeting. "I didn't think it necessary," Shazor said with an airy defensiveness.

Severus' eyes darted from Harry to his father before he pulled over another chair and they all returned to sitting. Harry poured out another cup of tea and passed it over.

"So," Severus stated levelly, "you have met Mr. Potter."

"Rather surprising person to have answer the door, I must admit," Shazor said. Severus raised a brow but didn't reply. Shazor made a noise of discomfort. "For several reasons," he hinted.

Harry looked between the two Snapes over the rim of his cup. "Is he referring to my dad?" he asked the younger one.

Severus sat back and crossed his arms challengingly. "I believe so."

"Oh," Harry stated casually. At Shazor's look, Harry went on with a shrug, "I didn't know him. Obviously." Harry picked up the teapot and discovered it was empty. He stood up with it and hesitated at the visitors' horrified expressions. Deciding to ignore them, he continued to leave for the kitchen.

"You have to forgive him," Severus sneered lightly, "he was raised as a Muggle . . . a Muggle house-elf."

Harry paused in the doorway to roll his eyes.

"I don't know whether to be more appalled by the strange manners of the hero of wizardry or your abominable manners, Severus," Shazor breathed.

When Harry's footsteps faded across the Hall, Snape commented, "He needs to learn that he need not cater to the adults around him. It is unfortunately the way he was raised."

After this formed a break in the conversation, Severus asked, "May I ask what you are here for?"

Shazor pulled out the *Prophet* again and handed it over. "Mr. Potter has already attempted to assure me that you are not one of the aforementioned."

Severus glanced at it and handed it back. "He is correct."

Shazor sipped his tea for a minute and frowned. "You joined them willingly--do they not know that?" he asked testily.

At that moment Harry stepped in with fresh tea. Shazor looked up sharply at him. Snape commented, "Mr. Potter knows most everything--do not concern yourself about him. If the Ministry ever knew, it has been forgotten, either accidentally or willfully. Should you wish to go over there and bring it up, they could very well take an interest, I am sure."

"I have no intention of doing so, Severus," he stated strongly.

Harry set the teapot down. "Should I leave?" he asked Severus.

"It does not matter. Sit down."

Shazor said in a voice that indicated his patience might be shallow, "I would like to speak with you alone. There are other matters to discuss."

Severus refilled his own tea and his father's and sat back with it in a forced casual attitude. "Most anything you need to discuss with me can be said in front of Harry. I have adopted him."

Shazor choked on the sip he had just taken. "You are not serious?" Gretta blinked her long eyelashes at Harry and then smiled at him sweetly, clearly charmed by the notion.

"Harry?" Severus prompted.

It took a moment for Harry to realize that he wanted him to pull out the adoption parchment. He went over to the bureau and pulled out the rolled, embossed application form. He handed it over to Severus, who handed it to his father.

As he unrolled it, Shazor asked, "Why?" in a very doubtful way.

Severus thought a moment. "I admit the reasons continue to change," he said vaguely.

Harry paused beside his chair and stared at Severus. "Is that happening to you too, sir?" he asked in quiet surprise.

Shazor let the parchment roll itself up again suddenly. "I would have appreciated being consulted before you took such a step," he said angrily. "As inheritor I would like to know he is worthy, even given who he is."

Still with forced casualness, Severus said, "Harry, how long did it take you to learn the Columnar spell?"

"The one we did a few days ago?" Harry asked. "Uh, I don't know."

"Ten minutes? Five, perhaps?"

Harry shrugged. "Something like that. It wasn't very hard."

Shazor blinked at that. Greta chimed in. She had taken hold of Shazor's arm apparently to calm him. "One would expect his magic to be very good, considering."

"Harry, in the bureau-" Severus stood suddenly. "Never mind. I will fetch it." He pulled another sheet out of a drawer and handed it to his father.

Harry recognized it from the back. "You have a copy of my O.W.L.s?" A little miffed, he added, "I don't plan to go on in Divination."

"Clap trap anyway," Shazor commented.

"Oh, Hon, that isn't true," Greta commented and patted him on the arm.

Harry sighed and held his mouth closed.

"And what do you plan to do after your schooling, Mr. Potter?" Shazor asked, now looking calculating rather than upset.

"Depending on how my N.E.W.T.s go, I plan to apply to the Auror's program."

"Goodness," Greta said, "haven't you had enough of that?"

"At the moment I feel that way, but in a month I think I won't," Harry replied evenly.

Shazor handed back the O.W.L. results. "Grades are all well and good. Are you an organized person?"

"I'm getting better," Harry admitted.

"Well mannered? Polite?" Shazor went on. "Never mind, you were polite to the house-elf as I recall." He shook his head. "At least he isn't blonde," he said.

Flatly, Harry said, "Severus was debating between adopting me or Draco Malfoy, but I had paper and Malfoy had rock." He took yet another biscuit and munched on it purely for the distraction.

Greta patted Shazor's arm. "He has your sense of humor," she pointed out. She smiled at Harry with that ultra-affectionate look again. Her gaze shifted past him and she said, "My, what a lovely snake! Is that yours?"

Harry had his wand out before he even turned around. Snape jumped up with his at ready as well, but Harry made it out the door of the drawing room first. "Nagini," he whispered as he watched the great snake make her way around the edge of the wall from the far corner of the hall. Red trailed behind her. Harry stepped across the open space, Nagini changed course to follow.

"Potter!" Severus berated and aimed his wand.

"NO!" Harry shouted. "She'll know where he is," he explained in a low voice. "He sent her because he couldn't get past the new spells."

"What is this?" Shazor asked from the drawing room doorway.

"Voldemort's pet snake, Nagini," Severus explained. "Pettigrew undoubtedly-"

The snake veered toward Snape's voice. "*This way*," Harry hissed at her. She turned again. "*Where is your master?*" he asked her.

"*I have not seen Master in a very long time.*"

"Oh. Dear. Merlin," Shazor exclaimed. "You cannot have adopted a Parselmouth," he moaned.

"*Where is Wormtail?*" Harry demanded. Nagini had slowed but she still approached. Blood smeared her jaws.

"Potter," Severus said threateningly, his wand still aimed at the snake.

"One minute more," Harry insisted. "*Wormtail cannot speak to you thusly. I speak to you as your master did--I see your mind as your master did. Tell me.*"

Nagini hesitated. She lifted her head up and investigated the air with her tongue. "*Will you give me a warm place to sleep if I answer? It has been too cold for too long.*"

"Light a fire, Severus," Harry said, pointing at the hearth at the end of the hall. "Put the rug in front of it."

With a questioning expression Severus stepped cautiously past Nagini's long tail and ignited a fire in the grate. He dragged the rug from the center of the hall to the hearth, keeping a careful eye on the snake as he did so.

"*There*," Harry said when it was set.

"*Seven gardens south of this one and four east*," she hissed and turned toward the fire. Harry repeated that aloud. Severus moved to the library, staying carefully clear of the snake. Harry watched as Nagini turned herself into a great coil before the hearth and rested her head on herself. Her eyes sank to half closed and her tongue flicked less frequently as she basked in the heat.

Harry, fierce determination burning through him, turned toward the door. Severus' voice pulled him up short. "Harry," he said sternly. Severus faltered as Nagini considered him as he passed her then sped up to intercept Harry, who was choosing to ignore him.

Forced to stop because Severus' much larger frame was in his path, Harry said in a low voice, "Get out of my way."

"I have contacted the Ministry. The Aurors will be here shortly," Severus explained.

"He's mine," Harry said. Pain and rage filled him at the thought of facing Pettigrew again. "I let him go once . . ." His jaw hardened and he held his wand out as though he thought of using it right then.

"If the boy has valid revenge to take, let him go," Shazor commented.

Severus shot him a warning look before turning back to his charge. "Harry, I cannot stop you because I do not wish to fight you." He sighed and lowered himself on one knee so Harry was looking down at him. This did capture Harry's attention, making him lower his wand.

"If you go, you will carve out a piece of yourself that you cannot get back. You have come so far, Harry," he said earnestly. "Far enough that I must implore you to let this go." He reached out and grasped Harry's upper arms as Harry reluctantly considered this, his expression varying between pained and determined. Severus went on, "You have your whole life ahead of you. You can choose to live it whole. If you choose to take a few moments of gratification in revenge you will forever live it incompletely."

Harry's shoulders fell. "He betrayed my mum and dad," he insisted in a dull voice. "He's the reason I've been alone all this time." A tear blinked out of his right eye at that.

"I know that," Severus said, sounding a little desperate. He stood up and in a smooth motion pulled Harry against himself. Harry rested his forehead against Snape's chest and sniffled faintly. "I'm trying to do what is best for you, Harry," Severus said quietly.

"Oh, dear," Gretta wailed into a kerchief. "So touching." She dabbed her eyes and nose and sniffed daintily.

Harry took a step back, released at that exact moment. Flushing, Harry breathed in and out, bringing himself under firm control. Shazor stared at his son as though he had never seen him before. Gretta sniffed again and gazed at them sadly.

A knock sounded on the door and it opened. Tonks stepped in. "Everything all right?" At Severus' assurances, she went on. "Good tip. Where did you get it?"

"From the snake." Snape indicated the large coil on the rug.

"Oh my," Tonks breathed. Nagini raised her head and considered the Auror.

Harry froze. "Tidgy," he breathed and started toward the rear of the hall. Severus grabbed his arm. "Ms. Tonks, please check the kitchen," he said.

Angrily, Harry said, "What? You are going to protect me from everything?"

"Yes," Severus said, as if that should be obvious.

Tonks re-emerged thirty seconds later. "Dead. I have to call the photographer over from the other location."

"What happened? You got him, right?" Harry asked. He tried to toss off Severus' grip and failed. He gave in with a huff and threw his arms down limply.

Tonks paused before them. "He seemed to think you'd be coming, Harry. Once he realized it was just us . . . he killed himself. Seemed pretty despondent about failing to get to you."

Harry jerked his arm again and this time Severus released it.

"You been hanging on to him all this time?" Tonks asked Severus in amusement.

"Trying."

Tonks chuckled lightly and tapped Harry on the chin with her fist. "Good to know someone is looking out for you, Harry, even at the cost of peeing you off royally." She leaned in close and whispered only for him, "Looks like you got yourself a real dad." She stepped back with a devilish grin and looked over at Nagini, who appeared to have gone back to sleep.

"What we are going to do with that, I don't know."

"She isn't evil," Harry commented. "She's just a snake."

Tonks looked doubtful, then shrugged. "Maybe the zoo then. Unless you want her?"

"No," Harry and Severus said together. Harry went on. "Give her a warm quiet place to sleep and she might be willing to answer any outstanding questions."

"Gee, where would we find a Parselmouth to talk to her? Hmmm."

Harry rolled his eyes.

When Tonks had departed, Shazor said bleakly as he shook his head, "A Parselmouth." Even Gretta looked unsympathetic about that.

Harry shrugged at Snape helplessly. "I wasn't born this way," he insisted.

"You weren't?" Severus asked in surprise.

"Dumbledore said I acquired Parseltongue along with this scar."

"Hmm. That is reassuring, Harry."

"It is? Why?" Harry asked in disbelief. "You sound like Greer," he added accusingly.

* * *

That night Harry tossed fitfully, visions of Pettigrew, cornered and angry, kept invading his thoughts. When the bed tilted, he jerked in surprise.

"Difficulty sleeping?" Snape's voice came from the darkness. The bedside lamp flared brighter, casting a halo of orange light around them. "Sit up."

With a frown Harry obeyed. Snape pressed a cup into his hand. "I don't want to need this all of the time," Harry commented tiredly.

"Firstly, it is a very mild potion. Secondly, I will not let that happen. You have had a stressful day. You need to sleep soundly to recover or this will only repeat itself tomorrow night."

Harry fingered the cup in indecision. Finally, he drank it down and handed it back. "Sorry about upsetting your father," Harry said.

Snape scoffed easily. "You have not seen him upset. And you are hardly to blame whether you naturally are a Parselmouth or acquired it."

"He seems pretty hard to please," Harry opined.

"And I am not?" Snape asked as though insulted.

Harry huffed in humor at his tone. "I don't know--maybe you are." He rubbed his forehead and put his hands over his eyes. "I think the potion is working." He lowered himself back down to his pillow and curled up on his side, welcoming the maw of sleep closing around him.

"Good night," Snape said. Harry merely murmured incoherently in response.

* * *

The next morning, Harry woke with the sun slicing between the curtains into his eyes. He padded downstairs in his dressing gown and slippers. The house was completely silent, reminding him with a twinge that Tidgy was gone. He stepped down the half flight to the kitchen. Whatever blood there had been was completely cleaned up. With a sad sigh, Harry took out the pans and started breakfast, ducking and leaning over a lot in a room designed for an elf.

"Potter," Snape said sharply. "What are you doing?"

Harry screwed the coffee pot together tightly and placed it on grate in the space made for it. "I assume that is a facetious question, sir," he commented and wrapped the hot toast in a towel. "I really don't mind and it seemed like the only way to get breakfast."

Snape took the towel and placed it on the tray. "I suppose you are correct on that last count." When the coffee boiled, he took that as well and carried it upstairs. In the dining room, he said, "We shall have to find another before the school year begins. It will not be easy on such short notice."

Harry had a thought. "Do you mind if I look for one?"

Snape gave him a derisive look. "With your extensive house-elf connections?"

"Yes."

Snape gestured with his hand that he was welcome to it.

After breakfast, Harry owed Dobby and that afternoon the doorbell chimed.

"Who is that, I wonder?" Snape muttered.

Harry jumped up. "I think it is the first house-elf applicant," Harry said brightly, even more amused by Snape's surprise. At the entry he waved in Dobby and a much dolled up Winky.

"See, Master Harry," Dobby said to her reassuringly.

"I am wanting no pay," she insisted.

"I figured that," Harry commented. As they entered the hall, Snape stepped over and looked over the two elves.

"Professor," Dobby greeted him, bowing. Winky did the same, not looking nearly as hopeful.

"Potter, in here a moment," Snape said. After he closed the drawing room door behind him, he said, "Crouch's old house-elf?" Harry nodded. "Probably the least likely choice I would have considered," he said aloud to himself. "Isn't she in the employ of Hogwarts?"

"They are willing to let her go. I checked that already."

"You do work fast, Mr. Potter."

"Hey, if you are going to yell at me every morning at breakf-"

"I did not yell at you."

"Scold then," Harry interjected. "Dobby vouches for her not being anything like him. She didn't do well after Crouch gave her clothes but he thinks she just needs to be bound to a household again."

"Most all of them do need to be. Ms. Granger's efforts notwithstanding, house-elves are not natural. They have been distorted, like an exotic breed of dog, to serve wizard needs. Are you set on this elf?"

"No, she is just the first one I thought of when you said they were hard to find."

When they stepped back into the hall, Dobby immediately ceased whispering to Winky and gave them a pleased look. Snape stepped over to them. "Tell me about your former master, Winky," he said.

She looked a little fearful and began turning her bright white tea-towel around in her hands. Quietly, she said, "He was maybe not nice wizard, but I loyal to him. I not saying anything."

"Look at me, Winky," Snape said in a tone not to be disobeyed. Harry took an unconscious step backward and bit his lip. After a moment Snape said, "You will do."

Winky looked very relieved and pathetically grateful while Dobby grinned toothily at Harry. "Dobby is going in that case," Dobby said, "Will be seeing Master Harry soon, he is thinking, at Hogwarts." At Harry's nod of agreement, he snapped his fingers and disappeared.

"He *is* an odd one," Snape commented. He turned his attention back to Winky. "You are prepared to be bound?" The elf nodded emphatically, keeping her eyes averted downward.

Harry stood to the side and watched, arms wrapped around himself. He had a feeling he wasn't going to like this. Snape pulled his wand out of his pocket and held it out over her head. As she started to shift to her knees, he said, "Stand. I think Potter would feel better if you do." His gaze slid over to Harry for an instant. Winky looked alarmed as she stood straight again.

Snape incanted something long and Latin. A yellow glow formed around Winky's small frame as he finished. She reached out her long hands as though a child looking for a sweet. Snape reached his hand out, palm down. Winky grasped it and kissed the back of it. At that moment, the glow flashed away.

"Potter?" Snape said, gesturing that he should take his place.

"I can't do that," Harry said.

"It is simpler if you do. You inherit her along with the house," he stated levelly. When Harry shook his head again, clearly uncomfortable, Snape said, "As you wish." To Winky, he said, "You will give Master Harry the same obedience as myself."

"Yes, Master," she said stridently.

"There are no limits to your run of the house. Go." He dismissed her.

She stepped across the Great Hall and down to the kitchen, peering in each room she passed.

Harry went up to his room. He badly needed a distraction after that, so he reread the last few letters from each of his friends. After that, he took out his new Map and worked on adding color to it. Eventually his stomach distracted him; he hadn't really had a good meal that day since at lunch he hadn't wanted to incur Snape's annoyance again and only had an apple from the fruit basket.

He wandered downstairs to the dining room. Snape was there, reading the post. Harry took a seat across from him, then jumped when dinner appeared on the table in a sparkle of spell, Hogwart's style. Harry, mouth watering, pulled over a plate with a pile of thin sliced roast beef surrounded by small potatoes. A bowl of fruit salad in some kind of creamy dressing also had appeared.

After waiting for Snape to serve himself, Harry started eating. The meat was really good. Harry ate what he had taken and took more.

"I will admit," Snape said between bites, "that you did very well choosing a house-elf."

"It *is* pretty good," Harry agreed, then felt a little guilty about Tidgy until pudding distracted him from it.



Chapter 18 - Mum

That evening in the library, sleepy from eating too much and feeling unusually secure now that he wasn't hunted, curiosity overcame Harry's better sense. "Can I ask you something?" he said to Snape.

"Only if you do not insist upon an answer."

"Is your mum still alive?"

Snape looked up from the ledger he was filling in. "Yes."

When nothing else was forthcoming, Harry asked, "Where does she live?"

"Quite a distance from here," came the level reply that sounded unwelcoming of further inquiry.

Harry put his book aside and considered whether this was worth the struggle. He sighed lightly and asked, "Do you see her at all?"

"Not in ten years," Snape replied and this time gave the very distinct impression that the topic had grown unsavory.

Harry sat back and considered that. "I can't imagine," he commented. Snape put his quill down and gave Harry a long look. "Ron said he didn't speak to his dad all Easter break. I can't even imagine that," Harry marveled. The very thought gave him a stab of jealousy that only faded reluctantly.

"You are thinking you would like to meet her, I assume," Snape said evenly if not a touch darkly.

Harry shrugged. "I hadn't thought of it until your dad showed up yesterday."

Snape closed the ledger and pushed it aside. "She lives in an autonomous coven in the eastern part of the country."

"I don't know what that is," Harry pointed out.

"It is a women-only community. A Muggle might call it a cooperative or even a cult, I suppose."

After thinking that over, Harry said slowly, "That sorta implies that your dad didn't treat her very well." When Snape didn't respond, Harry asked, "I'm out of line, aren't I?"

"No. Not if he is not here," he added dryly.

"So how long has your dad been remarried?" Harry asked, feeling emboldened.

"Almost ten years, to the extreme displeasure of my mother." Snape sat back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. "My mother is not exactly pleased with me, either."

"A son who's a teacher doesn't seem that bad," Harry opined.

"I think she saw only malicious intent in that."

Harry gave him a startled look. "Huh," he said, then remembered that he himself had only seen malicious intent in Snape at one point. After a long pause Harry said, "You really don't think she'd like to see you again?"

"And I am accused of being blunt," Snape commented as an aside. "I really do not know," he added with a hint of impatience.

"Ten years is a long time," Harry observed.

"I suppose it is not unreasonable to write her," Snape stated quietly.

"It is up to you, sir."

"I think you are oversimplifying the situation, but perhaps that is to be expected in your case." He sounded a little tired as he said this.

Harry got up from the lounge to depart for his room, partly because he was tired too and partly to give Snape a chance to write.

Snape's voice halted him in the doorway. "Franklin is away on another errand. May I borrow your owl?"

Harry brought Hedwig downstairs and perched her on the back of Snape's chair, where she proceeded to preen her wings. "Goodnight, sir," Harry said as he stepped out again.

Snape pulled a sheet of correspondence parchment out of the bottom drawer of the desk. It had a pleasant faint blue sheen, rather than a yellowed one. Trying hard to hold Potter's simple notion of familial loyalty in his mind rather than the memory of their last difficult meeting, he wrote out the salutation in neat script.

Each line required lengthy deliberation, especially because he did not want it to seem as if it did. Eventually, he wrote, *I hope this letter finds you well and that you have made a home for yourself at the coven. I assume you have heard of the Dark Lord's final demise. This has freed me to consider the future more broadly than I have previously been able. At the beginning of August I adopted a son who, as I expect all orphans do, obsesses over issues of family. He is very interested in meeting you, if you are amenable. I as well am curious how you are faring.*

He read that over, surprised to find that he was truly curious how she was. Potter was correct, perhaps, that ten years was a long time. He signed with a standard closure imploring a reply, finding that easier than asking for one outright. By the time he had the letter sealed in an envelope and addressed, Hedwig had her head under her wing. She perked up immediately at the sound of her name and took the letter in her claw. Snape stood up, intending to open the window wider, but the white owl swooped cleanly through the narrow opening before he could reach it. He watched her ghostlike form flit away over the trees before turning back to the warm, lamplit room.

* * *

Hedwig returned at the end of lunch the next day, a huge, Hogwarts kind of midday meal that made Harry again eat more than he could really fit in his stomach. Snape took the letter from her and she flapped up to Harry's shoulder and nipped his ear.

Harry looked at her and gave her a strip of chicken. "Long flight, I guess," he commented. She finished that piece and bobbed her head to request another. Harry fed her a choicer strip. Snape stood with the letter in hand and left the dining room.

In the drawing room he closed the door and opened the letter while sitting at the desk. The first thing he noticed was that the salutation was just his name. *It was rather surprising to find this marvelous white owl delivering a letter from you. First off, let me assure you that I have indeed made a home here at Dreveshire, odd for you to question that might not be true.* Snape flinched and put the letter down. He had forgotten how aggravating her penchant for misunderstanding could be.

He rubbed his temple and continued. *I have to remind myself that eleven years is a long time and people can change in unlikely ways. Something has apparently changed with you--the Severus I knew would not have had the slightest inclination toward parenting. I suppose he is the child of an associate of yours, many of whom were killed recently I am told. I am being advised by my Covenelder, against my instinct I might add, to give you another chance. One which you do not deserve but, in the interests of satisfying the curiosity of this boy, and my own, I will grant.*

Old arguments and bitter feelings rose up in Snape's mind much clearer now than they had yesterday when he agreed to pen his letter. They made him feel more angry than he had in a very long time.

Harry sat alone at the table, feeling pensive. Hedwig sat on the chair back beside him, fluffing herself and preening occasionally. He was starting to regret his suggestion. The dinner plates disappeared. After a while, Winky appeared. She wore a different tea towel now, but still a very bright, clean one.

"Master Harry is liking pudding?" she asked.

"Is it chocolate?"

She thought a moment. "It could be if Master Harry wishes."

"Yes, I'd like that."

Winky returned with a large tray containing one small plate with a slice of chocolate cake. She placed this before Harry and snapped her fingers, sending the tray away somewhere. Her magic amazed him; she did much more than Tidgy ever seemed to, without thought.

"Master is not being happy," she said, clasping her hands before her and leaning toward him.

"Huh?" Harry uttered. He wasn't accustomed to getting concern from this quarter. Then with a chill, he realized that she was referring to Snape. Harry frowned and put his fork down, deeply regretting his interference.

"Winky can . . . calm Master, but does not know. Winky not instructed."

He remembered now how she had kept the Death Eater Barty Junior under her power for years. "No, don't do that. Master Severus wouldn't want that."

She frowned and dropped her eyes. "Is Master being violent when he very angry? Winky is not allowing anyone to be hurt . . ."

"No," Harry replied, his heart sinking. He hadn't heard anything and wondered what she had seen. Maybe she just sensed things like that. He was starting to realize that he knew nothing about house-elves and maybe nothing about Snape. "It's all right, Winky. I don't think you need to do anything."

She started to turn away. "Winky will return if needed, Master Harry."

"Thank you, Winky," Harry said with forced calm.

Harry poked his fork into his cake and made himself take a bite. The chocolate would make him feel better, he assumed. He did not feel he could move. If he went up to his room, Snape might think he had given up on him. Of course, Snape could not know what Winky just came and told him, either.

Harry was saved from making a decision by Snape's return. As he took his seat, a fresh hot plate of food appeared before him. He stared at it a moment in a kind of surprised annoyance before he took up his fork.

"I'm sorry, sir. I shou-" Harry started to say.

Snape cut him off. "Don't, Potter. You apologize too much. It is one of your more annoying habits," he snapped.

Harry felt like some kind of spell had passed through his flesh. He waited in silent stillness for what might come next.

Snape rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. "I'm sorry, Harry; I should not have said that, at least not in that manner." His eyes roamed over the plate in front of him, unsettled.

"It's all right, sir," Harry insisted. Compared to things Snape had said in the past, that was nothing. But the meanings of things had changed; he had let them change, in fact. Harry longed to say something to undo everything, then wondered what it was about him that made him always wish for that. He took a small bite of cake just for an excuse to move.

"You are too concessionary," Snape said in a rambling way. "You need not be so careful around me. I am concerned you do this because you fear that if you displease me you could be sent away." In a harder tone, as though this were an old argument he wanted settled, Snape went on. "That won't happen. You cannot be sent away."

Searching for a response, Harry stared at his guardian with a pained expression. He had never seen this side of Snape before, had not even thought it existed. The letter had clearly undermined him. "I do appreciate that," Harry finally said. "And at the risk of conceding, I can certainly get by without meeting your mum."

Snape pushed his plate away. It disappeared an instant later. "She did agree to see us."

Harry blinked at that. Clearly this wasn't something he was going to understand anytime soon. "You told her about me?"

"I knew it was the only way to get her to even consider it."

"Gee, Mum, Harry Potter and I would like to drop by . . ." Harry said flippantly.

Snape laughed strangely. "She does not know it is Harry Potter," he said a little mischievously. "I did not feel I could use you in that way. If the mere fact of my adopting did not peak her curiosity . . ."

The landscape was becoming a little clearer now. Snape's tone and mannerisms were giving Harry a sense of underlying damage that was usually kept well masked. Snape was remasking it even as he spoke. Harry hoped this meeting went well, or he was going to have one more thing to deeply regret.

* * *

Four days later, they took the Floo from the Shrewsthorpe train station to a pub in a very small village in the East Midlands countryside. They walked from the quiet pub--where no one had paid them any attention when they arrived in the hearth--down a narrow lane that once had been paved with river stone, but now was mostly dirt and dust. A mile along, a gate formed of an elaborate rose bush appeared in the stone wall along the road. Harry marveled at the way the rose wood wound around itself as it met in the middle.

"I believe they practice a bit of Druidic magic," Snape said as Harry continued to study it. He pulled a cord beside the gate and a rusty bell at the top rang dully.

They waited. Eventually, a bent-over old witch appeared beyond the flowered arch. She uttered a spell and gestured for them to enter. "We are here to see--"

"Anita, yes, yes," the old woman interrupted. "This way," she said pleasantly, gesturing with her long walking stick. She waited for them to pass, then muttered something at the rose gate. She smiled mildly at them and started to lead the way, then stopped with a startled expression. She stepped up to Harry and gazed quizzically at him.

"Hmm, no more poppy tea before noon, me thinks," she muttered as she started up the brick path that meandered through a rampant garden. At the first low building, they entered. "Wait here, dears," she said and went out the far door.

Harry wandered around the room. Books lined low, roughhewn shelves along two walls. Crowded paintings of widely varying skill hung above. The furniture was all composed of antler and bone with needlework pillows. He had to admit, the decor didn't appeal to him much. He stepped back over to the window and looked out over the garden and the roses forming the entrance.

"Severus," an unfamiliar voice said with mixed emotion. Harry turned slowly and watched as a thin woman with a strong jaw line and short grey hair came in the door on the far side. The old woman who had met them at the gate stepped in before her as though on guard. Anita reached out and brushed Snape's sleeve. "You have literally not changed at all," she said in surprise. She collected herself. "Anastasia, this is my son, Severus."

Snape shook the old witch's hand. "I have heard quite a lot about you," she said as though challenging him to try anything.

"Clearly," Snape said dryly.

Anita took a deep breath and glanced around their side of the room. "Did you bring your son?" she asked.

Snape turned to Harry, gesturing with his arm, and Harry realized it must seem strange, him rooted to this spot way over here. Harry forced his feet to move. He carefully navigated around the prongs of the furniture as he went over to them.

"Ma'am," Harry said in greeting when he reached them.

She was more than surprised when she recognized him; she appeared to fall into a trance for a long moment. "This is your son?" she breathed. She turned to Snape. "You adopted Harry Potter?"

Snape bowed his head, sending his hair forward. "Yes."

She put her fingertips to her forehead in a very familiar gesture. "I can't believe they allowed you to do that. I assumed you had adopted one of your fellow Death Eaters' children."

Harry searched in vain for a response since the adoption had taken a bit of arguing on that exact point. Left hanging by the silence, Anita said dazedly, "Well, have a seat." She moved to one of the antler rocking chairs and gestured for them to take the couch. Snape and Harry sat there. The old witch sat to the side on a stool, her staff between her knees. Harry wondered if the whole thing wasn't a wand of some kind and how that would work if it were. Their eyes met and, after a moment, she nodded. Harry was certain she was answering his unspoken question. Used to Legilimency, Harry nodded in return and looked back at Anita.

"I need a moment to take this in," she said, staring at Harry perplexedly. She took a deep breath and asked, "So, you are living in the house in Shrewsthorpe?"

Harry answered, "For a few more days until classes begin at Hogwarts." He wasn't feeling very generous toward her. He kept remembering what her letter had done to Snape.

She clasped and unclasped her hands as though distressed. "You wanted this?" she asked him.

"To visit? Yes."

"I mean, to be adopted," she clarified.

"Yes," Harry replied evenly. "Very much so."

She turned to Snape who gave her a look as though, *you were saying?* "You believe you can find atonement this way?" she asked him bluntly. Snape's eyes narrowed.

Harry made a noise like a suppressed laugh. "You didn't tell me your parents were so much alike," he said.

"What?" Anita asked, *very* sharply.

"Shazor accused him of adopting me to protect himself from the Ministry. Actually, I should say, congratulated. You accuse him of having some kind of internal retribution to pay. Neither of you assumes he has altruistic motives." He could see she did not expect this much from him.

"You imagine he does?" she returned in a mocking tone.

Harry looked at her and thought, if you had seen him stopping me from going after Pettigrew, you wouldn't doubt it. The old witch cleared her throat, attracting Anita's attention. She gave Anita a solemn nod. Harry took a deep breath and Occluded his mind. He then intentionally waited for the old witch to look his way. She tilted her head to the side as if to say, *ah, well.*

"So, three weeks into this, you are still happy?" she asked Harry.

In a purely curious tone Harry said, "May I ask why you are asking me?"

A little uncomfortably, she replied, "Anastasia, my Covenelder, is helping me."

"I cannot read either of them now. The boy is as good as he is at hiding his mind once he realizes he needs to."

Anita looked at Harry a little suspiciously. "He taught you that?"

"Yes."

"You have something to hide?" Anita asked him.

Harry shrugged lightly. "I think you should trust people and what they tell you voluntarily. Everyone has things they would like to keep to themselves. Even from a Covenelder living in the middle of nowhere."

"Old wounds they would like to continue nursing, for example," Anastasia said airily.

Harry pushed his glasses up and gave her a long look. She gave him an innocent one in return. "For example," Harry acknowledged grudgingly.

"Anita," Anastasia said, "I agree with the boy. You should trust first in this case. Severus could not have brought a more powerful icon of his true self or a better peacemaker. He has met you much farther than halfway." She waited for Anita to respond. When a time passed, she said, "What is still bothering you?"

After a long moment, Anita said quietly, "I raised a dark wizard."

Harry glanced at Snape, who was staring at the floor before his mother's chair.

"You would never believe I changed," Snape said. "Twenty years have gone by and you still refuse."

Her eyes went dark. "You were a monster--there was no path back for you."

Harry bit his lip and waited for someone else to speak.

Anita took a deep, calming breath. "I fear now that you have fooled this boy," she gestured to Harry.

In a level tone, as though he were being extra patient with a student, Snape said, "Even if you have no faith in me, you are seriously underestimating two people, Albus Dumbledore and Harry himself." Snape stood up and looked back at Harry still on the couch. "Are you ready?" he asked factually.

"To leave?" Harry asked in surprise. "If you really want . . ." He studied Snape. Whatever had emerged to unhinge him was completely submerged again. Harry wouldn't have known it was ever there, looking at him now.

Anita stood as well. "We prepared lunch for you," she said a little strained. "Please, give us a chance to be decent hosts, at least."

Snape bowed acceptance of that after a brief hesitation. Anita led the way out the back to a stone paved area with a wooden table. Harry only now got glimpses of the other inhabitants, working in the gardens, weaving; he thought he heard a fire roaring hot nearby and imagined a kiln or a blacksmith. A wave of Anita's wand set the table.

A little sheepishly, she said, "I assumed your son would be a little younger, so I invited two of the young girls who live here to join us. They are nine and eleven. I think they will be thrilled to meet Harry."

The old witch had stepped away. She returned accompanied by a woman with long blonde hair with two sun-bleached children in tow.

"Severus' new son is a little older than I imagined, Caroline," Anita apologized to the woman as they gathered at the table.

Harry held out his hand. Caroline accepted it and said, "Caroline. We only have one name here," she explained.

"Harry Potter," Harry said.

The two girls gasped and the woman froze halfway to sitting down. "My goodness," she said.

"Are you really?" one of the girls asked.

"All my life," Harry returned.

"I want to sit next to Harry," one of them insisted and immediately leapt around the table to squeeze between Snape and him. The other, upon seeing this, jumped up as well. "Me too!" She took the short end of the bench. Snape moved down to make more room for them all.

"Hello," Harry said, feeling strange to be pressed between two glowing children with wide blue eyes of amazement.

"I'm Rattanita," one of them said. "Call me Ratta."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," Harry said lightly, making her giggle.

"I'm called Princess, but that isn't my real name," the other one ended in a whisper.

"You have to forgive them," Caroline said. "They are very sociable, but we get very few visitors. Especially not ones that they already worship."

"When are you coming out with a poster?" Princess demanded.

Harry gave her an alarmed look in return. "Never, if I have anything to say about it." When she pouted, looking honestly crushed, Harry said, "You can always magically blow up the chocolate frog card."

Princess leaned forward to look at her sister in excitement. "Good idea!"

"I didn't really say that," Harry said in disgust, taking off his glasses to rub his eyes.

Snape said, "Ah, it is good to see how well Potter has adjusted to his fame."

Harry narrowed his eyes at him. "Don't go there," he said in mock threat.

Ratta grabbed his arm rather hard and said, "I can't believe it! Harry Potter," as she shook him.

"Girls," Caroline admonished them. "Some decorum now, if you can manage."

They released him and sat up straight, primly putting their serviettes in their laps. Harry decided he preferred them the other way.

Salad arrived with dark red tomatoes and crisp cucumbers. Then cold soup. Then roasted vegetable sandwiches. "You eat well here," Harry said to the girls.

They shrugged. "What is your favorite food?" one of them asked.

"Chocolate cake," Harry replied.

"Birthday cake?" the other asked for confirmation.

"Yep. The first one I ever had was the best one," he said, falling into a mode of entertaining them. "Even though a giant had squashed it by carrying it in his pocket."

"No!" Princess insisted. "Don't be silly."

"I'm not," Harry said.

"How do you remember the first birthday cake you ever had?" Ratta asked in accusation.

"I was eleven. Your age."

"You didn't get one before that?" Ratta asked in horror.

"Not a one."

"We'll make you one!" They insisted.

"That's okay, really. I had chocolate cake for pudding last night. Our house-elf makes it all the time," Harry insisted, only then realizing the oddness of that.

"You still have that house-elf?" Anita asked Snape.

Snape shook his head. "A different one."

"What happened to Tidgy?" Anita asked suspiciously.

When no one answered, one of the girls parroted while tugging on Harry's arm, "What happened to him?"

Harry took a deep breath and replied, "He was eaten by a snake. A really big one."

Anita gave him a disbelieving look at the same time as the girls whined, "Nooooo, silly."

"I keep telling you the truth; I can't help it if you don't believe me."

Princess put her hands on her hips in mock disgust. "What happened to the snake?" she asked as though to test his story.

"I told it to go sleep by the hearth. Then the Ministry took it away."

Princess eyed him strangely as though realizing he wasn't playing the game properly; his tall tales were not supposed to be true.

"You *told* it to go sleep by the hearth?" Anita asked carefully.

Snape said quietly, "You have no sense of when to hide the truth, Potter." The entire table had frozen, staring warily at Harry. To the table, Snape said, "You have to realize that he was raised as a Muggle; he doesn't understand the implications of what he is admitting to."

The girls leaned around Harry and whispered, then slid off the bench and scampered off. Harry felt a little alone on his end of the table now.

"More tea, anyone?" Anastasia brightly asked, her aged hand holding the pot up unsteadily in invitation.

The girls returned, giggling. Harry turned to them in surprise. Princess held up a green garter snake for his inspection.

"Girls," Caroline said, although it didn't have the sharp edge it could have.

"We want to see him talk to it," Ratta insisted. "We've never seen anyone talk to a snake before."

"Because only dark wizards can do that," Caroline replied slowly, eyeing Harry.

"Mum, don't be dumb! It's Harry Potter." She handed him the snake. It was all of two foot long and as green as grass. It asked to be put down.

"It wants to be left alone." At their doubtful expressions, he insisted, "That's what it just said."

"Oh, you can't really talk to snakes," Princess said in disappointment. "I could have told you that."

Harry sighed. "What do you want me to ask it?"

Caroline sat back with her tea. "Ask it if it ate Peralla's Crickets. They all disappeared one day.

"Where were they?" Harry asked.

"In a small white box," Ratta provided.

Harry asked the snake that. Everyone at the table stiffened as he did. "Whoa," Princess breathed. The snake nodded. "It did! Did you see that mum--it nodded!" she exclaimed. "You really can talk to snakes." She took the garter back gently and set it down in a patch of tarragon nearby.

"You sound really strange when you do that," Ratta said.

"I can't hear it," Harry said. "I just think I'm talking normally." Snape gave him a surprised look at that. Harry shrugged in return.

Ice cream was served for pudding. Harry savored every bite of each of four flavors, thinking with satisfaction that it was probably twice as good as anything Dudley ever ate in front of him. Princess curled up in Caroline's lap across from him despite being far too big to do so easily. Caroline alternated bites between herself and her daughter. She set the spoon down to wipe her mouth, then ran her fingers through Princess' hair before kissing her on the top of the head. Princess looked up and got a kiss on the forehead as well. Caroline picked up the spoon again.

Realizing that he was staring, Harry went back to his ice cream, feeling colder inside than the ice cream could account for.

Ratta came up to him and nudged him shyly. "Can you sign this?" she asked, holding his chocolate frog card.

"Oh, get mine too!" Princess said, sitting up suddenly, unbalancing her mother and herself.

"I got it," Ratta insisted, pulling another roughed up card from her pocket.

Harry borrowed a quill and signed them both personally. With ginger motions they picked the cards up and carried them off, careful not to smudge the ink.

"Thank you," Caroline said across from him. Harry shrugged that it was no big deal.

The girls returned and now sat more quietly beside him. "Did a giant really squash your birthday cake?" Princess asked.

"Not really," Harry said. "It was only a half-giant."

Princess punched him on the arm. "What other funny things have happened to you? Tell us something else."

Harry gazed at her as though she were crazy. "How much time do you have?"

"Not that long," Caroline replied for them.

"Awwww," the girls complained. Princess grabbed his arm yet again. "Tell us something," she pleaded.

"Uh, about what?"

After a moment's deliberation, Ratta said, "The Tri-Wizard Tournament on the card. Tell us about that. How did you win it?"

"A dark wizard pretending to be a friendly wizard made sure I won it. I wouldn't have otherwise."

"Why did they put it down, then?" Ratta demanded, insulted.

"They didn't ask me before they wrote that. Otherwise I'd have told them to take it off."

"Did you get the bad wizard in the end?" Princess asked conspiratorially.

"No. The teachers did." Harry remembered that terrible moment in Moody's office when he realized the other wizard intended to kill him. He had already been shattered by Cedric's death and his narrow escape from Voldemort. He had been helpless, in shock. His heart pumped at the memory even two years later.

"Girls," Caroline said quietly. She gave them a palm down gesture with her hand, and they fell silent.

"I do hope you are helping this boy heal?" Anita demanded of Snape.

Taken aback, Snape didn't answer immediately. Harry did. "He is," he said quietly.

"More ice cream?" Princess asked him, looking concerned.

"Thanks," Harry said with a smile which removed her strained look instantly.

They made their goodbyes soon after that, while there was still plenty of good daylight left for the walk back to the pub. The train station was quiet as well when arrived there. Traffic on the road in the village was light and soon Harry relaxed as the door closed behind him inside their house.

"I'll tell Winky that dinner can be late and light."

"I suspect she already knows," Harry said.

"She is unusually perceptive," Snape agreed.

Post had arrived in their absence. Harry picked up two letters and took them up to his room to write replies. He told Hermione about the two little girls without saying where he had met them. Neville had been helping him with the parchment spell, even going into the wizard library in London to look for books that might help.

After a small dinner, Harry wrote a long note discussing what he had learned since they had last corresponded and tried out some spells Neville suggested in his letter. He was running out of blank parchment. If he tore a blank sheet off of the writing tablet, it threatened to not give you another. And once a sheet had been spelled, it never worked quite right for a new spell. He went downstairs and found Snape in the drawing room at the desk as usual. When he looked up, Harry asked, "Do you have any parchment?"

Snape pulled open a drawer beside him. "It is here--help yourself."

Harry came over and pulled out five sheets before shutting the drawer again. He hesitated there. "The visit went all right," Harry commented. Snape made an ambivalent motion with his head. Harry could not see him well since he was bent over some kind of form and this made his hair fall over his face. "Sorry about the Parselmouth thing. It just isn't important to me, so I can't remember that other people care so much."

Snape didn't reply, so Harry stepped away. "Hey, can I go to Diagon Alley now and get my school stuff?"

"I thought we would do that on the way to Hogwarts."

"Okay," Harry agreed and realized that Snape was right, he was trying too hard to please him, but doing otherwise wasn't really imaginable.

After playing around with some new parchment spells in his room for a while, Harry grew too tired to continue. He changed into his pyjamas, noting that they seemed too tight, and crawled into bed. He dropped off to sleep after a short while, undisturbed by dreams.

Something touching his hair woke him. Harry, lying on his stomach, turned his head to see what it was. A shadow loomed close in his mind, outlined by the dim light from the hall beyond in his real vision. He was actually starting to get used to that.

"I did not realize you would be so soundly asleep already," Snape said apologetically.

"Long day," Harry muttered.

The bed tilted slightly. "I realized something about you today, Harry."

"So did I," Harry murmured.

"What was that?"

"You are the only person who understands anything," Harry said sleepily.

"Hm."

A long silence ensued. Harry had to fight drifting off again. "Are you going to tell me?"

"I think not, upon further reflection."

Harry frowned into his pillow. "You are just here to make me nuts?"

"No," Snape countered softly. Harry started as something brushed his hair again. He opened his eyes to catch the dim silhouette of Snape's hand. He turned his face into the pillow as he realized that Snape had caught him staring at Princess and her mother. Flushed with embarrassment, he burrowed down under the covers. A hand rested on his covered shoulder a long moment before the bed tilted again and Snape left. A warm anxiety had replaced the cold ache and Harry marveled at how much better that felt.



Chapter 19 - Year Seven Begins

The morning of their return to Hogwarts, Harry packed his trunk and hovered it down to the main hall. He felt as though he had just arrived, and he wasn't really ready to leave yet, but the thought that the house would be here waiting made him feel whole in a new way. As he looked around the hall, the sun cut through the clouds and in the small windows at the end. The damage was still present from the battle; Snape had decided that he would prefer the noisy repairs happen while they were absent.

Harry stepped into the dining room and took a seat at the empty table. Tea came after a few minutes. Harry poured some for himself and sipped it, mostly to have something to do.

Snape finally came down as well. "Ready to leave it would appear?" he asked.

Plates of beans and toast arrived. Harry nodded. "Packed, anyway," he heard himself say.

Snape looked up at him with a strange expression. Harry returned to his breakfast without clarifying. They both ate quickly and the plates vanished immediately after. Snape drank down an extra cup of tea before he stood up.

A small trunk sat beside Harry's in the hall. Snape stood beside his, thoughtful. "Not that it is impossible or even difficult to return, but I dislike needing to do so," he explained "I believe that is everything, though." He looked Harry over. "We shall stop in Diagon Alley first, so let's take the Floo, Minerva has had the Great Hall hooked in for the remainder of the summer."

He hovered both trunks to the dining room hearth. As the trunks rested back on the floor he said, "Do you have your list for school?"

Harry pulled it from his pocket and waved it before restowing it. Snape started to reach toward the canister of Floo powder, then stopped. "I perhaps should ask if you need money for your supplies," he said.

"No," Harry said.

"Hm," Snape said as he took down the canister. "May I ask what source of funds you are using?"

"There is still some money left in my mum and dad's vault," Harry replied dismissively. Talking about this reminded him of living with the Dursleys. Maybe it was just the awkwardness. "It is enough to get through school," Harry said. "But, I don't know how much an apprenticeship costs."

Snape raised a brow. "For you, I would expect, nothing." Harry growled lightly at that. Snape held the canister out to him. As Harry took a handful, Snape said, "You will let me know if you need anything?"

"Sure," Harry replied curtly, wanting to cut the topic off. Snape gestured for him to go first into the Floo. Harry hovered his trunk into the hearth and stood behind it as he tossed the powder down beside his feet.

* * *

The sun shone over Diagon Alley as they stepped out into it from the Apothecary's, whose Floo they had used. "I have to go up to Gringott's first," Harry said, gesturing at the grand building at the next intersection.

"Be back here in an hour," Snape said.

Harry headed off, halting the activities of everyone in the street with his mere presence. He smiled faintly at everyone he passed and kept going even when suddenly befuddled people failed to move out of the way.

The Goblins earned his undying respect by not giving him the slightest consideration for being who he was and insisting on inspecting his key and himself suspiciously. Inside his vault, after filling his sack with a variety of coinage, Harry did a quick count: only 400 galleons and change remained. It didn't sound that bad, but he needed to find out exactly how much an apprenticeship cost. He only knew that the good ones were considered expensive.

Back out on the street, a few wizards and witches he didn't know greeted him as though they did. "I have to get books for school," he explained as he escaped.

Inside the bookstore, a familiar voice cried, "Harry!" and Hermione came up and gave him a hug then looked at him sharply. "I think you've grown three inches; you're taller than me."

Harry looked at her in alarm, suspicion building in his mind as he thought about all the potions he had drunk in the last month. "It's good to see you," Harry said honestly.

"Bet you are happy to get out," she said. She leaned to the side and looked out the window of the shop. Harry glanced that way to find it full of people looking in.

"In one sense," Harry said in a pained voice.

"Well, let's get our books and get an ice cream. Ron and Ginny aren't getting supplies until later, they're both in Romania."

As they collected their assigned texts, Harry kept trying to think of a way of explaining his new situation. Every time he opened his mouth to try, someone interrupted, shaking his hand or even hugging him. They all seemed very happy. He imagined her reaction, how it wasn't the right place for it, and sighed quietly as he gave up.

At Fortescue's they sat at the outside table and ate large sundaes. Suddenly, Hermione said, "Hello, Professor," to someone behind Harry. Harry jumped and almost pulled out his pocket watch before he thought better of it. He turned his head to look instead, meeting Snape's oh-so-level gaze. Harry couldn't decide quite what to do.

"Mr. Potter," Snape greeted him with a knowing look.

"Have a seat, sir," Harry invited, indicating one of the three empty chairs. Hermione nearly choked, but covered it quickly.

"Ms. Granger?"

"Yes, sir. Please," she said quickly, shooting a shocked glance at Harry, who felt a bit twisted up inside.

Snape took a seat, crossed his arms and considered them. "Get all of your schoolbooks, Potter?" he asked.

Harry, while relieved that Snape was willing to play this game while he hesitated, felt very bad about it. "Yes, sir."

Snape had reverted smoothly to his old slightly sneering tone. "Do you have other things to get before we return to Hogwarts?"

"A few things." This time Harry did pull out his watch. "I still have twenty-five minutes, Professor."

"But you are eating ice cream," Snape pointed out as though that didn't make any sense.

"I am," Harry said a little defiantly. "It is slow going, doing shopping, I needed a break."

"Perhaps if you didn't invite your fan club, it would go faster," Snape remarked. Witches and wizards had started to gather in the road near them, whispering.

Harry's brow furrowed. "Next time I'll remember not to."

"I didn't mean to get you in trouble, Harry," Hermione said. "I assumed you were here alone." She stood up. "I'll help you finish getting things. I'm going to Flourish and Blotts. Do you need quills and parchment?"

Harry nodded. "I have to get some things for Hedwig." He took a last bite of his ice cream; it had melted mostly anyway. "Do we get Hogsmeade weekends this year?" Harry asked Snape.

"I believe the headmaster is considering doubling them, in fact."

"Well, then I can skip the sweet shop." Harry stood as well.

"Out of hero-worshipping chocolate frogs already?" Snape gibed.

Harry gave him a narrow look. "No. I just like to have a good stash of things at the beginning of the year. I never know when the staff will decide I'm going to be a prisoner again," he replied with more than a hint of annoyance.

"Where shall I meet you?" Hermione asked as she organized her things in a businesslike manner.

"In front of the Apothecary's," Harry replied.

"See you then. Nice to see you, Professor." She left quickly.

"You'd best get going, Harry," Snape said when she was out of hearing.

Harry nodded and looked around for Eeylop's, remembering it was behind him. "Can you hold onto this?" he asked, indicating his heavy bag of books.

Snape gave him a very dubious look but then relented immediately. "Yes."

After Harry had purchased a new perch and water holder for Hedwig's cage, as well as more broom polish at the shop across from Eeylop's, he met Hermione before the brick wall leading to the Leaky Cauldron. As they waited for Snape, she said, "You've clearly been hanging out with the teachers way too long."

Harry sighed, feeling trapped by the momentum of his situation. "I didn't have much choice."

"Now that they've caught everyone that matters, you could go to the Burrow," she pointed out. "Ron and Ginny wouldn't be there but Mr. And Mrs. Weasley would be."

"Huh," Harry muttered. That hadn't even occurred to him. He had been thinking ahead to a quiet week before classes started, although he would like to see the Weasley parents. Snape arriving saved him from having to voice his indecision.

Hermione immediately noticed that their teacher was carrying Harry's books. Harry took them back with a thanks, even though he had to hold too much in each hand to do it. He made his goodbyes to his friend, then he and Snape stepped into the shop just as a small crowd of surprised witches began to form at the nearby brick wall, blocking the archway open which made it ripple in annoyance.

Harry's trunk and cage with Hedwig still sat behind the counter beside the hearth. Snape thanked Jiggers for holding it all for him. The man just waved him off. Harry thought they must know each other well.

In the Great Hall, Harry dragged his trunk out of the hearth. The hall was empty except for Snape, who arrived behind him. "Can you handle that alone?" he asked.

"Yep. I can hover it to the tower. But I have a question for you," Harry said stridently, catching Snape's full attention. Harry held out his arm; the sleeve didn't make it to his wrist, clearly too short. "Have you been giving me growth potion?" Harry asked accusingly.

"No, do you want some?" Snape replied evenly.

Harry stared at him as though not believing him.

"Really, Potter. You can be six and a half feet by Christmas should you so desire. How tall would you like to be?"

"Not that tall," Harry retorted. "I just thought . . ." He scratched his head.

"I would not give you such a significant potion without telling you," Snape insisted. "I did not realize this was such a sensitive topic or I would have offered some."

"I don't want to cheat," Harry said stiffly.

"As you wish. Anything else you would like to accuse me of? I need to take care of some things before a staff meeting."

"No. Sorry, sir," Harry said apologetically.

* * *

Harry settled into his dormitory. It didn't feel as closed in as it had before. The prospect of the empty beds soon filling with his friends made it much less so. Upon closing his trunk lid, he realized that it was lunch time and headed excitedly down to the Great Hall.

Several of the teachers were there and greeted him warmly. Snape and Dumbledore were absent so Harry sat across from Hagrid, who gave him a wink. "Good ter see yer, Harry. Hope yeh had a good time away."

Harry nodded and served himself chips, not bothering to converse much because he was too hungry to.

After lunch, Harry followed Hagrid down to his cabin, happy to just be able to wander outside. "Anything happen while I was away?"

"I' was vera quiet, Harry. Everyone left." Hagrid commented.

"Everyone?"

"Pretty much. Professor Sprout was around fer a few days. I helped her with a coupla things. Filch o' course, was here. Eager teh get away they all were."

"I can imagine," Harry commented to himself as Hagrid watered his garden from a large can. "What is that?" Harry asked about several long rows of stalks.

"Thassa . . . blue corn," Hagrid said a little slowly. Harry recognized that tone and wondered what blue wombats ate. At least it wasn't a blue dragon, or a blue sea monster, or some large, hungry, dangerous blue thing. "So where'd they hide yer, Harry? Now tha' you can say, I suspect."

Harry blinked at him. Was it possible Dumbledore hadn't told anyone? "I was with Severus," Harry said.

"Really?" Hagrid asked in surprise. "No one'd suspect tha', I s'pose."

"That's what he thought. No one would suspect he adopted me either."

Hagrid laughed and patted Harry on the back as he put the large red can back under the water spout. In the cabin Hagrid made tea and they sat down around the crate he was using as a table. "Ah," the half-giant said in pleasure as he took a sip. He looked suddenly at Harry. "Now wait a second here . . ."

"He did, really," Harry said, enjoying the warmth of the cup in his hands even in the warm summer weather.

"Well, tha's a surprise. Glad to hear it though; ya' deserve a family, Harry. Though I am a bit . . . uh, b'fuddled by your choice . . ."

"I think it was a good one," Harry said defensively.

Hagrid patted his knee. "Tha's all that matters."

Harry's face twisted as he said, "I, uh, haven't figured out how to tell Ron and Hermione, so can you not discuss it in front of them until I do?"

"'Course, my boy. O' course."

* * *

By dinner all of the teachers had arrived and were gossiping when Harry came into the Great Hall. He felt a little out of place as he approached the table. Dumbledore gestured from the end that he should come down beside him where there was an empty seat across from Snape. Relaxing, Harry took the offered place and returned Snape's slightly formal greeting.

Dumbledore patted Harry on the arm and said, "And how are you doing, my boy?"

"Good, sir," he replied sincerely, although he felt odd about being the only student, more so than he had at the beginning of summer. The teachers were talking vigorously amongst themselves as though at a reunion. They all sounded very happy. As he scanned them, Sprout gave him a nice smile, McGonagall a wink. His last year here, Harry considered with mixed emotion.

His eyes strayed to Snape, who was holding his sleeve back as he reached for his goblet. Unusual, countering tensions pulled at Harry as their gazes met, as though he could clearly hold in his mind, for the first time, all of the conflicting things he felt about Snape and being in school. Dumbledore's pale gaze graced him knowingly, making his face heat up. Harry turned to his mutton and potatoes and ignored them all in favor of eating.

* * *

The last week of summer holiday rushed past. Harry, thinking ahead with obsessive concern to his N.E.W.T.s, read and took notes on the first three chapters of all of his books. He wrote to Ron back and forth. Ron was traveling around a lot

visiting relatives before returning and Harry had to change owls each letter because they had travelled too far to be willing to go again immediately. Everyone, it seemed, was enjoying the freedom to move about safely.

The night before the students returned, Snape suggested eating dinner in his office instead of with the staff. "I feel I have been somewhat derelict with you," he said as Harry sat down across from him.

"You warned me you were going to be busy," Harry said as he uncovered his tray. Half a roast duck, jacket potato, and string beans were on his plate. "Looks good."

Snape said, "I am quite certain they are having chicken in the Great Hall."

"I got the trays from Dobby, remember," Harry said slyly.

As they ate, Snape asked, "Are you all ready for classes? I probably should have asked you that sooner."

"Yes, I am," Harry assured him.

They had a quiet evening of small talk that lasted until late into the evening. "I am perhaps leaving too much for tomorrow," Snape eventually commented. "But we have not had much time this week."

"It's only going to get busier, isn't it?" Harry asked.

"For at least the first few weeks. I will make time for you if you need me, but you will have to let me know," Snape said with a hint of firmness.

"I understand, sir."

Snape banished the trays with a wave of his wand. "You should probably get a good night's sleep as tomorrow you traditionally do not, correct?"

"Usually not. Especially not the night after you threatened to expel me," Harry said, teasing.

"You deserved to be," Snape stated unapologetically.

Harry stood and put the visitor's chair back where it belonged. "Fortunately, it wasn't up to you."

With a raised brow Snape acknowledged, "Fortunately." With a nod he sent Harry away.

* * *

"Sit here, Harry!" Colin Creevey urged from farther down when Harry and his friends started to sit in the middle of the table for the welcoming feast. Harry shrugged and moved down to where the ends of the tables were left empty for the new house members. As Harry put his leg over the bench, Colin said conspiratorially, "You should welcome the new students to Gryffindor, Harry. Make a good impression for the house."

"Oh," Harry said ambivalently.

"Good idea," Ron interjected in agreement. "Make the others jealous."

Harry rolled his eyes and watched as the sorting hat was brought out and placed on a stool. The First Years shuffled in slowly, tightly packed in a group as though for mutual protection. McGonagall shepherded the alarmingly small children along up to the front, where she explained the procedure to them. The hat had a shorter poem this year--it was back to its old self, it seemed, now that things had calmed down. A few new students swallowed hard and looked uncomfortably at the old thing.

"Jona Albert," McGonagall read off. A sandy-haired boy took a deep breath and went up to the hat.

"Gryffindor!" the hat exclaimed before he could even rest it on his head. The boy jumped and dropped the hat on the floor but recovered it quickly and smoothly to its perch. He looked up at the cheering table on the left side and walked quickly over. Colin shook his hand vigorously as the boy sat down beside him. Jona grinned happily at Colin, looked across at Harry and froze in place.

"Hi," Harry said and smiled in welcome. A Hufflepuff was sorted out as they sat looking at one another. Harry held out his hand. Shaking visibly, Jona accepted it limply. "Harry Potter," Harry said by way of introduction.

"Uh huh," Jona muttered fearfully.

"This was not a good idea, Colin," Harry commented. Hermione waved and said hello to Jona, trying to distract him.

Another student was sorted into Gryffindor, a girl with auburn pigtails high on her head. She fairly bounced over to the table and sat beside Jona. "Hi, I'm Maybella," she said perkily and waved back at Hermione.

Jona elbowed her and whispered, "That's Harry Potter," as he pointed across the table.

Maybella's mouth fell agape. "Hi," Harry tried again. The girl actually looked horrified. "I really am harmless," Harry assured them.

The table fast filled up and the sorting was finished. Ten new Gryffindors sat chatting shyly, eating cakes and drinking pumpkin juice. New students at the other tables would occasionally stand up on their bench to get a look at Harry. He ignored them, although he did wave at Malfoy as he walked between the tables, garnering a seething look in return.

Harry eventually managed to get a few words out of Jona after much effort. "You killed Voldemort?" Jona asked in a small, disbelieving voice. The entire end of the table fell silent.

"Yes," Harry said factually. Ten sets of awestruck eyes stared unblinkingly at him.

"In the castle here, right?" A girl two down on the bench asked.

"Right out there," Harry pointed out the main doors to the Hall. "You walked past the spot."

"Hey, are they putting a plaque in that spot?" Ron asked excitedly.

"Merlin, I hope not," Harry returned.

"You should have seen it," Colin said in a low voice. "Harry hit him with a Killing Curse and he flickered green and just crumpled!"

Harry looked down at his hands. "Not something you want to do to someone unless you absolutely have to."

Colin banked his excitement. "Well, of course. And you did something to him before that; he wasn't fighting back."

"What did you do?" The pigtailed girl asked in a whisper.

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me," Harry said to her, as if that were the end of it.

"Aw," many of the new students and some of the older ones complained.

Harry yawned and rubbed his eyes. "Pass the pumpkin juice, Hermione."

"You aren't going to say?" someone exclaimed.

Harry drank half of his juice and looked at their eager faces. He had to be honest with himself and admit that he didn't like remembering. It made him raw all over again to do so. "I attacked him with my mind," Harry said. "I didn't use a spell, until the end."

"Whoa," someone whispered low and long.

"How did you get into his head?" Jona asked eagerly; he seemed to be coming out of his shell, finally.

Harry, feeling a little annoyed with their worshipfulness, said darkly, "I always had been. He was always putting visions in my head, especially while I was sleeping. I turned it around on him that day--went after him." He glanced around to survey the effects of that statement. Many of the students appeared to have stopped breathing as they stared at him.

"Didn't they try to stop that from happening?" Colin asked him. This was new to him as well.

Hermione cut in. "Occlumency lessons. Poor Harry." She shook her head.

"They did help in the end," Harry pointed out and stifled yet another yawn.

Someone leaned in behind him suddenly. "Not sleeping well, Harry?" Snape asked in his ear.

Harry looked up at him and gestured with his finger for him to come close again. "I was up late making a banner for the common room," Harry said back.

Snape straightened and looked at him closely as if assessing the truth of that. Harry shrugged. The professor's gaze then flickered over the First Years with a look of dark disdain. "*Ten* new Gryffindors. Just what we need," he sneered sarcastically and, after another glare at them, stalked off.

"Who was that?" Maybella asked in concern.

Harry suppressed his grin. "Professor Snape," he replied, "the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"What!" Ron exploded, then put his head in his hands. "Oh no! He isn't teaching Potions anymore. And I wanted to take Defense."

"Is that Greer up there?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked where she pointed. "Yes."

"Any good?"

"I got off on the wrong foot with her, but she seems okay."

"The text didn't look that tough."

The Gryffindor First Years were tracking Snape as he glided out of the hall. "We *have* to take Defense, right?" someone asked.

"Yes, it is required for first through fifth," Harry replied. "You don't need to worry. The Defense teachers always try to kill *me*. I'm hopeful this year though." He shrugged, enjoying their confused horror.

Ron stood up as well. "I'm not," he whined. "Maybe I can drop out now." Hermione slugged him on the arm. "Professor Snape isn't that bad," she said, making Harry feel better.

"I still remember his comment about your teeth," Ron pointed out.

"Well, there is that."

"See you all around," Harry said to the First Years with a little wave, smiling through his frown.

Out in the Entrance Hall Hermione asked, "What did Professor Snape want anyway?"

Harry waved her off. "We've had an ongoing conversation about something."

"You are having a regular conversation with Snape?" Ron asked, sounding sickened.

"Yes," Harry said flatly. "Try hanging around here for the summer. I needed someone to talk to."

"Stay with us!" Ron said sharply.

"I wanted to," Harry insisted, remembering the beginning of the summer when that sounded like heaven. Someone was tugging on his sleeve, but he was feeling too angry at Ron to pay attention to it. "I had four Death Eaters and Voldemort's pet snake to deal with as it was. You really wanted me to put your family at risk?" he asked hotly. Ron didn't immediately find a reply. Harry looked down at Maybella's strained expression as she stood clutching his sleeve. "Sorry, Maybella," he said. "We shouldn't be arguing here."

"You didn't tell us about the Death Eaters," Ron accused him.

"I wasn't supposed to," Harry replied in defeat.

"So those D.E. the Ministry touted capturing; you did that?"

"Not alone," Harry said and too late realized his mistake.

"Who helped you?"

Harry hesitated, an ache forming in his chest. "Tonks and some other Ministry Aurors showed up," he hedged and felt very bad for it for many reasons. Maybella released his sleeve, so Harry looked back down at her, loosely grasping her shoulder as she started to step back, apparently overwhelmed by his tirade. "Did you want something?" he asked her gently.

After a long pause, she asked, "Where?"

Harry blinked at her. "Oh, you mean Voldemort. Not the four Death Eaters." Harry stepped over to the spot and pointed at the stone floor. "Right here, I think. It was morning, which makes the hall look a little different." He glanced over at her and the other fifty students piled in the doorways watching.

"There were a lot of Death Eaters here too," Ron supplied.

"True. Ron was right in front," Harry said to Maybella. "He and Hermione." The students' heads all turned. "So, Ron, how many Death Eaters were there?"

"I didn't want to count."

"Twenty-two," Hermione stated.

"Gloating, Potter?" Malfoy said as he pushed his way out the door and stepped over. He was a good five inches taller than Harry now.

"You better believe it," Harry said. The students chuckled.

"Just you wait, Potter," Malfoy said in a low voice.

"That is exactly what your father said. Right after I put a binding curse on him so the Ministry could haul him back to Azkaban."

Malfoy took a step back and sneered harder. "You better be ready to duel in class tomorrow morning."

"Oh, I am," Harry said with a sly smile.

Malfoy lost his. "My father said you were playing at something. We'll see how long that lasts now that I'm back."

Harry had to work hard not to burst out laughing. He shook his head as he stepped away and his friends followed. "See you in class," he said sweetly to Malfoy. He gave the other gaping students a smile before turning to walk up the stairs.



Chapter 20 - Settling In

Ron had to be dragged to class the next morning. He sat in his seat between Harry and Hermione with his back hunched. Snape strolled in on the hour and looked them all over. "Well, some of you that I had thought I was rid of," he stared pointedly at Ron and then Neville, "I seem to have back again. A side-effect I had not considered, I admit, when I asked to teach this subject." He picked up the class list and glanced at it. "Well, one cannot have everything," he breathed.

He tossed the list aside on the front table and unrolled another parchment. "As all but the least astute of you know, this is Defense Against the Dark Arts. It is *optional*. If you do not intend to work hard, you should not be here right now. This class is for those who intend to take the Defense N.E.W.T. at the end of this year. I will expect everyone to do exceptionally well on it should they stay."

His eyes took in the silent room again before he looked over the other parchment. "These . . . are notes left by your previous instructor, Mr. Grey. He felt obliged to . . . warn, I suppose one could say, the incoming teacher about certain students." Reading now, Snape went on, "Mr. Weasley, he states, is the most accident-prone student he has ever taught. Ms. Patil cannot demonstrate a spell without giggling first. Mr. Potter, he writes . . ." Snape glanced up at this point with a chastising look. "Is arrogant, presumptuous to the point of distraction, and apparently feels he should be teaching the class."

Harry winced a little, but held Snape's gaze. When Snape started rolling up the parchment, Harry raised his hand.

With a raised brow Snape prompted, "Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"There are no comments about . . . students from any of the other houses?" He had almost said Slytherins, but then thought better.

While continuing to roll the parchment tightly, Snape replied, "I believe it says Ms. Abbot shows promise, but she is unable to focus."

Hannah, who had been gazing out the window at the clouds, snapped her head around at that, eliciting a chuckle from the class.

"Other questions, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked with an unusual underlying tone. No one else seemed to hear it.

Ron raised his hand. When Snape's questioning look turned his way, he said, "Professor Grey didn't like Harry and me. His comments are unfair."

"He wasn't as bad as some of the others," Hermione countered. "He didn't try to kill Harry, for example."

"Yes, he did," Ron retorted. Harry slapped him on the arm to shut him up.

Snape took that in. "Explain that, Mr. Weasley," Snape insisted sharply as he stepped to the edge of the platform.

Ron's mouth fell open and he hesitated with a drawn-out, "Ah . . ."

With a frown and a huff Harry bailed his friend out. "He got really angry one day and challenged me to a duel. Which we had, just inside the Forbidden Forest. I don't think he was trying to really do me in though; the spell Ron is thinking of was just some kind of variant of a Blasting Curse that I ducked."

"Yeah, but the tree behind you just exploded!" Ron insisted and then slapped himself on the forehead and muttered, "Shit."

With another dirty look at his friend, Harry went on. "Basically, I beat him easily after that one shot and he left me alone after that."

Snape looked dangerous. "I presume that you didn't inform anyone else of this, Mr. Potter?"

"No, sir," he admitted quietly.

"Stupid boy," Snape muttered and went back to the table, where he put the comment parchment back down, crumpled from his hand gripping it.

"I'd think you'd be happy to hear that, sir," Ron said accusingly.

"Ron," Harry said in a low tone as he grabbed his friend's sleeve. Snape was giving Ron a dangerously dark look, making Harry's heart race a little. "You are not starting out the term well at all here." Ron pulled his arm out of reach and refused to look at his friend. Harry sat back with a sigh and crossed his arms.

"Stay after, Mr. Potter," Snape said as he flipped through his copy of the textbook.

"Yes, sir."

Snape smoothly moved on, "I will assume you have all read chapter one. Who can tell me the six crippling curses?"

At the end of class, Harry hung back. Hermione dragged Ron out before he could try to stay after as well. Malfoy stalled too but a sharp look from the teacher sent him out. When they were alone, Snape said, "Mr. Weasley needs to learn to think before he speaks."

"Tell me about it. He has the First Years terrified of me."

"That isn't far from awestruck, in any event," Snape commented as he stepped off the platform and over to Harry.

Harry met his gaze before dropping his again. He felt worse about not telling his friends the truth. He waited for Snape to say something about that. Instead, his teacher after a long pause said, "I am going to report the incident, so expect to get called to the headmaster's office to explain it."

"You think it's worth bothering Dumbledore for?" Harry commented. "Grey isn't teaching here anymore."

"It will undoubtedly be Professor McGonagall who questions you. This is for you to know, only, for the moment, but you are going to be assigned a new Head of House, probably at the end of the month. McGonagall is taking over more of the headmaster duties and does not have time for both."

At Harry's sad expression, Snape said, "It is inevitable, I am afraid."

Harry swallowed hard. "Do you think it's all right if I go up and visit Dumbledore sometimes?"

"I am quite certain that he would rather welcome that," Snape said. "The password is Roverandom." Snape stepped back to the front table. "Do you need a note for your next class?"

Harry hoisted his bookbag. "No. It's Transfiguration." He gave Snape a sly smile and departed.

"Sorry, Professor," Harry said as he stepped into the Transfiguration classroom in the middle of the roll call. "Professor Snape kept me after."

She lowered her parchment and studied him over her glasses. "I am going to assume you are not in trouble already . . ."

Harry paused in setting his bag down on the floor under the table. "Uh . . ." At McGonagall's disapproving look, Harry explained, "It is for something that happened last year." He glared at Ron. "Something someone should have kept their mouth shut about. I've been informed, ma'am, that I will be explaining it to you at some point."

"In my copious spare time, Mr. Potter," she breathed.

"It wasn't Harry's fault," Ron muttered.

"Ron," Harry and Hermione said in unison. "You've helped too much already today," Harry finished softly.

At the end of Transfiguration, McGonagall stepped over to Harry as they collected up the crickets they had been transforming into crockery. "Stay after, Mr. Potter. I would rather miss lunch than add anything to my schedule at this point."

"Yes, Professor," Harry said.

The door fell closed behind the last student. Harry hefted his bag onto the table and left it there. McGonagall was storing the crickets in a large, screened-in cage full of grass clippings and a ragged and skeletal potted fern. He helped her empty out the boxes, sometimes having to prod the clingy black insects from the inside of the lid.

"I have to admit, Harry, that I haven't managed to locate the right paperwork to record Severus' conflict of interest, shall we say. Nor have I had to time to determine which policy applies to punishment." She shut the cage and hovered it to the top shelf. "If he sent you to me, he presumably doesn't want to punish you for it himself."

"You misunderstand, ma'am. He just said he wanted it reported."

She stopped straightening things up and asked, "Wanted what reported?"

Harry swallowed hard and said, "Professor Grey's attempt on my life, ma'am."

McGonagall's eyes lifted to the ceiling. "You had to have a full set, didn't you, Harry?"

"I personally don't count the incident with Lupin," Harry said defensively as he crossed his arms.

"Everyone else does," she said. "So what happened?"

Harry summarized the events, pointing out that Ron thought the spell more violent than he did.

"What night was this? Do you remember the date?"

"I could figure it out from my study notes, I remember what he was trying to teach that week."

"Figure it out. Write out what happened. Sign it. Have Ron read it and sign it. Give that to me. It would help me a lot." She picked up her books from the front desk. "I admit it is much simpler now that he isn't here to be kicked out. If you can at all help it, don't get into a duel with another teacher for at least the next few months," she said stridently.

Harry followed her toward the door. "What about Severus?"

She put her hand on the door handle and gave him a soft grin. "You are on your own there, Mr. Potter."

"I am all right with that, Professor." Harry grinned back.

* * *

Potions with Greer wasn't the same as with Snape. She lectured more slowly as though they weren't very smart, leaving them rushed to brew before the end of the class, unless it was double-Potions. Hermione didn't seem to like or dislike Greer, which was okay with Harry. The other students, except the Slytherins, made a show of making her feel welcome, giving her little presents for the first week. While Harry thought it inexplicable, it did have the advantage of improving her mood.

She hadn't lost her impression that he was a little dim. Even by the end of the first week, she still seemed surprised when he turned in a successful potion at the end of class. Harry found this more annoying than it really deserved.

"Greer's okay," Hermione commented on the way out of class.

"She thinks I'm an idiot," Harry griped.

"Well, you do keep exceeding her expectations at least," she replied brightly.

"Yeah, great."

* * *

Harry enjoyed Defense the way Snape taught it. He seemed less concerned with their safety than previous teachers, or maybe it was just that they were Seventh Years now and expected to figure things out and control what they were doing. This meant they were allowed to try rather loud, bright, dangerous spells on occasion, sometimes even on each other. The added benefit of this was that Hermione didn't dominate the way she did in most other classes, since she didn't necessarily want to make as much noise as was required by a particular spell. He and Neville and most of the other boys found the noise half of the fun of things and shouted the spells energetically. Most, but not all, of the girls remained more demur as they practiced and demonstrated.

"Like this," Neville said to Justin while drawing a tiny rapid corkscrew in the air with his wand; a trail of shiny gold bled off from it and hovered. Snape was working with two of the other Hufflepuffs and Parkinson in the front, and had been for almost ten minutes. He glanced their way and then disregarded them.

Justin tried it a few times but he only got a gold sparkle or two. Hermione gave them a chastising look. "At least work on one of the spells from class, Harry," she whispered.

Neville answered before Harry had a chance, "This one is good for an ice curse, which is coming up after this."

"Is it?" Hermione asked with interest and leaned in to join them a bit, as did Ron.

From the front of the room, Snape cleared his throat. They all sat straight in their seats and waited more patiently for their fellow students to manage the assigned spells.

Finally the Hufflepuffs returned to their seats, looking worn by the extra effort they had been put to. Snape surveyed them a moment before announcing, "Mr. Longbottom wishes to demonstrate a few counters to the next curse, I believe."

Ron swallowed a smile as Neville slunk out of his seat and up to the platform opposite the teacher. Unlike in D.A., he stood a little slump-shouldered, but he had his wand up and ready.

Snape, looking unforgiving, said, "Mr. Longbottom will be demonstrating an Ororbis, correct?"

Neville nodded, obviously concentrating hard, but quickly adding, "Yes, sir."

Snape sent an ice curse his way after a "Ready?" Neville's arm was a blur as he drew a fast expanding spiral of gold ribbon in the air before him. As the curse arrived, tiny ice chips rained down onto the floor, not reaching him. The charm was strong enough that it hovered many seconds after the attack.

Snape waited for it to fade before saying, "And the heating charm from the assigned reading?"

"Yes, sir."

When Snape spelled him, Neville performed both the heating charm on himself followed quickly by a fireball spell, which went off like a photographer's flash. Snape lowered his wand. "Timing is usually considered too sensitive to use that counter against an ice curse," he stated, apparently for the edification of the room. "Mr. Longbottom, however, managed to get the timing precisely correct, as surprising as that is. Although it did not leave him time for much of a heating charm as a backup. Take your seat," he ordered Neville.

Neville lowered his wand and jumped off the platform. Harry could tell by Snape's expression that his fellow student had earned a little of his grudging respect, but he doubted Neville realized this; he took his seat with a sigh, looking only relieved to have survived the test.

As Harry left class, he glanced back to nod a goodbye and noticed Malfoy standing beside Snape's desk with his book open as though to ask a question. His chin-length blonde hair hung forward to frame his light eyes as he gave Harry a small sly grin. Harry rolled his eyes in return and closed the door behind him.

* * *

"Ms. Granger, may I speak to you a moment?" Professor Greer asked as the students filed out at the end of class.

"Yes, ma'am." Hermione waved Harry and Dean on and stepped to the front of the room.

"You are a very intelligent young lady, Ms. Granger. May I ask what career you plan to follow upon finishing school?"

"I haven't decided, Professor, something in Muggle relations. I'm looking for something outside the Ministry if I can find it."

"Why is that, dear?"

"They were too slow to admit that Voldemort was back. I haven't forgiven them for that."

"Dear me, you are a strident one, aren't you?" As she spoke, she arranged the potions turned in by the students into a locked drawer of her desk. "You have been here for six years; perhaps you can answer a few questions that have been bothering me?" Greer said this in an extra-friendly voice.

"I can try, ma'am."

"The students seem very pleased to not have Professor Snape."

Hermione frowned inwardly and hesitated. "He wasn't the nicest Potions teacher, Professor. The Slytherins aren't happy he's gone; that's why there are only two in the Seventh Year class."

"You have him for Defense though, still?"

"Yes, ma'am. I think he is happier teaching that." Hermione shifted her bookbag, wondering if she was out of line. Snape's demeanor had improved, although she felt uneasy about voicing a guess as to why.

"Hm," Greer muttered thoughtfully. "I've heard a few jokes about Parselmouths in this class, which is unexpected." She hesitated, her voice sounding forced steady. "I realize it is a bit unthinkable, but is there someone in this school who speaks Parseltongue?"

Hermione laughed lightly. "Yes, of course." She didn't notice Greer's alarm at this. "Harry Potter does. Everyone knows that."

Greer's expression went flat. Slowly, she said, "Really? That is very interesting. Thank you, dear. That is all."

Hermione smiled helpfully and exited, failing to understand the quirky, dark, false smile the teacher responded with.

* * *

Saturday was the first chance Harry had to wander to the fourth floor outside of class time. Snape was in his office grading essays. He greeted Harry relatively warmly, for Snape. Harry took a seat opposite the desk. "It will take me another hour to finish these," Snape said.

"That's okay," Harry said. He pulled out his Transfiguration essay and worked on that.

Finally, Snape rolled the essays up into bundles by class and tied them. "How was your first week of seventh year?"

Harry finished the sentence he was writing out as he replied, "Fine." He put his parchment and textbooks away. "The First Years are still terrified of me. And some of the other students as well who should know better. I'm not used to that yet and I can't figure out how to get past it with them."

"Does it matter?"

"It bothers me. I'm not scary or dangerous. They step against the wall to let me pass in the corridor like I'm going to explode or go on a spelling spree. Ron just thinks it's funny." Harry waited for him to ask if he had told Ron and Hermione anything, which he hadn't. Why the opportunity never seemed to arrive, he wasn't certain. His dreading the moment of revelation might have something to do with it.

Instead, Snape opined levelly, "Give them time. They read those newspapers that you pass off as rubbish. People like heroes and are slow to give them up."

They had tea and talked for an hour, until Harry noticed the clock. "I have D.A." He stood up.

"You are still holding that?" Snape asked in real surprise.

Harry pulled the Galleon from his pocket to check that he remembered the date and time correctly.

"What is that?" Snape asked.

Harry held the coin out. "Hermione created those for our meetings. The date and time are coded in the serial number with a Protean charm. We had to do that to avoid Umbridge."

Snape handed it back. "Bright girl."

"Too smart for her own good," Harry quipped.

"One wonders what she sees in Mr. Weasley," Snape commented idly as he placed the rolled essays into his satchel.

Harry hadn't thought about it like that. He shrugged. "They've always liked each other."

"Hm."

"Gotta run." At the door, he stopped. "Do you have time tomorrow?"

"Some. I will be brewing a few potions in the dungeon in the morning. Most weekends in fact."

"I'll try to come down," Harry said brightly.

* * *

Sunday morning, Harry helped out in the dungeon for a little while, until Greer started hovering annoyingly. Harry begged off, not wanting to make trouble for Snape. As he headed back up the staircase, he realized that he was free to visit Dumbledore.

After the staircase bore him up to the office door, Harry knocked with anticipation that made him realize he should have remembered to visit sooner. Dumbledore stood looking out the window behind the desk, his hands clasped behind his back. "Hello Harry," he said, even before he turned.

"Good morning, sir," Harry replied brightly. On the desk a model of the solar system was rotating and catching the light from the window each rapid time around.

"Is there something on your mind, my boy, or are you just visiting?"

Harry took his eyes from the blue and green hollow orb with one white moon that represented the earth. "Just visiting."

"Please, have a seat." Dumbledore invited him around the desk and conjured a pair of overstuffed chairs in a bright flowery pattern. From their seats they had a nice view of the lawn, part of the pitch and a vast expanse of forested hills. "You are doing very well, I hear."

"We've barely had any assignments," Harry pointed out.

"I didn't mean in your school works," Dumbledore replied gently.

"Oh." He took a deep breath. "I guess I am. Good to be able to go out if I want. No one seems to think Avery or Jugson is any threat."

"The Ministry believes they will remain in hiding for a long while or leave the country. They were both considered by the Aurors and Professor Snape to be a bit of a drag, in fact, on Voldemort's organization."

Harry remembered seeing Voldemort brutally punish Avery in the graveyard. He *had* been a simpering wimp. Maybe Voldemort had kept him around just to take out his anger on. Harry fidgeted with his feet as a cloud moved over the sun. He thought about his inability to tell his friends about his new situation and fidgeted again.

"Something else is bothering you. Can I help?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry pulled his eyes from the view and looked at the headmaster. From this close distance, he looked much older than Harry remembered. It made Harry ache uneasily. He dropped his gaze and admitted, "I haven't told Ron and Hermione about being adopted."

"Hm." Dumbledore sat back and steepled his fingers. "Would you like a butterbeer? I think I would." He conjured two bottles and handed one over. Harry sipped his: it was icy cold which was refreshing before the sun-soaked window. "I assume you believe that they will disapprove?"

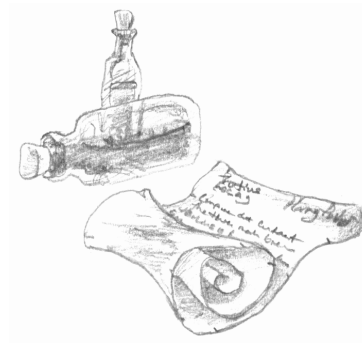
Harry nodded and felt the persistent knot in his stomach tightening up. He drank more butterbeer, but it didn't loosen.

Dumbledore said gently, "In your place, I'd give them a chance. But then again, you know them better than I. A true friend feels obliged to share his thoughts but in the end he, or she, should support you. I believe they are true friends to you."

Harry's stomach loosened a little.

A silence fell. Dumbledore finally interrupted it. "Quidditch starts soon. A full season for your last year. No Voldemort. No Dementors."

"I'm looking forward to it, sir," Harry said, more upbeat and glowing a little in anticipation.



Chapter 21 - Potions with a Capital "P"

Tuesday Potions gave Harry more of a flashback than he ever expected to get. As they all took notes on the lecture, Greer called on him. She had a smile on her face that made him wonder with a jolt if she were actually Umbridge using a Polyjuice potion. It was a Nagini kind of smile.

"Tell me, Mr. Potter, what kind of caustic is shared by Beetlejubs and Bezoars?"

Harry blinked at her. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione move in a way that made him think she didn't know the answer either.

"Mr. Potter?" the teacher prompted with a acidic sweetness.

The question did remind him of something. Something from one of the other texts he had read the first few chapters of over the summer. He racked his memory. "Uh, Clian- Clyentate?" That wasn't quite right.

"Wrong, Mr. Potter," she announced airily, enormously pleased. Harry glanced at the other Gryffindors. All of them shrugged that they didn't know either, making Harry feel better.

Greer spent an inordinate amount of time hovering around his cauldron while they brewed as well. This didn't bother Harry much; she couldn't touch Snape for intimidation. He acted surprised to find her there when she finally did critique their potions.

"Perfect potion, Ms. Granger. Too much heat when you added the fly's legs, Potter. You will get graded down for that," she said happily as she strode on to the next bench, where the students suddenly stood straighter as she approached.

Harry glanced into Hermione's cauldron, then into his. They didn't look the least bit different. He shook his head.

At the end of class, Greer handed out essay assignments. This in itself was a little odd. She did it as they walked out the door. "Due Friday," she said happily. "That will leave your weekend free . . ." Several students actually thanked her for that.

Harry accepted his parchment slip and jammed it into his bag. Hermione read hers aloud as they walked, "*Describe the uses of the seven kinds of bezoar-based potions.* Doesn't sound too bad." She tucked it away in her book which she left in her hand since it didn't look like it would fit in her bag.

As they mounted the stairs to the ground floor, Harry looked around for a place to pull her aside. His secret was starting to tangle his insides and looking at her calm visage as she thought ahead to the rest of the day, reassured him that, she of all people, would understand. As they approached the Entrance Hall, he espied the staff lounge as Professor Vector stepped out of it. It looked empty and, although the door had closed, he knew the password.

Harry gave a tug on Hermione's arm. She turned to him with a questioning expression. "Um, there is something--" Harry started to say. His expression must have looked pained because her brow furrowed in concern.

"Hey there," Ginny said, stepping over to them.

Harry looked over at her and at Ron ambling up behind his sister.

"Uh," Hermione said.

"Lunch time," Harry announced, stepping through them all to lead the way. The thought of Ron finding out produced a cold fear in Harry, which made him feel trapped. He was very grateful that Hermione was smart enough not to prompt him more as they walked to their table.

As they sat at lunch, Hermione sent Harry questioning looks. He gave her small wry smiles in return. Ron asked her to read his essay for History and she occupied her self with that as she ate. *Well, it's like this*, he imagined himself saying to her. *Professor Snape, well, adopted me.* It sounded odd, even to him, in the context of the Great Hall filled with his loudly chattering peers. Six years of history complicated things incredibly.

Harry ate a nice crispy panini as he watched his two friends. They were sitting very close together; they had leaned in over the essay so they were touching all along their sides. It occurred to Harry with a twinge that Hermione's loyalty was almost certainly not first to him no matter the topic. Nor Ron's, he didn't expect. He turned to the head table. Snape's eyes narrowed for a half-second, a sign Harry knew that meant he was curious or even concerned. Harry managed a light smile for him before returning to his lunch.

* * *

After Care of Magical Creatures that afternoon, Harry went up to the second floor. Snape was reading intently from a large book when Harry entered. He closed the door and waited for Snape to put down the hand he had raised for silence. Snape's lips moved as he recited something from the text, making Harry curious. At the end of the page, he put his hand down and looked up in question.

"This is quick," Harry assured him, glancing upside-down at the detailed page of curse applications. "Do you have those other seventh-year Potions texts?"

Snape's brow went up. He pointed to a bookshelf in the corner. Harry went over and crouched to look on the bottom shelf, the only shelf that held books with textbook-like bindings. "What is this other one?" Harry asked of a worn, narrow, thick volume titled *Potions Compendium*.

"You may borrow that as well, should you wish to. May I ask why you feel you need them?"

Harry sighed. "Greer asked me today what caustic Beetlejubs and Bezoars have in common. I almost remembered," he said in frustration. "It was in this one." He set the books on the corner of the desk and pulled out a blue-covered one. He flipped it open. "Catalyndate. I was close."

"It was not in your regular reading, I assume."

"No. It was not." Harry opened his bag to fit the books in. He pulled out the parchment slip with his essay assignment to keep it from getting crumpled. He glanced at it and froze with a growl. It was a different topic than Hermione's--a much harder one.

"Something the matter?" Snape asked mildly as he flipped through the volume in front of him.

"Yes, but I'll handle it." He pocketed the parchment and loaded the books into his bag. "I'll take this one too," he said and pulled the compendium from the shelf. It barely fit in his bag lying sideways on top. He shook his head, thinking that the assignment was due on Friday to make it hard for him to get help. As he reached the door, he said, "I'll have to see you later, sir. I have a lot to do."

Harry worked every spare minute on his Potions essay, neglecting his other class assignments. On Thursday night as they all sat around studying, he asked Hermione, "Can you read over my essay for tomorrow?"

Hermione wiped her fingers from the biscuit she had been eating and accepted his rolled parchment. "This is long, Harry," she observed as she unfurled the top of it. After she read the first part, she said, "What is this?"

Harry, holding out his assignment slip, said, "I received a different assignment than everyone else."

In disbelief Hermione looked at his slip. "Compare and contrast the three major brewing techniques of heat-simmer, brew-ferment, and flash. Include detailed cases where one is superior to another and explain why. Harry this is nuts. This isn't even a N.E.W.T. essay. No wonder you've had all of those other books out."

"Snape loaned them to me."

"He did?" she asked in surprise. "Didn't he insist you tell him why you needed them?" She picked up the compendium. "Wow, this is hard to find. I'm surprised he trusted you with it."

Harry blinked at that series of confused assertions. He couldn't imagine Snape withholding books from him, of all things. "I didn't tell him why. I didn't want to sound like I was whining about another teacher." This at least was the truth. "Can you read it over?"

"I am not going to be much help, I don't think, but I'll try." She read the first part of it. "Did you discuss crystallization differences?"

"No, I forgot about that." Harry made a note to himself on one of the many parchments he had been recording his readings on. "See, you're helping already."

"Harry, why didn't you complain in class yesterday?"

"She was waiting for me to. Like I'd give her the satisfaction."

"She shouldn't have done this. And you're too accustomed to hating the Potions teacher, that's for certain," she commented as she read. "Boy, this is long." She unfurled it all the way. "You have declared war right back, I see."

Harry grinned.

* * *

In Potions the next day, Harry actually went so far as to use one of his old Occlusion exercises to keep his expression even as he fished out his essay and handed it forward. The student in front of him, Justin, weighed it in his hand and gave him a questioning glance. Harry just shrugged as though it were nothing. Surreptitiously, he watched as Greer glanced at a few of the essays as they came to the front, including his. But her reaction was to smile a bit more to herself, which confused him.

Deathly tired of the subject of Potions, but having no choice, Harry took out his quill and began taking notes.

After Potions they had no afternoon classes that day, so they went out on the lawn and relaxed in the sunshine.

"Greer didn't say anything," Hermione said in disbelief.

"You turned in that monster essay and she didn't make anything of it?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "I have no idea what she is up to. Even Snape never stooped that low. Exactly."

Hermione said, "No, he just didn't grade your potions at all sometimes. Dropped them on the floor, for example."

"Actually, he said he did grade them," Harry said.

"When did he say that?" she asked.

"Over the summer I got mad and accused him of it in front of McGonagall. It was pretty funny the way she laid into him." Harry didn't explain that Snape had gone on to point out a bit angrily that Harry should have realized a show was being put on for Malfoy, Nott, and company.

"Wow," Ron said. "Wish I'd been there to see that."

* * *

It was a Hogsmeade weekend. Harry had a sense that Ron and Hermione wanted to hang out together, alone. He sent them on without him, saying he wanted to work on D.A. spells while it was quiet. In reality it was a good opportunity to spend time with his guardian without an excuse. Last weekend, he had told his friends he had been with Dumbledore longer than he really had.

Snape wasn't in his office. Harry went down to the dungeon and found him in the corridor, ferrying extra cauldrons from the classroom. "Are you here to help?" his guardian asked.

"If you want help."

"Yes, of course." He walked Harry patiently through the currently brewing potions and the instructions for each, which were placed beneath them on the shelf. "If you will handle these four for the next fifteen minutes, I will start another one." He set the two empty cauldrons up as Harry quickly reviewed the instructions for the ones he had been assigned. The next twenty minutes was a blur of hurried stirring and ingredient adding.

"Holding it together there, Harry?" Snape asked at one point.

"Yes, Severus, I am," Harry said, a little put out at being doubted. He stirred two cauldrons at once before turning the burner up on one of them, wishing for a third hand, then wondering if there were a spell for one.

Once the other two cauldrons were simmering, Snape checked Harry's work. He made an ingredient adjustment on one of them and then nodded. "They can simmer now. Thank you for assisting," Snape said as he closed the lids on the prepped ingredient jars and put them away in a small cabinet.

"If it is the only way to spend time with you . . ." Harry said as he read through the corresponding discussion for one of the potions.

"It isn't the only way. Shall we go up to my office and have lunch in?"

Harry put the book back on the shelf. "I'd like that."

* * *

Hermione and Ron returned just before curfew, smiling and laughing. Harry forced down his feeling of being left out as he met them in the Entrance Hall. "Hey, Harry," Ron called and waved, his cheeks a little red from the sun.

"We just ate," Hermione explained when Harry gestured for them to go into the Hall.

"All right," Harry managed levelly.

"We could do second pudding," Ron suggested.

"No . . . we couldn't," Hermione retorted in disbelief.

"See you later," Harry said and joined the stream of students going in. He sat with Ginny, Neville and Colin.

As the plates of food appeared, Justin stopped beside them and said, "Hermione told us Greer gave you an essay assignment ten times harder than the rest of us and that was why she handed them out rather than just telling us the topic."

"Looks that way. I did finish it," Harry said with a grin.

"That's nuts. You should have complained," he insisted, sounding like he was willing to take on some of the unfairness of it.

"I'm sure that's what she wanted me to do," Harry said. Justin shrugged and stepped over to the next table. Harry took a glance at the head table, Greer had her eyes narrowed at him all right. "I don't know what her problem is, but I'm not giving in," he said quietly.

Pointing at him with her fork, Ginny said, "Harry, I think you like being persecuted."

Harry's lips cocked sideways. "I did have fun working on that essay even though it was wicked hard."

"Where are Ron and Hermione?" Ginny asked.

In a high pitched mimic of Hermione, Harry said, "We ate already in Hogsmeade and we're soooo tired."

Ginny laughed. "Oh yeah. I can see that. Getting serious, those two."

"That's why I split them up when we were fighting in the final battle," Neville said in a falsely stern voice. "I thought, if they are side-by-side they might forget we're fighting Voldemort."

They all laughed.

When he finished his plate, and before he stood to leave, Harry took another peek at the head table--this time to look for Snape. Even through the hair that had fallen over his face, he could see Snape's brow go up. Harry gave him a small smile. If he had glanced at Greer, he would have seen her eyes narrowing more at him.

* * *

Tuesday in Potions, Harry waited impatiently for his essay to be returned. Greer strode back to the front of the room without returning it, but having returned everyone else's. Hermione gave him a wide-eyed look. He raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" she drawled.

"I didn't get my essay back, ma'am," Harry pointed out in the nicest voice he could manage.

"See me after class, Mr. Potter," she said in a stiff tone he didn't recognize.

Harry made it through class and brewing, but just barely. Greer seemed downright predatory today as she stalked around the room. She was too chubby to slither the way Snape used to, but she still managed. Her long fingernails tapped on the bench tops as she circled. At Harry's table, they all made faces of dismay at each other when her back was turned.

Finally the bell rang and everyone packed up and departed for lunch. Harry packed his bookbag and left it on the bench.

"You wanted to see me, Professor?" Harry asked. She hadn't looked up at him so he had been forced to walk up to her desk.

"Do you know the penalty for cheating in this school, Mr. Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "How does that matter, ma'am?"

Anger came through now. She had his essay in her hand, crumpled a bit. "Excessive assistance constitutes cheating, Mr. Potter," she announced in a victorious tone.

"I didn't get any help with that," Harry argued, pointing at the parchment.

"Don't lie to me; I can see right through you, my boy."

"Right." Harry said as he thought, *you haven't seen anything about seeing through people.*

"Who helped you with this?" she demanded. "Or need I not ask?"

"No one helped me with it," Harry repeated.

She huffed. "We'll see about that." She came around her desk and headed for the door. "Follow me," she ordered.

"Where are we going?"

"To see the headmaster. There are some other things he should be made aware of as well, I should think." She sounded righteous, much like Aunt Petunia often did.

Harry, thinking of Dumbledore not needing an interruption of his quiet contemplation, said, "I don't think it is worth bothering the headmaster for, ma'am. How about Professor McGonagall? She's the deputy headmistress."

They were going along the ground floor corridor now. "And your Head of House," Greer countered smartly.

"She has always been very impartial," Harry insisted.

Even though his legs didn't look any shorter than hers, he had to half-jog to keep up. She didn't respond to that assertion. Harry was out of breath when they made it to the far side of the second floor. She gave the password and the gargoyle leapt aside. Harry protested again, "I really don't think-

She grabbed the collar of his robe and dragged him into the turning staircase. Harry was too startled to do more than regain his balance. Same as with Mulciber, she had him beat easily if he couldn't use magic. At the top, Greer barely waited for an invitation to her knock before opening the door. She pulled Harry in behind her, only letting go when they stood before the headmaster's desk.

Dumbledore glanced calmly up at them. He sat writing a letter it looked like, with his glasses perched on his nose.

"Headmaster Dumbledore," Greer began a bit pompously, "I have a number of problems with this student to discuss with you."

Dumbledore looked curiously at Harry as the latter straightened his robes from having his collar twisted. "Good morning, Harry," Dumbledore intoned.

"Good morning, Albus," Harry greeted him back. Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at that. Greer seemed rather startled by it, which was Harry's intent.

"Now, Gertie, what is your concern?" Dumbledore asked as he put his quill aside, blotted, and rolled up the letter.

"First off, I must say this boy is treated far too casually and leniently by your staff."

Dumbledore slipped his spectacles off and folded them slowly. "Well, you will have to forgive us for that, as we are very appreciative of having Voldemort gone." She sniffed a bit doubtfully, making Dumbledore elaborate, "If you had been one of the ones who were duped completely and drawn away from the school just when the students needed us the most, and upon realizing this, imagined the absolute worst, only to return to find Mr. Potter here standing over Voldemort's remains and the rest of his club students incarcerating his followers. We perhaps have gone a little soft on him. If we start to forget, we only need consider that the alternative outcome would have been utterly tragic." He gave Harry an affectionate glance before he sat straighter and went on, "Nevertheless, if there is a problem to be addressed, we will by all means do so." He favored her with a questioning expression.

Greer geared up her anger again as she pulled out Harry's essay. "Mr. Potter is receiving undue assistance on his assignments."

"I did not!"

"Harry," Dumbledore said in a firm tone. "You will get your turn."

Harry bit his lips as Greer went on. "I do not like my students receiving assistance on assignments that are used to determine a final grade. I have the records of his previous grades in Potions, they are marginal at best. It is not possible that he is capable of the work he is turning in as his own, yet he persists in lying about getting help. I am especially disappointed that it is presumably another staff member who is giving him said assistance."

She held out the essay, but Dumbledore waved it off.

Greer continued in a lower tone, "As well, I have observed what I believe to be an inappropriate relationship involving Mr. Potter and a member of your staff, which I am *certain* is outside the bounds of school regulations."

Harry stared at her now, trying to catch up with that. He was starting to suspect that she wasn't after him, but Snape. Dumbledore's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. "Harry, do you have a response to that?"

Harry mentally backed up. "I haven't had any more assistance on my assignments than normal. Hermione reads my essays over when she has time and notes things she thinks are wrong. She doesn't say how to fix it, though, so I don't consider it cheating and neither have any of the other teachers. I haven't had any help from a teacher with *any* of my Potions essays."

"Potter, you can't honestly expect me to believe you wrote this!" she held the essay out to him.

"I did," Harry insisted. "As to Professor Greer's second allegation, I'm not sure what she's referring to."

"Your grades took a very interesting turn upward the last two months of the previous year, Mr. Potter."

"I was studying harder."

"Don't play coy with me." Her voice dropped even lower, unimaginably low, as she pointed at the door with his rolled up essay. "I saw you in my office last Saturday. I'm certain you didn't know I was there." Harry shook his head and thought fiercely back to the weekend brewing session while she grinned happily at his discomfort.

"Harry?" Dumbledore prompted.

"I honestly don't know what she is referring to, sir. I spent twenty minutes or so helping Professor Snape with some potions."

"Potter," she said as though he assumed she was stupid. "He had his hand on your back as he explained the potions to you, and he stood much closer than would ever be appropriate in my experience, anyway."

Harry gave her a studious look. He was a little embarrassed, mostly because he knew Snape would not want Dumbledore to hear this.

Dumbledore stood up and paced slowly behind his desk, rocking side to side more than walking, as though he were stiff. "Professor, if you will allow me to address these issues in the order of their seriousness."

She became all prim again. "Of course, Headmaster."

"When I hired you to teach Potions, we both agreed that since you had not taught in seven years, and not so many classes at once, that it would be best if you were not also burdened with the duties of Potions master."

Flustered, Greer stammered, "Yes sir, but-"

Dumbledore held up his hand to forestall her. Harry grinned and ducked his head. He really did love Dumbledore.

"If you have changed your mind or are feeling as though your territory is being invaded, you should have come to me to re-negotiate."

"That doesn't have anything to do with this," she insisted, gesturing at Harry with the parchment essay.

"Ah, but it does, I believe," he countered kindly.

Greer's mouth twisted to the side as she took that in.

"Harry, perhaps you should explain . . ." Dumbledore was giving him a look that Harry read as, *see what happens when you keep things to yourself?*

Harry sighed and said, "Professor Snape is my d- . . . guardian." Dumbledore gave him a sharp, amused look at that. "He adopted me," Harry added, a little rattled by his near slip.

After a long stare Greer breathed, "You aren't serious?"

"I witnessed the papers myself," the headmaster supplied. "Was there anything in what you saw that exceeded the bounds of a parent-child relationship?"

Harry rolled his eyes uneasily. Greer muttered in barely audible speech, "No, not at all."

Dumbledore retook his seat. "As to the allegations of cheating, I suggest you ask Professor Snape how much, if any, help he provided on the assignment. Good day, Professor," he said dismissively. With a smile he said more brightly, "Good day, Harry."

At the bottom of the tower, Greer thrust the rolled parchment at him. "Get it signed off by Professor Snape that you didn't receive any help. Then I'll mark it." She stalked off.

Harry used a flattening charm on his essay to take out worst of the wrinkles, then re-rolled it carefully. His bag was still in the dungeon; he would have to retrieve it before lunch ended. He went around the corner just in case Snape was in his office. He wasn't, but the classroom door was open. A peek inside verified that Snape was cleaning up from the previous class. Bits of wood disappeared from the floor with a Banishing Charm as Harry stepped in and closed the door.

"Harry," Snape greeted him when he looked up.

"I need to have you sign something," Harry said. "And to warn you that Greer has it in for you."

"I am already aware of that," Snape commented easily as Harry stepped over to him.

"Did you know she was in her office last Saturday?" Harry asked. Snape shook his head with a thoughtful expression. He took the parchment Harry held out as he explained in an annoyed way, "She insists that you sign that you didn't help with it. Otherwise she won't give me a mark on it." Harry watched in mild trepidation as Snape's eyes scanned the first section of the essay. "She dragged me up to Dumbledore's office just now to accuse me of cheating," he said to fill the ongoing silence. When Snape went on reading, Harry, with growing concern, insisted, "You don't need to mark it too--just sign it."

"You did a good job on this," Snape commented. "Greer gives remarkably difficult essay assignments and could not have given you much time to finish this as it is only the third week of classes." He carried the essay, while still reading, over to the desk to pull out a quill. "Reyfreem is not a reagent," he said.

Harry glanced over his shoulder. "I said that wrong. I was pretty tired when I wrote that part."

"The entire class must be tired."

"No one else got that assignment," Harry said. "Everyone else had: describe the seven kinds of bezoar-based potions."

Snape looked up at that with an intense expression. "And you didn't complain?"

"I thought she was trying to get to me. I would have, if I'd known she was trying to get to you, by giving me an assignment she was certain you'd have to help with."

Snape quickly read over the rest of it. He pulled out his wand and obliterated the erroneous line. "Rewrite that and I'll sign it," he said, pushing the parchment over to Harry.

Harry laughed and shook his head. He crouched so he could write normally in the blank space and repaired the miswritten line. "I'm only doing this because I did know better, just didn't write it out very well."

"Of course, Harry," Snape stated patronizingly. He took the parchment back and added a line across the entire bottom edge of Harry's text and wrote just below it, *No assistance provided*, with his signature. As Harry rolled it up again, Snape said, "If I were you, I would insist it count as the mid-term."

"You think so?"

"Yes. I am impressed, Harry. Makes me think I didn't challenge you enough."

"Oh, you did," Harry strongly insisted, garnering a small smile from his guardian.

Essay in hand, Harry went back to the dungeon to collect his bag. The classroom was empty. He knocked on the office door and was told to enter.

"My assignment, Professor," Harry announced levelly. He brought it up to the desk and set it there. She kept writing in her log book with her quill, her grey roots showing in her thin scalp. She didn't look up. Instead she waved him off. Harry turned and started back to the door. Peeved at her silent dismissal of things, he turned at the door and said, "Professor, if you think you know how to see through people, you should look up Legilimency in the library next time you are there."

She gave him a withering look. "Did I ask for your advice, Mr. Potter? I am quite certain I didn't."

"I'll keep the second part of it to myself then, ma'am, which was listing the staff who know it. It is no matter to me. Good day, Professor," Harry finished in a calm, level voice that he thought even Dumbledore would be proud of.

* * *

Breakfast was Harry's favorite meal, usually. This particular morning, however, it wasn't going as well. There was a lot more whispering and glances his way than normal. Much more. Students were passing around copies of what looked like the *Prophet*, and reading avidly. Harry tried not to look too alarmed by this as he reached for the honey.

Hermione was eating calmly and reading her own copy with her normal consumed expression. Harry resisted the strong urge to jerk it out of her hands. Torturous, long minutes passed as he tried to eat, tried to listen to the whispering, and waited for the paper.

Justin swept behind and hit him on the shoulder. "Hey, Harry," he said meaningfully.

"Huh?" Harry asked him.

"You don't have to explain," Justin said in a false sympathy as he stepped to his table. Harry resisted glancing at the head table, but just barely.

Luna stopped by next. "*Really*," she said, sounding disappointed in him.

"What?" Harry asked her. His uneven heartbeat was struggling with the notion that the reactions were just a little off from what he feared.

"Oh, this," Hermione said, grabbing Harry's attention. He swallowed and waited as she read something on the back page. She shook her head in confusion and with a dubious look, handed the paper over to Harry.

This reporter is bearing rumors that a certain wizard hero is in a family way. More to follow when verification can be obtained.

It was Skeeter's gossip column on the back page. "Family way?" Harry asked aloud, not sure whether to laugh or cry. Everyone around him broke out laughing.

"Who's the lucky girl, Harry?" Ginny asked suggestively, then flickered her eyelashes at him. They all giggled again.

"No one," Harry snapped, tossing the paper back on the table. "Argh," he breathed. Even Hermione couldn't keep from laughing. Harry shook his head and finally managed to eat some of his cold breakfast. Skeeter was getting close though; he really didn't know how much longer he had to work things out his own way, whatever that way was.

* * *

After Herbology that afternoon, Harry watched Ron's and Hermione's backs as they disappeared into the rose garden, engrossed in conversation. This left Harry free to visit his guardian. He had a question about his Potions reading as well that he would much rather ask of Snape.

In the second floor corridor, Harry paused outside the door because Malfoy was inside. He looked to be having something explained to him, but it wasn't something out of their class textbook.

"I expect to finish this one next week," Malfoy was saying in what must be his Best Boy voice. "Which one should I order to read next? This book refers to another by Brutus Brindlestaff. Do you know of it?"

Shit, Harry thought, *what is Snape teaching him?* He had a flash of the future: him as an Auror facing off with a Malfoy armed with spells Snape had taught him. While he waited his shoulder tired, so he set his bag down beside the door. Malfoy noticed this and gave him that sly smile again. Harry leaned against the doorframe and waited patiently. Snape suggested a different book and gave Malfoy a slip with an address from which to obtain it.

The blonde boy slunk over to Harry. "Need extra help, Potter?" he asked snidely.

"No," Harry replied in an almost friendly tone, refusing to be baited. They passed close in the doorway.

"Come in, Mr. Potter," Snape said as he arranged a small stack of parchments on his desk. He glanced up at Malfoy and added, "and close the door."

Harry froze at that and at the dark look Malfoy was now giving him. The scene Greer had caused in the headmaster's office played through his mind. "Uh . . ." he started. Malfoy actually looked furious now as he glanced between them. Harry held the door open and said to the Slytherin boy. "What do you want, Malfoy?"

Malfoy's pale eyes looked him over in silent, disapproving appraisal.

Harry stepped closer to him and dove in. "How about the truth?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Snape's head come up sharply. He glanced that way. "Trust me," Harry explained.

Snape rested his chin on the back of his fingers and considered them both. "Mr. Malfoy does know how to keep things to himself," Snape stated in an oddly mild tone, leading Harry to wonder what he had on Malfoy. "Sit down, Harry. Mr. Malfoy, step in and close the door."

After Harry took a seat, Snape sighed and considered him in consternation a moment. Harry gave him a shrug. "Potter has apparently seen something here that I did not," Snape said. "Perhaps because you have been competing only against yourself, Mr. Malfoy, even though you didn't recognize it. To save you further effort and . . ." Here he looked over at Harry in question. " . . . to address something Mr. Potter is concerned about, I should tell you that I have adopted Mr. Potter."

Malfoy's mouth fell open. "What?" he finally breathed after long seconds of empty expression. He spun on his heel and paced a bit, actually whimpering once as he turned. After a few times across the floor he stepped over to Harry. "No wonder I couldn't bait you at all. It was taking all the fun out of it, frankly."

Harry chuckled silently and grinned at the other boy. Malfoy made a noise of despair and put his hand over his eyes a bit theatrically, although Harry expected he meant it. Finally he put his arm down and said to his teacher, "Is that all, sir?" in a rather worn tone.

Snape, fighting a grin, replied, "Yes, Mr. Malfoy."

At the door Malfoy stopped. "I couldn't tell the House that, sir. I'm not that cruel," he said before he left.

When the door closed, Snape gave Harry, who was still trying not to laugh, a questioning look. "I assume there was reason for that."

"There was," Harry insisted. "Haven't you noticed Greer is off your back?"

Snape raised a brow. "I did."

Harry sighed. "Let's just say that when she dragged me up to Dumbledore, she was pretty certain she had you gone." He watched Snape take that in before he added, "I really didn't feel like going through that again." Harry smiled again and quipped happily, "It is fun to beat Malfoy at anything, though. And to make him miserable."

"Was there something specific you wanted?" Snape asked slowly with a hint of dismay. "Or are you just visiting?"

Harry reached for his bag. "I did have have a Potions question, if you don't mind. But it's mostly a visit."

Snape accepted Harry's notes with a long exhale that implied he was trying hard to be tolerant. Harry laughed lightly, not buying it.



Chapter 22 - Painful Truth

"We have been given permission to do a few offensive spells," Snape said at the beginning of lecture. "Potter, come up here."

Harry, feeling a little trepidation, went up to the platform. As he faced his teacher, he had to remind himself that Snape was not going to do anything untoward.

"The first spell we are going to do today is the Mutushorum or Freezing Spell."

Harry growled lightly in disapproval of being part of the demonstration, causing many of the students to laugh.

"The canceling incantation for this is Locoinitio," Snape went on.

Hermione raised her hand. "Why is this a restricted spell?"

"Because if incanted with too much force it can cause damage by temporarily inhibiting breathing or even cardio function."

Hermione slowly put her hand down. "Oh." She glanced worriedly at Harry and sat back slowly in her chair.

"I would not be teaching you this spell if I didn't think all of you capable of controlling the force of your spells," Snape went on. He turned to Harry. "Are you ready, Potter?"

"No," Harry said, causing more chuckling.

"I suspect your ego can handle it," Snape said with a hint of derision.

Harry glanced at the ceiling. Snape raised his wand and paused just a moment before casting the spell. Without any forethought, Harry raised his wand as well. The Mutushorum scattered away. Snape crossed his arms and gave him a disapproving look.

"What was that?" Snape asked snidely.

"A Chrysanthemum block?" Harry replied sheepishly.

"Are you asking me or telling me?" Snape demanded.

"Telling you, sir. I can't just stand here and be spelled," Harry complained. Someone snorted at that in humor.

"Give me your wand," Snape said. When Harry gave him an appalled look. The teacher stepped over to him. "Potter," he said threateningly.

Harry closed his eyes and held out his wand. Snape took it and pocketed it before stepping back to his previous spot. Harry looked very uneasy. Snape dropped his wand and said with some disgust, "Potter, if I had designs on harming you, I have certainly had ample opportunity to do so . . . *unobserved*."

Harry gave him a dark look, but forced himself to relax. Snape aimed his wand and cast the spell at him. As promised, Harry couldn't move. Snape came over to him, lecturing as he went, "We can see that he is still breathing. And blinking, you will note."

Harry thrashed in his mind, trying to get free. His limbs refused to budge and straining made no difference, at all.

Snape went on, "Cast properly, no autonomous function should be disturbed." He put a hand on Harry's shoulder and pushed him backward. He tipped up like a statue. "Usually the target will fall over, but Mr. Potter was well balanced." He pulled Harry back level, squeezing his shoulder before he released it.

"This is not an Imperio, although one could bring about the state you are seeing with a command under an Imperius curse." He paced back away. Harry really hoped this would be over soon. "The spell will wear off on its own in an hour or so. But it can be canceled anytime with a *Locoinitio*." Snape spelled him as he spoke. Harry hit the floor on his hands and knees, startled.

Snape said levelly, "Then there is that. The victim eventually relaxes since their voluntary muscles are not functional." He watched Harry get to his feet slowly. "Ego still intact?" Snape asked him.

"Yes, sir," Harry said evenly. "Can I have my wand back?"

Snape held it out, handle first. Harry came over and retrieved it before returning to his seat. He slouched back in his desk chair, feeling grumpy. Hermione gave him a sympathetic look.

"Everyone pair up. Be extremely careful as you are trying out the spell, won't you?"

* * *

Classes wound on. Ron stopped complaining as much about the long periods Harry and Hermione insisted they spend on assignments. Harry suspected that his first set of grades weren't as good as he had hoped. Ron fidgeted a lot as he worked though, annoying Harry.

"Can we take a break?" Ron asked late one evening.

"Sure," Hermione said. She put her things away with a sigh, indicating that she too was tired of studying.

"Should we go for a walk around the castle?" Ron asked.

Hermione stretched her neck. "Sounds good." They dropped their stuff in their respective dormitories and headed out the portrait hole. The corridors were quiet and dark as they walked and shared minor gossip.

As they turned a corner, they heard a gasp and quick footsteps go one way, then another, toward them. Dennis Creevey came around the corner and stopped short upon seeing them. "Filch!" he gasped in horror.

Harry saw what had him panicked: the statue of Roland the Rider now sat upon something more like a possum or some member of the stoat family, rather than the usual armored steed. "Dennis, what are you doing?" Ron asked in his prefect voice.

"It was just a joke," Dennis insisted in a frightened voice.

Uneven footsteps sounded around the corner along with the malevolent voice of Filch. "I'll get you this time you little scoundrel. Hang ya' by your little toes I will . . . 'til they pull out of their boney little sockets."

Dennis moved to hide behind them. This was relatively easy for Dennis. Harry waved him away. "Go on," he hissed. Dennis gave him a very grateful look and ran off.

"I wouldn't have done that," Ron commented. "He needs to learn not to be stupid."

"Look who's talking," Hermione hissed.

Filch was upon them, so angry spittle flew from his mouth as he raged at them, gesturing at the statue. "This is the last straw . . ."

"Sir," Ron said, "we just found the statue like this. We don't know who did it."

"I've taken more than enough from the lot o' you," he said, bloodshot eyes roving over them. "Ya' tryin' to tell me it's someone else. Who else is in this corridor, eh?"

"Look, we're both prefects, and she's Head Girl," Ron insisted, gesturing at their badges. "If we knew who did it, we'd tell you."

"I knows troublemakers when I see 'em and this one's been sticking in my craw for a long time now." He came right up to Harry with that. He dropped his cat on the floor and grabbed the collar of Harry's robe and dragged him away. Harry, thinking that this was happening far too often, struggled a bit but was outweighed as usual.

Filch let out a stream of invectives as he towed Harry down to his office. "Restrictions, my arse," he mumbled. "Treats 'em like a bunch a pansies, they does. Branding was the way in my day I'll tell yer." He tossed Harry into his office. Harry, a little rattled, took the visitor's seat he had half-fallen into.

"Really, sir," Ron said, stepping into the doorway. "Harry didn't do anything."

Filch ignored Ron. "It's just occurring to me, Potter, that with the headmaster feeling less than his usual self and you having no parents to squawk, that there is no real limit to your punishment." He grinned a yellow, toothy grin. With sadistic pleasure he said, "Well, now, yes, that does seem to be the case, doesn't it?"

"Didn't you hear? I got adopted over the summer." Harry said, rubbing his neck where his collar had cut into it.

"Nice try, Harry," Ron quipped. To Hermione, he said, "Maybe you should go get McGonagall."

She looked from Ron to Harry with a bit of a helpless frown. "I will if we really need to. She isn't usually very helpful in these situations." She fingered her wand pocket, looking concerned.

"Let's see now," Filch murmured to himself. "If this is your seventh offense that means we can use the hot irons." He chuckled to himself and pulled out a long file drawer. "Tenth, we can turn the flesh eatin' slugs on ya'. We must be at least up to that, Mr. Potter, hadn't we? Works slow, they does. Nice and slow." He chuckled again, showing half rotted teeth.

Harry swallowed hard despite himself and wondered, not for the first time, why Dumbledore kept Filch around. With long fingers that emerged from holes in his straggly grey gloves, Filch opened Harry's file and frowned at the top sheet. Harry recognized it from the back as a smaller copy of the application to the Wizard Family Council. The caretaker pulled it out and studied it intently, his hand shaking as he held it up. With an angry motion he stuffed it back into the file and slapped it shut, making everyone jump.

"Let's go up and see him then, eh?" he threatened, then said thoughtfully, "I trust he can dole out punishment--at least as well as I."

With extra forced confidence Harry asked, "Whom do you think he'll believe--you or me? Whom do you think he'll be more angry with?"

Filch growled low and long, sounding like his cat might. He slapped the file into the drawer and closed it with a boom. "Get outa my sight. I catch you agin' I don't care who your dad is, you understand me?"

Harry jumped to his feet and led the way out the door, forced to part his friends who were standing, mystified, in the doorway.

Two corridors and several staircases later, Hermione caught up with him. "Uh, Harry?" Harry slowed so they could come abreast. "What was that?" she asked carefully.

Harry stopped, breathing deeply from more than the fast walking. "It's what I said. I was adopted."

They both gaped at him. "You didn't tell us?" Hermione sputtered in disbelief.

"I didn't think you'd understand," Harry admitted. If anything, this made them gape more. Scrambling for a decent excuse, he said, "I'm seventeen, I assumed you would wonder what my problem was."

"Harry," Hermione said sharply. "We would never do that. I still need my parents, Ron still needs his, even though he fights with them half the time."

"Scuse me?" Ron said.

"Why would we think that?" Hermione asked. She sounded very hurt.

"I . . ." Harry started then stopped. He felt really awful. "I just didn't think you'd understand," he repeated miserably. He started walking slowly down the empty corridor away from them; they immediately came beside him again.

"I wish you'd trusted us, but we're really happy for you, Harry," she insisted. "You've been through so much; you really need someone besides us. Really. If you thought we'd feel put out."

"It isn't that," Harry said quietly. "It's just . . ." He stopped and grimaced.

"What's the problem?" Ron asked. "It isn't like you've been adopted by Snape or something."

Harry turned on him, his green eyes intense.

"Ron," Hermione said in a warning tone, putting a hand out to hold him back.

"You didn't!" Ron blurted in horror.

Figures at the end of the corridor by the staircases had stopped at the sound of Ron's voice. Hermione pushed them both forward, hard. In rapid speech she said, "The Room of Requirement is just around the corner. Hold it in until we get there."

The door to the room closed behind them and Ron was on Harry. "What the hell!?" he demanded. His voice died out quickly, bouncing off padded walls and floor.

Harry just stared at him, leaning toward his friend challengingly even though he was having to look up an awful lot. Hermione took Ron's arm. "Back off, Ron. You're making a huge mistake."

Ron shook her off. "That's sick," he said to Harry. "What the eff is wrong with you?"

A long pause ensued. Hermione took Ron's arm more gently this time and gave Harry a pained look.

"I knew you wouldn't understand," Harry said quietly, fiercely.

Hermione huffed in frustration. "Tell us what happened," she suggested helpfully.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Well . . . it is a bit of a surprise," she replied.

Harry's shoulders slumped. "You don't get it. You have parents you've had all your life, you can't possibly understand."

"Let's start with the basics," Hermione said slowly, gesturing for them to calm down. "When did this happen?"

"August second. Severus put—"

"'Severus', listen to you!" Ron exploded.

Harry fell back into a brooding silence where he glared at Ron.

"Ron, so help me. Shut up," Hermione said. "You aren't helping."

"Helping?" Ron asked with a false laugh. "Aren't you listening. He's telling us he's been adopted by *Snape*, the greasiest git in the wizarding world."

A shell closed around Harry at that, isolating him from Ron and letting him see his oldest friend in a way he hadn't before, as cruel and shallow. Hermione frowned as she watched this. "Harry, please," she said, grabbing his arm instead of Ron's. "You must admit that four, five months ago, this would have seemed very disturbing, even to you."

Harry dropped his gaze. Of course he could remember that. "Yes."

"All right," she said. "So you understand where Ron is right now. Tell us what happened," she pleaded. Harry's face went pained as he tried to sort out a story for them. "You spent the summer here . . ." Hermione prompted.

"It started before that," Harry said in a defeated voice. "The day Goyle and Crabbe grabbed me . . . tortured me. I know it'll be hard for you to believe, but Snape took care of me that night when we couldn't return right away. No one has ever done that for me." Harry turned sideways to them. "I didn't like that exposed feeling afterwards. He was always so cruel; I was terrified he was going to cut me down again and know really how to do it this time. But he never did. Instead, the night before the Quidditch match, when McGonagall turned Neville and me away, he asked me what I was dreaming, gave me a potion to sleep, even told me what was going on. He was the only one who bloody cared! The rest of them were too wrapped up in not feeling helpless or outrightly frightened to give me even a moment."

He paced around the soft floor of the empty, padded room. More reluctantly, he went on, "When I lost Sirius, I lost the only person I could ever turn to. I didn't think I'd have another chance to have someone like that again. Dumbledore suggested it to Snape and a month later, he asked me." He looked at each of them, pleading for understanding. "I'd spent half the summer around him at that point, helping brew potions for the stocks, helping him prep for Defense class."

Harry swallowed hard and ignored Ron's disgusted expression. "I said 'yes'. It's signed and filed with the Wizard Family Council. I spent the rest of the summer at our house in Shrewsthorpe." Ron blanched at that, comically disgusted. Harry stepped right up to him. "You don't know what it's like to have no place to call home. You with your quaint wizard house and property large enough to play Quidditch on it."

"You can't be jealous of *me*?" Ron sputtered.

"Why not?" Harry yelled back at him.

Ron gaped at him as though Harry had completely lost it. "You're a nutter," he said, not in a teasing way. "What are you saying, anyway? You went *home* with him?"

"Yes, he's my guardian," Harry insisted in the hardest tone he could manage.

Ron spasmed. "I can't take it," he said. "You don't let him touch you, do you?" he asked in horror.

Harry stared at him with absolutely no expression, then turned away and walked to the door.

"Harry," Hermione said, intercepting him. "Just give him a chance to get used to the idea . . ."

"What? You expect me to spend time *thinking* about that?" Ron asked in complete disbelief.

Harry opened the door and stepped through it. The corridor was even darker than before and completely deserted. He strode to the staircases and stopped when he got there. The dormitory was not an escape, but he was in no mood to talk to Snape, either. He headed for the headmaster's office instead. He had to talk to someone.

The lamps in the dark windowed tower office were supplemented by candles. The mood of it calmed Harry just on its own. Dumbledore relaxed in a lounge, writing in a large book. "Come in, Harry," he said welcomingly.

Harry shut the door quietly and stepped up to the desk. He couldn't figure out what to say.

"What is it, my dear boy?" Dumbledore asked. He set the book aside and stood up. "Have a seat," he insisted as he came around to the other side of the desk. Harry, his eyes heated now, took a seat in the visitor's chair after Dumbledore waved it into an overstuffed armchair. "What is it?" Dumbledore asked again.

"I told Ron and Hermione," Harry said quietly. Then after a pause. "Ron went berserk." That knowledge felt like one of the torn strands of the Dementor's web.

Dumbledore leaned back against the desk and clasped his hands before him. "Hmmm," he murmured.

"I realize now that I knew I'd be choosing between them," Harry said. "He refuses to understand."

"You may just need to give him time to absorb the idea," Dumbledore suggested.

Harry scoffed.

"You couldn't keep it secret forever."

"No. And I felt bad about doing that at all, anyway. It wasn't fair to Severus."

"Give it a little time, Harry," the headmaster stated sagely. "I still believe Mr. Weasley is a true friend to you."

Harry frowned and thought, *not anymore*. He stood up. "Thank you, sir. I needed someone to talk to before I go and share a dormitory room with him."

"Do you regret the adoption?" Dumbledore asked.

"No."

"Then the rest was inevitable. Accept that and move on. Do not apologize for taking what you truly need. You have given everyone else too much to even consider it. This is your time now."

Harry considered the old wizard for half a minute. This was a different attitude than he was used to from him. "Yes, sir. I'm realizing that."

"Good luck, Harry."

By the time Harry returned to the dormitory, Ron's drapes were closed. Harry changed and crawled into his own bed and closed his own drapes. He lay awake for quite a while until he relented and used a small sip of potion to knock himself out.

The next morning, Ron changed in silence and left quickly. Neville watched him stalk from the room. "What's up with him?" he asked Harry.

"We had a fight last night," Harry said.

"What about?" Dean asked.

"I don't want to talk about it. I don't feel like losing any more friends right now," Harry added as he pulled on his shoes.

"Harry," Neville chastised him. "You can't lose friends that easily."

"It took five minutes to lose him," Harry pointed out. He thrust his robe over his head and jerked it straight in anger.

At breakfast Hermione separated them on the bench. As everyone settled in, Dumbledore stood and announced that the Head of Gryffindor house was being reassigned to Professor Sinistra. He smiled broadly as he said this, as though it was the best thing that could have befallen the school. Harry's heart sank a little more as he heard it.

"What's that about, then?" Parvati asked the table in general.

Harry replied quietly, "McGonagall is too busy with her Deputy Headmistress duties to be our Head anymore." He and Hermione shared a look of understanding which was interrupted by breakfast appearing.

As he ate, Ron didn't look as though he had relented at all. Ginny prodded him, sensing his mood. "Ask Harry what's wrong," he finally snapped at her. Ginny gave Harry a questioning look, to which he dropped his gaze to his plate.

"Disgusting," Ron muttered a few minutes later.

Harry put his fork down and walked away. It wasn't until he was at the door to the hall that he realized Ginny had followed him. She took the door from him and closed it behind her. A few students sitting on the grand stairs gave them a curious look. Harry met her gaze before turning and heading up. Ginny followed him, eventually pulling him into the empty Transfiguration classroom. "What happened with Ron?" she asked bluntly.

Harry ran his fingers over the worn, carved surface of the desk beside him. "I told Ron and Hermione something I should have told them sooner, but I was afraid they were going to react the way Ron did," he confessed.

Ginny stared at him. "He gets unthinkingly vicious when he's really upset. Charlie's like that too." She stepped a little closer. "I don't suppose you'd tell me?"

Harry looked away.

"I promise not to behave like Ron." When he didn't respond, she said. "You have me really curious. Can I guess?"

"You are not going to guess this," Harry said, glancing around the classroom. The mice were skittering around in their cage.

"You're gay?"

Harry shook his head. "No."

"Yeah, too obvious, and I would expect better from Ron, but then again, maybe not."

"I have to get my books for class," Harry pointed out, voice flat. He started to turn to the door.

She grabbed his arm. "Look, I owe you a lot. You've never given me a chance to make it up to you. I can help with Ron, especially if he is in the wrong, but frankly, even if you are."

Harry stared into her bright eyes. He knew the knot in his middle would loosen if he told her. "Professor Snape adopted me."

Her eyes went wide and her mouth fell open as she read his face avidly as though looking for the truth in that. "Wow. That is a surprise." She exhaled hard and tilted her head to the side comically. "All right, that is really weird. Just as well I didn't keep guessing. Can I ask why?"

"Because he wanted to," Harry stated as though it were obvious. "I spent part of the summer at his house . . . met his parents."

"We are talking about the same Snape . . . the teacher here?"

"Ginny," Harry chastened her.

"Just checking. I thought you hated him, is all." She finally released his arm and rubbed her cheeks in thought. "Are you happy with it?"

"Very."

"Wow. Well, what else matters?" she said, clearly to herself. "You're much less moody now than you were at the end of last year. And frankly, he's a lot less nasty. I guess it works both ways." She glanced at the clock. "I'll work on Ron."

"Thanks."

As she reached the door, she said, "And I'll leave it to you to tell anyone else, because no one would believe me anyway. Who else does know?"

"McGonagall signed the papers as did Dumbledore. Hagrid knows. Ron and Hermione. Greer." He skipped mentioning Malfoy.

"Thanks for trusting me," Ginny said as she pulled the door open on the busy corridor.

"Thanks for believing I know what I'm doing."

* * *

The next evening, Ginny sat with Colin and Margory working on assignments.

"Do you understand this section of the text?" Margory asked the two of them. She turned her book around and pointed.

Ginny took it and read it through. "I thought it meant a binding charm wasn't like other object-producing spells because the bindings are not really physical."

"That can't be right, though," Colin said. "It says at the beginning of the chapter that they are all examples of the Grafting class of spell, which are all physical."

Margory frowned at her essay. "I don't know how to write this out to dodge the issue and this is due tomorrow."

"Why don't we just go ask," Ginny said. "I need a break anyway."

"You mean as in, just go ask Professor Snape?" Colin suggested in horror.

"He is the teacher," Ginny pointed out.

"You go ask him, then," Margory said.

"Watch my stuff."

As Ginny stepped out of the library, Colin jumped up. "I'd better go with her. What if she never comes back again?" With a hiss, Margory collected her things together as well and asked Dennis to watch it all.

Ginny looked at them both in surprise as they caught up to her. She walked with her textbook in her hand with her finger marking the page.

As she knocked on the Defense office door, she had to remind herself that this was Harry's dad to keep from leaving, or at least backing up to the middle of the corridor. The door swung open suddenly. "Ms. Weasley?" Snape greeted her, sort of.

"We have a question about the reading, sir," she said, proud of how casual it came out.

He gestured for them to enter. Colin jumped when the door boomed closed behind them. Ginny held out the book to the right page and pointed. She explained their confusion as he read it through.

He handed the book back and said, "Technically it isn't a Grafting spell. The book is incorrect." He glanced over them. "Any other issues?"

"Ron," Ginny replied, meeting the teacher's gaze steadily.

Snape tilted his head and considered her a long moment. "Yes, well, that is unfortunate."

"I'm trying to work on him, but . . ." Ginny said, then shrugged in frustration.

"I do appreciate that, Ms. Weasley." He gestured with his hand toward the door. "I believe you have essays to finish?"

On the way to the staircases, Colin said, "That was really strange; he was almost *nice*. What were you two on about anyway?"

"I expect everyone will know soon enough. I said I wouldn't say."

Margory frowned at her. "And who is your best friend?" she teased in annoyance.



Chapter 23 - A Time to Reap

"Severus," Dumbledore's voice came from the back of his office.

"You asked to see me?" Snape said as he stepped in. He could see the robed headmaster through the graceful limbs of a delicately balanced metal mobile on the desk. He went around to where the headmaster sat by the tall windows. A wren alighted on the sill before being caught in the wind and flitting away again.

A large diary sat in Dumbledore's lap and he held a white quill in his age-spotted hand. "This will be short, I know you have things to do," he said.

Snape locked his hands behind his back. "It is no matter, Albus."

"Harry was here a while ago," Dumbledore said slowly. "I wanted to tell you how very impressed I am with you. He seems very healed, especially given the rift currently separating him and Mr. Weasley."

Snape didn't reply, just stared out at the evening sky and the dark forest.

Dumbledore went on, "It eases my heart immeasurably to see his forgiveness. It still amazes me how calm and understanding humans become when their pain has been removed." He sighed. "Most of his anger *was* perfectly justified. We expected far too much from him in some instances and far too little in the rest." With slow movements, he opened the wide cover of the diary and pulled out the chocolate frog card he was using as a page marker. "Look at him," Dumbledore said, holding it up for Snape. "The eyes of someone older even than myself." He took the card back and held it up before himself. "But the Harry who visited not an hour ago had the eyes of a seventeen-year-old, as he should. You are to be commended for that."

Snape still didn't respond, even after a long silence.

"I think you were the best choice, Severus. You usually take nothing for granted, and I suspect neither does Mr. Potter. It makes for a good match."

After a minute Snape stood straightened and spoke finally, "My mother accused me of looking for atonement, my father of attempting to protect myself from the Ministry. Harry laughed at both of them." After a pause he added, "I earned his faith somehow; I do not know quite how."

"Harry is capable of fierce loyalty. Craves giving it, in fact. You earned it by being on his side when it mattered the most, and remaining there when you did not have to."

"He accuses me of understanding him too well."

"There is great power in that as well." Dumbledore tucked the card back away and sighed. "I was afraid we had sacrificed his future for our own, but I see that has not come to pass. Thank you, Severus," he said.

Snape bowed and, after a lengthy hesitation, departed.

* * *

Harry found himself calm around Ron now. He was generally polite to his friend and pretended the single syllable responses he received in return were sufficient. This seemed to ease the strain on Hermione a lot.

Ginny made a point of being extra nice when she was around, in fact, seemed to enjoy showing up her brother. "It's his choice," she would say when he was being difficult. Or, "He doesn't go around mocking dad, does he?"

After D.A. one evening, Harry trapped Ron after everyone else departed. Ron seemed surprised to find the two of them alone. "I just have to say a few things," Harry said.

"Yeah?" Ron retorted.

"For the first time in my life, I feel whole. Don't try to cheat me out of that."

Ron looked very taken aback. "I don't-"

"And don't make me choose between you and him. You aren't going to like my choice, as hard as it is to say that."

"I keep thinking you're under an Imperius Curse. I even went and looked up how to tell."

"So, am I?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"No. Doesn't seem like it," Ron conceded. "It still makes me nauseous to talk about this." He really did look unwell.

"Then we won't. I don't need to." With that, Harry left him standing alone in the Room of Requirement.

* * *

"Mr. Potter, come with me, please," Professor McGonagall said the next Saturday morning as they sat studying in the Library. They were rushing to finish things before Quidditch practice.

Harry closed his books and left them with Hermione. McGonagall's expression reminded him of the one she had the night Ron and he flew the Ford Anglia to school. Musing about why he might be in trouble, Harry followed in silence up to the headmaster's office.

Pomfrey sat whispering with Sprout in the main part of the office. McGonagall led Harry past them into a side room. Harry stopped in the doorway of what was clearly a bedroom. Dumbledore lay upon the bed, clothed in a bright blue dressing gown, covers pulled up to his waist.

"Harry," he said with affection and patted the bed beside him. Harry, stunned and pained to find his headmaster bedridden, moved to his side. Dumbledore grasped Harry's arm above the elbow. "My dear boy," he said with emotion.

"How are you, sir?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore smiled kindly. "I have been better," he replied amiably. "And how are you?" he asked pointedly.

"Pretty good, sir," Harry admitted.

"Quidditch is going well, I assume?"

"Very good." Harry then added in a burst of honesty, "Especially since Malfoy is too big to play Seeker, and he didn't make the team in any other position." McGonagall, standing by the door, rubbed her brow and appeared disapproving.

"Ah, not too much joy at another's expense, my boy."

"They'll have the last laugh, I think," Harry said. "If he didn't make at least Beater, they must be pretty good this year."

"It does all seem to even out in the end, Harry." Dumbledore lifted a gnarled hand and pushed his student's hair back, thumb brushing his distinct scar. "So good to be done with all that," the old wizard intoned. His intense blue eyes peered into Harry's. "So good," he repeated softly.

"Yes, sir."

Dumbledore put his hand behind Harry's head and pulled him forward against his chest. "I am so very proud of you," Dumbledore said. Harry gave in and rested his cheek and arm on the old wizard's broad chest in something of a hug.

"Minerva," Dumbledore said evenly. Harry would have sat up if a hand hadn't been holding his head down. Professor McGonagall's hem came into view as she stepped forward. "Take care of the school," Dumbledore intoned.

Harry took a sharp breath and held it. He squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself not to make a sound. If he made any sound, it would only be a scream of denial. He heard McGonagall say, "Of course, Albus," in a very unsteady voice. This only made it worse, forcing a tear out Harry's eye. He held perfectly still. It seemed incredibly important to do so.

No one moved for long moments. Harry heard someone sniffle from the doorway. McGonagall went into motion then, stepping around the bed, taking Harry's shoulders and pulling him to his feet. Harry held his eyes closed, trying desperately for control. She held him loosely, letting his forehead rest on her shoulder.

"Pomona, get Severus, will you?" Her voice was back to normal. "Get everyone else for that matter."

Short minutes later, Snape stepped through the unusually open headmaster's office door. Sinistra, Flitwick, Vector and Pomfrey stood in the doorway to the bedroom. When he reached them, one glance at Dumbledore's peaceful visage told him everything, and he shook his head. McGonagall gestured for him to come over to her side. Potter was clearly on the brink.

"The rest are on their way," Sprout said as she came in behind him.

Snape stepped around and turned the boy to him by the shoulders. Harry sniffled, eyes clenched shut. "Harry," Snape said. He glanced down at the old headmaster and put an arm around the boy. "Let's go into the other room."

As they stepped around the bed, Snape raised his gaze to the astounded ones of his colleagues. He shot them all a dark challenging one in return. They watched with wide eyes from the bedroom doorway as Snape led Harry to a spot before the headmaster's desk. Harry still had his forehead resting on Snape's shoulder. "Come now," he cajoled, "I don't think Albus wanted anyone to react this way, least of all you."

McGonagall stepped through the startled throng blocking the door, still paying little attention to the deceased. "Called him up here, in fact," she pointed out.

She and Snape's eyes locked a moment. "Quite an honor, Harry," Snape said. "Greatest wizard of our time wants you beside him." He stopped and rubbed his forehead with his free hand. More evenly he asked McGonagall, "You have notified the Ministry?"

"Not yet." She sighed and stepped over to the hearth.

Snape patted Harry on the back lightly and waited for him to pull himself together. His brow furrowed as he saw a disconnected pair of shoes coming up the still staircase. A gasp sounded and two sheepish faces appeared above an invisibility cloak.

"So it's true then?" Hermione asked. Ron beside her looked like he deeply regretted his current location. His adam's apple bounced as he swallowed hard.

"Yes," Snape replied.

McGonagall returned to the front of the office, giving the two on the steps a very disapproving glance. "Fudge and his retinue are on their way, so if you don't want to be on the front page of the *Prophet*, I'd take him down."

Harry lifted his head and gave his friends a very pained look and sniffled again. Snape looked him over and steered him by the arm. "Come on, Harry, you are a front page image to die for at the moment. Let's get you out of harm's way." A sharp look got Ron and Hermione moving as well.

At the bottom of the stairs, Harry hesitated about following his friends. He looked from them to Snape with a beaten expression. Snape stepped back over and said, "It is up to you."

Harry gave Hermione a long look before turning and walking the other way. Ron choked in shock. Hermione had to give him a tug on the arm to make him follow her.

Halfway down the corridor, Harry asked his guardian, "You don't mind?"

"Of course not."

In the Gryffindor tower Ron was still aghast. "Ron. Chill," Hermione insisted.

"I can't believe it," he said through clenched teeth.

"Did you find out what's going on?" someone asked.

"Dumbledore died," Hermione said quietly.

General exclamations of denial and unhappiness went around. Students were called out of the dormitories and told as well. The common room became crowded.

"Ron's taking it pretty hard," Dean commented, his eyes red-rimmed.

"That isn't what's bothering him," Hermione said with a disgusted shake of her head.

"What is?" Dean asked.

"Harry," Ron seethed, "went off with his *dad* rather than coming to the tower."

"What?" several people chorused.

"Too embarrassed to tell anyone," Ron said mockingly to Hermione.

Ginny stepped out of the crowd and said, incensed, "Ron, you can be so miserable!"

"That's the best you can do?" Ron retorted.

"He's your best friend. At least *try* to be understanding," Ginny argued in a low voice.

"Wait, wait, wait," Dean said, stepping between the three of them. "Let's back up to the 'dad' part."

"Harry was adopted by *Snape*," Ron explained.

"Ron, what have you been drinking, mate?"

Ron put his hands on his hips. "You think I'd make that up?"

"It's true," Ginny confirmed.

The entire room fell into an odd silence until Neville stepped over and said, "That's what you two have been fighting about?"

"It disgusts me. I can't take it," Ron stated sullenly.

Neville's eyes narrowed giving his usually friendly round face a menacing edge. He closed the rest of the space between them. "Harry found a father and all you can do is give him hell about it?" he asked, incredulous.

"It's *Snape*!"

"That's not your problem!" Neville shouted at him, surprising Ron and everyone else. "Ginny's right, you are a miserable friend."

The portrait hole opened at that moment and Professor McGonagall ducked to come in. The room erupted at her arrival.

"Dear me. Everyone calm down," she admonished them.

"Is it true?" Colin asked in dismay. "Professor Snape adopted Harry?"

McGonagall checked her reaction. "I had thought the topic would be the headmaster, but I see, as usual, that I am mistaken. The answer is 'yes'. And that is the end of that for the moment." She composed herself, giving Ron and Hermione stern looks as she did so. With a deep breath, she said, "I am here with solemn news. We have lost Headmaster Dumbledore."

Most everyone dropped their eyes, even though this wasn't news.

"He will be sorely missed by all, I am sure. There will be a memorial tomorrow; the time will be announced at breakfast."

Dennis raised his hand. McGonagall composed herself again and said, "Yes, Mr. Creevey?"

"What were his last words, Professor?" he asked curiously.

"Last words?" she echoed.

"Yes, ma'am," Dennis insisted solemnly. "Someone always records the last words of great wizards and witches. For example, Greta Gobstobber's were, 'May there always be time for the growing of poppies and marigolds.'" After a pause, he added, "Marvin the Magnificent's were, 'Bloody, where did I drop my wand this time?'"

Half the students ducked their heads, this time to laugh. Even McGonagall smiled with crinkled eyes. "Ten points, Mr. Creevey, for making me laugh when I dearly need to." She cleared her throat and looked around the ceiling in thought. "Let's see. He told Potter that he was very proud of him." Everyone shuffled a little where they stood. "He told me to take care of the school . . . and that was it."

She took another deep breath. "And on that note. I expect the prefects to take up the slack for the rest of the day; the staff are very chaotic at the moment." She picked out the relevant students with her eyes before she departed.

Harry refilled his teacup and leaned back on the couch in Snape's office. "I miss him already," he said, thinking painfully that at dinner the center seat at the head table would be empty. He looked at Snape staring into his own cup. "Thanks for letting me come down here. I can't take a crowd right now."

"I prefer this to the alternatives as well." He stood up and paced over to the window. "The Ministry and the press are here in force," he observed.

"Did you lock the office door?"

Snape gave him a small smile. "Yes." Then after a pause: "I should not shirk my duties for long. Leaving my colleagues so startled was probably not wise."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

"You were otherwise distracted by internal matters in the headmaster's office, but we were the main attraction. Alarming really, given that the foremost wizard of our time had, moments before, passed on."

"You never told any of the other teachers?" Harry asked in surprise.

"It is none of their concern," Snape said, as though that were obvious.

They fell silent for a long time. A breeze blew in the open window, upsetting the papers on the desk. Harry fiddled with his cold teacup. "I feel bad that I feel so . . . liberated." Snape turned to him with an intense expression. Harry explained, "The two wizards who were running my life are both gone."

"The two most powerful wizards in the world, no less," Snape drawled, "of the century, perhaps, even." He paced across the floor and passed his eyes over the bookshelf on that side. He shook his head. "We are far too similar, you and I, for being so utterly different."

"Too many powerful wizards mucking about," Harry quipped sadly.

"That is what powerful wizards do, Harry," he said a little snidely. "Or they avoid mucking until the very last moment and only do it so no one else knows it is them and no one has the slightest clue what is going on."

"You're just trying to make me feel better, aren't you?"

Snape returned to the table and topped up his tea. "I am trying to make myself feel better." He drank down the cup as though wishing it contained something stronger and considered Harry. "And I suppose your little friends have gone up to the tower and told everyone."

"I expect," Harry said with a shirk. "If I'd thought of that . . . but I should have said something sooner anyway. I was being very unfair to you."

"Unfair to me?" Snape asked in confusion. "Believe me, Harry, I was quite content to keep my personal business, private."

"I was afraid you'd think I was embarrassed or something," Harry explained carefully. "I wasn't. I just knew I'd lose Ron's friendship," he said sadly. He thought a moment and considered Snape's angular features and rough hair. "It does ruin your reputation, doesn't it?" Harry asked with a crooked grin.

Snape frowned at him. "Yes, indeed," he said grimly, making Harry smile more. "A Gryffindor, no less," he went on in a disgusted tone.

Harry stared at the far wall and chewed his lip sadly. "I don't know where I'd be if I didn't have you right now," he said quietly.

Snape stepped back over and sat beside him. "I do believe this is the moment Albus had in mind when he made his suggestion to me."

Harry shook his head. "Mucking about as usual." Harry unwrapped a sweet from a bowl on the tray and popped it in his mouth. "Did you know this was coming? Did he warn anyone?"

"I should have. He made his peace with me the other day. But he has always been exceedingly old and he would initiate little conversations like that periodically, so I thought nothing much of it."

"He didn't say anything surprising?"

"No. In retrospect I am surprised by what he left out. The conversation was entirely about you," he complained in his most disgusted tone.

Harry laughed lightly and scrubbed his face with his hands to shake his seesawing emotions. Every time he thought about never seeing Dumbledore again his chest ached horribly. This mood overcame him again and he stared at the floor without seeing it.

After long minutes of silence, Snape said, "I should go."

Harry hoisted himself to his feet off the low couch. "Facing the Gryffindor tower *will* take my mind off of Dumbledore for a while," he commented bleakly.

At the door, Snape said, "Come and find me if you need to."

Silence fell over the crowded Gryffindor common room when Harry stepped in. He gave the room an uncertain smile, wondering what they were all thinking.

"Hey, Harry," Neville said, breaking the stillness.

"Neville," Harry returned as though they were having an ordinary conversation.

Dennis chimed in, "Does this mean Professor Snape doesn't hate Gryffindors anymore?"

"I doubt it," Harry replied dryly.

"He has been nicer in general, for Snape," Ginny pointed out.

Harry wanted to head for his dormitory room, but he had to get through this. He took the empty seat by the fire across from Lavender. She stared at him as though he had turned into a Dementor. Hermione came over and sat on the arm of the chair and crossed her arms.

"I'm happy for you, Harry. Everyone else should be too," she said in a low voice while scanning the room. A few murmurs of assent followed this. She gave Ron, moping by the staircase, an especially long look.

"It's all right, Hermione." Harry sat back casually. "I'm happy. I don't care what anyone else thinks."

"Good for you," Hermione said. She patted his leg as she stood up. She stalked over to Ron to glare at him from closer range. Ron finally escaped up the stairs and disappeared.

Harry's shoulders fell as he watched this from the corner of his eye. Eventually everyone went back to their quiet conversations. The ones around Harry sounded like they may actually be about Dumbledore.

Severus Snape encountered a not dissimilar audience in the staff lounge, where McGonagall was preparing to speak to the press gathered in the Great Hall. He gave each stunned gazes an extra malevolent one in return.

"Wha's the matter here?" Hagrid said from his seat by the window.

McGonagall looked up from her notes and shook her head wryly. Sprout, standing at the half-giant's shoulder, said in a low voice, "We are a little surprised to discover Severus has adopted Potter."

"Ach, is tha' all?" He waved a great hand in dismissal. "Harry told me tha' ages ago. Doesna make no difference, 'cepting to Harry o' course."

The staff shifted uncomfortably but didn't argue.

McGonagall held out a parchment to Snape. "Read this over. Tell me if you see anything glaringly wrong or omitted."

It was a list of Dumbledore's accomplishments. Snape was stunned to find nothing on it that really held any meaning right then. "I don't think I am the right person to go over this." He started to hand it back.

McGonagall's head jerked up. "That boy has made you soft," she scoffed and snapped her fingers near his nose. "Get it together! I expected to rely on you."

Chastised, Snape took the parchment and a quill and sat down at the table to make edits.

* * *

That night Harry couldn't sleep. With a sigh he sat up in the darkness. He had lain awake for hours without feeling any more likely to sleep. The drawer of his nightstand held a half-full potion bottle, but he resisted using it. It felt disrespectful, somehow.

Silently, he pulled the drapes apart, put his legs over the edge of the bed and sat in thought. He noticed it then as he grew more alert: the castle didn't feel right. Harry pulled down his dressing gown, wrapped up in it, and quietly left the dormitory. On the stairs he realized he had forgotten his slippers. He decided it wasn't too cold and continued down to the common room. The silence felt oppressive, the castle too still as though it were waiting for something. He didn't have to be alone, he considered, as he eyed the soot-blackened, cold hearth.

In the corridor Harry stepped lightly, his bare feet slapping the worn stone floor. The sound kept him company as he headed to the staircases. Something definitely was different. He stopped at the top of the first staircase and took a deep breath, expecting to smell something of the change. His hand rubbed the top of the banister as though trying to awaken a spell in it, or a djinni.

The thought that Dumbledore's magic was that strong, that he could sense its loss, frightened him, made him long for reassurance from someone. He went down five long staircases. Even the portraits along the way seemed a little duller, less interested in him.

At Snape's door Harry hesitated because he realized it was three in the morning, but thought of walking back through the castle's empty corridors made him knock. The door opened after a brief moment. Snape gestured gallantly for him to enter. He still wore his robes from earlier in the day.

"You haven't slept?" Harry asked as he entered the dim office. Snape shook his head. Harry dropped onto the couch with a sigh. A lamp on the desk flared higher as Snape adjusted it. He didn't immediately turn back. Harry watched his stooped back as he fiddled with the guard on the lamp. He was surprised Snape didn't burn himself as he rotated the glass collar by the top edge.

"Does the castle feel different to you?" Harry asked, curious.

"Yes."

Harry wrapped his arms around himself and sat back. The two of them could have been alone in the castle for all the sense of life Harry now had of his surroundings. Finally, Snape turned his head to consider him. He pushed the lamp farther onto the desk and came over and sat beside him.

"I wish he hadn't gone," Harry said, blinking back a sudden dampness in his eyes.

Clasping his hands together tightly, Snape said, "His certainty that Riddle would rise, and return, was the only reason he was still with us."

"Still," Harry said. "I don't know if I like it here anymore," he said with a shiver, rubbing his arms.

"I think you will get used to it," he said levelly. He sat back as well and after a moment's hesitation, put an arm behind Harry, who leaned closer and rested his head on his shoulder.

Silent minutes later, Harry was asleep. Snape was grateful that they were in a comfortable position, because he didn't feel he could move. He listened to Harry's steady breathing for a while and wondered if Harry's sense of the changes in the castle were the same as his own occasional bouts of rampant uneasiness.

Harry shifted in his sleep and curled up his legs. For the first time Snape noticed that his charge was barefoot. Had Harry been awake, he'd have chastised him for it; as it was, he merely tightened his arm around him.

* * *

The Memorial service in the Great Hall was a staid affair. The students were in rows on the right side and the guests were arrayed on the left. The walls were lined, three-deep, with standing visitors. McGonagall made a long speech which Harry couldn't concentrate on, nor remember, as though it were in a different language. He felt worse today than he had the day before. A reporter, with a photographer in tow, slunk closer to the front along the center aisle to get a picture. Harry could see him scanning the students' faces as he went. Harry carefully kept Ron's taller frame beside him between himself and the stranger. Hermione had selected these seats in the middle for exactly this reason. Dean stood on Harry's other side in case someone came up the right aisle, although now it was too crowded for that to happen.

The speeches concluded. It required a full minute of silence for Harry to realize they had. A student a few rows ahead was sniffing repeatedly. At some signal Harry couldn't see, the crowd began to disperse. The four of them stayed put until most all the students had left. Harry could now fully see the stone platform at the front. Dumbledore was in the same sky-blue robe he had worn during the welcoming feast. The sight of his peaceful face and long beard laying across his chest was too much. Harry's eyes started to burn.

Grappling for control, he turned away from the sight. Dean took this as a cue to move and led the way out of their row. Harry followed close behind, eyes closed more than open. At the doors out of the hall, Dean stopped suddenly and Harry ran into his back. His friend's arm came around and pushed him against the wall behind the open door.

"They look like they're waiting," Dean said quietly of the reporters meandering in the Entrance Hall. "I assume for you, but maybe not." When Harry didn't respond, Dean turned his head around. "All right there?" he asked.

"No," Harry replied thickly. He brushed his face with his sleeve surreptitiously. Hermione was close beside him then, patting his arm. With enormous force of will, Harry won the battle with himself. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. He was pinned between Dean and Hermione. Out in the Entrance Hall he could hear Skeeter asking about him.

"Do you have something you can say?" Hermione asked.

Harry snorted. "No." After a beat he said as though quoting, "We'll all miss him."

"Good as it gets," Dean quipped. "Shall we go? Or we can wait 'em out. Your choice."

Harry leaned against the stone wall beside him and looked at Hermione. The Hall behind her was empty except for the platform and Dumbledore's still, supine figure. A chill ran over Harry's limbs.

Someone stepped sharply in the far set of doors. It was Snape. He glanced sideways at them before turning smartly around and shrugging melodramatically to someone beyond in the adjoining hall. He pulled out his wand and sliced the air with it as he stepped back out. All six doors swung closed with a *boom!*

Harry breathed out in relief. He stepped forward to sit backwards on the last bench on that side. Resting his head on his hands, he said, "I'm sorry. I just can't take it all today. I just want to be left the eff alone." When his friends shifted a bit, he added quickly, "Not by you. By them." He gestured at the closed doors. "I can stand to give a piece of myself away if people are worried about Voldemort being gone, but what I'm feeling now is no one's business." He sat back. "I'm sorry; I don't mean to rant."

"Losing him is hard, but it had to happen sometime," Hermione said sitting beside him.

Harry's brow furrowed. "It happened when he wanted it to," he said sharply. "He wanted to go." At her doubtful look, he went on. "You think I can't tell the difference between alive and dead? One moment he's talking to me and McGonagall and the next *poof!* he's gone like a snuffed candle?" Breathing hard, Harry looked away from their stunned faces. Angry now, rather than hurt, he stood up. "It sounds quiet out there."

Dean went to the center doors and peered between them. "No. Still crowded."

Harry huffed and paced a bit, sparing a glance for the blue figure lying at the front of the room. The center doors opened. McGonagall leaned in and said, "The press have been convinced to give up."

"Good," Harry breathed and stalked around her to leave.

She gave his friends a questioning glance. "A little moody," Ron commented as he followed Hermione out. "Ma'am," Dean said as he passed. "Mr. Thomas," she replied before pulling the door closed behind them all.

* * *

Classes resumed on Monday. Harry found himself resisting heading down to Defense class. He stalled until the last moment and made it just as Snape stepped upon the platform at the front.

"We had a rather distracting weekend, but I still expect all of you to perform the assigned spells today." Snape glanced at Harry as he took a seat. The other students studiously avoided glancing at the straggler.

In pairs they were called up to demonstrate a Ferrus counter curse. When Ron and Hermione stepped up, Snape said, "Perhaps you should wait for the next demonstration, Ms. Granger."

"Why?" Ron asked sharply.

"I would presume, or hope, Mr. Weasley," Snape sneered, "that you would prefer to aim dangerous spells at a different classmate." Several students giggled at that. Ron turned bright red and waited as Neville changed places with an also blushing Hermione.

Ron, feeling vexed, threw a very hard blasting curse at Neville, who countered it easily. They reversed and Ron countered the carefully controlled spell Neville sent his way.

"As usual Mr. Longbottom," Snape said, "nicely done." When Neville stood stunned, staring at the teacher, Snape said in a tone of thin patience, "You may return to your seat, Longbottom."

Neville blinked and shuffled off in a hurry. He sat at his desk and stared ahead while the next pair went ahead. Eventually he leaned over to Harry and whispered, "What did you do to him, then?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing," he insisted.

"No," Neville insisted. "Somethin'."

Harry watched Snape working with Padma on the spell. "He likes teaching this better," he suggested, mostly because he knew Snape wouldn't want anyone to suspect him of softening up.

* * *

Harry made it through the next two days without dwelling excessively on Dumbledore's memory. He was feeling set free, and the more time passed, the stronger that feeling became. Even the emptiness of the castle began to seem more like new potential.

It was easier to visit with Snape now that everyone knew. Or had heard but didn't believe, as he found out one day when Pansy Parkinson came to ask for help while Harry was there working on his Potions essay.

"You don't really think you can hang out here, do you?" she sneered at Harry.

Snape's gaze as he accepted the rewritten essay she handed over went positively dangerous. She backed up and looked nervous a moment before asking in an almost elf-like voice, "You aren't saying it's true, are you, sir?"

"Yes, Ms. Parkinson. It is."

Her whole body drooped in a positively tragic way. Her eyes slid over to Harry and looked him over with total distaste before she drooped still more. She sighed deeply. "My essay, sir. I'm turning it back in," she stated sadly and dutifully before shuffling out the door and closing it softly. Harry actually wished she had slammed it.

Harry thought that over, feeling an odd tugging of sympathy. "You do tend to look out for them . . . more than the average Head of House," Harry opined.

Snape stared at the closed door. "And I don't intend to change that," he said thoughtfully. He remained thoughtful a while before returning to marking assignment. Harry took his leave soon after, not really in the mood to ruin more Slytherin egos, although he wasn't sure why he cared.



Chapter 24 - Rendezvous

Harry thought of a use for the secret passage. It came to him in the shower that morning as though it were something he had thought of previously and simply forgotten. Grinning, he dressed and got ready for class. Even the prospect of Potions didn't diminish his newfound buoyant mood.

At breakfast as the post owls arrived, Pig dropped a letter in Harry's lap and zipped around Ron's head a few times until the redhead waved his hand to chase him away as though the small owl were a fly. Harry avoided looking up at Ron as he noticed the return address of the Burrow. As he was opening it, another owl, this one small and dark, dropped another one beside Harry's breakfast plate. It was from Lupin. After a moment of indecision Harry continued to open the one from Mrs. Weasley.

Dearest Harry, I do hope you are coping well with the loss of dear Albus. It has been rather glum here at the Burrow since the memorial, I'll confess, and I do apologize for not finding you afterwards, but it was too crowded to, apparently. We were both concerned that he meant too much to you to take his passing in stride. Ginny owed us with assurances that you are taking it well enough and with the news that you have acquired a guardian. I must admit, I felt I needed to confirm this with Prof. McGonagall, given our children's penchant for practical jokes. Minerva explained that you had not informed anyone of this, which worried me until Ginny explained your apparent reasons.

My dear Harry, I do apologize for the abominable behavior of my youngest son. Would it not have embarrassed you as well, I'd have sent him a howler straight off. Rest assured he has received a sharp missive instead with strict instructions to straighten up.

Harry casually lowered the letter and let his eyes move over the table. Ron was eating with his usual gusto although his eyes looked a little empty as they stared at a spot just above his plate. With a small frown Harry returned to the letter. He sort of wished Mrs. Weasley had let Ron work it out on his own.

I must admit to being surprised by who has taken you on as an adopted son, but I know the choice of accepting was certainly yours alone to make and that no one forced you to make it. Although Minerva tells us that it was Albus' intent that Severus should do this, I cannot help but imagine what your father would think.

Harry sighed and took a drink of pumpkin juice. His plate had gone cold. He nibbled on some toast as he went back to the letter and avoided Hermione's gaze, which seemed to be trying to catch his. He reread that last line and thought that his father wasn't exactly here to complain.

Well, Arthur informs me I should not have stated that last part, but I feel I should.

Harry grinned at the notion of them fighting over the letter, even as he felt a twinge at her desire to speak for his parents.

You are viewed as Albus' protégé, you know.

That startled him. He couldn't imagine living up to that and willed her to be mistaken.

Ginny believes you still wish to keep the adoption quiet despite your schoolmates all knowing. I expect that given your age, fewer in the wizarding world will take an interest than you expect.

Harry hoped that were true. The rest of the letter was wishes that he be happy. He folded it and put it in his pocket. Breakfast was winding down. He stashed Lupin's away as well and stood up with his friends.

During Transfiguration Harry considered that McGonagall seemed to be taking Dumbledore's death rather well; he was watching her circle the room helping students with a three-stage transfiguration. They were supposed to change an onyx crystal into a tulip, which qualified it as a metatranscendent transformation as the two were opposite classes of object. This class had become a bit of a letdown each Monday after the ease and fun of Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Harry watched the teacher help Justin with interest. The Hufflepuff couldn't do the spell either and Harry was hoping to pick something up before she came around to their table. Beside him, Hermione was trying to figure out how to get a yellow tulip with a red center, rather than just a yellow or just a red one. It was getting harder to not have her success pile onto his own frustration. Worse yet, this was making him understand Ron better.

Ron was still transfiguring the onyx crystal into quartz. Harry had that down at least. Getting the quartz to make it to thistle was proving beyond him. He got something that looked like a glass pine cone tinged green instead. It was pretty, but far from correct.

Justin finally managed the spell, but Harry couldn't tell how from the other side of the room. Harry tried it again himself, thinking, as he had been instructed, of the natural growth angles of quartz and the branching of the thistle plant. McGonagall had left him with the impression that she thought this an easy step. He thought hard about long spines as he incanted the first two spells. The resulting very spindly pine cone actually collapsed in a shower of quartz needles. Harry could hear the Slytherins laughing at him. He banished the mess and took another crystal from the box provided to each table. He had not ceased to notice that McGonagall always stocked their table well.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall said as she strode up to them, "that didn't sound very promising."

"No, Professor," Harry agreed. His newest onyx crystal sat before him, looking innocent. When he looked up at the teacher for any advice, he found her eyes tinged with something like regret. He lowered his wand to his lap and slouched a bit; transfigurations seemed unimportant all of a sudden.

"You are having trouble with the second step, correct?" she asked. At Harry's nod, she said, "Study the thistle a bit more." Harry did so. It sat in a pot on the table in the middle of the room, looking dangerous. McGonagall gave him a moment to consider it before saying, "It is alive, Harry; you must make it not only a shape transformation in step two, but also a protasmic one. Neither is really hard but both are necessary. Try it again."

As Harry stared at the chunk of smooth, dark rock before him, he remembered that Transfiguration was Dumbledore's subject as well. Harry regretted that he had never had a class with him, although it was just as well he couldn't see his current slow performance. He cast the two spells, the first now quite rote. Before him was . . . something. It was kind of a plant and it was kind of green. The weight of the long quartz needles on its leaves was making it droop as he studied it.

"Closer," McGonagall said flatly. "I think."

Harry was starting to dislike tulips rather a lot. Ron finally got a quartz crystal, to grand congratulations from Hermione, who was now trying for a purple tulip.

After classes, Harry finally had a chance to open his other letter when he let his friends go on ahead to the tower without him. He stood in a window looking out on a cloudy day and opened it. It was much shorter than Mrs. Weasley's.

Dear Harry, A great deal of news about you in the last week. Unfortunate that you didn't feel you could share your new home circumstances, but far be it from me to fault others for keeping secrets. I have been assured that Severus is treating you well, as odd as that notion is. It leads me to believe he must have been under far too much strain these many years. Trust that I and many others share your grief about Dumbledore. He truly had an impact on us all. Please owl if you need to speak of anything at all, Remus.

Harry folded the letter and put it with Mrs. Weasley's. Something that had been on his mind for a while came to the fore. He headed to the staircases with purpose.

"Professor?" Harry said as he pushed open the door to the headmistress's office. It had been left ajar, which would have been unusual before.

McGonagall sat at her desk, concentrating hard on the parchments before her. "Yes, Mr. Potter," she said in a flat tone.

"This is very quick, Professor," Harry said apologetically. "I was just wondering when Severus' birthday is."

McGonagall raised her eyes at that and grinned a little mischievously. She pulled out a file drawer and flipped through it and parted one of the files to peer at it without pulling it out. "November the twentieth," she replied with a small crooked grin.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"You are quite welcome, Harry," she said in a much more amiable tone.

Harry grinned to himself as he left her office and went straight to the kitchens to get what he needed for his prank. He needed a large cork and just the right size jar. Dobby turned out to be a great help, patiently bringing him one empty jar after another until he found one that made exactly the right noise when the cork was pulled. It was a small jar too, which was even better. Contemplating a bit of trouble made him feel better than he had in a very long time; he was just a little bothered that he didn't have Ron in on it, although he imagined he was going to enjoy it.

* * *

Late that evening, Snape looked up from the book he was studying when McGonagall entered his office. She had an odd look upon her face, as though reminded of something of that evoked mixed emotion.

"Among Albus' things I found a collection of these," she said, holding out a small sealed envelope.

Snape accepted it and examined it. The parchment looked aged, yellowed, especially around the gum seal. His first name was written in Dumbledore's hand on the front in faded ink. Snape made a noise of conflicting interest.

"You probably won't be able to open it," McGonagall commented.

With a doubtful look, Snape tried to slip his thumbnail under the seal--it steadfastly refused to budge or even tear a little.

"Pomona's and Hagrid's are that way as well. Mine was open when I found it. Most everyone's opened when I handed them out. Just as well to put off reading it," she opined.

He looked at the ordinary but unopenable seal again. "Powerful wizards mucking about," he breathed, annoyed. At McGonagall's dubious look, he explained, "Potter's words."

"Ah. I always thought not much was getting past him." She adjusted her robes and turned to leave. "There was no letter for him, by the way."

"Good."

* * *

As students settled in for Defense on Friday, a note was passed surreptitiously. It read, *Do not react. Act normal.* Used to this sort of thing, they followed it immediately, maybe too much.

Snape took roll call visually, his brow furrowing momentarily as he noticed Harry's absence. He scratched his brow and started the lecture, determined to give his charge no extra consideration.

"Today we will continue with cutting spells," he said. As he gave them an overview of what they would cover that day, he noticed that they all seemed somewhat extra attentive, almost innocently so. He shook that off and described the advanced narrow burning spell.

If Snape had turned around, he would have noticed one of the wooden panels behind him swing open. He almost certainly would have seen Harry step silently out from behind it and close it, tapping it once with his wand very lightly. The class obediently kept their eyes on the teacher as Harry pulled the small jar from his pocket and pulled the cork.

A loud *pop!* made Snape turn around. Harry stood behind him, hands in his pockets, looking inordinately pleased with himself. A few students giggled.

"Potter," Snape said with his old sneer. "You do not expect me to believe that you have managed to Apparate inside the castle. Or Apparate at all for that matter, since I know for a fact you are not licensed to do so."

Harry gave him a shrug and stepped around him. "Sorry I'm late, sir," he said.

Snape looked around behind him, then back at Harry, who was very much Occluding his mind, but made up for it with a very sweet expression of innocence. The class grinned as one now, even Malfoy and the other Slytherins.

"I am sorely tempted to take ten points from Gryffindor for your intentional disruption of class," Snape said in harder tone.

Neville piped up, "It would be worth it, sir."

Snape closed his eyes a long moment then managed to glare at the boy. "Stay after class, Mr. Potter."

"Yes, sir," Harry said easily.

At the end of what felt like a long class Harry did as he was told and hung beside his desk as the room emptied. He received a lot of winks and waves as his fellow students departed. Snape stepped down and over to him. He sighed in dismay and said, "You did not really Apparate, did you, Harry?"

Harry grinned widely. "You really think I could manage that?" he asked, flattered.

Snape glanced around the platform with narrowed eyes before turning back to him. "I am finding myself conditioned to not underestimate you."

Harry still smiled. "I didn't Apparate," he reassured him.

"Good," Snape said. "Things would have become very complicated had you done so."

Harry took the bottle and cork out of his pocket and held them up. He then laughed. "The look you gave me was pretty funny," he said. He set his noisemakers down and reached in his bag for a copy of his Map. He held it out for Snape. It was blank so he tapped it with his wand. The seven floors, the towers and the dungeons appeared. "And don't tell any students, I showed you this part," Harry said as he incanted, "Passages," while tapping the parchment again.

Snape's eyes narrowed as he looked the page over. "This reminds me of something," he breathed.

Nervously, Harry said, "Really?"

Snape gave him an intent look and held the parchment out.

"You can keep it," Harry offered.

"Does it do anything else?" Snape asked. When Harry shook his head, he added, "Pity. I presume you still have the original?" Harry looked away, reluctant to answer. Snape dropped his arm, making the parchment flutter. "Potter, I have no intention of taking it away from you. I suspect you have very few things that belonged to your father."

Harry relaxed. "I still have it," he admitted. "I've been trying to figure out how it works, without much luck. Even with some help from Remus." He shrugged. "I don't have time to work on it with classes now. Speaking of which, I'm going to get detention from McGonagall for being late again." He hurriedly packed up his things and slung his bag over his shoulder.

As he motioned a casual goodbye, Snape asked, "You really expect Minerva will do that?"

Harry breathed deeply. "We'll see."

Harry didn't get detention, but he received a very stern talking to in front of the class when he arrived. By the time he walked in the story had been told and McGonagall was ready for him.

When the tongue-lashing concluded and McGonagall returned to the lesson with a disappointed huff, Neville raised his hand and said, "If you'd seen the look on Professor Snape's face, ma'am, you'd think it worth it."

She glared at him a moment and said, "Yes, well, I didn't have the luxury of that, so it does not count in Mr. Potter's favor." She turned to stalk to the front of the room and murmured, "Next time, Potter, be sure to invite a few more bystanders."

Harry shared a look of relieved amusement with his friends.

* * *

The weather turned colder, but that didn't dissuade them from heading into Hogsmeade on Saturday. The crowd in the Three Broomsticks was thinner than the previous visit. Harry and his companions sat at a table by the side wall and Madame Rosmerta brought them a round of butterbeers immediately.

"We get such great service with you here, Harry," Hermione commented. Ron looked like he might be in agreement, but he didn't speak. Harry shook his head in dismay at both Rosmerta and Ron. They held up their mugs in a silent toast to Dumbledore before sipping the cold, sweet liquid.

"What is this?" Hermione asked the table in general. At their questioning looks, she nodded at a table near the window.

Harry turned and espied an ordinary witch in mauve robes sitting with a man whose back was to them. "That's Professor Snape, isn't it?" Hermione asked. Harry squinted and nodded that it probably was. "Who's the woman?" his friend asked. Harry just shrugged. "Huh," Hermione huffed suggestively. "Hasn't said anything?" she went on.

"Why would he?" Harry returned. As they chatted and drank a second round, Hermione's notion began to gnaw at Harry strangely. He shook it off several times, but his gaze seemed to end up over at the other table without his will.

* * *

Harry stood reading sections of the *Dragon Lair Book of Dangerous Spells* before D.A. Neville came over and tipped the front edge down to glance at the page he was on.

"Finding anything good?" Neville asked. "Where did you get that anyway? The library doesn't have a copy."

"Snape," Harry replied, lost in the description of something called the Cuisinart Spell. It sounded like the kind of thing that would kill a giant spider, if not at least cut its legs off. One would have to be very careful with it, though. Very careful.

"Goodness," Neville said, reading over Harry's shoulder now. "Professor Snape really loaned you this, or he just failed to notice you removing it from his shelf?"

Harry laughed lightly. "He really loaned it to me. Just warned me I was personally responsible for anything anyone did with anything they learned here."

"Still," Neville commented, reaching out and turning the page to read more of the next spell, the Nostrafresca. "Aye!" he said and dropped the page back down. The woodcut illustration was rather gruesome. "Don't teach anyone that one."

Harry closed the book, still smiling at Neville's antics. He put it back in his bag by the wall where Ron, Ginny and Hermione were standing.

"Something wrong, Neville?" Hermione asked.

"Just imagining being turned inside out by my nostrils," Neville said with a wince. "So nothing is really wrong."

More students wandered in, fourth-years, chatting boisterously. Harry still wasn't used to the fun feeling most members brought to the meetings now. It used to be so strained, almost to the breaking point, with everyone in a near panic that if they didn't get each spell right, they might not survive.

"Are we going to do any curse detection?" Ernie asked as he, Owen, and Laura wandered over to the four of them.

"I'll add it to the list," Hermione said, reaching for her bag, "if it isn't already on it."

"My parents owed to say they were thinking of getting rid of an old trunk in the attic that belonged to my great aunt. She always warned us the thing was full of stink cursing, eyeball eating, slime producing objects. As kids we never believed her, but she's gone now and we kinda want to look through it."

Harry, sympathetic to this, said, "Star it on the list; it sounds less dangerous than some of the other suggestions."

"Today we are doing more blocking, though, right?" Ginny asked. "I always get paired with Striver Bletchley during Defense class and I'm tired of landing on my bum."

"Want me to complain for you?" Harry asked.

"Oh!" Ginny said brightly. "You could do that, couldn't you? You don't think Professor would just instead pair me with someone worse, like Mortimer Montague?"

Harry thought that over. "I really don't know," he replied. "It would depend on how I asked, I suppose."

"Maybe not bother," Ginny said warily. "Just help me out so I can kick anyone's arse, please."

Harry grinned. "Sure thing." He turned to the room, which had about thirty students in it, and got everyone's attention to start.

* * *

Harry spent the week wracking his brain for a present idea. He had asked for the date with less than three weeks to spare, making him very glad that he hadn't put it off any longer. No good ideas came to mind, though. He finally broke down and went down to Hagrid's cabin to ask his advice.

"Tea," Hagrid said with authority. "Drinks a lo' of it, doesn't e?" he added at Harry's doubtful expression.

"Doesn't seem very creative or unusual," Harry commented, as he petted a bright young Fawkes who sat on his perch beside the hearth.

"Don't try so hard. Trust me--that'll only go wrong in the end. And HOW," Hagrid said with embarrassment. Harry wondered what brought on that flush of dismay, but held his questions when Hagrid muttered a bit about people who really didn't want an exotic pet even though they said they might . . . several times.

* * *

The weekend arrived. As Harry sat in the Three Broomsticks, mulling over his dilemma, Hermione nudged him and pointed at the door. Snape and the same woman entered and sat at a table in the corner. Snape seemed too preoccupied to take in the occupants of the room, which wasn't like him.

"I have to run an errand," Harry said suddenly, feeling an urgent need to get cracking on the present.

They waved him off, whispering between themselves. Harry pulled his cloak over his shoulders and walked down to the teashop.

As he turned off High Street, he encountered an eager face. Harry wondered why Skeeter seemed to be waiting for him. He shook off his suspicion and said a flat hello as he stepped by her. She beat him to the shop and put her foot at the edge of the door to hold it closed.

"You are a tough one to get at when you are in school, you know that? I am looking forward to you finishing, just so I can get access to you."

"What do you want, Ms. Skeeter?" Harry asked, continuing to stare through the glass into the shop.

"A moment of your time," she said as though it were the easiest thing in the world.

Harry sighed, "What do I get out of it?" When she hesitated replying, he added, "More stupid entries in the Rumors column?"

"I admit, the Dumbledore retrospectives have distracted me from tracking more of that rumor down." She did make that sound like a confession. Biting her lip, she went on, "How about doing something for me for old-times sake?"

Harry gave her a very doubtful look, then glanced up and down the street to see if anyone was approaching. He released the door handle and stepped around the side of the shop where the wall overlooked nothing but a sheep field back-dropped by the Forest in the distance.

"Look," Harry said as he crossed his arms and leaned against the peeling paint of the siding, "I'm continually reminded how much I'm owed by everyone. I've never called anyone on that, but I'm doing it now. Leave it be."

"Why? The public deserves to know," she said, sounding over-rehearsed.

"I don't ask for much. Actually," he said, leaning closer to her, "I haven't asked for anything. All I want is to be left to myself. The public deserves to know that Voldemort is really gone and I'd spend hours helping you convey that. But my life is mine."

She adjusted her heavy bag on her shoulder. "You wouldn't believe the rumors flying about you right now: You're secretly married. You keep illegal pet dragons. You have pregnant girlfriends. Sometimes all of the above in odd combinations."

Harry shook his head. "Why does anyone care?" he grumbled.

"Their own lives aren't interesting enough to hold their attention. Now you may argue that if they paid more attention to their own lives, rather than yours, that they may become more interesting." She shrugged. "It sells papers, so I'm not complaining." While she studied him, she took out a cigarette and put it between her lips. At his dismayed look, she said, "Yeah, I know; I'm supposed to smoke a pipe like a proper witch. I hear it all the time."

Harry didn't know how to tell her that wasn't at all what he was thinking.

Talking around the cigarette, she said, "Look, I know a nice scoop is staring me in the face, but I can't get anyone at the Ministry to talk. I've never seen anything like it." She took two long drags, then stamped out the cigarette on the cold ground. "Am I right?"

"Probably," Harry admitted.

"Help me and I'll drop it."

Harry closed his eyes. "What do you want?" he asked warily.

"Dumbledore's last words. Were you there?"

"Take care of the school," Harry replied, seeing no harm in that.

Deep in thought, Skeeter took out her pad and a normal quill. "I didn't buy that from your new headmistress. Serves me right." She didn't write anything down, just considered him. Eventually, she asked, "Are you worried about Jugson and Avery? No one else seems to be. I thought Fudge declared victory a little early."

Harry watched a flock of small birds circle and dive over the field. "I watched Voldemort torture Avery for being disloyal. I don't think he ever did anything he wasn't forced to. Jugson I don't know as much about. I do trust some of the Aurors and they seem to think they are unlikely to come out of hiding." He shrugged. He wasn't having dreams anymore, but he wasn't about to tell her that. "I feel safe," he added instead.

She made a few short notes. It made Harry wonder if he should be authorized to speak with her. He could mess up a lot of people should he choose to.

She put her pad back away. "I'm thinking that I'd prefer to hold this over you. I'll keep things quiet, if you answer my questions."

Harry felt the blanket of blackmail descending. "If that's what it takes," he heard himself say.

"So tell me what it is I'm keeping quiet about," she said as her quill went into her bag and she buckled it.

Harry grinned lightly. "I was adopted."

Her face twisted and immediately untwisted. "You're joking." She laughed, sounding regretful. "Figures. Got a few owls from some old friends saying just that. But it sounded like a dead end, Mr. Seventeen-Year-Old."

Harry shrugged, feeling sweetly like he had won this round even though it felt an unstable victory.

Skeeter stepped away, shaking her head. Harry followed her to the road and watched her stride slowly to the next street. As he entered Puddifoots, a bell chimed somewhere in the back.

After a long discussion with the teashop proprietress that almost qualified as an educational seminar about rare teas, he ordered a canister of high-altitude Himalayan first flush. Grateful to have that out of the way, but still feeling like he was failing in this task, he went back out to the road. Ron and Hermione were hovering outside the Three Broomsticks. Harry caught up to them and they headed toward the castle together.

"They were looking pretty chummy in there," Hermione teased Harry as they left High Street and headed on the path to school.

"What?" Harry retorted defensively. He shrugged his cloaked shoulders to indicate he didn't care, but part of him thought he should have come up with a better present.

* * *

Harry arrived early for D.A. to set up some things. He wanted to try a few spells that countered potions, but making his fellow students drink stuff that would make them ill smacked of Fred and George so he wanted to be prepared. The lonely walk through the castle hadn't felt as uneasy this evening, for which he was grateful. He wondered idly as he set his bag inside whether the castle was adjusting to Dumbledore's absence or he was.

He glanced around the avocado tile floors and walls; the Room was apparently a little confused about what he wanted. He stepped back out and in a few times, thinking differently about what his real needs were for this session.

"Having fun?" a voice sneered from the shadow of a doorway across the corridor. Draco Malfoy stepped forward into the light of a flickering wall lamp. His face looked its usual condescending.

"Yes, actually," Harry replied easily. "What is it to you, anyway?"

In a mocking singsong, Malfoy said, "Ah, the famous Harry Potter, playing musical doors."

Harry shrugged but didn't open the door again. "Something you want?"

Malfoy pulled his wand out. "Yes, there is." Harry didn't move, just glanced at the wand as though it were harmless. "Don't taunt me, Potter," Malfoy threatened. "Get yours out."

"What, you want to duel?" Harry asked in properly sneering disbelief.

Malfoy smiled with pleasure. "Yes," he drawled.

"Come on in then," Harry said easily and opened the door. Inside was now a regulation dueling platform. The walls were solid granite all around with no windows.

Malfoy stepped in suspiciously although he let his wand fall. "This is a bloody interesting room, isn't it?"

As they stepped over to the platform, Harry said, "You must be bored now that you've lost your junior Death Eater status. How is your dad, anyway?"

Malfoy's lips crooked as he huffed. "He chose a losing side," he commented quietly then smiled a bit more.

Harry stood with his wand out at his side. "You've been getting along better than I'd imagined," he commented, "given how much has changed."

"I discovered that power vacuums are made to be filled," the blonde young man replied as he raised his wand to ready. Harry matched him. "You are clearly too stupid to do so," Malfoy went on.

Harry went on mockingly, "I'd have thought you'd miss running around in a dark robe with a mask, dodging in and out of shadows like a cockroach."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "I don't know how someone as pathetic as you brought down such a great wizard--"

"Don't worry," Harry cut him off. "The same thing wouldn't work on you--you actually have feelings."

This caught Malfoy off guard and he blinked a moment as he took it in. Then he scoffed, "You've been hanging around Snape too long." With no warning other than the movement of his arm, he fired a blasting curse at Harry who blocked it and sent one back that Malfoy also blocked.

"He's been teaching me on the side," Malfoy said maliciously. "Far as I can tell, you only have him for class." He fired a *Figuresempre* and got one in return, both of which were blocked easily.

Harry was starting to enjoy this. His heart was pumping nicely rather than panicky and his mind was clearly focused. "I finished Seventh Year Defense in one afternoon," Harry pointed out and cast a wide cutting spell at the other boy. It wouldn't have done more than given him a red streak on his skin, but Malfoy ducked and did what Harry'd hoped he would, he got angry and incanted something nasty back. Harry blocked the hatchet curse and the following narrow cutting spell that would have done real damage.

"Can we do this every week?" Harry asked hopefully as he stepped back into position after getting knocked back.

Malfoy growled and incanted something Harry didn't recognize. Harry put up a titan block since it was usually a good bet. Part of the spell bounced off, but the air sizzled with red tendrils after the block dissolved. Two of them struck Harry on the arm and chest before he could roll out of the way. From a kneeling position, he used a very hard *Figuresempre* back again, knocking Malfoy back, almost off the platform.

Harry's arm and chest burned as he stood up, wondering fiercely what had hit him.

The door opened at that moment and the two of them froze. Neville and Dean stepped in and looked between them. "Drat," Neville said, "What are we missing?"

Harry laughed despite the sharp streaks of pain. He didn't lower his wand. "Draw for now?" Harry asked the other.

Malfoy lowered his wand. "I don't want an audience," he said in a spoiled voice and jumped off the platform. After he had stalked out of the room, Harry unhooked his robe and unbuttoned his shirt to look at the damage. Nasty red snaking streaks were on his chest and upper arm.

"What is that?" Dean asked.

Harry winced and headed for the door. "Look up a spell with the incantation '*Aduroreptum*' for me, will you?" he said as he left for the hospital wing. "Thanks," he breathed as he closed the door.

Pomfrey was her usual unsympathetic toward him. "And what were you doing, young man?" she challenged him when he showed her the strange welts.

"Practicing spells," Harry said as though it were obvious and completely normal.

She went to the supplies and brought back a tin of salve. "Try that one."

Harry rubbed a little on and sighed at the instant relief.

She put her hands on her hips and stared at him. "Do recall that I have someone to report you to now."

"You may do so, Madam," Harry said easily. He was feeling cocky after holding up so well against Malfoy in an all-out duel. He grinned widely as he said, "He'd have to take points from Slytherin, so he probably wouldn't want to hear the whole story."

* * *

McGonagall gave them Hogsmeade privileges again the next weekend. Harry suspected she was trying to balance out losing Dumbledore. The opportunity worked well for Harry, otherwise he would have had to owl for the package from the shop and although it was a short flight, Hedwig wouldn't like the package if it were heavy. Hermione and Ron skipped going down because it was very windy. Harry enjoyed the solitary walk down the path to town. Only a few other

students were ahead of or behind him and they were a distance away. As he walked, all he heard was the crunch of his boots on the snow and the creak of the thin ice on edge of the lake. He slowed his pace, despite the biting wind, just to take it in longer.

At the teashop he pulled open the door and pulled off his hat and mittens. As he stepped up to the counter, he heard a gasp from near the window, followed by whispering. Harry stuffed his mittens into his cloak pocket and turned toward the sound. He recognized the violet-robed woman after a moment's consideration. She was leaning over, talking excitedly to Snape who gave Harry a positively disgusted look.

The shopkeeper came out of the back and, when he saw him, set Harry's package on the counter in a fancy bag with pink yarn for handles. Harry forced his smile down and put some coins on the counter and took up the bag. When he stepped back toward the door, the woman gave him such a bright look, he almost couldn't hold back on his grin.

"Sir," Harry said to Snape.

"Potter," Snape replied flatly.

"You know him?" the woman asked Snape in delighted surprise, severely testing Harry's control.

Snape hesitated just an instant. "He is a student at Hogwarts," he explained with a hint of short patience.

"Ma'am," Harry said.

She put out her hand. "Candide Breakstone," she said.

Harry took her hand. "Harry Potter," he said.

"Wow," she said gleefully. "You are."

Harry couldn't risk a glance at Snape, or he knew he would lose it.

"You must have things to be doing, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked impatiently.

Harry, feeling free since Snape had started the game this time, said conversationally, "Not really, sir." He turned back to the bright-eyed woman just as she finished giving Snape a sharp look. "So, what do you do?" Harry asked her.

"I'm an accountant. It is the end of the fiscal calendar year this month, so I spend all of my time with my firm's clients here in Hogsmeade."

Harry blinked at her before saying, "That's nice," as levelly as possible.

"Oh!" she said. She reached into her bag and pulled out a white mug. "Would you mind terribly?" she asked Harry with a pleading tone. She held it out.

Harry accepted and looked it over. It was some kind of a commemorative mug celebrating the *Year of the Dark Lord's Demise*. It had a fake seal format to it and lots of gold accent. "Yee," Harry uttered in dismay.

"Yes, it is rather horrid, I know," she admitted. "But my boss gave them to all of us. If you signed it, he would be livid with jealousy."

Harry swallowed hard, mostly because it was his fault this particular encounter had gone this far, and gave her a pleasant smile. He took a quill out of his bag and used the marker pen charm on it. Snape had taken the mug to look at it with an appalled expression. Harry took it back a little impatiently and signed it *To Candide, from your friend, Harry Potter*. He then spelled the fresh ink with a permanent charm.

"You have a spell for every possible autographing circumstance?" Snape asked him in his most snide tone.

"I do try, sir," Harry said sweetly as he handed the mug over to Candide. She looked at it with a glowing smile before stashing it in her bag. "Thank you," she said honestly.

"No problem. Nice to have met you." Harry said. He picked up his package from the floor and said, "Professor," to Snape in a very formal tone.

Later that evening back at the castle, Harry stopped by Snape's office. "Didn't mean to interrupt your date," he said as he stepped in.

Snape gave him a dark look. "I don't know if one would call it that," he said as he flipped through a large book on his desk.

Harry waited an appropriate amount of time before saying, "Candy the accountant?"

Snape's eyes came back up to him. He gave him a long dark look and said, "Go away, Potter, before I say something I'll regret."

Harry frowned a bit and departed in hard silence.

In the common room most of his friends were enjoying themselves with games or talk. Harry, not feeling sociable, collected his books and took them to the library, which was almost empty. He worked on Potions since he was in a bad mood already anyway and could use sharp phrasing in his essay as an outlet for it.

* * *

Harry's dark mood didn't abate much by Monday. He was quiet in Defense class, which attracted a few long looks from Snape, especially when Harry couldn't find any patience for his spelling partner, Lavender.

Snape stepped over and reviewed the Quiescent spell with her. Harry kept his eyes averted, watching Ron and Hermione practice making each other swoon onto large cushions. He rolled his eyes at the appropriateness of that, and waited for the chance to practice more. Finally, when Lavender was ready to try it again, Harry paid attention. Fortunately she still didn't have it right, and all he received was a dull buzzing in his ears.

* * *

Thursday was Snape's birthday. Harry's annoyed mood had lightened a bit, but not enough to make him relish the notion of giving a gift to him. He borrowed wrapping paper from another student in the House and wrapped the large square tin when everyone went to breakfast. He dropped it into his bag, thinking that an opportunity would arise to hand it over. He put it off until after the last class of the day. This was usually a good time to catch any teacher in their office, since they were often taking care of things before heading down to dinner.

Snape's door was closed. Harry knocked on it just in case, but there was no answer. Sighing, mostly because this meant he was going to have to work himself up to this again, he stepped away.

After dinner he came straight back. The door was open this time and Snape was filing things when Harry knocked on the doorframe. This was going to cost him some pride--he could feel it.

"Harry," Snape said evenly. It was the usual greeting, but Harry felt he could have used a tad more encouragement.

Harry checked the hallway and seeing it was empty, stepped farther in, unbuckling his bag as he walked. He set it on the visitor's chair and took out the lime-green wrapped present. As he placed the package on the desk, he said evenly, "Happy birthday, sir."

Snape put down the parchment he had in his hand and gave Harry and the gift a stunned look. Holding that gaze cost Harry more pride than he had expected. He hefted his bag and stepped out while he still had a little of it left.

* * *

Snape sat in the teashop alone that Saturday. It occurred to him now that it was the gift Potter was picking up when he had encountered him here. The boy had done a good job of not giving that away.

The proprietress brought him more hot water, turning his thoughts to the time. Candide had made it sound very doubtful that she would make it. But she had done that the weekend before as well. He did believe that she worked every day, including weekends, as the end of November grew closer, but he couldn't help but suspect that he had botched it somehow. Though tempted to blame the incident with Potter, since she had seemed mildly upset by his treatment of the boy, it had really started before that. The week before, when her friend had joined them briefly in the Three Broomsticks. After that Candide had insisted on meeting elsewhere with a tone that said, "if at all".

The door opening interrupted his musings. "Hope you weren't waiting too long," Candide greeted him as she stepped over. She set her packages on the floor, took the seat across the small table, and pulled over a cup and poured for herself. Her eyes were much more distracted than usual. He resisted the strong temptation to Legilimize her.

After a long sip she tossed off her cloak and let it fall over the back of her chair. "I don't think we should meet anymore," she stated simply.

"May I ask why?" Snape heard himself say.

She shrugged. "You can ask."

"Your friend Roberta didn't like me, I assume."

"She knows you better than I," Candide said. "She was three years behind you at Hogwarts, but I don't think you recognized her."

Snape shook his head.

"Anyway," Candide murmured, picking at her nails nervously.

"I certainly enjoy having tea with you," Snape said.

Her eyes darted around the room. "You are interesting to talk to. Most people aren't, really."

Snape raised both brows. This was one of the more endearing things she had ever said. A shadow moved outside the shop window. Snape rapped on the glass, startling Candide. "If you do not wish to have tea with me anymore, or mead, that is your choice," Snape said to her with a tone of finality.

The shadow outside hesitated then stepped up to the door and opened it. Harry shut the door behind him against the cold wind. "Sir?" he asked.

"Come over here, Harry," Snape invited.

Harry pulled his hat off and stashed it in his pocket. His cheeks were red from the wind and he was breathing as though he had been walking quickly. He loosened his cloak and coat collar. "Hello again," he said to the woman. She smiled and returned his greeting.

Snape stood up and took his own cloak down from the hat rack behind him. "You were not introduced properly last time," Snape said as he pulled his cloak around his shoulders. Harry watched this in confusion. "I'll head back to the castle with you," Snape explained to him.

"Okay," Harry said easily.

"Thank you for the birthday present, by the way. Well chosen."

Harry smiled at that, forgetting everything he had felt in between. "You're welcome, sir," he said brightly.

"It was your birthday?" Candide asked.

Harry rapidly looked between them, trying to figure out the situation. Snape turned to her, his hair falling into his face as he looked down to get his gloves out of his pocket. He nodded faintly as if it were no matter. As he clutched his black gloves in his hand, he exhaled audibly. "Harry, this is Candide Breakstone. Candide, this is my son, Harry."

Harry gave her a normal smile, thinking that Snape must have some reason for going straight at the jugular. Her expression was rather shocked. Her startled eyes gravitated to Harry who gave her a small nod. Snape had been plotting an exit--Harry could go for that. "I have a D.A. meeting to prepare for," he said to Snape. It was somewhat true, inasmuch as it was always true. "Nice meeting you again," he said to Candide.

On the way down the road, Harry said, "So she broke it off, eh?"

"Yes," Snape answered in a low tone.

"I don't know," Harry said, trying for a teasing voice. "She failed the Harry test."

"Very true. I would not have imagined such mindlessly adoring behavior from her."

"I am sorry," Harry said, minutes later, as they stepped along the path beside the lake. It was true; as odd as the notion had made him feel, he could see the other side of it easily now.

"It wasn't her--it was her friend," Snape complained. Something in his tone made Harry think this brought back bad memories, so he let the whole thing drop rather than risk sending Snape into a funk.

* * *

The next morning an owl dropped a letter in front of Harry. He opened it, surprised to find it was from Candide. *Was Severus serious? You nodded, but I simply cannot imagine. Please reply to the address below.* The address at the bottom was an in the care of one of the businesses in Hogsmeade.

"Interesting letter?" Hermione asked as Harry stared at it.

"Merlin, don't ask. Can I borrow a quill?" Harry wrote a reply on the back, explaining that yes, Severus had adopted him and should she care to, she could look up the filing with the Wizard Family Council. As to their odd behavior the first time around, that was a little game they played since the adoption wasn't general public knowledge. He signed it and folded it to take it to the owlery after breakfast. He gave the quill back and poked at his food again.

Later, as he handed the letter to Hedwig, he realized he was most likely reopening this thing between his guardian and this woman. He would have to try to hold the mindset he had had the day before when he had expressed regret as they were walking back to the castle. It wasn't going to be easy; he could feel it slipping away, even as Hedwig sailed out one of the upper openings.

* * *

Harry didn't want to be seen as having intervened, so when he went down to visit with Snape that evening, he left the topic well alone. He had brought all of his books and assignments to work on. Usually he selected just one to bring in case Snape was busy. This time he found himself settling in for a long evening.

Around the end of the second hour, Harry looked up to find Snape considering him in silence. "Would you like some tea?" his guardian finally asked.

Harry, having much more to finish that evening, said, "Sure." As tea was being made, he returned to his efforts at describing the origin of wizard community law in the five-hundreds. At least Binns seemed to have realized that something other than Giant wars and Goblin rebellions had happened in the past, though Harry wished it were something more interesting.

Snape set a cup of tea before Harry, who raised it to his nose and hesitated. It smelled of sunshine and fresh herb. Distracted from his reading he took a sip. It wasn't anything like any tea he had had before; it was earth and enchanted green leaves with a bit of toasted something at the end. He blinked into his cup. "Is this the stuff I got you?" he asked.

Snape sat back, holding his cup with his fingertips. He looked amused. "You didn't try it first?"

"I got talked into it. It was a special order." Harry took another sip and marveled all over again. "Wow." He felt better, realizing that he had managed all right on the gift after all.

* * *

Harry found himself hanging out in Snape's office a little more often that week, even though he really didn't have time. Instead of being there, he should have been finishing assignments before Quidditch practice or practicing spells for D.A.

Snape didn't comment or make an indication that he noticed Harry's change in visiting habits. Twice, Harry opened his mouth to ask if anything had happened with Candide, before he cut himself off at the last instant. The second time he had to scramble for another topic. "Big match this weekend," Harry said. This was at least true; it was Gryffindor against Slytherin.

"And you are expecting to win?" Snape asked.

"I actually don't know," he admitted. They had secretly watched the Slytherins practicing and they had appeared intense and disciplined in a wholly new way. Only Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw had played so far, so no one had seen Snape's house on the pitch. "Your new Seeker is awfully small," Harry commented thinking of the white-haired girl with grey eyes he had seen practicing and since then, noticed in the hallway. Ron had thought her name was Suze Zepher.

"Seekers are supposed to be," Snape pointed out rather pointedly.

"You think I'm too tall?"

"You are certainly getting there. But far be it for anyone to suggest you leave the position." When Harry gave him a dark look, he went on, "Did anyone try out against you?"

"No. That rarely happens though."

"Not on the Slytherin team. Positions are always in jeopardy," Snape stated.

"No wonder they all look so intent," Harry mused.

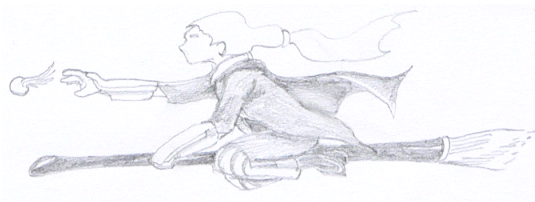
"I would expect."

"They don't look like they are having fun, though," Harry commented as he collected up his books. He needed to get to a meeting.

"Winning is its own reward," Snape observed.

"It would have to be," Harry quipped as he went to the door. "Later, sir," he said as he departed.

Author's note: Yes, I have Snape's birthday wrong, but this was written before jkrowling.com announced it on the calendar.



Chapter 25 -- Another Big Match

The weather turned warmer for the big Quidditch match. As they stood waiting to fly out, Harry noticed for the first time that he was taller than one Chaser and the same height as one of the Beaters. He mulled on this unexpected observation as Ron gave them a little pep talk before the door fell open. Ron clenched his fist and pounded the air a lot as he urged them on. Harry considered commenting that they all wanted to win as much as Ron, and that he didn't need to worry about that, but held back.

Finally the door fell open. It felt good to float out over the green expanse. He felt freer as the memory of the match of last year dimmed, overlaid by the here and now. He appraised Suze, the opposing Seeker, as they waited for Madam Hooch to release the balls. She gave them a long talking to, giving Harry time to notice that the girl was actually smaller than her broom, which had no label. Harry suspected, with a bit of a jolt, that meant it was a custom one. A sinking feeling tried to take hold of Harry's stomach. No Dementors this time, he reminded himself to help get back in game mode.

Madame Hooch's whistle blew just as the sun cut through the clouds. As Harry turned to take up his circling position, he saw Suze squint her very pale eyes in the bright light. With any luck, the Snitch would stay high, Harry thought.

Slytherin scored first on their first possession. Harry could read Ron's lips as he swore and paced between the posts. Suze dove suddenly. Harry, used to being faked out by Malfoy, turned and dove mildly to check if she were serious. When she continued to dive, the crowd began to rise. Harry pushed his speed up a notch. Suze pulled up a few feet from the ground and soared along at ground level, turning suddenly at the far wall and heading straight up. Her broom didn't seem to believe it had a rider aboard, the way it maneuvered.

Harry forced himself to ignore her and returned to scanning where he normally found the Snitch: above the stands on the periphery. Suze came around beside him and slowed instantly to pace him. The Slytherin stands cheered another goal. Harry ducked to circle lower and when she matched, with a floating ease, ducked again. She sped up then. Harry let her sail ahead and bend around the turn in the pitch. He regained a little altitude and continued looking for the Snitch as the opposition scored yet another goal.

Suze lapped him, coming up close beside on the outside. Harry hoped that she cut off part of the loop, otherwise her broom was faster than he had imagined a broom could be. She sloth rolled gracefully beneath him to pace on the inside. The crowd murmured at that provocative maneuver. Harry dove suddenly to test her. She matched him so easily it might have appeared to the crowd that they moved as one. Harry regripped his broom, feeling moisture between his palms and the straps of his wristguards.

Every move he made, she matched without appearing to even try. Harry flew in a wider loop and sped up, barely skimming the fabric covering the stands, watching intently for his target and trying to pretend he didn't have a shadow.

Someone shouted and one of the Slytherin Beaters came at them, swinging hard at a Bludger. Harry's first thought was to wonder why he was aiming at his own teammate, since Suze was directly in the path of it. His hesitation at this confusion cost him. She curved easily out of the way and the ball careened into Harry's chest, knocking him back into the fabric of the stands. His shoulder took the brunt of the collision with the wood of the staircase behind the bright cloth, and he ducked his head to try to protect it. Instinctively, he held onto the broom as he fell, bouncing off the tower once, and just righting his flight as he struck the dirt track around the pitch. The crowd made a noise of dismay, he was heartened to hear.

Harry slowly stood himself up off the ground and took a deep breath. No sharp pains resulted from this so, a little unsteady, he hovered his broom. The students in the stands above him were cheering down at him, all Ravenclaws. He gave them a small wave as he kicked off. Ginny swooped low to check on him. He waved her off as well.

More determined now, Harry scanned the pitch. The Slytherin Seeker was circling high, looking about herself with a cold assurance. Harry turned to pace beneath her, feeling she was a little high. She dropped smoothly beside him, giving him a sharp look. Harry wiped his forehead and blood came away on his fingers. He didn't feel any pain, so he wiped his hand on his cloak and ignored it, and her.

Gryffindor finally managed to score but it was answered within a minute. Harry shook his head and avoided checking on Ron, assuming Ginny would do that. He fell into a mode of cold concentration then, distracted only by having to wipe the blood that seeped into his right eye.

They circled slowly until the sun streamed out of the clouds again. Harry tail-turned and angled up at it, accelerating at the limit of his broom. Suze apparently felt she had no choice but to follow. Harry angled steeper and sideways a few times to mimic the way he would have to chase a Snitch. Behind him, he could hear her thick cloak flapping as she trailed close. Without warning, Harry tail-turned again back to level and cut into a tight spiral. He would have cleared her, but she panic-dodged to avoid a collision anyway. They were dizzyingly high, even Harry had to admit, although the fall from here was barely different from one at the height of the stands.

Harry spiraled downward a few turns before kicking violently out of it and plummeting level. Suze flew nearby, indecisive about following. Back at the level of the flags, Harry turned out in a broad, banked circle. She had decided to follow. Harry swerved, using the flag as a pick and forcing her to fly wider. He turned to maximize this advantage and used the next tower again as a pick. She stayed directly behind him after that, so close that he suspected her of holding his bristles. A glance back, as he wiped his face on his sleeve, showed her hands firmly on her own black broom handle. His brow stung fiercely from being rubbed on the gritty fabric of his sleeve, making him look around harder for the Snitch to end the match as soon as possible.

The crowd cheered but Harry didn't spare any attention for it to find out who had scored. The larger of the two green-clad Beaters loomed up around the next tower. Harry swerved hard and a Bludger struck him on the leg from behind. He had been flying at top speed making the next tower loom fast, requiring him to pull up sharply to avoid it. He clipped the Hogwarts flag on the top of it, sending it end over end to the ground.

Suze was no longer behind him. Harry turned and immediately had to duck a Bludger as he looked for her. She circled broadly, intently looking about for the Snitch. He sped up, then slowed as the Slytherin Beaters rose to block his path. The crowd booed something. Harry leaned back and reversed before dropping into a plummet when the Beaters started forward. He was too close to the ground for this maneuver, but he didn't care. His padded knees bounced on the grass as he recovered from the drop and looped under the overgrown Slytherins who couldn't move as agilely.

Harry came up behind Suze, breaking hard to match her. Her white hair was coming loose from its tie, and it flapped madly as she turned suddenly. He followed, forced to grip his broom as hard as he could to stay on it. The wind whipped his clothes as she sped up and he matched again, although it took two breaths for him to gain the same speed. He pulled up very close, this time on the inside, limiting where she could turn. He shifted his weight back on his broom, knowing she would slow down to cut away from him. When she moved her grip, he started breaking, matching her perfectly and leaving her no place to go except to fly farther out of the pitch area. She did so, looping tight considering their speed. Harry cut her off again, anticipating correctly that she would drop lower to avoid him.

Around the pitch they flew in their crazed dance, chased by the green-clad Beaters. Harry barely had any attention for searching for the snitch since it took everything he had to stay ahead of her and avoid getting bludgeoned. It required every ounce of preemptive strategy and instinct he had to maintain close proximity to her feather-light form and advanced broom.

She finally slowed down a bit. Harry was out of breath but didn't dare reveal it. Lack of air made him feel dizzy as a result. His hands felt tired as well, and he regripped a few times to help them recover. He swallowed hard and took a long slow breath to relieve his screaming lungs.

Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a golden flutter. Relieved more than excited, he didn't turn his head. Instead, he swerved the other way across the pitch, away from it, toward the Beaters who had returned to harassing the Gryffindor chasers, who were scoring easily without them.

One of them turned to Harry and redirected a Bludger his way. This gave Harry an excuse to turn back when he swerved to avoid it. Suze, directly behind him, swerved the other way to avoid a head-on. Harry's heart leapt--she was now heading in completely the opposite direction from the Snitch. He kicked his broom down fast and headed directly at it, finding it easily against the green grass behind it. His head swam with the acceleration.

The Snitch dodged upward as he closed on it, which forced him to break hard and lift, making him dizzy. One hand slipped free of the broom, too tired to hold on. He reached out with it and rolled upside down to stay with his target. The fluttering wings brushed his fingers as something collided with his right side. With no thoughts except for the Snitch, he tugged the broom to meet the collision and strained his arm at the shoulder. His hand closed over the struggling thing as another padded arm bumped his, hard. Harry marveled that Suze could have made it across the pitch so quickly.

A roar went through the crowd as the end of the game was announced. Harry, knocked off balance by Suze pulling away suddenly, struggled to right himself over his broom. His vision tried to tunnel in. He bent over himself to recover, but instead, blacked out completely.

For an instant, Harry imagined he was flying, which didn't alarm him too much. The blackness of his vision did more so. But that was wiped from his mind by his impact with the flat grass of the pitch.

Indistinct voices and running feet roused Harry. A high-pitched, elf-like voice nearby said plaintively, "I'm sorry, Professor. I should have had him beat."

"You got it!" Ron cried, accompanied by a ceasing charge of pounding footsteps.

Harry opened his eyes. The sun behind Ron was an orb painted on the shifting clouds. As he looked up at his friend, Harry considered with slow thought that it used to be much easier to breathe. More faces were appearing in his narrow vision, including Snape's, much closer.

"Potter," he said with an ambiguous tone as he crouched and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. The wraithlike Slytherin Seeker stood beside Snape, looking glum.

Harry wondered what made him think it was worth it. "Sorry for ruining your game, sir," Harry said.

"He's delirious!" Ron shouted in concern. "Quick, get him to Madam Pomfrey."

Harry found the strength to hold the Snitch up in Ron's direction. Ron took it from him with a wide smile. "Oh, well, that's all right then," he said.

Darkness took Harry at that moment with a last fleeting thought that, if he wanted to stay aware, he was going to have to breathe more despite the invisible troll that was apparently standing on his chest.

* * *

Harry woke up in the hospital wing. He felt around for his glasses on the side table and put them on. A basket of chocolate frogs was there as well as some jars of sweets. He wondered how long he had been out.

"And how are you feeling, Mr. Potter?" Madam Pomfrey asked. She stood at the foot of his bed, hands on her hips, looking very unsympathetic despite her words.

Harry touched the bandage on his forehead. "Not bad, Madam, thank you."

"You had quite a gash there. It was still bleeding when they hovered you in," she admonished him.

"I couldn't feel it," Harry said.

She humped, rolled her eyes and stalked off, muttering something about it not mattering if the Dark Lord was gone as long as there was still Quidditch.

The door to the wing opened and Hermione and Ron appeared. When they saw he was awake they rushed over. "Feeling better?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah. Have a frog," he said. Ron accepted one without meeting his eyes.

"Did Madam Pomfrey tell anyone you were awake?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't think so."

"Professor Snape wanted to be told." She pulled out her wand and put down the half-eaten frog. Talking around the chocolate, she said, "Let me see if I can do this." She closed her eyes and said, "*Flickerus Pravda Snape*." She pointed the wand at the wall in the direction of the rest of the castle. A silver bird shot out of it and disappeared through the stone. At Harry's impressed look, she said, "It only seems to work about half the time. I wasn't going to show it off until I had it down better."

Pomfrey stepped over to them. "Can Harry leave soon?" Hermione asked her.

"A double dose of blood replenisher requires a six-hour stay," she stated, leaving no room for argument. After straightening the covers with sharp movements, she stepped away again.

"Too bad," Hermione said. "You'll miss dinner." She took another bite of frog.

Harry pushed himself up a little straighter; his body complained in many, many places as he did so, making him glad he didn't have to move until at least late in the evening. He reached for a frog as well and unwrapped it slowly.

The door to the wing opened and Snape stepped in. Harry rubbed his eyes to try to perk himself up some and set his uneaten sweet on the night stand. Snape's expression as he approached wasn't readable. Ron reflexively stepped aside to get out of his way, although he didn't need to move all the way to the end of the bed, which he did. Ron put his hands in his pockets and looked away from all of them.

Harry turned from him to Snape, who stood with his arms crossed beside the bed. "Feeling better, I presume?" he asked. Snape's eyes flickered over to Ron, who studiously stared down the wing toward Pomfrey's office.

Harry began to have a sinking feeling that something had happened after he had passed out. "Yes, sir," Harry said. His shoulder throbbed at that moment and it occurred to him that winning wasn't necessarily fun after all.

"Ms. Zepher is considering resigning as Seeker."

"She shouldn't," Harry said stridently.

"Yes," Snape said. "I tried to explain that she lost not a battle of skill but one of will, of which she has far less experience than yourself. Perhaps you would speak with her, should you see her."

"Sure," Harry said, disregarding the startled look of dismay this caused on Ron's face.

Snape uncrossed his arms. "Should you need anything, Harry . . ." he said then looked between them. "I don't know who sent the bird."

Harry pointed at Hermione. "Hm," Snape said and turned to her. "Dumbledore would be most pleased to see his spell being replicated by a student. You need to temper your power, though, it burned out very fast after it arrived."

She brightened at that and felt thoughtful. "I'll show Harry," she said.

Snape nodded at her and departed with a swish of his cloak. Ron relaxed, sighing with relief when the door closed.

Hermione sat on the edge of the bed and taught Harry the bird spell. She then asked Ron to stand outside in the hallway to signal if he had received one because getting it to go through a wall was the hardest part. When their friend was out of hearing range, Hermione said, "Ron lost it with Professor Snape after you passed out. It was ugly. He's lucky he didn't get spelled into a newt or get a lifetime's detention or something. Give it a try," she said.

Harry, distracted by her story, couldn't generate anything. She started from the beginning, explaining the spell all over again, sending a bird through the wall to Ron, who waved in the window of the door that he got it. Harry put aside his questions and nearly panicked concern, and incanted the spell. A silver arrow that bounced off the wall was all he managed. He tried several more times, doing no better.

"Finish the story. Pomfrey will have let me go before I get this right."

Hermione sent another one, apparently to keep Ron occupied rather than to demonstrate. "It was really unfortunate, too, because it was clear to everyone else that Professor was really worried about you." She sighed, her eyes unfocused as she said, "Professor Snape put Ron in his place so forcefully that some of the Slytherins are demanding a new Head of House."

"What?" Harry asked. He tried the spell again. The silver arrow left a burn mark on the wall this time. "Why?"

"He made it a little too clear, although he didn't say it outright, that you were all that mattered," Hermione said cautiously.

Harry gave her a doubtful look then felt chagrined. He tried the spell again, this time it was a bird, but it spiraled away out the window. Ron opened the door and watched it leave. "I don't think I'm going to get it," Harry said to him.

"I can't either," Ron commented, "so that makes me feel better."

Harry intentionally didn't react to Ron's talking to him, although he and Hermione shared a very fleeting look of understanding as Ron sighed and fidgeted a bit.

* * *

Harry saw Suze the next day, sitting in the Great Hall after lunch. She was with a small group of younger Slytherins whom Harry didn't know. The rest of the Slytherin table was empty. Harry waved his friends off and stepped over there. The group looked up in surprise at his approach.

"Can I talk to you?" he asked Suze.

She blinked her pale eyes at him and shrugged one shoulder. "I'll see you 'round," she said to her friends as she slid off the bench.

She followed Harry to the front of the room to the bench below the tall window at the end of the head table. She reluctantly, it seemed, sat beside him and didn't meet his eyes. "Professor Snape mentioned that you were considering leaving the team," he said. She clasped her hands together and didn't respond. "Don't do that. If we played ten matches, you'd win the next nine, I'm certain," Harry said with painful honesty.

She looked up, her white brow furrowed. Harry wondered if she were part something other than human, or just albino. "What year are you?" he asked.

"Third," she said.

"You have all those years of Quidditch ahead," Harry said, sounding a little jealous, which at one level he was. "You're very good now. Even just another year is going to make you completely unbeatable." He could see the impact of his words in her eyes. It made him a little nervous to think he had that much sway.

Her eyes moved over him at that. "You think I *am* good enough to play?" she asked slowly.

"Are you kidding? You are the optimal seeker and you have a killer broom. You just need a little more playing experience. Some things you can't pick up on the practice pitch. Don't quit because you lost to me," Harry insisted. "I'd feel really awful if you did that."

She looked stunned by that.

"I gave that match everything I had and it was essentially a tie. And you didn't end up in the hospital wing overnight, so in essence, you won." When she didn't reply, he went on, "Learning to lose and keep going is an essential skill in everything--you'll set a bad precedent for yourself if you give up this easily now."

"I let my team down," she said quietly. "Everyone else was playing really well."

"Hey, they want to put up another seeker against you, let them try. I can't imagine they have another one better than you."

She went thoughtful at that. "Hm," she breathed.

Harry stood up and Suze nodded a goodbye. She looked like she was going to sit there for a while longer, thinking.

* * *

"Are you brewing in the dungeon today?" Harry asked his guardian the next Sunday as he stood just inside the office door.

"No," Snape replied, "the stocks are set until next term."

"Oh," Harry said, a little disappointed. He wandered around the office a bit, pulling down a book about the history of Dementors.

A knock sounded on the door and Malfoy stepped in. "Professor, I have--" he stopped upon seeing Harry. "Figures you'd be here." To Snape he said, "I have my extra credit essay," he said, handing over a scroll. "For what it is worth," he added darkly.

Snape unrolled it and glanced at it. "If it makes you feel any better, Mr. Malfoy, I will inform you that I am grading Mr. Potter twice as hard as yourself, or any of the other students."

"What?" Harry blurted.

Malfoy laughed at him, got control of himself, and then laughed again as he departed. The laughter echoed in the hallway. Harry shoved the book he held back onto the shelf. Dully, he said, "I'd better get back to revising."

* * *

Harry sat in the common room reading his Potions notes. He was bored with it, with all studying, really. His eyes kept getting dragged back to the flames in the hearth which, despite being pretty ordinary, seemed much more interesting than bone growth potions.

Hermione dropped into the chair across from him. "You aren't waiting until the last minute again, are you?"

"What?" Harry asked her.

She gave him a disapproving look, not unlike the one usually reserved for Ron. "The Christmas Ball, Harry," she said as though he were a little slow.

"Headmistress just announced it two days ago. I have two weeks," Harry retorted. At her raised brow, he frowned.

"Okay, I get your point."

More quietly, she said, "Whom are you going to ask?"

Harry laughed painfully. "I have no idea."

"Whom would you like to?"

"Tonks," Harry returned without thinking.

Hermione took that in. "Are you serious?" At Harry's shrug, she said, "She's a little old for you; she must be twenty-three, twenty-four."

"I wasn't serious about inviting her--you just asked me who I'd like to ask," Harry retorted.

"Oh," Hermione murmured, looking a bit parentish in her concern.

Harry frowned more deeply. "I hate these things," he said darkly, accepting the truth of it as he did so. At her sad look, he explained, "There isn't a girl in this school I can connect with."

"That's not true, Harry," she said, sounding a little offended. "I understand you." After a pause she added, "Ginny does too."

"She's going with Dean."

Very quietly, Hermione said, "I think she'd rather go with you."

"I'm not getting into that," Harry insisted firmly.

Hermione sat back, "Let's see. Seventh Year girls," she murmured as she tapped her finger on the chair arm. She mumbled off a few names thoughtfully. Eventually she frowned. "How about Sixth Years?" At Harry's shrug, she thought some more. "Mirna isn't too bad. A Ravenclaw. And she just broke up with someone so she is . . . probably not the best bet."

* * *

Harry stepped into Snape's office and dropped into the visitor's chair with a huff. "Can I borrow Candy for the ball?" he asked in frustration.

Snape eyed him oddly. "You aren't serious--are you?"

"McGonagall insists I have a partner, if not a date." More angrily, Harry said, "This Ball is apparently a bit of a P.R. thing. The press has been invited as well to show, quote, how much things have returned to normal here."

"Harry," Snape said sharply. "You aren't being singled out and used, as you seem to be implying." Harry looked away at that, still fuming. Snape said stiffly, "Step out into the hallway there." He gestured with his hand. "And ask the next girl who comes along. She will most certainly say, 'yes'."

Harry dropped his gaze to the floor and flushed.

"What is the problem?" Snape asked harshly.

"I don't know," Harry mumbled.

"It is one ball, Potter. Not a commitment. Just a party. I think you are taking it too seriously. You are the single most famous individual in this school. Half the girls who already have dates would drop them if asked to go by you."

"I don't want to do that," Harry said stridently. He wondered fleetingly what Cho was doing now. Her last letter was months ago, she was probably busy. Harry asked, "You don't think McGonagall is using me?"

"I should hope not. If you feel that to be true, you should most certainly discuss it with her, as I am certain she would not want you believing it." Snape sounded as though his anger had solidified somehow.

Feeling worse than he did before coming here, Harry stood up to stalk out.

"Harry," Snape said in a less harsh tone. "I don't mean to be . . . unsympathetic to what you clearly believe is a dilemma, but you are making much too much out of this." At Harry's frown, he went on. "Pick a girl. Ask her. And you will be finished with it. There are literally hundreds of girls in this school, surely one of them will suffice for one evening."

Harry could hear in his tone that Snape truly was unsympathetic, but Harry wasn't looking for sympathy, he didn't think, just a way out. With a frown at the heat of anger that still burned in his chest, Harry departed.



Chapter 26 -- The Christmas Ball

Harry studied in the library, in the far corner, mostly to avoid Hermione and anyone else who might see fit to remind him he needed a date. He had ten days; that was plenty of time. The previous night he had seriously considered owling Cho, but upon reviewing her last two letters, decided that she had dropped hints of an engagement that he had not picked up on before. He had also looked for Mirna at dinner last night and thought she looked down and teary-eyed, which reminded him of Cho in a bad way.

The whole thing made him angry with McGonagall again. He found himself wanting somewhat to get even.

He sat with his back to the corner, blocked in nicely by shelving and a plant. He was feeling sullen toward Snape and McGonagall, and maybe even Hermione and Ron. His Transfiguration text was not holding his attention. Even his usual method of forcing his attention on a subject, that of imagining himself needing some skill or knowledge as an Auror, wasn't working right now.

A group of students went by, talking in low tones about Quidditch. Harry recognized one of the tall, bulky Slytherin Beaters over the low shelf in front of him. Wereporridge was his name. Harry wondered that he could actually read. Then he heard a familiar high-pitched voice, lilting a bit so as to not sound too loud in the library.

Harry's brow went up as the seed of an idea germinated. What if their little Gryffindor hero took a Slytherin to the ball? he wondered. She most likely wasn't going already since third-years couldn't unless invited by an older student. The group sat down at a table, talking over a book. Harry tried to hear what they were saying, but couldn't.

Thinking that he would love to get this over with, Harry stood up and went over to them. Wereporridge gave him a very challenging look as Harry approached. "Can I talk to you for just a moment?" Harry asked Suze.

Wereporridge stood up at that. "What about?" he asked Harry as he towered over him.

"I suppose if I told you it wasn't any of your business, you probably wouldn't go for that," Harry sighed.

"You would suppose correctly," the other boy replied in a low voice.

Harry glanced at the other three; they looked a little alarmed by their fellow's behavior. If he were actually going to take her to the ball, he would have to be willing to have them know it. "I want to ask Suze to the ball," Harry explained to Wereporridge.

"You what?" One of the others asked in disbelief.

Wereporridge pushed his finger painfully into Harry's chest. "Why in the world would she go with a loser Gryffindor?" Harry glanced at Suze--she looked stunned and not much else. Wereporridge went on, shoving Harry with his hand now. "We don't mix with non-Slytherins, get away."

Peeved a little, Harry said, "I am the adopted son of your Head of House, you know."

Wereporridge blinked at that and looked a little concerned as he considered it. Harry ignored him and turned back to Suze. "Uh," Harry said, suddenly not sure the best way to proceed. "Think about it, I guess," he said to her still-stunned gaze. "Let me know."

As he walked back to his corner and picked up his books, he could hear their table whispering avidly. On his way out, he gave Suze a casual smile. At the door to the library he considered going back to the common room. At least if Hermione asked him if he had asked anyone, he could say he had.

In the corridor Suze caught up with him. "You weren't just teasing in there?" she asked.

"No," Harry answered stridently. "Why would I do that?"

"It wasn't just some Gryffindor practical joke?" she asked next.

Harry stared at her pale eyes, thinking that Snape had no clue how hard this was. His other backup plan, of pretending to invite someone from outside the school and then falling deathly ill the night of the ball from a potion he could cook up, was seeming better all the time. "No," Harry replied, a little frustrated. Feeling like he should explain, he said, "I thought we'd have something to talk about. I discovered at the last ball, that matters more than I expected it to." It occurred to Harry then that she hadn't been in school during the Tri-Wizard Tournament. That, Merlin forbid, she might have learned he won it from a chocolate frog card.

He shrugged. "I really am asking you. And it is up to you," he restated.

Her eyes darted around the walls a moment. As though thinking aloud, she said, "I don't get to go otherwise and it sounds like fun. They don't hold them very often." She put her pale hands on her hips. "Why are you inviting me?" she asked curiously.

"I'll be honest with you," Harry said. "I have to invite someone. You are the first person I've asked because you are the first person who came to mind who isn't already dating someone, or who wouldn't be too giggly to spend an evening with."

She studied him long moment. "You are really Professor Snape's son?"

"Yes."

"That is so odd," she breathed. "All right-"

Harry held up his hand and interrupted her. "I feel compelled to warn you," he said. "The press are going to be there, since this ball is partly a show for the outside world." Her eyes narrowed at that. "So if you don't like that kind of attention, you aren't going to like going."

"Clearly, you do," she observed sarcastically.

Harry laughed. "I hate this whole thing. I'm trying to make the best of it," he rambled.

"You are telling me that the press are going to be taking pictures at the ball and that my mum and dad might pick up the *Prophet* at breakfast and see the two of us on the front page?" A strange crooked smile had formed on her face.

"If you view it that way, then you can probably survive the evening."

"Sounds like fun," she said earnestly.

"Oh, good," Harry breathed in relief. "Professor Snape thought I was pathetic for having such a difficult time finding a date. He was kind of angry even, although I shouldn't have asked to borrow his girlfriend."

"You what!" she blurted in shock.

"That probably *was* a mistake," Harry confirmed thoughtfully.

Suze doubled over laughing, then made herself stop with effort and dabbed her eyes, still chuckling occasionally. "I'll see you the night of the ball, then."

"I'll meet in you in the Entrance Hall at the bottom of the staircase," Harry said.

"Til then," she said with an unfading smile.

* * *

Hermione actually held off on saying anything until four days before the ball. She wouldn't have needed to say *anything* if she had been able to correctly interpret the odd looks the Slytherins were always giving Harry as he and his friends went about their classes.

Examinations were starting in two days and he was panicking over his new understanding of the higher standard he had been put under in most of his subjects. He was buried in a textbook when she came over and leaned on the arms of the chair and put her nose close to his.

"I have a date," Harry said to her, cutting off her question.

"Who?" she asked, sounding like she might not believe him. Harry noticed others nearby stopping to listen to the answer.

"You'll see," Harry replied. "No one you know."

"Someone outside the school?"

"No. We have a lot in common. She thinks posing for the press will be fun, so I think I'll actually survive the evening."

Hermione breathed out loudly. "Well, that's good. Glad to hear it. I'm curious as Crookshanks, but I deserve the torture of not knowing, I think." She went back to studying with Ron and Neville.

* * *

Hermione wasn't the only one checking up on Harry. McGonagall called him up to her office the night before examinations started. When he opened the door, she immediately put down her quill and closed the large book she had been writing in. "Mr. Potter, come in," she invited.

Harry closed the door and stood before the desk. The room didn't look that different since she had taken over from Dumbledore. There were still a few of those mysterious balanced contraptions around, but the biggest difference was the shelves were cleared and held just a few rows of books and some glass sculptures.

"Did you find a partner for the ball?" she asked blatantly.

"Yes," Harry replied flatly.

"Good," she smiled. "Now you are going to be opening the ball--"

"Just me and my date?" Harry blurted.

She gave him a disapproving look. "You and the Head Boy and Girl. So three couples. We are opening with a waltz," she started, looking like maybe she was already at the ball in her mind. At Harry's alarmed expression, she returned to the present and said. "You don't know how to dance, do you, Harry?"

"No, Professor," Harry admitted, expecting her to change her mind about the whole plan.

She stood up. "You need to learn then," she said resolutely.

Harry dropped his head and said with the barest hint of a whine, "And I thought I was past all the things I was going to have to get over at this school."

When he looked up, she looked displeased. "This is one of the normal teenage things, Mr. Potter, getting over the awkwardness of asking a pretty girl to dance and then managing a reasonable facsimile of actually dancing with her. Lifelong torment by a powerful dark wizard bent on killing you is not a normal teenage thing to have to get over. You should be basking in this opportunity to be a normal young man for once."

She pulled out her wand and tapped the sculpture of a swan behind her. It began spinning and playing a song like a music box, although it sounded much better than a Muggle one. When she stepped around the desk and stood before him, Harry gave in, mostly because he was afraid he had offended her with his comment, which he really hadn't meant to do.

She took his hands, placed them, and then counted to the music. On the third round of counting, she stepped backward, pulling him with her. After four bars he finally had a vague hang of it. After ten he thought it was actually pretty easy. They began turning as the music continued. "Around the dance floor counter clockwise. Got it?"

Harry nodded, forcing himself to not look at his feet.

"You're a natural, Harry," she said. Then she laughed lightly at his expression of disbelief. She finally released him and stepped back to the swan. "One more. My favorite is swing."

* * *

End of term examinations left Harry a wreck, but he was hopeful that he had done all right. Everyone else, even Hermione, seemed strung out by them, so at least he was in good company.

The evening of the ball was the evening before everyone left for holiday. After his last examination, he pulled out his dress robes and took them to Hermione for a quick flattening charm, which she did before handing them back.

"I'd tell you to do it yourself, but you look so pathetic," she said. "I hope your date realizes how determined you are to not have a good time," she said evenly.

"I told her I hated the whole notion of it, so 'yes'," Harry replied in a put-off tone.

"My goodness," Hermione said. "You aren't taking a Slytherin are you?" she teased him.

Harry gave her a very sly grin.

"Ah," she breathed in audibly. "Harry!" She hit him on the arm. "No wonder no one knows who it is. I can't believe you."

"Hey, it wasn't easy. I had to argue that I was an honorary Slytherin because of Severus to even get a chance to ask."

"I can imagine. They are pretty insular when it comes to dating. And everything else." She held the robes up against him. "Put those on and come back down," she commanded him. Others were congregating in the common room as well, getting hair styled and exchanging jewelry and scarves.

Harry slipped back up to the dormitory and did so. When he came back down, she looked him over appraisingly, tugging on the shoulders and the cuffs. "Okay. Just fits. You look good. Although . . . you might try to do something with your hair," she said critically.

"I was," Harry retorted, a little offended. He went back up to the dormitory for his kit. He espied his watch on the side table and slipped it into his pocket. In the toilet it was crowded with boys all trying to improve their appearance. Harry wetted his hair down and combed it repeatedly until it dried. It looked a little better as a result. He combed it carefully one more time when he got a chance at the mirror.

"Why are you always hiding your scar under your fringe?" Dean asked him from the next sink over.

Harry stared at his friend in the mirror. "Cause I don't like to see it, so I don't expect anyone else to," Harry replied. He combed his hair apart, revealing it completely. "It's the first thing everyone looks at when they meet me, like there's no more to me than that." He squinted and leaned into the mirror, rubbing the jagged scar with his finger. Mystified, he whispered, "I think it's fading."

Half the boys in the room stopped what they were doing and turned to him.

"Do you think so?" Harry asked Dean, leaning toward his friend.

"Maybe," Dean answered. "It looks flatter, maybe. Not so carved into your skin like it used to. Though I have to admit, I don't pay that much attention to it."

As Harry turned back to the mirror to comb his fringe forward again, Dean said, "Who are you going with tonight?"

"You'll see," Harry breathed airily, glad to have something else to think about.

Right on time, Harry reached the top of the staircase. As he had walked to the Entrance Hall, he had passed many transformed female classmates and had really started to wonder, and worry a bit, what Suze was going to look like. His date for the evening stood by the curl in the railing at the bottom of the steps, looking pretty much herself except for the stylish slate grey robes she wore that made her skin look much warmer than normal. She had a sparkling tie loose in her long white hair.

As Harry considered the crowd from his high perch, he noticed Professor Snape eyeing Suze and starting through the crowd toward her. Harry hesitated, curious. Snape asked her something and she gestured as she replied. Harry headed down to them, thinking Snape might be challenging her being there as a Third-Year.

"Severus," Harry said in greeting. "Suze." He offered her his arm. As he did so he received such a priceless look of surprise from Snape, he almost broke out laughing. "I'll see you inside, sir," Harry said evenly with a broad grin.

The Great Hall was laid out with round tables each with a floating horizontal wreath full of candles. Harry led Suze to the center of the floor where they stopped to admire the decorations. Monstrous pine trees sparkled from each corner, fairies flickering among their branches carrying little colored lanterns.

McGonagall stepped up to them. "Mr. Potter," she said. Her eyes flicked down to Suze. "Ms. Zepher," she said without missing a beat. Harry was a little disappointed in her reaction. "You are at the head table there," she pointed at the large oval table at the front of the hall where the platform normally sat but had been removed.

As the headmistress stepped away, Suze said, "Cool."

Harry turned to her and gauged that she was taller than his shoulder, which was higher than he remembered. "Did you use a height charm or potion or something?" Harry asked.

She pulled at the knee of her robe and stuck out her left foot to reveal matching glittery shoes with thick, thick soles—at least five inches thick. They must be heavy. "You are walking really well in those," Harry commented. "But you didn't have to wear them." When she looked up at him curiously, he went on, "It will make it easier to dance, but you shouldn't worry about being yourself."

She blinked at that, apparently trying to take it in. Harry shrugged and led the way to the head table where Hermione and Ron were already standing, watching them in surprise. Ron gaped at them, but Hermione held out her hand to Suze and introduced herself. Hermione was dressed in blazing red with long red gloves that stretched above her elbows.

"That's a shy outfit," Harry said.

Ron gave him a look of dismay and quickly looked away to avoid having it be seen by their mutual friend. "I've decided red is my favorite color," Hermione said happily.

Justin and Lavender stepped over. "Is she with you?" Justin asked of Suze. At Harry's nod, he asked, "Aren't you the Slytherin Seeker?"

"Yes," Suze replied in a voice that said, *if you are making something of it, be prepared*.

"Oh," Justin said, glancing oddly at Harry who smiled sweetly in return.

They moved behind their table as the hall began to fill. The headmistress and the four Heads of House also joined the head table. Harry took a seat near the middle, was actually herded there by the headmistress. As he held the chair out for Suze, he received another sharp look from Snape. Ignoring it, Harry sat down and watched the amassed students arranging their seating. Finally, when everyone was seated and the sound of movement quieted, Professor McGonagall leaned over to the students at the table and said, "Everyone ready?" At the resulting general nodding and shrugging, she stood up and clinked her goblet for attention.

"Welcome. I hope everyone enjoys this evening as much as I intend to. After the feast there will be a quintet providing music for dancing. I do hope you all have a wonderful holiday and return to us whole and safe in the new year. But for now, let's eat."

Harry picked up the menu on his plate and said, "Duck." A plate of duck, potatoes and little carrots materialized before him. Suze shifted in her seat and peered at the menu before ordering lamb. When it arrived, he gave her a smile, which he was glad to see made her relax.

During the long dinner, Harry lost his date to Ron when his friend asked Suze which Quidditch team she followed and she replied Falmouth. What ensued was a frighteningly detailed discussion of defense tactics. Harry shared an amusingly dismayed look with Hermione over their dates' bent heads and gesturing fingers.

Harry turned instead to the headmistress who looked as though she was enjoying her job of presiding. "Professor," Harry said.

"Mr. Potter," she returned. "Having a good time?"

"Mostly it's been dinner," Harry pointed out as a *Prophet* photographer moved in and took a few photographs. Harry ignored him.

"Ah, just wait," she said. "I love balls. The music. The movement of the couples on the floor."

"I got that sense, ma'am," Harry said in a slightly suffering tone.

She looked out over the murmuring crowd and sighed. "I think I'm going to miss you when you are gone, Harry."

Harry wondered at that comment, since he was trying to be a bit difficult. "I'm not going far."

Her lips twitched. "I suppose not."

Harry turned back to Suze. She said, "I'm sorry, I should be talking to you, not your friend."

"That's okay. Catching the headmistress after . . ." Harry leaned forward to peek into McGonagall's goblet. " . . . a bit of mead is always an interesting experience."

Suze giggled, but not in an annoying way. Their plates vanished and the lights dimmed except for the fairy lights that hung in a square around the area designated for dancing.

McGonagall stood with a sweeping motion of her arm. The students at the head table stood as well when they noticed. "Mr. Potter," McGonagall said, inviting him to lead. Snape gave them a dark look as they collected themselves. Harry held his arm out to Suze, who accepted it with high decorum. He gave Snape a look back that he hoped said, *you said to ask anyone*. The look he received in answer he could have interpreted as, *don't try anything*, but Harry couldn't imagine that was what it meant.

They stepped off the platform, passing the quintet of string musicians who now sat on a platform beside the dance floor. As he watched Ron positioning his arms with Hermione, he wondered where they had learned to dance.

"I hope you can dance," Harry said. "I just learned two days ago."

"My mum sent me to ballet for five years. Thought it would make me grow taller," she replied.

The music started and Harry managed to remember the correct foot to start with. After that it flowed smoothly. "You're not bad," she commented.

Harry watched the photographer as he crouched to take a photo of Justin and Lavender. "I hate to admit it, but the headmistress had to teach me," Harry confessed.

Suze grinned. The photographer came over to them. Harry danced without turning until he finished. Suze smiled nicely for each shot. In comparison, Harry wondered if he would look glum.

At the end of the first piece, McGonagall swept past. "Careful, my boy, you look like you might be having fun."

"So what are you doing after Hogwarts?" Suze asked when the headmistress was out of range.

"I'm going to try to get into the Auror's program," Harry said. "If that doesn't work, I'm not sure." The next song started up and more couples came onto the floor. "How about you?"

"Me?" she asked in surprise. "I'd love to play Quidditch. My mum is an actuary, and my dad is a spell developer. They aren't so keen on sports as a profession."

"Your dad's a what?" Harry asked. "I've never heard of that. Who does he work for?"

"A publisher of spell books called Yuring Press. The second largest. He also does research to figure out old spells that have been forgotten. He goes to estate sales of old families and looks for forgotten books or even notebooks and diaries. He found two rare books at the Black estate, for example. Kept him busy for over a year."

Harry stopped dead at that.

"What is it?" she asked in alarm.

Harry shook his head and found the pace of the song again with his feet. "Nothing. Just remembering. That's not usually a good thing for me," he quipped darkly.

As Suze glanced over her shoulder at the head table, she asked in concern, "Do you think Professor Snape is upset with me?"

"No, why would he be?"

"I'm worried about that look he gave us earlier," she said. She really did sound worried, making Harry realize that even a student with two normal parents could crave approval from another adult.

"That look was for me. Trust me," he said reassuringly.

After that song, they sat back at the head table. The teachers were there, talking amongst themselves. Rita Skeeter stepped over and crouched between Harry's and Suze's chairs. "Hello, Harry," she said in a falsely friendly tone.

"Ms. Skeeter."

"And who is your lovely date?"

"This is Suze Zepher," Harry said. Suze held out her hand to Skeeter, who shook it while appraising the girl. "Suze is Seeker on the Slytherin team. She is going to be a professional Quidditch player," Harry provided. Skeeter grudgingly jotted that down. "Maybe ask her who she is hoping to play for," Harry said levelly. Suze's eyes went wide.

"What do I get in return?" Skeeter asked quietly, glancing at the teachers who were keeping a casual-appearing eye on the proceedings. She watched Harry think that over. "Do you have anything right now I might want?" she asked a little snidely.

"Lots. Nothing I want to give up. Give me a topic."

"The last set of D.E. that were caught. That seemed fishy. The releases and interviews from the Ministry didn't jib."

"I'll anonymously confirm that was fishy," Harry returned quietly.

"Off the record?" she prompted.

"I don't want you to print the truth," Harry stated calmly.

"So much for inheriting Dumbledore's mantle," she said sarcastically.

"I wouldn't want it anyway," Harry came back.

"So of the five, three were killed. Tell me how."

Harry turned a bit so he was facing her better in case the teachers could read lips. "Rookwood fell down the stairs after a binding curse and broke his neck. Mulciber got in the way of Malfoy's Killing Curse. Pettigrew killed himself when the Aurors showed up. He'd hoped it would be me." Harry knew that only the last was official.

"Okay," Skeeter said. "Ms. Zepher, who would you like to play for?" she asked, back to her friendly tone.

Suze's jaw fell open and she pulled it closed again when Harry winked at her. "Falmouth. They are my favorite team. I like their defensive strategies."

Skeeter jotted that down. "I do something for you, Potter. . . you end up owing me more."

"I realize that," Harry said blandly. "A delay would be nice."

"I'm good at what I do," Skeeter snapped at him as she closed her notebook the quill pinched between the pages.

When she was gone, Suze started to speak. Harry stood and invited her back out on the dance floor where they could talk out of range of prying ears. "Thanks for that," she said. "How did you know all that?"

"Because the D.E. were all after me when they were caught. The binding curse was mine and I ducked under Mulciber to avoid Lucius Malfoy's Avada Kedavra."

She gaped. "You say that so calmly. Guess you could be an Auror."

"I don't know what else I'd do."

They danced another song. Harry noticed Hermione looked like she was thinking of switching partners. *Next one*, he mouthed at her. She nodded.

"So you haven't asked the obvious question," Suze said a little put-upon.

"What would that be?"

She gave him a dark look. "Isn't it obvious?" she asked in annoyance. "Why I look this way?"

"It's just the way you are," Harry said. From anyone else that might have sounded stupid. She blinked at him as though assessing that. "Is it a wizard thing?" Harry asked.

"Of course."

"You have to understand--I was raised a Muggle," he explained.

"Really?" she asked. At his nod, she said, "Then maybe you don't know what Triptendora is." He shook his head. She went on, "It is also called Wizard Measles. It is easy to treat but if you get it as an infant and it isn't treated in time . . . you end up with no color and very short."

After a moment, Harry said, "So your parents weren't very smart, I guess."

"That's just it--they're very smart. I don't know what their problem was," she said sharply.

"They mean well most of the time?"

"They mean well all of the time. Makes me crazy. They are perfectionists like you wouldn't believe."

They passed the head table in silence. After passing the quintet, Harry said. "You probably remind them of their failure. Through no fault of your own," he added quickly. "That would make them hard to live with I can imagine."

"I hadn't thought of that." She blinked at him in surprise. After a pause, she asked, "What do I do about it?"

He shrugged. "Live with it. Tolerate their craziness." At her doubtful look, he said, "I was raised by my magic-hating aunt and uncle who lied about how my parents died, kept me locked in a broom cupboard until I was eleven, and barely fed me enough to stay alive. That's why I am small for my age."

"You're serious, aren't you?" she asked warily.

With long-suffering humor, he said, "Why is it when I tell people about myself, they assume I'm making it up?"

She giggled then apologized for it.

Harry said, "Well-meaning would go a long way in my view of parenting."

The evening ended with one last waltz. Ginny had cut in on his dancing with Padma the song before. Harry insisted they both switch back to their original partners for it. Suze still seemed as chipper as when the evening had started. Harry wondered at that--he was exhausted. "Hope you had an okay time," he said, stifling a yawn.

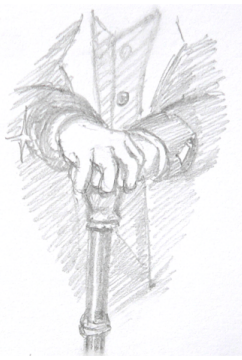
"I did. I hope they have a few more of these while I'm in school."

"Tell McGonagall. She loves them too."

"Cool."

As the song ended, Harry bent down and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Thanks for coming with me."

She ducked her head and giggled. "Thanks for the invitation," she returned with a grin.



Chapter 27 -- Holiday Blues

The train left Hogsmeade right on schedule the next morning. Harry had gone down to the platform with the rest of the students and he waved Ron and Hermione off as the train chugged away. They both shouted, "Merry Christmas!" to him out the window, making Harry realize that Ron must have finally accepted things at some point without Harry noticing.

Hogsmeade lay quiet as Harry wandered up the street to Puddifoots where he had tea and a scone. Six months to go, he thought. He envied Suze her upcoming years here. His friends would think he was a nutter for that; they were all so eager to leave. But he had missed a lot over the last six years, he was beginning to realize. Being tormented by Voldemort had cheated him out of things, like getting to know most of his classmates. Getting through a year without something suspicious and tragic happening had been impossible and had left him with only stolen moments of enjoyment.

Harry paid for the tea and stepped back out into the crisp air. He strolled slowly back to the castle through a light dusting of snow. The Entrance Hall and the Great Hall were empty and echoing too much, so Harry wandered up to the Defense office in search of company. The door was open and Snape was packing books from the shelf behind his desk into a small trunk.

Snape glanced up at him and said, "I am caught up with marking, so we can leave shortly."

Harry was looking forward to Christmas with mixed expectations. "Whenever you're ready."

"You appear to have survived the ball," Snape commented as he compared the spines of two books.

"It was all right," Harry said as he leaned casually against the doorframe. In the window snow lay in little ridges on the sash, haloed by ice crystals.

Snape raised his dark eyes from the books. "Interesting choice of date."

Harry chewed his lip. "You did say . . ."

"Yes, I did. It was unexpected, nonetheless, but you seem to have handled it appropriately, in the end."

Harry crossed his arms and leaned harder on the doorframe. "Why wouldn't I have?" he asked, sensing that he was wading into something murky.

Snape selected one of the books in his hands for the trunk. "As you yourself said: I do look out for my students," he stated.

Something inside of Harry shifted and he didn't like the feel of it. He tried to pin down the squirming thing. "As opposed to me," he heard himself say.

Snape set the book he had just pulled out onto the desk. His eyes narrowed as his head tilted to the side. "In this, I do not expect you to need it."

Harry considered that, before he pushed himself straight. He didn't feel like arguing over something he wasn't clear on himself. "Let me know when you're ready. I'll be in the tower," he said before walking away.

* * *

The next morning in the Zepher household, Suze rubbed her eyes and sat down to breakfast. Her mother had woken her early to eat with them. Even though it was not a work day, both her parents were dressed well and sitting properly, her mother with her pinky extended as she gripped her teacup.

"How did your examinations go?" her father asked, sounding not too confident of the answer.

"All right," Suze replied, feeling defiant but working hard to keep it out of her voice.

"Hm," her father said in a "we'll see" kind of way.

Suze frowned and buttered her toast rather than get into anything. They acted like she didn't try at all.

"Wurther's called a meeting for this afternoon," her mother announced to her father from behind the orange-tinted *Financial Times*. "I'll pick up your robes on the way back."

Suze wondered if her parents had ever been interesting people who went to balls. She propped her chin on her hand and remembered yesterday evening while munching her toast. It seemed even more fun in retrospect than it had at the time, and Harry had been much nicer than she had imagined. She sighed a bit as she cracked her egg with her butter knife. They had rotated around the Hall so many times she could still feel the movement this morning.

Hope I can live down being at the ball with a Gryffindor, Suze had commented when she had felt a little more at ease.

I'll tell you a secret, Harry had said. *The Sorting Hat tried to put me in Slytherin, but I made it change its mind*.

She had laughed very hard at that notion, and without thinking had said, *You are the very picture of Gryffindor. I hear they're going to replace the lion with your face*. This was a rephrasing of a snide Slytherin comment and she had immediately wished to retract it.

He had made a noise as though she had mortally wounded him, then laughed. *Merlin, I hope not*, he had said, not angry at all.

"Are your school supplies all set?" her mother asked sternly, interrupting her pleasant reverie. "Make a list if you need anything. I'll get things today but I don't want to have to go out again before the holidays." Her tone indicated impatience held over from past times when Suze had forgotten things.

Suze got up and made the list right then. She bit her tongue as she handed it over, and her mother took it without comment, wearing a serious expression. By the time Suze returned to it, her egg was cold. She ate it anyway.

A scratching at the window announced the post owl, so her mother pointed her wand over her shoulder to open it. The owl dropped the paper, picked up a sickle in its beak from a small bowl on the table, and flew off again. The window closed itself after the owl left.

Suze watched, barely breathing, as her father unrolled the *Prophet*. He read the headlines and then flipped it to unfold it. On the front page was a photo from the ball. It showed Harry on the left talking to the headmistress as Professors Snape and Sprout looked on with polite attentiveness. She was cut off; not even a hint of sleeve showing. Suze sighed as she squinted to read the headline and the first part of the article before the paper moved. It was boring stuff about how things were completely normal at Hogwarts. Or as normal as they ever were, as McGonagall was quoted. Pages rustled as her parents read. Suze heated a piece of toast from the bread basket with her wand and buttered it.

Being a professional Quidditch player sounds like fun, Harry had said.

I don't know what else I would do, she had returned, echoing his earlier comment.

Just keep getting a little better all the time. You don't have far to go from what I can see. She replayed that in her mind a few times, pinning dangerous hope on it--hope that would not have come from anyone else's opinion.

Her father's confused voice said, "Isn't this you?" He folded the paper around, then folded it in half again before laying it on the table for her to see. Down the right-hand column was a rather nice picture of the two of them dancing. They were swaying to the music and Harry was talking silently. "Isn't that Harry Potter?" her father asked in near utter confusion.

"Yeah," Suze replied as casually as possible. "Harry asked me to the ball," she stated as though it happened everyday.

Her mum put the *Times* down and leaned over to look. She grabbed up the paper in a sudden motion and read out the caption, "*Harry Potter and Suze Zepher enjoying the Hogwarts Christmas Ball.* I didn't know you knew Harry Potter," she said in surprise.

Suze shrugged. "He's the Gryffindor Seeker."

"We know that," her father said. "But isn't he a Seventh-Year?"

"We just went as friends, Dad," she said, borrowing one of their tones.

"I didn't mean that," he said, "I'm just surprised you got to know him that well."

"We had a good match--we talked about it afterwards. That's how we got to know each other," she felt compelled to explain. They rarely asked her about her friends or her playing, even though they seemed to follow the school's Quidditch matches rather closely.

"Slytherin lost that match," her father pointed out.

A little miffed, she said, "Yes, but Potter ended up in the hospital wing overnight."

"You put Harry Potter in the dispensary?" her mother asked, appalled.

"One of the Beaters did. Potter got knocked into a tower by a Bludger and despite bleeding like crazy, he wouldn't quit. He passed out from lack of blood right after catching the Snitch and fell about sixteen feet." In a darkly determined voice, she added, "I was so close to beating him to it."

Her parents appeared startled by this speech.

"You should come to the matches more often," Suze commented levelly.

"All right. From now on we'll try to do that," her mother said. Suze couldn't tell if she were really excited by the notion or thought it would make it easier to keep tabs on their daughter.

* * *

Diagon Alley was decorated up for Christmas: wreaths with twinkling miniature lanterns hung on each lamp post, house-elves in green and red costume tossed glittering dust on passers-by. A dusting of snow lightened the scene and neatly covered the grime.

Harry went to Gringott's first. As he waited behind a hunchback, a family with four misbehaving small children, and a hag, for a goblin to take him to his vault, he tried to estimate what his list was going to cost. It was at least fifty or sixty

galleons, he thought. Once he got to his vault, this seemed like an extravagant amount given his dwindling piles of coins. But he reassured himself with the thought that even after he filled his sack, he would still make it through the school year.

Back out on the road, Harry headed first for the Quidditch supply store. He had only yesterday thought of what to get Ron, and if it were going to work out, he would have to act fast as there were only seven days until Christmas. At the shop he purchased an authentic Chudley Canons cloak, cringing a bit at that much orange fabric in a single garment. The stitching on the logo was nice, though, unlike the cheap versions he had sometimes seen.

He folded it up tightly and took it immediately to the Post. He had already written the letter out, which he took out to reread as he waited in queue. The letter was basically a plea for the team to autograph the cloak. Harry had not missed the look Ron had given the Bulgarian bat at Harry's birthday party. He hoped his own personal request would be enough to get the cloak back signed in time for gift-giving. He suspected with chagrin that it would be, and felt a little uneasy about doing this at all, but he had not thought of anything better and was desperate.

With the cloak owed off to the team captain, Harry went back down to the bookstore. He perused the recent arrivals, looking for anything Hermione or Snape might appreciate. He pushed through the crowd to move around the table and picked up a new book on advanced counter curses and flipped it open to read a few random pages. Beyond the book, his eye was caught by the sight of a silver-tipped cane tapping along the floor as someone approached.

Startled a bit, Harry raised his eyes. A greying, portly man in a fine, three-piece suit and satin-lined cloak approached, but unlike Malfoy, this man seemed to need the cane since he kept it close beside his right leg as he walked.

"Hm," the man said as he stopped a polite distance away. "You must be Mr. Potter." His voice was deep and rolling.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied, wondering if he should know this man.

After a pause the man said as though it were a point of information, "I am Alfred Freeland."

Harry froze but recovered quickly and held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, sir," he said honestly.

The man's grey eyes looked Harry over. "You look to be doing well, Mr. Potter."

A witch pushed her way behind Harry, nearly losing her hat. "I'm doing all right, sir," he acknowledged. Then thinking quickly, added, "I did appreciate your offer, sir."

Freeland smiled faintly at that. "I wonder . . . would you be willing to grace my table with your presence, on Boxing Day?"

Harry hesitated only an instant. "I'd be honored, sir."

"I'll have an invitation sent to you then. Do you have a card?"

"No," Harry admitted, laughing lightly at that notion. From his knapsack he pulled out a parchment and never-out quill. He wrote out his address and handed it over.

"Shrewsthorpe," Freeland read from it. "You are very close by, indeed. My estate is in Riverden, just two towns over." He gave Harry a polite smile. "I look forward to your visit," he said and gave Harry a small bow of the head.

"So do I, sir," Harry managed to remember to say.

* * *

Harry carried his haul back to the house and immediately took it to his room. He realized now that he was going to have to get more wrapping paper, but he had a few days to manage that. The evening felt very quiet in comparison to being at Hogwarts or even shopping. The fire in the dining room hearth made the room comfortable as they sat down to dinner.

"One term down," Harry commented, finding himself falling into this countdown.

Snape raised his head and pushed his hair back from one side. "Looking forward to finishing?"

"Yes and no," Harry replied honestly. He felt like he should, since every other student was, but he also resisted the thought of moving on, since it was all he knew.

"How did your examinations go?" Snape asked.

"Pretty good, I think. You haven't finished marking the Defense ones yet?"

"Not quite."

Harry frowned as he reconsidered. "Are you really grading me twice as hard as the other students?"

"Yes."

Flustered, Harry mumbled, "I might not have done so well, then."

A platter of roast mutton appeared, covered in sauce, it smelled wonderful. As he served himself, Harry complained, "Geesh, Greer is doing that too, I know, and the other day I suspected McGonagall of it as well. I think my grades are in trouble."

Snape smiled a little slyly as he accepted the serving spoons when Harry finished with them. Harry shook his head and sighed, prompting Snape to say, "All that matters at this point are your N.E.W.T.s."

"Yeah, I suppose," Harry breathed, not feeling much better about that.

An owl arrived late as they were enjoying a bit of chocolate cake. Harry accepted the creamy white envelope and the aged bird took off again.

"What is that?" Snape asked curiously.

"An invitation to dinner, I expect," Harry said. The card-shaped envelope was addressed to *Harry Potter & Guest*. He tugged the wax seal open and took out the card which had a message written upon it in gold flowing script. Boxing Day dinner at seven o'clock was the summary of its lengthy prose.

Snape was examining the seal on the envelope with a lowered brow. Harry handed him the card as well and retook his seat. "You knew this invitation was coming?" Snape asked.

Harry lifted a shoulder. "I ran into Lord Frelander in Diagon Alley yesterday," he replied casually.

Snape stared at him. "This is a rather highbrow event, Harry."

"So . . . dress robes, you are saying?"

"At the very least."

* * *

A few days later, Harry woke to a surprise breakfast guest. Sitting at the table looking mussed and casual as though she might have spent the night, was Candide. Harry hoped he covered his uncertainty quickly enough as he sat farther down the table than normal, across from an empty chair.

Breakfast arrived and she asked in a friendly tone, "How did your term go?"

"Well enough," Harry replied, grateful that he could occupy himself with eating rather than conversation.

He ate and listened to them talk about everything from Ministry politics to gossip about her officemates. When he finished, Harry rose from the table, picked up his cup of coffee, and mumbled that he wanted to get his holiday assignments out of the way. The pair nodded at him as he departed.

In his room Harry buried himself in his schoolwork, starting with his Potions assignment. At lunchtime he was called down to eat. Harry took his Transfiguration textbook with him. It was his weakest subject, and looking over his essay grades from the previous term made him think McGonagall believed so too. At the table he opened the book before him like a suit of armor. He was aware of Snape's eyes passing over him, but his guardian didn't chastise him for being unsoberly occupied.

During the afternoon, Harry spent an hour or two reading in the window of his room, sitting on his trunk. He found himself hoping the girl in the yellow slicker would walk by, although he couldn't decide whether he would run down and try to introduce himself or not. She would probably be wearing a different coat in the winter, but he thought he would still recognize her.

He didn't need to decide, as she didn't pass by while he was waiting.

Harry did not bring a book down to dinner because he simply could not study any longer. He found Snape and Candide playing a card game with Harry's wizard pack while they waited for Winky to serve. They were drinking something in little metal cups, and Candide was laughing much more than usual.

Dinner materialized. Harry, not feeling particularly hungry, picked at his plate in a desultory fashion. Candide tried gregariously to involve him in the conversation.

"So, Harry," she said, "How much longer do you think the Minister of Magic can ride the popularity he gained when Voldemort was defeated? He's waiting a long time to call an election."

Flatly, Harry replied, "I don't read the political items in the *Prophet*."

In a slightly snide tone, Snape explained, "He doesn't like to read about himself--you must understand."

"Lucky for you," Harry said levelly, "nothing shows up in the *Prophet* about you."

Had Candide not been sitting across from them both, this comment would have garnered a very different reaction. As it was, Snape simply peered down his nose at him, shoulders stiff. Candide said, "There was that nice picture of you dancing with someone the other day. You didn't even see that?"

Harry shook his head.

At the conclusion of the meal, Harry tried to use the excuse of assignments to get away, but Candide urged him strongly to join in some three-person game she wished to play.

"I've never played card games with more than one person," Harry explained in an apologetic way.

"Perhaps it is time you learned," Snape said in one of his more insistent on obedience tones.

Harry retook his seat, trying to not appear too much as though he were giving in. He listened politely to the rules of the game and the random strategy hints she proceeded to impart. After the deal, Harry picked up the nine cards before him and sorted them as instructed.

After several rounds and many corrections he finally had a basic sense of the strategy. He couldn't win a hand, though, but he did manage to prevent Candide from winning one with a lucky play. "Figures you two would gang up," she commented as she collected the cards to redeal.

At ten, when he could reasonably do so, Harry claimed he was too tired to continue and this got him out of a new game that was about to be introduced.

* * *

The following morning, only Snape was in the dining room, having a coffee. Harry sat across from him, glad to have a quiet breakfast. Breakfast failed to appear though, and Harry was forced by boredom to read some of the paper. As he was turning to page two, footsteps sounded behind him and Candide shuffled in, looking in dire need of coffee. Harry froze, then pulled the paper up before him to hide his reaction, which was more severe than expected.

When he had his expression under control, Harry lowered the paper and folded it casually beside his plate. "Good morning," he managed in return to her greeting. Not feeling social enough for this, he ate fast and left for his room.

Harry paced for a minute before pulling out a quill and parchment to write to Hermione. After the basic greetings and hopes that her holiday was going well, he stalled. *Candide has moved in*, he considered writing, but it sounded so odd. *Candide has been visiting*, he wrote instead. Whatever generosity he had felt toward her had dissipated utterly. He wondered at that, reminding himself that he had been determined not to allow it to slip away completely.

I've been learning to play cards, he added. Certainly Snape deserved someone, he thought, remembering the real regret he had expressed when she had broken it off. Snape had used him to make some kind of point with her, but Harry could only guess what the point had been, exactly.

He finished the letter with meaningless chatter, folded it up, and attached it to her present. Hedwig came to the window from the neighbor's pine when Harry opened it. She flew off again, willingly carrying the thick book and light letter.

Harry didn't sleep well that night, which was becoming a trend during this break. He woke several times with bad dreams but did not want to ask for potion, if only because it would mean interrupting both of their sleep, at the least. At worst Snape would want to know what he was dreaming about, and he wanted to keep to himself his queer dreams of being left behind.

* * *

The next afternoon, a Christmas tree appeared in the main hall. Not a large one; one that in fact had the look of the last chicken in the shop, but it was decorated with an array of interesting glittery spells, one of which made the branches themselves glow green intermittently. A few presents were under it already for him from Anita, Dobby, Gretta and Shazor. There was also one for Snape, presumably from Candide, as it was not signed. Harry thought of fetching his gifts, but realized that he had not bought anything for Candide, so he didn't. He had had no notion before that moment that he might need one and didn't, in any event, have any idea what he might get her.

Harry fetched his books instead and went to the library to study until dinner.

"It's really sweet," Candide said in a playful tone, leaning in the doorway of the drawing room where Snape sat making notes from a textbook.

"What is?" he asked in a very doubtful tone.

"Harry's fallen asleep over his book in the library," she said with a grin.

Snape stood suddenly and stalked past her with purpose. At the door to the library he stopped and surveyed the scene. Harry was slumped over the small desk, his head pillowed on what appeared to be his History of Magic textbook. Snape,

with angry motions, stepped in and started to close the French doors, but paused to say, "If you'll excuse us for a moment." He shut the doors on Candide's concerned face.

Snape stepped over to the desk. "Potter," he said sharply. Harry jumped awake and rubbed his eyes. Snape demanded, "You are not sleeping properly?"

Harry frowned but didn't reply. He closed his textbook, the pages had become rippled from the moist heat of his face. Snape said, "Go up to your room. You have two hours before dinner to get a little sleep."

Harry stacked his history book with the others and, scratching his head, left the room. In the hall he encountered Candide, who looked curiously at him. Tired, he turned away mutely and went up the stairs to his room.

In what felt like minutes after he put his head on the pillow, a sharp rap sounded on the door to his room. He assumed it meant dinner and forced himself with effort to sit up.

Dinner was very quiet and even a little tense. Harry waited after finishing his plate for tea to be served. He really needed to spend more time on his assignment for McGonagall. Before the holiday, he had had a notion of rereading the textbook carefully from start to finish, and he had not given up on doing so yet, but he would need some serious tea to even consider working on that this evening.

That night in his room, Harry read Transfiguration until he could not keep his eyes from falling closed at each new sentence. Eyes aching, he put the book aside and turned down the lamp before flopping onto his pillow.

At midnight, in the bedroom at the other end of the balcony, Snape sat up. "I should check on him," he said after exhaling loudly.

Carefully, Candide said, "You were a little harsh with him earlier . . . "

Snape huffed again. "Harry periodically has difficulty sleeping but I only find out when he becomes narcoleptic," he explained impatiently as he pulled on a pair of slippers and a dressing gown.

Harry rolled over when he heard the door latch click open. "Still awake?" Snape asked. When Harry didn't respond, Snape stepped over to the bed and stood beside it. "Are you having nightmares?" he asked factually. When Harry shrugged, Snape said, "Why didn't you say?"

All Harry could think of to do was to shrug again, so he did nothing.

"What is in your nightmares?" Snape asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," Harry replied. After a pause he added, "There aren't any shadows or anything," in a slightly desperate tone. He *really* did not want to talk about it.

Snape stood silently for a while in thought before sitting on the edge of the bed. "You have had a nightmare already tonight?" At Harry's reluctant nod, he said, "What was in this dream?"

"I don't want to say," Harry repeated tiredly. "It's a stupid dream."

"If it is keeping you up for days at a time, it cannot be insignificant," Snape pointed out. "Where were you in the dream?" Snape asked in a soft, demanding tone.

Harry sighed in frustration. He really wanted to be left alone to try to sleep. "In the ocean," he finally replied reluctantly.

"*In* the ocean; doing what?"

"Swimming. Treading water. I've fallen overboard," Harry admitted sadly.

They both sat still for a long moment before Harry continued, "No one notices. No one on the boat notices," he clarified. In his mind he could see the vision from the dream of Snape, Candide and formless others laughing and drinking, unable to hear his calls. He frowned. "It's a stupid dream," he repeated, finally turning to look at his guardian.

Snape eyed him a moment in surprise before bending over to rest his forehead on his palm. His hair fell around his face. "Harry, you are not being pushed aside, or abandoned," he stated forcefully.

"I know that," Harry retorted in a difficult tone. "I said it was dumb," Harry insisted, feeling an ache of uneasiness despite his assertion.

Snape rubbed his eyebrow. "Do you have potion?" he asked.

"I don't want any," Harry said stiffly.

"You wish to continue to fall asleep while studying? Shall we expect you to fall asleep during meals now as well?" Snape asked facetiously.

Stung, Harry rolled away, curling his legs up a bit and ducking his head. He wanted to just tell his guardian to go away, but he could not quite bring himself to do it. He ignored him instead.

Snape sat in silence for a long minute before standing to leave. Back in his room, Candide asked if everything was all right. "He is having nightmares," Snape said. "A not uncommon occurrence with him," he added as he turned the lamp down.

At three in the morning, Snape found himself still lying awake. He rose with cautious movements to check on the boy again. Harry actually seemed to be asleep this time, Snape discovered with relief. Although, the duvet was crooked on the bed, implying that he had not been sleeping undisturbed. Snape moved to straighten it and found that Harry's hand was clutching it. Pulling it free drew a noise of complaint from the sleeping form, so he hesitated straightening it farther. With a start Harry woke up and immediately rolled away again onto his side, tugging the duvet around himself tightly.

At five in the morning, Snape again rose to check on him, strongly compelled to do so. Harry was sitting in the window this time, staring out of a pane that had the frost cleared from it. He was sitting on his trunk, wrapped in the duvet from the bed. The fire burned high in the hearth as though recently fed new wood.

Snape stepped over to him and stared out at the crystallized street light and snowy road. "Is there anything I can do, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. He looked exhausted.

Back in Snape's room, Candide said in a mystified voice, "Checking again?"

"He is being difficult and obstinate," Snape commented.

She rolled over and peered at him in the dim light. "He's seventeen; he's supposed to be." When Snape didn't respond, she said a little impatiently, "Don't you remember being his age?"

"I try not to."

She laughed mirthlessly at that. "Well, that would be normal for his age, believe me. I think you're taking it too seriously."

Snape sat on the edge of the bed and mulled things over in silence. Candide broke into his thoughts by asking in honest curiosity, "Isn't he usually difficult?"

"No," Snape replied, "only when he's distressed." While Candide froze and considered that, Snape added, "Your presence is disturbing him more than I imagined it would." He went on, "Perhaps it would be best if you departed today."

"I can leave first thing," she said in an ambiguous tone.

"Perhaps after lunch and please make some external excuse, if you will. His capacity for nightmares is second only to his one for guilt. I do not want him suspecting."

She fluffed her pillow before plunking her head back on it. "My parents are wondering why I haven't made it to their house yet. They're hinting strongly that I should be bringing you."

Snape exhaled audibly. "That is as good an excuse as any," he said a bit forcefully.

* * *

Breakfast proceeded in silence until Candide finally said to Harry, "Severus told me that you're invited to the Freelanders' for Boxing Day." At Harry's nod, she said, "Too bad it isn't summer, the estate is supposed to be beautiful. You'll probably get a tour of the house, though." When Harry shrugged again, she gave up.

After lunch, as Harry sat reading his Transfiguration textbook and drinking tea, Candide came back down with her satchel. Harry took this in with surprise.

"I have to get to my parent's house," she explained with reluctance. "They are about to send another owl, I'm sure," she added in a long-suffering tone. "Here is your present, though." She handed over a smallish yellow-wrapped box. Harry accepted it slowly.

"It's nothing much," she said, "compared to what you undoubtedly deserve."

Harry cradled it against his arm. "Thanks."

She smiled kindly at him before turning to Severus for a quick hug. Then she was gone in a flash of green in the hearth.

Harry frowned lightly at the gift. "I didn't realize she was leaving today," he said, thinking again that he would not have known what to get her.

"She has delayed visiting her family twice already," Snape commented. "There was some pressure in fact for my visiting with them as well," he added with honest dislike of that notion.

"Oh," Harry breathed. He stood to take the gift and put it under the tree and realized that tomorrow was Christmas Eve. He went up and fetched his presents for Snape and put them under as well. Hedwig had not returned from taking Neville his present, although she had returned with Harry's gift from Hermione, which was also under the tree now. Gifts for him definitely dominated.

Harry returned to rereading his Transfiguration text in the dining room, finding it much easier to concentrate now, which he credited to the tea.

In the middle of Chapter 6, Harry asked, "Do you know the theory of Holistic Hovering?"

Snape shook his head, looking like he might not have ever heard of it.

Harry frowned and sighed. "Of all the N.E.W.T.s I need to get at least an 'E' on, this one is the most in doubt."

"Have you asked Minerva for extra help?"

Harry shook his head. "She's sorta busy. Hermione helps when she has time."

"Ms. Granger's remarkable grasp of certain subjects, notwithstanding, especially for a Gryffindor--"

"Oh," Harry interrupted. "She did the same thing I did--talked the Sorting Hat out of putting her in Ravenclaw."

Snape looked disturbed by that. "That hat needs a spell rework, I think. Nevertheless, I believe you would find a teacher's assistance more useful. Do not be hesitant about seeking help from Professor McGonagall. I expect she would make time for you if you expressed a need for it."

A pair of owls arriving cut their conversation short. Harry opened the window and used a severing charm to cut the strings to the package they were jointly carrying. With grateful sweeps of their wings they took off again. Harry read the label as he brought it to the table. "All right!" he said in excitement. "I was afraid this wasn't going to make it in time." He tore the box open. There were two orange cloaks inside, which explained the weight. He snapped the first cloak out. It was signed to him. He stared at it in confusion.

"Goodness," Snape exclaimed snidely. "Where do you plan to wear that?"

"I don't." He pulled out the other one. "It's for Ron's present." This one wasn't signed quite as extravagantly, but it was still nicely done in a variety of ink colors.

Snape lifted the corner and read one or two. "Well, at least you are learning to use your influence for *something*."

"You think I abused it?" Harry asked in concern.

"Did you send them two cloaks?" Snape asked. When Harry shook his head, he said, "Then clearly the Canons do not feel that you are."

"I couldn't think of anything else to get him," Harry complained. "And Ron was jealous of the Bulgarian Quiddich bat I received from their national team."

"I expect he will be pleased," Snape commented unreadably.

Harry packed it up quickly and said, "I hope Hedwig returns soon."

"You may use Franklin. He is a much larger owl and that isn't exactly light."

"Thanks," Harry said and took it to his room to wrap it. He stuffed the other cloak deep in a trunk with the thought that if Ron ever saw it, it would diminish his own cloak considerably, in his friend's eyes anyway. Once that present was away, Harry relaxed and returned to his studies, making notes now of things he should ask McGonagall when he had the chance.

Author's note: For the interesting plotline it brings up, I've taken Harry's Pippy Longstocking-style fortune away. Frankly the only evidence that we have that Harry has limitless funds is Harry himself as an eleven-year-old who has never had any money. I'm using this questionable judgment as the basis for his actually being able to run out. I am not arguing that this is how it will be in canon, just my universe. I'm trying to have Harry go through normal growing things and this is one I couldn't pass up.



Chapter 28 -- A First Christmas

This evening at home seemed much quieter than the previous one. It occurred to Harry that if Snape enjoyed playing card games with Candide, he might like playing something else. "Do you like wizard chess?" Harry asked.

"I do not dislike it," came the even reply.

Harry went and fetched the set from his room and set it up on the small table in the library. He was promptly and utterly beaten two games in a row.

Harry shook his head as he set the board up again.

"You want to play another?" Snape asked in surprise.

"Sure. Why not?"

"You usually are not so sanguine about losing," Snape pointed out.

"I'm not?" Harry asked.

"You nearly killed yourself on the Quidditch pitch rather than lose to a younger, more skilled opponent."

"Yeah, but that's different. I lose at this to Ron all the time," he explained as he put the last pieces in place. He counted the moves this time. It only took seven to be beaten this game. Harry thought over the sequence before quickly resetting the board. "Can you replay that?" he asked.

Snape did so. Harry saw the trap point this time and sat a while before making another move that threatened one of Snape's pieces. It was a poor tradeoff though, which he resisted.

"Better," Snape said as he took Harry's piece. Harry took Snape's in exchange. Even so, he could not foresee anything other than a long slow death.

"I've lost, can we start again?" At Snape's nod, Harry reset the board again. After three rounds he finally managed to almost avoid the trap altogether but had sacrificed too many pieces.

"May I make a suggestion?" Snape asked.

"Sure."

Snape reset the board this time and then made the first few moves on both sides. "Move these two from the back row. That frees the rook to move here and defend this pawn. Then I cannot even set it up."

Harry looked the board over. "All right," he said, rubbing his eyes. It was late and he was tired. After putting the board aside, he went up to his room with a casual goodnight. He slept quite soundly that night.

* * *

The day before Christmas, Franklin returned with Ron's present to Harry and a card from Mrs. Weasley to them both. Dinner was duck, roasted until it had a dark crispy skin. Harry ate until he was groggy from it. As the dinner plates disappeared, he pulled out his Transfiguration text despite his heavy eyes and forced himself to read it.

Snape sat back with something thick in a little metal cup. "You are going to study on Christmas eve?" he asked in surprise.

Harry looked up from his text. "I was trying to reread this during break and I'm running out of time."

"You are taking your studies very seriously."

Harry frowned. "I feel like I'm letting McGonagall down, I'm doing so poorly. I think she thinks I'm really dumb."

Snape tilted his head at him with a look of disbelief. "I am quite certain she does not think that," he said reassuringly, a little amused even.

"She has no patience with me," Harry commented.

"She is not known for that. Does she have patience with other students who are struggling?"

"Neville," Harry said after a moment's thought. "Somewhat."

Snape sighed lightly. "Yes, well."

"That's different," Harry guessed.

"In what way?" Snape probed.

Harry opened his mouth to reply then found he didn't have one. He and Neville were very similar. "I don't know." He closed his textbook and leaned his chin on his palms. "Certainly getting picked out for a Mark wasn't in my best interest," he commented in annoyance. Although if he hadn't been, where would the wizarding world be now, he wondered before putting such thoughts aside.

"And that is the only difference that you see?"

Harry shrugged. He remembered getting ready for the ball and asked as he pushed his fringe back, "Do you think my scar's getting fainter?"

Snape appeared surprised by the question as he set his drink down and leaned forward across the table. He reached out and brushed his thumb over the jagged scar, making Harry jump as though a shock had gone through him. Harry rubbed it, decided it wasn't tingling, and muttered, "That was odd."

Snape looked at him uncertainly before saying, "It might be fading. You keep it obscured most of the time, so it is difficult to say."

Harry fidgeted with his hands before opening his textbook again. Snape's eyes remained on him for a long minute before he too went and fetched something to read.

* * *

Christmas morning, Harry put on his dressing gown and headed downstairs just after seven. He had gone to bed early and finally felt well rested and alert. He sat before the shining tree and looked over the presents. He imagined Ron was

probably opening his right about now and he smiled to himself. Snape stepped over, carrying a cup of coffee. Harry held one of his gifts up to him. Snape placed his cup on the floor and opened it. It wasn't a bad gift, except that Snape would have figured out that it existed easily enough in his own time.

"I didn't realize they were ever releasing a supplement," he said in a very pleased voice as he flipped open the *Potions Compendium Update Volume 1*. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Harry replied. He shook the present from Hermione. "Books all around then," he quipped as he tore the wrapping. It was a Transfiguration study guide for the N.E.W.T. He sighed at the notion that everyone knew he was struggling. "Ever practical," he muttered of his friend.

Inside the present from Ron was a vast collection of Weasley Wizard Weezes experimental candies and novelties. "You didn't see those," Harry said, closing the lid quickly.

"I am endeavoring to forget," Snape said stiffly but with a vague humor.

Harry set that box aside and pulled out the present from Neville. This one was a little more mysterious. Inside was a half dome of crystal with something like an egg inside it. Harry peered at it curiously.

"You don't know what it is?" Snape asked. When Harry shook his head, he went on, "Set it on the window sill for a few days."

A little worried, Harry set it on the book from Hermione. He handed Snape the other present from him. "It worked well the last time," Harry commented as Snape opened the wrap to reveal a canister of robusta shade-grown Polynesian coffee. His guardian actually smiled lightly in amusement. "Open yours," he prompted.

Harry pulled out the present from Snape. He gave the large box a light curious shake. It sounded like clothes. He opened it and pulled out a long black satin cloak with a red velvet lining. "Wow," Harry said, and stood up to swing it over his shoulders. The pewter clasp was in the shape of a snake. With a huff of false offense at that, he hooked it and turned around. "It's great. Thank you," he said honestly as he flicked the corner out to see the flash of red.

Harry sat cross-legged on the floor, still wearing the cloak, and reached for the next present. It was from Gretta and Shazor. Harry hadn't intentionally grabbed that one ahead of the one from Anita. He pretended he hadn't thought of any significance to that as he unwrapped it. Inside was a painted mask with a comic happy face. A little confused and intrigued he lifted it out and dropped it immediately back into the tissue when it distorted to an equally overdone look of surprise with a round mouth and brows steeply angled outwards.

"A wizard carnivale mask," Snape provided. "I assume you have never seen one, given your reaction."

"No," Harry breathed. He put the box lid underneath and set the in the box with the others to avoid touching it again. Snape reached over and lifted it out. The mask went neutral, with a flat mouth and brow. Harry watched him turn it over.

"It is from Rio De Janeiro," he said. "Gretta does like to travel," he went on as he put it back into the box. It held its neutral expression, even after he had released it.

Harry pulled his eyes away from it and over to the next gift on hand-printed paper. Inside was a handsewn book of quotes and a few poems, something they had put together at the coven. Harry flipped through and read a few words of wisdom, most a bit trite, before setting it with the others.

Candide's present he lifted up and, rather than risk breaking it by shaking it, opened the bright wrapping. Inside were handmade dark chocolates, each one just a little different from the next, all of them a little strangely shaped. Harry tried one and made a long noise of delight. Thickly, he said, "These are good." He lifted out another one, stripped with raspberry color, before he closed the box and stacked it on top of the one from Ron.

"Huh, no jumper," Harry commented.

"No what?"

"Uh, Mrs. Weasley always knits everyone jumpers with a big letter or picture on them," Harry explained.

"That . . . would explain a lot," Snape said carefully. At Harry's slightly challenging look, he added, "about your wardrobe."

"Hey, the thought that someone would actually make something for me, rather than give me some way oversized, badly dyed, hand-me-down was really touching," he explained. He carried the glass dome and Weezes up to his room and brought the study guide and chocolates to the dining room.

Snape stepped in a few minutes later and hovered near the hearth. "Do you have other holiday rituals you are accustomed to?" he finally asked.

"I don't have any at all--I don't think," Harry said. Snape took a seat across from him and eyed the chocolates. Harry pushed them over and Snape selected one with an odd daintiness. "Hm," he said appreciatively as he tasted it. Breakfast arrived on the table, distracting both of them.

* * *

"Are you almost ready?" Snape called up from the main hall.

Harry checked himself in the mirror again. He was wearing his dress robes yet again--it had to be a record. His hair looked as good as it ever did. From the balcony, he said, "Right here."

Snape, looking much better groomed than usual, almost startlingly so, led him to the entryway and pulled down their cloaks. Harry watched as Snape pulled out and examined some thick white sheets from a pocket before re-stowing them.

"What are those?"

"Calling cards." He held one out; it was like a large Muggle business card but larger and more stylish. "Essential for a such an occasion."

"I don't have any," Harry said. After Freelanders had asked for one earlier, he should have thought of this sooner himself.

"Go write up a few on nice parchment. Quickly," Snape said.

Harry dashed to the library. He cut up a few sheets of thick cream parchment and pulled out the peach quill Dumbledore had given him. Writing carefully, he put his name and address on each: his name in the middle and the address along the bottom, smaller. The only title he had ever been given, by the sweet company that made chocolate frogs, he did not relish using, so he stopped with that. He made up five of them before stashing the quill away.

In the entryway, Snape draped the new cloak over Harry's shoulders and opened the door. A horse-drawn carriage stood outside on the dark road, flickering lanterns hanging on its sides. "It is the appropriate way to arrive for an event like this," he explained at Harry's hesitation.

Harry climbed inside and closed the half door. He leaned out as they pulled away with a snap of a whip. The shod hooves on the road seemed too loud at first, but the sound fell into the background after the first mile. A few cars passed them, accelerating fast. A town went by; the pavements full of people milling in the warm glow from the shops.

Finally, they pulled through a pillared gate of white stone and up a cobbled drive. Harry glanced out and caught his breath at the massive building and organized grounds. Their carriage waited in a short line to be unloaded at the steps, where a red carpet had been laid out, dusted with fresh snow. Harry wished he owned better dress robes, or even a Muggle coat with tails.

"Only you would get invited to such a thing, Potter," Snape commented. He sounded a little put-off, or even jealous.

Harry considered that he should have explained the whole story, but at that moment they pulled up before the grand entrance and the carriage door was opened by a footman. Harry stepped down and waited for his guardian before ascending to the bright light pouring from the doorway.

Inside was a marble floor and two-story hall with a gilt balcony all around. The plaster ceiling was sculpted elaborately with garlands. A dour man in tails bowed and took their cloaks as another stepped up to lead them to the threshold of the next room, which was even larger than the first. Harry could not fathom this as his own; how could all this belong to one person?

Before them a tall, lithe woman with her glasses on a jeweled stick stood with her arm through a stout man's. The man handed over a card and the butler read it out loudly. "Mr. and Mrs. Trout of the Devonshire Trouts." From across the room a small man with a pince-nez came over and greeted them warmly as old friends, otherwise there was no acknowledgment, which was surprising, considering the volume of the announcement and the number of people in the ballroom. Harry had had no sense of the scale of the event he had agreed to attend.

"There are Muggle lords here. Peers even," Snape observed under his breath.

As they stepped forward, Harry glanced at his guardian who looked haughty and alert. If he stuck with that, Harry could manage. Snape handed his card to the man who read it out without seeming to think it out of line. He handed it back. Harry handed him his after. The man had to squint at the oddly bright ink before he announced the name, causing most of the room to stop and turn. Harry fought the flush coming into his cheeks.

Harry waited a moment to receive his handwritten card back, but the man had stashed it in his inside suit pocket with a smile. Harry sighed. Freelander himself came over.

"Good to see you, Mr. Potter. And . . . Snape, Professor. Correct?" he said, shaking Snape's hand. "Please come in."

A waiter swooped in with mugs of mulled mead that spoke profoundly of clove and cinnamon. Harry couldn't resist. He immediately had to switch hands as he was introduced to two Peers and some solicitor who seemed very self-assured. Harry wondered who was Muggle and who was Witch or Wizard. This wasn't a problem he had expected to have. Everyone eyed him appraisingly the way Fudge had a habit of doing. After a minute or so of conversation, the looks wore off, thankfully.

They circled the room. Harry realized after the second group that he was being herded by Freelander or his wife or by the butler even. He was grateful when they sat down to dinner at a table that rivaled the house ones at Hogwarts. A man by the name of Ratslinger sat across from them with his young wife or mistress; Harry wasn't clear which. He was middle aged with closely spaced eyes. Harry hadn't understood quite what he did. The man's introduction had included Lord of Morals, but he hadn't caught the rest.

As the first course was set before them all by an army of staff, Harry leaned over to Snape and said, "This party is mostly Muggles, right?"

"Half and half, I would guess," Snape said.

"Why don't you think Fudge is here?"

"I expect he was invited. I expect he had several competing events this evening. Do you wish he were here?" Snape asked snidely.

"No. I was just trying to figure things out."

"It isn't worth it," Snape opined.

After dinner they joined the tour of the house and stables. They lagged behind the group to talk more easily. One garish baroque room flowed into the next, distinguishable only by wall color or a unique tapestry or painting.

Freelander came up to them as the bulk of the tour moved around a turn. He joined them as they stared at a scene of a knight bowing to a dragon who looked to be considering whether roasting or barbecuing would leave the man more tender. "So glad you could make it, Mr. Potter," he said sincerely. "I don't think we were quite introduced properly," he added, looking to Snape.

With a faint sense of doom Harry said, "This is my guardian, Lord Freelander. He teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts."

Freelander looked Snape over far differently this time. "Huh," he said, clearly mystified. He looked Harry up and down next. "You appear to be doing well. That is what matters," he added a little flatly.

They continued following the tour. Harry ignored Snape's questioning glance until Freelander had moved ahead to explain the origin of a large landscape painting in a room at the end. Harry stopped and waited until the rest of the group had entirely gathered around for the story. He and Snape were stalling in the wide preceding corridor that seemed to serve no purpose but to hold paintings of other large manors.

"I'm sorry; I should have explained completely," Harry said quietly.

Snape stood examining a painting that showed a garish fountain of Neptune in the foreground and paths leading in all directions; the one up the center led to a yellow estate house in the distance. He turned and said in a slightly disinterested voice, "Explained what?"

"Freelander wanted to adopt me."

Snape blinked in surprise. He tilted his face to the ceiling as he took that in. "And you said 'no'?" he said in a disbelieving manner.

"Of course I said 'no'," Harry replied smartly.

In a bit of a sneer Snape said, "I cannot believe you would have chosen me over this," as he swept his hand to indicate the room.

Harry, annoyed with his guardian's tone, said, "It wasn't like that. I turned him down in May."

"You could have changed your mind. You most likely still could," Snape said with a harsh undertone that Harry hadn't heard in a long time. "The Wizard Family Council would jump at the chance to place you in a proper home."

Harry frowned. "Don't do this," he pleaded quietly. When Snape didn't respond, Harry said, "I don't need all this stuff. What would I do with it?"

Snape crossed his arms. "It isn't the 'stuff', Potter--it is the power. Something you have been utterly unable to grasp," he said condescendingly. "You, whose idea of influence is getting a Canon's cloak autographed."

Harry stared at a bright painting of a lake with a path beside it leading to an open domed building on a bit of a point. He wished he had turned Freelander's party invitation down. As though that thought might have summoned the man, he approached. "You have fallen far behind," he said in a gracious tone.

Harry looked to his guardian, who had masked his expression, fortunately. They followed through the next wing and out to the stables, which were connected by a covered walkway to the main house.

The stall doors each had a brass plaque with the horse's name. The first one said, "Studebaker." The massive brown animal turned and studied them a moment before turning back to the pile of hay in the corner.

"Steeplechase, this one," Freeland said with the same tone of voice Ron used to discuss Quidditch. "As is the next." They were given a little history and siring on each one as they went.

At the end of that row they turned and headed back. "What about these?" Harry asked of the next row of stalls. A beautiful black horse with a long white blaze peered out at them curiously from one of them.

"Those are just the riding horses," Freeland said dismissively.

The black horse whinnied as though insulted. Another farther down answered from inside its stall. Harry stood glued to that spot imagining that. When he looked up at Snape, his guardian had an expression that said *figures*. Harry shot him a sharp look in return before they followed Freeland back out the way they had entered.

Brooms were better than horses, Harry told himself. Except a broom didn't exude the raw power and borderline wildness the black horse had. He shook off the regret that tried to weasel its way into him.

The carriage ride home was silent until they passed the intervening town. Harry felt he needed to say something. He adjusted his cloak, grateful for it. "The cloak is warm. Thanks," he said.

"You are welcome," Snape said quietly, barely audible over the clapping of the hooves outside. He sounded uncertain. Harry didn't know what to say, feared saying the wrong thing. He closed his eyes and dozed off to the regular rocking of the carriage.

Back in Shrewsthorpe, they alighted and entered the unlit house. Harry hung up his cloak and stepped into the dim hall. He waved the chandelier up brighter and turned to wait for Snape to emerge from the entryway. When he did, he gave Harry a vaguely dark look. With an ache of frustration, Harry huffed at him, unable to find words to make the situation all right again.

"You prefer this?" Snape asked snidely with a wave of his arm to indicate the main hall.

"Yes," Harry insisted.

"You are a fool," Snape said as he turned to stalk off. Harry followed close behind, grasping for a retort. At the stairs, Snape turned on him and said, "They owe you everything, those wizards and Muggles tonight. You should have taken everything you could from them."

Harry considered that Snape saw the world very differently than he did. "I don't want what they have," he said firmly.

Snape shook his head disgustedly and continued up to his room.

* * *

At breakfast Snape seemed to have calmed down. Harry was sitting at the table working on holiday assignments when his guardian came in. His first reaction to seeing him there appeared the opposite of the night before. Harry thought he almost looked grateful, but covered it so quickly, he couldn't be certain.

Harry sighed and bent back to writing about the formation of Goblin monetary law in the fifteen hundreds. A cup of black coffee appeared before Snape and he drank it in silence as Harry worked.

After long minutes, Snape said conversationally, "Getting everything finished?"

"Yep," Harry replied, glad Snape sounded normal.

Another long pause. "Need help with anything?"

Harry hesitated, then said with a grin, "You could look over my Potions essay. . . ."

Later in the day, the sun came out of the clouds. Harry went up to his room to exchange the textbooks he was working on and to put away his mail, including a letter from Ron that was incoherent with gratitude for the Canon's cloak. At first Harry didn't notice anything, but as he turned to the door he suddenly swung around again. The window was now nicely framed in a dark green ivy. Harry stepped over to it. It was emerging from the glass dome from Neville that he had placed on the sill and forgotten about. Tiny little buds were on the branches, hinting at a variety of colors between the green capsules around them.

He stepped back and admired it. The room did look much better that way, much less wintry.

* * *

Harry was asleep, calmly asleep, when a noise woke him. It was the noise of the logs in the hearth shifting. They made the hollow, high, rasping sound of the coal they had become. Dark and light flickered in his mind, flame and shadow. He rolled over upon recognizing the noise, and pulled the covers up a bit higher against the chill of the room. The noise repeated, sounding less natural. Harry raised his head and found Snape adding fresh wood to the fire.

Finally, his guardian stood and brushed off his hands. He turned and noticed Harry was awake.

"You're the house-elf tonight?" Harry teased.

"It is especially cold and she had not come around yet," Snape explained. He came over to the bed and stood above him. "You seem to be sleeping well," he commented.

"Really well." He couldn't remember any dreams at all, just restful darkness. "When are we going back to Hogwarts?"

"The day after tomorrow."

Harry nodded and mumbled, "All right." Fleeting, he realized that this had been the first normal Christmas he had ever had. Gifts from grandparents, even, sort of. "Thank you for the nice Christmas," Harry said as Snape moved to the door.

The figure in the flickering dimness turned. "I am glad it turned out to be so. Good night, Harry."

"Night," Harry said back just before the door clicked closed.

* * *

The Weasley household was still strewn here and there with the remains of presents being opened when Harry stepped out of the Floo. He had selfishly been enjoying his time at home, but Ron's third owl where he mentioned his mum inviting him over, brought him to the Weasley hearthstone. Harry kicked a half-burned strip of pink ribbon off his shoe and savored the fact that for the first time he needn't view the Burrow with deeply buried longing.

Mrs. Weasley came downstairs and gave him a firm hug. "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Weasley," Harry greeted her.

"Happy Christmas, Harry dear. Did you get everything you wanted?" she asked, tweaking him on the chin.

Harry considered his lack of jealous pang upon arriving as good as he could have imagined. "Yes, but, uh, I didn't receive a jumper, I don't think," he teased.

"Didn't do any knitting this year, dear," she said.

"No?"

"Been trying out something different--would you like to see?"

More footsteps sounded on the stairs and Ron appeared. "Harry! Oh, Mum's showin' you her new craft, what?" He sounded a little pained. From a large wooden sewing box beside the rocking chair, Mrs. Weasley pulled out and proudly held up a set of colorfully decorated robes. "She's into needlepoint now," Ron explained.

"What do you think?" Mrs. Weasley asked, shaking the garment flat. It was festooned with a bizarre array of shapes: flowers along the cuff and collar, but dragons on the breast and then--only partially filled in--gnomes along the hem. Even if muter colors had been selected, the design would still not hold out in even wizard public.

"That's . . ." Harry began, trying hard for words in the face of her proud expression. "Really . . . expertly sewn." Which was true; he hadn't imagined needlepoint gnomes looking quite so realistic. And ugly.

Ron leaned over. "Thank Merlin she's too slow to get at my dress robes yet," he whispered.

* * *

As he and Snape took the Floo back to Hogwarts castle before the next term, Harry wondered at how he was allowed to skip the train that everyone else was required to take. Not that he was the only student around in the days before classes restarted. Four other students had stayed over because of family schedules or problems. Harry joined them in the Great Hall the afternoon he arrived.

Pansy Parkinson gave him a dissuading look at he sat down, but she was the only Slytherin, so she remained silent. There was also a second-year Gryffindor named Desmond Hern and two fourth-years from Hufflepuff Harry didn't know the names of until they were introduced as Quinton Alden and Frobin Waxwing. All but Parkinson seemed surprised to have him sitting there.

"Did you have a good Christmas?" Desmond asked.

"Yes. Thanks," Harry replied as he took out his Transfiguration textbook.

"Professor Snape get you everything you wanted for Christmas?" Pansy asked in a rude tone. The other students stiffened.

Harry shrugged. "I didn't ask for anything. But I got some nice things anyway," he answered calmly.

"You really live with him now?" Desmond asked, sounding uncertain how he felt about that.

"Yes," Harry replied, sounding much more annoyed than he intended. Desmond visibly closed his mouth tightly and bent over his own school work.

A few minutes later the two Hufflepuffs were arguing in close whispers. Frobin finally shushed the other and asked Harry in a pained whisper, "There isn't any sign of You-Know-Who coming back, is there?"

Harry looked at her. She had short hair pulled nonetheless into two tight ponytails on the top of her head. Her truly worried brown eyes looked large in the cloudy light of the hall. With certainty, Harry replied, "No." She relaxed a little at this answer, but not entirely. "I would know," Harry insisted. "My scar tingled or burned when he was doing much of anything and it hasn't done anything at all. In fact it's fading," he added, rubbing it unconsciously.

"Really?" Frobin asked hopefully. All eyes at the table were staring at him, wide-eyed.

"Really," Harry replied with extra assurance, returning to his textbook in the hope that they would return to theirs.



Chapter 29 -- Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered

The new term began as winter settled in hard around the castle. Harry had not imagined it possible, but Ron and Hermione seemed even more glued together than they had before break. He had expected some commiseration from Ginny on this, but found that she wasn't paying much attention to anything but Dean.

At first he felt merely mystified by all of it. That was until he noticed that he had faded into the background along with everything else, then he felt a little annoyed. The weather was definitely conducive to sitting close together, he considered, more than once. As the first few days passed, it began to grate on him more, making him feel unsettled and anxious. He started avoiding his friends when it was convenient to do so.

Friday evening, Harry stood in the common room with his bookbag over his shoulder, looking for someplace to settle in to talk or even study. The room, to his eye, seemed paired up into fixed sets. He didn't feel like interrupting anyone, so with a sigh he headed out the portrait hole, thinking of the library. He wandered instead to Snape's office. His guardian was researching something in stacks of books piled on the desk.

"Do you mind if I study here?" Harry asked.

Snape, his long finger holding his place in the text, looked up at him. "Not at all." As Harry sat in the visitor's chair and dropped his bag hard on the floor, Snape asked, "Is something wrong?"

Harry wrinkled his face up as he thought over an answer. "All of my friends are, I don't know, wrapped up in each other." He shook his head in light disgust. "Voldemort could Apparate into the common room right now and no one would notice." Harry cracked his Transfiguration text open and slouched over as he read.

"Hm," Snape murmured.

"What?" Harry asked, feeling a little annoyed.

"I am surprised you do not understand."

Harry frowned at him. "They've all lost their heads," he complained. "What's to understand?"

"You've never fallen for someone?" Snape asked.

Harry thought about Cho, how he had thought about her when she wasn't around, how he had been jealous of others around her. It seemed dumb in retrospect. With a hint of anger Harry said, "Not like that."

"Well, you will," Snape stated dryly.

"Yeah, right," Harry breathed. He tried to read the first paragraph of chapter ten yet again. His mind refused to take it in. Anger had built in him, generated by some source he wasn't aware of before. He glanced up at Snape to find his guardian considering him in silence. Snape closed the book before him and clasped his hands on the desk.

"What?" Harry asked sharply.

Snape didn't react, just continued to consider him. Harry closed his book as well, a little harder and with a huff of frustration. "You are doing one of those Dumbledore things, aren't you?" Harry asked. "Just waiting to see what I'll say."

"I am actually trying to determine what the problem likely is before venturing to ask anything," Snape said. "You are clearly jealous."

"I'm not," Harry returned smartly. "I have too much work to do to spend my time mooning over someone like they all are. Fat chance, anyway, given how hard it was to find a partner for the ball."

Snape reopened the book he had been reading and looked for his page. "I cannot believe it was that difficult," he opined.

Harry stuffed his book away in his bag, disgusted and angry now. He was shaking a bit as he moved, he was so furious. "You think just anyone would go with some freakishly dangerous person . . ." With a jerk he stood up and hefted his bag. ". . . who has spent the last seven years as nothing but a puppet a dark wizard, as—what did McGonagall call it—a Vold-o-meter?"

As he turned to the door a spell flew over his shoulder and highlighted the doorframe for an instant. He tried the handle anyway, but it wouldn't budge.

"Sit down," Snape intoned.

Harry remained facing the door, but let his bookbag slide to the floor. His fury had peaked and ebbed quickly, leaving him achy, hurt and without purpose. Snape didn't speak as Harry gathered himself together before turning around. He didn't meet Snape's eyes as he abandoned his bag and returned to the chair. The twisty ache in his chest was only intensifying.

They sat in silence, he trying to imagine getting to know someone as closely as Ron and Hermione knew each other. It seemed impossible. "I can't imagine explaining it all," he breathed out in a pained way. "And who in the world would stick around for the whole story?" He wrapped his arms around himself as though he were cold.

"I am not unsympathetic to your dilemma," Snape stated. His chin rested on his bent fingers, thumb picking at the edges of his nails. "But there are twenty-seven girls in your year—"

"Please don't," Harry interrupted, willing him to stop. "I've been through them all with Hermione already. Sixth-year too. Thank you for trying," he added sarcastically. "I don't think you realize how many students are just plain scared of me. The others are disgustingly adoring or think I'm a freak."

"I believe you are exaggerating," Snape said.

"If I pull my wand out at dinner, care to lay a bet on how many people duck under a table?"

"You are mistaking awe for fear. But neither is conducive to getting to know someone," Snape admitted. "And trying *that* would not improve the situation."

"I have some sweets that will turn my eyes red. I could do that tomorrow. Imagine how many nightmares I could cause with that," he said provocatively.

"Harry," Snape chastised him in dismay.

"No one will ever understand," Harry said quietly, sounding bleak.

"May I offer some advice?" Snape asked. At Harry's annoyed shrug, Snape said, "You need to adjust your goals. If you set yourself exclusively to finding someone to be everything to you, you will almost certainly fail, after much frustration, I

might add." Snape stood and came slowly around the desk. "Set yourself instead to looking for a friend of the opposite sex. It is much easier to get to know someone casually. If more is possible it will flow on its own from there."

Ignoring Snape's gaze, Harry stared out the window as his guardian spoke. "Okay, so where is this person?" he huffed.

"Perhaps not here at Hogwarts," Snape admitted.

"Maybe not even a witch," Harry mumbled.

Snape raised a brow. "If you are willing to open the field that wide your possibilities do increase considerably." With his knuckle he tweaked Harry's chin to bring his eyes back over. "Do not destroy yourself worrying about it in the interim. That is the worst you can do."

Harry frowned deeply and tapped his foot against the chair leg impatiently as he returned to staring out the window. Snape made sense, but it didn't improve his mood any to hear it.

Snape went on with yet another sigh. "I know it is not easy. Especially since your friends are most likely intimate at this point."

Harry turned to him in surprise. He thought a moment before rolling his eyes. "Yeah, probably," he mumbled. That thought *really* didn't help.

Snape frowned. "You may very well have to settle for never being fully understood."

"Did you tell Candy your whole past?" Harry asked bluntly.

With a shake of the head, Snape reluctantly replied, "No."

"That's setting a good example. You're saying I should live a lie?" When Snape didn't reply, even though he looked for a moment like he was going to, Harry said in frustration, "I can't imagine going over it all again. But, what's the point in being close to someone if they . . . don't understand?" His eyes were burning, making him blink.

Snape frowned and rubbed his forehead as he stepped back around the desk. "I do not know what to say to you, Harry, except perhaps that I don't believe anyone is fully understood by anyone else."

Harry rubbed his left eye under his glasses. "I really can't imagine explaining it all," he murmured, repeating himself. "It takes something out of me every time I have to."

"I have no answers for you," Snape repeated. "I will, however, point out that everyone is different. Do not make assumptions about someone until you know them very well. You clearly dislike others doing it to you."

Harry gazed sadly at the floor, thinking idly about that. He thought about the girls in the school, most of whom seemed giggly or fashion obsessed and really not worth getting to know. It was daunting to think of trying to get to know any of them better, especially since if he sat down beside them they would either giggle annoyingly or gape in surprise.

Snape's voice pulled him from his circling thoughts. "There was something I wanted to discuss with you, since you are here." When Harry looked up, he went on, "I saw your first term grades—"

"I haven't even seen them," Harry complained.

Ignoring the interruption, Snape said, "You received an 'A' in Potions."

"What?" Harry blurted. "Greer really hates me," he commented.

"Also in Transfiguration."

Harry did frown at that. "What about the rest? Did I get an 'O' in anything?"

"Hm," Snape replied. Harry kicked the chair leg with his heel in frustration. "You need to do better," Snape insisted.

This felt like the final blow. He put his head in his hand and sat hunched over. "I can't try any harder than I have been," he said. "I'm doing better than that in Potions," he insisted. "She's not grading me fairly."

"What is the basis for Frenkels Salve?"

"Isisin and Chamomile."

"What four potions use Uyrs Iodyn?"

"Uh, Draught of Isis, Venidyn, Smith's Semper, and . . ." He tugged his hair back as he thought. "Just a second, something else uses Venidyn as an ingredient. Uh, Hope's Harm Reducer." Harry waited as Snape considered him a long moment. Harry said defensively, "You said I did well on that big essay. Don't you think that was at least an 'E'?"

"Yes. I expect that is how I'd have marked it--if not higher."

"She only gave me an 'A' on it, you know."

"Perhaps your Potions grade is in error, then. But the Transfiguration one is not." When Harry groaned in frustration, Snape said, "I am certain Minerva would give you extra tutoring if you asked."

Harry pulled his book out again and flipped back to chapter ten, tired of talking about it when he could try to do something about it. "I'll think about it."

* * *

Harry sat in the library studying. Normally, he would have found his friends here, but he was starting to suspect that Hermione was catering to Ron's dislike of studying in a place where he was forced to be quiet. He joined Neville at a large table and took out his books. Snow fell heavily outside the nearby window in large flakes that floated and swirled mesmerizingly. Harry had to repeatedly force his gaze to return to his parchments.

Neville fidgeted a lot as he studied. Harry finally took a break from rereading his notes to ask him what he was working on. "Transfiguration," Neville replied. "My worst."

"Mine too." It felt good to share studying complaints with someone. Neville seemed like a safe person to revise with. There were fewer interruptions from others. "I have to get a good N.E.W.T. score," Harry breathed. "It's not looking good right now."

"You'll do all right, Harry," Neville said without looking up. "You always do."

"Doesn't feel like it this time."

Luna came by a few minutes later. "Want to go for a walk?" she asked.

Harry blinked at her in surprise until he realized she was asking Neville, who surprised him further by answering brightly, "Yeah!"

When they had gone, Harry frowned. It looked awfully cold outside to him. He really didn't get it, he thought.

An hour later, Suze wandered by. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

She glanced around them as though to check if anyone were listening. "You have this club, the D.A., right?" At Harry's nod, she went on. "Can I join?"

"Sure," Harry said.

"Well, you don't have any Slytherins in it. I thought maybe they weren't allowed."

Harry's brow furrowed as he thought about that. "We don't keep them out. It's just that no one has ever asked." He reached into his pocket and took out his fake Galleon. Next Thursday at 7:30 had been scheduled. He showed her how to read the serial number.

She accepted it and asked, "Why the coin?" as she tossed it off her palm.

"Because we were illegal under Umbridge and we needed to vary the time to avoid her." And the Slytherins she had hunting us down, he almost added. "It'd be great if you could come."

She pocketed the coin and gave him a smile before walking away.

* * *

Harry was very grateful for his new cloak during astronomy class late one evening. The stars blazed in the night sky as they all huddled under their telescopes on the astronomy tower roof. The wind was low but the clear sky left the air bone-chillingly cold. Ron and Hermione were bundled under her cloak together, which was awkward, as they weren't allowed to share telescopes. Sinistra eyed them a few times but didn't comment. Harry kind of wished she would.

He sighed and moved two degrees right ascension with the dial. He pulled his hands inside his cloak as he stared at Arc-turus. Inside his cloak he pulled out his pocket watch and used a charm to light the face of it. He preferred his own watch to the one Sinistra provided. He checked the telescope and his watch, back and forth. As the star passed the crosshairs he noted the time. He glanced around. Only Hermione also seemed to be noting the extra credit meridian passage of Acturus on the assignment sheet.

He rarely worked out the extra credit questions, especially since he could be packing up his lenses instead of shivering. The second part of the question, How does nutation affect the reliability of your answer? He thought hard and jotted down quickly that it could be off by nine minutes of angular distance but that the component of that in the right ascension was small. He didn't know by how much or how to compute it, so he stopped there. Rolling up his parchment quickly, Harry frowned as he noticed Hermione had her telescope put away already because Ron was helping.

* * *

In Defense they were doing curse breaking. Each of them came up and picked out a box from a widely varying collection on the front table. For the assignment one needed to retrieve what was inside. This explained why Snape had not wanted visitors the last two days. Harry waited and took the last one remaining, a burnished brass box with large hinges. Once closed magically, it didn't look likely that there was another way into it even with Muggle power tools.

Harry had grown in the habit of sitting in the far back of the room. His friends seemed confused by this, but they changed as well and sat nearby. Harry returned to the last desk in the middle row and stared at the box.

Malfoy let out a cry of surprise as his sleeve caught fire when he simply tried the latch on his inlaid wood box. Parkinson used a water charm on him, leaving him damp all over. Harry looked over his notes as he suppressed a laugh.

Harry rubbed his eyes as he read; he was tired from Astronomy last night, which had gone until one in the morning. Snape swished by, pausing behind him. After a moment, fingers rested on Harry's shoulder. He glanced up at his guardian and gave him a weak smile and then, a little nervously, looked around at his friends. At the desk beside his, Neville

was chewing his lip, staring with concentration at his glass box. Hermione and Ron were bent over a parchment so close that their hair touched. Harry assumed they were plotting out how to proceed on their battered old jewelry boxes.

Harry took out his wand and used the curse detection charm Snape had used the night Malfoy and company had attacked. The blue lines zipped around the lid and turned red at the hinges. An obvious place to curse this particular box, really. He glanced again over his shoulder at Snape, who gave him a somewhat soft look, for him anyway.

As Snape moved on, Harry thought about what curse he might use to foul big hinges like these. There were a lot of possibilities. He started through them one at a time, beginning with a counter for a sticking charm.

The seventh attempt--an oil charm to counter a possible ancient aging charm--caused a flare of gold fire to blast out the sides. That wasn't what he had expected to happen and he worried what it meant.

Hermione looked over. "What was that?"

"Don't know." He ran the curse detection spell again and it remained blue all over now, but he was still very hesitant to try the lid.

"What spell was that you just used?"

"One we are going to do in D.A.," Harry answered distractedly, hoping she didn't ask to see it now, because he was busy thinking. It had taken him a week to work it out. It detected bad intention in the form of a curse. Harry carefully considered what else he should try, since he didn't want his robes ignited or his hair to turn green, as had happened with Padma. He avoided looking up at Snape; this was between him and the box only, as far as he was concerned.

As he sat thinking, the hinges flared gold again. On a hunch he repeated the curse detection and found the hinges back to red again. "Huh," he muttered and tried to think of what that might imply. Moments later, Ron leapt up, crying out in surprise and shaking his hand, which was surrounded by a flickering halo.

Snape stepped over and forced him back into his chair with a sharp admonishment that it was only an illusion. A flick of the teacher's wand canceled the octarine fire.

"I followed the suggestions from the lecture exactly," Ron complained as he looked his hand over in concern.

"You need to think a little more creatively than that," Snape sneered as he stalked away. In the front row he paused and observed Malfoy using a cutting spell to simply remove the lid of his box. A smoky haze floated from his desk.

"Got it!" The Slytherin said proudly as he produced the metal ball from inside the box.

"I did mention, didn't I, that you would be marked down for damage to the box?" Snape asked snidely.

Malfoy shrugged and tossed the ball into the air and caught it. The cuff of his sleeve was brown and shriveled. "I get extra credit for being first though, right?" he asked cockily.

Harry returned to contemplating his box. Some kind of timing charm or curse was on it, perhaps. He tried a few more simpler curse-detection spells and they were clear. It must be a charm then. Beside him, Hermione was pulling the ball from her box with a broad grin. Figures, Harry thought with a sigh. Ron's box was soon to follow, he considered, now that he would get full-time help.

As Harry lifted his wand to try one of the timer cancel charms he had seen Mrs. Weasley use for cakes, Hermione's box let out an ear splitting wail. She stared at it in shock for many painful seconds before slamming the lid shut. It promptly popped open again and returned to full volume. Ron stood up and jumped on the lid, and for a moment there was silence. The lid however had other ideas and, despite appearing to be made of dilapidated, pink cloth-covered wood, it tossed him onto the floor when it popped open again.

The students returned to putting their hands over their ears. Hermione canceled the alarm on the second try and the room fell blessedly silent. Many students sighed in relief. "Drat," Hermione muttered. "Thought I'd managed full marks, too."

Harry savored that comment for a while as he tried the timing spells he knew. None of them worked. This wasn't an assignment where they could do more research so it must be something simpler or more common. He went through in his mind the spells that reinitiated themselves. The only common one he could think of was the filing charm for letters that returned them to their proper envelope. It had a white flare but maybe that was only on parchment or paper.

He did the cancel spell for the filing charm. Nothing appeared to happen. He did the oil charm again and this time the lid popped open. Hermione looked over sharply. Harry gave her a victorious look as he Accioed the ball out, just in case the lid had designs on eating his hand.

"Five points for Gryffindor, Mr. Potter," Snape said from the front of the room.

"That's not fair!" Malfoy complained.

With narrow eyes and a dark challenging tone, Snape asked the Slytherin, "What, precisely, is not fair about it?"

Malfoy, frowning, declined to respond.

* * *

A week later, Harry sat studying before D.A. on one of the fifth floor window seats, far from the usual active areas of the castle. He liked this spot; in the evening the sun shined in through the colored glass. As well, the owlery was nearby and the birds flitted past regularly, keeping him company.

He read through his Transfiguration essay for the third time and sighed. It didn't read like one he would have written for Potions or Defense where he really understood what he was writing about. Transfiguration had only grown harder. The assignments seemed to have less and less to do with the book and lecture, leaving him frustrated, especially since Hermione didn't seem to have this problem. When Harry would ask her a question now to help clarify something, the answer would only generate more questions, since he had fallen too far behind to understand the immediate answer. Rereading the textbook from last year had helped some. Maybe he should order some alternative textbooks, he considered. That had helped with Potions a lot. Hermione had some catalogues, he would have to remember to ask her for them. At the last possible moment Harry headed down to D.A.

During this session they finished up curse detection from the previous meeting then the four of them stood off to the side talking about what to do next. Neville whispered, "I really want to do Animagia." He gave Harry a wince as he did so; Harry figured he worried that because of Sirius, this would be a sore topic. Neville's glanced nervously at the others. "We've been discussing it and . . . well . . ."

Hermione also gave Harry a pained smile. "I'd like to try it as well," she finished for Neville. "What do you think, Harry?"

Harry rubbed his cheek in thought. "It's worth trying. I'm pretty sure it's against school rules so we can't have everyone working on it. Why don't we split the group as we have been talking about doing, into advanced and intermediate. Only people you trust to not mention it to a teacher get into the advanced group."

Hermione said slowly, "And you'll stick with the intermediate?"

"For now," Harry said, "I'll do both." He didn't have much hope for figuring out a transfiguration that advanced, but he couldn't stand to not try.

He watched Neville collect Luna with a shy smile and take her aside to talk to her. Harry watched them with an ache of jealousy before collecting up the newer members and leading them to the far side of the room.

"Good evening, Severus," McGonagall said as he stepped into the headmistress's office. It was late and she had on a long black dressing gown for warmth, apparently not willing to stoke the fire up so close to not needing it.

"You sent me for me . . ." he prompted.

She paced across the back wall, along the glass-fronted cabinets. "Yes," she breathed, clearly thinking how to proceed. "I don't wish to interfere with Harry . . ." she began and looked over at him. When he didn't react, she went on, "but I have noticed he has withdrawn himself from his friends. Three times this week I have seen him studying alone on the fifth floor. I only note it because he seems unhappy, frankly, which is in great contrast to how he was at the end of summer."

Snape crossed his arms and stepped slowly over to the celestial model on the corner of the desk. The breeze from his movement made the etched glass globe rock on its spindle. He touched it to make it turn slowly.

McGonagall prompted in the tense stillness, "Have you spoken with him?"

Snape nodded. "Yes."

"Hm," she prompted.

Reluctantly, but with a tone of being unburdened, he said, "I believe the immediate problem is that he is the only one of his friends without a love interest. Secondarily, he sees no hope for one in the immediate future. Thirdly, at no point does he feel he can expect to be understood by anyone."

"Ah."

Snape touched the glass sphere to halt its turning. "I had no good advice to offer him," he stated in frustration.

She came up to the other side of the desk and leaned on it. "This is a tough age anyway, and getting to know members of the opposite sex would be even harder for him."

"I do not see that," Snape said doubtfully.

She studied him closely. "Everyone thinks they already know him and they are certainly completely mistaken about him. He can't approach anyone without it seeming too significant for whomever he approaches." She sighed. "I assume the ball brought this on."

"That, his friends' close relationships, and other things," Snape commented, failing to mention Candide.

She fell silent with her brow furrowed. "So many lovely young ladies in this—"

"Do not mention that fact to him," Snape said sternly. "His friends have already walked through the list with him and he is adamant about the uselessness of it."

She shook her head with a sad smile. "All right. You clearly speak with him regularly, and intimately, so I am going to assume you are keeping an eye on him." She tossed her robes back as she sat down. "There is something else I've been meaning to discuss with you."

Snape straightened his shoulders, clasped his hands behind his back, and gave her an attentive tilt of the head.

"I've been trying to convince Pomona to be my deputy headmistress, without luck, I must add. She insists she cannot lose the time from her research projects." She smiled wryly. "Not to drive home the point that you were not my first choice, because you usually handle things precisely the way I would, but would you consider being my deputy headmaster?"

Snape, not having ever considered this, did so now. When he had thought it over in silence for half a minute, McGonagall added, "You are already doing many of the duties, as you probably realize. But there would more paperwork, for example."

"You do not expect the board to complain?" Snape finally asked.

She tapped her finger on the desk. "I honestly don't know how much cachet I have with the board. This would be one way of finding out." She clasped her hands together. "Does this mean you are saying yes?"

Snape's eyes roved around the office as he stalled. "Would I be in charge of performance evaluations?"

"Why?"

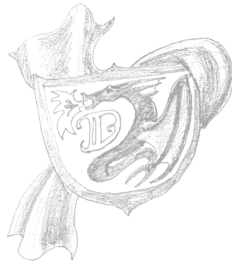
"I wish to discuss grading criteria with Ms. Greer," he replied, his tone lower.

"Hmm. If it is grading involving Mr. Potter, you will have to leave it to me in any event." She sighed lightly. "I wondered about that Potions grade."

"He is doing better work than that, I am quite certain."

"I'll speak with her then." She fell thoughtful a moment. "And with regard to Mr. Potter's other difficulties, perhaps there is something we can do . . ."

At Snape's curious look, she waved him off with a mischievous smile.



Chapter 30 -- Transformations

"First session went well, don't you think?" Hermione said brightly as they studied in the common room after advanced D.A. Ron nodded energetically. He was actually, honestly reading the book Hermione had ordered. The original title *Animagical* had been charmed to read *Remedial Potions*. Harry had ordered some alternative Transfiguration textbooks at the same time. They might have helped if he could find the time to read them.

Hermione took the ring off her pinky and charmed it to the same time next week. She had issued plain silver rings to the ten students who wanted to work on becoming Animagi. The date and time were engraved on the inside. Harry had helped her with a parchment charm to make the date and time into a nice flourishing script that scrolled around the inside.

Harry suppressed a sigh at the memory of his own frustration at the session and pretended to be too involved in his own book to respond.

"Boy, I really want to know what animal I am. I think that is the most interesting part," Ron said quietly without lifting his nose from his book.

"You are most likely what your Patronus is, but that isn't always true," Hermione lectured.

"McGonagall's Patronus is a tiger but she's a house cat as an Animagus," Harry commented.

"When did you see Professor McGonagall's Patronus?" Hermione asked, then answered her own question quickly. "Oh yeah, the Dementor attack. How could I forget?"

"Snape have one?" Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. It bothered him to remember. The thought that it might not be possible for Snape to think of anything happy enough to generate one was hard to accept. He frowned and really tried to get into his reading to have something else to think about.

* * *

Harry continued to work hard in his classes, to the point where he was really looking forward to Easter holiday, even though it was still a month and a half away. The advanced D.A. group was starting to hang out more together outside of sessions, everyone except Suze. When she had asked Harry why some of the sixth and seventh-years weren't going to the regular meetings anymore, he had willingly told her. Without knowing her all that well, he found himself trusting her completely. When she had expressed keen interest in joining as well, he had asked Hermione to give her a ring.

They were sitting in the Great Hall when Hermione joined them. "Did you hear?" she asked in a whisper. Obviously, none of them had, so she said, "We are getting eleven Durmstrang students for the rest of the year. Seems they don't have much of an advanced Potions or Defense Against the Dark Arts classes right now, so some of the students wanting to take those are coming here."

"When are they arriving?" Ginny asked with avid interest.

"In a week or so." Hermione looked sideways at Harry, who had the N.E.W.T. preparation study guide in front of his nose. "Did you hear that, Harry?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I heard you," he said in disinterest.

Hermione rolled her eyes and huffed in frustration. The conversation soon returned to Animagia.

* * *

"You have a lot of scrolls to go through," Harry commented to Snape as he stopped in for a visit before dinner. They were all of odd, varying sizes, some with faded gold braid hanging off the wooden dowels.

"Policy documents," he explained. He considered Harry a moment. "The school's board approved my posting as deputy headmaster."

Harry's eyes went wide. "You're the deputy headmaster now?" he asked in wary surprise.

"Yes," Snape confirmed, a little snarkily. "Thinking about getting into trouble?"

"Uh, no," Harry replied quickly. "Better not, I guess."

"That was always true, but perhaps more so, now," he said, as he returned to reading.

Harry lifted one of the smaller scrolls and unwound a foot of it. It was a detailed description of scheduling procedure. He wondered how he could ask for one that would cover what spells were forbidden for students to work on. After rolling that one up neatly, he picked up another. This one was about grounds maintenance. Insomnia would not be a problem with one of these by one's bedside.

"Looking for something in particular?" Snape asked without raising his gaze.

"No. Just curious," Harry lied. "Guess I'll leave you to it."

When he reached the door, Snape said, "Minerva will most likely announce it at dinner tonight."

"Thanks for the warning. My friends will be thrilled."

Snape grinned lightly as he raised his eyes. Harry shook his head and smiled, giving up on his suffering mode.

McGonagall did announce it at dinner and Harry's friends did all turn to him with surprised and, at least one, impressed expression. He just shrugged in return and insisted that he could not have given them much warning.

"Boy," Ron muttered as he served himself roast. "Good thing this didn't all happen years ago, we'd have got both of you expelled."

The others laughed and Harry ducked his head to adjusting his napkin in his lap to hide the twinge; the last six years certainly would have gone differently. He remained withdrawn through the meal, listening to his housemates carry on a spirited discussion of the relative merits of two *Wizard Wireless* performers Bretagne Lancelot and Treegrove Simsdaughter. Idly, as he ate his pudding, he wondered that Snape didn't have a *Wireless* set somewhere in the house. Maybe they did have one; a proper wizard household should.

He was mulling over what a *Wireless* set might look like, thinking over each of several objects in the house which had unclear purpose, so he didn't notice when the table around him fell quiet. Ron uttering, "Sir," a little formally, brought Harry's attention back and he looked up to find Snape standing behind and to the side of him.

"A bit brooding, aren't we, Mr. Potter?" he asked, although the tone didn't match the words, being too concerned.

Harry pushed his glasses on firmly and gave a slight shrug. He couldn't shake the what-ifs that were clawing at his mind right then.

"'e's just sad 'cause 'e can't cause trouble no more," Seamus commented with a snicker.

Harry managed to brighten up a bit, although it seemed to hit his pride to do so. He sensed that Snape saw through it, and that made him feel unexpectedly better.

* * *

"All right," Hermione said loudly to get everyone's attention during advanced D.A. "This is the spell. The incantation is *Canarevelatio* but you **MUST** have your animal in mind when you do it. If you can't visualize anything, you aren't supposed to be trying it. Foot is safer than hand, because if you have a wing or something, changing it over might cut off your limb, and that will take some explaining to Madam Pomfrey."

Everyone shuffled a little nervously. But most took out their wand and some also sat on the floor to remove a shoe. Harry sat off to the side watching, hoping no one got hurt doing this. Ginny had her shoe off already and was concentrating hard.

"I'll go first," Hermione said, seeing this. She sat in a chair and closed her eyes for a long minute. She opened them and tapped her foot while speaking the spell. Nothing happened. "Hm," she said. She tried again with no luck. After many attempts, she gave up with a huff. Harry felt a little amused at her expense. Neville tried next, also with no luck. Ginny, finally running out of patience, shouted the spell and whacked her arch hard with her wand. At first Harry thought she had also failed, but Ginny squealed in surprise. Everyone gathered around her. Ron said, "I don't see anything."

"It was there," Ginny insisted. "Feathers. Brown ones with little white stripes. Right about here." Due to the close crowding of students, Harry couldn't see where she indicated.

"Try it again," Ron urged excitedly.

Around the twentieth try, Ginny could reliably change her foot into a bird foot. It looked grotesque sticking off her leg and it faded quickly, morphing back to her own after a few seconds.

Neville said, "I have a bird book. We can look it up later." He was looking over Dean's shoulder at his sketch of what Ginny's foot had looked like.

"I'm next," Ron said brightly. Like the others, he couldn't produce anything.

Several more students tried with no success. Suze went last. "What is your Patronus?" Hermione asked her.

"I can't do one," she said defensively. "I haven't learned that yet. But I've been listening and I want to try."

"Go ahead, then," Hermione said. Harry could hear in her voice that his bright friend assumed nothing would come of it. She had been evenhanded with Suze but Harry suspected she had only agreed to let her in because Harry had asked. She had not been in the regular D.A. long enough, really.

Suze sat on the floor and bent her pale foot toward herself. She sat quietly for a long time before incanting the spell. Even from where Harry was, he could see her foot transform into a little white paw. The room broke out into awed noises.

"What is it?" Ron asked, leaning over to peer at it more closely. It stayed transformed a lot longer than Ginny's bird foot.

"A mink," she replied factually. "That was always my favorite." It finally faded.

"Wow," Hermione said, impressed. "Well you guys are going to have to help the rest of us out. But I think we are done for the night. I have an essay to finish."

General grumbling went around at the thought of uncompleted schoolwork. Hermione turned to Harry, still sitting off to the side. "What about-?" Ron started to say before he cut himself off.

Hermione came over to Harry and sat close beside him. "Don't even want to try?" she asked in a pained voice.

"I'm really rotten at this stuff," he said.

"Harry," she said admonishingly. "Listen to you. You're good at nearly everything. Don't get down on yourself."

"I'm getting an 'A' in Transfiguration. That's all I'm going to get on the N.E.W.T., if I'm lucky. I'm not going to get into the Auror's program." The thought of that made his chest tighten up. He forced himself to breathe deeply.

"They can't keep *you* out of the Auror's program, Harry," Ron said in a disbelieving tone.

Harry stood suddenly and said stridently to his face, "If I don't deserve to be in it, then I shouldn't be." He stalked off, leaving his friends frowning at each other.

* * *

The next day at dinner, Hermione said to Harry, "Why don't you ask McGonagall for help?"

"Like she has time," Harry said smartly.

"She'd make time for you," Hermione said in her talking to an idiot voice. "She now has an assistant, remember? Go ask her after dinner. Do you want me to ask her for you? I don't mind," she offered, sounding ready to jump up just then.

Harry looked defeated as he put his napkin in his lap. The food had not appeared yet, which was a little slow. He wished for it as a distraction.

The doors to the Great Hall opened and a tall young lady wearing Durmstrang student robes and very long black hair stepped in a little uncertainly. She was followed by an Indian girl in the same outfit who had her long hair in a thick braid wrapped around her head. McGonagall was heading down the center of the Hall with her long stride.

"Welcome," she said with broadly spread arms. Three more girls stepped in as the first held the door open.

"What? Are they all girls then?" Ron asked sarcastically.

Harry didn't see it but when he turned, Ron was rubbing his arm as if he had been struck hard on it, presumably by Hermione. McGonagall waved her wand to open both doors, revealing six more students.

"There are boys," Hermione said smartly of the three, stern looking, olive-complected young men standing at the back, two with crossed arms, one with eyebrows like Krum. If Harry had looked at his friend, he would have seen her keenly eyeing him to see where his interest seemed to fall. The first girl who had appeared had caught his eye. He watched her as they stepped up the Hall, glancing at the ceiling and the students with equal interest.

"Please come in," McGonagall said in a very kind voice. She led them to the ends of the tables where the students were far less crowded due to the proximity of the staff table. "Have a seat at any table. I'm sure you're hungry from your journey."

She addressed the whole room. "Everyone, these are visiting students from Durmstrang Institute. They are here to take advanced classes for the rest of the year here at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I expect you all to welcome them and make them feel at home as they settle in." Her eyes took in the room as though trying to pick out all the

troublemakers. She turned and stepped around to the staff table, whose occupants looked as though they were trying to eye the new students without actually appearing to do so.

Food finally arrived after McGonagall returned to her seat. Ron whispered to Hermione and she shushed him sharply. He rolled his eyes in disgust and served himself from the bowl of potatoes that had appeared. Conversation in the Hall didn't return to its previous volume as everyone talked of the new arrivals in muted voices.

At one point the three newcomers sitting with the Gryffindors stood up to peer down the table in their direction. Hermione said to Harry, "You could wave."

"What?" Harry asked, looking up from his study guide, which he was now intent on simply memorizing cover to cover.

She laughed. "Too late." Ron had a smirk on his face. Harry shook his head at both of them in annoyance.

After dinner Hermione left the table quickly, then returned as they were all standing up. At the doors they glanced back at the newcomers gathered in the front being introduced to the staff.

Back in the tower they gathered their books for studying. Hermione came back down from her dormitory and said, "Three new trunks are in our room and more beds have been added."

"That's right," Ron said jealously. "It must have been awfully spacious in there with only three of you with a whole floor."

Hermione just shrugged. "Now it's normal, I think. But it does seem crowded," she admitted.

The portrait hole opened and Professor Sinistra stepped in followed by three of the new students. Everyone in the common room stopped what they were doing and watched them enter. The two longhaired girls were there and a shorter one with a flat topped head of dusty brown hair. She stood like a Quidditch beater might, with a lot of physical confidence.

"Students, we have a few additions for the rest of the year. They will be living with the girls in the seventh-year dormitory." Sinistra gestured over her head for Hermione to step forward. Harry stepped up a riser to get a better view over Ron's shoulder. "Girls, this is Hermione Granger. She is Head Girl and is also in your dormitory. Please come to her with any questions you have." Hermione gave them a smile which was only returned very weakly.

"This is Penelope Tidewater," she said, introducing the tall girl who had led the way into the Great Hall. "Darsha Seth," she said, indicating the Indian girl, who did smile at the room. "And Frina Chuchinick." Frina nodded at the room, her light colored eyes taking everyone in with vague suspicion. "Hermione will show you up to your room. Your trunks are there already."

Harry stepped aside as the group approached. Frina spotted Ron's Prefect badge and shook his hand in what seemed an official way. "Ron Weasley," he said, in an oddly deep voice. Harry had a feeling he was imitating Percy and had to turn away to hide his near laugh.

Ginny and several other girls followed the newcomers up as well. Ron said with some glee, "Well that will put a damper on studying tonight." He turned to Harry and shook his head. "I can't believe . . ."

"What?" Harry asked when Ron had stopped suddenly.

"Uh, that Durmstrang can't teach a decent Defense class," he finished hurriedly. "Hope they like Snape. Seems like their type. No offense intended," he added, touching Harry on the shoulder.

"None taken. I would agree, really. Kind of a stoic bunch."

Ron picked up his bookbag from the floor by the stairs. "I'm sure they'll loosen up once they've been here a while," he said with an unexpected comic certainty. They took seats near the hearth and took out their books.

As predicted, the girls were a long time returning. Hermione and Ginny, when they finally reappeared, came over and sat with them. "They were tired from the train, so they're going to sleep," Hermione said. "They seem nice enough. A little standoffish, maybe, but I'm sure they'll open up once they get to know people," she said reassuringly, oddly echoing Ron.

* * *

The next morning at breakfast, Ron and Harry grew tired of waiting for Hermione to appear and went down without her. Ginny was also apparently helping the new arrivals make their way around this morning because she didn't appear either.

"Girls," Ron breathed in dismay as they exited the portrait hole. "How good do they have to look for breakfast anyway?"

This was the first time in a long time that Harry had been alone with Ron. As they walked down the corridor to the staircases, he swallowed hard and said, "So things are going well with you and Hermione?"

Ron tilted his head from side to side. "Yeah," he answered noncommittally.

Harry frowned. He was really darn curious just how close they were but he had no idea how to ask. He would need an entire evening with Ron to even get near the topic. And maybe a jug of mead as well. With a quiet sigh he let it go for now.

In the Great Hall they took up their normal seats near the center of the table. Neville was already there. He gave them a smile as they sat down. "Where are the others?"

"Who knows?" Ron asked in disgust. "They're girls. It could be HOURS."

Neville laughed. "Luna's not like that."

"Consider yourself lucky," Ron commented as he took an apple out of the basket on the table and bit into it with a loud crunch.

As it turned out, it was just another five minutes. Hermione led the way to the bench across from the three of them and invited the new students to sit. They thanked Hermione politely and sat almost in unison, although it was clear they were not accustomed to stepping over the bench. Penelope had to lift her hair to the side to avoid sitting on it. They took up their serviettes and primly arranged them.

Frina, sitting across from Harry, looked over at him and froze. Harry had to fight a frown as their eyes locked. She nudged Penelope beside her, to no avail, since her friend was discussing the ceiling with Hermione in great detail.

"Hello," Harry said evenly.

"Hello," Frina returned in an accent he didn't recognize. She seemed to recover herself and tossed her head as though she realized she'd been silly. "Very pleased to meet you," she said as though quoting a phrase book.

"Where are you from?" Harry asked.

"Split. That is in Croatia."

"Ah," Harry said, happy to have a geographic reference for the accent.

With a small smile, she nudged her companion, again to no avail.

"Where is your friend from?" Harry asked.

"Switzerland. The German part." She gave Harry a wink.

"Just asking," Harry returned defensively as food appeared before them.

"So much easier than the serving line at Durmstrang," she said. "The Prefects get to get in line first, behind the teachers. It is ridiculous," she complained. She picked up her fork and began eating with the same relish Ron did, slowing down only when her plate was empty and she had to pause to serve herself seconds. When she glanced up at him, she seemed surprised all over again to be across from him.

The conversation about the enchanted ceiling, its spells and history, finally completed. Frina yet again nudged Penelope and asked, "Did you meet my new friend?" Penelope dabbed her mouth and looked across where Frina indicated. With a quirky smile Frina said, "This is Harry Potter. I am pretty sure anyway. I am told he has this scar."

Harry frowned lightly at that and Penelope's shocked expression. She definitely fell into the *he could get dangerous at any moment* category. "Hello," he said.

"Hullo," she returned hesitantly as she stared at him. After a moment she too seemed to realize she was behaving oddly and pushed her shoulders back. "You are, uh, normal looking," she said in a light German accent.

"Thanks," Harry said with a little sarcasm. Beside him, Ron ducked his head.

"I haven't heard that one," he said with amusement. "And it probably isn't true."

Harry addressed his plate a bit more than the students around him.

"I am not intending to be rude," Penelope said evenly, sounding concerned.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, "I should have done introductions. These are my friends. Ginny Weasley. Across from her is Dean Thomas. This is Harry Potter." She ignored the gasp from Darsha on her left. "Ron Weasley, *my* boyfriend. Neville Longbottom. Over here are Dennis and Colin Creevey." The Creevey brothers gave cheerful waves.

"You are friends with the Destroyer of Voldemort?" Darsha quietly asked Hermione in her heavily accented English. It carried well down the table.

"Someone has to be," Ron quipped.

"Ron," Hermione said in such a darkly dangerous voice that Neville instinctively shifted away from his friend in case something bad were about to befall him.

Harry had to resist shooting the new Indian student a dangerous look just to see how she would react. He sighed faintly and pushed his scramble around with his fork, not the least bit hungry anymore. He pushed the plate away and it disappeared. His pumpkin juice sat untouched. He drank it, acutely aware that he was the center of immediate attention.

"I'll see you in class," he said as he stood up to leave. "Nice meeting you all," he said flatly.

At the head table McGonagall watched Harry depart with abnormally slumped shoulders. "Ten points from Gryffindor," she murmured. Snape, in the seat on her right, turned to her in surprise. She stared at her nails in thought as breakfast wound down.

* * *

Two rows of new desks had been added to the Defense classroom. By the time everyone arrived, it was rather crowded. Harry and his friends took the back right section of seats. Especially with the new students, Harry decided he liked being back here and able to watch them all without effort. Penelope and Frina mouthed hellos as they sat down. Hermione responded in a very friendly way. Harry gave them a weak smile. Ron frowned in apparent annoyance, which Harry wondered about.

Snape stepped up to the platform and said, "We may need to find a different room. We'll see how it goes today."

Snape lectured at length about advanced blocking and counter-cursing, much of which they had already covered. Hermione didn't even take many notes. Dean, beside Harry, seemed intent upon this review session as did some of the others who apparently felt weak in it.

"A demonstration then," Snape said, looking over the room. "Who is the strongest among you in this?" he asked the Durmstrang students.

The new students all turned to the tallest boy, who stood up slowly. He had a mop of curly dark hair and a roman nose below his prominent forehead. As he stepped up to the platform, he moved with easy confidence.

"You can do all of the spells I just reviewed, Mr. Opus?" Snape asked him.

"Yes," he responded in his very deep voice.

"Mr. Longbottom," Snape said. "Come up here."

Neville recovered from his surprise and came up. "Me, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, Longbottom." Snape directed him to stand at the other end, ignoring when he almost tripped over his own feet getting into position. "A Figuresempre, an Expellimarius, and a Mutushorum, in that order." He stepped back to get out of the way.

Neville ran through the attacks. Each was blocked easily. "This is the best you have?" Opus asked Snape.

"May I run through them again, sir?" Neville asked, seeming to try not to sound *too* eager.

"No. You may return to your seat."

Neville actually looked like he considered arguing, before he gave in. "I was trying to be polite," he complained as he sat down in the seat ahead of Harry's.

"You know those attacks, correct?" Snape asked Opus. He looked over the class. "Who wishes to block for Mr. Opus?"

Hermione stood up immediately and stepped to the front. Harry sat forward and watched with some nervousness until he noticed Ron didn't look concerned at all. As Hermione stood across from Opus, wand out, the new student said, "I cannot send curses at a lady. We are never required to do this."

"Good chance to get used to it then," Snape stated with false helpfulness. He gestured for him to begin.

Opus lowered his wand hand to his side. "I will not do this."

"What are you concerned about?" Snape asked with impatience. "I am quite certain Durmstrang does not tolerate arguing with the instructor."

Opus cringed and gestured in Hermione's direction. "That she will get injured. She is so small--imagine if her block fails." Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared back at him.

"Mr. Opus," Snape stated, "the two students you have faced, Ms. Granger and Mr. Longbottom, provided blocking for all nineteen students who attacked the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters in the Entrance Hall of this castle. You truly need not worry about her block failing."

The Durmstrang students, especially the three living in Gryffindor, gaped at Hermione. Opus relented with a concerned ripple to his brow. He incanted a very weak Figuresempre which Hermione blocked, barely needing to move her wand.

Snape stepped in a little angrily. To the two other Durmstrang boys, he said, "Either of you willing give Ms. Granger a chance to demonstrate her blocks?" When they merely looked at each other and shrunk down in their seats, Snape huffed. "Mr. Potter, come up here."

Harry got to his feet. The Durmstrang students were whispering avidly amongst themselves as he stepped onto the platform. He followed Snape's gesture for him to take Opus' place and the tall boy stepped over to the wall and leaned against it, holding his wrist in his hand.

"Yes," Snape intoned while eyeing the visitors. "*The* Harry Potter." He stepped back again. "What is your strongest attacking spell?"

"Uh, blasting curse, I guess."

"That then. Full power, Mr. Potter."

At the other end Hermione took a deep breath and concentrated. Harry spelled her with about ninety percent of what he could do. It struck her Chrysanthemum block and scattered around the room, shaking the window panes and desks, even upsetting a stack of books on Snape's front table. She was forced to take a step back as it hit, and she grumbled to herself about that.

"You *are* light, Ms. Granger," Snape commented. "Even a good block will move the caster when it is hit hard. Now, Mr. Opus."

Harry retook his seat, disregarding the stunned expressions of the new students as he walked between their desks. Opus gave it a good show this time, although Hermione looked displeased. She returned to her seat looking dangerous.

A few more pairs went through the spells. The quality of the Durmstrang blocks dropped off after the first five demonstrators. Snape had asked for them to come up in order of skill. Frina was second followed by Penelope and two others. They were each paired at random with a Hogwarts student.

One of the Durmstrang girls Harry didn't know, raised her hand before the next pair was chosen. When Snape acknowledged her, she asked, "Are these all purebloods in this class? Because we are not . . ."

Snape rubbed his forehead and glanced at them all under his hand. They remained silent, waiting to see what Snape would say. "Ms. Travoli, such notions are not acceptable here. Although you may well hear them expressed on very rare occasion by one or two students." He glared at Malfoy sharply as he said this.

He stepped down to the floor of the classroom and stopped before her desk. "What you are seeing isn't breeding or even nurture; it is the end result of two years desperation against overwhelming odds. Eighty percent of what these students know, or most of them anyway, they taught themselves. I am not trying to demonstrate either school's superiority here, I simply need to know where you are to revise the syllabus for this course."

He returned to the platform. "I have every intention of bringing every one of you to the same level at the end of this year. It is going to require a great deal of work on your part, but I see no reason why it is not possible."

The Durmstrang students appeared relieved at that. The next student came up and was paired with Parkinson.

* * *

"Ms. Granger," A familiar voice said as Hermione and Ron walked to lunch. They turned to McGonagall, who stood down a side hallway. "A moment."

Hermione received a sympathetic look from Ron before she stepped over to the headmistress. McGonagall steered her down to Snape's office. As they entered, Snape shelved the book he had been holding and crossed his arms.

"What happened this morning?" McGonagall demanded. Hermione, faced with incriminating Ron, who had only made things more difficult, shrugged. "Ms. Granger," McGonagall prompted dangerously.

She frowned as she replied, "There were two, oh-Merlin-I-can't-believe-it's-him and one he-might-kill-anyone-at-any-moment. Should have warned them, I guess."

Snape's eyes narrowed in thought. McGonagall huffed. "These are some of Durmstrang's best students. They aren't lily-white by any measure."

"We didn't handle it well either," Hermione admitted, spreading the blame around.

"Then you deserved to lose the points you did," McGonagall breathed as an aside.

Hermione's jaw dropped open. She closed it without comment; McGonagall seemed too upset to risk arguing with.

"You will do better?" McGonagall asked with a threatening certainty.

"Yes, ma'am," she replied smartly. "And you are going to start tutoring him in Transfiguration then, right?" Hermione added, leaning forward in anger. Surprised at herself, she backed down immediately. "Sorry Professor, that was out of line." She glanced at Professor Snape and found him looking at her with positive regard.

"He hasn't asked," the headmistress pointed out.

"You're going to have to make him do it," Hermione said. "You know him. He thinks you're too busy, so he won't ask."

McGonagall drew herself up straight. "All right," she said. "I'll do that. And you will take care of the social direction?"

"Yes, ma'am," Hermione replied with confidence. "I think Harry won sympathy points, frankly, so it's probably all right from this morning." She glanced at Snape who had a neutral, thoughtful expression. He hadn't said a word, she realized, as she departed.

* * *

After the last class of the afternoon, they gathered in the Great Hall with the new Gryffindor boarders. The three young Durmstrang ladies settled in quickly and intently to their assignments. Harry found himself across from Penelope. She gave him the occasional considering look, which he ignored as he worked out his Astronomy assignment.

As students arrived for dinner, McGonagall strode in. She tapped Harry on the shoulder and gestured for him to follow her. He obeyed, stepping over the bench and down the aisle. When they were out of earshot, the headmistress said. "You have no D.A. tonight, correct?"

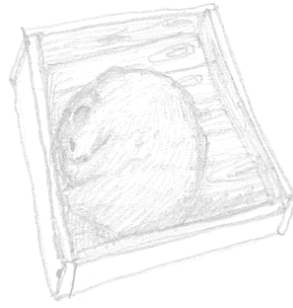
"Uh, correct," Harry replied. They had no official D.A., just Advanced, which he couldn't admit to.

"Bring your Transfiguration books to my office at eight," she said. "Ah, Pomona," she then said to the teacher walking past, turning away from Harry. He blinked at her in confusion as she stepped around the head table, intent upon another conversation.

He sighed and returned to his friends.

"What was that about?" Ron asked. When Harry moved his silver ring to his other hand, the signal that he couldn't make the meeting, Ron said, "Oh."

They put their books and parchments away as dinner arrived.



Chapter 31 -- Fur and Snow

That evening, Harry gained admittance to the headmistress' office. His bookbag was slung weightily over his shoulder, full of his assigned and self-purchased alternative texts. It made a loud thud when he set it on the floor beside the visitor's chair. As he sat down, McGonagall waved the straight-backed old thing into an overstuffed armchair. He settled in comfortably and sighed. "Are you sure you have time for this, Professor?" Harry asked in concern.

"Tea?" she asked, rather than reply. At his nod, she tapped the teapot and it poured out two cups. As she handed one over, she said, "One of your most endearing qualities, Harry, is that you have never asked for, nor expected, anything in return for eliminating Voldemort." She smiled affectionately at him. "I will never forget the day after, when you insisted that you couldn't read your post because you had assignments to finish."

Harry sipped his tea and wondered what she *had* expected. His furrowed brow must have given him away.

"As opposed," she explained, even more amused, "to insisting on, say, a week off from your studies. Or even a year, frankly."

It was true; he *hadn't* thought of that. Too late to ask for a by on his N.E.W.T.s probably too, he thought darkly. He shrugged instead of responding.

She took her chair and with bright eyes shook her head lightly. "You saved so many students' lives, Harry. And many of ours, as well. Most of us would have traded anything for that, and yet you asked for nothing." She put her teacup down and refilled it. "I am glad Albus insisted on giving you something anyway, although how he ever managed to arrange it is beyond me."

Harry sort of considered that to be between him and Snape, so he didn't comment.

She sipped her fresh cup with pleasure. "I promised you that I would see you through your N.E.W.T.s so that you could gain admittance to the Auror's program, and I intend to follow through with that. Now, where shall we begin? What was the last assignment you had difficulty with?"

"Protasmic Elastic Transformations," Harry stated slowly, as though the words themselves were hazardous.

"It was just a special form of Elastic, which we covered in fifth year," she offered in a helpful tone. His face must have given him away, because her tone dropped as she said, "You didn't understand it then, either."

Reluctantly, Harry shook his head. "And it didn't make more sense the second time around, last week."

In a commiserating tone she said, "That can happen at this level of coursework. You fall a little behind and it escalates until everything is simply too hard to understand."

Harry nodded and dropped his gaze. "And I feel stupid when I don't even know what to ask to get another explanation. I'm afraid I'm just going to waste your time here."

"Oh, my dear Harry," she said with pained affection. "Goodness, imagine my class of all things making you feel less than worthy." She stood up with a rustle of her robes and came around the desk. She stood before him and said, "In the forty years I have been at this school, you are the student who has amazed me the most. You have already passed the most important test of your life--the rest of this is just so many small details. And I *will* get you through them."

* * *

Exhausted and with a History of Magic essay unfinished, Harry made his way back to the common room. Hermione, Ginny, Dean, and Ron were studying in the corner. The new students weren't around.

"That took a while," Ron commented upon seeing him.

"Tell me about it," Harry breathed as he plunked down in a nearby seat. He rubbed his eyes as he pulled out his half-filled essay parchment. It felt like torture to have to complete it, but he had no choice. "How did Ani go tonight?"

"No one made much progress," Hermione whispered. "We read one of the *Animagical* chapters aloud and discussed it, mostly. What do you think of the visiting students?"

"They're all right," Harry answered as he reread the first part of his essay titled *History of laws applying to Trolls and Giants*. He remembered Binns discussing something about them being only allowed to carry weapons that were all wood with no charms. He hadn't mentioned that yet.

"Just all right?" Hermione asked brightly.

Harry shrugged and pulled out his notes.

"Penelope is very pretty," Hermione went on.

Ginny asked, "Does she use something on her face at night? She has the nicest skin."

"I haven't noticed. You could ask her, I'm sure," Hermione said chummily. Harry was writing fast now, desperate to finish, so Hermione dropped the topic.

* * *

During Care of Magical Creatures the next day, Hagrid pulled out the Blue Wombats. They had mated, apparently because there were nearly a dozen small blue creatures which even Harry had to admit were very cute as they slept in their wooden crates. The girls were *obing* excessively as they gathered around, their winter cloaks brushing together noisily.

"Yer going ter be assigned one teh take care o' until the end of term. So find a partner," Hagrid instructed. "Nah, tha' won' do," he said as they chose their normal partners. "Split up a bit and take one o' the Durmstrang students, each a yers."

Hermione bit her lip and hauled Ron over to where the six Durmstrang students in this class were gathered. "Ron, why don't you partner with Opus?" she suggested brightly.

Ron opened his mouth to protest but was cut off by Hermione saying. "Frina, do you want to be my partner?"

"Everyone says you are the smartest in the school . . ." Frina said, sounding eager.

"Great," Hermione said.

Harry wandered over at that moment. "Do you haf a partner?" Penelope asked him, making Hermione bite her bottom lip very hard.

Harry shrugged and said, "No."

"Would you mind?"

Hagrid came by with small crates lined with shredded *Prophets* and *Witch Weeklies*. "That'd be fine," Harry replied levelly. Hagrid handed him a crate, and with one of his massive hands, lifted out a small blue ball of fur. Harry accepted it and placed it in the bedding. It curled up tighter and ignored them all. "What magical properties do these things have?" Harry asked as another was scooped out for Hermione. He watched with trepidation as Malfoy took one out of the big crate and handed it to Parkinson.

"Oh, ye'll find ou' soon enough," their teacher said happily.

Harry froze. Hermione giggled and leaned over to say, "They aren't dangerous, Harry."

"That's no fun," Frina complained, as she prodded theirs gently with her index finger. Her hair turned blue and everyone gasped. A few laughed. "What?" she asked curiously.

Harry heard Parkinson's annoying laugh and looked over at Malfoy whose blond mop had gone to the sapphire. Frina turned as well and her hand immediately went to her own head. "Aye," she breathed. Penelope doubled over in laughter, her delicate fingers half over her mouth. She had a much nicer laugh than Pansy.

* * *

After dinner, they all went up to the attic to check on their wombats. Each pairs' crate sat on the floor along one eve, charmed to prevent anyone else from opening it or even disturbing it. Harry stood aside and let Penelope open the crate. The small blue furball was absolutely still. She peered at it with a tilted head. "You don't think it likes to be touched?" she asked.

"Hermione?" Harry deferred.

"I don't know. The books referring to magic wombats have all been removed from the library." She sounded insulted. "I tried to look up more information with no luck. I think this assignment is about the process of figuring it out for ourselves." She and Frina stared down at theirs as well.

"Do you think it's hungry?" Ron asked. His and Opus' crate was two down from Hermione's. He stepped over to the supplies area where fresh bedding, dog's milk, dried blue corn, and a large mortar and pestle sat on an old heavy table. Hermione came over and the two of them mixed up a bottle with two tablespoons of ground corn as they had been instructed. Ron shook it as he took it back over to the crate and tried to get the wombat to accept it.

Opus crouched across from him. "You not ever lived on farm?"

"No," Ron replied, sounding as Malfoy might if asked the same question.

Opus took the bottle and with practiced motions, used his finger to get the wombat interested in it. It sucked eagerly at it after that. His hair didn't even change color.

"Wow," Penelope said. "It did not look hungry."

Ron looked proudly at his impromptu partner and gave Hermione a smile. The rest of them, with some instruction from Opus, gave all three of theirs bottles. After long minutes when they stopped drinking, they wouldn't give them up again. Harry shrugged and said, "Just leave it inside, I guess," as he picked up the lid and set it in place. He added an additional locking spell to their crate, just in case.

* * *

That night, Harry awoke with a start. He couldn't remember a dream or a shadow, so he wasn't sure why he was awake. He had been sleeping pretty well lately, so he was a little annoyed to be wide awake at three in the morning. As he lay on his back, staring into the darkness, he started worrying about their wombat. Maybe they shouldn't have left the bottle in the crate all this time, he thought. Although, what was the worst that could happen?

With a huff he rolled over and punched his pillow to fluff it, but he was now even more awake. Silently, he slid out of bed and down to his trunk. He hadn't taken out the Marauder's Map to actually use it in a long time. With his invisibility cloak and the Map, he crept out of the room.

The walk to the attic proved rather pleasant; the castle was dark and silent and he felt old comfort in its corridors and halls. Once in the attic, he turned up the oil lamp dangling from the ceiling. The crates in this light resembled coffins, which disturbed him. He stepped down to his, released the spells and lifted the lid before promptly dropping it and jumping back in horrified surprise. Instead of a cute, fuzzy, blue, bear-like thing, there was an oddly monkey-like, furry, blue, winged bat.

As Harry sat beside the crate, catching his breath, it moved its dark skin-covered wing to shade its fox-like head from the light. Harry's panic eased finally and he crouched to lean over the crate and take a better look. The bottle was still there, about half-full. He really needed to take it out, it almost certainly had gone sour. Because the chimneys ran up through the room, the attic was warm all the time, which would certainly have spoiled the milk. Bracing himself and wincing, he reached in with two fingers and plucked the bottle out without disturbing the occupant of the crate. He exhaled in relief and sat back to think. He and his partner now knew something none of the other groups knew, but what did it mean?

He decided that he needed to know what kind of bat it was. With the cloak and Map he nipped down to the library and brought back a book on flying mammals. Other than being blue, it looked an awful lot like a Livingstones fruit bat, which according to the entry could have a wingspan of six feet. Harry tried hard to imagine that and failed. This one was a lot smaller, but then it also was young.

He headed down the kitchens on a hunch and had Dobby put together a basket of fruit, including lots of blueberries, which he took back to the attic. He had left the crate open and had a bad moment before he found his bat hanging from the rafter above its crate. It blinked at him, turning its head this way and that to look him over. Harry dimmed the lamp and offered it different fruit, one kind at a time. It expressed some interest in the blueberries, but mostly it just dropped them on the floor. The orange it took up eagerly when Harry handed it a slice. Using the hooks on the bend in its wings as hands it quickly chewed down the wedge, sucking at the juice before dropping the remains. Harry gave it another.

It ate three-quarters of an entire orange before refusing the next slice. Harry tossed the peel and masticated wedges back in the basket along with every last stray blueberry. Lastly, he needed to put the wombat-bat back away. He looked at the crate in thought before emptying the bedding and putting just a little in one end. It took a little awkward coaxing but eventually he got the bat to hang on the inside of the crate, which he placed on the floor on its end before attaching the lid. He put on extra protective spells and took the basket away.

* * *

Yawning, Harry went down to breakfast. He intentionally sat across from Penelope, who gave him a casual good morning. "We should check our wombats before class, so eat fast," Harry said and then winked at Penelope. She blinked at him in surprise before returning to her plate, befuddled.

Later in the attic, Harry moved in first to reset the crate before anyone saw it, then stalled a bit to let the others get involved in their wombats, changing bedding and bottles. Penelope gave him a concerned look as Harry held the lid just cracked and waited until no one was watching. He put his finger to his lips as he opened it.

Inside wasn't what he was expecting either. Penelope almost gasped, but clamped it off. Inside was a much larger wombat, one with orange tiger stripes. Harry nodded to the corner where spare crates were kept. Penelope went over and picked out a larger one, filled it with bedding and brought it back. Using his body to block the view, Harry moved the sleeping form from one to the other before covering the new one. In rapid, covert silence, they put together a bottle and gave it to the creature before re-closing the lid.

"I have to recheck my essay before class," Harry announced in general. Hermione made a noise of acknowledgment as she and Frina tried to get their wombat to take a bottle. Theirs and Ron's were exactly the same as they'd been the day before. With a wag of his eyebrows at Penelope, Harry left. After a moment, Penelope followed, saying a quick goodbye to her friends.

"What did you do?" she asked when they were on the stairs.

"It was kind of an accident. Not a bad one," he said quickly. "Last night I couldn't sleep so I came up to check on it and . . ." he waited for a cluster of third-years to pass, several of whom said hello to Harry. ". . . you wouldn't believe what I found." He patted his chest at the memory of his racing heart.

"Vat?" she whispered eagerly, accent thickening.

They were at the portrait hole and waited as students came out of it. "I have to get my books for class," Harry said as they stepped through. The common room had a few mingling students in it. "Come up to the boy's dormitory," he said, thinking they could talk freely since it would be empty.

She looked shocked.

"Or . . . not," Harry retracted, a little amused. "Boy's can't go up the girl's staircase, but the reverse doesn't apply. A bit suspicious, I think," he said. "We can talk after classes then. We'll find someplace," he said dismissively and started up.

"It is really okay?" she asked uncertainly from the base of the stairs.

"Hermione has to come up all the time to get Ron moving some mornings," Harry said.

With a glance at the other students in the room, who weren't paying any attention, she followed. Harry then hoped the room wasn't a total mess. He opened the first door and stepped in. It wasn't as bad as it could be.

She looked all around curiously, especially at Dean's football posters. "Dis is a Muggle poster," she commented.

"Dean is Muggle-born," Harry explained offhandedly as he tossed a pair of Neville's socks onto his closed trunk lid.

"Both of his parents?" she asked in surprise.

"Far as I know. Hermione's the same."

That surprised her even more. She stepped around the ends of the beds. "Dis one is yours?" she asked. Her eyes moved avidly over the stuff on the night stand, the poster on the wall. "Do you play Quidditch?"

"Seeker."

She looked at him doubtfully. "You are too tall."

"I didn't used to be. No one told me to change positions for this year."

"No, I don't suppose dey would," she commented. Beside he and Ron's shared window, Ron had pinned up a few *Daily Prophet* articles regarding the final battle. She leaned over to look at the photo of him in the entrance hall. "It is de same picture as de chocolate frog card," she observed.

Harry could barely stand to look at that picture now. "Blue wombats," he said to draw her away. When she turned with a curious look, he said, "What I found last night at three in the morning was a real bat in our crate. What looked like a Livingstones fruit bat, except blue."

"Hm," she said. "Guess you couldn't come and get me."

He shook his head. "On a hunch I went to the kitchens and brought back fruit for it. It ate most of an orange, hence the stripes, I think. And it's phenomenal growth, too, I suppose."

"Wow. We should check again tonight. Three a.m. we meet in the common room?"

"Sure. We have to get to Potions, as much as I hate saying that." He turned to check the contents of his bookbag sitting beside the bed. Penelope headed out on her own. When she was gone, he unrolled the Auror's application that was slowly being crushed in the side pocket. He rolled it back up and stuffed it in the drawer of the night stand.

Harry and Penelope met up with the rest of their friends in the Entrance Hall. They headed down to the dungeon together. "Not your favorite?" Penelope asked Harry as she, Hermione, and Frina sat at a bench. Greer wasn't there yet but they were a little early.

"It never has been," Hermione said consolingly. "Though I don't know what Professor Greer has against you, Harry."

"I think I do," Harry said, remembering lunch the first day she arrived.

"You guys just didn't hit it off," Hermione commented.

"And we won't ever. She tried to get Severus fired," Harry said quietly.

"You didn't tell us that," Hermione said in a slightly blameful tone.

"You are referring to Professor Snape?" Frina asked in confusion. "You refer to your teachers by first name?" she asked in horror.

Harry shrugged. "The headmistress keeps telling me to call her 'Minerva'."

Hermione said, "Harry's special," with a broad grin. "And after the years of suffering in Snape's Potion class, he deserves it."

"Professor Snape used to teach Potions?" Penelope asked.

"Yep," Harry replied. "In fact he graded your school's O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. tests this past year."

"Did he?" Hermione asked with keen interest. Harry nodded in confirmation.

"It is too bad he cannot teach both," Frina said stoutly. "I like Professor Snape. He treats girls and boys the same." Penelope gave her friend a distressed look.

"There's a reason to like him," Hermione quipped in disbelief, garnering a difficult look from Harry.

Greer stomped in at that moment and conversation stopped.

By the end of double Potions, Penelope and Frina were very concerned. In the corridor on the way out, with Darsha trailing behind, Penelope said, "She is totally unfair to you."

Harry shrugged it off. "I have too many other things to worry about. And my N.E.W.T. grade is all that matters."

"I hope she grades *us* fairly," Frina said worriedly. "What do you think?" she asked Darsha.

"I liked the lecture," she replied. "Her pomposity does not matter." She gave Harry a measuring look when their eyes met. He ignored it.

"Bring her a present or something. Get on her good side," Harry suggested.

"Good idea," Hermione confirmed.

"We will do that at lunch," Frina said. "We have a few things we brought to give as presents, but your headmistress did not seem to expect any so we still have them."

* * *

Late that night, Harry went down to the common room without his cloak or Map. Penelope was waiting before the fire. He stepped over, making her jump.

"Sorry," Harry said.

She patted her chest and caught her breath. "I didn't hear you." She stood up and put on her cloak. Harry thought she looked a little sad.

Outside the portrait hole, he asked, "Are you glad you came to Hogwarts?"

"Very. Durmstrang lost many staff last year, so even de end of last year's classes were cancelled or not taught well. You were very lucky here. In one way," she added quickly. "I keep forgetting who I am conversing with," she said, half to herself. As they rounded the first corner, she said, "You are not at all as one would expect you to be."

"No?" Harry prompted. He wasn't sure he wanted to cover this topic, but he was a little curious what she meant by that.

She thought a moment. "You are not as . . . grand, I suppose is de word. Quieter than I have expected."

"Keeping low was important for staying alive," Harry pointed out.

"Very true," she agreed quietly. Harry sensed there was something there but didn't feel he could pry at it.

Up in the attic they opened the crate and found the same striped wombat as before, although it looked a little bigger than this afternoon.

"It is too cute to not pet," she said, reaching into the box to touch it on the head. Her long black hair turned blue striped with orange. She pulled her hair around and examined it with her other hand. "Hah," she breathed, but continued to pat the creature on the head.

"If your skin changes, maybe you should stop," Harry suggested in concern, taking a seat on the floor nearby.

Silence descended for many minutes, until Penelope said in an odd voice that sounded closed in by the low attic, "What was it like, destroying Voldemort?"

Harry tilted his head to the side and didn't reply. He noticed the strips in her hair oscillating a bit when she spoke.

"You did kill him, right? That isn't just a story?" she asked a little stiffly.

"Oh, yes," Harry said. "I had a little help, of course. My friends kept his followers at bay long enough for me to do it."

She shook her head. "De news reports said you were fulfilling some prophecy. Is dat why you were trying? Otherwise you were merely insane to try. You don't look like someone who could defeat such a powerful wizard."

"It was insane," Harry admitted, feeling the honesty of that relaxing him. "I'm amazed I succeeded when I think back on it. But I couldn't not try. He was there to kill me."

She lifted the wombat out and cradled it on her arm. Harry held his breath, afraid something bad might happen. It seemed to be asleep. "Don't move much, do they," Harry observed.

"I think it is a lovely thing. Like a baby bear." She held her hand out to check it for color. Seeing it normal she petted the wombat more. "Were you taking revenge when you killed him?" she asked.

Harry looked her over. He couldn't shake the notion that she sounded hopeful. Her hair definitely rippled that time. "No. I would have died had I tried."

"I don't understand."

"I don't want to explain."

She looked up. "I'm sorry. I'm too curious. It is easy to talk to you, which is very strange. You are so ordinary."

Harry grinned at that. He stood up and with a sigh, said, "I'd like to be." He went to the supplies table and put together two bottles. He had kept an orange from breakfast in his pocket. "I want to try something," he commented. He squeezed the orange into one of the bottles and brought them both over. She lifted the wombat to put it back in the crate; it clung to her robes with a kind of desperation.

Harry reached over and unhooked its broad claws so she could put it down. It pawed the bedding when she released it. "It wants something to hold on to," she said, sounding very concerned. She stood up and took off her cloak.

As she wrapped it into a tight bundle, Harry said, "You're going to use that?"

"I think it will like the fur collar." She put a few charms on it to keep it clean and untorn and stuffed it beside the wombat, down into the bedding. The creature grabbed the furry side and pulled itself over to it. "Zeems to like it." She looked up at him. "Harry?"

Harry had fallen into a trancelike state of memory. "Don't mind me," he said quietly, mentally shaking himself. He saw the bottles he had set beside the crate and picked up the orange-tinted one. "I want to see if it still wants some fruit." The two of them coaxed it to take the bottle and it happily went to it. "I assume it wouldn't eat it if it shouldn't," Harry said. "You think?" he asked her.

She lifted a shoulder. "Probably would just annoy it to switch back and forth to test."

By silent consensus they closed the lid again and left it there.



Chapter 32 -- Applying Oneself

It was a cold, windy day for the Slytherin-Ravenclaw match. Harry was very glad they weren't playing as he and his friends mounted the steps up to the stands. They emerged in a brisk breeze that froze his cheeks. He wrapped his new cloak tightly around himself as he sat between Ron and Penelope.

"For which side are you cheering?" Penelope asked.

"Oh . . ." Harry said and hesitated.

Ron's head snapped around at his indecision and he glared at Harry. "Don't tell me . . ." he breathed in annoyance.

"I like Suze. I wouldn't mind if she caught the Snitch," Harry explained calmly.

Ron grumbled but it sounded vaguely conciliatory.

The Gryffindor stands were backing Ravenclaw, so Harry kept his cheering for the Slytherin Seeker quiet. Roody, the Ravenclaw Seeker was around Harry's size and he was having a very hard time keeping up. Harry could see him deciding to just play his own game and ignore his pale, feather-light opposite.

The Slytherin Chasers, whom Harry had not had time to watch last game, were really very good. And very violent, rarely swerving out of the path of an opponent who tried to cut them off. Sometimes they would just take a bludger to the body rather than lose an offensive setup. Quickly the score was fifty to ten. The green-clad Beaters then focused on Roody, who could not handle both the violent harassment and his agile opponent. He let himself be forced farther out of the pitch area, where it was not impossible the Snitch was hovering, but it was unlikely.

Forty-five minutes into the match, the crowd rose to its feet as Suze turned and dove for the snitch. Roody was too far away but he turned anyway and sped toward the center of the arena. The Snitch dodged twice, but Suze stayed right with it and snagged it easily out of the air.

The Slytherin stands erupted into cheers. Harry grinned. Ron gave him a disgusted look as the crowd drew in its breath and shouts of warning went up. Harry turned in time to see Roody careen into Suze, unable to slow in time from his mad dive. Harry stiffened at the sound of the collision of bodies and brooms. Without forethought he dashed for the stairs and took them three at a time. Other spectators were also pouring onto the pitch.

When Harry arrived where the teams were landing, Suze was trying to stand up and her teammates were urging her to stay put. Roody was rubbing his elbow with a pained frown. Harry grabbed the front of his jersey and demanded, "What did you bloody well think you were doing?"

Roody gaped at him in complete shock and Harry released him with a small shove. Everyone around them quieted, waiting to see what might develop. Snape arrived and ordered Suze to sit down on the frozen grass to await Madame Pomfrey. Ron grabbed Harry's arm and tugged him away from the Ravenclaw team. "Hey there, mate. No fighting," he said in a strangely amiable tone. Hermione was giving him a very soft look.

Harry tried to justify his reaction. "She's too small, Roody should have been more careful."

"Harry, it's Quidditch," Ron stated as if that covered it.

Harry glanced back. A witch and a wizard he did not recognize were crouching beside Suze, fussing over her despite her protestations. Harry studied Suze's very ordinary looking parents as the crowd pressed in, blocking the view.

They walked slowly back to the castle. "You were starting a fight?" Penelope asked Harry.

"Wasn't trying to," Harry replied.

Ron supplied with a crooked grin, "Harry was just standing up for his date from the Christmas Ball.

Penelope blinked at that. "She is so young, no?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I was *ordered* to find a dance partner for the ball," he griped, trying to close the topic. "It wasn't a date."

Ron, still in a teasing mode, went on, "So he picked the girl that would make the teachers least happy with him."

"I had a nice time," Harry said defensively. "So did she."

* * *

Hermione found herself cornered on the way to Advanced D.A., of all times. "Ms. Granger," McGonagall intoned before opening her classroom door and inviting Hermione inside. Hermione followed and kept her face neutral as she waited for McGonagall to speak.

"How are things going?" the headmistress asked. "I had Harry to my office for tutoring just an hour ago, but I could not read him this evening."

"Pretty good, I think," Hermione said. "He is partnered with one of the new students on a Care of Magical Creatures project. Penelope. I get the sense that they've talked a little."

"Good," she breathed. "Harry, of all people, should not feel left out." She gestured that Hermione could leave.

Hermione hurried down to the Room of Requirement. She was now firmly determined to make Harry try the Canarevelatio spell today.

While the rest of the students worked on building what the book called membrane energy, Hermione cornered her friend. "Try for me, please," she pleaded. When he frowned, she pulled out the big guns. "Your father would be so proud of you, following in his footsteps." She held her breath. That was either going to work, or backfire badly.

Harry huffed and sat on the side bench to take off his shoe. Ron, seeing this, came over and sat beside him. Harry incanted the spell on his right foot. Nothing happened. When he shrugged, Hermione insisted chastisingly, "Try again." Harry did so, many times, still with no result.

Suze came over as well and stood beside Hermione, who said, "Maybe you are thinking of the wrong animal. What are you thinking of?"

"A stag, like my father and my Patronus," he said, a little annoyed despite them all trying to help.

Suze, in her lilting voice, said, "Just think of your spirit. That is what I did."

Harry's brow furrowed as he considered that. He scratched his head and thought a long time. Images of himself as various things flitted through his mind: Fawkes, a stag, a dog like Sirius. He tried to imagine himself as something else, though not anything in particular, as an essence, maybe, and spoke the spell.

"Whoa!" Ron exclaimed.

Harry looked down at his foot, which was now a big paw except scarlet furred. Bright scarlet. He was afraid to touch it, just stared at it, waiting for it change back, fearful it might not.

"What is that?" Hermione said reverently as she crouched to look it over. When she reached out to touch his foot, he jerked it instinctively away. "I'm not going to hurt you, Harry," she chastised him.

"It just bothers me," he explained. His foot morphed back at that moment and he breathed out a deep sigh.

"Let's see it again," Dean said.

"No," Harry said. "I saw it enough."

Over the groans of disappointment, Hermione said, "Come over and start working on your membrane energy. Come on," she urged, tugging on his arm which forced him to follow.

* * *

McGonagall stepped into the Defense classroom between sessions. She held out a rolled parchment to Snape. "I took the liberty of checking with the Ministry if Mr. Potter had applied." She waited for him to unroll the blank form. "I apologize if I have overstepped my bounds but I have an old promise I feel obliged to uphold and the application period is only open one more week. I have hopes for his N.E.W.T. result, but perhaps he doesn't. I will leave it to you."

"Thank you, Minerva," Snape said. "Perhaps there is one thing more you could do . . ." he added, as she moved to the door.

Harry inevitably stopped by, that evening in fact, as Snape worked in his office. "Sit down," Snape said to him.

Harry, caught a little off-guard by the tone which was more businesslike than expected, obeyed slowly as he tried to think of what he could be in trouble for. Snape waved the door closed and stepped before his desk, arms folded.

"Do you wish to apply for the Auror's program?" Snape asked him.

"Yes," Harry replied automatically. "I still have time, right?"

"Yes. Not much, however," Snape pointed out. "May I inquire what the delay is caused by? Clearly you won't be certain of your N.E.W.T.s until months after the deadline."

Harry looked away as he thought up an answer. When he didn't reply right away, Snape said, "Is it caused by your inability to know for certain that you have rightfully earned a spot?"

"Maybe," Harry hedged. He hadn't given it a terrible amount of thought, just kept putting it off.

"I have taken the liberty of having Headmistress McGonagall contact Ms. Tonks regarding your concerns. We have been assured by her that your application will be treated with as ordinary regard as possible. Also, that should you qualify, your testing will be equally as rigorous as your peers'."

Harry considered that. At one level, their interference bothered him, but at another he felt relieved. Snape reached into his pocket and pulled the application out. "Why don't you fill it out right now?"

Harry accepted the rough brown parchment. He hadn't filled in anything on his own copy, so starting again was all right. With one hand he flattened out the sheet on his lap as he reached in his bag for a quill. Snape set a bottle of ink on the edge of the desk for him to use. After pulling his chair closer to use Snape's desk for writing, Harry considered the many blank boxes. The questions at the end had seemed as daunting as when he had first looked it over.

"Certainly the first line does not present a problem," Snape commented snarkily.

Harry shot him a slightly annoyed look and filled in his name. It felt like he was gaming it already just with that. He kept Snape's reassurances in mind as he filled in his basic contact information, including the address in Shrewsthorpe, and date of his N.E.W.T. testing. He left the score boxes blank since the date was in the future. He willed those blanks to be filled in with the proper number of Os and Es when the time came.

Below the basic data were large, fancily-framed boxes. The first one said, *Describe in 500 words or less why you wish to pursue a career as an Auror.* Snape considered him as he thought this over. He stepped around to the back of the desk and sat in his chair. As he steepled his fingers before him, Snape said, "Perhaps you should answer the last question first. The answer to the first one may flow from that."

Harry uncurled the parchment to reveal the last blank space. *Please include below any other details you would like considered with your application.* Harry stared at that with a vaguely floating feeling that was not very conducive to writing.

Snape's voice interrupted his pointless musings. "When did you decide to become an Auror?"

"When I found out there was such a thing. Nothing else has seemed remotely interesting since then," Harry replied. "I met Tonks and the others. They enjoyed what they were doing. They were always involved in whatever was going on." Always knew *what* was going on, Harry thought wryly. "Whatever they are assigned, always has some kind of meaning."

"I would not go that far," Snape commented from his leaned back position in his chair. "But your point is a valid one, nonetheless. All good material for the first box."

Harry shifted the parchment up and forced himself to rephrase what he had just said. It looked pale to him, but he had to put something down. "Do you think I should be applying?" he asked, looking for reassurance.

"Harry, if I didn't think it utterly unfair to do so, I would talk you out of it."

Harry blinked at him in surprise. "Why?"

Snape's hair had fallen half over his face as he stared over his steepled fingers. "Because it is a very hazardous occupation." He frowned inwardly and sighed.

"You don't think I'm used to that?" Harry asked.

"Perhaps too much so." Snape fell silent a long time before he said, "Promise me something, Harry."

"Of course."

"Never let your guard down," he said simply, then after a slight pause he went on in his earlier, generally helpful tone, "The second box asks about special skills, does it not?"

Harry made himself check the answer to this. "Yes," he said. He swallowed as he thought about that. "I'm resisting writing Parseltongue," he said. "As well as pointing out that I see Death Eaters in my vision at the edge of sleep."

"You have unique insight into the Dementors," Snape said.

"Don't you think they know that?"

"If you wish to be treated as an ordinary applicant, you must behave as one and assume they know nothing."

Harry managed to write something down to the effect that since he had temporarily been part of the Dementors' mind web, that he understood them rather better than the average wizard. He thought over his other skills. Seeker wasn't very meaningful, although his skill on a broom might be, in general. He wrote that down, trying to make it sound Quidditch-neutral.

After Harry paused again in thought, Snape commented, "Certainly you have more than two skills." At Harry's shrug he said, "Did you include your ability to teach spells to others?"

"Do you think they care?"

"It is rarer than you realize. Probably worth noting." As Harry added it, Snape said. "You are adept at Occlusion."

"Good one," Harry said, adding that with confidence.

"You pick up new spells quickly," Snape said.

Harry noted that, trying hard not to sound cocky in the phrasing. The list looked pretty good. "Last box," Harry said, considering his answer. "I suppose saying that I wouldn't know what else to do with myself wouldn't be the best thing."

"Do you have a backup plan?" Snape asked.

"No. Do you think I should?"

"For your own flexibility only. There is no chance they will turn you down for the program," Snape said evenly.

"I thought you said—" Harry said with ready offense.

Snape sat forward suddenly and interrupted him sharply. "You are consummately qualified, Potter—that is why you will not be turned down." Harry could hear plainly how Snape regretted that notion. His guardian went on, "If you are not qualified, no one is." He sat back again and stared at the far corner of the ceiling. "Use the last box to list the dark wizards you have survived battling, captured, or outrightly killed."

Harry couldn't read the tone Snape had used to say that. "Do you think I'll get past the first stage if I don't?"

"Most likely."

"Maybe I won't then."

"Your fellow applicants certainly would."

Harry stared at the blank space. "It would take a while to work it out." At Snape's snarky expression, Harry said, "I didn't mean it that way."

"The result is the same. Start from the beginning, if you must."

"How about from the vilest down?" Harry quipped in his own snarkiness. At Snape's accented shrug, Harry frowned, he found he couldn't just write, *I have fought the following dark wizards*, followed by a list. "I can't just write them out."

"Why not?"

Quietly, Harry replied, "Because I wish none of it had happened."

Snape rubbed his forehead before tossing his hair back and staring at the ceiling. "Why are you applying for this apprenticeship again?"

Feeling more uncertain than he ever had about it, Harry admitted, "I'm not sure."

"You need to figure it out," Snape commented levelly.

After a long pause, Harry asked, "Can I sleep on it?"

Snape ignored this plea. "What does Nymphadora Tonks have that you do not?" he asked.

That was a good question, Harry thought. He pulled off his glasses to rub his eyes as he pictured her going about her duties. "Control of her destiny?" he finally suggested.

Snape considered that at length before he said, "We should all be so lucky, Potter."

Pleading ever so slightly, Harry said, "I'm doing this because I want to. Not to stay alive . . . or to preserve everything that matters," he finished grimly.

"I would not recommend writing that," Snape commented.

"It *is* the other side of 'what else would I do with myself?'" Harry added and laughed painfully. He looked down at the parchment and sighed. "I don't feel so bad now about not starting this sooner."

"I really think you should list who you have faced and be done with it; it speaks for itself," Snape said. He pulled out his wand to make tea as he spoke.

"If I didn't become an Auror, what do you think I could do?"

"Aside from follow the path Lockhart so clearly blazed for us all and sell books with yourself on the cover, perhaps teach, since you show promise for that."

Having never considered that, Harry gave it due consideration now. "But you have the job I'd want," he pointed out, amused. Snape poured tea for them both with a momentarily alarmed expression. Harry assumed it was a put-on and laughed lightly. As he accepted the cup he said, "I do want to get away from this place."

"You should. And I am not just saying that because of my lack of confidence in which of us McGonagall would choose for this position, if faced with the choice."

Harry watched him top up his tea. A surge of gratitude at having a guardian flowed through him. His friends were scheming their flight from this place, making it clear by their optimism that they would not look back, nor feel much consideration for others not so well set up with plans. At the end of the year, he would essentially be left entirely to himself were it not for the wizard sitting before him.

"Shall I list them for you?" Snape asked, breaking Harry's reverie.

"I can." Harry did as he said he couldn't stand to do, and began listing. "Quirrell, Voldemort, Tom Riddle, Peter Pettigrew, Barty Crouch Jr. . . ."

"Sirius Black," Snape suggested. At Harry's disapproving look, he added, "The Ministry would count him."

Harry shook his head and re-dipped his quill, surprised to find only a ghostly ache where there had once been a gaping wound. He blinked at the parchment and waited for a moment of regret to pass before he returned to his task. "The twelve at the Ministry, Voldemort again so I won't list it, especially since I'm certain I would have been toast if Dumble-

dore hadn't shown up. Malfoy and company, which is a subset of the Ministry . . ." Harry looked up as he thought about that. "Anything happened with the other two, Avery and Jugson?"

"The Ministry thinks they have gone to ground permanently, although they are still looking." Snape studied his fingernails as he added, "Next to Crabbe and Goyle, they were the least effective members of the Dark Lord's inner circle."

Harry had forgotten about them. He forced himself to list them too. It was a long list. He glanced back at the first box. "Should I add that I think I would be good at it?"

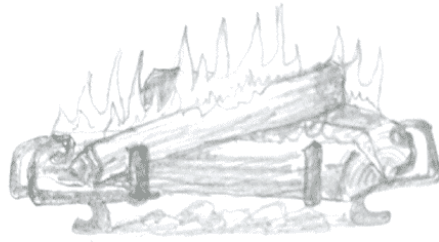
"No, because I think they will be spending the first year beating overconfidence out of you. That is only a guess, of course, based on interacting with many Aurors over the years. I certainly *hope* they will be doing so."

Harry left it off. He folded it up and took the envelope Snape offered. He copied the address from the top of the application onto the front and sealed it. Holding it in both hands, he said, "Is my detention over then?"

Snape raised an amused brow. "Yes."

Harry hesitated in the doorway as he considered how to thank Snape for putting his own inclinations aside. "Thank you, sir," he said simply.

Snape nodded as he returned to his earlier work.



Chapter 33 -- Old Wounds

A few weeks went by. Harry and Penelope had to change crates yet again as their wombat grew. It now ate fruit exclusively and it started resist returning to its crate. Dean accused them of using a larger crate just to make people wonder. They had to choose times to take care of it when others weren't coming up to check on their own projects. As they arrived one night during dinner time, Malfoy was just leaving. He looked angry and his whole hand was blue.

They went through the now-practiced procedure, using less bedding this time since they didn't have a larger crate, and it was crowded, which the creature didn't seem to mind. As they worked, Harry could not keep his mind off Malfoy's wombat. His eyes kept straying over to Malfoy and Parkinson's crate in the corner. He felt bad that he had forgotten his concern when he had first watched them take one.

As they closed the lid on their crate, Harry stepped over to the far one. "Want to check on it?" Penelope said from behind him.

"Yeah." He ran a long string of curse breaking spells on the crate, getting two flashes on random ones as the spells released. Then a series of unlock spells, which revealed nothing.

"Wow," Penelope breathed after the long series ceased.

Harry lifted the lid. Inside was something similar to a chrysalis. "What is that?" he asked aloud. The stiff skin of it rippled as something inside moved. Unnerved, Harry closed it and respelled it. "It's in some kind of defensive mode, I guess." He felt badly for it.

"What can we do?"

"Complain to Hagrid. I'll do that after class tomorrow."

* * *

Greer stalked around the classroom as they brewed. She paused beside their bench and peered into Frina's cauldron appraisingly. "More heat," she stated smartly.

Frina moved quickly to adjust the flame. Greer then eyed Harry's potion while he mostly ignored her. "And we are not allowed to say anything negative about Mr. Potter's potion," she said quite snidely.

Harry held off just barely on rolling his eyes or just snarling at her. His expectation that she'd grow bored of this theme had proved wrong. Clearly either his guardian or McGonagall had spoken with her at some point. He continued to ignore his teacher as he ground beetle wings into the finest powder that one could ever manage. Luckily, she had stopped asking him questions as well and he hoped it was because he almost never got them wrong. Padma fell under the teacher's unrelenting scrutiny next. She added too much rat brain powder and a cloud of noxious grey smoke mushroomed from her cauldron. The Slytherins jeered in whispered singsong and Padma looked as though she wanted to knock her setup onto the floor. Greer waved the contents away with a falsely sympathetic grin.

"Poor dear, perhaps next time," Greer said.

Padma bit her lip and took out her notes and sat down to review for the remainder of the session. The rest of them shared pained looks.

"She is too soft," Frina stated sadly.

"Greer is too--" Hermione began, sounding unusually vicious, but was cut off by the teacher asking her a question that was not in the reading, but she answered it correctly anyway. Under her breath after Greer turned to praise the Slytherin potions and assign them some points based on her praise, Hermione said, "If nothing else, we will ace our N.E.W.T.s if we survive this class."

* * *

"Don' worry, Harry," Hagrid said when he and the gamekeeper were in his cabin after class. "Can' really harm 'em. Yer weren' supposta look yeh know. Tha's cheating."

"We were worried about it," Harry explained.

"Ah, yer a softhearted one, Harry. Have time fer a spot o' tea?" Hagrid asked, lifting the big bucket off the fire to take it to the pump out back.

"Not really. I'm going to be late as it is for double Defense."

Harry ran to the Defense classroom and still arrived five minutes after the start, which Snape pointed out as he entered.

"You took five points from Slytherin last time I was late," Malfoy complained.

"You are correct," Snape said, "Five points from Gryffindor," he breathed and gave Harry a look that dared him to challenge it.

Harry frowned and sat down, but Penelope gave him a sympathetic smile which made it all right. The dark look she gave Snape after, made him a little uneasy.

After class Harry went to the front and said quietly, "I was talking to Hagrid about something important."

"You should have done it later. I have to be hard on you, or I could lose control of the class," Snape said.

"Or at least the Slytherin part of it," Harry commented with a sly grin.

"Perhaps you will do me a favor next session," Snape said as he flipped through the parchments that had been turned in.

"After *that*?" Harry asked with false sharpness.

Snape touched him on the arm and said with a small smile, "Yes, after that. I want to split the room up to cover two different things next week during the double session. Can you and Ms. Granger cover the examination review for the regular students, while I cover curse detection for the Durmstrang students? The Durmstrang students are not taking end of term examinations and it is a good chance to catch them up.

"Sure," Harry conceded.

Snape reached into the drawer of the desk and took out a roll of parchments tied with black ribbon. "Here are my notes for the term. Please don't lose them. Starred topics will be tested. Don't show that to anyone but Ms. Granger."

Harry nodded and put it in his bookbag. He said goodbye and stepped away, surprised to find Penelope hovering by the door, apparently waiting for him. "Thank you, Harry," Snape said as Harry crossed to the door.

"No problem, sir," he replied over his shoulder. Penelope followed him out, looking concerned.

In the corridor, when they had almost reached the portrait hole, she said in a low voice, "Professor Snape was good friends with Headmaster Karkaroff, you know."

"I wouldn't have said, 'friends'," Harry returned. They walked in silence until Harry led the way into the common room where they joined Ron and Hermione. Penelope appeared to wish to say more. "Don't hold back because of them," Harry said to her.

"What's up?" Hermione asked in concern.

"She is trying to warn me about Professor Snape, insists he was friends with Igor Karkaroff."

"Oh," Hermione snipped. She gave Penelope a pained smile. "Don't wade into that," she suggested.

Penelope gave her a dark look before ranting, "He was evil. You don't how bad it was when he came back. It was a nightmare. He caused so many to die. And anyone who was with him, with Voldemort, well . . ." She looked them all over sharply, eyes bright. As she spun away to leave, Ron caught her with one of his long arms and dragged her back. "Let me go," she protested.

"Sit down," Ron said, exchanging places with her, so he was standing, holding her down in the chair by her arms.

Harry stared at Penelope's distressed face. She had her long hair pulled over her shoulder and ran her hands over it repeatedly in a form of self-comfort.

"Stay," Ron said before releasing her.

"It was terrible. Everyone took sides. Some took Karkaroff's because they thought he would restore order. They foolishly believed him." A tear dropped out of her right eye. She rubbed it away angrily. "It is so much nicer here. The place where Voldemort came himself. I don't understand."

"That was mostly Dumbledore's doing," Hermione said. "He worked hard to keep the outside world at bay." She glanced at Harry and they shared a frown.

Harry said, "Professor Snape is my adoptive father. He isn't a dark wizard. Even if he did know Karkaroff from way back."

She stared at him in surprise. "Dis is true?" she asked the assembled. When they nodded, she dabbed at her eye primly. "You would trust him? To be alone with him?" this she directed at Hermione.

"Harry lives with him," Hermione pointed out.

Harry nodded to confirm this and said, "If you need someone to talk to about what happened with Karkaroff, Professor Snape might be willing. I'll ask him if you want."

She looked alarmed at the notion, then relented slightly. "Perhaps I am keeping it too boxed up inside," she said dazedly. "But I would not have thought to talk to him."

"Or talk to any of us," Hermione offered.

Penelope looked over at her. "You faced twenty-two Death Eaters." She shook her head. "We only had to face each other," she said sadly.

"Sounds worse," Ron said. "It helps to know who your enemy is."

The other students in the common room were quieting to listen in. Ginny came over and crouched beside the chair. "Discussing bad stuff over here?"

"I would have wanted revenge," Penelope said as she stared at the far wall.

"Surprised Harry didn't," Ginny said. "Why was that, Harry?"

"Let's not go into the Harry part of it," he said.

"Keeping it all boxed up too?" Ginny teased.

"Yes. Thank you," Harry snapped at her although it had a playful edge to it. Ginny laughed.

"It's almost the end of term," Ron said. "We're coming up on the bloody anniversary, you know."

Ginny teased in a falsely excited way, "That means the press will be here."

"Merlin," Harry breathed.

Penelope looked at him with sad eyes. "It is so unreal to be here with you all," she breathed. "With the Destroyer of Voldemort and his friends. I write home to my mum and dad and I don't think they believe me."

"We would have taken out Karkaroff during the Tri-Wizard Tournament had we known," Ron said with feeling.

"Dumbledore would have kicked your arse," Ginny said to him.

"True," Ron said with a little alarm at the notion. His stomach growled at that moment. "It is dinner, right?" he asked hopefully.

"Why don't I take you to the girl's toilet to wash up," Hermione said to Penelope. "Ginny, can you get her kit? It is the purple one on the first night stand on the left." Ginny jumped up and went to the dormitory stairs.

In the toilet as Penelope washed her face, Hermione asked, "Did you lose someone?"

"My brother. My boyfriend."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, choking up herself at the thought.

"It was terrible. Every day or two there would be more bodies. You start to get used to it and just . . . check if they are someone you know," Penelope said. Ginny came in and handed over her purple toiletry kit.

"Why didn't you leave?" Hermione asked.

"Durmstrang Institute, it is not like Hogwarts School. It is spelled in more ways to hide it and protect it. You cannot just leave. The headmaster controls that."

Horried, Hermione swallowed hard and helped Penelope put a bit of base under her eyes.

"I should just skip dinner," she said, looking at herself in the mirror.

"No. That isn't a good idea," Hermione insisted. "You have to stay around your friends. People who know what happened to you."

"Works for Harry," Ginny said as she crossed her arms and leaned against the next wash basin.

"Ginny," Hermione chastised her.

Ginny retorted, "Hey, thinking about how messed up Harry was always made me feel better. I never had Dementors in my head. Just Voldemort like he did."

Penelope froze as she put on a bit of blush. "He had Voldemort in his head?" she asked in a stunned voice. "You had . . . ?"

"Ginny, you are like Ron; I'm going to have to smack you to get you to shut up," Hermione said angrily. "If Harry feels like sharing stuff like that, he can do it himself. He has a hard enough time getting treated normally without you two reminding everyone of how messed up things have been."

"I tink he is very ordinary," Penelope opined carefully.

"Good," Hermione said forcefully. "Tell him that sometime, will you?"

"I did before." She started putting away her makeup. "He did seem pleased to hear dis."

"I'm sure he was." Hermione said, moving to open the door. "It's a lifelong dream, I think."

Dinner passed in self-absorbed, reflective quiet at their part of the table. Everyone moved on automatic as they served themselves and ate. Harry had a sense that this was obvious to others and that they were being watched because of it. He finally turned and challenged the gazes from the head table. McGonagall looked away a little guiltily. Snape narrowed his eyes at them and stood up.

"Oops," Harry said as he turned back. "We're about to have company."

Hermione turned and watched Harry's guardian approach. Snape stopped behind Harry and asked, "Everything all right here?"

Harry watched Penelope across from him, studying Snape in a pained, worried way. "Uh," Harry started, then noticed that much of the table, up and down from them, were listening. "I'll explain later, sir."

Snape's hand fell on his shoulder. "Yes," he confirmed simply before walking back to the front.

At the end of dinner, Snape waited beside the hearth where Harry joined him. Standing in silence, they let the rest of the students and staff file out. When the Great Hall was empty, Harry checked the doors and saw Penelope hovering there. She had a fondness for that, apparently.

"Come in if you want," Harry invited.

"And the topic is?" Snape prompted.

"Durmstrang. Karkaroff," Harry replied levelly.

"I see," Snape breathed. "By all means, Ms. Tidewater. Come in," he invited dryly.

She stepped in silently and came over to them. The lamps in the Hall had dimmed themselves and now the fire provided most of the light. "Karkaroff was a desperate man," Snape stated, his gaze sliding over to her. "That kind is always the most dangerous."

"How well did you know him?" she asked.

"Hm. Better than average, I suppose," he replied reluctantly.

Harry stepped back and sat on the nearest bench, facing the fire.

"You are saying that is why he did it?" Penelope challenged him.

"He did it because he was weak. Durmstrang and its spells were a tool and a kind of shield, a powerful one built up by centuries of respelling. Taking over the school bought him time. Snape turned to look back at Harry sitting behind and to the side of him. He seemed to be deciding how best to proceed. "Only a weak man like Karkaroff would work so hard to take so many down with him when he fell."

"He took many down," Penelope agreed sadly. Her eyes darted around the Great Hall. "The risk here of de same?"

Snape replied, "The risk of that here is much lower--most of the magic left by the Hogwarts founders has been reduced to only the most passive spells."

Harry snorted quietly.

"Well, for the most part," Snape admitted. "Harry had the misfortune his second year to be led into a trap left by one of Hogwarts' founders."

"Who led you in?" she asked Harry, clearly distracted from her own dark musings. "The ghost of the founder?"

"Voldemort," Snape supplied.

"What?" she blurted in surprise.

"This school, for all its protections allowed Voldemort access many times. Wouldn't you say, Harry?" Snape prompted, seeming unwilling to let Harry sit out this conversation.

Harry, worried at Snape's tone, replied quietly, "A few, yeah."

"Your first year as I recall and your second."

"Voldemort was here--?" Penelope began in alarm.

Snape continued over her, "Your fourth he had to abduct you, since he could not access the castle, but yet again you prevailed."

"That was a draw at best," Harry pointed out.

"It made him mortal, therefore killable," Snape refuted in a hard tone. "Fifth, he certainly got the better of *you*. Sixth of course, we all know. Five times, Potter. My goodness."

"And your point is?" Harry asked in an annoyed tone. He didn't want to meet Penelope's gaze. The glimpse he had of it made it appear far too awed.

"That if you, with your penchant for feeling sorry for yourself, can persevere, then anyone can," he stated with his old rudeness.

"I had a lot of help. And I think having friends pitted against each other would be worse then facing clear evil."

"Hm," Snape replied noncommittally. To Penelope, he said flatly, "Healing and the blessing of failing memory take time. Be patient. Dwelling in the tragic past only keeps it alive."

She wrapped her arms around herself and looked between them with a strained expression. Harry gave her a soft frown, not finding anything useful to add. He didn't like the pained, wishful expression she was wearing now; he thought she was hoping for too much from him.

Snape crossed his arms and added, "It may help you to consider it an expensive lesson; next time you will see it coming. Such things do not happen because of only one person, especially when that person is a rather mediocre wizard at best."

She looked away with an unsatisfied wrinkle to her lips. When they had fallen silent a long time, she stepped away, her expression closed and inward. After the tall door closed behind her, Snape put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "And you are doing how?"

"All right," Harry said with a doubtful tone. "You really think it works to make someone feel better by telling them how much worse someone else has it?"

"Yes."

Harry shook his head, but didn't argue.

* * *

The next morning, their wombat, now actually the size of a small bear, outrightly refused to go back in the crate. It clung to Penelope and made a sad screeching noise when they tried to unhook it. "I'll keep it," she said.

"All day?"

"Why not?" she countered, patting it on the head. "It will eat from the fruit bowl at breakfast. Let us take it down."

"Okay," Harry agreed doubtfully, although he would have felt very bad about forcing it back into its box, so he was glad from that perspective, but he thought she was a little optimistic.

They were early for breakfast. Penelope sat with the wombat on her lap feeding it orange sections. Harry commented, "Slowly. Otherwise it will get full before breakfast is over."

The other students who were studying or talking stopped and looked over curiously. Penelope's matching blue hair with orange stripes was something to see. Ron and Hermione came in and froze. Hermione ran over. "Is that your wombat?" she asked. "Ours has barely grown at all and it's all blue. How did you get it to eat anything solid? Wow."

Harry laughed at her pile of comments. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I would!" she said sharply. "We are completely missing this assignment," she complained to Ron. They sat down, still gaping. Others came in and stopped by, amazed by the creature.

"Heh!" Hagrid said as he came in with McGonagall. "Look at tha', will ya? Harry, tha' yours?"

"Yes." Harry glanced at McGonagall who looked neutral on the topic of blue wombats.

Hagrid leaned down and patted the wombat on the top of the head. "Orange was a good choice," he said.

"I let it choose," Harry said.

"Interestin'," Hagrid drawled, then winked at Harry. As he passed by Hermione and her frustrated expression, he patted her on the head as well, though not as gently.

* * *

The day's classes went better than expected. The wombat mostly slept, although it insisted on being held. It turned out most anyone was more than eager to do this, so Harry and Penelope did not have much to do with it except keep track of its whereabouts.

By dinner its orange strips were bright and made of much longer fur, making it look a bit like a caterpillar. Hagrid stopped by again while Hermione was holding it. "Aye. She's a beaute. Mus' 'a had a lo' o' attention today."

"It did," Harry confirmed forcefully.

"Yer pret'y much done," Hagrid said, plucking at the long blue claws resting on Hermione's shoulder. "Can' grow much more en tha'." He put his sizable pinky against its mouth and it sniffed it before turning away. "Well tempered ta boot. Yer got a place to keep 'er for the nigh'?"

Hermione and Penelope nodded vigorously. "We've already set up a crate in the girl's dormitory," Hermione said as she patted it on the back and put her nose against the top of its head the way she did to Crookshanks.

Harry found himself starting to feel sorry for the thing.

* * *

Exhausted after his tutoring with McGonagall, Harry made his way down from the headmistress' office. As he passed one of the unused classrooms along a darkened corridor he thought he heard something. He quietly backed up a few steps and listened. Giggling followed by Malfoy's voice speaking low, came from behind the closed door. Harry rolled his eyes and stepped more quietly away, fearful of being detected. He just got out of range as Parkinson sighed and said something he really didn't want to hear clearly.

Literally shutting down with tiredness, Harry used the handrail heavily down a set of staircases. He wanted nothing more than to sleep, but he really needed to work on his Potions essay. As he trudged down the next corridor, Hermione came up to him.

"Harry," she said nicely. "Could you *please* help us with our wombat?"

Harry grinned at her tone and amiably walked along with her. "If I knew what I did, I would. But it was kind of an accident."

"Well . . . what happened?" she asked impatiently.

"The first night I couldn't sleep so I went up to check on it. It was about three in the morning. I didn't find quite the same thing in the crate."

"Oh," Hermione said thoughtfully. "I'll have to check the moon phases, zodiac, cloud cover, Merlin what could have caused it? We've been up there at one or later and it has been the same." When Harry shrugged, she said, "Maybe Frina and I will just sleep up there with it. Or take turns."

Harry was still working on his essay in the common room when Hermione and Frina headed up to the attic. "Want company?"

"Sure," Frina said eagerly. "Since we're babysitting *your* project."

"I'll take it to our dormitory," Harry offered.

"You can't have it," Frina countered stiffly, then laughed gaily.

As they walked, Harry feared they would all hear some couple having a rendezvous, and he blushed warmly just thinking of facing that with these two. Fortunately the way was quiet this time. Up in the attic Hermione went to their crate, opened it, and took out their wombat. "Boy, that is small," Harry criticized, garnering a dark look from his friend.

"Hermione said you told her your one turned into something else," Frina said.

"I don't know why it did, though," Harry admitted.

"You are just very lucky," Frina stated matter-of-factly.

He pulled out his parchments and worked on his essay as the two of them sat talking. Harry looked up as Hermione handed the creature over to her partner, amused by the shifting hair color. Hermione looked better with brown hair than blue. As he worked and listened, he was amazed by the things they talked about: personal things about growing up, interesting people they knew, bizarre relatives, parental annoyances. He couldn't imagine sitting around with Opus and doing the same thing. . . not a chance.

Harry finished his essay, finally. As he rolled it up, Hermione held her hand out for it. "Thanks," Harry said as he gave it up. He stood up to stretch and paced the length of the gable. At the window he remembered Malfoy's strange creature. He stood before it and described to them what he had seen. "Hagrid wasn't happy I'd looked."

"Let's look again," Hermione immediately said, setting Harry's essay on the floor to stand up. He stepped aside for her to run through the un-cursing spells herself, and the same ones were on it as before. Inside the box was now a hard-shelled blue chrysalis that was attached to the inside of the wood by an organic blue cord with root-like tendrils.

"Whoa," Hermione breathed. "What'd he do to it to make it do that?"

"I hate to think about it," Harry said, re-closing the lid. "At least it looks safe now."

* * *

Revising for end of term examinations and Quidditch practice occupied the next week. Harry did not think it possible for him to cram any more information into his brain, but somehow he seemed to manage, going from classes, to constant studying to quizzing by his friends without much rest in between.

Harry was taking a break, a nap really, on a window seat on the fifth floor. It was midday and McGonagall came by, stepping sprightly. "Everything all right, Harry?" she stopped and asked in concern upon seeing him there.

"Just tired, Professor." He bent his knees to move his feet out of the way for her to sit down, which she did. The sun lit her robes as it slanted through the glass beside her. Harry commented, "If I try to learn anything else, I think my brain will explode." As she smiled in real humor at that, he marveled that he was sitting here so casually with the headmistress of all people. He shifted up the stone frame to sit up more.

"Looking forward to a holiday, then?" she asked nicely.

"Very much so."

"And you filed an application for the Auror's program?" she asked factually, sounding way too much like Dumbledore.

"Yes, ma'am."

She smiled. Harry thought of mentioning what Hermione had told him, that demonstrating an Animagus spell at the N.E.W.T. testing was worth thirty bonus points. He hadn't made any progress since revealing something of his form, but

then again he also had not had much time. Then again, they were not supposed to be working on it at all; he was pretty certain.

"It will all be over soon," she said helpfully.

"I don't necessarily want it to be."

She smiled more at that. "Even *you* will look back on this time with fondness, I think." She patted him on the leg. "Why don't we skip your tutoring until you return from break."

Harry nodded that he thought that was a good idea.

"I'll let you get back to your nap," she said with a smile in her voice.

* * *

"You are playing today?" Penelope asked as Harry hurried through of the common room. He needed to get down to the pitch early for a strategy meeting with Ron and Ginny. Ron didn't want to discuss it in the school--he thought someone might be listening in. Harry had to admit that Extendable Ears had become unnervingly common during the school year and Filch had not caught on to start confiscating them.

Harry paused long enough to reply, "Yes."

"I will be cheering for you," she said.

At the portrait hole, Harry said, "Thanks," with sincerity.

In the changing room they hurriedly suited up with pads. Ron said, "Overconfidence is our biggest enemy today." He paced before them, talking sternly. He went on in this vein for a while before going over a few plays he wanted to try out today before facing Ravenclaw later in the year. Harry considered pointing out that treating Hufflepuff as practice smacked of overconfidence, but he held back, mostly because he *was* feeling confident.

It was warmer today than the last game, although Harry still had one of his rabbit lined gloves on his left hand with which held the broom. His right he kept against his side, warm, until the whistle blew.

The match was long, although Gryffindor held the lead throughout. Harry paced Janet, the new Hufflepuff Seeker, for most of the match, confident that he could overtake her if she made a move. She didn't even try to fake him out, which Harry would have done in her place, frequently. In the end the snitch came up from behind. Harry caught sight of it in his peripheral vision, turned hard, and gave chase.

Janet followed, never managing to get position on him despite the rapidly dodging Snitch giving her a few openings. The crowd was on its feet and shouting as the chase went on, raising Harry's spirits as he gained on the elusive thing. It looped around him and he had to foot spin to catch it. He was still dizzy from the maneuver when he landed on the grass with the fluttering Snitch in hand. The team landed as well and thumped him hard, elated with the win even though it was not much of a contest. Hermione and Penelope came out as the team was moving to the changing room.

"You are very good," Penelope said, eyes bright. He had not seen quite that expression on her before, it was vaguely worshipful, but it didn't bother him for some reason.

"Thanks," Harry said with a broad smile, as the team moved off the pitch, slowing to wait for him. "I'll see you later--when I'm presentable," he added over his shoulder with a smile as he brushed his mussed hair back. He brought Hermione into that with a glance and found she had a far too pleased of a look on her face.

In the changing room Ginny said, "Well, that went all right." She sounded a little put out in contrast to the words.

"It went really well," Ron countered.

She shrugged and tossed her wrist guards haphazardly into a locker before bending and unsnapping her shin guards with quick, annoyed movements. Harry and Ron shared a perplexed look. Ron shrugged and ignored her. Harry figured Hermione would be better to talk to her than himself, so he didn't question her either.

* * *

"You've got it, I think," Hermione said excitedly. "Try again and think of your form this time."

Ginny closed her eyes and stood still for long breaths. Colors rippled over her robe like sunlight through water. A long time passed before a warping sound started, startling all of them. A fluttering thing fell to the floor and scrambled at the stones. Hermione was the first to react. She stepped quickly but carefully over and tried to lift the hawk up by the feet.

"All right!" Ron exclaimed, stepping over too.

The bird was too awkward to balance even with Hermione helping and it fluttered back to the floor, wings and claws scraping.

"Ginny, you remember how to disrupt the energy to release the form, right?" Hermione asked the bird, a little loudly and in a very concerned way.

Harry, in his usual seat off to the side, watched things with growing worry. He huffed and stood up as Ginny reappeared, half-sprawled on the floor. The room erupted in cheers, making Ginny grin broadly through her blinking disorientation.

Harry stepped right up to her. "No flying," he said firmly.

"What?" she replied.

"No flying. That's final." No one said anything immediately.

"You're no fun," she snapped at him.

He followed closely as she turned away. "Ginny, I mean it. You don't know the first thing about it. And what if you change back a hundred feet off the ground."

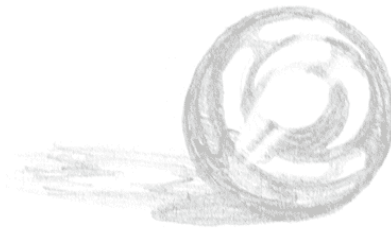
"Actually . . ." Neville started to say, holding up one finger. When Harry turned his hard gaze to him, he fell silent.

"I kinda have to agree with Harry," Ron said reluctantly.

Ginny huffed in frustration. "All right, all right," she breathed. She took a seat on the side bench and put her chin on her hands. "I'm sure I can find a cage to perch myself in," she muttered.

"You did great, though," Ron added in a concessionary way. "Wish I could do it."

"Yeah, you are all just jealous," she commented with another huff.



Chapter 34 -- Round About the Cauldron Go

Author Note: Starting with this chapter and running through until the Shakespeare three-witches chapter titles end there is a mini-whodunit in the story.

The morning of the train departing, they all shared a large breakfast. "Are you going back to Croatia?" Harry asked Frina.

"Yes. I miss my parents and they are worried about me. Oh, which reminds me. Opus!" she called to the Durmstrang students huddled in the doorway. "Do you mind?" she asked Harry.

"Mind what?" Harry responded.

Frina pushed the platter of bacon aside, climbed over the table agilely, and sat beside him. "Peni," she said as she reached around Harry and tugged on her friend's robe to get her attention. Opus had come over with a camera and now stood checking its settings on the other side of the table. Harry sighed and smiled as they leaned in close for the first picture. For the second one he relented and put his arms around both of them. A warm feeling started up in him as he did this; he could feel it responding to the sense of their shoulders and even their arms against his sides. He stretched his neck and forced it out of himself.

"Oh good," Penelope said. "My parents will finally belief me."

"Why wouldn't they?" Harry asked in confusion.

She shrugged broadly with an expression that said he would not understand the explanation.

* * *

Harry went home that evening. Snape had to stay at Hogwarts a few days longer to finish up marking and paperwork, but he pointed out that he could then stay in Shrewsthorpe until late Sunday if he did so.

Harry stepped out of the hearth at home and started when he found himself face to face with a purple-haired witch. "Tonks?" he said in surprise.

"Hey, Harry," she greeted him casually and balled up the parchment in her hand. "I can skip the note since you're here," she said as she banished it with a toss. "One of the old spells we left from last summer was triggered, so I came to investigate. Only the outer one was touched, so I suspect it was a neighbor kid crossing through your back garden."

"Guess they don't do that often," Harry said, thinking it strange that it had not gone off before now.

"Your wall is pretty high and a little crumbly at the top. That would dissuade most people," she said casually. "Every other protection is still in place, so don't worry about it. If it hadn't been your place, I probably wouldn't have come right away." She gave him a wink as she said this.

"Want some tea?" Harry offered, kind of hoping she would stay a little while.

She sighed and replied sincerely, "I really don't have time, Harry, but thanks." She put her stuff in her hipsack and sealed it with a spell. "I saw your application come in," she said, sounding teasing.

Harry couldn't read her voice. "Did it look okay?"

She laughed lightly. "Of course. We received a lot of applications this year, good ones. Still trying to decide how best to handle them all. I think we should just make the admission tests harder. That would be to your advantage, anyway," she said with a wink.

Harry looked away, a little embarrassed by praise from this quarter. The post that had arrived in his and Snape's absence was scattered over the table; he organized the envelopes as a distraction.

Tonks stepped to the hearth, nearly knocking over the rack with the poker and ash shovel. She righted the thing and took out a leather drawstring sack of Floo Powder. "What are you doing Sunday night?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"Care to hang out in London with me for the evening?" she asked. "I need to get out and I'd love to catch up with you."

Harry's heart sped up as he imagined that. His jealousy of Ron's freedom to explore London over last summer had not completely disappeared. "I'd love to."

"Clubbing all right with you? A little befuddlement charm will get you in past the bouncer at the places I like to go."

He blinked at that stretching of wizard law. "Sounds good," he replied.

"Want to meet me at Trafalgar or Soho?" she suggested. Upon seeing his reaction, she said, "I'll just come here and we'll go together."

"Great," Harry said.

"I really have to run," she said. "See ya." She stepped into the hearth and vanished in a column of green flame.

Harry fairly skipped up the stairs to his room with his bookbag. Sunday evening was going to take years to arrive, he thought.

* * *

Harry studied hard to pass the time and finished two long essays before Sunday lunch. An owl had arrived that morning from Snape saying that he would be delayed until Monday morning. Harry could not believe his luck; not only could Harry stay out late, he would not even have to explain his 'date' to his guardian. He wasn't sure at all what Snape would think, if anything at all, but he wasn't taking any chances with his first time out for an evening in London. With a woman. With someone he liked a lot and a woman. The thought was almost overwhelming.

* * *

Sunday night, as he was dressing in Muggle clothes, he decided he should leave a note in case Snape came home earlier than expected. As he was folding the parchment over and writing Snape's name on it, the hearth flared. The first thing Harry thought upon seeing Tonks was that he was very underdressed. Tonks was wearing shiny pants and a fuzzy yellow top. She read his expression and hooked an arm through his. "You look fine. Guys never dress as well as women anyway at these places."

They took the Floo into an upstairs parlor in Soho. When Harry arrived, the two well-dressed couples sitting around a table on the other side of the room were greeting Tonks like an old friend. "Your date?" a woman's high-pitched, nasal voice said loudly. "Let's see him. Come on, he has to pass inspection since you clearly have no sense yourself." At this, Harry stepped over to them and stood beside Tonks. He got the notion they were paired by gender by the way they sat. The woman who had spoken had sharp yellow eyes and very short auburn hair. Her many large earrings clanked as she leaned forward to inspect him.

"What's that? Lightening scars aren't in fashion now are they?" she asked in dismay, rubbing her forehead as though considering what it might be like to have one.

"And no fashion sense at all," the taller man said with a grimace. "Early eighties schoolboy," he breathed in clear horror.

Harry looked down at his plain black trousers and crisp white shirt. Tonks put her arm around him. "Ignore them. We're leaving now," she announced melodically, pressing her fingers into Harry's shoulder to turn him.

"Wait, wait," the ear-ringed woman said. "He hasn't passed yet. What does he do?"

"He catches dark wizards," Tonks said. "Let's go," she said to Harry.

"He's an Auror then? Thought you guys weren't supposed to date each other?" the other woman commented. "Looks a little young, frankly."

"He's not an Auror, yet," Tonks insisted. "And this is just old friends out for an evening." She gave Harry a push toward a closed door on the other side of the room.

"Shoulda said. We wouldn't have wasted our time," the ear-ringed woman commented loudly.

"Or his ego," the other woman quipped.

"His ego is just fine," Tonks reassured them, patting Harry on the shoulder. "Right, Harry?"

Harry shrugged and let Tonks open the door since she moved to it first.

"Wait a minute!" the woman said, striding over to them. "You aren't really?"

"Really what?" Harry asked.

She peered at him closely. "This is just a Clandestine charm, right?" she asked Tonks. "You aren't really out for an eve with Harry Potter--are you?"

"She's what?" the taller man exclaimed, spilling the black liquid he was pouring as he spoke. "Sorry 'bout the fashion comments, mate," he said quickly giving a wave of dismissal. "Studios ones never know how to dress," he said in a stage whisper to his male companion.

"Or how to have fun either," his companion came back with a nudge. He held his glass out for a refill and nudged again when he didn't get any.

"Well," Earrings said as she took the door from Tonks and held it for them while leaning on it heavily. "Have a nice evening. We'll have a nice drink and discuss He-Who-Shall-Be-Not-Named when you come back through."

"Voldemort," Harry supplied.

She bit her lip and said uneasily, "Yeah. That bloke."

On the pavement outside, Harry adjusted his cloak and breathed out in relief. "Interesting friends."

They walked along a tree-lined street. Ahead, bar patrons spilled onto the walk from the restaurants. "Acquaintances really. They run that Floo node like a social parlor. Keeps them occupied and mostly out of trouble. Though who knows what they were drinking."

They had dinner in one of the small, cramped places along a side street. Tonks, with her matching fuzzy top and yellow spiked hair, attracted more attention than Harry, which was a nice change.

After eating, as the sun set behind the buildings, they walked a distance to a place Tonks liked to go to dance. It was below ground and very large. It was also relatively deserted on a Sunday. The bouncer at the door paid them no heed beyond giving Tonks a nice hello that sounded insinuating to Harry.

Inside, ten or so couples gyrated on the dark dance floor, outlined by the changing colored lights behind them. With a grin Tonks led him over and cajoled him into joining in. The song shifted to another one. Harry counted out a swing rhythm and took Tonk's hands.

"Where did you learn to dance?" she asked as they moved around the floor.

"I hate to admit it, but McGonagall."

She laughed. "Poor Harry," she said in humor. "You're pretty good though."

"I had a lot of practice at the Christmas Ball."

They chatted about school. Harry asked about the apprenticeship, reluctantly, since he worried that if he got too tied up in it and was rejected, he would be really sunk.

The song shifted to a slow one and Tonks moved in close. This made it easier to talk over the music. "So, how is it having a dad after all this time?"

Harry shrugged to buy time. He had not been required to answer that question for a while. "I like it. I like knowing if I need something, he can't turn me away."

"That's what you like?" she asked in surprise. "You really haven't had anyone to rely on, have you?" she asked in a gentle tone.

"Guess not," Harry answered stiffly. She frowned and changed the topic.

During the fourth song, Tonks tensed and watched something over Harry's shoulder. Harry glanced that way, but didn't see anything or anyone in particular. Tonks huffed in annoyance and steered them to another part of the dance floor.

"Someone here you don't want to see?" Harry guessed.

"Ex-boyfriend," she said darkly. After dancing for a while longer in a manner that Harry was certain was designed to keep them from being recognized, she said, "Let's sit down. I'm thirsty."

She took his hand and led him to a high side table with permanent stools around it. The bartender came around immediately. "I'll have a scotch and he'll have a . . . an ale."

The bartender glanced closely at Harry before stepping away, but came back a few minutes later with their drinks. Harry sipped at his. He thought it could have stood to have been sweeter, but it wasn't bad. Tonks poured a dash of water into her tumbler of amber liquid before sipping it. "I have tomorrow off. First day in two weeks." After a minute of silence she added, "Being an Auror is too much work, Harry," as though warning him off from the whole notion.

Harry didn't reply; he was watching a man on the other side of the dance floor who was looking at Tonks' back. Her hair was still spiky yellow, which really gave her away. Harry thought then that she should have turned it black or some other normal color. The man approached, leading a young woman by the hand. They were both very well dressed.

"Tonks," the man greeted unctuously when he reached their table. His dark hair was styled foppishly and it flipped down when he leaned over and rested his elbow on the table facing her. Harry disliked him instantly.

Tonks gave no indication she felt anything. "Hello Rick," she said evenly.

"How have you been?" he asked, then didn't wait for a reply as he said, "Have you met Tara?" He pulled the fair-haired, tight-skirted woman closer to the table. She looked as though she wanted to resist but gave in quickly and held out a hand in greeting. Tonks shook it with a touch of coldness. Rick was going on in the same smooth tone, "Tara is working at the bank. Father and her actually get along, can you imagine?"

Rick leaned over the table, even more pointedly ignoring Harry, who decided that this was just as well. He assumed the man would bore of this game and leave soon enough, although the topics of the bank and father seemed to supply a lot of potential material. Harry at first assumed they were Muggles, but a little magic was dropped through the conversation, changing that assumption.

Finally, as though just noticing Tonks had a companion, Rick turned to Harry. "Oh," he said in a kind of girlish way. "Name's Richard, by the way. Richard Rothschild."

With deliberately slow, calm movement, Harry accepted the pro-offered hand. "Harry Potter," he said, very evenly.

The man froze, which Harry resisted reacting to. "Goodness, you are," Rick said, sounding stunned. He turned to Tara and leaned close to her. She was standing with her lean arms crossed, looking like she wished she were elsewhere. "It's Harry Potter," he said to her, still surprised. She blinked and found Harry's eyes and presumably his scar. Tonks gave Harry a roll of the eyes.

"Well," Rick offered, "why don't we join you for a drink?" Harry thought of saying, why don't you not? as the man smoothly took one of the other stools and gestured for Tara to do the same, all while simultaneously waving to the bartender.

Harry shot Tonks an apologetic look and received a disbelieving one in return. "So," Rick said breathily if not a little hungrily, "you are the, what does the chocolate frog card say . . .?"

"Destroyer of Voldemort," Harry finished for him, wanting to rattle the man if possible. He definitely got the girlfriend with that one.

"Yes," Rick said with more than a hint of pleasure. "So what are you doing with yourself now?" he asked, then ordered drinks for himself and Tara when the bartender appeared.

"I'm in school," Harry said. "I've applied to the Auror's program."

"Ah, well, you are in good company here, then," he said with a glance at Tonks.

Harry looked at Tonks as well, with a look he hoped conveyed some of his feelings. "Tonks is the reason I want to be an Auror," he said honestly, his gaze not wavering. "She's my inspiration." Her lips curled into a true smile, making Harry very glad he had said it.

"That's very sweet," Tara said. The drinks arrived. Rick accepted his and immediately began clinking the ice in it.

Harry turned to the girlfriend. "What do you do?" he asked.

She smiled lightly. "I work in finance at Bennett's of London. We do a lot of cross Muggle-Wizard project financing." Harry nodded sagely in a way he hoped looked knowledgeable. He didn't want to ask how that differed from accounting.

"Do you like it?" Harry asked.

"It's interesting and sometimes a lot of work," she said, seeming surprised to be addressed again.

"We are working with Goodley and Stevens right now," Rick put in. Harry had no idea who they were. "Where do you live?" he asked Harry.

"Shrewsthorpe," Harry replied, wondering how to get rid of him. Maybe they needed to finish their drinks and claim another appointment, he thought. He took a big gulp of ale to that end. Tonks had already finished her drink and waved for another. She seemed to be trying for a different kind of exit.

"Oh, you are very close to Riverden," Rick said. "The Freeland Estate encompasses it; it is just lovely. I was there once as a boy," he added as though this fact were important to share.

"We were there for Boxing Day dinner," Harry said evenly. "It is a big place. The stables were bigger than our house," he quipped to Tonks.

Rick froze at that. "You were?" He reassessed Harry at this point, seeming conflicted with his clothes and that notion.

Tonks said, in the air of one forced to participate, "He has a lot of horses, then?"

"Freeland only introduced us to the first twelve or so, but there were a lot more for just riding." Harry decided to just pretend it was him and Tonks. "I'd thought they were like Thestrals but his steeplechasers are huge animals. And they aren't magical, so how one controls them . . ." He looked alarmed at the notion.

Tara laughed. "They are usually pretty easy-going," she said, then backed off on her humor with a worried expression.

"Really?" Harry asked her quickly, afraid she assumed she had insulted him.

Rick nursed his drink, standoffish and fidgety now.

Tara relaxed a little. "Depends on the breed. I wouldn't have ridden my brother's Arabian for anything . . . it was totally out of control. My Morgan was like a big kitten for personality."

"Huh," Harry said. "Does sound like fun. But not worth getting adopted for," he murmured to Tonks, whose eyes went wide at that, so he gave her a mischievous grin. Rick gave him a close one as though dearly wanting to know what he had said.

A slow song started up. Harry stood and held his hand out to Tonks. "I promised the next slow one, remember?"

She set her fresh drink down with a thud and jumped off her stool to join him. When they were out on the floor, she said, "You are better at socializing than I imagined. Sorry about him." She laughed then. "You really knocked him with that comment about Boxing Day."

"It was some big event. I didn't realize when I accepted the invitation," Harry complained a bit.

"You were serious?" she asked, amazed. "I thought you made that up."

"No," Harry said stridently. "I wouldn't make things up to impress Mr. Rothschild there. Are you kidding?" he felt vaguely disappointed in her assumption.

"I'm sorry," Tonks said, "Of course you wouldn't. One of the things I like about you. Of the many."

Harry smiled and dropped his gaze.

"That and your humbleness, which always astounds me. You *are* the opposite of him. Total opposite."

"I hope so," Harry said strongly, making her laugh. He noticed in relief that the other couple were finishing their drinks and departing from the table. "So, I'm not sure the best way to ask this but . . . "

"What did I see in him?" she finished for him. At Harry's nod, she replied with a strained expression, "I'm not sure. He impressed my parents. He impressed me at first, frankly, but that wore off. Once everyone around you keeps saying how great it is that you are on the right track finally, it gets hard to get off the train."

Harry tried to imagine that and his face must have revealed something because she added, "When he turned his charm on just the right way, I could overlook a lot. And surprisingly few see past it, even though you weren't fooled at all."

They danced another song, a faster one, without separating. Harry was deciding that he really preferred slow dancing better. He and Tonks were exactly the same height, so they moved with surprisingly little awkwardness around the floor.

Several songs later, Tonks was dancing even closer, which was starting to affect him. The room felt too warm and the gaps where they moved apart felt too long. He pulled her closer without thinking, which brought a sharp look from her, a surprised and calculating one. Harry dropped his arms and turned to walk back to the table since the song was winding down anyway. At the table, his ale was too warm. He drank a big gulp of it anyway, feeling the need for anything that might calm him down.

Tonks didn't comment, but she did have a very small smile on her face. They finished their drinks in silence.

"Another round? Or do you want to go?" she asked.

"Maybe go," Harry said. He checked his pocket watch; it was just before eleven.

As they passed the bar, Tonks waved to the bartender and tossed a Muggle note on the bar. The bartender nodded good-bye with a wink. Out on the street it felt fresh and quiet, letting Harry relax. It was chilly now, making him glad he had worn his warm cloak.

"It's still pretty early," she said, sounding reluctant to quit the evening. "How does tea and biscuits sound to you?"

"Pretty good," Harry conceded. "Somewhere quiet?"

"Sure."

They walked back to the parlor they had used to Floo in. No one was around this time for which Harry was very grateful; he was tired of verbal jousting. Tonks stepped into the Floo and gave a location followed by a password. When she was gone, Harry followed.

They landed in a small flat with shelves lining the walls with all kinds of things on them. An owl fluttered in a cage in the corner. "This your place?" Harry asked.

"Yep," she replied. "You said 'quiet!'."

"I did, didn't I," Harry said, feeling a little nervous. He took a seat at the small table near the stove as she made tea.

She eventually placed the pot on the table and opened the biscuit tin. "Help yourself."

Harry, feeling hungry despite the big dinner he had had, accepted eagerly. The tea steeped and she poured out cups for each of them. Harry sipped his gratefully. The sudden silence was still ringing in his ears and the ale had made him groggy.

Two cups later, Tonks stood to clear things away. Harry had relaxed now, feeling less anxious about being at her place. She brought a few things back over from the shelves. One of them was a picture of her finishing the Auror's program. Harry looked at her glowing smile in the photo. As the photo moved, a middle-aged man put his hand around her shoulders proudly.

"Three years of training goes fast," she said wistfully.

"How many people apply normally?"

"Six or so take the tests. More apply but are rejected. I think you'll do fine on the tests." She held up the other thing. It looked like a large glass marble with swirling colors. It was a little dusty.

"What's that?" Harry asked. She handed it over. It had many balls inside one another each floating in a clear liquid. When shifted, it clunked inside as the spheres bumped.

She replied, "A promise ball, which it occurred to me that I could break now. Severus fulfilled it for me."

"What was it?" he asked, handing it back.

"A promise I made to myself to get you away from your aunt and uncle the first chance possible. I actually yelled at Dumbledore after the rescue, which stuns me even now to remember. He finally explained why you had to be there, which didn't help much." She tossed the ball in the air. "It bothered me a lot thinking of you there, so someone suggested using one of these to ease my mind. It worked. It magically binds you to take action when you can so you can relax and not obsess in the interim."

She stood and tossed it into the hearth where it smashed in a bright white flame. The glass crackled as the shards fell through the grate. As she stepped back to the table, she put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "It's good to see you doing so well." Her hand shifted to trail through his hair. "Everyone says that, you know, comments on how well you are doing."

Harry sighed in embarrassment and crossed his arms. She reached swiftly around him and forced them uncrossed, holding his wrists so he couldn't lift them. Her cheek was pressed against his from behind as she held that position. When she did move, it was to bend down to kiss him on the neck lightly.

Harry couldn't seem to draw a breath. Maybe that wasn't too much of a surprise as his chest had turned to putty. His will had gone; he just held still and waited for something else to happen. Tonks pulled him to his feet and kissed him fiercely, pressing him back over the table. Harry found he did have will, at least to pull her tighter.



Chapter 35 -- Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog

Harry woke with a start. "What time is it?" he asked. As memory flooded back, he was glad for the darkness because if the burn in his cheeks was any indication, he was blushing pretty badly.

"Ten to four," came the groggy reply.

Harry forced his heart to slow down. Snape would probably not be in before breakfast, or much before, he figured. Tonks shifted closer and Harry started yet again at the feel of so much of someone else's skin. From the sound of her sigh, he assumed she intended to simply fall back to sleep. Harry had been tired earlier but now he was wide awake and almost in panic. He lay in the darkness listening to her breathe and dwelling in memory until grey dawn lit the flat's single window.

In the eye-straining light, Harry sat up, rousing Tonks from sleep. "I should go," he said. "I really don't know what Severus will think if I'm not there." Harry had left a note, but it just seemed much simpler to avoid any conversation at all on the topic of his evening out.

She stretched and sat up, uncaring apparently about covers or not. "I can't imagine he'd care, but who knows," she said, yawning. "I couldn't imagine him as the father type, either." As she rubbed her eyes and pushed her rampantly blue hair back, Harry thought that she looked pretty nice. When she stood up with a mumble about making breakfast, he thought that even more so. He also thought that looking closely, in the long run, wasn't going to do him much good.

He sat down at the small table by the stove as she plunked down toast and hazelnut butter. She was only wearing a fuzzy pink robe. Harry, on the other hand, got completely dressed before daring to emerge.

She sat across from him and sipped a steaming hot cup of tea. She put her hand on her forehead and considered him in depth. "I keep trying to regret what I did, but I can't."

Harry didn't know how to respond to that. He certainly didn't regret beyond the ongoing embarrassment that he could not shake. In this, he apparently could not avoid learning about himself without whomever he was with learning it too. That had not occurred to him before. Nor had it ever occurred to him that Tonks may have been named appropriately.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Good," Harry replied with certainty, making her laugh.

"I broke a few Ministry rules, I'm sure." She sighed. "Good thing your application hasn't been accepted yet. Once it has, I'm essentially your boss, or one of them."

She sipped her tea again. "We can't repeat this," she said, sounding like she was talking to herself more than to Harry.

Harry had a feeling, in a week or so, that was going to seem more cruel than it did at this moment. "Yup," he said in agreement.

* * *

Harry was sitting, studying diligently, at the dining room table when Snape appeared from the Floo around ten in the morning. Harry managed a casual greeting, although he was Occluding his mind when he lifted his gaze from his book.

Snape seemed distracted, so it probably did not matter. "I need to visit Diagon Alley for some supplies, if you would like to accompany me."

Eager for a break, Harry put his books aside and stood to fetch his cloak. As he returned and hooked it around his collar, he was amazed that there was not some blatantly obvious difference in him announcing what had happened to the world. Snape seemed completely oblivious, which wouldn't be like him at all. Fighting a blush, Harry grabbed a handful of Floo powder and ducked into the hearth to hide it.

They walked along Diagon Alley away from Gringott's, where Harry had withdrawn what now seemed like an exorbitant number of Galleons. Good thing he didn't go out for dinner at nice restaurants regularly, he thought with some stress.

"I need to get something from a shop down here," Snape said, indicating Knockturn Alley. When Harry hesitated, looking down the street with sharp eyes, Snape said, "Never been?"

"Uh, once . . . accidentally. Hagrid rescued me, fortunately." He still did not like the looks of the place.

"I truly do not think you will have a problem, O, Destroyer of Voldemort," Snape commented snarkily.

Harry frowned at him. "Well, go on then," Harry urged with stung pride while indicating that Snape should lead the way.

Far from having a problem, Harry seemed to be upsetting the economy of the place. Many grimy witches and wizards ducked out of the way or Disapparated when their startled gaze fell upon him. A few just gave him a measuring look as though wondering how much he really could do.

"Far less crowded than expected," Snape stated airily, when they reached a shop called *Fiddlesticks and Sone*. Snape stood outside and waited for the proprietor to appear. An extremely thin, old man with a hump and sparse straggly red hair eventually emerged from the dark interior. Snape handed him a list; the man squinted at it with a foul expression before approximately smiling and shuffling back inside. "It is best to remain on the street," Snape offered as they waited.

Harry rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Late night?" Snape asked as a pair of hunched-over hags spotted Harry and promptly turned around and walked the other way.

"Loads of clubs in London, it turns out," Harry explained, avoiding Snape's gaze as he remembered the whole night yet again. This led to his limbs going tingly even through his tiredness. He leaned on a barrel of Black Cat syrup and closed his eyes to rest them. He opened them when he heard the voice of the shopkeeper. The shriveled old man handed over a worn basket and Snape handed him some coins. Harry watched this in a daze.

"Let's go," Snape said easily. He stepped past Harry who followed automatically.

As he turned with another yawn, Harry realized with a jolt that there was one dark shape in his mind ahead of him, and one behind. He grabbed a handful of the back of Snape's cloak and pulled. His heart was racing as he responded to Snape's questioning look. "Shadow," he breathed.

Snape went instantly on alert. He grabbed Harry's upper arms and demanded, "Where?"

"Behind me," Harry whispered.

Snape peered sharply over Harry's shoulder as he surreptitiously pulled out his wand. His eyes moved avidly back and forth along the alley. Harry turned slowly around as well, trying not to attract attention as he did it. He pulled his wand out of his pocket and into his sleeve, holding it where it wasn't visible. He didn't see anyone he recognized among the black robed figures standing in small clusters talking or moving with laden baskets and cauldrons among the shops.

"I assume you are certain about what you sense," Snape queried.

"Yes."

"Which one do you sense?"

"Did. I'm fully awake now. And I can't tell who it is anyway." He almost pointed out that all the shadows in his vision were alike, but censored it.

"Go inside," Snape said. "Call the Auror's office."

Harry obeyed. Inside the shop, he discovered that the bent-over man who had come out earlier *was* the son. An incredibly wizened old wizard sat at a counter logging the latest sale.

"I need to use your Floo," Harry said.

The son shuffled over to him, his eye twitching. "You are the Boy Who Lived?"

"Uh, yeah." Harry decided not to quibble about the term 'boy' just now.

A little peeved the man said, "Go on, then," as he gestured at the small hearth. "Who's to stop ya?"

Harry dashed over to the aged marble hearth and took out his pocket canister of Floo Powder and tossed some in. When he announced that he wanted the Ministry Auror office, the proprietor gagged in surprise behind him. Rogan's head appeared and Harry explained that he'd seen one of the remaining D.E. on Knockturn Alley.

By the time Harry stood up, four Aurors had Apparated into the shop. Tonks stepped over to Harry, who noticed that the shopkeepers had vanished along with half the contents of the shelves.

"Whom did you see?" she asked him. Nothing but professional focus showed in her posture, stabilizing Harry's heart rate. On the other hand, he resisted explaining his Voldemort inherited vision to her or anyone connected to the Ministry. Considering that a fifty-fifty chance was a pretty good one, he randomly said, "Jugson, I think. It was pretty quick though," he added to try to insure they considered either possibility.

The Aurors went out to the alley. Harry's gaze raised to Snape's just inside the doorway of the shop. He didn't react at all to Harry's lie. Harry approached him slowly, and when he came aside, Snape commanded, "Stay in here while they sweep the alley."

Presently, the Aurors returned and reentered the shop. The section of alley Harry could see through the grimy window was now utterly deserted. Rogan said, "I didn't like the answers Burke gave. Really didn't."

The others hadn't turned up anything. "We'll set up a stakeout then," one of the others said. Harry didn't know his name, he looked a lot older than the others. "You are certain you saw one of them, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, comfortable being certain with that answer.

No one argued with him or expressed any doubt.

* * *

Uneasiness haunted Harry that evening at the house. His emotions teetered between feeling euphoric and feeling cheated out of having his life to himself again.

During dinner, Snape stated, "I am quite certain you are safe here, now."

"It isn't that," Harry commented. He tore his bread into many small pieces as he collected his thoughts. "I don't want this vision anymore," he complained. "I'm tired of it." As he painstakingly buttered the many chunks of squashed bread he wondered if that were really true. He didn't mind, really, occasionally sensing that Snape was nearby.

Snape put down his utensils and held his mug without drinking from it. In a low voice he said, "I don't believe anything can be done."

"I didn't think so. And I wasn't asking you to try, just . . . wish things were different," he said wryly. "I've been doing less of that lately," he added, "which is good."

Snape topped up his mug of mead from the bottle on the table and sat back, cradling it in his long hands. "You really wish none of it had happened?"

Harry poked at his roast ox and Yorkshire pudding with his fork. "I don't know. Mostly. Though I'd be someone else in that case, which might not be better."

"You would still be with your parents, presumably," Snape observed levelly.

The comment felt a bit like bait, since Harry didn't know what Snape was getting at. With honesty he said, "I can't imagine that anymore--haven't been able to for a long time." He felt a little guilty at that notion but couldn't resolve it with a daydream that had drifted too far into fantasy. "It's the killing and fighting I could have skipped."

Snape returned to eating, appearing more relaxed. "And becoming an Auror will certainly isolate you from more of that," he stated with his classic snarkiness.

"I'll be old enough to deal with it and trained to," Harry pointed out. "I expect that will make a difference."

Snape nodded sideways, his way of accepting a point.

After dinner they settled into the library. Harry had no desire to study so he pulled a book off the shelf on Muggle-safe illusion spells instead.

The library was silent beyond the turning of pages, the lamp flames still and tall. Harry's mind wandered back to last night. He wondered at how much he had learned, too much to absorb it all at once, apparently, because the knowledge would sneak up on him at random times, as it did now. He stood up and changed books even though he wasn't finished with the one he was reading, simply needed the distraction.

* * *

Snape sat at his desk in the drawing room. It was Wednesday, which meant half of the holiday was gone already. He sorted through his old files, tossing things he didn't need into the hearth and a summer fire he had started just for that purpose. The window was wide open and a nice breeze carried away the extra heat.

Harry knocked on the doorframe. "There's a picnic this afternoon at the Burrow. I told Ron I'd come. Did you want to go?"

Snape considered Harry as he stood in his doorway in old jeans and a Chudley Cannons t-shirt. While every Weasley offspring disliked him, Harry's presence would most likely negate that. "I am enjoying the quiet, thank you," he replied.

"That's true. It probably won't be quiet there. All right then," Harry said. His tone almost could have been considered disappointed. "I'll be back late, I think," he added over his shoulder as he departed.

Snape just barely heard the flare of the Floo Powder over the wind in the trees across the street. He pulled out another stack of files and sorted through them. In the last one he found the old letter from Dumbledore that had been left for him

after the wizard's death. The flap was open now. He set it aside until he had finished sorting through the entire drawer and had closed it with a satisfying thud. He leaned back in his chair and reluctantly pulled out the missive. The yellowing on the envelope made him expect that the letter would contain old notions. Within the envelope was a note card, with writing only on the inside, although the text was small and cramped as though the words had been forced to make space for each other.

Dearest Severus,

I would firstly like to thank you for your years of service. Once you came to me, you were the most faithful of servants, in all ways. Perhaps because your choices were so clear to you, this was true. Secondly, I want to sincerely thank you for taking on my last unfinished task.

Snape stopped there and huffed as he changed his understanding of the letter. The old wizard had charmed the entire message, not just the envelope. The envelope might very well have been sealed ten years previous as the color indicated.

By now his presence is most likely a given. It has been a year, and that can seem a very long time.

Snape blinked at that. A year? he wondered, before he understood Dumbledore meant a year from rescuing the boy from the Forbidden Forest. He felt consternation that the old wizard would have made that so significant. On the other hand, it did seem in retrospect, an incredibly long time; literally everything had changed in the interim.

Harry is incredibly special; although I suspect you still will not admit that. All the more reason to remind you once again. For him to be more than a vehicle of all our freedom, he needed more than he was getting. Understanding. Loyalty. Security. Consideration. By now you realize, I'm sure, how straightforward these things are to provide. You've already commented to me about his fierce loyalty and I know firsthand your own capacity for it. A good match, I'll always believe strongly, for that and other reasons. Learn how to receive these things in return, Severus, and I will truly feel I have tied up every loose end.

It was signed neatly below. Snape closed the card, feeling a little annoyed with the dead wizard, which even he could not be for long. He opened the card again to glance over it and noticed that a postscript had appeared at the bottom: "*Loyalty*" was always a safe euphemism to use with you. Snape slapped the card closed, now definitely annoyed. He re-filed it with his other old letters from the former headmaster and found something to read to force it out of his mind.

* * *

Harry did return very late. It was almost two, a whole twelve hours after he had left. Snape was reading with a pot of tea at the dining room table.

"You're still awake," Harry commented. "I didn't realize you were going to wait up for me."

"I wasn't precisely."

"Oh, good." Harry took a seat across from his guardian. His head pounded a bit, so he rubbed his temples. "It was a big party," he said. "A bunch of Ministry people and some from Gringott's, although no goblins. All the neighbors. Actually had enough for a real Quidditch match. You'll be pleased to hear I was at Chaser this time. Lots of younger kids wanted to play, so there were three Seekers per side."

"And you were the main attraction?" Snape prompted dryly.

"For a little while," he admitted with a frown, remembering autographing odd things people happened to have on hand, like Muggle money or even clothing. "And the kids were scared of me at first--I really hate that."

Snape put down his book. "They assume that since you did the impossible that you can do anything. Children are wary of that kind of power, for good reason, frankly."

Harry looked at him closely. "Have you been drinking some of the weird things they were serving tonight?"

"As someone who knows intimately what can go wrong with bad brewing, I usually avoid unknown concoctions." Snape squinted at him as Harry rubbed his temple again. "Were you *not* avoiding them?"

Reluctantly, Harry admitted, "I tried a few. Nothing that was on fire permanently. That was my rule."

"Pity. All kinds of intoxicating things burn off very easily," Snape said a little snidely. He stood and leaned over the table to look closely into Harry eyes. "At least your pupils are equally dilated and not excessively so. Want something for that headache?"

"You have something?"

Snape looked insulted. "Of course."

"I guess I shouldn't doubt you."

"I should say not." Snape left the room. He returned a few minutes later with three bottles of liquid. He poured a splash of each of them into a teacup. The result fizzed bright pink. He pushed it over to Harry.

"Thanks." Harry drank it down, swallowing bubbles to do so. His head cleared instantly. "You really are very good at those," he said honestly. "If that could be made into a sweet, you could license it to Fred and George." He held the teacup up. "*Professor Snape's Plain-thinking Pop-ups*."

"And clearly you spent far too much time speaking with those two this evening."

"About two hours. More. You wouldn't believe the stuff they have going on. Scares *me*. Doesn't scare Ron or Ginny though. They just come back with some idea even more frightening." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Really much better," he said. "What is Absinthe anyway?" he asked in distracted curiosity.

Snape actually laughed. "Perhaps I *should* accompany you next time," he said, shaking his head.

* * *

Harry's sleep degraded that night making him decide that Snape's remedy hadn't completely cleared everything he had experimented with drinking. The next day the weather turned warmer still and Harry thought about sitting outside for the fresh air. There was a very old stone seat in the garden beside the door. He took his History of Magic textbook out there and set about clearing aside the ivy that had grown over the bench. As he did this, he noticed that roses grew beside it, nearly choked out. The yellow buds were very tiny as a result. With hands on hips, Harry surveyed the small area. At one point it had been laid out in a fairly organized manner.

With an eye toward putting off studying, Harry took his book inside and grabbed a pair of old dragonhide gloves that sat on the shelf above the coats. He also grabbed the orange Cannon's hat Ron had given him at the party the night before. It was a Muggle-safe hat that only showed a player on a broomstick when one was actually at a match, otherwise it was blank.

With his eyes and hands protected, Harry attacked the ivy, tossing the long yanked strands into the center of the bricked path from the gate. The dragonhide gloves made it easy to work around the roses and soon they were looking much happier and unencumbered.

Harry became so engrossed in the weeding that he didn't notice the door open. "What are you doing?" Snape asked.

Harry looked up from his kneeling position in the grass as he carefully pulled up something that was crowding out some bulbs that had emerged. He thought over his response. "Avoiding studying?" he replied.

Snape shot him a dubious look. "You are not a servant, Potter."

"I know that," Harry answered sharply. "I like doing this," he added as he pulled up a long runner root of a small linden that needed to come out. Indeed, yard chores were the few tasks the Dursleys had made him do that he hadn't abhorred.

He had always thought it was because it let him spend time away from them, but it felt like more than that now. "You're not worried about what the neighbors'll think, are you?" Harry asked challengingly.

"Certainly not," Snape huffed and went back inside with a swish of his robe.

Harry grinned as he easily pulled up the linden now that its roots were exposed.

He weeded the house side of the garden before stepping back and reassessing. It occurred to him only now that there most likely were spells to accomplish this in a matter of minutes or seconds. Snape probably thought he was being the nutter Muggle for doing it by hand. It felt more satisfying this way, and it passed more time he would otherwise be reading *History of Magic*.

Someone had rather carefully laid out the garden long ago. Surrounding the bench were roses and some other small-leaved shrub he didn't recognize and beside that was a low bed of bulbs and in the corner, ivy emerged, meant to cover just the stone wall. He tapped his finger on his leg--he needed mulch to really finish the job by covering the newly exposed ground.

As he wondered where he would get some, light footsteps came along the road and stopped beside the gate. Harry turned and found himself face to face with the girl he had been watching every day from his window over the previous summer. Bit of a shock really, seeing her so close, where she could see him too. "Hi," Harry said. She was not wearing the slicker today, but a short cloak.

"Hello," she replied with a hint of uncertainty. "Do you live here?" she asked, eyes glancing down to his clay-clumped gloves, then his green and brown stained knees.

"Yes," Harry replied as he stooped to toss some stray strands of ivy onto the main pile.

"Hm. I didn't realize there was anyone else in the Snape household," she commented, sounding concerned to not be up on this. "This is still Severus Snape's house, correct?"

"Yes," Harry replied. He was taking advantage of the close proximity to fill in his understanding of her looks. Her skin was almost too smooth, and transparent and her nose definitely too pert, especially in view of the very proper accent. He pulled his hand, still clean, out of his glove and offered it. "I'm Harry, by the way."

"Oh," she said as though realizing her manners had been set aside. "Elizabeth. Peterson. My house is down the road two hundred meters or so past the station."

"Yes, I've seen you walking by a few times."

This appeared to unnerve her a bit. She blinked and recovered with ease and said, "I go to my lessons every day, almost, over the holidays. Piano and harp from Mrs. Blithewell, just around the corner." She pointed as she said this.

Harry, wondering fiercely if she were a witch or not and, thinking that he had nothing to lose, said, "Would you like to come in for tea?"

"Oh," she said, as though taken by vaguely pleasant surprise. "My lesson is in five minutes, so I really can't. Perhaps another time," she said with practiced ease.

"Sure," Harry said with no expectation. She bade him a pleasant day and went on her way. He watched her back as it disappeared around the gentle bend in the road. He suspected he may have spent too much time wondering about her--she seemed downright ordinary, really. Or maybe he was comparing her to Tonks. The latter seemed more likely, as he warmed at thinking of the Auror. He really had to not make that a habit.

Just before noon, when Harry was finally settling in for a good long read of Astronomy, a knock sounded on the door. A little mystified, Harry went to open it. Ginny stood in the garden, looking rosy as though from a brisk walk. "'Ello," she said.

"Hi," Harry returned. "Come in," he invited, scratching his head idly. "Just wake up from the party?"

She hesitated. "Yeah," she admitted. "You left early, you know."

Harry shrugged, thinking he had been finished hours before he had actually left, and most of it was a blur.

"Did you get in trouble for being out so late?" she asked as she stepped in and eyed the entryway keenly.

"No." At her surprised look he shrugged as though not understanding her disbelief. He led her into the main hall and wondered if he should force her to say hello to Snape. His guardian saved him the decision as he stepped out of the library with a book under his arm. "Ms. Weasley," he said in a manner of greeting.

"Sir," she replied, straightening as she did so. She gave Harry an uncomfortable look when Snape disappeared into the drawing room.

Harry gestured toward the dining room. Once there, they sat down across from each other at the table. He assumed Winky would bring tea. "Enjoying the holiday?" Harry asked.

"Yes," she replied strongly. "One more term 'til summer," she added in a mantra-like way.

"Don't like school?"

"I dislike the hard work."

Winky came in with a tea set, startling Ginny severely. "*You* have a house-elf?" she asked in complete shock.

"Yes," Harry answered, intentionally in a tone that indicated he thought it the most normal thing in the world. He wanted to see how she reacted. She looked confused. After Winky shifted everything from her tray, he thanked her and poured for Ginny. Winky gave them a little curtsy, which wasn't normal, and departed. Harry tried not to appear too mystified by that, since it dismayed Ginny more.

She sipped her tea. "So how is *your* holiday going?" she asked in a normal chummy voice.

I got shagged, so it is going pretty well, Harry considered saying, then almost laughed. "Good. Fun party last night," he said quickly to cover after a long throat clearing. "And I'm finally meeting the neighbors here a bit."

Ginny sipped her tea before setting it down on the saucer and straightening both with unusual precision. "Do you like me?" she asked suddenly.

"Uh, you're nice," Harry replied.

"Oh." She sounded disappointed. Harry avoided smiling with some effort. Ginny ate a biscuit and glanced around the room with interest. "Nice house," she said.

"Thanks. It's nice to have one."

"Oh yeah. I 'spose it would be. Hope I'm not keeping you from something by being here."

Harry shook his head. "I have studying to do. Take your time."

She chuckled at that. "You have been a bookworm. Don't know what happened to the *fun* Harry."

"I wasn't fun at the party?" Harry asked.

"I didn't get to talk to you much--you were always surrounded, either by the kids or my brothers." She took another biscuit. "Well, one term more," she said again, sounding glum.

As though mention of school had conjured him, Snape stepped in. He poured himself a cup and held it. "Studying hard this break, Ms. Weasley?"

"Trying to, sir. My brothers, who don't have school assignments, like to throw big parties."

"Poor dear," Snape said in a classically snide tone.

Harry gave him a warning look.

Looking uncomfortable in Snape's presence, Ginny drank her tea quickly. Harry poured her more and took another biscuit so that she would take another. She smiled, apparently noticing his urging her to stay a while.

An awkward minute later, Snape set his cup down and rolled up one sleeve, presumably since it was warming up in the house. "Staying for lunch, Ms. Weasley?" he asked, making it sound less like an invitation than a point of interest.

"Uh, no. I don't think so." She swigged the last of her tea and stood up. "Nice to visit a bit, Harry," she said quickly.

Harry showed her to the door and waved her out of the garden. She gave him a fleeting glance over the shoulder that had more furrow to the brow than expected. Back in the drawing room, Harry said to Snape, "Did you chase her off on purpose?"

"No Weasley was ever chased off that easily," Snape replied as he looked for something in the little drawer of the desk.

"Yeah, I suppose," Harry agreed and stepped away.

* * *

When Harry slept badly the second night after the party, he wasn't so certain that his alcohol and potion consumption was the culprit. Saturday morning, after another poor night, he mentioned it at breakfast.

"The Ministry hasn't caught the D.E. you 'saw'. Are shadows involved in your dreams?" Snape asked.

"I'm not sure. Probably," he answered with a frown. He had grown very accustomed to not being harassed in his dreams and hated to imagine that was happening again. Plates with extra bacon appeared, spurring Harry to take up his fork.

"Need potion?"

Harry shook his head. "I have some."

After a moment Snape added, "You may wake me in the night, if you need someone to talk to."

"I appreciate that," Harry said, with a twinge of gratitude as he wrapped a long greasy strip around his fork.

That afternoon, Harry again grew bored of doing assignments. Thinking about the unfinished garden made him eager to continue on it. He decided to check the back garden where an old wardrobe, charmed to resist the rain, stood in for a shed. He found a claw shaped tool that would be good for loosening the hard soil and fertilizer in the form of a large woven sack of dragon dung--so old, it smelled fresh--so old, it would stand in for mulch in a pinch.

Harry carried his haul back around to the front and arranged it all before starting in. He used the claw tool around the plants and pulled up stray weeds he had missed last time, after deciding that they weren't magically growing back that quickly. He considered that would be a rather amusing way to curse a garden.

Footsteps came along the brick walk. Harry sat back from crawling around the shrubs to use the claw along the edge of the wall. "I have a few errands on Diagon Alley," Snape said. "I assume you are safe to leave for an hour or so. I am certain you would render either Jugson or Avery helpless with laughter were they to approach while you're are doing that." Harry tried to give him a dark look, but failed. Snape went on, in the same tone of dry, airy disbelief, "Barring that, I am certain you could beat them off with that thing you are holding."

Chuckling, Harry said, "Too bad if you don't like it. I'm doing it anyway."

"Hm," Snape muttered before disappearing back into the house.

Harry was just finishing mulching and was pretty happy with the way it all looked, when he turned and eyed the other tangled half. He thought maybe he should have had Snape buy a book of gardening spells while he was out.

"Hello again," Elizabeth said from just the other side of the low wall by the road.

Harry spun around and adjusted his cap as he greeted her. He realized that because if it, she didn't know who he was. "How does it look?"

"Vastly improved," she stated.

"That's what I thought," Harry said happily, surveying it again.

"You must really dislike studying," she commented, looking around.

"History, yes," Harry said. "Boring as it gets."

"I like history," she said. "Classes at Malvern are always at least somewhat interesting."

"Where's that?" Harry asked, never having heard of it. It didn't sound magical.

"Worcestershire." She pulled off her white gloves and put them in her pocket. "Where do you go to school?"

Harry grinned as he thought of replying St. Brutus'. "A boarding school in Scotland," he said with a shrug.

"With a boring History class," she added for him.

Harry considered that if he explained that the it was boring because the professor was dead, that might not go over so well. "Yes," he replied simply. "Would you like tea?" he asked, sensing that she was impatient about something.

"Yes, please," she replied eagerly, taking Harry by surprise, mostly because he had not imagined he had pinned her motivations correctly.

He led the way inside, dropping his gloves just inside the door and intentionally forgetting to remove his cap. In the hall, while she looked around, he leaned down the steps to the kitchen and asked Winky for afternoon tea. Winky came over to the bottom of the steps and actually gave him a wink, which she had never done before.

Shaking off the confusion from that, Harry turned back to Elizabeth. "Dining room," he said gesturing at the nearby door. With a smile she followed his gesture, glancing at his cap as she passed him. Harry pretended not to notice.

"This is nice," she said of the wooden-walled room. She glanced down and studied the patterned rug. It was Harry's favorite room as well, so he smiled at that as he sat down across from her. "Is the rug Belgian?" she asked.

"I don't know," Harry replied.

"You only know plants," she suggested in a level tone.

Harry, accustomed to harmless snideness, was nonetheless a little taken aback. "Actually, I don't know plants really, either," he replied. Winky arrived with the tea in that instant. She set the table and poured two cups.

"I wouldn't have expected a house-elf," Elizabeth said, clearly pleasantly surprised. She seemed to have a special tone of voice just for conveying that. "So you are Harry Snape? Or is your name something more formal, like Harold?"

Harry almost inhaled his tea. He cleared his throat as gently as possible. "No, just Harry," he managed hoarsely.

The Floo flared then and Elizabeth calmly put her cup down and watched as Snape bent under the mantel. Snape's eyes moved between them with a slightly suggestive expression. Elizabeth stood and held out her hand out. "Elizabeth Peterson, sir. We've met once, several years ago."

"Ah, yes," Snape said, shaking her hand.

"Rather surprised to find you have an addition to the household," she said pleasantly.

Snape swung his cloak off and draped it over his arm. "He is a recent addition," he stated helpfully.

"Surprising that no one knows," she went on insistently.

Snape seemed to search for a reply. As he did so, his eyes glanced over Harry's orange cap. "It didn't seem to warrant a formal announcement," he stated, matching her formal tone and almost matching her accent. Harry had to fight a grin. "I'll leave you two to your tea," he said politely, sounding very odd as a result. As he turned to the hall, Harry had the distinct impression that Snape was trying to tell him something. At the doorway, Snape glanced back one last time and Harry realized he was telling him he could remove the cap since his back was to the bright window.

As Elizabeth sat back down, Harry pulled off his cap and fluffed his fringe to hide his scar. She smiled when she saw he had removed it. They chatted for a half hour or so about the village; Harry learned a lot of things he had wondered about at one point before forgetting when he got used to the place, such as how long wizards had lived here in the relative open: 300 years, and what the resident Muggles thought of witches and wizards: they were mostly relatives of magical people who found it nice to easily have either kind of visitor.

Snape wandered back in after Winky had brought them a fresh pot. He poured himself a cup and stood sipping it. "Do you want to join us, sir?" Harry asked. Snape shook his head and took another sip.

Elizabeth said, "You should both come for dinner some evening. Mother would be most interested to meet you." For an instant, Harry thought she had recognized him without giving any indication, until she said, "Another Snape, how interesting," in a gossip sort of way.

Snape gulped and jerked his cup away from himself. He looked like he may have burned his mouth. Harry cringed; he really should have corrected her immediately. His guardian looked about as amused as Harry had ever seen him. He rubbed the bridge of his nose as he fought to keep from laughing.

Elizabeth, uninterrupted, went on blithely, "Really surprising, you adopting a Muggle and all."

"What?" Harry blurted. Snape lowered his hand to give him a very odd expression. "What makes you think I'm a Muggle?" Harry asked her, stunned by the notion.

"Well, you were doing the gardening by hand," she said, as though that covered it completely.

"Oh." Harry thought of saying that he didn't know how to do it any other way. Instead, he said, "I prefer doing it by hand. I was killing time."

"Oh," she said, sounding completely mystified. Harry decided she must be a witch.

Why do you go to Malvern instead of Hogwarts?" he asked bluntly.

She sat back and crossed her legs. "Father doesn't believe in magical education. He's a Muggle. Mother tried to explain, but he insists I go to Oxford like himself." She ended with a shrug. "I prefer it now. Before, when I first started, I wasn't very happy about it. My mother has taught me some useful spells and she bought me a wand. I have it at home," she added proudly.

Harry stared at her, trying to take that in.

"So you probably know lots of spells," she said, apparently to fill the silence.

"Hundreds," Harry replied.

"Well," she waved her hand in the air, vaguely in Snape's direction. "You have a father for a teacher," she said dismissively.

Harry nodded, "True."

"Besides, things must have been simply dreadful last year with He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named visiting and all."

"Voldemort," Harry supplied flatly. "But still true."

"Much better to be away from things. Safer that way," she asserted in a different, flatter, tone.

"Not everyone in Shrewsthorpe was safe," Snape stated in one of his talking-to-a-dim-student voices.

"They were safe-er," she came back firmly, sounding like she was quoting someone else.

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Thrimbol would definitely agree and Horis Jourhart and Sora Dreamham," Snape stated, sounding a little relentless.

Elizabeth looked away. Harry did not recognize any of the names. "Who are they?" he asked.

Snape looked reluctant to explain. As he considered a response, Elizabeth said, "I was walking home the night the Mark floated over Trudy Thrimbol's house. What the hell did they want with her anyway?" she snapped in frustration, then flushed, apparently at her language.

Harry dropped his gaze and took a deep breath. He listened as Snape said, "She worked in the records department at the Ministry part time even though she was retired. That made her extremely useful." After a pause, he said, "Harry?" a bit sharply.

Harry raised his eyes as he frowned.

Snape put down his cup and stridently said, "You did everything you could have possibly done. Sooner than anyone expected you to."

"What are you talking about?" Elizabeth asked.

Snape crossed his arms and huffed. "His capacity for guilt is phenomenal," he snapped with a hint of anger. "I am attempting to persuade him to not take on any more. Especially any not his to bear."

She looked very confused. "Why would you be responsible?" she asked Harry.

Harry sighed. "Because killing Voldemort was my task. Maybe I could have done it sooner."

"What?" she breathed.

Snape scoffed. "Have you forgotten already how you did it?"

"No," Harry admitted in a difficult tone. The night in the abandoned manor had been key, Harry knew all too well. Only a month had passed after that. How much difference had that made? It probably made a difference to someone, another gnawing voice in his head commented. But he couldn't have hunted Voldemort down himself, hauled his friends off again somewhere unsafe, and he had needed them too, just as much. Snape was closely watching him think this over.

"Um . . ." Elizabeth interrupted his thoughts. She started to speak, then stopped, twice.

Snape put his hands down to lean over the table and said to her. "Yes, he is Harry Potter. Not Harry Snape," he barely managed the last, having to swallow a laugh to get it out. It bothered Harry rather a lot that his guardian was finding this so amusing, especially since he only ever found the darkest irony amusing. At Elizabeth's disbelieving look, Snape wanded the lamp up and came around behind Harry to pull his hair back. "See?"

"G'off," Harry protested, pushing his hand away.

"The Hero of Wizardry himself," Snape went on in an odd tone. Harry shot him a narrow look over his shoulder. Snape added, "Of course, he does not think that is a positive thing."

"Why not?" Elizabeth asked, sounding stunned in general.

"A very good question," Snape said, sounding too much like a teacher. He stepped back to the head of the table and crossed his arms. "Perhaps ask him. I'd be curious to hear the answer myself."

"Were you hiding?" she asked, amazed.

"No. I just--" he gestured at the cap. "Well, maybe," he conceded in a low tone. "It is hard to get to know someone that way."

"Really?" she asked doubtfully. "I would have talked to you longer the other day, had I known."

"Yes, but that wouldn't have been talking to *me*," Harry insisted. "Just someone you thought you knew from the *Prophet*."

"No," she insisted, "I would have been talking to a wizard--I thought you were a Muggle."

Harry sighed and gave up trying to explain.

She sat straighter. "In any event, you are very welcome to the village, hero or not," she said in a nicely prim tone. "I think I must be going, now," she added suddenly and stood up. Harry showed her to the door, where she shook his hand and gazed in amazement at his scar before stepping out. "Very nice to have met you," she turned and said in an almost comically proper voice. Harry waved her off, hoping he didn't wear too dismayed an expression.

When he returned to the dining room, Snape was in her chair, having another spot of tea.

"Now everyone will know I'm here--won't they?" he said dully as he sat down.

"Within minutes, I believe," Snape stated. After a long pause, he added, "You are who you are. There is no sense running from that."

Harry stared into his cold teacup. "She bothered me," he said.

"And why shouldn't she?" Snape asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know," he replied in an annoyed tone, not wanting to voice the reasons for his disappointment.

Later, as he was finally reading a bit in his Astronomy text, a post owl arrived, flitting straight in the open window. Harry accepted the letter and noticed the return address of Switzerland. He opened it as he nibbled on the last chocolate biscuit. There was a letter as well as a copy of the photo Opus took. The photo took him by surprise--his eyes were brighter and happier than he imagined they looked most of the time. He set it aside. When Snape raised his chin to look over at it, Harry pushed it around to his guardian, who lifted it to examine it more closely. Snape raised a brow and placed it back on the table.

Dear Harry, Hope you are having a fine holiday. Currently we are visiting my grandparents in Geneva. My mother and father were rather stunned by the photograph. They insist I invite you to come visit during the summer, so I am doing so, even though I am certain you are much too busy. I am looking forward to returning to Hogwarts and am very glad to be there rather than Durmstrang even though I miss many friends terribly. I have not been studying as much as I should be. I hope you are having this problem too so that it will not be as noticeable. See you very soon, Penelope.

That evening, many visitors came to the door to say hello as though they had just moved in or something. They were all very pleased to meet Harry. All wanted the two of them to come for dinner very soon. Harry was glad they were due to leave for Hogwarts too soon to accept any invitations. Elizabeth returned with her mother who actually patted Harry on the head with her white gloved hand, pushing the control of his annoyance to the limit. Elizabeth gave him a very apologetic wince that balanced some of it out.

As he closed the door when they had finally said goodbye for the last time, he exhaled in relief and leaned back against it. "Maybe we should leave in the *morning* tomorrow," he muttered.



Chapter 36 -- Wool of Bat and Tongue of Dog

Early Sunday evening, as he came down the stairs to depart for school, Harry considered that the house really did feel like it was equally his.

In the dining room, Snape asked, "Ready to go?"

Harry rechecked his bookbag for his texts and nodded. He stepped into the hearth and took a handful of the coarse powder Snape offered him.

* * *

The visiting Durmstrang students had returned, as well as the rest of the students, for Sunday dinner. Harry sat down with his friends; everyone chatted vigorously about their activities.

"How did your holiday go?" Penelope asked Harry with shy interest.

"Oh, good," Harry said, feeling more than a bit uncomfortable.

She seemed to sense his unease and turned to Frina with her next question.

"Don't mind him," Ron insisted to Penelope. "He had a rough break."

"What, your picnic qualified as 'rough'?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"I meant being stalked by Death Eaters," Ron said.

"I told you about that?" Harry asked him in confusion, certain that Snape wouldn't have said anything. Frina and Penelope turned at those words and listened with trepidation.

"After the second kamikaze, yes," Ron replied, amused.

"Oh. Did I say anything else I didn't mean to?" Harry asked seriously.

Ron laughed. "I don't know. Why wouldn't you want us to know? No one else has seen those two."

"No one else sees Death Eaters with their eyes closed," Harry breathed very quietly to himself. When he fell silent in thought, Penelope gave him a sympathetic look.

* * *

Harry had studied only cursorily over Easter break, so when Greer asked him a question during the first Potions class, he did not know the answer, which was a first for months and a bad way to start the last term of his school years. Greer asked one of the Ravenclaws, who answered correctly. A moment later, Parkinson's annoying laugh rang out. Harry

glanced over to see Malfoy leaning over and whispering to her. Harry looked away and ignored them for the rest of the class, which was harder than usual; Malfoy seemed to be making more snide comments today, keeping the students around him entertained. Although Harry could not actually hear the comments from the other side of the room, they were making him a bit aggravated, or maybe it was just that he had a few Hufflepuffs laughing.

Dean leaned over and elbowed Harry, he assumed to keep him from retorting and making more trouble. Harry gave him a weak smile and returned to his notes. Dean sighed and returned to his own notes. The sigh seemed too heartfelt for the current situation, making Harry wonder what was bothering him.

More snickering brought Harry's gaze up before he could stop himself. Malfoy sat smugly with his arms crossed, fingering the material of his uniform. Harry wondered if Pansy beside him was taking notes for both of them. He wished Greer would penalize them for the disruption they were causing, especially since it looked like Malfoy wasn't paying attention, but the teacher didn't seem to be noticing anything was amiss and pointing it out would certainly be a mistake.

Hagrid had taken care of Harry's and Penelope's wombat over break, so after Potions Harry went down to the game-keeper's cabin to see if he should take it back. It was sleeping in a crate on the floor, still curled around Penelope's cloak. Fawkes' perch overlooked it and the two made for a brightly colored pair.

The wombat had not grown much and when he commented on that, Hagrid said, "It was done growing Harry. And in record time too. Yeh musta given i' everything it needed." It still looked small when Hagrid scooped it up with his large hand and gave it to him. "You kin turn i' in next class, ifn yer wan'. I'll see that i' ge's sen' to Australia and released."

"I'll have to talk to Penelope about that," Harry said, accepting the cloak as well.

He carried the wombat up to the castle, hitched on his hip. It looked around in interest as he walked into the main doors and along the entrance hall. He had half-expected it to be alarmed after Hagrid's small, quiet cabin, but it seemed a little curious about what everyone was doing. When he found Hermione, Ginny, and Penelope in the Great Hall, they jumped up to greet the wombat rather than him.

* * *

Returning to school did not help Harry's dreams. The second night, he awoke with a start and required a long minute to feel oriented and safe in a different bed than he had slept in over holiday.

"Harry?" Ron said in a faint whisper.

Harry pulled the drapes aside quietly. "Yeah?"

Ron's grey silhouette hovered beside his bed. "Need anything?"

"No."

"Wanna go for a walk around the castle?"

"Maybe not," Harry replied, although he could clearly remember their walks before Voldemort was destroyed.

Ron's shadow moved away. "Let me know if you change your mind," he whispered as he crawled back into his bed.

Harry lay awake for a while, grateful for his friend's attempts at helping. He tried in vain to catch the threads of the shadows in his dream. They made less sense than they had in the past, moving counter to each other somehow rather than just coming at him. He thought maybe he should owl Tonks and try to explain somehow that his dreams made him think something was happening, without explaining everything. Thoughts of her made him grin in the darkness and relax enough to sleep, which he finally did, in time to feel mostly rested in the morning.

The next day, Harry and Penelope agreed to turn in their wombat. Hagrid accepted it with a grin and put it in a pen behind his cabin before starting the lecture on electric walking sticks--long insects that zapped painfully if you touched them. Hagrid had them in a box. As they all leaned in to look, little lightening bolts flickered between the camouflaged things. Harry stepped back to let others see. As he did so, he noticed Malfoy had his hand right on Parkinson's bum as they stood waiting to take their turn at the crate. Malfoy gave Harry a snarky once-over at his expression. Surprised by this bold rudeness, Harry stepped around to the other side, closer to the pen where the wombat was rolling around holding its back foot as though to playfully attack it. Not the brightest animal, he thought.

In Defense Against the Dark Arts, Snape paired them up for a full practice session. "I have discovered that some of you are taking the liberty of dueling on your own time, which I might point out is strictly against school rules. I have decided that it would be best to just get it out of your systems during class."

Penelope and Hermione dueled first. Harry watched almost mystified at how polite they were about it, with their low power spells and long pauses between offense and defense. It was like watching a ping-pong match between two grandmothers. Opus and Neville went next. This was a little more interesting to watch since both of them looked like they felt they had something to prove. Neville lost, unfortunately, when his blasting curse was rebounded by some kind of flexible block Harry had never seen. Neville lost his balance and had to jump off the back of the platform to keep from falling on his head. Harry had not noticed until that moment, but Neville looked more athletic than he remembered.

"Mr. Potter," Snape said, inviting him up with a sweep of his fingers. "And . . ."

"Oh please, let it be me," Malfoy murmured.

"Despite the interruption, why not?" Snape drawled, indicating he should come up.

Harry pulled out his wand and moved to the center of the platform. As they stood back to back, Harry said, "You going to cheat again?"

The other boy scoffed. "I don't need to cheat to beat you."

"Good luck," Harry sneered as the count started.

On ten they both issued blasting curses which they both managed to block. Harry was first with the next one, a Figure-sempre which was blocked easily. Harry decided that Malfoy had been practicing since their last 'draw'. Malfoy, grinning with almost disturbing pleasure, made Harry wait before he incanted a chain binding curse. Harry ducked under it and it wrapped up one of the wooden stands behind him with a loud clatter.

Malfoy was supposed to wait for Harry's next one, but instead he spelled at the same time Harry did and their curses met in the middle with a spectacular explosion of light. The other students *obed* in an impressed kind of way. Malfoy was faster than expected again, with a spell Harry did not know. In a panic he put up a Titan block since it was the first thing to pop into his head. When the strange spell hit, it jolted him to his knees and made him drop his wand.

As he grabbed up his wand and tried quickly to aim back, he discovered Snape had stepped in the middle. "No permanently damaging curses, Mr. Malfoy," he stated angrily.

In a bit of an overdone whine, Malfoy retorted, "It isn't if he counters it."

Harry got to his feet and shook his arms out, which were tingling painfully.

"Take your seat. Ten points from Slytherin for that, Mr. Malfoy." Snape turned to Harry; he seemed to want to ask if he was all right, but held back. "A Chrysanthemum block would have been a better option and generally is for an unknown attack," he said factually, although it had a layer of something under it, something seeking to soothe, perhaps.

Harry took his seat, still rubbing his tingling arms. Malfoy glanced over and grinned as he saw that. Harry dropped his arms and pretended they didn't hurt anymore as Ron and Dean were paired up on the platform.

* * *

More members of the Advanced D.A. were managing to achieve their Animagus forms. Hermione became an otter in the next session, to a long run of cheering. She actually came over and chewed on Harry's shoe, when he stayed off to the side while everyone else gathered around. Harry laughed despite himself, especially when she changed back and ended up on all fours.

"Maybe I should stand up some before changing back," she said, blushing fiercely.

"I'm glad I'm spared such embarrassment," Harry opined.

She slapped him on the leg. "Not for long," she chided.

Dean also managed his form late in the same session. He turned into a Moor pony. He turned back again quickly when the others began arguing over who got the first ride. Four students were now Animagi since Suze had managed her white mink form over holiday. In a buoyant mood, they broke up to return to their assignments for tomorrow.

On the way back from the Room of Requirement, the thing Harry had feared earlier did happen, but fortunately he was with Ron, Ginny, Dean and Hermione. As they passed a cupboard, voices could be heard talking low.

Hermione, closest to the door, actually giggled, utterly surprising Harry. They all moved on as quickly as they could while remaining silent. When they were out of range, Hermione said, "Boy, thought Malfoy was really attached to Parkinson."

"He does seem to be," Ginny commented.

"Why was he back there with someone else?" she asked, amused.

"How could you tell?" Ron asked doubtfully.

"I could hear them talking; couldn't you?"

"I wasn't listening that closely," Ron grumbled uncomfortably.

As they reached the stairs, Hermione said thoughtfully, "Sounded a bit like Eloise, actually, whom I thought was going with Moon. Ah well, anyone dumb enough to trust him, gets what they deserve," she said dismissively.

* * *

Harry was dreaming. Not a bad dream like he had been having, but a more pleasant one in which he was dancing in the Great Hall with Tonks, who was wearing a rather extravagant fuzzy yellow ball gown that flared wide around her. The hall was decorated similarly to the way it had been for the Tri-Wizard Tournament except that the walls themselves glittered. And through the tall windows the stars winked brightly rather than ominously.

Tonks smiled at him with equally bright eyes and laughed as they spun intermittently fast and slow. Harry pulled her close but in the dream he could not feel her the way he expected to. She leaned forward with a sly grin and kissed him softly, timidly. Harry did not understand why she was kissing him so when she had done it much more aggressively before. He reached out dream hands toward her to try to make things right, painfully aware that this was not right somehow.

A pleasant sigh snapped Harry awake. Lips were on his and the transition from dream to reality hard to distinguish. "Wha?" Harry said, grabbing the figure above him. He could feel narrow shoulders under his hands.

"Harry," a familiar voice whispered.

Harry sat up and grabbed up his wand and used a Lumos charm. The light revealed that the drapes around his bed were closed tight and that Ginny knelt on the bed beside him. She had a very crooked smile and bright eyes.

"What are you doing?" Harry demanded in a harsh whisper.

"You don't have to be quiet--I used a Silencio on the drapes," she said in a normal voice. She reached out a hand and touched his arm. "I wanted to see you," she said quietly despite her previous assertion.

"Ah . . ." Harry said as he rubbed his hair back to think. "You shouldn't be here," he finally said.

"Why not?" she asked smartly. "The dormitory steps don't keep girls out, even at night. Don't you want me here?"

"I was sleeping. And . . ." he trailed off as her hand brushed his upper arm with tantalizing lightness. He grabbed her hand in his and held it away. "I don't think this is a good idea."

Her face had fallen when he had restrained her. Harry set the wand aside, still glowing, and sat up straighter. "Really, Ginny, Ron is just in the next bed," he pointed out a little distressed. "What were you thinking?"

She frowned a bit and said, half to herself, "I see the way you look at her."

"What way?" he asked.

"*That way*," she said as though he were slow.

Harry became distant and thoughtful. "Do I really?" he asked a little eagerly.

With a grumbling huff, she tossed aside the drapes and departed. When Harry heard the dormitory door click closed, he breathed out in a deep sigh of relief, but he could not relax and it took over an hour to fall back to sleep.

* * *

The old, half-ruined, stone cabin faced the constant wind from the sea. Whoever had built it was either an idiot or really wanted a view. A figure approached along a grassy path, wand waving occasionally before him to ward off protective alarms. He approached quietly enough that the occupant did not detect him until he stepped into view.

"You!"

A sweet smile then. "I have something I need from you."

Slight relaxation accompanied this statement although the man continued eyeing the other suspiciously. "Take whatever you want," he said with a gesture at the drooping roof of the cabin behind him. He then laughed a little maniacally at his own sarcasm.

"It is true you only have one thing left. And you really have no choice but to give it to me." The visitor fired a binding curse from his ready wand.

* * *

Harry stretched his neck as he stared at the glass sphere before him. A moment ago it had been an orange, so he was at least making progress. But any moment now it was going to switch back. He sighed; he was tired and not really in the mood to change things into other things. He had had a difficult time at breakfast pretending everything was normal; a much harder time than Ginny, who appeared to have forgotten it all. His forced casualness had attracted his friends' attention, although they had not pressed him to explain. Harry took off his glasses to rub his sore eyes. At some point he

had fallen again into the mode of being tired all the time. Too easily, he thought, although people interrupting his sleep certainly did not help.

When he put his glasses back on, he found McGonagall observing him. He sniffed and returned to the next phase of the transfiguration which was to turn the air in the center of the sphere into smoke. Fortunately, even Hermione was having a tough time with this one; her sphere kept cracking open when she attempted that stage. Today, since Harry was stalling, she was the one using up all the oranges at their table in a bid to get it right as fast as possible.

McGonagall eventually stepped around to them. "We can go over it again this evening, Mr. Potter, if need be," she said in reference to his tutoring session.

"I really need to get this?" Harry asked.

She frowned. "It is commonly on the N.E.W.T., I'm afraid, since it tests all forms of multi-transformation at once. A little hint to you: if they give you just the end points for the transfiguration rather than the steps, assume that the steps are applied in order of easiest to hardest, because that is typical of the test design.

"Hm," Hermione muttered sounding like she were committing that to memory. "Thank you, Professor."

Harry, realizing that he could work on his spell again later, casually used the smoke transformation on his sphere out of boredom. It actually worked.

"Hey," Hermione said brightly, "nicely done." In a frowning voice she added, "So, what did you do?"

"If I could tell you, I would," Harry commented. "I doubt I can repeat it."

She set another orange before him, moving his smoky sphere gently to the side. "Do it quick while you still remember."

Harry tried, but could not work it correctly again, even when he made himself pretend he didn't care if it worked.

* * *

Harry left his friends studying in the library and took the long way around to the tower, to dump off his books, just for a chance to stretch his legs which were stiff from the hard chair he had been sitting in the last few hours. He was looking ahead to his tutoring session, so he was not paying too close attention to what was happening around him. As a result, when a figure burst out of a side corridor and looked around, it startled him more than he would have liked.

"Suze?" Harry asked in concern at the way she glanced around herself. She relaxed a bit upon seeing him there, giving Harry the notion that she feared he might be someone else. He stepped over to her. "What's going on?" he asked.

She composed herself and surreptitiously glanced around behind him. "Nothing," she replied; for a Slytherin it was a very poor lie. She straightened her ponytail efficiently and started to walk away.

Harry, worried, said, "No, really," as he reached out a hand to her shoulder to slow her down.

She jumped away from him and snarled, "Don't touch me!"

Stunned silly, Harry jumped back himself and stared at her. "I didn't--" he started, then stopped. "I'm sorry," he finally managed, holding his hands to the side and a little back. She turned again and walked away, but Harry followed. "Suze, what's wrong?" he asked in concern.

She stopped at the bend where the sunlight tried valiantly to light the corridor through thick clouds. "Who do you think you are, my big brother?" she accused him.

"Uh," Harry said, feeling like he had missed part of the conversation somehow. He knew she had no siblings, so he dove in as though he were following along. "If necessary," he said.

Her shoulders fell as though admitting defeat. Harry knew that feeling well: the one where your strength leaves you because someone says that they will help. "I can take care of myself," she insisted.

"If you won't talk to me, you should talk to Professor Snape," Harry insisted. "Whatever is wrong. . . ."

She gave him a glance as though he were an idiot and strode away again. Harry let her go this time. As she disappeared down a short set of steps where the wings connected, someone stepped up beside Harry. He turned as Malfoy, arms crossed, pert nose a little high, said, "Bit of a wench."

Anger poured into Harry as heat in his veins. His hands balled into tight fists at his sides. Malfoy gave him a glance that said, *what is your problem?* In a low voice, Harry threatened, "Don't you ever . . ."

The blonde boy scoffed and walked away, shaking his head. Harry reached into his robe and put his hand around his wand but did not pull it out. So badly did he want to hit the other in the back with something jarring; something that would land him in the hospital wing or St. Mungo's for a week. With a quiet growl he let go of his wand and went around floor the other way.

Snape was in his office, grading as usual. His first glance at Harry seemed to tell him a lot. "What is it?" he asked, setting his quill down beside the stack of parchments.

Harry, too keyed up to sit, pushed the visitor's chair out of the way of his pacing route. He knew he had to say this just the right way, but as he thought it over, he realized that he did not know anything for certain. He swore lightly in frustration.

"I do hope you don't use that language around the other staff members," Snape said with a touch of snide.

"Huh? Oh, no. I don't." He stopped and gestured with his hands as he said, "Look, I think there's a problem with one of your students." Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose and Occluded his mind; if Suze did not want to say anything herself, he could not by rights give her away. "Are you keeping a close watch on Malfoy?" Harry asked.

"Not so much lately, I must admit," Snape said. His intent gaze made Harry suspect he had noticed that Harry had closed his mind. "There are other, far more problematic students to watch over."

Harry struggled for words. "I think he's getting . . . aggressive, maybe is the word, with some of the female students."

"That does not sound like Mr. Malfoy," Snape opined with certainty.

Harry thought back to the scene of minutes before. The events were coincidental, maybe?

"Whom are you protecting, by the way?" Snape asked.

His guardian's bluntness surprised Harry enough that he almost dropped his Occlusion. Gathering himself together, he replied in frustration, "The person who should be here talking to you."

Snape interlocked his fingers before himself and stared at them a long moment. "I will speak with him and a few others." He paused before saying, "Do not do anything stupid yourself."

"How did you know I was thinking that?"

Snape gave him a small smile and a raised brow in reply.

Harry noticed the clock. "I have to get to my Transfiguration tutoring," he said in a rush.

Carrying his full backpack, because he had not made it to the tower to drop it off, Harry headed for the gargoyles. As the stairs turned upward, he rested his forehead against the center stone post that turned with him. He almost dropped his bag from surprise at the shadows moving in his mind.

The steps stopped at the top and McGonagall said, "Are you all right, Harry?" Her door was open as usual and she stood reading something before the bookcase near the doorway.

"I think so," Harry said, hefting his heavy bag into the room by its straining straps.

"What was that just now?" she asked as he plopped into the visitor's chair.

With a frown he replied, "I've been seeing a lot of shadows lately."

The book she held hit the desk with a slap. Almost accusingly, she said, "You are still seeing that green vision from before?"

With a reluctant frown, he replied, "Yes."

"Does Severus know this?" she demanded.

"Yes." She relaxed marginally, so he added, "I owled Tonks as well." Although this was a bit of a lie, as he had only told the Auror he was having worrisome dreams. She had owled back saying they were very close to picking up at least one of the last two, but could not go into detail.

"Well, at least you are willing to tell someone you are in danger, unlike before."

A little peeved, Harry said, "I'm a little better able to take care of myself now, Professor."

"Nevertheless, it was Albus' intent that this place be safe for you and it is mine as well. My staff and I will review and renew the spelling that was set up to protect you last year."

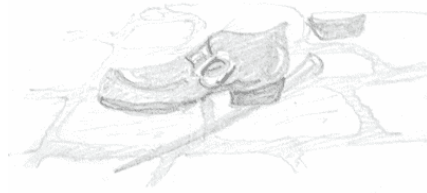
Harry paused in pulling out his Transfiguration textbook. "The castle was spelled to protect *me*, specifically?" He felt a little touched by this notion, then thought more. "But it didn't work. Voldemort just walked in."

"Yes, well," she sighed. "It should not have been that easy," she stated offhandedly as she set an orange out on the desk. "His powers were still growing, it seems."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Good thing he's gone, then," he said as he found the right chapter in his book and placed that on the desk as well.

She smiled lightly at him. "Yes. It means we may devote our full attention to attenuated multi-transformational charmed objects."

"That's what I was thinking," Harry agreed, trying to sound excited by that notion, but it came out as suffering instead.



Chapter 37 -- Adder's Fork and Blind-Worm's Sting

Professor Snape approached Draco Malfoy as he sat in the Slytherin common room, playing wizard chess with Fredericka Fredrick, a fifth year. "Mr. Malfoy," Snape said to get his attention before gesturing with his fingers that the boy should follow.

Malfoy looked up cockily at his professor. With a very casual shrug he stood and followed Snape to a dungeon classroom. As Snape shut the door, Malfoy strode casually over to a stool and hitched his hip upon it. He waited for his professor to speak with a tilted head expression of haughty impatience. Snape could not help but be glad to be getting rid of the boy in three short months.

"I have had a complaint about you, Mr. Malfoy."

"Yeah? Can't imagine who that would have been," he sneered. "You listening to Gryffindors now?"

"Only the ones I trust, I will admit," Snape said. "But nevertheless. You had slipped below my attention so it came as a surprise."

"He's made you weak," Malfoy said. "You wanted that?"

"What you think is of no matter. You are required to heed me, not the other way around." Snape paced to the high windows before turning suddenly back. "Are you guilty of what Mr. Potter accuses you of? It occurs to me that I have not ever seen you socializing with Ms. Fredrick before this."

Malfoy shrugged. "What's it to you? You my baby sitter now?"

"I am if you are crossing the line," he replied in a very hard tone. The blonde boy was adeptly Occluding his mind, making Snape suspect that Harry was correct. "If I see you again with a student below sixth year, I will make your life very miserable," he promised.

The boy grinned crookedly and shook his head in disgust. After a long pause Malfoy said, "You fooled everyone, you know." When Snape did not immediately respond, he suggested, "Or are you fooling them now, maybe? Potter doesn't seem that stupid, but maybe he is."

"None of that is any of your concern," Snape said dismissively.

"Really?" He slipped off the stool and stepped over to his teacher. "You betrayed . . . a lot of people."

"They deserved to be," Snape stated.

Malfoy gave him that sloppy grin again. "It's too bad Voldemort didn't catch you at it," he said with a hint of relish at the notion.

Snape grabbed up the front of the boy's robes and lifted him up to his toes. "Is there a particular reason you are taunting me? Or are you really that foolishly overconfident? Your father is not going to be able to do anything for you . . . *ever*." He released him, angry that he had lost control. With a frown he headed for the door.

"That's what you think," Malfoy said quietly.

"Just remember what I said," Snape returned in his most threatening voice.

* * *

That weekend, Snape and four other teachers were assigned to respell the castle. Harry watched them very early Saturday morning before most students were awake. Hagrid and he stood at the bottom of the steps as McGonagall and Sprout formed a blue field around the main doors. When the glow stabilized, they stepped back and watched it fade to invisible.

McGonagall stepped over to Harry. "Looks like hard work, Professor," he opined.

She shook her head. "The castle is designed to hold magic so it takes much easier than an ordinary object would. Every last stone was selected for its metal and crystalline content, especially around the doors."

Harry considered that if he had ever managed to get around to reading *Hogwarts: A History*, he undoubtedly would have known that.

Unexpectedly, Neville came out wearing very Muggle clothes, exercise clothes in fact. He looked surprised to find them all standing there. McGonagall gestured for him to head out. "Good morning, Mr. Longbottom," she said graciously.

"Morning, Professor," he said in a questioning tone.

Harry wondered what he was up to that the headmistress was so casual about.

"Just renewing the protective spells, my boy," McGonagall explained to Neville. At some point she had adopted Dumbledore's form of address for them; Harry kept intending to point out its inappropriateness, but could not bring himself to.

"Good idea, ma'am," Neville stated shyly, with a strange glance at Harry.

Harry wondered at the look and watched Neville as he moved off, went to the corner of the outer wall, and put one foot up on it and bent over his knee. Harry watched his friend rather than the teachers as the risers themselves were charmed. Neville changed feet a few times, then jogged off to the edge of the forest and started around the edge of the lawn. Harry tracked him as he fell into a smooth stride around the lawn edge.

Later, at breakfast, Harry said to Neville, "I didn't know you ran."

"I started over Christmas. A Muggle friend of mine got me started on it. It's really relaxing."

Harry gave him a doubtful look and returned to nibbling his bacon. Neville did look different now; better proportioned maybe, as though he might actually be muscular under his robes. Harry wondered if the running had done that.

"What were the teachers doing this morning?" Frina asked Harry. "I saw you outside with them."

Harry, noticing Penelope's gaze come up curiously, blushed. He was finding himself much more concerned about her opinion of things. "They were renewing the protective spells on the castle."

"Do any of the spells keep people in?" Penelope asked cautiously.

"Just out," Harry replied reassuringly with a kind smile, thinking that Ginny would not like this look either.

"Good," she breathed.

* * *

"What do I get, Mr. Potter, if I take today's potion, ice concentrate it, mix it with Dermanus powder and boil it for five days?" Greer sounded victorious by the end of the question.

"Calamnute," Harry replied confidently without looking up and without hesitating. The other four textbooks were bloody useful.

When Greer spun away with a huff, Frina asked curiously, "Doesn't the house usually get points for answering such a question?"

Greer spun back around. "What house are you in, young lady?"

"I do not have a house."

"You are at the Gryffindor table, are you not?" Greer sneered.

"We were not sorted, as you call it. We board in their tower, yes," Darsha explained calmly when Frina was at a loss for words.

"Ten points from Gryffindor then, for your cheek," she snapped at Frina.

When Greer had moved on out of immediate hearing range, Frina apologized in an angry, stressed whisper.

"It's not your fault," Harry assured her.

"Ron is very keen to win this house cup, right?" Frina insisted.

"I think he is going to have to do without it," Harry commented flatly.

* * *

Harry walked back from checking on Hermione and Frina's wombat for them while they finished up a difficult Arithmency assignment. The fifth floor corridor was quiet and empty, his footsteps echoing off the stone walls. He thought ahead to his half-finished History assignment; just the notion of it made his brain slow down.

His steps faltered when the hair on his arms prickled as though a draft had swept by him. Harry stopped and looked around. The corridor was empty, a half moon revealed through the dark windows on the end. Even so, he reached for his wand. Nothing moved as he turned his head back and forth and began to feel a little silly for his paranoia.

He let his wand hand fall to his side and took a step along the corridor. The next instant, he was sprawled face down on the floor. He rolled over immediately, propped on one stinging hand, wand held out. No target appeared. He had heard no incantation and had seen no spell trail. Breathing heavily, he moved the aim of his wand around him. The corridor remained utterly still.

"*Accio Cloak*," Harry incanted, thinking only then that someone might be standing close-by, invisible. Nothing happened. He repeated the spell in the other direction, also with no effect. He shifted to get up and found his legs befuddled somehow. He could move them, but they refused to get under him, so it was impossible to stand. Heart racing harder at his predicament, Harry pulled himself along the floor a few feet, slowly because he did not want to lower his wand and use both hands.

Harry needed help. He aimed his wand at the floor and began a Pravda Bird spell. As he spoke it and the bird emerged, his wand and the bird were blasted away from his hand. His wand clattered along the floor and stopped beside a marble statue of Corin Cornelius, who was carved giving a lesson on broom safety. The silver bird spiraled along the wall beyond the statue and vanished in a small cloud of silver sparks.

Harry looked frantically back along the path the spell must have taken, peering closely at the air for any sign of disturbance. No sound or movement could be detected. He considered yelling for help, wondered if anyone would even hear him, or if his pride could withstand it. At the sound of his wand scraping on the floor he whipped his head back around. His wand was lying halfway between himself and the statue now, tantalizingly close.

Wondering again with a stab of fear what was wrong with his legs, Harry pulled himself along the floor toward his wand. This time there was a spell flash from behind him and he was thrown forward by a blasting curse. Stabbing pain shot through his skull as his nose and teeth struck unyielding stone.

Harry carefully raised his head and put his hand over his nose, which bled freely. A fancy black boot appeared beside his wand, beneath an invisible hem, making him realize in surprise that it *was* a cloak. He swallowed blood and watched in horror as the boot rested on his wand on the uneven stones of the floor, clearly intending to break it.

Harry threw out his left hand, and with all his will, shouted "*Accio wand!*" In his mind thoughts of Dumbledore setting him up to get that wand mixed with the emotion of the Final Battle, the most important time he had used it. The wand scraped harshly out from under the boot sole and hit his palm with a slap. He immediately cast his own blasting curse at the spot above where the boot had just re-vanished. The spell shattered against the wall and echoed up and down the corridor. His aim, left-handed, had not been very good and the figure undoubtedly had moved quickly away. Whatever the reason, the miss made him snarl in fury.

He rolled to a sitting position and switched the wand to his bloody right hand and cast a rapid succession of blasting curses in an arc, all of them shattering harmlessly on the wall. As he scanned the hallway again for any small sign, he rubbed his face painfully on his sleeve to keep more blood from his nose from streaming into his mouth.

A minute of silence passed beyond Harry's harsh breathing, until voices sounded from the adjoining corridor. Harry worried that whoever it was might get hurt as well. When the figures turned the corner and saw him on the floor, they hesitated before continuing.

Harry recognized the halo of white hair on the smallest figure. "Did you see anyone?" Harry asked loudly, his voice flattened by his plugged nose. The Slytherins approached faster now, all of them pulling out their wands and looking around themselves avidly.

"No," Suze said as they passed Cornelius. "What happened?"

Harry closed his eyes in a moment of extreme embarrassment. "Someone kicked my arse; someone under an invisibility cloak." He tried to stand up, which, if he had wanted to preserve the remainder of his dignity, he should not have tried.

Harry groaned and sat back down and pulled his robes aside. His feet were flipped in odd directions. Suze gasped and leaned down to look closer in disturbed fascination. Someone else made a distressed stomach noise. Calmly, Harry said, "I think someone took the bones out of my legs." Experimentally he moved his left leg and found that below the knee he had no control over it. His foot dragged behind as he moved it along the stones. With a huff of utter frustration, Harry sat back and said, "Suze, can you get Professor Snape or the headmistress? Please?"

Suze nodded and stood straight. "Portny," she ordered Wereporridge, "Take him to the dispensary."

Wereporridge shrugged his too broad shoulders and stooped down to pick Harry up. "Hey," Harry said in alarm, "Don't you know a Hover spell?"

"You don't want to see his Hover spell," Parkinson said dryly, "as much fun as it would be to see him use it on you."

Harry kept quiet then. Suze ran swiftly ahead of them, light as a dancer and nearly soundless in her soft shoes.

Suze rushed down four corridors and one set of stairs. Snape didn't answer his office door and the classroom was dark. It was evening, but maybe they were holding a staff meeting. By the time she made it down the many long staircases to the entrance hall, she was out of breath and disgusted by it. She had guessed right, though; several teachers were meandering before the open door to the staff room, chatting. The four Heads of House were standing around McGonagall.

Breathless, Suze pounded over to them and tried to explain.

"Ms. Zepher?" McGonagall said in question, putting a hand on Suze's shoulder.

"Harry," Suze breathed and watched their expressions and demeanors shift starkly to alarm as she took a breath to continue. "Attacked on the fifth floor . . ."

"What?" two of them said together as Snape moved quickly by her.

"Team taking him to the hospital wing," she said urgently to his back. He turned his head an instant to glance back before he continued rapidly up the stairs. McGonagall followed behind with the others.

Harry, to his utter dismay, was dropped onto a bed in the hospital wing. To avoid messing the linens he yanked off his shoes, bending his legs disturbingly in the process. Pansy's loud voice rang out for Madam Pomfrey, grating on Harry's sore nerves. Pomfrey bustled over and waved the other students away. They backed off to the other side of the wing and stood there uneasily.

Pomfrey lifted Harry's chin and looked at his nose. "My, my, what happened, Mr. Potter?" she asked, and for once sounded genuinely sympathetic.

"My face hit the floor when someone hit me with a blasting curse." No sooner had he said this, than the double doors to the wing burst open and Snape came through them. Harry dropped his eyes, feeling furiously ashamed. Pomfrey lifted his head again and spelled his nose unbroken. It felt much better immediately, making him sigh in relief. He could even half-way breathe through it now.

Snape came aside the bed as the headmistress entered the wing followed by Suze. "What happened?" Snape asked in alarm.

"Someone got the better of me. Obviously," Harry replied in disgust.

"Who?" McGonagall asked.

"Don't know," he said angrily, gesturing with his hands. "He or she was under an invisibility cloak."

Snape's eyes shifted to the Slytherin Quidditch players across the room. Preemptively, Harry said, "If they hadn't happened to come around the corner, I don't know what would have happened. I couldn't even manage to hold my own." Indeed, the notion that he had been expertly toyed with was grinding harder on his pride now that he had the luxury of thinking clearly.

Harry held still while Pomfrey made his broken tooth grow back in. She then handed him a warm wet towel to clean his face and hands followed by a sip of blood replenisher. "And this; your favorite," she said pleasantly as she poured out a cup from the distinctive Skele-gro bottle.

"Skele-gro?" Snape asked sharply.

Harry pulled his robe aside and moved a leg to demonstrate. Snape stiffened in surprise at the odd floppiness of his foot. McGonagall looked grimly thoughtful.

"Didn't want me running away, whoever it was," Harry commented darkly as he accepted the cup. He forced the liquid down past the stomach churning taste and handed the cup back.

"Bad night coming up, Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said sympathetically as she capped the bottle and set it on the side table.

"To go with my bad evening," he muttered and dropped back on the pillow.

"No idea at all who it was?" Snape asked, sounding frustrated as he leaned over the bed slightly.

Harry shook his head. "I only saw his or her boot. I didn't recognize it. It was a nice one, though." He pulled out his wand and sat back up to reach the towel to wipe the blood smears off of it. The wood had been badly gouged when he had compelled it to come to him. Maybe Ollivander could fix it, he thought, as he stashed it back in his pocket. At least it still worked.

"I'll have your friends bring your things for the night," McGonagall said before turning to leave. "And I'll speak with you," she said to the Slytherins, gesturing broadly for them to lead the way out of the wing. Harry gave Suze a small smile of thanks when she glanced back at him before the door closed.

Harry flopped back again with his hand over his eyes. "I was useless," he muttered. "I tried to Accio the cloak away, but that didn't work. I couldn't think of anyway else to reveal him . . . or her."

"There are a few things you could have tried," Snape said evenly. "A Bolero spell for example."

"Can you show me?" Harry asked, desperate and eager.

"Tomorrow, certainly. When you can stand."

Harry moved one limp leg. "Yeah," he breathed. He shook his head and sighed. "Not really Auror material, I don't think."

Snape's hand moved to his shoulder. "Harry, truly your pride cannot be that fragile," he said in disbelief, sounding almost amused. At Harry's dark frown, he added, "We will arm you so it cannot happen again, all right?"

Harry looked away, biting his lips at the pain blossoming in his legs from the Skele-gro. He nodded. Snape removed his hand. "I have grading to do, but I can bring it down here."

"That's all right," Harry said dismissively.

"You are certain?" He looked surprised but willing to give in.

Harry nodded, feeling his ineptness did not need an audience. As Snape stepped hesitantly away, the doors opened to reveal his friends. Snape nodded at them as they passed.

"Harry! What happened?" Hermione asked as she came over, sounding like it might be at least partially his fault. Ron carried Harry's pyjamas and kit, which he placed under the night stand. He looked too accustomed to doing that.

Harry growled, but he sat up a bit on the pillows to explain what happened.

Eventually, his friends were shooed from the room by Madame Pomfrey. Harry took out his things to change out of his school clothes, and buried in between his pyjama top and bottom he found the Marauder's Map. Grinning at his friends' foresight, he unfolded it and activated it after checking that Pomfrey was safely in her office.

On the Map the last students were heading for their respective House rooms. J. Finch-Fletchley was still in the library, moving around in the stacks. His friends were walking on the staircase. P. Tidewater was with the other Durmstrang students in the Gryffindor common room along with many others. He scanned all the names on the page. In the House rooms they were stacked up tight together. He did not see an Avery or Jugson among them, or any others he didn't rec-

ognize. Sighing, he folded it up and stashed it in the pocket of his robe and lay down to sleep, confident in the spells on the wing to not let in anyone with ill intent. Desperate for a good rest, he forcefully Occluded his mind as he relaxed into sleep.

* * *

"Bella, *pot!*" a harsh voice whispered.

Bellatrix Lestrange sat up on the thinly padded stone pallet and squinted into the darkness. She hesitated a long time before moving to the cell door. When she did move, it was in near total silence. The halo of blonde hair was unmistakable. "Lucius?" she breathed in confusion and extreme suspicion, "what are you doing out of your cell?"

Malfoy looked down the corridor in each direction before replying, "I need your help. I can't get past the outer guards without an assistant." He held up a sparkling silver-framed gem on a chain around his neck. "A friend finally came through with this." He fingered it lovingly. "Some betray while others are brilliantly loyal. One never seems to know," he whispered, as though speaking to himself. It could have been a pledge to revenge.

She gasped and grabbed the bars hard. "Is that an Ampliment?" she asked hungrily.

"Yes," Malfoy replied, the word drawn out in a hiss. He stashed the shining thing back inside his robe. "I can only assume you would like to depart this place as well?" he asked cockily.

She laughed quietly. "You always have such a way with words."

* * *

Harry was dreaming, a groggy, pain-filled dream that teased at being pleasant. He breathed out and breathed in another's warm breath. This jerked him fully into wakefulness just as soft lips found his.

"Ginny," Harry admonished, very dismayed.

The figure above him stood straight with a gasp and moved off. Quickly, Harry painfully sat up and reached for the bedside lamp just as the door to the wing opened with a *swoosh*. All he saw was a silhouette with very long hair turning into the dim light of the corridor.

"Peni," Harry breathed in complete shock. "Ugh," he groaned. Compelled to follow, he put on his glasses and reached for the carved crutches sitting against the wall at the head of the bed.

Rushing, and with his mind still swimming in sleep, he clumsily hobbled across the room. He thunked unceremoniously through the double doors at the end and paused because his hands were shaking on the crutches with exhaustion from carrying nearly all his weight. The corridor was long empty and his strength wavered alarmingly. He stood swaying on the highly-polished, forked tree branches, trying to figure out what to do. The pain in his feet now overwhelmed his thoughts, making a decision impossible.

A figure appeared at the end of the corridor, billowing robes highlighted by the flickering sconces on the left side. "Harry?" Snape's voice sounded.

"Did you see anyone?" Harry asked.

Snape glanced around himself in alarm before replying, "No. And since we just finished thoroughly searching the castle, I would hope not."

He came aside as Harry mumbled, "Maybe I was dreaming, then."

"Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said as she strolled purposefully through the doors to the wing. "What are you doing out here?"

Harry's feet throbbed ominously almost making him choke on his reply. "I don't know." He must be insane to be upright on newly grown foot bones, he decided. Only a Crucio had ever been more painful than what he was experiencing right now.

Snape stepped closer and took one of the crutches away before slipping an arm under his. "Take these, Madam," he said, holding it out. Pomfrey took one than the other crutch in hand and Snape hefted Harry into his arms. The hospital witch held the door open for them. "You must have grown," Snape complained breathlessly as he carried his charge back into the dispensary.

Harry, stunned silly by the utter relief of being off his feet, did not reply. At his bed he expected to be dumped unceremoniously as Wereporridge had done earlier. Instead, he was lowered carefully to the mattress.

"What ever possessed you to get up?" Snape asked harshly, hand moving to Harry's shoulder as he released him.

Harry closed his eyes. "I don't want to get into it." Numb relief had given way to painful heat in his feet and ankles. Pomfrey's hands on them relieved some of it as she gently twisted his feet one way then the other. When she finished, she tossed the duvet up over his legs and stalked away.

Snape straightened the covers as he said, "Trouble sleeping?"

"It's strange sleeping here," Harry said, thinking past nocturnal visitors. "The respelling has made the dormitory easy to sleep in. It doesn't feel like that here." He thought that over more as rubbed his eyes. "It's like the shadows are blocked out some when I'm in the tower. Is that possible?"

"Perhaps," Snape replied, sounding concerned. "A number of night-calming spells were added to the Gryffindor tower with the intent of helping you sleep."

Harry tugged his glasses off and set them aside. He dropped his head back on the pillow and closed his tired eyes. "Could use one of those spells here right now," he mumbled.

"The castle has been thoroughly searched," he said. In a firmer tone, he added, "Do not get up again until morning, Harry."

"Yeah, all right," Harry murmured, half asleep already. His trepidation about nightmares did not hold sleep at bay.

Harry was in the Forbidden Forest at twilight. An aquamarine light shimmered in the cooling air as a breeze vibrated the leaves above him. A shadow floated by him. He stepped back in fear of it but it did not seem to notice him there. Other shadows flashed between the trees, hiding, watching.

Looking around him in a panic, Harry tried to find a place to hide himself, but the tall wide trunks shifted away from him when he approached them to obscure himself. He could not hide and he didn't seem to have his wand, since he was still in his pyjamas. He wrapped his arms around himself from the chill of the dew collecting on his thin clothes as he moved.

Harry froze in place as two shadows shifted into the open and clashed. A horrible screeching went up and the trees faded away, revealing a dull green world. Many dark forms converged and retreated. A bolt of pain shot through Harry, forcing him to his knees. He reached out a desperate hand toward the wavering shadow in the middle of the cluster as it flattened and shrank, drawing a burst of wind towards it as it popped into nothingness.

Harry snapped awake with a gasp. The hospital wing surrounded him with its odd peacefulness. At the last moment of the dream he had seen another shadow flicker into the open, full of malevolence. He wondered what was going to happen next but he could not recapture it, even by closing his eyes. His face was wet; he dried it with a swipe of his sleeve and hurriedly fumbled for his glasses. Panicking now as the meaning of the dream flooded through him, he swung his legs

over the edge of the bed and reached for the crutches. Memory of the earlier pain in his feet warred with his extreme need to check on his guardian.

"Mr. Potter!" Pomfrey said as she strode up the wing from her office.

"I have to . . ." Harry tried to explain.

"You have nothing you need to do at this hour, Mr. Potter," she stated, hands on hips. Her strict manner relaxed, however, when she looked over his face.

"I have to see Severus," Harry insisted, heart stopping panic filling him again as he said it.

"I will fetch him, then. YOU stay put." She stalked off.

Still holding the crutches in each hand as he sat on the edge of the bed, Harry tried to hold himself steady. It did not work all that well, though. The odd pain in the dream had unnerved him badly, and like a broken record it kept replaying itself in his head as he waited.

Finally, voices could be heard in the corridor. "I'm *am* sorry, Professor, for disturbing you," Pomfrey was saying.

The doors opened as Snape said, "It is no matter." The crutch from Harry's left hand hit the floor when Snape stepped into the dim light of the wing. Relief, like a spell of weakness, rendered Harry's arms useless and he could not retain his grip on it. Snape strode quickly over and scooped up the fallen crutch, gathered it up with the other Harry still held, and set them aside, his expression intently curious and concerned.

Pomfrey took them up and placed them a little farther away. "Only if the hospital wing is on fire, Mr. Potter," she chastised him before striding away.

"Harry, what is wrong?" Snape asked in concern.

Harry clasped his shaking hands together to quell them. Snape, apparently seeing this, grasped them and sat on the edge of the bed beside him. "Harry?" he prompted again more forcefully.

"I thought . . ." he started to reply before cutting himself off. He could not think it again. Realizing he needed to explain somehow, he said, "Shadows are killing each other." Snape sat straight and gripped Harry's hands tighter.

"How close by?" Snape asked.

"I don't know," Harry replied. "And I don't just see it, I can feel it too." Words failed him, so he fell silent, even though he truly wanted Snape to understand. He rubbed at his chest where the stab of pain had gone through him in the dream.

"What is he saying?" Pomfrey asked. She stood between the beds, hands clasped before her the way she held them when she was diagnosing something.

Snape put an arm around Harry and pulled him sideways to lean against him. "I believe he is saying that Voldemort's former servants are killing each other and that he feels them dying." Pomfrey took a step backward. Harry frowned and dropped his gaze so he didn't see Snape give the hospital witch a most displeased expression. Snape sighed and said, "You are safe here, Harry."

"I want to know what is happening, though," he murmured. Strength was returning to his limbs, so he sat straighter against the reassuring weight of Snape's arm.

"We should inform Minerva anyway. I can summon her," Snape said, as he reached into his robes for his wand.

"I'll fetch her," Pomfrey said, forestalling him. "A little less abrupt to be woken in person," she chastised. She spun on her toe and walked out.

Harry let his head fall to the side, onto Snape's shoulder. The warmth and solidity of him chased away the last of Harry's earlier panic and with the calm the rest of his strength flooded back as well, as though the vision had half paralyzed him somehow.

Eventually, the door opened again. McGonagall hesitated momentarily at the sight before her, until Pomfrey's passing her made her step forward. As she approached, she put up a hand to stop Snape from explaining. "Ministry contacted me just before Madam Pomfrey arrived. Seems there was an attempted breakout from Azkaban tonight. A bit of a battle ensued as a result and two former Death Eaters were killed."

"Who?" Snape asked.

"The Lestrangle brothers," she replied. "It was apparently Bellatrix Lestrangle and Lucius Malfoy who initiated the breakout. The Ministry assure me that they are all back in custody now."

It bothered Harry that he had felt such pain and regret at the death of one who had tortured Neville's parents. In the dream he had been reaching out to save him, which sickened him now. He was pulled back to the present by Snape's arm shifting so that just a hand rested against his back.

"He saw it in his mind," Snape explained quietly to McGonagall.

Harry looked away; he didn't want anyone to know that. McGonagall stepped closer and said, "I'm sorry, Harry. I wish I had a spell to cut you free of them." For a moment it seemed she would say more, but she patted his shoulder instead. "Need anything?"

Harry shook his head, still not looking up at her.

"Will you be all right now?" Snape asked. "Do you want me to stay?"

Feeling renewed embarrassment, Harry shook his head with certainty. Snape stood up but hovered near the end of the bed. Harry put his glasses aside yet again and lay down. Exhaustion tugged at him despite his aching bones. His eyes fell closed on their own. Footsteps headed away, scuffing lightly on the stone floor. As the door creaked open, he heard McGonagall say, "I do apologize, Severus," before their voices faded out.

In the dim corridor leading to the staircase, Snape asked, "For what? I do not think even Albus could have severed him from these remnants of Voldemort's mind. They are a part of him, probably have been since he received that scar."

McGonagall clasped her hands before her as they stopped at the bottom of the stairs before parting. "That wasn't what I was referring to." She smiled slyly and said, "I was apologizing for ever doubting that you could take care of him."

Snape stiffened and put his hand on the handrail curling upward. "Hm," he huffed lightly while shooting her a dark look that lacked real conviction. He turned away and stepped up.

She grinned and shook her head. "Goodness, I hate admitting that Albus was right," she said to his back.

He paused midway up and turned, still holding the narrow eyed look from before. "Dare I ask about what?" he inquired with some snide.

McGonagall grinned more. "He must have been. Can't imagine you've changed that much," she commented playfully.

He jerked back around with an abrupt snarl before heading up and through the door to the next wing.



Chapter 38 -- Lizard's Leg and Howlet's Wing

Harry was released the next morning. The muscles in his ankles felt badly bruised but he took pride in his ability to force himself to walk normally out the door anyway. He wanted to get to the tower before his friends departed to come visit him.

"Harry!" Ginny greeted him warmly when he stepped through the portrait hole. She looked as though she was trying to finish up an assignment in a hurry before breakfast. Her eyes were a little puffy as though she had had a late night. "Sorry, Binns' essay," she explained as she bent back over her parchment and wrote furiously. "Glad you're better, though," she said sincerely as she scrawled.

Harry went up to his room where he received equally warm greetings from his dormitory mates. A little embarrassed by the attention, he changed his robes quickly and followed them down to breakfast. As they entered the Hall, many students turned to look at him and whispered to each other. Harry shook his head and took a seat, hoping food would come soon so everyone would stop talking about him and start eating instead. His friends all gave him sympathetic expressions. Penelope looked downright sorry. Harry, anxious to talk to her alone, ducked his head and rearranged his napkin. He had not felt this embarrassed by attention since the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

Parkinson stopped by their table on the arm of Malfoy, who looked positively gleeful. He gave Harry a kind of kissy-face. "Too bad it wasn't Voldemort, Potter," Parkinson said mockingly. "Didn't seem to have any trouble with him." She laughed gratingly as Harry turned away from them and rolled his eyes.

"Get lost," Ron threatened them.

"Hah," Parkinson laughed as they strolled to the front. "Carried to the hospital wing . . . by a Slytherin."

"Aye?" Ron asked when they were gone. "That true?"

Harry rubbed his forehead as he felt himself flush. The whole Great Hall would have heard her. "Yeah. Wereporridge."

Ron burst out with a laugh before quickly clamping a hand over his mouth. "Sorry," he mumbled in a sincerity belied by his inability to keep from laughing with his eyes.

"Bring it up in ten years when I can laugh too, all right?" Harry snipped at him, although he could not seem to dredge up any real anger.

"I wonder who it was?" Hermione said as she arranged her napkin in her lap. She picked up the copy of the *Prophet* beside her. To Harry she said, "You should read this."

"What is it?" Ron asked, mouth full of toast.

Hermione said in an imparting big news voice, "Malfoy and the Lestranges tried to escape from Azkaban last night."

"I knew that," Harry said. When she asked how he could know, he replied simply, "McGonagall."

"Came and woke you up to tell you that?" Hermione asked disbelievingly.

"Not exactly," Harry replied, not feeling like getting into it right there. "I'll explain later." He scanned the paper; the article heading *Death Eaters' Grim Gaolbreak* was at the top. When Ron prompted him, he started reading aloud. "Convicted Voldemort Lieutenants Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange attempted last night to break out of Azkaban. Mr. Malfoy had apparently come into possession of an Ampliment. Their plans--"

"What's that?" Ron interrupted to ask.

Harry looked up at Hermione for an explanation. "A magic amplifier. Only works on some kinds of spells though. Rare and strictly regulated."

"Figures he'd have one, then," Harry commented before continuing. "Their plans went awry when Mrs. Lestrange tried to release her husband Rodolphus who was caged with his brother Rabastan. A fight apparently ensued in which Mrs. Lestrange, using a wand fashioned from a pear tree from the prison yard and strands of Kneazle fur, killed Rabastan with an Unforgivable Curse." Harry paused as the memory of the shadow shrinking to nothing played through his mind along with the quivery chilling feel of it.

Hermione took the paper back, saying informationally, "Rodolphus then attacked Bellatrix and she took him out as well. All right, there, Harry?"

"Yeah," he insisted, taking up his fork. He decided firmly that he didn't care what the lot of them all did to each other.

Their first class that day was double Herbology. As they walked to the greenhouses, Harry hung back slightly, tugging on Penelope's robe to slow her down as well. "I need to talk to you," Harry said quietly.

"Later, perhaps," she replied, glancing around shyly. There was no more time as they had arrived at the foggy glass door to the classroom.

Late that afternoon, Ron and Hermione dropped Harry off at the Defense classroom. McGonagall insisted that Harry not move around the school without at least two students or a teacher with him. Since he rarely went about alone, he thought he could tolerate that. He waved his friends off and closed the door.

"How are you feeling?" Snape asked.

"Embarrassed," Harry muttered.

Snape used the edge of another book to prop open the one in front of him before stepping around the front table. "Let's take care of that, then, shall we?" Harry put his bookbag on a chair in the last row and pulled out his wand as he came to the front. "Cloaked opponent," Snape said as though announcing a class topic. "I assume you attempted to Accio it, as I have seen you do that previously."

"Yep. Didn't work."

"It is possible to charm objects to stay put against an Accio, of course. I would not recommend attempting to counter it in the heat of battle as it is tricky. Instead, I think it is easier to utilize spells that work on everything in the immediate vicinity, invisible or otherwise." Snape studied him as though to make sure he was paying full attention before he stepped briskly onto the platform. Snape spread out a series of wooden stands before backing up to the far end and aiming his wand. "Do duck down," he suggested.

Harry, a little alarmed, backed up and squatted between two desks. Snape narrowed his eyes and said, "*Bolarum!*" while circling the wand over his head. The air filled suddenly with hundreds of spinning grey things which encircled anything upright. Snape immediately held his wand before him and used a Grand Flecture, causing the spinning blobs heading his way to flow around him. Harry ducked down farther as they whistled close over his own head.

The room fell silent. Semi-amorphous grey bindings were around all of the wooden stands and even the curtains. "You must be fast though with another spell once you locate your opponent--the bindings are easily tossed off." Snape canceled the spell on most of the bound objects, ignoring the curtains. "You try," he said, gesturing at the spot where he had been standing.

Harry, ankles painful from crouching, limped over to the indicated spot and waited for Snape to stand aside. He fingering the gouge in the handle of his wand and focused his mind.

They covered four other spells, repeating them until Snape was satisfied Harry had them down smoothly. Harry rubbed his eyes. Lack of sleep and his painful ankles were wearing him down.

"Feel better about your chances next time?" Snape asked.

"Yep. Thanks," he replied gratefully.

A knock sounded on the door before it opened and McGonagall leaned in. "May I have a word with Harry?" she asked.

Snape gestured that she could. "I will be in my office if you need me," he said as he departed.

When the door closed, McGonagall sighed. "Have you had other thoughts about what happened?"

"No," Harry admitted. "I don't know who it was. I don't even have a good guess beyond the obvious."

"I am considering questioning the Durmstrang students individually," she said thoughtfully.

"Don't do that, Professor," Harry said quickly.

She gave him a considering look. "Why not?" she asked with a bit of challenge.

Harry sighed. "They are all on edge after what Karkaroff pulled last year."

"You are saying that he and I are comparable?"

"Your position is," Harry insisted. "They don't know you that well." He could not bear to imagine Penelope getting questioned alone in the headmistress' office. He sighed and walked along the platform, slowly because his ankles complained immediately. "I don't think it was one of them anyway."

"Why is that?"

"Because I don't know any of them that well. Whoever it was, it was way more personal than that."

"Professor Snape has spoken to the students in his house who immediately leapt to mind. All of them were accounted for at the time."

"If you do question the visiting students, can you have Hermione or someone there?" Harry pleaded.

"That is an excellent idea, Mr. Potter, I shall do that. And please watch yourself since, as usual, we are unable to protect you," she added darkly.

"I will, ma'am," he insisted.

That evening in the common room, Harry, deciding he was not going to get a better opportunity, jerked his head to the side when Penelope looked up at him. He stood up, stepped away and waited. She hesitated with a pained face, their

friends all glancing up now in curiosity. Finally she put her books aside and stood to join him. Harry led her over to the empty corner by the bookshelf under the staircase to the girls dormitory. She glanced nervously back at her friends.

"Look," Harry started. He was immediately cut off by her saying, "I'm sorry."

When they both hesitated, she prompted, "You first, I think."

The problem was, Harry was not sure what he wanted to say. "I apologize for thinking you were Ginny," he said quietly. "I hope I didn't hurt your feelings."

"I assumed you expected or wished me to be," she said, sounding as though she were treading carefully.

"No," Harry insisted, surprised.

She relaxed with a silly grin. "I was so worried about you getting attacked and hurt," she muttered quickly, sounding grateful for a chance to express herself. "I thought you might want company, but you were asleep and . . ." She flushed then, eyes darting away. "I should not have woken you so, I think."

Harry could not hold back a grin. "It's all right, really."

They fell into an awkward silence. "Everyone is looking, are they not?" she asked nervously.

"I expect so," Harry replied, scanning the edge of his vision. They certainly were quiet over there. "Maybe we should go back over," he suggested, hoping to be saved from trying to say anything more.

* * *

"Harry," Hermione said in a businesslike tone as they stood in the Room of Requirement before D.A. "This book is a little better, I think. I just ordered it from the library in Edinburgh. Or, should I say, I had Remus Lupin order it and send it, since I was afraid they might send a note to McGonagall if I had it sent here direct."

"You told Remus what we were working on?" Harry asked, feeling a little uneasy about that.

"I asked him for advice. He was pretty amused, really. Think about it--he isn't going to tell. And he watched his schoolmates struggle with exactly the same thing." She made him sit down and they read sections together that she had marked.

When they had discussed the section on Transmogrifying Formation, she stood up and said, "Come on let's try it."

Harry stood slowly. "I don't think this is going to work," he breathed.

"Harry, it isn't that hard once you get the hang of it."

"Transfiguration has always been easy for you," Harry pointed out sharply.

"That isn't all there is to it, though," she said, sounding a little sad. "You haven't even wanted to repeat your form revelation to figure out what it is."

Harry couldn't deny that. The large, oddly bright, dog-like foot had rendered him very reluctant about the whole thing.

"Hagrid would know what it is, why don't you go ask him? He wouldn't tell what we were up to, I'm sure." At Harry's doubtful look, she added, "He doesn't have the same loyalty to McGonagall."

"I'll think about it," Harry said to put her off.

"Let's work on this spell then. Come on." She tugged on his arm to give him no way out.

* * *

Harry almost hated Potions again. It was getting very close. Greer paced by their bench for the tenth time, nose high, which made it hard for her to look down and made her look a little silly. Harry ignored her. She had already taken fifteen points off Gryffindor for questions he, Dean, and Frina had been only partially correct on. Greer had finally, and unfortunately, discovered that she could assign house points however she wished.

"What base would I get if I added four centipede segments after the boil?" Greer asked of Justin.

Justin who was busy with a critical part of his brewing, did not answer beyond a drawn out, "Um," to stall.

Greer answered for him. "Dryer's Caraway is the answer," she said. "A common N.E.W.T. question, by the way," she added in a helpful tone.

Justin looked relieved as he hurried to mix powdered bull's horn into his cauldron. Greer gave Harry a dark grin as she circled around.

"We have to do something," Dean leaned over and said. "She didn't take anything off. She only takes points off of Gryffindor now."

"I noticed," Harry said quietly, ignoring the teacher. Penelope and Frina looked at them in concern.

"Shh," Hermione said, although she looked pained. Harry assumed she was thinking of Ron's reaction two days ago when he saw the totals after last Potions class. She had had a hard time explaining to Ron what had happened to their lead. Harry felt the effort for the cup wasn't going to be worth it, but he did not want to voice that to his friends. That and he really would not mind if the Great Hall were in Gryffindor colors for the Leaving Feast--his last Leaving Feast.

* * *

"How are you doing, by the way?" Snape asked as he handed over a cup of tea while they sat in his office Thursday morning when Snape had an open slot. Hagrid had escorted Harry up after Care of Magical Creatures.

Harry thought of his failure at fending off his invisible attacker, his uncertainty over Penelope, his ongoing failure at generating enough magical energy to transform into whatever creature his Animagus form took, and his annoyance with Greer. He shrugged in lieu of a reply, and sipped steaming hot tea. After a long moment, he said in a sudden thought, "Do you think I could drop Potions and just take the N.E.W.T.?"

"What?" Snape asked in confusion.

"Our eighty point lead for the cup disappeared in three days," Harry said, just barely holding his anger at bay. He held up his hands. "And honestly, I don't actually think it's worth the trouble, but . . ." He stopped at Snape's very doubtful look. "Really, it's too much of a battle," he insisted, now sounding a bit angry. "But it just occurred to me that if I'm not in Potions class, then Greer won't take so many points off, or give so many away to the other houses."

"You truly think that your presence makes that much of a difference?" Snape asked. "And I did not realize you believed there was a problem."

"She stares at me every time she does it," Harry griped, eager to vent now that he had started. "That's why I think so. And yes, there's a problem." He remembered Ron's anguish at lunch yesterday when Hermione told him what had happened yet again. He had come within inches of sniping at Harry. "My friends are angry with *me* now, but I don't know what to do. You used to do this too, but not so perniciously," he added emphatically. This garnered a closed look from Snape. Harry sighed and started to put his books away. "Sorry, I told myself I wasn't going to complain about other teachers to you, and I should stop."

"You need not leave," Snape pointed out, sounding like he really wanted Harry to stay. "You truly believe there is a point problem?"

Harry pulled his History book back out. "It seems petty to give you a precise accounting of the points assigned in the last two class periods, but I can. And if you don't believe me, I'm sure Hermione remembers."

"I would trust your accounting, Harry," Snape insisted. "I will speak to Minerva."

"Oh good, Greer won't know where that came from."

"You have another suggestion?" Snape asked snidely.

Harry forced himself to relax. "No," he replied quietly. "I just think she'll come up with some other way to take revenge." Harry sighed and opened his textbook.

"Speaking of revenge, are you still having visions?" Snape asked before Harry could start reading.

"Occasionally," Harry admitted. "Though they've got a little better lately." This was somewhat true. When he had them, his dreams were less threatening but still shadowy in a strange way he wasn't used to.

"I wish we knew whom you sensed on Knockturn Alley for certain," Snape said. "Although, I cannot imagine either one managing to pierce the protections of this castle, or besting you, cloak or not."

"I looked at the Map that night, but I didn't see anyone on it who shouldn't have been."

Snape's eyes considered him. "How good is the Map?"

"It knew Moody was really Crouch," Harry explained. When Snape raised a brow in surprise, Harry went on. "I didn't realize it was his son though. I thought it was Crouch Senior in your office that night. And of course I didn't know it was actually Moody." Harry set his cup down on the edge of the desk before leaning back and staring upward. "Trusting him was such a mistake."

"More?" Snape asked, reaching for the teapot. When Harry shook his head, Snape commented dryly, "We were all fooled, Harry, in case you are still holding yourself solely responsible for that as well."

Harry studied the ceiling. "I guess not," he conceded.

Snape stood suddenly and went to the window. After a moment he muttered, "Hm," and went back to his desk. "Hawks rarely can be convinced to deliver post," he commented.

Harry froze. "What?" he asked, too sharply.

With an intent look, Snape said, "I've noticed a hawk around the castle. It delivered a letter a few mornings ago." As Harry growled and put his books away quickly, Snape asked suggestively, "Somewhere you need to be?"

Angry, Harry hefted his bag. "A red-tail, right?"

"Yes." Snape's eyes narrowed, but Harry did not feel any Legilimency. "Is that hawk something special?" Snape asked slowly.

Harry shrugged instead of replying, put his things together quickly, and departed.

He found Ron sitting alone in the common room since Hermione had Arithmancy at that hour. "Wha?" his friend greeted him. "You about without an escort?"

"Never mind that," Harry said harshly. "Come here--I need to talk to you." He dragged him out and down to an empty classroom.

"Your sister has been flying?"

"No!"

"You're certain?"

Ron thought a moment, staring at the bright window with a deep expression. "I really don't think so. She'd have told me--or bragged about it at least."

Harry exhaled harshly. "She better not be." He noticed the clock. "We have to get to class."

"And *you* have to have an escort," Ron said firmly, poking Harry painfully in the chest.

* * *

At breakfast the next morning, the room shifted as the post owls came in the upper windows. Harry watched the incoming birds closely, until Ginny sat across from Dean, two chairs down, complaining about some essay assignment Binns had given them. A little chagrined, Harry returned to buttering his toast.

Footsteps walked briskly up the hall and stopped beside him. He glanced up to find Snape holding out something for him; it was a copy of the *Prophet*. Snape's expression was a little different, unusually intent for just an instant. Harry took his eyes away from his guardian and unrolled the paper.

Jugson, Death Eater, Apprehended, the headline read. Harry blinked at it and quickly scanned the accompanying text. The man had been hiding out at Borgin & Burkes on Knockturn Alley, the shop Harry had accidentally Floored into once. Ministry Aurors also arrested one of the shopkeepers, Illustrius Burke.

Harry was surprised that he had guessed right. He held the paper back out to Snape as Ron asked, "What's up?". Ron put his fork down and poured juice for himself. "Oh, hello, Professor," he added awkwardly upon seeing Snape there.

"They have captured Jugson," Snape explained.

Ron hit Harry on the shoulder. "And without your help this time," he teased.

"Not precisely," Snape said dryly. He rolled up the paper and stepped away with a swish of robe.

"They got him from your reporting the shadow?" Ron asked quietly as he took a thick slab of butter for his bread.

Ginny piped in, "What is this?"

Whispering, Harry explained, "Over holiday I sensed a shadow on Diagon Alley. Knockturn Alley, actually. Snape'd needed ingredients from a shop down there. The Aurors just arrested him."

"Good job, Harry," Ginny congratulated him.

"How was it down there, by the way?" Ron asked around a thickly buttered piece of toast.

Harry grinned. "Pretty funny. I scared nearly everyone away, so it was really quiet." He let his friends finish laughing before he said in a low voice, "But I lied to the Aurors--I didn't tell them that I could see a D.E. in my mind. I told them I'd actually seen one of them and I had to guess which it might have been."

"Why did you lie?" Hermione asked, concerned and a little chastising.

Harry frowned and tossed his toast onto his plate, half eaten. No one around them seemed to be listening in. "Because I was afraid if they knew I inherited that from Voldemort, they wouldn't let me into the Auror's program."

"Oh, probably a good thought," Ron commented, frowning as he considered things further. He gestured with his butter-coated knife while saying, "Ministry can be funny about things like that." He glanced worriedly across at Hermione before returning to eating. She refrained from comment with a frown of her own.

A letter dropped before Harry. In a fit of coincidence, it had the Ministry seal on it.

"Look, they're onto you already," Ron teased.

Harry opened the envelope and found a letter and a brochure about the Auror's program. Heart racing now, he scanned the letter. "They accepted my application," he said excitedly.

No one around him moved. Finally, Ron said in a Greer-like tone, "Of course they did, Harry."

"Tonks insisted they were going to treat it fairly," Harry said, suddenly miffed.

"I'm sure they did," Hermione said reassuringly, giving Ron a warning look.

"Harry, be reasonable," Ron said. "What did you write on your application anyway?"

Harry finished reading the letter which was clearly a form letter and flipped open the brochure. "Uh, Severus made me list all of the dark wizards I'd caught or battled."

Hermione ducked her head. Ron rubbed the bridge of his nose. Harry couldn't tell if they were trying not to laugh or something else.

"Harry," Ron began in a tone to fill him in. He waved off Hermione as he said, "How could you honestly think that you wouldn't get accepted?"

"I suppose," Harry conceded, folding up the brochure and putting both away.

"Aye," Ron breathed and pounded his forehead with his fist. Harry glanced around at his friends. They were not amused; they actually looked a bit tired of him. He vowed not to bring it up again.

Later, when they were settled into the common room after classes, Harry again pulled out the brochure entitled *So you've been accepted to a Ministry Apprenticeship* and read it carefully. Most of it he could have guessed, but on the back, a list of qualifications to be covered during testing for the Auror's program had been penned into the box for this. Mentally he checked off that he was all right with: *advanced spell mastery, potion identification and brewing, low tendency to panic*, beneath these was one he hadn't considered: *good physical condition a must*. From a Muggle perspective, he did not qualify at all as athletic. Getting around on a broom during Quidditch was sometimes a workout, but probably not at the level they meant.

"Good reading?" Dean asked.

"I have to get into shape," Harry said a little worriedly.

Frina looked up from her parchment. "I am surprised Hogwarts has no workout rooms. Durmstrang has three."

Hermione chimed in, "I think English wizards are loath to appear to use their muscles for anything." She reached over and shook Ron's skinny arm to demonstrate. "Wha?" he blurted, since he had not been paying attention.

"I've been running to lose weight if you want to come along," Neville offered from the couch, where he was reading the Quibbler, sideways this time rather than the normal upside-down. "I don't go very fast, but I try for an hour every three days."

"That'd be great," Harry said, instantly relieved to have some help.

"Tomorrow before breakfast, then," Neville said before returning to his textbook.

"Aye," Harry breathed. "All right," he agreed, thinking he had no choice, really.

"Someone else has to go as well," Ron pointed out. When everyone turned to him expectantly, he said, "Ugh, *before* breakfast?"



Chapter 39 -- A Charm of Pow'rf'ul Trouble

The weather warmed up, making their morning runs a lot more pleasant. By breakfast time, though, Harry found he wanted nothing more than to eat the way Ron usually did.

They piled onto the benches in the Great Hall after quick showers, their hair still damp. Despite the quick grooming, Penelope seemed to think he looked fine. Her considerate expression startled him when his eyes met hers, and reminded him that he had to manage to talk to her alone, which was bloody difficult when he needed escorting at all times.

When the food appeared, he and Ron actually battled over the spoon for the eggs. "Go on then," Harry said, giving it up. Ron immediately served Harry a large pile of scramble with a grin.

"Better this morning?" Hermione asked.

"Yep," Harry assured her. Neville had insisted the first two weeks were the worst before it got much easier. "Not too bad today; although I'm still ready to go back to bed."

He glanced around the Hall as he usually did at breakfast, looking at who was paying him special attention. Greer was, as usual. They had not caught Harry's attacker and in his more annoyed moments, Harry wondered if it wasn't her. McGonagall seemed to think it was someone inside the castle due to the protective spells. Harry didn't quite have that much faith in the castle's spells, even if she insisted no one could have come in. McGonagall definitely had not liked his suggesting the Potions professor, so he had not pressed it. Given the way the points were going--they were now seventy behind Slytherin--he hoped it was her, and that she tried it again.

Pig dropped a letter before Ron, who flipped it open and read it with a worried expression. His face brightened halfway through. "Dad got a promotion," he said happily.

"That's great," Hermione said at about the same time Harry did.

He read more of the letter. "He's now Assistant Department Head. Mum says it's a nice rise and it can't possibly be any more hours." Ron looked up and down the table, then looked confused. "Wonder where Ginny is," he said.

Harry's chest froze and melted. He looked up and scanned the birds circling overhead. He listened to Hermione say, "I think he'll like working for Amelia Bones." There were too many birds to track easily what kind they were. Maybe she was just finishing an assignment at the last moment, Harry considered, when he didn't see any unusual species coasting overhead.

He had just given up and returned to his eggs when a whip-like sound and screech came from the front of the Hall. The whole large room quieted and everyone turned. Professor Snape had a large bird in a net. It fluttered on the head table futilely, knocking everything about.

"Shit," Harry breathed and immediately stood and strode toward the front. Halfway to the head table the fluttering abruptly ceased and Ginny, tangled in a net, was sprawled over the white linen and plates.

"Ms. Weasley," Snape greeted her darkly.

"Goodness," McGonagall said, sounding dismayed. Some of the other teachers stood up to better peer down the long table.

Gasps and giggling sounded from the around the Hall. Ginny was just managing to stand when Harry reached her. "I said no flying," Harry snapped angrily at her.

"Who are you, my mother?" she snarled back, her eyes darting to Ron and Hermione who had come up behind Harry.

"Everything that happens is my responsibility, or didn't you consider that?" he came right back.

"Hm," McGonagall murmured. With forced politeness, she addressed Harry. "Mr. Potter, just how many Animagi do we have?"

Harry stalled to think, surprised at how quickly she had put that together. "Seven," he reluctantly replied.

Her brows went up rather high. She stood and leaned over the table to address the Hall. "May I have your attention. I want all Animagi up here before the head table, please."

The avid whispering around the Hall, which had paused for the announcement, restarted fiercely. Students stood and came to the front, including three Slytherins. Harry looked over the two beside Suze in surprise.

"This is a few more than seven," McGonagall observed dryly.

"Not all of them are ours, Professor," Harry explained.

"Well, let's see them," she commanded. "Ms. Weasley, we know yours, obviously. Mr. Weasley?"

Ron, blushing, but also looking a bit like he had been given a rare chance to show off, stepped forward and closed his eyes. Long seconds he stood there before an Irish setter took his place. It looked up at the headmistress with its large eyes. The buzzing conversations of the Hall surged and Harry glanced around at the wide-eyed gazes of the rest of the students.

"Not surprising somehow, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall opined as Ron changed back, already mid-blush. "Ms. Granger . . ." she said next.

Hermione changed where she stood into a brown otter that slithered around in a circle once before transforming back.

"Fine. Mr. Longbottom?" She sounded surprised, although as well like she did not want to sound so.

Neville looked down at the floor before changing into a lion. The whole school *oobed* at this and more students stood up on the benches to see better. Neville's tail swished back and forth.

"Very nice, Mr. Longbottom," McGonagall said in shock. Neville, when he changed back, blushed as well and scuffed his feet as he stepped back. "Mr. Thomas, can you top that?" the headmistress asked. She had completely lost her scolding tone and now sounded as though she might be enjoying herself.

"I can try, ma'am." He changed into a moor pony.

"I'd say that equals it, at least," she said as she leaned forward to look him over better.

"Mr. Pullman," she prompted the Hufflepuff Chaser, who had to scrunch his eyes up in deep concentration before turning into a billy goat.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry shook his head. At her questioning expression, he explained, "I can't do it." She looked disappointed, making him drop his gaze.

"Mr. Peranna?" she turned to the Slytherins instead.

The tallest of the Slytherins changed into a raven and immediately back. "I'm registered, ma'am," he stated in a very deep voice.

"So am I," Ginny interjected. At their surprised looks, she said, "Dad took me into the Ministry over holiday to file for it. I just don't have my card yet," she added less assertively.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Ron demanded.

"Why didn't *you* ask Dad?" she retorted. Ron looked as though that had not even occurred to him.

"Ms. Parkinson?" McGonagall prompted, ending their arguing.

Pansy sighed and transformed. At first it seemed that she had disappeared, but they all looked at the floor where a long red centipede slithered between the stones. Many students along the house tables shuffled to try to see as well. Pansy reappeared a blink later.

"And the youngest by far . . . Ms. Zepher," McGonagall prompted, sounding impressed. Snape as well, studied her intently. She changed into a white mink that stood on its hind legs and observed them. "Nicely done," the headmistress said, then added chastisingly, "Although, if you can manage that, there are no spells in my class that are beyond you."

Suze changed back, looking chagrined.

In an official headmistress voice McGonagall said, "I expect you all to register. I'll provide you with the forms." She turned to Harry, "And you, Mr. Potter. I will see *you* in my office." She stood and stepped quickly down the table. Harry wandered to the end to meet her and followed her out. The whole school watched them depart, whispering fiercely.

Once in her office, Harry took the visitor's chair she gestured at. She went to a shelf and took down the teapot. He watched her make tea and set it to steep on the desk. She set out two cups and waited patiently with her hands clasped for it to steep enough. Eventually, she poured them each a cup and pushed one to Harry.

Harry, confused, accepted it. McGonagall sipped hers with a faraway expression and said, "I think ten minutes will seem appropriately stern, don't you?"

"Ma'am?"

"For your thorough chewing out. Ten minutes?"

"Uh, I'm not sure what you mean," he replied carefully.

She smiled faintly. "There must not have been any injuries. Pomfrey has always watched for them."

"There weren't as far as I know," Harry said.

"When did this start?"

"A few weeks after Christmas," Harry confessed, cradling the teacup in his hands to draw off its warmth.

"Seven, in that time?" she breathed, stunned.

Harry double-checked that in his mind. "Yes, ma'am," he replied, dropping his gaze.

"I do not know what to do with you, Mr. Potter."

Harry hoped he had not gotten Snape into equal trouble. "Severus didn't know," he thought to insist, hoping it was not too late to sound believable. When she remained silent, he raised his eyes to hers. Her expression looked strange, maybe even affectionate. He blinked in confusion.

She set her cup and saucer aside. "This school does not have a medal for students who inspire others to learn far beyond their year."

"Are you saying I'm not in trouble?" he asked in disbelief. He was tempted to point out that Hermione was the main inspiration, but decided that could come out as blame passing. It bothered him to stay silent on this point, but he did so with difficulty; he could always apologize to Hermione later.

She stood and came around the desk. As she passed him, she put a firm hand down on his right shoulder. "To everyone else's view, you are in serious trouble. But in reality, you are not." Harry's shoulder relaxed under her long fingers. "But, I will have to take a hundred points from Gryffindor for it to be believable."

"Ugh," Harry groaned in pain at that thought.

"I will, however, reverse any other point changes Gertrude chooses to make for the remainder of the year." She gave him a twinkling eye. "I expect that will more than balance out."

Harry had to force down a wide grin. "I expect it will," he said with happy expectation.

After the proper time had passed, Harry headed back down to the Great Hall. Ron had just returned from checking the gems used for House scoring. He looked sad.

"We'll manage, Ron. Don't worry," Harry insisted as he stepped over the bench and warmed his plate with a heating charm.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said sincerely. Her eyes followed McGonagall as she strode to the front. When the headmistress returned to her breakfast, Hermione said, "You must have taken the blame."

Harry shrugged. "I could have stopped it so I have every right to it. Don't worry about it." He was worried though; Snape was giving him a *very* stern look. In the midst of all the new spell work and interesting discovery, Harry had somehow overlooked the potential to disappoint his guardian.

Frina and Penelope looked a bit like they had been run over by something. Hermione reassured them repeatedly that everything was all right, that they had been in much worse trouble in the past. Harry wondered if they were feeling left out, rather than worried as Hermione assumed.

Breakfast ended. The plates cleared themselves and the students filed out. Harry waved off his friends and stepped to the front where Snape sat eyeing him with a shuttered expression. McGonagall had started to depart with the others, but returned upon seeing the two of them remaining behind. She clasped her hands before her and waited for the other staff to leave.

When their half of the hall had cleared, the headmistress said, "I think we are even with Mr. Potter--we failed him as well recently." She patted Harry's shoulder as she turned away. "Go easy on him, Severus. I did."

Harry was grateful to see that Snape's posture eased at her comments, at least somewhat.

"We have class right now. We *will* discuss this later," his guardian stated as he stood up.

"Yes, sir," Harry agreed.

After a long day of classes, during which many students came up and congratulated him and his friends and only a few complained about the points, Harry trudged to the Defense office escorted by Ron, Hermione, Frina, and Penelope. The four of them stood behind Harry with almost comic formality as the office door opened.

Snape took in the scene before gesturing that Harry should enter. At the last instant, as the door was re-closing, Penelope stepped forward and halted it with her foot. Before she could speak, and it looked to be something deeply felt, Snape cut her off by saying, "Your forthrightness is admirable, Ms. Tideweather, but misplaced."

Harry said, "It's all right, Peni." As he stepped in, he waved them away with an expression that made it clear they were overreacting.

The door closed. Snape returned to his chair and steepled his fingers before him. "Peni?" he echoed.

"What?" Harry retorted defensively as he stood before the desk. "She thinks you were in with Karkaroff, of course she's worried."

Snape looked like he was resisting a retort he might regret. He clasped his hands tightly. "Minerva was ridiculously lenient with you," he stated darkly, making Harry swallow hard.

"I hadn't thought until after that I might get you in trouble," Harry said. "I certainly didn't mean to do that. Is that what's bothering you?"

His guardian's eyes narrowed in thought. "Partially," he admitted. "Your flaunting of the rules has always bothered me."

Harry frowned and took the visitor's chair by dropping into it. He glanced at the many fancy scrolls now filling a shelf off to the left. "Did you actually find the rule that we were breaking?" he asked, taking a chance.

Snape looked slightly taken aback. His focus went distant as he considered the question. "There is a general rule against students working on dangerous spells without supervision. I expect that would apply."

"It wasn't dangerous. No one got hurt. By that definition, my walking down a hallway alone violates the rules."

Snape rubbed his forehead hard with his fingertips. "Why did you not ask for supervision? It would have been provided."

"It wouldn't have been the same," Harry said.

"It would not have been following in the footsteps of the Marauders, you mean?" Snape challenged him fiercely.

Forcefully, because Snape had caught him off guard with this interpretation, Harry retorted, "It had nothing to do with that!" He leaned forward, hands propped on the arms of the chair, furious. "Don't you dare believe that," he added.

"So what was the purpose?" Snape sneered.

Harry breathed in and out to calm himself. "Thirty bonus points on the N.E.W.T." he replied. "And I don't mean to sound obnoxious, but there wasn't much else left to work on." Still angry, Harry stated darkly, "Not many footsteps to follow, given that they're nearly all dead." When Snape didn't comment, Harry went on, a spike of desperation driving his words. "Why would you even think that, or better yet, think it had anything to do with you?"

Snape still did not respond, although his expression lost some of its flatness.

Harry swore under his breath. "We ran out of things to do and it sounded interesting. That was it. I've been working on it for the points, but it isn't as though I've managed to get anywhere with it . . . it is Transfiguration after all."

"You truly have not mastered the spell?" Snape asked.

"NO," Harry nearly shouted. "So I'll get an 'A' on my N.E.W.T. Happy?"

Snape sat back suddenly. "I do not, in the least, wish you to fail your tests," he stated, sounding frustrated. He frowned deeply. "Perhaps I am overreacting. And as Minerva said, we have failed to protect you as well."

"I don't see the connection. But I'll take it," Harry said. "I really don't mean to make you angry."

Snape exhaled loudly. "Any other rules you are despicably flaunting at the moment?" When Harry shook his head, Snape challenged him. "None? You have not broken a single other rule this year?"

"Uh, I opened Malfoy's wombat crate because I was worried about how it was faring. But Hagrid already rebuked me for that. I'd told him I was worried about what it was turning into," he explained. "Uh . . ." Harry thought more. At Snape's expectant expression, Harry quickly said, "I let Malfoy talk me into a duel. But I think I won, so I didn't bother mentioning it. I think that's why he was so tough during class the other day . . . he was trying to get even." Harry eventually shook his head. "I can't think of anything else."

Snape rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Rather boring year, then."

"Not really," Harry insisted. More lightly, he said, "Someone is still trying to kill me. That makes it feel normal."

Snape's hair fell into his face as his head lowered. "I do apologize for not finding out who it is." He stood and came around the desk, face still curtained. "I expected it only would require an interview or two with a few of my students to discover it. But surprisingly, no one knows anything. Even of the things they are unwilling to speak, nothing was useful."

Harry, not really comfortable with Legilimency being used like that on his behalf, fidgeted with his feet.

"Well, continue to not go about alone," Snape said in a dismissive voice. As Harry stood, he added, "And please, no more severe rules violations."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. He thought of pointing out how little time there was left to make that much trouble, but decided against it.

* * *

During Quidditch practice, Harry hovered, waiting, while Ron re-explained a play he wanted the Chasers to practice. Harry and the Beaters were pretending to be opponents, but at the moment they weren't doing anything. Normally, Harry would not have minded hanging out in midair on a broom on a nice day, but today, for the very first time ever, he thought maybe he should be studying instead. Realizing he was thinking this made him rub his head, hard.

Harry flew a lap on his broom to distract himself while Ron and Ginny debated how the play should run, but he could not shake the vague angst that he would be better off right that moment with a book open in front of him, or his notes. He needed to write up quiz sheets for their revising for an Astronomy examination two days away. He needed to take a look at the bookmarked sections of the supplemental texts for the Potions N.E.W.T. He needed . . . Harry sloth rolled and hung upside down to distract himself further.

From his upside-down viewpoint, he noticed the Durmstrang students sitting in the stands, books open in front of them. Other students were here and there on the benches, talking or reading. With his hand Harry tweaked the broom handle and turned himself to better look at the Durmstrang students. Penelope sat bent over a small book, her dark hair shining in the sunlight. The angle of her shoulder was kind of pleasing, he thought idly.

"Bored?" Ron asked from where he and Ginny hovered. When Harry turned upright and shrugged, Ron said, "Well, let's run it again, before Harry decides to try flying without his broom."

Harry positioned himself with Sloper and Carren on either side and prepared to make appropriate defensive maneuvers when the Chasers came down the pitch. When Ginny came at him he swerved away slightly before aiming back at her, smooth on his old familiar broom and feeling aggressively strong, which he attributed to running since nothing else could account for it. The certainty of his movements made her pass the Quaffle off earlier than Hickory was expecting it and the other Chaser had to dive to get it.

"Sorry, let's do that again," she said in a disgusted tone. She sped around to her fellow Chaser to pick up the Quaffle and return to the starting position. The others reset without comment. Ginny gave Harry a narrow, challenging look before she said, "Go."

Harry repeated the same thing and this time she held her course despite his cutting her off. In the end Harry dodged away to avoid the foul, and their robes brushed at high-speed. Harry turned and gave Chase as Ginny passed the Quaffle upward as Hickory rotated around. Sloper swung between them aiming his broom straight at the center post. Hickory threw the Quaffle hard to him, which he ducked rather than caught. Ginny caught it instead, flying beyond him and tossed it through the left-hand goal.

Ron cheered from his position as opposition keeper. "All right! Let's repeat it with a Bludger in play."

* * *

Harry rode the turning stone staircase for his next tutoring session with some unease, a little worried McGonagall would change her mind about letting him off. He stepped into the office at her invitation and took the overstuffed chair already facing the desk. As he unpacked his bookbag, she came around and held out a book. "I've already read that one," he pointed out upon reading the title *Animagical*. He placed his other books on the edge of the desk.

She withdrew it and turned it around to flip through it. "Have you tried a Canarevelatio?" she asked.

Harry set down the quill he had just taken out for note taking. It sounded suspiciously as though she were trying to help him become an Animagus. This possibility had not occurred to him. "Yes, ma'am."

She considered him in silence. "And it didn't work? You should be able to predict your form, in any event, I'd expect."

Feeling reluctant now, Harry replied, "No, the revelation did work."

A little befuddled, she said, "That is half the difficulty of the Animagia. Have you been working on the various energies? This book does a rather remarkable job of explaining them all."

"Yes, ma'am."

"A stag is a grazer. They are usually easier to attain. Unlike Mr. Longbottom's rather predatorial hunter."

"What's that?" Harry blurted. He had not known there was a difference.

"Prey forms are easier to attain than predator. I expect your stag form is easier than you realize. As your godfather used to tell it, it took him much longer to work out the Animagia energies and your father never let Sirius live down how slow he was in achieving his form.

Harry shook his head. "It's not a stag. . . . I don't know what it is." His father had been prey, he thought with a queer, cold shiver.

Her brow furrowed. She put the book down on the desk and rested her hand beside it. "Let's see the Canarevelatio."

Harry reached for an excuse. "Are you sure you want to cover this instead of last week's class session?"

"It is worth thirty points on the N.E.W.T., as I'm certain you are aware. It would most certainly push you over the top to the grade you need. Go on."

Harry pulled off his shoe and sock. After a deep breath he incanted the spell. On the first try the same bright paw appeared. With a sudden movement, McGonagall leaned in close and reached for it. Harry tried to pull away, but she was faster.

"Hold still," she said distractedly.

Harry had to bite his lower lip to keep from jerking his foot away again. The nerves on his paw were in some different arrangement and her touch felt *very* odd. She pressed on his toe, causing a vicious long black claw to protrude. Harry was gaping at it when his foot changed back.

She stood straight, deep in thought. "It would make sense, actually, for you to be something predatorial, Harry. No offense."

"What is it?" Harry breathed.

She considered him in silence. "You are very uncomfortable with your form, aren't you?"

"I don't even know *what* it is," he pointed out defensively.

She crouched before him and put a hand on his bare human foot. "Harry," she began soothingly, then stopped. "Repeat the spell one more time," she said easily.

Harry sighed and obliged her. She looked over the rough paw pads and pushed out each of four long claws. If he had seen claws like that on something in the Forbidden Forest, he would have run the other way.

"Not precisely a cat, but not a canine either," she said in thought. "I don't know quite what you are, Harry." She continued to hold his foot again after it had normalized. Eventually, she said, "We all have the potential in us to become something unexpected. It doesn't make us less ourselves. It doesn't make us dangerous, unless we let it." She stood then, with apparently stiff knees. "I'm not sure what you are uneasy about, exactly, but I expect that you of all people will not become something you despise, no matter how much power you may attain."

He took in her words with a little confusion, but they were finding a hearing inside him somewhere. He felt much calmer as he considered them.

McGonagall was speaking again. "Next time you can, go down to Hagrid and ask him what that is. He will most certainly know," she said as she stepped back to her chair. "Now, where were we. . . ?"

Harry was still thoughtful when he returned to the common room, escorted by Professor Sinistra, and joined his friends working on various assignments.

"Is everything okay?" Penelope asked him. Everyone else looked up to see the answer to this.

"Yeah, it's fine," Harry replied. "No worries," he added with a small smile.

"Your headmistress is very nice," Frina commented.

Harry studied her. McGonagall must have questioned them, he realized. His eyes went to Hermione, who nodded with a wry smile.

"I told her not to bother," Harry pointed out.

"She has to consider every possibility, Harry," Hermione pointed out.

Harry flipped open one of his alternative Potions texts to look for more essay material about blood-based brewing techniques. "She hasn't considered the right one yet, apparently," he commented.



Chapter 40 -- Boil Thou First i' the Charmed Pot

It was a fine sunny day for Slytherin vs. Hufflepuff. Spring seemed eager to give way to summer. The lawn fairly glowed in lush greens as they all tramped down to the pitch. Overhead, the banners snapped in a steady wind and they found seats in the second row from the front. The other stands were also crowded; apparently everyone thought it a fine day for Quidditch.

The old leather-covered crate with the balls was carried out and placed on the pitch. Madam Hooch stood beside it, waiting. Ron leaned close. "Still cheering for Slytherin?" he asked Harry.

Harry gave him a smiling glance to which Ron rolled his eyes hopelessly. "Janet doesn't have a chance," Harry asserted quietly. Except it is sunny, he thought and wondered if the Hufflepuff Seeker would realize how sensitive Suze's eyes were to the light.

The teams flew out, looking eager and energized. They hovered impatiently in formation while Madam Hooch gave them the usual warnings about what she was going to be watching for.

For a Hufflepuff match it was a rough game and much closer than expected, until Suze finally caught the snitch. Harry had watched her circling high in order to look down while searching. Even so, she squinted a lot in the bright light. Janet, if she had tried to take advantage, did not do so successfully.

As they left the stands, Ron muttered, "That's a one hundred ten point difference, so that puts Slytherin up by . . . uff, I can't even think it."

"We have another match," Harry pointed out.

"Don't catch the Snitch until we are two hundred points ahead then, okay?" Ron said sarcastically.

When they reached the lawn, Harry said, "It really means that much to you? The cup?" Harry did not want it to mean so much that losing it would ruin the end of their school days.

Ron scuffed his big feet through the grass. "It'd be nice to win it," he insisted glumly.

* * *

Harry looked up from his book in the library as a silver bird shot up through the table. Frina and Penelope looked up sharply as well. Harry gave a tug on the bird's beak and it unfurled into a scrap of silver parchment that he just managed to read before it sparked out of existence.

"I'm late," he realized, glancing at the clock. The message had asked if he was going to make it to advanced D.A.

As he collected his books, Penelope asked, "Can we come?"

Harry looked them over, down the line to Darsha, who blatantly returned to her Potions textbook. "As long as no one says anything," Harry said, feeling that he would like them to come along, especially Penelope.

Frina and Penelope shook their heads and they all turned to Darsha. "She is already an Animagus: A Squirrel," Frina commented. "In her part of India they teach them Animagia as young children."

Harry gestured with his head, "Come on, then--saves me from finding an escort." He glanced back at Darsha who continued to ignore them. He disregarded his concern of what she might say on the basis that she had not reported to the headmistress when all Animagi were called up. Out in the empty corridor, he said, "Strictly speaking, this is still against the rules."

"Why are you still working on it then?" Penelope asked.

"Sinistra is available to help and has to be present when anyone tries to change form, so we aren't breaking as many rules. McGonagall just wants the school at large to think we've been punished and stopped. Mostly we are doing it because some of our friends haven't managed it yet, like Seamus, Luna, and Justin."

"And you," Frina pointed out.

"Yeah," Harry muttered. He did not miss Penelope elbowing her friend on the arm as they turned a corner. "It's all right," he assured her. "Headmistress is helping me with it now," he added.

"You do get special treatment," Frina stated.

As Harry opened his mouth to defensively say, "Not all the time," Penelope rather forcefully said, "He deserves to."

"I don't know about that," Harry insisted, surprised by her level of emotion.

"You do," she repeated, making Harry hesitate in opening the meeting room door where they had stopped. Her fierce assertion made him uneasy as well as touched.

Inside the Room of Requirement, Hermione looked surprised to see the two Durmstrang students. "I needed an escort," Harry explained with an innocent shrug.

Hermione frowned and stepped away from Justin and the other Ravenclaws in the group. "There probably isn't time to get you all the way through it," she stated. Her eyes met Harry's and he could see her give in. "But you can get started, anyway."

* * *

At the end of a particularly long tutoring session, McGonagall said, "Just a moment."

Harry had about four hours of assignments yet to complete that night, but he put his bookbag back down and retook his seat. She had her hands clasped before her on the desk. "Have you spoken to Hagrid?" When Harry shook his head she stood up and took down her cloak from the hat rack in the corner. "Come then," she said brightly.

"We're going right now?" Harry asked in surprise.

"You are running out of time, my boy. Come along."

The grounds were dark from a new moon. The torches beside the door cast misleading light over the steps as they exited.

At Hagrid's cabin, the headmistress knocked loudly. Hagrid opened the door and greeted them with surprise. "Come in. Come in," he invited genially, reminding Harry with a twinge that he had not visited in a while. "Tea?" he asked, holding up his big bucket.

"Yes, thank you," McGonagall replied politely.

Hagrid went out back and returned presently. He poured water from the bucket into a cauldron which he swung over the fire. Harry sat on a footstool near the grate, enjoying the heat from the flames. Fawkes was enjoying the fire as well, sleeping with his head under one wing.

"Ta wha' do I owe this visit?" Hagrid asked, as he lowered his great frame into his regular chair.

"Harry needs some assistance from you, but has been too shy to request it," McGonagall supplied.

"Harry!" Hagrid chastised him. "You ken come ter me anytime. You know tho'."

"It's complicated," Harry insisted, wishing he were elsewhere even though he liked seeing Hagrid.

Hagrid poured hot water from the cauldron into his massive unglazed teapot and set it on the hearthstone to steep. "Well, wha' can I do fer you, Harry?" he asked.

Reluctantly, Harry explained, "I've been working on becoming an Animagus, but I don't know what animal I'm supposed to become. I can make a foot of it, but it's something really odd." He looked over at McGonagall; she was studying her clasped hands rather intently.

Hagrid sat straight. "Hm. Well, le's have a look, then."

Harry, concentrating on the thirty bonus points, pulled off his shoe and sock. He did the spell and stared at the strange paw. Even after this much repetition, he still was not comfortable with the looks of it.

"Hmmm," Hagrid murmured. Harry again was forced to withstand having his claws pushed out, one by one. It didn't hurt, but it made him very uneasy and possessive of his foot.

"Can' do anything quite average, eh, Harry?" Hagrid teased.

Harry searched for a retort, surprised to find he did not just wish that he were a stag, even though that would have made things much simpler. "Guess not," he muttered. What did he want to be? he wondered and started to feel curious for the first time about what this thing was.

Hagrid hefted himself to his feet and went over to a low, rough bookshelf. He murmured aloud as he flipped through one book before selecting another. "Retractable, non-reticulated, ash grey pads . . ." Harry squinted at the book title in the firelight, *Exotic Creatures of the Urals and Surrounds, Care e3 Feeding*. Uneasiness flowed all the way into Harry's fingertips it so filled him.

"Please don't find it in there," Harry whispered when the wait stretched too long. He was starting to wish Snape were here, he was so anxious.

"Huh?" Hagrid said, distracted from the book. He returned to it with a disapproving glance at Harry. Presently, he said, "I think this is i'." He whistled in an impressed way as he brought the book over. "I'd love ter see one," he said reverently, which made Harry's insides flip.

With weak hands, Harry accepted the heavy book presented to him. McGonagall came over and read over his shoulder. Harry blinked at the hand-painted woodcut, grateful for the stabilizing feel of McGonagall's hand on his shoulder.

"Scarlet Mountain Gryffylis," McGonagall read aloud. "Scarlet is certainly accurate."

Harry looked at the image: it was of a winged creature that looked vaguely like a Hippogriff except thin and wirey. Parts of the drawing were vague, like the transition from feather to fur, which the artist had apparently been unclear on. He

hoped the artist had been unclear on the disproportionately long rear legs. They almost looked like a stag's. It did not have a bird tail, but a lion one it looked like, so he suspected it did not fly well. The head was catlike with a longish snout and long canine teeth. Long feathers stood out behind its ears in a haphazard fashion, sort of like a peacock's might, giving it a foppish look.

Harry swallowed hard. He felt numb as he handed the book back.

"Have a good vision of it in your mind?" McGonagall asked helpfully.

Harry nodded emphatically. He would not be forgetting that image.

"Some o' the details on these ol' woodcuts can be wrong," Hagrid pointed out. "Not all are from, uh, firs' hand observation," he added, then cleared his throat and put the book away. Harry imagined gibbering mountain dwellers trying to explain what had killed all the sheep. He felt vaguely unwell.

McGonagall poured some tea into a large ceramic mug and pressed it into his hands. She patted his shoulder. "It doesn't change who you are, Harry," she said gently. "And you are finding out that the danger of learning Animagia isn't all physical. Were any of your friends distressed by what they became?"

Harry shook his head, then said, "Neville always seemed embarrassed, but I think he was really pleased, inside." He swallowed and wondered why he did not feel the same. "Why can't I just be something normal?" he griped.

"Aye," Hagrid said as he refilled his own tankard with tea. "Tha's a beautiful an' rare creature the Scarlet is. Don' be bad mouthin' it now. Unlike other Griffin species, the males sometimes have wings."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Only female Griffins ha' wings, normally," Hagrid said as he tossed another massive log on the fire and sat back. "N.E.W.T. question, Harry," he added chastisingly. "O.W.L. for that matter," he added in a mutter.

Hagrid and the headmistress made small talk for a while while Harry stared into the flames. His unfinished assignments loomed ahead of him and he was grateful for the mundanity of that notion.

At the base of the front steps, McGonagall slowed and tugged Harry to a stop by his shoulder. Her eyes held more concern than he was used to seeing as she said, "You have the potential for great power, Harry, and by choosing to be an Auror, you are virtually guaranteeing that you will realize that power." She squeezed his shoulder harder. "If you are truly uncomfortable with that, then maybe you should rethink your plans."

Harry frowned as he stared out at the blackness of the lake in the distance. "You think that's what's bothering me?"

She grinned. "If your Animagus form were a rabbit, what would you be thinking right now?"

Harry could not hold in his dismayed reaction to that thought. "I'd wonder what was wrong with me, I guess," he replied with a laugh in his voice.

"You've never been like everyone else, Harry. Nor can I imagine why you would wish to be," she added, her thoughts sounding distant.

The castle door opened and a figure stepped halfway out of it. In the tricky light, Harry had to fall back on recognizing Snape's distinctive profile. Harry forced his mind to settle and walked that way.

"Everything all right?" Snape asked.

"Everything is just fine, Severus. We were visiting with Hagrid," McGonagall said in her usual matter-of-fact tone.

Harry managed a small smile for his guardian. He wanted to talk to him, but he wanted time to sort things out himself a bit first.

Harry was up very late finishing his assignments. Hermione and Penelope had tried to stay up with him but they eventually had to give up. Tomorrow was going to be a pepper-up day, Harry considered with a frown. He stood to toss another log on the fire and a blast of heat came out as the coals were disturbed. The room didn't need the warmth--he just needed the company. He sat back on the couch and reviewed last week's History notes for anything else he should add to his essay about Wizard criminal law in the seventeenth century. Relaxed, he leaned his head back as he scanned his own handwriting. The tower felt very safe since the respelling. Harry was rarely bothered by odd notions, even late at night and alone as he was.

Finally, at three in the morning, after wrestling his wandering thoughts from a certain female student, Harry wrote out the last line of the essay. He packed everything up and crept up to his dormitory room as quietly as possible.

* * *

The very next day, as Transfiguration was ending, McGonagall strode over as they packed up their books. "A word, if you have a moment, Mr. Potter," she said.

Harry wondered what she had to say already after last night. He had managed to hold his yawning to a minimum during class, he had thought, so hopefully it wasn't that. As the classroom door closed, his friends gestured that they would be waiting in the corridor.

"I meant to discuss this last night, but it did not come up," McGonagall said. "The week after next is the anniversary of your destroying Voldemort. In case you had not remembered," she added in her most professorish tone.

"I couldn't exactly forget, ma'am."

"Hm, no I suppose not," she replied amiably. She urged the last few rats into their cages and hovered them to a shelf. Then she considered Harry in silence before saying, "Would you like another party like the last one?"

Harry, taken aback by being handed such decisionmaking, hesitated. He had not really enjoyed the last one, nor remembered it all that clearly, but it sounded like fun now. "Do I have to give a speech?"

She breathed in audibly. "Yes."

"Is there an alternative to a big party?" Harry asked whinging slightly.

McGonagall gave him a light smile. "I have been considering alternatives only because we have not found your attacker. I am thinking that it should be kept small, in any event, just major dignitaries and the students."

"A speech?" Harry confirmed.

"I'll help you write it, if you wish."

"I'll need the help," he admitted, feeling nervous already.

* * *

During Care of Magical Creatures, Harry noticed the toe of Malfoy's boot as he crouched to assemble cages for the Brinkenpops that Hagrid was going to catch that night for the next class session. The pens had to be made of green bamboo woven with strands of wild grape vine. Brinkenpops would easily escape a cage that was not made of living material. The Slytherin was working quietly and diligently on the weaving and tying as though he might be enjoying it. He also appeared to be wearing very nice boots.

Harry stepped around to the blonde boy. "Let me see your boot," he said.

Malfoy gave him such a look of derision that Harry thought he should have picked a different tack. "Shoe shopping, Potter?" Draco asked with full snide.

"In a sense," Harry replied in the hardest tone he could manage.

The other boy rolled his eyes and stuck his foot out while pulling up his robes. They were nice boots, but they had unfamiliar bright silver clasps and lower heels than the ones Harry remembered.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled as he shirked away. He should have just sneaked a look, but he had been too confident to think that deviously.

"Yeah, anytime, Mr. Harry Cobbler," Malfoy sneered.

* * *

Harry sat in Snape's office while he worked on his Potions essay. He found this worked well for getting the best grade, no matter how tough Greer felt like grading him. Since Easter holiday, he had not spent much time here things had been so busy.

He finished rereading the chapter in the assigned text and read over what he had written so far. They were repeating fungus-based potions, which was fine with him, even though Snape intimated that they should be covering other topics before the end of the year. Harry's alternative texts had bookmarks now with sections Snape believed would be covered on the N.E.W.T. Harry had not yet found the time to go over them carefully. The way things were going, he would end up reading them the night before the examination.

With some care Harry wrote out several paragraphs explaining the ingredient conversions possible with different fungi. Since the fungi were not magical, this was a fairly straightforward topic and not difficult. It appealed to his Muggle sense of the world, he decided as he wrote.

Finally, he finished the essay and held it out. "Would you mind?" Harry asked his guardian. Snape looked up from the stack of parchments before him and reached out to take it.

While Snape read, Harry tried not to fidget too much. He let his mind wander to other things, like the fact that he had not yet explained to Snape that he knew what his Animagus form was. The night they had visited Hagrid, McGonagall had left it to him, and he had not let go of that momentum. He was certain that Snape would insist upon working out exactly what was bothering Harry, and he did not feel like doing that. He had not decided yet if McGonagall was right.

"You are missing two uses for lungwort. Other than that it looks fine." He handed the rolled parchment back.

Harry spread it out and opened his class notes to check what he had written. When he found the missing items, he amended his essay and rolled it up with satisfaction.

"Ready for the party on Friday?" Snape asked.

"I'm not too thrilled with the speech I'm supposed to give." It was only Monday and Harry was determined to improve it by the end of the week, at least into something he would not gag at.

Snape fought a twisted grin. "You are giving a prepared speech. How quaint."

"I wasn't given a choice."

"Your influence must be wearing off," Snape commented. "You need another dark wizard to destroy to boost it up again."

"Guess this mystery attacker's reputation isn't high enough."

"I suspect not. But one never knows. It could be Salazar himself, back from the dead."

Harry considered the stack of parchments on Snape's desk. "Are you a little overworked?" Harry asked.

"Perhaps. Why do you ask?"

"You're being . . . flippant, or something," Harry observed.

Snape bent his head forward to make a note on a sheet before him. "Oh? Have I insulted you?"

"No," Harry reassured him.

"I must be slipping."

"Like that," Harry said with a little force.

Snape studied him through a curtain of hair as he rubbed his forehead. "I will be grateful for this year ending. I will not have the Potions master duties next year; although, presumably, I will still have those of the deputy headmaster." He sighed and said, "Although next year you will not be here."

That was an odd notion, Harry thought. Snape here, himself . . . at home, doing something, hopefully his apprenticeship. "Just a month and a bit left," Harry said thoughtfully.

"Ready for your N.E.W.T.s?"

Harry thought about his Animagus form. "Not quite. But I haven't given up on it."

Snape spun his chair and pulled two books from the shelf behind him. "There are a few other Defense spells I think you should know, just in case they are included." He flipped the top book open and ran his long finger down the page.

"You aren't going to cover them in class?" Harry asked in confusion.

Without looking up Snape replied, "I am already covering more than any Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor ever has at this institution; I do not have the energy to teach exceptionally complicated, past extra-credit standardized examination spells to that many remedially competent students."

Harry felt he should defend his fellows. "They aren't that bad."

"Still," Snape insisted, now flipping open the second book and marking a page before paging rapidly ahead. "These aren't generally useful spells, just historically on the examination. Teaching them to you is remarkably little effort."

Harry sat back and dropped his shoulders at that unexpected compliment.

"Here we are," Snape said before standing up. "Get out your wand."

Standing slowly as he reached into his pocket, Harry said, "You don't want to move to the classroom?" He had visions of burned books and smashed potion bottles, since that is what surrounded them at the moment.

"A lesson in attenuation as well would not be out-of-line," Snape drolled.

"My attenuation is really good," Harry insisted. "How many students do you want injured during your class?" he asked with a touch of snideness.

Snape gave him a silent doubtful look. "We will go over that after," he finally said. "First the Macedonum." He moved to stand beside the desk and gestured for Harry to push the visitor's seat aside. Harry obeyed, then stood still while the spell was cast in his direction. The stone floor warped beneath his feet and he was forced to put out a hand, oddly now sideways to the floor, to keep from falling over as he sank into a deep dip forming around him. The dip did not hold still; as his chin reached normal floor height, it surged upward into a peak, which rolled him aside. He stopped himself tumbling just before he reached a case of glass bottles full of dark viscous liquids.

Rubbing a bruised spot on his shoulder, Harry stepped back to the center of the now-flat floor, while giving his guardian a challenging look. "That's an interesting one," he commented in a low voice. "Might even work on a cloaked opponent."

"Only if you can put enough power into it." Snape set the visitor's chair into the center of the open office floor before the desk, stepped back, and said, "You try."

"What, I don't get to try it on you?" Harry asked levelly, trying for a disappointed tone. He aimed the wand and said the incantation but the only effect was a faint ripple in the floor like a stone falling into water. He tried it again to the same paltry result. A glance at his guardian revealed Snape standing with his arms crossed looking reserved.

"More power?" Harry asked. When Snape merely raised a brow as though this were a test, Harry incanted it again, shouting this time and pouring a lot into it. The room shivered, stones and all. Snape grabbed his arm, presumably to cut him off.

"This is not an ordinary spell," Snape said, losing his momentarily alarmed expression after a glance around the room. "Power only helps if you are focussing properly. The spell is a wave and more random power is as likely to interfere as to build up." He stood beside Harry. "Watch again." Snape aimed his wand and lifted a small peak in the floor before it reversed to a valley then flattened out.

"How do you get one or the other?" Harry asked.

"Unfortunately, you do not have control over that. But you must have coherent power, that is critical."

Determined, Harry aimed his wand again, turning it slowly in his fingers as he thought about focussing magic. After long seconds he dropped his arm. "How do I do that?"

With a small grin Snape said, "You practice it--it is something you must get a feel for." He repeated the spell, again creating a small peak. "For myself, I imagine I am pushing the spell in my mind through something as small as the wand. But I expect everyone is different." He stepped back again to give Harry a clear space.

Harry narrowed his eyes, and his thoughts, as he raised his wand again. When he spoke the spell a ripple again formed, though the ripples seemed taller this time. Determined to not get impatient with himself, he repeated it again and again.

"Think about it differently," Snape suggested, almost gently, considering how his normal suggestions sounded.

Harry imagined his magic as a funnel, as a laser, and as a snitch even, because when it darted it looked like a line. Imagining it as the narrow stab of pain from his scar when Voldemort was near worked best, although the resulting peak was not very high and was still surrounded by ripples.

"Must better," Snape said. "How were you focusing?"

"Don't ask," Harry muttered.

Snape looked mystified, but did not ask. "Practice that one. Care to learn another?" his guardian said instead.

Harry glanced at the time. "One more."

* * *

"Will you come up with us to check our wombat?" Hermione asked Harry late the next night as he worked on his Astronomy assignment. Frina and Penelope stood by the portrait hole, waiting. "I'll help you with that," his friend offered to entice him as she pointed at his essay.

Harry grinned. "Sure."

The girls all took out their wands as they walked, which Harry found a little over careful. He left his in his pocket. When they reached the attic, Parkinson was just respelling hers and Malfoy's crate.

"How's your wombat?" Harry asked, wishing they had arrived just a minute earlier.

"Fine."

"Working on it alone now?" Harry asked.

"Draco wasn't very useful anyway," she complained with a very miffed tone. She stepped by them all a little quickly. Harry had not meant to upset her, but apparently he had anyhow. Hermione gave him a wry grin and a shrug.

"A tangle of webs weaved," Frina stated philosophically as she watched Parkinson disappear down the rickety steps.

"Pretty much," Hermione agreed. She unspelled their crate and lifted out the occupant. It was a little bigger and they had eventually convinced it to eat a few blueberries, so it had grown tufts of brighter blue fur on its back. These spots made Hermione's appearance all the stranger as she carried the animal over to the supply table.

Harry followed her over and ran a finger over the top of its small head. "Never got it to change into a bat like yours did," Hermione said.

"Maybe you need to dream about it for that to work," Harry commented idly, thinking back to that night when he had woken in concern for their animal.

Hermione dropped the can of dog milk, splashing the contents across the wood roof beams. The wombat crawled up her arm in a panic. Harry plucked it off and carried it to Frina, who was coming over quickly to help. "What did you say?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"Uh, I think I may have been dreaming about the wombat that night." More defensively, he said, "I don't know. I have so many strange dreams," he shrugged.

Hermione fell into deep thought. "We have tried just about everything," she said smartly. "Wonder how we'd get that to work? Maybe a dream potion. They're easy. Can you get me a few supplies, Harry?"

"Is the potion a forbidden one?" he asked carefully.

"I don't think so," Hermione replied, returning to the here and now.

"It's just that Severus was more than a little upset about the unsupervised Animagi club." Harry really did not want to tempt that again, even for the sake of her assignment. He suggested, "Give me the ingredient list, I'll just ask him for them. That's safest."

Hermione took the parchment scrap Frina offered and wrote out five things. "I have everything else. We'll use the usual brewing location since it takes most of a day," she added with a smile. "Just bring the stuff there."

Harry took the list and tried to read her expression. "I don't mean to sound unhelpful."

"Harry," she said. "It's all right. Believe me; I understand that you don't want to get into trouble. It's a new thing for you," she teased, "but I understand."

On the walk back Penelope stayed beside Harry. "What are your plans after school?" she asked.

"I have my Auror's testing but other than that I'm free."

"Would you like to visit me in Bern?" she asked eagerly.

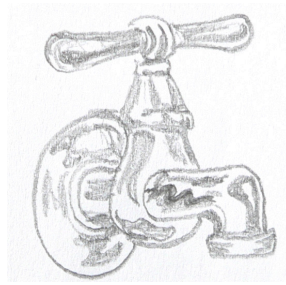
"I think I'd like that. The testing schedule isn't set, though; I'd have to let you know later."

She smiled broadly despite his uncertain answer. "My parents would be very excited to have you visit. The whole city would."

"Uh," Harry began.

"Or a quiet visit, of course," she amended quickly while grabbing his arm, apparently to reinforce her insistence.

"That might be better," Harry stated.



Chapter 41 -- Swelter'd Venom Sleeping Got

Since Hermione was eager to get started on the potion, Harry headed down to Snape's office very early, well over an hour before breakfast, using Dobby as an escort when he had finished straightening the common room. When he arrived, his guardian was going through what appeared to be the same large stack of parchments. Harry asked the broadly grinning house-elf to wait before stepping inside.

"I need some stuff," Harry said. "None of it's restricted, but it isn't in the usual student supplies."

Snape stood and accepted the list. With a doubtful glance at Harry, he went to his personal supplies cabinet. "May I ask why you now are *trying* to have dreams--usually it is the opposite." He handed out pollen essence and pickled worm skin.

"I'm not the one drinking it. It will have to be Hermione or Frina."

Snape glanced up as he handed him gold-leafed scarab wings.

Harry explained, "The explanation really isn't very interesting; they want to test a theory about the wombat assignment--"

"Ah," Snape said, sounding like everything made sense.

"So that *is* it?" Harry asked.

"I am not supposed to assist. None of the staff are, but I am surprised it took Ms. Granger that long to think of that." He handed Harry a leather pouch full of dyed bezel leaves and a tiny vial of concentrated black coat ash.

"She didn't," Harry could not resist saying, then followed it with a grin to make the point.

"She must be slipping."

"Thanks," Harry snipped at him. "You do need a break," he commented as he balanced the variety of containers against his arm. "Or a stiff drink."

"I am . . . looking forward to the party on that regard." Snape watched him juggling things before saying a little snidely, "Would you like something to carry that all in?"

Harry found the three of them in the girls' toilet and waved Dobby off with thanks. With his oversized eyes, the elf glanced doubtfully at the sign on the door, but did not comment about Harry's entrance into the wrong toilet, just bowed and said, "Good day, Master Harry." Harry put the ingredient sack down beside Hermione who was firing up a cauldron in the middle of the floor.

"Doesn't bother you to be in here, does it?" Hermione asked. Harry's eyes *were* on the washbasin tap, the one with the serpent.

"No."

Frina and Penelope were giving him curious looks. "Couldn't get Ron to come down?" he asked Hermione.

"He refused to get up early for an assignment."

"Well!" Myrtle said as she floated out of a stall. Frina and Penelope jumped back in surprise, one grabbing the other.

"Hi, Myrtle," Harry said congenially.

"WHO . . . is this?" Myrtle asked, floating nose to nose with one, then the other of the Durmstrang students. "And THIS?"

"Yet another ghost?" Frina asked. "No one purges them?"

Myrtle's face crinkled up before she burst into tears, covered her face and dove into the nearest toilet. Hermione had her wand out with an umbrella charm long before the water splashed into her work area.

"Try to be nice to her," Harry said quietly. "She used to be a student."

"What happened to her?" Penelope asked. "How long has she been here?"

"A long time," Hermione said as she adjusted the flame below the cauldron, "About fifty years."

"She was Voldemort's first victim," Harry said.

"What?" Penelope and Frina blurted in unison.

"That was back when he still went by his given name, Tom Riddle," Harry explained. He sat on the floor beside Hermione and helped her grind the beetle wings into powder. "He was the heir of Salazar Slytherin," Harry went on, "one of the school's founders. He opened the supposedly mythical Chamber of Secrets the founder left behind, and released the Basilisk, which did in poor Myrtle there."

They stood staring at him in shock.

"The entrance is just there," Harry added, pointing at the sinks.

"Right there?" Frina asked fearfully.

"Don't worry, the Basilisk is dead," Harry said reassuringly.

"Who killed it?" Penelope asked.

With her silver stirring stick Hermione pointed at Harry.

"*You* did?" Penelope said, "Is this what Professor Snape was referring to?"

"Yep. Want this now?" Harry asked Hermione in reference to the powder.

"Dump it in," she said, stirring rapidly as he did so.

"Figuring out how to kill Riddle was harder than sticking a sword through the Basilisk's head," Harry commented. "I can roast the skins if you want."

"Not quite yet. They might dry out," Hermione said, glancing at the recipe.

"You killed Riddle, er, Voldemort that time too?" Frina asked in confusion.

Harry took over stirring while Hermione opened more jars. "That was the third time I'd did essentially kill him," he said casually. "Too evil to die," he added flippantly.

Hermione added more ingredients and stirred thoroughly before saying, "It needs to simmer for an hour." She stood up to stretch her legs and wandered around the sinks. "Can you still open the Chamber?" she asked curiously.

Harry followed Hermione over as Penelope said, "Open the . . .?"

They stood before the faucet with the snake. "I don't know," he said. "The tunnel caved in some back then--it may be completely blocked now."

"I want to see," Hermione said. "I had a chance to see it. Do you want to see it again?" she asked hopefully.

Harry considered that. It was a very long time ago. A glance at the clock showed that they still had forty-five minutes before breakfast. He could still sense his younger instinct to explore without regard to risk and felt nostalgic about it. "Sure."

"Won't you get into trouble?" Penelope said quickly, stepping close.

Harry shrugged lightly. "I'm the only one in the world who can open it, I think." He turned to Hermione.

"I expect you are. I'd really like a look before we leave for good," she said, wheedling slightly.

Harry grinned at her. "I remember when you wouldn't do anything even slightly out of line. Used to make us bonkers."

Hermione laughed. "Go on then."

"It's probably sealed up," he muttered. Harry narrowed his eyes and stared intently at the snake figure. "Open the Chamber," he said. He knew he had spoken Parseltongue only because the visiting students tripped over each other stepping backward. Harry pulled Hermione back as the porcelain unit moved and folded in on itself, leaving a square gap in the floor. He and Hermione stared down into the dark hole.

"We've got a bit of time this morning or do you want to wait for another time?" Harry asked his friend.

"You're a Parselmouth?" Penelope said in utter shock.

"Yeah," Harry replied with extra casualness. He let her hang there, feeling as though she should learn to deal with it on her own, and if she couldn't, well . . .

"We have almost an hour and a half before class," Hermione said. "Time for a little exploring followed by a quick shower."

"We should go get Ron," Harry said.

Hermione used a bird spell to summon him. "He shouldn't be so lazy," she commented before bending down to squint into the darkness again. "How's the landing?" When Harry shrugged, she jumped in.

Looking into the hole after Hermione in concern, Frina asked "How far down is it?"

"It isn't too bad down here," Hermione shouted before Harry could respond. "A little obliterate spell and it's pretty clear."

"It occurs to me," Harry said to no one in particular, "that we got out last time by riding on the tail of a Phoenix."

Penelope and Frina gave him wide looks as though he had lost it. "My silver message spell isn't as good as hers; can one of you go down to Hagrid's cabin and ask him to send Fawkes to the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Sure," Frina said in a tone one might use to calm someone who had lost his head.

Enjoying their surprised dismay too much, he added, "Really, we will need Fawkes. You remember the bird Hagrid had in class a few weeks ago?" When they nodded, but still looked doubtful, Harry shouted, "I'm coming down," as he stepped into the hole.

At the bottom, he brushed himself off. "You have cleared it out. But boy does it stink."

"Didn't last time?"

"No. Not like this."

Harry led the way to the sealed chamber latch where he again had to ask in Parseltongue for it to open.

"Interesting locking mechanism," Hermione said. "I detect a theme."

Harry shook his head with a crooked grin and they stepped inside. Water still covered most of the floor and they held up their robes while they splashed through it. Rats scurried away from their approach. At the front, the source of the smell was clear. Face wrinkled in disgust, Harry approached the twisted Basilisk skeleton. Its skin hung in tatters like old cloth over most of the grey-stained protruding spinal bones.

"They never took the Basilisk away," Harry said. "I'm surprised."

"The sword is gone, though," Hermione observed.

"As is the diary. Dumbledore had them," Harry supplied.

"Hey!" a voice made them jump severely. It was Ron, entering from the hatchway. "Didn't imagine you'd come down here. . . yeech."

"Morning, Ron," Harry greeted his friend, who splashed over to them while holding his robes bunched at his waist. Harry slowly circled the long creature. In a shallow pool lay a long, bleached tooth. After examining it for a moment, he tossed it aside with a splash. He could remember the extreme pain of being bitten by it too much to want to keep it.

"Don't want it?" Ron asked, fetching it and slipping it into his pocket.

"You can have it," Harry said, stepping over to the large carvings on the wall. This place felt empty, dead. Maybe that was why Dumbledore had left it as a tomb.

They explored the sculpture and the perimeter of the room until a cry rent the air and Fawkes flew toward them low across the water. The bird fluttered to a perch on a high protruding bone and cocked its head at them.

"What's he doing here?" Hermione asked.

"That's our ride out," Ron teased. "Am I right?" he asked Harry. They all looked at each other with grins of shared experience and emotion.

"Goodness, I'm going to miss this place," Harry said with more than a hint of sarcasm. They all laughed uproariously.

"Bloody lucky to be alive," Ron teased him.

Harry removed his glasses to wipe his eyes free of tears of laughter.

"You outlived Voldemort, though; few thought you would manage that," Hermione said, squeezing Harry's hand after he had replaced his glasses. "Couldn't hope for more, though I think you got it anyway."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"Only a father, silly," she pointed out.

Harry, having difficulty balancing out the memories of this place with what she said, turned his gaze back to the long grim skeleton before them. Fawkes had his head tilted oddly as though listening in. He met the bird's tiny eyes and considered how very much Fawkes had seen through the years. A rush of odd thoughts flickered through his mind then as though he had accidentally Legilimized the bird. Visions of stone arches being constructed and books being collected and read, late candlelight discussions and arguments with two witches, one who always seemed to be smiling and a wizard, who always seemed to be scowling.

Harry staggered, bringing his friends near. Ron took his arm and held him up by it. "You all right?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked up at Fawkes again, stunned. The bird let out the loudest cry Harry had ever heard from it. "Nothing," Harry said as he shook them off. "Just too many memories."

"We should go," Hermione said, nervous now. More lightly, she said, "I want to finish the potion before class so it can simmer during the day."

Fawkes easily carried them back up through the floor of the girls' toilet. Frina and Penelope were stirring the potion when they arrived, announced by a loud Phoenix cry. The girls jumped to their feet and stood against the wall, even though they were already out of the way.

"Thank you, Fawkes," Harry said. The bird circled once, nearly colliding with Harry, before it vanished, leaving a feather fluttering downward. Harry caught it out of the air.

"When you said to send the Phoenix, I didn't believe you," Penelope said. "Fortunately, Frina did."

Harry held out the feather to her. She accepted it hesitantly. "That is a very rare thing."

"Have it anyway," Harry insisted, teasing. "Fawkes has more, I'm sure."

Hermione sat before the potion, stirred and examined it. "Maybe I'll skip breakfast and finish this up. Then it can brew until evening." She reached for the pollen and added a dusting to the bubbling surface.

"I will stay and help," Frina said, sitting beside her.

"Did you make enough for Opus and I?" Ron asked.

Hermione added more beetle wings and stirred slowly. "Enough for one of you, but let me try it tonight first since we aren't certain this is going to get us anywhere."

"Actually, we are sure," Harry said.

She looked way up at him from her low position. "We are?"

Harry nodded, then added a wink.

* * *

Hermione clapped her Arithmancy book closed and stashed it in her bookbag as they all sat studying late in the common room that evening. "We have a fruit basket, torches . . . everything hopefully. Just have to go take my potion."

"I will take it as well, if you wish," Frina suggested.

"I didn't make enough for all four of us. You gave Opus his bottle, right?" she asked Ron.

He nodded, not lifting his gaze from his History textbook. She did not bother him further, presumably since he was actually working through the N.E.W.T. revision tables she had drawn up for him. He had not even noticed that Crookshanks was curled up around his feet, asleep.

Eventually they all headed up to bed after stretching out the kinks from sitting too long.

Harry was sound asleep when a commotion woke him. Frightened voices sounded from beyond the drapes of his bed. "This one," someone said and the drapes parted, letting in flickering torch light.

"Harry!" Penelope's voice called. Frina was rousing Ron, Harry noticed, as he put on his glasses and squinted at the next bed. "Hermione is sick. Come, please!" Penelope said, desperately grasping his pyjama-covered wrist.

Harry stumbled out of the room, just grabbing his dressing gown from the corner bedpost. "Did you call Madam Pomfrey?" he asked. Ron, who awoke faster at the news, stomped down the staircase ahead of him, and turned to head up the other which instantly turned to a slide.

"Parvati went to get Professor Sinistra," Frina stated calmly as she followed them down. "What is this?" she asked regarding the now nonexistent stairs.

Harry pulled out his wand and Accioed his broom from his trunk. "Ron! Here," he said as he mounted it. Ron gave up on climbing the polished slope and jumped on the back of Harry's broom and barely held on to his shoulder as they zipped up the passageway. At the landing they jumped off and stepped inside.

Hermione was on the floor, Lavender, Ginny and some other house girls were kneeling around her. Harry and Ron moved in beside. Hermione was clutching the edge of a long piece of torn bed drape and muttering something. She had apparently been sick as soiled damp rags were piled to the side.

"Hermione?" Ron prompted, shaking her.

"Ginny," Harry said, "Please go down to the Slytherin dungeon and make sure Opus is all right."

"What?" she blurted, disbelievingly.

Ron was lifting Hermione off the floor, trying to get her to release the drape from the death grip she had on it.

"He took the same potion," Harry explained. Ginny looked at him in shock, he assumed at the notion of the Slytherin dungeon at night. "Take Neville with you, or Dean," he suggested smartly when she stood reluctantly. Finally, still wide-eyed at the suggestion, she departed. He turned back to Hermione. She was completely nonsensical and Ron was trying to get through to her with verbal reassurances. "Just a second," Harry said to quiet him.

" . . . trapped, so dark, so alone . . . help, help," she muttered almost imperceptibly.

"Just take her to the hospital wing, I think," Harry said firmly to Ron, who appeared to pull himself together at having instructions to follow. Harry stood with Ron as he hefted the much smaller Hermione into his arms, her long hair tangling around her face.

"Hospital wing, yes," Ron muttered in a similar way to Hermione. "Pomfrey will know what to do."

Sinistra came in as they reached the dormitory door. "What are you doing in here?" she asked the boys, very surprised to see them.

"Herme's sick," Ron explained, voice breaking.

"Oh, dear. Well, come along then." She ushered them down the stairs and across the common room, opening the portrait with a wave before they arrived so they didn't have to slow down.

In the hospital wing Ron gently put her down on the last bed. She spasmed strangely and muttered something about darkness and fear again. Harry had never seen such a tragic look on Ron's face as he reached out to pull her hair aside; it made him very sorry he had mentioned anything about dreaming. Pomfrey shooed them aside brusquely. Ron grudgingly stepped back just a half step and moved back close as soon as the hospital witch shuffled around to the other side.

Ginny and Dean came in as they watched Pomfrey work. "Opus is fine, said he hadn't had any troubles at all even though he took the potion hours ago, just before sleeping," Ginny supplied.

Harry's brow furrowed as he took that in. Penelope's worried gaze caught his own, which was not reassuring. Hermione's mutterings replayed in Harry's mind. "What if?" he started to say. He stepped closer to Penelope and Frina. "I have an idea," he said, leading them away from the group around the bed. Quietly, he said, "What if she is dreaming someone else's wombat?"

"All of you: scram, scram," Pomfrey finally ordered, prompted by Ron and Ginny hovering directly in the way. Reluctantly they moved completely aside. Harry gestured adamantly for them to follow.

"I have an idea," he repeated. On the way to the attic, he explained what he was thinking.

"You think it's Malfoy and Parkinson's wombat she's dreaming of?" Ron asked, aghast.

"One way to find out," Harry said. He strode purposefully to the last crate on the end and ran through the un-spelling of it. It didn't open. He knelt hurriedly beside it. "Is there something to pry with?"

Frina transformed a stray pine crate slat into metal and handed it to him. "Thanks," Harry said. He inserted the end under the edge of the cover and pried hard because the adrenaline in his blood would not have allowed for less. The cover popped open easily, knocking him over, off-balance.

Flailing and screeching filled Harry's vision and ears. He managed to throw an arm over his eyes as needle-like claws descended on his face. Pain spiked along Harry's arm as he threw himself aside, trying to escape the blue and black, madly flapping thing that had latched onto his arm. The others around him were shouting.

Something web-like shot at Harry and the creature was gone, trapped in white netting that tangled its membranous wings up in odd directions. It hit the floor and skidding to the center of the attic where Penelope crouched with her wand out. Harry rolled over, clutching his arm which blossomed with streaks of pain. Blood soaked his pyjama sleeve where he pressed it tight to dull the searing.

"The hell," Ron muttered, stepping over to the trapped thing. It screeched at him and tried to hop away, on four feet, Harry noticed. Frina handed Harry a clean rag from the supplies table. He pressed it against the deep cuts on his arm with a wince. The creature had quieted and now moved oddly. On his knees Harry moved closer to it, checking the netting to be sure it was secure. The taut ends of the web pressed into the wood beam of the floor where Penelope held her wand point.

"Thanks," Harry said to her.

"You're welcome," she said, looking pleased and a little embarrassed.

"What's it doing?" Ron asked in disgust.

Harry squinted at it; it appeared to be cleaning its feet and the edges of its wings. It looked a little purplish to Harry now. Its tiny pointed head looked up at him, clearly sniffing him. Harry backed off a little.

"It likes you," Ron teased. "Imagine that."

"It wants the blood," Frina observed.

Harry, moving slowly because he was stunned by that notion, pulled the rag away from his arm. Dark streaks marred it where his arm still bled freely. The creature strained forward against the webbing with sad, hungry noises. "Can you get me another rag?" Harry asked.

Frina handed Harry another cloth which he traded for the soiled one on his arm. The bloody one he tossed within range of the transformed wombat, which eagerly picked it up with its dexterous front feet and gnawed on the darkest parts of it.

"I think I'm going to be ill," Ron murmured.

"Maybe check the others," Harry suggested. "Don't be surprised to find any normal bats."

The others went about opening the remaining crates. Many teams had turned theirs in already, essentially giving up. Only six in total remained. Ron gave a cry of victory when he opened his. "It's a bat now," he announced proudly.

"See if it will eat any fruit," Harry said tiredly, still watching the netted creature. His arm wasn't throbbing nearly as much as before. He pulled the rag aside to reassess the damage. The streaks had almost stopped bleeding. He blinked at his arm in confusion when one of the streaks disappeared as he was looking at it.

"Wha?" Harry muttered. The others were busy and did not take note. Harry looked up at the creature, watched it gnaw contentedly on the rag in one spot, before shifting to another damper section. Another cut disappeared. "Merlin," Harry said. "Come look at this."

Ron left his bat hanging with an Asian pear clutched in its feet. Frina and Penelope loosely replaced the lids on the crates they had just opened and stepped over as well.

"Your arm does not look so bad," Frina commented.

"*Now* it doesn't." He reached over and jerked the rag from the creature, which hissed at him as it lost possession. "Watch." Using the cleaner rag, Harry pressed a corner over the deepest of the remaining gashes before holding it out to the creature, which grabbed it up and began gnawing on it eagerly to recover the fresh blood there. "Look," Harry said, indicating his arm. The wound was narrowing and finally vanished.

"Bloody amazing," Ron said.

"It's like the powder of sympathy," Harry observed.

After a few minutes of careful feeding, all of Harry's wounds were healed, including the ones on his face, which Penelope wiped blood from for him. The creature was calm now and nearly riotously violet in color; the kind of color only Tonks would find appealing as hair. It finally dropped the rag and began grooming itself awkwardly through the webbing.

"Now what?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "Put it back in its crate?"

"Then let's check on Hermione," Ron said, thinking ahead.

"Go now, Ron. We'll clean up," Harry insisted.

"You'll escort him then?" Ron confirmed with Frina and Penelope using unusual seriousness. At their nods he dashed off.

They put each of the wombats away, including Hermione's and Frina's small sleeping one and Ron's and Opus' now greenish yellow swirled one which had to go into a larger crate. Harry was glad that Ron's grade had just gone up, if nothing else. The strange violet one of Malfoy's, they closed in, still netted, and canceled the webbing spell only after the lid was secure.

"I owe you one for catching that thing," Harry said to Penelope.

She tossed aside the rag she was wiping her hands on. "No. You cannot."

"Let me try, at least," Harry insisted, feeling this point was broadly important. Frina had moved to the other side of the attic, near the stairs where she waited with her head turned downward.

Penelope tilted her head to the side as though maybe accepting that.

"Can you show me that spell?" Harry asked.

"Of course," Penelope replied eagerly.



Chapter 42 -- Like a Hell-Broth Boil and Bubble

The next morning at breakfast, Hermione appeared with a chagrined expression. Ron jumped up and eagerly led her to their part of the table, strongly reminding Harry of his Animagus form.

"Hey, Hermione. How are you feeling?" Harry asked her.

"Not bad." She took her place between Ron and Ginny. "Can't complain about one night of bad dreams, can I? Not with how many you've had." This last she directed at Harry.

"We'll let you complain," Ron insisted. "Won't we?" he confirmed with his friend.

"Sure," Harry said with a smile.

She rolled her eyes in embarrassment and accepted the pumpkin juice Ron handed her solicitously.

Breakfast passed uneventfully. Post arrived, causing some to tease Ginny until she snapped at them, seeming truly tired of it. Most of the students left to get ready for class, but the six of them stayed on because Hermione was eating slowly, clearly lacking appetite.

Snape strode along to their section the table on his way out. "Bit of an exciting night, I hear," he said, eyes darting between them. All Harry could think was his guardian did not know quite how exciting. "Did you of all people mis-brew a dream-inducing potion, Ms. Granger?" Snape asked, curiously.

"No, sir--worked too well, I think." She glanced from him to the clock. "We should get to class," she said to her friends.

"Did you get enough to eat?" Ron asked in concern.

When she swallowed hard and nodded with a frown, they all stood up. Snape stepped back to give them room. Harry was just considering how exactly to explain to his guardian what had happened when a screech interrupted their departure. The remaining students in the Hall all froze as a something violet, a blurred bullet, dashed around the open door to the Hall and headed straight at Harry.

Everyone moved. Snape had his wand out, but missed with whatever spell he had incanted because the thing dodged it. Ron went up for the block but only got his fingers scratched for his trouble. Harry got a chest full of fuzzy critter that somehow managed to not actually puncture him with its numerous needle-like claws.

Seeing Snape aiming his wand, Harry backed away with his hand up. "It's all right!" he insisted. He carefully plucked the creature off his chest, but it squirmed out of his grip and scrambled up to his shoulder, where it clung hard to his robes. Everyone stared. Snape glared intently, but lowered his wand. Harry sighed and said to him, "Last night was more interesting than you know."

Malfoy charged through the door, wand out and when his eyes found Harry and the creature, he stalked over in pure anger. As he bore down on Harry, Malfoy pulled up short with a glance at the teacher, and forced himself calm. "Pansy thinks you messed with our assignment," he said, voice shaking in anger. Claw scratches marred his cheek, Harry saw.

"It's a long story," Harry said. The creature was actually burying its head in his hair and collar, to hide. Malfoy's face twisted at the sight of this.

"You should take points off Gryffindor for his ruining our assignment," Malfoy demanded of Snape, his face reddening.

"That is for your Care of Magical Creatures professor to decide, Mr. Malfoy."

"We didn't ruin it anyway," Harry said. "Why didn't you finish it yourself? Clearly you were going for this transformation from the beginning," he added, thinking aloud.

Malfoy dropped his arms and backed off warily. His eyes darted between Harry and Snape before he spun on his heel and stalked off. Harry plucked the transformed wombat off his neck again only to have it insist on climbing his arm to reach his shoulder again. "What am I going to do with this?"

Snape reached for it, only to have its vicious shrieking fill the Hall. He jerked his hand back . . . just in time. "Perhaps go down to Hagrid and ask," he said flatly, brows raised in worry as Harry petted it to calm it down.

"All right if I'm late for class, then?" Harry teased.

"I suppose," Snape sighed with false suffering. "If you can avoid bringing that . . . it would be better."

But Harry could not avoid bringing the creature; Hagrid insisted that it needed to stay with him. When Harry asked for how long, Hagrid had only mumbled something and insisted that it was Harry's fault he was paired with it. It had taken a long time for Harry to explain exactly what had happened the night before. Finally the argument that Malfoy had been leaving it there to suffer, as Hermione had seen in her dream, got him back in Hagrid's good favor so he could leave for Defense class.

As he stepped into class, he gave Snape an apologetic shrug for still having the creature. Everyone turned and stared at him in curiosity, except Malfoy and Parkinson, who sent him daggers with their eyes.

At the end of class Harry's friends gathered around. "How's he doing?" Ron asked.

"She actually, according to Hagrid," Harry said.

"It is cute." Penelope reached out to pet it, but it screeched and viciously tried to nip her.

"I hope all women aren't like that," Harry commented.

"They are," Dean breathed, while Neville nodded sagely along with him. The girls looked insulted as the rest of them laughed.

Harry still had the wombat bat at dinner time, since removing it from his person involved risking losing a finger. Left alone it seemed to have a livable disposition.

"You're goin' to have to name it," Ron commented teasingly.

Harry turned to the creature on his shoulder and peered at it. It raised its head from sniffing the aromas wafting up from the table to look at him as well. Ron tore off a hunk of roast beef and held it up for the beast. "Wah!" Ron shouted and jumped back when it snatched the meat out of his fingers in an eye blink. It proceeded to chew happily upon it.

"She get you?" Harry asked.

Ron reluctantly examined his hand as though expecting the worst. "No," he replied in relief. "Name her Killer, maybe," he said smartly.

"Looking for a name? Are you keeping that?" Ginny asked.

"It's keeping me. I don't seem to have any say," Harry complained.

"How about Fly Paper?" Ginny suggested as the creature crawled down Harry's front to take a closer look at his plate.

Harry lifted the wiry creature back to his shoulder, where she hissed until he handed her another piece of meat.

"Kali," Hermione stated with certainty, "goddess of destruction."

"I like that one," Harry said with a grin and tore off another chunk of the bloodiest part of his roast and set it aside for when "Kali" wanted it.

* * *

"Well, I think we may have to manage our grade just from the essay," Hermione said to Frina in an apologetic tone. They were putting their very blue, still small wombat back in its crate. Only two other project crates still on the attic floor had been changed for larger ones.

"I will take the potion if you wish to make more," Frina offered.

"No," Hermione stated in a tone of finality. "It isn't worth it--believe me. Maybe just set an alarm for every two hours and if you think you were dreaming, come up and check." She shrugged, apparently not caring about the grade much anymore.

Ron held up his and Opus' project. It had beard-like fur around its chin in bright green and a yellow swirl on its back.

"You might just keep it out," Harry suggested. His own unintentional second project was asleep, locked in a crate in his dormitory. Hermione had suggested a Quiescent Charm, since it was a gentle one and Kali very small. It had worked, leaving him creature-free for the evening.

"What? Carry it around all day?" Ron asked in disbelief. When Harry and Penelope nodded knowledgeably, he slumped, "Oy."

"We might need to speed it along," Opus said, taking the animal expertly from Ron. It clung to the tall young man willingly.

"Yeah," Ron said carefully, "I think it likes you better. Maybe you can take it tonight?"

Opus grinned. "If you wish. If you clean up, ya? I have that big essay to complete. It takes me longer in English than you, I think."

"No problem," Ron insisted.

Frina and Penelope looked antsy as Opus departed. "Go on," Harry said to them with a grin. With relieved glances they followed Opus out. When everything was put away, they also tromped down the rickety wooden staircase out of the attic.

The three of them strolled down the quiet fourth floor corridor in a relaxed mood. "Your membrane energy was good today, Harry," Hermione said, recalling their earlier advanced D.A. session. She sounded unusually reassuring and encouraging.

"McGonagall's been helping me with it, you know," Harry pointed out.

"Well, but still," she insisted. She started to say more, but stopped.

"What she is *trying* to say," Ron interjected, "is that you should be able to try your full form. . . . Anytime."

Harry stared straight ahead as they walked. His friends were right, as usual. He let his curiosity war with the unknown of becoming something he did not fully understand and walked in silence.

More excited, Ron said, "Hey, then we can all go for a late-night stroll in the forest, you know. That would be great." Harry looked doubtful, but didn't reply in the face of Ron's enthusiasm. Not long ago he would have relished the idea, perhaps as much, mainly because both Sirius and his dad would have jumped at the chance.

"Why don't we just take 'mione down for a swim in the lake," Harry suggested without seriousness. "You can retrieve her if the giant squid comes along."

"Excellent idea!" Ron said boisterously.

"Oh, please," she said. "Though I could swim in the lake easily, couldn't I?"

"You honestly didn't think of that?" Harry asked in surprise. "What, the big tub in the prefect's bathroom is good enough?" he teased.

"Well . . . yes," she admitted with a major blush.

"Secret's out," Ron teased as he put an arm around her playfully, slowing her pace.

Harry bent over in laughter, since he had only been joking by suggesting it. He took a few steps ahead of them before turning when they did not catch up. He turned slowly because he really expected them to be snogging or something given the delay. Instead he found them still, frozen like mannequins, Ron's arm crooked oddly in the air around Hermione's shoulder.

Harry whipped his wand out of his pocket and spun back around. He waved it around his head and shouted "*Bolerum!*" just as a blasting curse struck him. It took every ounce of strength to stay upright and in front of his friends as he followed with a Grand Flecture, hoping it would protect the two behind him.

A mummy-like form emerged in the swirls, although the grey things were falling away from it quickly as it struggled. "*Gravesco!*" Harry incanted with anger. The few clinging grey strands indicated the figure had collapsed suddenly and was trying to move sideways. Panting from the pain of the blasting curse, Harry shifted to keep between the attacker and his friends.

A muffled voice incanted something and Harry put up a Chrysanthemum block, a wide one to protect him and the others. Unfortunately, it did not hold well spread out so thin, so the curse knocked him back and made his body vibrate like a gong. He held onto his wand through it, but just barely. Immediately he returned an Unjackardum, aimed at the few remaining quivering grey strands, just as the Bolerum spell faded out, returning his opponent to invisibility.

A grunt sounded, followed by a ripping sound as the invisibility cloak tore, its weft weakened by the hex. A jagged figure appeared, trying to stand against the extreme weight Harry had cursed it with. Now that his assailant was nearly visible and he could aim carefully, Harry spelled the hardest blasting curse he could produce. His opponent flew backward, skidded on the stone floor and lay still.

Harry spun around to his friends, who still stood like wax figures, apparently untouched. Afraid to try anything to animate them without understanding how they were frozen, Harry staggered over to his opponent. Doubled over and coughing, he fell to his knees beside the supine figure and yanked the visible remains of the cloak aside.

"Malfoy," Harry whispered. The next thing Harry knew, he was flying backward. He hit the pillar between two windows with his back and shoulder as his foot arched behind him and smashed the colored panes of thick glass. His foot caught in the heavy leading of the window as he fell, turning him in the air and making him strike his back hard on the unforgiving floor.

As he drew a desperate, difficult breath into resisting lungs, he looked up and found Draco Malfoy standing over him, dissolved cloak and dilapidated robe clasped around him, wand aimed steadily. Shadows danced in Harry's mind, one very close.

"When did you become a Death Eater?" Harry gasped, mystified. The pale gaze and wand wavered in surprise. Harry latched desperately onto that advantage. He laughed. "Who do you think inherited Voldemort's power to see his servants?" he asked with as threatening an expression as he could manage.

The wand wavered a moment more as Harry slowly moved his hand to look for his wand beside him. His leg throbbed where it had caught in the window and his trouser leg clung wetly to his skin.

Malfoy's wand stabilized and his confused look receded as anger retook him. "You should die now, I think," he said, "Voldemort inheritor or not."

"I'd go with an Avada Kedavra, if I were you," Harry stated helpfully, preparing himself to launch at the boy's feet if he did so.

"Why?"

"It works so well on me," Harry stated amiably. He had found his wand--he was lying on it. "Go on then," Harry urged as his fingers closed around familiar warm wood.

"You aren't lying," Malfoy said, confused again. It was not a good mode for him; in fact he was looking rather unbalanced now and his eyes vibrated occasionally in his skull.

In one smooth movement Harry brought his wand around and put up a Chrysanthemum block, which was exactly the right thing for the bright, deadly, narrow, cutting curse that flared from Malfoy's wand. The block was strong enough that it expanded and knocked the other's wand away. As Malfoy dived to retrieve it, Harry sat up and waved a chain binding curse at him, collapsing him. He added a second, just for good measure.

Harry tried to catch his breath while he watched for any sign of the curses loosening. He made it to his knees with extreme effort just as running feet approached. Harry glanced half backward, not removing his wand's aim from his fallen opponent. Snape came around the corner, followed close behind by Neville and Dean.

"Harry," Snape exhaled in relief upon taking in the scene. He came up behind Harry and grasped his shoulders. Harry leaned gratefully backward into the support for his dizziness.

"What's with them?" Dean asked of Hermione and Ron.

"Do not touch them!" Snape warned, putting a hand up. "I'll take care of them." He turned back to Harry and squeezed his shoulders. "Draco Malfoy," he breathed. "I would not have believed it."

"I don't," Harry said, eyeing the apparently unconscious figure. "Check him for potions."

"What?" Snape asked, moving to comply. "A Polyjuice?"

"No," Harry said. He reached into his cloak pocket and pulled out the Map. With slow, effort-filled movements, he unfolded it. Snape glanced up from his search of Malfoy's clothes to watch Harry activate it. He rolled his eyes at the incantation before returning to his task. "He doesn't need that much help. See," Harry said, holding out the parchment. Snape

had found a small bottle in Malfoy's trouser pocket; he held it to the light momentarily before turning to the parchment Harry held out.

Snape stiffened severely. "L. Malfoy?" he breathed and with a quick, jerking motion pulled his wand back out and aimed it at the fallen, chained figure.

Malfoy's grey-blue eyes snapped open in that instant. Breathing heavily in anger, Snape stepped closer to stand fully over the other man. He waved the small bottle over him. "Elixir of Youth, I presume?" he snarled.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," Malfoy stated with pure malevolence. His face fell, resigned and disgusted. "Trouble was, I was enjoying my freedom a little too much."

With a start Harry thought of Suze. Suze and all the other little things.

"How long have you been here, Lucius?" Snape demanded.

"Since Easter Holiday," Harry answered. "I've been seeing his shadow, just didn't know it. And it must have been Draco trying to get out of Azkaban, probably a little tired of being there. I'm sure he isn't too happy with you," Harry said the last to Malfoy Senior. "Severus, can you wake them?" he nodded at his still-frozen friends.

Snape gestured fiercely for Neville and Dean to help guard Malfoy as he stepped over to Ron and Hermione. He looked them each over closely before tapping one then the other while saying something rather long and complicated. Ron swooned limp followed by Hermione, although they both immediately struggled to get up. Snape pulled Hermione to her feet first before helping Ron.

"Harry!" they said in alarm and came over.

"Blimey!" Ron muttered, pulling out his wand and standing beside Dean and Neville.

"You all right, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"No," he replied honestly since about six major parts of him were extraordinarily unhappy with him. His throbbing shoulder and his bloody leg were arguing for first place in the battle for most painful.

Snape stepped over to him and pulled him to his feet with an arm over his shoulder. "Pomfrey, *now*," he said. Harry gasped but managed to take his own weight.

Malfoy raised his head, the only thing he could have moved. "You disgust me, Severus, you bloody traitor. You should be dead."

Harry pulled his wand out and stalled Snape's retreat as he aimed it at Lucius Malfoy. "Don't you dare threaten him," Harry hissed.

"Don't bother, Harry. Come on," Snape said in a remarkably easy tone.

Harry relented and let himself be led away. McGonagall and the other teachers were coming down the corridor breathlessly. "Oh dear! Harry," she said in deep concern upon seeing him.

Snape tossed his head behind him. "Contact the Aurors. It is Lucius Malfoy, disguised as Draco."

Her eyes spread extraordinarily wide, and she gestured to Flitwick to go back the way they had come.

"Sure you want to walk?" Snape asked.

"Yes," Harry insisted. He was very tired of being carried and hovered.

As they turned the corner, Hermione and Ron following at Harry's plodding pace, Snape said, "You fared much better this time." He glanced behind them. "Even given that you had to protect your friends."

Through the haze of pain Harry's lips twitched into a smile at the tone of pride he heard. "Could have done better--should have used the chain binding right away," he said as they managed the stairs. He was regretting that mistake more and more as they walked.

Harry was leaning quite heavily on his guardian and Ron by the time they arrived at the hospital wing. The three of them helped him onto a bed and he very relieved to lay back on it.

"Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said in disbelief as she came beside the bed. "Again?"

Harry closed his eyes and let his exhausted self go.

The waking world returned reluctantly. Harry shifted and felt the distinctive semi-reclined position of a hospital bed. Memory flooded him and his arms jerked with an instinct to take action. A hand brushed the hair off his forehead, sending a bolt like electrical static through his scar and waking him completely.

"It's all right, Harry," Snape said from beside the bed. His gaze looked uncertain, though, when Harry found it with his blurry vision. His guardian held out his glasses which he accepted gratefully. Snape straightened in his chair. "Pomfrey said you may leave when you feel up to it." When Harry squinted at the clock in the dimness, Snape provided, "It is just after three in the morning."

"Maybe not worth waking my dormitory mates," he whispered. Experimentally, he moved his injured leg. It felt bandaged still. He pulled the covers aside to look and found his shin to his foot bound firmly in white cloth bandages.

"You had quite a bit of glass in your leg," Snape stated.

"It felt like it," Harry commented, stretching his shoulders and neck, glad to find only stiffness there. He tossed the covers back and sighed. "Any news?" he asked, thinking that the Aurors must have come and taken Malfoy away.

"The Ministry Aurors do wish to speak with you. They will probably come at lunchtime tomorrow to do so. Also, Minerva is rather pleased that this situation has been straightened out."

"Especially with the party coming up," Harry added, half-teasing.

"I think, more likely," Snape said with forced patience, "that she is happy to not have to worry so much about you . . . and the other students."

Harry grinned before his face fell. "I'm remembering all the things Malfoy has been up to."

"You are not alone in that," Snape stated forcefully. "I did not even suspect. I just assumed he was growing more obnoxious, which did not seem surprising, as well as better skilled at Occlumency. As you suspected, Draco switched places with his father during a visit to the prison over Easter Holiday."

"On Monday?" Harry asked, thinking of Knockturn Alley.

Snape replied, "Sunday, but it was he on Knockturn Alley Monday, according to Malfoy himself. He divulged some of what happened during the Veritas serum treatment they gave him before taking him away."

"Sorry to have missed that," Harry commented. "What about Jugson?"

"A plant, for the Aurors to capture. Put there after Lucius' hiding place was revealed. Lucius fetched him to be caught in his stead when Burke told him it was he who the Aurors were searching for." Snape ended with a wry expression.

Harry froze. "Oh," he muttered.

Snape stood. "You should rest," he said, patting Harry on the arm. "Now that you should be able to do so."

Harry sighed again as he relaxed against the pillow. The door to the wing fell closed. Harry was not very tired, but eventually he fell back into a calm sleep anyway.

* * *

Harry's friends came in early the next morning, as he was putting on his shoes. "Morning, Harry," Hermione and Ron greeted cheerfully as they came in the door followed by a troop of others.

"You end up here frequently," Penelope commented.

"Er, yeah," Harry agreed, a bit embarrassed. He shook out his robe prior to slipping it on. As he was straightening his robes around him, he heard an odd sound from behind Ron. "What's that?"

"Ah, well, this thing drove everyone nuts last night, 'til we silenced it. But 'Mione thought it might really need to get out and see you." He brought the crate containing Kali from behind his back.

"Oh," Harry said, remembering the creature. Its tiny paw reached between the slats and clawed at empty air in his direction. He took the crate and set it on the bed to release it. With an unearthly shriek it clamored up to his shoulder and circled his neck several times. It seemed nearly frantic.

"They're empathetic, I'm pretty sure," Hermione said. "And this one maybe the most because of the blood you gave it."

Harry patted Kali when she finally sat still and mewed piteously.

"Poor thing," Hermione said.

"Poor thing?" Ron echoed in disbelief. "That thing would take off your nose just as well as look at you! Poor thing," he repeated with a scoff.

Harry took his wand from the night stand, momentarily studying the flattened, unpolished edge of it. He was not going to get to Ollivander's until the school year was over, he realized, putting it into his pocket. Kali mewled while sniffing his ear, which tickled. "'S all right," he insisted, patting it again.

The doors opened and Snape strode in, just as Ron was complaining about his empty stomach and how they should be heading down to breakfast. Harry's guardian stepped into their group and looked him over. "You still have that?" he asked in dismay. Kali stretched toward Snape to sniff him.

"I don't have any choice," Harry said easily. "I'm starting to like her," he added.

Ron commented, "We should get her something to eat before she takes someone's hand off."

* * *

"What's McGonagall going to say?" Ron asked on the way to class after breakfast, nodding at Kali, who was crouching comfortably on Harry's shoulder.

"Guess we're about to find out," Harry breathed as they stepped through the classroom door.

They took their seats. McGonagall's gaze swept past them, alighting briefly on the creature then away.

"Sorry, Professor," Harry said, loud enough to be heard at the front of the room.

A little stiffly, she said, "It is an immature Chimrian, Mr. Potter. I do understand what that means."

Harry, out of the corner of his eye, could see Hermione pull out a quill and quickly jot that down. When McGonagall had gone over to speak with a Hufflepuff who had asked a question, Hermione said, "Guess we don't know everything for that essay yet."

After class, McGonagall stepped over as they packed up their books. "My office, Mr. Potter--the Aurors should be here shortly."

Harry nodded. His friends patted him on the arm as they departed, as though he might be the one in trouble. He waved them off a bit impatiently and followed McGonagall, who asked how he was feeling in a way which made him think she felt partially responsible. He reassured her as they walked that he was fine and hinted that he was happy to have had the chance to get even.

In her office Harry warmly greeted Tonks and Rogan. Seeing this, the headmistress said, "I will be down in the Great Hall, should you need me." Harry took a seat as the door closed behind her, lifting Kali from his shoulder to his lap.

"You have a new pet?" Rogan asked.

"A class assignment," Harry explained. "Well, someone else's class assignment. It's a long story." He thought some more. "Malfoy's actually."

"Seems to like you," Tonks said, watching Kali snuffle around Harry's hands. "Nice color too," she added, making Harry grinned. She went on, "Well, let's get started. Would have liked to have talked to you last night, but there were too many indignant teachers and hospital witches in the way." Harry tried to imagine that scene and was glad he had been unconscious for it. Tonks rearranged some parchments in front of her. "You really got hammered both incidents, didn't you?"

"Did better the second time," Harry insisted, worried that they might think less of him because of what happened. "Maybe," he hemmed, rethinking the two times.

Tonks sported a silly grin as she said, "Just one Death Eater, Harry," in a disappointed tone. She winked at Rogan, but Harry did not see it.

"I know," Harry admitted, self-recriminating.

"Harry," she said chastisingly. "I'm only teasing."

"Oh."

She dipped her quill in McGonagall's inkwell. "Let's start at the beginning." When Harry hesitated, she prompted, "Harry?"

With sweating palms Harry said, "I lied at the very beginning. I'm sorry."

She froze an instant before setting the loaded quill down on the blotter. With a befuddled expression she said, "Let's go over it first, then write it down after we have it straight." She looked honestly confused.

"It was Malfoy on Knockturn Alley that day, he said so himself," Harry explained.

She rubbed her lips thoughtfully. "And you told us Jugson. Why?"

"I didn't know who it was--I was guessing."

Both of their brows furrowed. Tonks said, "You called us down there, told us you saw one of the remaining Death Eaters."

"I did see one," he insisted. With a frown he added, "Just not the way you think." He rubbed his forehead and eyes, feeling a little unwell at having to confess this. "I was afraid I wouldn't be allowed to be an Auror if the Ministry found out . . . found out I still have visions I inherited from Voldemort." He studied Tonks for a reaction. She did not respond, just considered him closely. "I see his followers as shadows in my dreams," Harry confessed. "And I was a little tired that day and resting my eyes while I was waiting, and suddenly there were two shadows in my mind."

"Two?" she asked sharply.

"Well, yes--Severus and the unknown one."

Her face fell away into an odd stillness. "You see Severus as a shadow, as one of Voldemort's followers?" When Harry nodded, she asked quietly, "Doesn't that bother you?"

"No," Harry replied honestly. "I don't mind somehow." He didn't think he could explain how protective it felt at the house, when he knew the shadow was Snape, when he would come to check on him at night, as no one had ever done before.

She seemed alarmed and doubtful as she considered that, but eventually moved on. "And we know the rest of what happened in Knockturn Alley. What happened here at Hogwarts?"

Harry explained about his sleep becoming disturbed, about the respelling of the tower, the first attack, and Malfoy's change in behavior. He covered the second attack in more detail because he felt he had done better that time and his pride twisted uneasy around the two of them.

Tonks fiddled with the quill as she listened. When Harry finished, she looked over at Rogan. "What do you think? No one has commented on the discrepancy."

"Whitley is the one who would have, and you are right, he didn't," Rogan returned thoughtfully.

Tonks explained, "Whitley was the older gentlemen you met that day in Knockturn Alley. Came out of retirement to help us while we are short-handed." She flicked the quill over the backs of her fingers. "I would hate to think the Ministry wouldn't trust you, Harry, no matter what. But anything surrounding or even hinting at Voldemort makes them irrationally paranoid." She fell silent.

"Leave the earlier report the way it was," Rogan suggested in a low voice. "They've been strutting about getting Jugson. Skip to the dreams for this interview."

Harry looked between them and wondered suddenly which of them was in charge.

"I hate to make exceptions," Tonks said as she started to write, the quill scritch-scratching loudly on the rough parchment. "It is the kind of thing that let everything get out of control in the first place when Voldemort first returned." She paused and excessively dipped the quill she was using. "But for you, Harry . . ." She glanced up at him with a small smile and kept writing.

Author's Notes: The Gravesco Spell is an invention of kraeg001 who graciously offered it. I changed the functionality of the Mauraders Map just slightly to make it more likely Harry would miss Malfoy's different first initial in the crowded Slytherin common room the night of the first attack.



Chapter 43 -- Silver'd in the Moon's Eclipse

Friday evening and the one-year anniversary party arrived. Harry pulled out his dress robes and held them up. They really were not anything special; in fact, they were stained and crumpled, although he could probably work out a spell to tidy them quickly.

"Do you want to borrow my new ones?" Dean asked. "My mum just sent them but she wouldn't mind, I'm sure." At Harry's indecisive glance, Dean quickly pulled them out of his trunk, still in the Muggle cardboard box. They were a beautiful dark maroon with an accent of gold at the collar, cuff and pockets.

"Wow," Harry breathed.

"I think they'd fit you," Dean said. Ron and Neville stepped in as Dean was holding the robes up to Harry's shoulders for size. "A little broad," his friend said, "but workable."

"New robes, Harry?" Neville asked.

"Dean's offering me his new ones, actually." He turned to Dean. "Do you have something else to wear?"

"I have my old ones, which are just fine."

"Wear those, Harry," Ron said. "You'll look like Godric himself up there."

He would be wearing peach, Harry wanted to joke, but held back since he thought he really shouldn't even hint at what he suspected. "You really don't mind?" Harry asked his friend.

"No, please. Makes a great statement for the house. And since we aren't winning the cup . . ." He shrugged.

The boys passed a pair of Ministry wizards on guard at the end of the corridor as they went down toward to the Great Hall. They nodded them through, but McGonagall waylaid them before they reached the grand stairs. "I think an entrance is in order again, Mr. Potter."

Harry grumbled. "Then it should be all the D.A., Professor."

She hesitated then bowed her head. "Go fetch them from the Hall," she instructed his friends. She gestured for Harry to step into the nearest classroom and closed the door. "Speech all ready?"

"I made a few changes, but yes." He waited for her to ask what changes.

"It is your speech--you may say what you wish," she stated as though reading his thoughts.

A few short minutes later, the D.A. returned, all twenty-one of them, including those who had been kept back from joining in the fight directly. Even a year later, they still looked too young to Harry, and he was glad he had thought of holding them back during the chaos that day; he was certain it was saving him now from deep regrets at the memory of that day.

Trebor, now a Second Year, said upon seeing Harry's expression, "Ron said we should come."

Harry forced his face to relax. "Yes, of course." He added a smile for good measure, which made Trebor look away with a blush.

McGonagall led the way down, and stopped before the large doors, reminding Harry vividly of his first sorting, so long ago. "Mr. Potter, you last," she said with a wink before she pulled open the doors and led them in.

The conversation in the Hall hushed as the students filed in, walking roughly in lines of two along the aisle open in the center of the large round tables. Harry followed last, taking the door from Ron ahead of him and letting it close behind him. The room shuffled to its feet as they passed. It felt more natural this time, Harry found, even when everyone began clapping. At the front the students split off to their tables, leaving Harry and the headmistress alone. She turned him to the filled hall and patted him on the shoulder. The clapping grew louder, punctuated by cheering that sounded Weasley in origin.

The crowd quieted. "Thank you all for coming," McGonagall said to the assembled. As she made more welcoming remarks, Harry looked around the room. The students were allocated to the last rows of tables with the front two rows for various Ministry people, reporters, and near the windows, members of the Order. He gave them a smile which they returned. With a pat on Harry's back, which he hoped wasn't to capture his wandering attention, McGonagall said, "With that, let's eat."

McGonagall led him onto the platform to stand beside Fudge's chair. Harry looked around at the other ministers at the table, giving Obolensky an extra nod.

"Good to see you, Mr. Potter," Obolensky said graciously.

Harry grinned. "Good to see you too, sir. It's been a while."

"Ah, yes. Well, time is what it is." He sat back and shifted his gaze to Harry's left. Harry turned to McGonagall as well and found her waiting for him.

"Perhaps a few introductions," she said.

They went around the table, starting with Conor Mallory, the Irish Minister of Magic and ending with Juba Oni, Priestess of the tribes of the Niger Bend, whose colorful garb made everyone else at the large table look positively staid. Everyone was in a party mood it seemed, based on their easy-going greetings. The other table on the platform contained yet more ministers and the four Heads of House. Introductions were made there as well, before Harry and the headmistress finally sat down.

Through dinner Harry managed small talk with the various people at the table. In between interruptions from Fudge, that is. Harry was surprised at the deferential attitude they all used with him.

"Mr. Potter, I hear you will be finishing school soon," Ms. Oni intoned formally in a rich accent. "Rumor has it you are becoming an Auror."

"Accepted him already," Fudge cut in proudly, then put a large bite of meat in his mouth.

"I've been accepted for the admittance examinations," Harry clarified in his Best Boy voice.

Oni went on in her deep melodic speech, "You honor us, young man, by continuing your pursuit of those engaged in the darker magicks."

Harry would have shrugged before a different audience, but he felt obliged to rise to their deference. "I, uh, I have just always wanted to be one," he explained soberly.

At a pause Obolensky said with a sly look, "Speaking of rumors, I hear! you haw a family now."

"What is this?" Fudge blurted in surprise, bordering on indignant.

"I'm living with Professor Snape now, sir," Harry said calmly, wondering which rumor had leapt to the minister's mind.

"Oh, well. I see," Fudge hedged before dabbing his mouth with his napkin.

The main meal concluded and the Hall began to hum more loudly with general conversation. McGonagall nudged Harry. "Ready, my boy?"

Harry *almost* corrected her. "Yes, ma'am."

She stood, which brought the Hall to a hush. "Mr. Potter is going to say a few words to mark the occasion before we enjoy dessert." Harry took that as his cue to join her at the edge of the platform and to his dismay, sporadic clapping actually broke out. McGonagall turned and tapped Harry's throat with her wand before returning to her seat. Harry experimentally cleared his throat--the sound of it rumbled in his ears.

"Thank you all for coming," he started.

"Oy, we've had this marked on our calendar since last year," Fred or George commented from the Weasley table.

"So has the headmistress, I think," Harry rejoined quietly. Many of the assembled chuckled. "It does seem a long time ago, doesn't it?" Harry continued as he scanned the bright faces at the many round tables, all attentively turned to him. "A nice contrast to the preceding year, I think, which is a bit of blur at this point," he added thoughtfully. He remembered the parchment in his pocket and reached for it. As he unfolded it, he said in an apologetic tone, "I actually have something prepared. . . ." He scanned the top of it. "Oh, yeah. Welcome the ministers, it says," he read out loud with a bit of chagrin. The Hall laughed lightly again. Harry half-turned to his table, then the other beside it, and used a sweep of his arm to take them in. "Welcome honored guests," he said formally. Several of them bowed their heads graciously, nearly all of them smiled in amusement.

Harry turned back to the Hall and glanced at his speech. It didn't seem quite right now but he tried to follow it anyway. He felt much more confident than he had expected to, buoyed perhaps by the general good mood. "Hard to believe it has been a year," he said, which was the next line in the speech.

"Oy, and Voldie hasn't come back yet," one of the twins said loudly. "Think ya got it right this time?"

The crowd shifted nervously while Harry fought a grin. He could see that the Weasley parents looked about to get up to go around the table to where their twins sat. Mrs. Weasley did actually get up. "Good thing I'm not keen on this speech anyway," Harry said. When he saw she had a hold of her son. "Molly, it's all right, really," he insisted.

Mrs. Weasley froze, suddenly the center of attention of a very large room full of people. Harry held up his parchment. "I do address that point later," he said in bit of a suffering tone. Mrs. Weasley slunk back to her chair, sending warning looks at the twins from her seat. "You have to understand," Harry said to everyone. "They are the closest thing to brothers I have. Don't hold it against them. We wouldn't be here now if it weren't for all of them," Harry stated with feeling, more grateful for the chance to say it than he would have thought possible. Most of the redheads bowed them in embarrassment. Harry heard George or Fred defensively say, "See mum."

"There are a lot of people whom, if not for them we wouldn't be here today." He glanced at the Order table, which had the most intent expressions in the room. When he found Lupin's gaze he held it a long moment. "So even though I'm the one up here making this speech, don't think this anniversary has that much to do with me." Harry had wanted to include

something to this effect in the written speech, but McGonagall had resisted. There were a few drunken mutterings of denial. He glanced back at McGonagall to see her expression, and found it serene and patient.

Another glance at his parchment and he said, while again taking in those behind him with an arm gesture, "As the presence of all of the assembled magical leaders attests to, this is an important event to mark. It is important to remember that we have to remain vigilant and cooperative when evil emerges. Otherwise we risk failing to overcome it."

The crowd fell silent or thoughtful, Harry hoped. He took in the head tables again and found Snape's intent gaze. The look startled him and he hesitated as he forgot what came next. Quickly, he ducked his head to his notes, shaking a bit at his own reaction to Snape's intense look of pride. He had no previous notion how much that could affect him.

He found his place with effort, because continuing with the speech meant shedding the warm emotion that had overtaken him. "The hard struggle against Voldemort should have taught us that every last one of us has an important part to play in resisting evil's spread. Something Dumbledore always reminded us of." Harry remembered the many times he was not believed and spoke the next line with feeling. "But especially important is the role of those in power, as their complacency is the most damaging to spreading the truth." Harry fell silent, as did the room. His notes looked like too much more of the same. He raised his eyes. "Fred, George," Harry quipped, "Care to lighten this up a bit?"

The room laughed, relieved. One of the twins said sheepishly, "We, uh, would like ta not be disowned. But thanks for thinking of us."

Harry folded the parchment away. The Hall waited with amazing patience while he thought. Finally, he said, "Maybe we should remember Voldemort for what he did not manage to destroy, since that is obviously what we most hold most dear: our friends and families. We should hold onto the new ties that were forged out of necessity." He resisted turning to Snape. "Then Voldemort will have failed utterly." He scratched his head and said, "I shouldn't be talking off the top of my head. That means it's time for pudding, I think." Initial noises of denial turned to happier ones. "Enjoy the rest of the evening," he concluded before stepping back.

The Weasleys started the clapping, Harry saw, before he turned to McGonagall to have the charm removed from his throat. She gave him a soft smile as he stepped by her and returned to his seat. The clapping at his table faded quickly, fortunately.

Fudge leaned in close and said, "You, uh, wouldn't be considering a career in politics, now would you?"

Harry was sorely tempted to lie and say yes. Only the thought of what the headline in the *Prophet* might read if he did, kept him in line. "No, sir."

"Ah, well. Doesn't seem your type of thing, really," the man said dismissively. Fresh plates and cutlery appeared, distracting him.

Harry was feeling too good to be bothered by this man. He disregarded him and looked for his friends in the far tables. Ron waved which Harry returned. Ron then gave him a thumbs-up which let him relax about his awkward speech.

Their distance communication ceased as the Hall fell silent and the lights dimmed. The center doors opened and the most enormous cake Harry had ever imagined was wheeled in by Dobby, who pulled it across the floor on wheels by a long wooden handle. Seven layers of luscious frosting and hundreds of sizzling sparklers creaked its way to the front of the Hall.

Dobby bowed and pointed at the cake. A flash and *bang!* followed and confetti rained down on the room in pink and silver. Harry at first feared that the entire thing had exploded, but it was just the top layer, which now sprouted the burning image of a phoenix. More house-elves appeared and began serving pieces by hand. Dobby took the first and second layers down with a snap of his fingers and carried it to the head table. Another snap and pieces appeared on each plate. With a wink and a bow he returned to assist in cutting up the rest. The glowing phoenix now served as a centerpiece.

"Thank you, Dobby!" Harry shouted over the excited crowd. Dobby turned with an exceptional grin and gave him another bow.

Harry took up a fork and paused. The cake was shifting between colors and he assumed flavors. When it was rich brown, he stuck his fork in it and took a bite. It was deliciously rich chocolate with light fluffy frosting. Halfway through his huge serving of cake, Harry turned to his table mates. They all appeared amused again. He gave Obolensky a questioning glance, since he was most likely to explain.

"We are all reminded of who you are, Mr. Potter, by your voracious cake eating."

Harry narrowed his eyes a bit as he puzzled that. Now that he had stopped eating, the remaining cake chunk was cycling through its flavors again. Distracted by stabbing his fork into the cake while it was bright green made Harry slow in responding.

"You are just a boy," Oni commented in the kind of tone Trelawney used when she pretended to prognosticate.

"Uh, little older than that," he said with a hint of defensiveness.

Oni grinned faintly. "A little." As he thought over a reply, she said, "Do not resist the cake because of us, please."

Harry glanced at his plate. He did wonder what flavor that could be. With a sideways glance at them all, he took a bite. It was sweet lime, strange but good. At least it wasn't spinach or something. They were grinning again, most of them. Harry shook his head and decided he was feeling good enough that he didn't care what they thought, even as important as they all were.

McGonagall patted Harry's arm when he finally gave up on his dessert. She stood and attracted the Hall's attention. "The fireworks will be starting shortly," she announced. "If everyone can make their way to the lawn. . . ."

The Great Hall began to empty, with people moving in animated groups to the three sets of doors. Those at the head tables stood as well. Obolensky stepped around Fudge, who looked a little food-groggy as he moved away.

"Werly nice speech. Not too long, but the important things said."

This sentiment was repeated by some of the other ministers. Harry chatted amiably with a few of those from the other table until the Hall was nearly empty and McGonagall urged them to move on. They followed her slowly out of the Hall, the Heads of House falling in behind. In the Entrance Hall Harry glanced back at Snape in his flowing emerald dress robes. Snape still fixed him with that intense gaze. Harry slowed and waved the others through the main doors to the outside.

"Severus," Harry said, forestalling Snape's stepping through as well. He turned to Harry with a questioning expression. Harry waited for Sinistra and Flitwick to depart and for the doors to boom closed, locking out the lively crowd sounds. "I, uh . . ." He began but didn't know where to start. He dropped his gaze and thought fiercely about what he wanted to say.

"Everything all right?" Snape asked, eyes flicking down to where Harry still had a hold of his sleeve.

"Yes. Really all right, actually," he said with a grin.

In a low voice Snape commented, "You did very well up there."

Harry tilted his head to the side as that overwhelming feeling returned, bringing a painful grin with it. Before he could reconsider himself out of it, he stepped forward and hugged his guardian, who stiffened in surprise. "Thank you. For everything," Harry said with firm sincerity.

Snape's shoulders fell as he relaxed. He patted Harry's shoulders and said, "You are quite welcome," just a little unsteadily.

Harry tightened his arms momentarily before stepping back, at least as far as Snape's hold on his shoulders would allow. He rested his hands on Snape's arms. Their eyes met an instant before Harry looked away. "Tonight has been easier than I thought it would be."

"You did make it look easy."

"Did I?" Harry asked, running his fingertips nervously over the soft fabric of Snape's sleeve. Something inside of him was straining to be acknowledged, unsettling him.

Snape pulled Harry's chin up to look him in the eye. After a breath he said, "Any parent would be very proud of you right now." A bit drier and with a touch of snideness, he added, "You who refuses to take credit for anything." Harry could not hold back a smile as Snape went on, "On this day, at least, you should be willing to admit that in the end it was you, and only you, who mattered."

Harry started to protest.

"Ah," Snape said sharply to cut him off. "I watched you do it, remember?"

The right-hand main door opened and Obolensky leaned in, saw them and stepped in quickly before pushing the door closed behind him. Harry stepped back and dropped his arms. "I must apologize," the Bulgarian minister said honestly. "Headmistress McGonagall sent me to see what the delay was." His eyes moved between them several times. "I did not mean to interrupt."

"It's all right," Harry said, heading for the doors. "I wasn't thinking about her waiting for us."

"You," Snape stated as he followed. "She is most certainly waiting for *you*."

Harry stepped out and down the steps. Overstuffed chairs and couches were arrayed on the lawn for the special guests to sit on. The grounds were full of meandering people and students, all creating a warm din of happy sound.

Snape watched Harry lean over to McGonagall and presumably apologize before taking a seat beside her. As Snape let the door to the castle close, Obolensky put a restraining hand on his arm. The Bulgarian leaned close as the first rockets lit the sky and asked, "Am I seeing how it is he is doing so well?"

Snape shook his head, but didn't explain further. The white streamers erupted into blue and silver flowers high above the lawn. Obolensky had not released him and Snape did not feel like tussling to free himself.

"I am curious," the man said in a low voice, barely audible over the crowd. His tone reminded Snape of Malfoy somehow, perhaps because it was loaded with a challenge while his face showed a friendly smile.

Snape reached down and casually peeled the Bulgarian's fingers from his arm. "What are you curious about?" he asked easily.

Obolensky waited for the booming explosions and echoes of the next set of fireworks to pass before he said, "You werle tormenting Mr. Potter a yearl ago, werle you not?"

"I was pointing out the obvious a year ago," Snape returned levelly. Harry had turned around to look back at them. Snape saw his eyes narrow as he noticed them still standing there. "Is there some point you are trying to get to?" Snape asked the Bulgarian as he nodded to Harry that everything was all right. Harry was resisting though; Snape could feel his questioning whether he should return. As with many things surrounding Potter, Snape felt both dismayed and touched simultaneously by his concern. He sent a firm *no* to the boy and Harry finally turned around to face the lawn with a quick glance at McGonagall.

"That was interlesting," Obolensky stated with a hint of darkness.

"He is my son now, Minister Obolensky," Snape stated, warming in anger inside his plush robes. "If I wish to teach and practice Legilimency with him, that is my concern. Trust that I taught him Occlusion first; he is free to block me out as he wishes. Now that he is nearly eighteen, he has been doing that quite a lot."

Obolensky grinned an instant before his serious expression returned. "Tlust that I am only concerned for him."

A yellow and red explosion lit the castle and them both. "Do not be." Snape insisted. "His few needs are easily met."

Obolensky gave him a strange look. "I cannot imagine his needs being simple or few. How is that possible?" he challenged.

Snape considered that Dumbledore always regarded the Bulgarian minister highly and imagined that given the past, his honest concern deserved addressing, especially since he was well aware of Snape's own history. He watched the colorful crowd and thought back to the boy he had brought home the previous summer, still dangerously headstrong and independent, but also in total contradiction, emotionally fragile, a veritable minefield of unexpected and unforeseeable weaknesses. Once they emerged though, he had managed to deal with them, one at a time, though some had re-emerged again in altered form. The afterimage of spiraling streamers burned in Snape's retinas as he said, "Perhaps they would not seem simple to anyone else. As difficult as it may be for you to believe, Mr. Potter and I are very similar and have little difficulty understanding one another."

Obolensky looked doubtful at this. "You have been charged with his carle on this notion?"

"By Albus Dumbledore," Snape stated.

"Interesting," he said, sounding like he was honestly trying to accept that.

Dryly, Snape stated, "Albus was always a bit eccentric and his motives rarely clear." He crossed his arms and turned in close to the Bulgarian. In a low tone he said, "But in this, they *were* clear. Harry required someone who understood what it was like to be marked by the Dark Lord. Marked and punished to do his bidding or suffer his evil whims." Obolensky leaned back slightly, Snape leaned in farther. "He needed someone for whom the Dark Lord's death meant the beginning of life, a total rethinking of who one is. To one who did not understand these things, he would have been a disturbing mystery, a burden even." He backed off from the minister and wishing to end the conversation, said, "Accept it or not."

When Snape turned back to the lawn, he found Harry's eyes on him again. Harry whispered to McGonagall and stood up quickly. Snape clasped his hands behind his back and affected a casual pose. Obolensky looked to still be considering things, and his dark brown eyes tracked Harry's approach thoughtfully. "You called him here?" he whispered.

"By no means," Snape growled back, also in a whisper.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, his eyes studying each of them in turn.

"Just discussing things, Mr. Potter," Obolensky said in a patent politician voice.

Harry clearly did not buy the tone. He looked to Snape instead, clearly hoping for an explanation. "It is no matter, Harry," Snape insisted. He nodded at the couches. "Minerva undoubtedly wishes you to remain with the special guests."

Harry's eyes darted between them. "Don't be long, then," he insisted before retreating.

"He is very loyal to you," the Bulgarian commented.

Quietly, Snape said, "That is not something I taught him." With a nod he stepped away from the minister and headed down the lawn. Harry eagerly made space beside himself on the bright flower print couch.

"What did he want?" Harry asked curiously.

Snape glanced back to see Obolensky joining a group a distance away. "Nothing worth explaining. Quite a set of robes," Snape commented levelly, looking Harry up and down.

"Dean loaned them to me," Harry said.

"That explains the pretentiousness."

"You think they're pretentious?" Harry asked in disbelief, glancing down at the rich fabric and sparkling cuffs.

"In those colors, they cannot be anything but," Snape opined.

McGonagall patted Harry's arm. "They are lovely robes, Harry," she assured him.

They sat in silence as the fireworks continued. Harry wished he could join his friends now, but thought it expected he would stay with the dignitaries longer. Lupin passed by a few rows away, carrying several mugs of mead. Harry waved at him. His former teacher grinned and veered their way. "Are those spoken for?" Harry asked.

"Not if you're asking," Lupin teased, holding a mug out to him when he reached them.

He still had two. "Can Severus have the other?"

Lupin smiled and shook his head as he gave up another mug. Harry thought Snape looked like he could use one. "You are doing well, Harry," Lupin said after a long swig of mead. "It's very good to see."

"Everyone keeps saying that," Harry complained. "Was I that messed up before?"

McGonagall looked away, apparently wary of replying. Lupin nodded while Snape remained neutral.

"Guess so," Harry said with a sigh.

"All that matters is how you are doing now," Lupin insisted. He held out his mug to toast it with Harry's. When Harry raised his, Lupin said, "To you, Harry," as he *clunked* their mugs together.

Harry's shoulders fell. "I can't take much more of this," he breathed.

McGonagall said, "Drink up, my boy, it will help."

Harry took a big swig, nearly wiped his mouth on his sleeve until he remembered that these were not his robes, wiped his lips with his fingers instead and said, "About this 'boy' thing . . ."

Lupin laughed heartily. Harry glanced up at him and did a double take, as Lupin had his hand out to Snape. "Congratulations, Severus," Lupin said soberly. A tense moment passed before Snape accepted the offered hand. "You should get the lion's share of the credit, I think," he went on.

Snape retrieved his hand and shifted uneasily. "You underestimate Potter's resiliency, Remus."

Harry looked between them, reassessing yet again their apparent view of his change over the last year. "I am sitting right here," he pointed out a little sharply.

"I realize that, Harry," Lupin said apologetically. "Just didn't think I was going to get another chance. I should probably be apologizing to Severus as well as congratulating him."

"That is most certainly unnecessary," Snape stated quietly, eyes straight ahead and distant.

Another tense moment passed. Harry swigged another gulp of mead and insisted, peeved, "Can we drop all discussions of Harry's state of mind for the rest of the evening? Please?"

"If you wish," Snape said.

"You don't realize, Harry," Lupin said, a little tipsy, "how your obvious good health has relieved the wizarding world's collective guilt."

"What?" Harry blurted.

"Ah uh, Remus," McGonagall said to cut him off. "I agree with Harry that the topic should be closed." She conjured another chair, a yellow tulip-patterned one. "Please have a seat and enjoy the rest of the fireworks."

Remus accepted the chair and gave Harry a smile over his shoulder.

Silently, Harry mouthed, "Collective guilt?" at him in question.

Lupin tipped his head to the side and turned away to face the lawn.

"Aye," Harry breathed before leaning back and drinking another swig of mead.



Chapter 44 -- More than the Wars of Our Fathers

Harry slept in late the morning after the party. So did most of his dormitory mates, except Neville, who apparently went alone for their usual run. It was Kali who woke Harry by clawing the inside of her crate. It took a long, sleep-hazy minute to determine the source of the little *scritch scritch scritch* noises. Harry reached under the drapes to unlatch her crate and lift her out. She scrambled over his chest, sniffing his clothes and fingers avidly with her tiny fox-like snout. Rubbing his eyes, Harry reviewed the party from the night before. It had gone all right, he decided. That notion gave him the energy to sit up and get out of bed.

The eyes of his fellow students had gone a little reverent again, he noticed, as he made his way down to the Great Hall with only Kali as an escort on his shoulder. She took her job seriously though, hissing at Parkinson and Wereporridge when Harry passed them on the staircase. Harry tried not to grin too broadly as he patted her head.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said brightly when he reached the Grand Staircase.

He returned her greeting and stepped into the Hall, which was flooded with bright, late-morning light. Hermione and Ron were already deep in conversation over a letter when he sat down.

"Hallo, Harry," Ron said without looking up.

"What's that?" Harry asked.

Hermione sat straight and said with a twinkle of excitement in her eye, "I've an offer for an internship at a solicitor's in London. It's a firm run by two Squibs who do work for both Wizards and Muggles. They sound very excited at the prospect of having an actual witch on staff." She looked over the letter again. "I have to find some courses in policy, but this is a good start."

"Sounds like fun," Harry said, thinking it sounded actually a little boring. Ron was silently doubtful as well, but they both hid it when their friend looked up from her letter to smile at them.

Classes were a little slow on Monday, even Defense, as though everyone was still groggy from the mead that many days later. Or maybe it was just the reminder that things weren't quite as critical as they used to be.

"Harry," Snape said as they all stood to leave class when the bell rang. Harry dropped his bag into his chair and waited beside his desk while his friends hovered nearby. Snape approached, giving Harry's companions an impatient gesture as though to brush them off. Ron took the hint, tugging Hermione toward the door by the crook of her arm. "A word, if you have a moment," Snape said.

"Sure," Harry replied. He stood casually beside his chair and waited for the room to empty out.

Snape stepped away to pace and clean up the large marble blocks they had been using to practice anti-cursing charms. Even after they were alone, he was slow in speaking. He hovered a second block into the corner, stacking it on the first. "Minerva mentioned something to me, offhandedly, that made me suspect that she is helping you become an Animagus."

"She is," Harry replied.

Snape's dark eyes came around to him, but Harry could not read what was behind them. "She also implied that you are having difficulty, still." Harry dropped his gaze and thought about a response. Snape strode over in that sudden manner of his and said sternly, "This difficulty stems from where?"

"It's complicated," he hedged.

Snape hesitated, but finally said, "I am . . . concerned that it stems from my earlier rebuking of you."

"I don't . . . maybe," Harry said, when he decided that was feeling truer than expected. He ran his hand over the worn, thickly refinished wood of the chair back beside him. "Mostly it is just that I don't really understand what I'm supposed to become."

"You don't know what animal it is?"

"I know what it is, kind of." Harry's tone took an annoyed turn. "From an old woodcut in a book Hagrid has."

Snape's brow went from furrowed to raised. "Ah."

Harry ran his hand over his head, tugging on the longer hair at the back.

Snape filled in the silence. "Not something normal then."

"No," Harry replied. "Something bizarre with claws like this . . ." He demonstrated with his fingers. "And long teeth, and too nasty to get a photograph of, apparently." He tried to read what Snape was thinking; he looked to be balancing between amusement and chagrin.

"Hm," Snape muttered, appearing to change tacks.

Quietly, but needing to explain to his guardian, Harry said, "Professor McGonagall thinks I'm uncomfortable with the notion of that much power. She thinks if I can't accept that, I shouldn't be an Auror."

Snape fell more thoughtful and rubbed his brow. Finally, he said, "I think, Harry, that I would find that heartening."

"What do you mean?"

"Until now, acquiring power for you has been a matter of survival. I think now you are realizing that you have the luxury of getting by without it. Great magical power is not something to be acquired without purpose. Power for the sake of itself does tend to corrupt even the least corruptible." He studied Harry while Harry thought that over. Snape interrupted his circular musings by saying, "But I must admit, Harry, that of all the wizards I know, power, even great power, worries me least in your hands."

Harry's jaw worked a moment. "Why?"

"Because you understand being the underling. Perhaps the second major reason Albus left you with your aunt and uncle, if not the first. I am beginning to suspect that he was more often than not thinking farther ahead than the defeat of Voldemort."

Seconds passed where Harry considered that without drawing a breath. When he finally did breathe in deeply, Snape asked, "So, what is your Animagus form?"

A little embarrassed, Harry said, "A Scarlet Mountain Gryffylis."

Snape raised his eyes to the ceiling and lightly sneered, "Somehow, not utterly inappropriate."

"Thanks," Harry said darkly. He moved his hand to his bag, and adjusted the straps for something to do. "It's the difference between an O and an E on the N.E.W.T."

"Minerva thinks you are going to do all right on the examination."

With a light frown Harry hefted his bag. "It's all easy for her--that's why she thinks that."

Snape held up a restraining hand. "There is something else." Harry lowered his bag back down and listened as Snape said, "The Elders of the Wizengamot met this morning to consider Draco Malfoy's situation."

When Snape paused, Harry prompted with a sense of doom, "And?"

"They have scheduled his full hearing for *after* he finishes school and takes his N.E.W.T.s." Harry made a sound of dismay. "It was argued that an immediate hearing had the potential to seriously limit his future."

Harry grimly considered Snape's words. His face must have given him away because Snape said, "I understand your dismay, because I am equally so. But Minerva cannot override the Wizengamot on this." Snape sighed. "It is less than a month and he is not his father. Yet, anyway," he added darkly.

Harry lifted his bookbag yet again. Flatly, he asked, "If he does something stupid and I put him in the hospital wing, how many points does Gryffindor lose?"

"I expect there will be a line ahead of you. He will be on a very short leash."

Harry felt too mixed up to get furiously angry. "Thanks for warning me. When does he get back?"

"Tomorrow morning."

Harry turned for the door. "Can I warn everyone?"

"If you wish."

* * *

Harry stomped into the common room. The portrait hole felt much too small to easily step through, he expected he should be happy about that. Maybe it was just that his bookbag was too heavy, rather than him being too tall. His friends were in the far corner near the windows, chatting amiably. As he dropped his bag beside Ron's, Hermione said, "What's up?" in a concerned way.

"Oh, only that Draco Malfoy is coming back to school tomorrow morning."

"What!?" their corner of the room exploded.

Harry explained what Snape had told him. Ron was incensed but Hermione was more understanding. "It is better in the long run if he's been able to take his N.E.W.T.s. Then at least he can do something useful with himself."

Harry plunked into a nearby chair. "That's an optimistic way to think of it," he criticized as he pulled out his wand, his thumb as usual, finding the flat spot that was starting to wear smooth. Hermione frowned in his direction, but didn't argue further. Harry Accioed Kali's crate down from his dormitory to let her out. She climbed madly over him before settling on his shoulder and hissing at Hermione, apparently for good measure.

"You that angry?" she asked quietly.

"No," Harry insisted. "Just annoyed at you for trying to be right, even for a Malfoy."

Hermione's eyes flickered over Kali expectantly, but the creature remained silent and eventually started grooming itself.

* * *

At breakfast Harry fed Kali bacon from his plate. Fatty food seemed to leave her groggy, making it easier to put her away for the day.

"Look who's here," Neville said grimly.

They all turned and watched McGonagall leading Draco in the main doors closest to the Slytherin table. A glance at the head table showed Snape eyeing the boy very darkly. The whole hall had fallen silent and turned to watch him walk to his usual place near Parkinson. He did not seem to appreciate the attention. Harry hated himself for it, but he felt just a tiny bit sorry for him.

As they departed at the end of breakfast, Ron looked like he was considering heading Malfoy off. Harry grabbed his robes and tugged him in the direction of the doors. "It's only a month. Just let it go."

"His dad kicked your arse. Twice."

"His dad," Harry reiterated. "Draco tries anything . . ." He quieted as the blonde boy crossed their path walking quickly to the Grand Staircase, looking like he wished he were invisible. Penelope and Frina both eyed Malfoy suspiciously with deep frowns.

Double potions was quieter than normal as everyone spent more than the usual amount of time eyeing Draco, who concentrated very hard on his brewing and ignored everyone in the room. Greer made her usual rounds and eventually stopped at the Slytherin table.

"You brew exactly the way your father does," she marveled. Harry's table all froze in various positions of pouring, reading, and stirring to turn their attention across the room.

"So?" Draco snapped at her.

"Well, it means your grades would be all the same anyway, does it not?" Greer asked in a forced matter-of-fact manner.

"That's it," Hermione breathed. Her stirring stick *twanged* as it struck the tabletop when she slammed it flat.

"Hermione," Harry said in a warning tone.

"Uh oh," Penelope said.

"Let her go, I want to see this," Dean said in a darkly curious way.

Harry, thinking of the new points rule McGonagall had informed him of, grinned slightly. "Go on, then," he urged his friend.

"No," she breathed harshly as she hesitated, though she looked a little ill from the effort.

"Why not?" Harry asked. "Imagine how much you'll regret later not saying--"

Hermione slapped her hand on the table before she yanked out her wand and waved her potion away. Neville peered into her empty cauldron in amazement. Greer, her attention drawn over by the sudden noise, strode their way. "Problem with your potion, Ms. Granger?"

"No," Hermione replied firmly. "Just a problem with you."

Greer noticed her empty cauldron and put her hands on her hips. "And how many points is your cheekiness worth, dear?"

"Don't call me that," Hermione threatened as she slid off her stool and stepped purposefully around the bench to face the teacher directly, rocking up on her toes to match her diminutive height. Neville made a small noise of discomfort or fear.

"You get a zero for the day, Ms. Granger," Greer said, leaning over Hermione slightly.

"I don't care; your grades are no more than a useless exercise in stroking your sorry pride anyway."

Everyone stiffened. Greer went a little purple around the edges of her face. "How dare you? Twenty points from Gryffindor."

Hermione swung her arm and balled her fist. Harry for a moment feared she was considering going for her wand, instead she poked the teacher with her finger. Half shouting, she asked, "What have you got against us all? Do you miss Voldemort or something?"

Greer's eyes narrowed to slits. "You, of all people, accuse me of consorting with dark wizards? You who are friends with that?" She pointed at Harry.

Hermione actually took a step backward, she was so surprised. "You think Harry is a dark wizard?" she blurted, nearly laughing.

Greer stalked to the other side of their bench, leaning forward in a vain attempt at looking menacing. "I've been watching you, Mr. Potter. Currying favor with those in power. Manipulating the rules to have things your way." Harry actually leaned back from the force of her barely controlled fury. "I know what you are. I know you can speak to the vilest of creatures."

Hermione interrupted her with a snarl. "The only dark wizard we've had in this class was Lucius Malfoy, and you treated him the best of all. You're still treating his son the best of all!"

Swinging to lean over Hermione, Greer sneered, "There has *never* been a Parselmouth who was not a dark wizard, Ms. Granger, who struts her pretty little over-read self around this school." When Hermione folded her lips into her mouth, Greer prompted viciously, "Am I right, Ms. Bookworm?"

"That doesn't mean anything," Hermione said, although it was too quiet.

"How can that not mean anything?" Greer mocked.

"You're a nutter," Dean said quietly.

"Another twenty points from Gryffindor," Greer stridently said.

Harry suppressed a grin, he couldn't feel bad, because he hadn't said anything about the ongoing change in point allocation. Nevertheless, they did have three weeks of classes to survive. "Hermione," he said gently.

His friend swung on him. "This doesn't bother you?" When he shrugged, she huffed in frustration.

"It isn't worth it," he explained. The whole class was watching, although a few were trying to brew at the same time. Oddly, Malfoy did not look on triumphantly, just exhaustedly. Harry addressed him, "So Draco, am I a dark wizard? You've probably seen more in the last month than everyone else here."

The whole class spun their heads around. Draco hesitated, tilted his head to the side, then glanced at the ceiling in a fidgety way that reminded Harry very strongly of Sirius. "No. Hardly," he finally scoffed. "Mr. Everybody-Loves-Me cannot possibly be a dark wizard." When Greer narrowed her eyes at him, he added. "You'd know already if he were because he's too chicken to take the Dark Lord's place." Draco turned to Harry with a piercing gaze. "Too chicken to control his followers, though I'm sure he could," he added quietly in a knowing tone.

The room had fallen silent and no one worked on their potion while they waited for Harry's response. Harry said, "I inherited more from Voldemort than anyone could want, but not that much." The room shifted uneasily, reminding him that he could unsettle his fellow students back to the way they used to treat him, which he really did not want.

Draco smiled crookedly, glancing around the room to check the effect of his words. "I think have it and you're just scared of it."

Harry forced his shoulders to relax and his face to neutral. "It had to work out that I was part of him," Harry said calmly. "Otherwise I couldn't have destroyed Voldemort and he would still be here. You wouldn't want that, would you, Draco?"

Draco laughed lightly, though it sounded forced. "No, of course not."

The room relaxed some with some glances of consternation at Harry. A few people returned to their notes for the potion. Greer clicked her wooden heels hard on the stone floor as she strode away from them. "Claim what you will, Mr. Potter," she insinuated darkly.

Harry rolled his eyes and returned to his copy of the potion instructions. Hermione grudgingly returned to her seat. As the legs of her stool shifted loudly on the stone floor, Greer turned and said, "And fifty points for your abominable behavior, Ms. Granger. And a week's detention."

Hermione seemed to not hear this as she opened her textbook to the next chapter and began taking notes. A minute later, she said, "Ron is going to kill me."

"No he won't," Harry replied easily. He gave her a flash of a knowing grin which left her puzzled.

At lunch they met Ron and Ginny in the Entrance Hall. Harry leaned over to Hermione and said, "Don't say anything."

"About what?" she whispered back.

"Anything. You'll see."

"Hey," Ron said in cheerful greeting. "Potions must not have been so bad today."

Hermione opened her mouth, but then forcibly closed it again. She glanced at the scoring gems, puzzled. "Guess it did go okay," she agreed. As Penelope and Frina arrived along with Neville, she shot Harry a look of confusion.

"I told you he wouldn't mind," Harry teased her as they walked in the Great Hall.

"So what is going on?" she asked in a whisper.

"My undo evil influence with those in charge," Harry said with a wide grin. Leaning into her ear, he explained, "McGonagall is reversing every point assignment she does."

Hermione's mouth fell open and Ron said, "What?" from across the table.

"Nothing." She waved him off and fell thoughtful. "Good thing you didn't say anything sooner," she said quietly. "Goodness, is that tempting."

No one else noticed the slight gain from the bottom Gryffindor had managed that morning. Harry watched his friend's face as it went more thoughtful and strategic as lunch progressed.

* * *

Harry, sleeping well and feeling more fit than he ever had, was looking forward to his last ever Quidditch match. He listened with only half an ear to Ron's pep talk before they flew out. The day was trying to be sunny, though at the moment the clouds were winning, but at least it was warm. Harry circled, eyeing Roody, the opposing Seeker. The black boy was considering him as well, but with a look of resignation. Harry wished he would just be determined and not look like Harry had beaten him already.

Ron gave them a thumbs-up as the crate of balls was opened. "Clean game--don't really need to tell you that," Harry heard Hooch say before the Snitch zipped free and he stopped following anything else. Roody watched it zigzag away as well and their eyes almost met, except Roody dropped his to stare at his broom handle.

The whistle sounded. Harry headed in the direction the Snitch had gone and began circling. Roody came up beside and paced him, dark eyes scanning all around them. Harry decided he better not underestimate him, even as defeated as he appeared, especially since he had been given the tricky task of stalling the game's conclusion as long as he could without actually losing the Snitch.

Meanwhile, Ginny, Hickory, and Quinn were playing harder than Harry had ever seen them, flying repeatedly and heedlessly at the goals; so much so that the Ravenclaw Beaters seemed hard-pressed to aim. The new plays helped Harry as well, because they distracted Roody as the score marched upward. At forty to zero Harry spotted the Snitch, or he thought he did out of the corner of his eye, even heard the crowd murmuring in that direction, but he pretended he didn't. Instead, he lazily changed course to circle the other way and Roody distractedly followed.

Harry, when Roody looked his way, took care to appear intent on his Snitch searching. At sixty to ten, which would be enough points, along with the one hundred-fifty for the Snitch, to get them out of last place for the cup, Roody turned suddenly. Instinctively, Harry followed, kicking his broom to top speed and aiming to cut the other Seeker off. The Snitch was feeling generous toward Ravenclaw though and dodged in Roody's favor. Harry veered sharply to try to get between the other Seeker and the golden ball. Roody had his hand out, straining, following the Snitch in a wide arc, slowly gaining on it with a painfully hopeful expression. But Harry had a better broom and at top speed he just managed a body block in time to jar Roody's arm off course.

The whistle blew. Harry braked his broom sharply and turned to see Madame Hooch signally a foul. At first he was certain it could not possibly be for him. Ron zipped over to argue with her, expressing disbelief. "Blatching, Mr. Weasley. I said a clean game. Free shot, Ravenclaw."

As they waited, Ginny steered over to Harry. "Tsk, tsk," she teased. Roody circled away, rubbing his upper arm and looking glum and frustrated.

"How many points does Ron want?" Harry asked her, feeling a little dark. Ron rushed up to defend the goals for the penalty throw.

She scoffed. "How far behind Slytherin are we?"

"Three hundred twenty, or something."

"Well?"

"I can't avoid the Snitch that long," Harry pointed out as Ardent tossed the Quaffle at the left post after a successful feint to the right, making the score sixty to twenty. "Well, dragging out my last ever game isn't the worst way to spend an afternoon," he muttered and steered his broom around to find the opposing Seeker.

Roody began avoiding Harry, which only made sense when one considered it. Fortunately, in working to avoid Harry, he did less looking around for the Snitch, so again when Harry spotted it, Roody failed to. And when Harry changed course languidly toward it, Roody went the other way as Harry had hoped.

At hundred to thirty the crowd was even getting restless and the Slytherins were revitalizing some old songs that had fallen out of favor.

*Gryffindors 'r's dumb as an ox
Can't fly their way out of a box
Their Chasers are facing a Bludgering macing
Their Seeker is meeker than toads in a beaker*

Roody came alongside then, much closer than before. "You are being meek, aren't you?"

Harry sighed as they circled. "I'm trying to delay catching the Snitch. We need the points."

"That's sorry," Roody complained. "Just play the game."

"I wouldn't mind, but it means a lot to my house. You won it last year," he pointed out at Roody's rolling his eyes.

"I thought I was just lucky that you hadn't come up with it yet, that you didn't just take it away when you blocked me. I was *so* close."

"You were," Harry agreed. He slowed and turned his head to listen to a chant starting in the Slytherin section. It was only being carried on by a handful of voices, he was heartened to hear.

*Potter's a rotter
Kissed a hag's daughter
Slept with eels, slugs, snakes and an otter
so did his mater*

Roody cocked his head as well, brow furrowing as he listened to the repeat, which was more coherent. "Whoa, what is Professor Snape going to say to that?" he asked.

Harry shrugged but couldn't help grinning. He didn't get a chance to see what his guardian's reaction might be because the Snitch chose that moment to zip between them where they hovered. Both of them looked at each other and gave chase. As they swerved and bumped, Roody grunted, "Make me look good for my parents, that's all I ask."

The Snitch remained at its most elusive as they followed it across the pitch. Harry got a fleeting sense of the crowd rising up. The Snitch passed through the Gryffindor goal area and they each diverted in different directions to avoid the foul. Harry had guessed badly where the Snitch would reemerge; it headed almost directly for his opponent. Ron shouted something strident at Harry as he cranked his broom up and around the zone, thinking there was no way Roody would fail to catch the Snitch--he was right beside it.

Roody looked up at him bearing down, gave a smile, and took the golden ball out of the air before him. Harry veered right, which was actually up from the world view, to avoid colliding. The crowd groaned as the Ravenclaw stands erupted.

Harry flew over to where Ron hovered in stunned dismay. "I passed it up so many times," Harry said to him. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Ron muttered.

"Trying too hard, I think," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ron repeated emptily.

Ginny came alongside. The Ravenclaws were landing and leaping on one another; they looked exceedingly happy with themselves. The Gryffindors watched the celebration a moment before Ginny said, "Well, that game plan didn't quite work."

"Sorry," Harry repeated. "You guys looked great. I should have held up my end." He wanted to point out how uncooperative the Snitch had been, but didn't want to make excuses.

"Yeah," Ron repeated yet again.

Harry frowned as he watched Ron land and walk across the pitch dragging his broom. He followed with the others in silence. At the door to the changing rooms, Harry turned back to the crowd. He could see Roody in the center of the pitch, showing the Snitch off to a couple who were almost certainly his parents. They were all glowing rather radiantly with elation. Harry sighed again and stepped inside.

They removed their equipment in silence. Harry took off his wrist guards and stowed them in the basket rather than the locker, so they could be cleaned for next year. Feeling heavy and tired, he dropped onto a bench and watched Ron's sad motions as he unstrapped himself.

"I should have ended it sooner," Harry said, breaking the long silence. "I pushed it too far."

"It's all right, Harry," Ginny insisted. "We should have had a fixed score to go for so you didn't have to wonder or wait for some kind of signal."

Harry thought that over. "I had him easily--I just guessed wrong when it really mattered."

Ron tossed his stuff toward the basket, missing with most of it, and walked out.

"Don't worry 'bout him," Ginny said. "Big dinner and he'll forget all about it."

Harry chuckled. "I hope so."

At dinner Ron was more amiable, despite staring for a full minute at the paltry pile of red rubies in their hopper before entering the Hall. "We were trying too hard," he agreed, breaking his silence.

Harry, vastly relieved, said, "Doesn't mean it wouldn't have been nice to win."

Frina joined them, jostling Penelope and Darsha. "We joined the wrong house, no?" she said with a smile at the rest of them.

"Sorry," Harry apologized for what may have been the hundredth time. "I was trying to win it all or have a remote chance of winning it all, at least." Roody's annoyance at their strategy was seeming more reasonable now.

"You did not play your best," Penelope said, chastising him.

Harry frowned and thought of the excessively tall cylinder of emeralds. "It would be nice not to lose to Slytherin, though."

"Really?" Hermione prodded, "O honorary Slytherin."

"Heh, that's right," Ron said accusingly with his mouth full.

"It's not the same, believe me," Harry insisted. "There must be something--"

Snape strode over at that moment, hands on hips, looking a bit too pleased. "Well," he began airily. "It wasn't as though Gryffindor was any threat to Slytherin's dominance, but I did expect a better showing from this house, nonetheless."

Ron swallowed a big chunk of his second serving of roast and sounding worryingly like he might be winding up, said, "You know, sir . . ." Ron gestured with his fork. "There are advantages to last place." He smiled. "One just has to be willing to, uh, take advantage of them." He gave their professor a nice smile.

"Oh, dear," Snape muttered before turning to leave.

"What was that?" Harry asked his friend, but Ron just continued to smile.

* * *

Exhaustion felt routine as Harry rode the staircase down from the headmistress' office. This endless cycle of revising, classes, D.A., and tutoring had now gone on long enough that he was forgetting what free time felt like. He rubbed his eyes, adjusted his bag, and crossed the gargoyle's path, heard it move back into place before the doorway as he reached the center of the floor.

Another movement behind him caught his attention. Harry turned, feeling for his wand. Draco stepped into the large torch-lit alcove from the shadowy corridor. He stood haughtily with his bookbag slung over one shoulder. "Are you actually getting tutoring? From the headmistress?" he asked snidely.

Harry dropped his hand from his wand pocket when he noticed the other boy wasn't holding his. "What's it to you?" he retorted.

"That's pathetic. If you can't cut it, you should just fail like everyone else would. Why do you deserve special help?" he sneered rudely, disgustedly looking Harry up and down from his taller height.

Harry started to turn away and ignore the other boy. Draco took a hold of Harry's robe and forcefully pulled him back. Harry got an inkling as he disengaged Draco's hand that Azkaban had hardened something about the Slytherin. "You're one to be talking," Harry snarled, finding anger in him still from the memory of his own experience, "Mr. Delayed-Wizengamot-Hearing."

Draco, mouth twisted sourly, said, "I'll still manage better grades than you, without constant babying from the headmistress *and* a Head of House." He shoved Harry back and used a childish voice to say, "Poor little Potter, we have to help him set up for a nice little future." Harry, knocked off-balance, let his heavy bookbag fall to the floor. Draco was continuing in the same grating baby-tone, "Even the headmistress has to help him with such easy-weasy spells otherwise he might fail his N.E.W.T.s."

Stung much more than he would have preferred to be, Harry again resisted reaching for his wand.

"What?" Draco obnoxiously asked in a overdone disbelieving tone. "No argument from the hero of wizardry?"

"Bugger off, Malfoy," Harry breathed and leaned down to catch the straps of his bag.

"What? That the best you can do?" Draco asked breathily, sounding much too much like his father.

Harry released the straps of his bag and vaguely heard the sound of it resettling on the stone floor. Something inside himself was hardening as well, channeling fury into determination. Magical energy shifted his robes around him. He recognized it, smiled slightly, and relaxed himself in the way Hermione had repeated so many times: relaxed and thought fancifully of paws, claws and feathers. His view of Draco was twisting oddly, accentuated by the blonde boy stepping back suddenly and falling as he tripped on the hem of his robe.

Harry was above him now, much too far above him. He moved a foot and felt it levered on claws scraping the stones and catching on the mortar. Draco made a noise of fear which sounded almost musical; Harry felt the oddness of ears turning forward to listen. He lifted a hand, but really a brightly colored furry leg with a huge paw. The world tried to ripple downward again; he forced more membrane energy into the spell and Malfoy's terrified expression re-solidified below him.

With care Harry placed hand, or paw, down on Draco's chest. A tightening just there, like stretching his fingers made a row of four black claws appear and press their points into Draco's white shirt. Draco whimpered again. Harry sniffed now, noticing the sharp scents coming off the body below him. Strong sweat, ammonia, and the smell of cooked chicken skin battled for Harry's attention. The last was the most disturbing, as it implied Draco might be edible.

"Help," Draco yelled. Harry noticed his blue eyes were looking off to the side. Pulling himself to his internal sense, Harry stepped awkwardly back, lost his balance, and was utterly startled to find excessive limbs tossing themselves instinctively to the sides to right him. A sharp breeze accompanied this odd motion. Merlin, he had wings! He stepped back again and rested on his haunches since that was easiest and it still left him taller than everything around.

Draco scrambled away, pointing and trying to explain something to another figure. Harry turned his head and found Snape looking up at him, quite a ways up at him, one brow raised in a considerate expression. "Most impressive, Harry," Snape stated in a droll tone. When Draco moved to stand behind him, Snape asked in a falsely confused voice, "Problem, Mr. Malfoy?"

With a snarl Malfoy retreated, making a wide path around Harry before stepping rapidly down the corridor. Harry felt a little dizzy watching him retreat; he seemed to be seeing too much of both directions of corridor at once. He was ready to return to himself, especially since even Snape with the cacophonous overtones of pungent potion and wet charcoal ink clinging to his robes, also hinted at the scent of chicken. He remembered Hermione's concerned loud instructions to Ginny and relaxed again as he released the energy. The world twisted disturbingly before he could close his eyes on it. His knees hitting the floor jolted him back to himself.

Snape's hand closed around his upper arm and hauled him to his feet.

"You were there all this time?" Harry asked, finding his balance on two oddly round and clumsy, shod feet.

"It did not seem like intervening would do your battered ego any good. Had he pulled his wand, it would have been different." Snape looked him over as Harry brushed off his knees. "Was that the first time you have managed that?"

"Yes," Harry said, heart racing as he thought about it.

"I am certain Minerva would like to see it, in that case."

"Yeah, next session, maybe," Harry said, thinking he would feel silly running back up there now. "Strange really-- everything seems a little different: brighter and stronger smelling. And shorter," he added with a grin. Snape handed him his bookbag, which he hefted as they walked. Waving his arms, he said thoughtfully, "I don't know how to manage both arms and wings, though. That's too many limbs."

"There are no athletic requirements as part of the Animagus bonus section of the N.E.W.T." Snape stated reassuringly.

"Good," Harry said happily.

They walked to the staircases where they would split up. After a group of Third Years went by, Harry asked excitedly, "Do you think I can fly?"

Snape hesitated replying as though having an internal struggle with the question. "Hagrid would know, I presume," he finally said.

Harry, thinking now he had been wrong to put such restrictions on Ginny and that he should apologize, said, "I bet I can, at least short distances."

Snape still appeared to be struggling. "Consider that you cannot take your N.E.W.T.s from the hospital wing."

"Yeah, yeah," Harry said dismissively before heading along the balcony towards the corridor to the Gryffindor tower. He glanced back once to find that his guardian wore a familiar expression, but only familiar from long ago. Thinking maybe he should not have been so offhanded about things, he almost went back, but Snape was already heading down the staircase.

In the common room Harry leaned over between Ron and Hermione, which was difficult given how close together their heads hung over their assignments. "Guess what?" Harry said. When they both turned curious faces up to him, he said, "I managed my form."

"Harry! That's great!" Hermione exploded. "During your tutoring?"

Most of the common room had turned their way. More quietly, Harry said, "After, when Draco was harassing me. I don't think he'll do that again," he added with a cruel grin.

"Ha!" Ron said. "Well, let's see, come on."

Harry balked, glancing around at the crowded room. "Not here."

His friends quickly put their books aside. "We can go somewhere else like the Room of Requirement," Hermione said eagerly. "Neville," she said across the room, "have a minute?"

"No, but I'm assuming it's something I don't want to miss?"

"I'd say," Ron replied and gave Harry a shove toward the portrait hole.

"How about the lawn?" Harry suggested instead, thinking of trying a running start with some serious flapping.

"Really?" Hermione confirmed. She glanced at her watch. "It's twenty to ten, but why not? Just make it quick."

"And we've already lost the cup," Ron pointed out as they turned down one staircase after another. "Might as well make the most of that."

Hermione's expression made Harry wonder what she had come up with to try and win it despite their firm last place position. She bit her lips as they continued on. Seeing a familiar redhead on another staircase that was shifting from one place to another, Ron shouted, "Ginny, come with us! Harry's going to show us his form."

Many students started following after that. Harry caught up to his tall friend. "I don't need that much of an audience," he complained.

"Why not?" Ron retorted and gave him a big grin.

"Oh, sure, why not," Harry, feeling buoyant, gave in.

The large doors to the outside creaked open, letting in a breath of mild night air. "Beautiful night," Ron opined grandly as they stepped down to the lawn. A knot of students surrounded the three of them as they stopped.

Gesturing with his hands, Harry said, "Clear a path to the lake."

Glancing between each other, they backed up. Ron said, "What are you turning into, a whale?"

"Just give me some room," Harry said, thinking that if he didn't get airborne, the water would be a soft landing. He dropped his arms to his sides and tried to generate the same rippling energy he had managed before. Breaths passed with just a slight movement of his robes.

"Any year now," Parkinson sneered from behind him.

Harry turned and gave her a broad grin. "Thank you, Pansy," he said sincerely. Anger again forged the energy just the right way and the world twisted below him. He hoped he did not always need an insulting Slytherin around to manage this.

Expressions of surprise and fear echoed around him. Again he was not balancing all that well, or perhaps didn't know where the strength was in his limbs, and had to step backward to steady himself. His friends stepped in close before him.

"Wow, Harry!" Ron exclaimed. "Merlin, that's really something."

Harry moved his head around and tried to get used to the wide-angle view he had on the world. Stunned faces loomed in the corners of his vision. He twitched his nose; this many bodies around smelled like the Quidditch changing rooms at the end of a hot season. He tried his wings, bumping a few students aside.

Ginny said with a grin, "Try a flight over the lake where crashing isn't painful. It's not as hard as you think."

Harry leaned forward a bit and found his wings again, which felt like a second set of arms.

"Harry," Hermione said in deep concern and a touch on his leg, "you aren't *really*?"

Harry leaned forward down the lawn to lose the need to step backward when he lost his balance. He was grateful that he could not talk, since it meant he could not bother to argue with her. A few experimental steps forward went pretty well. He leaned more and picked up the pace, learning when he clawed his front foot with his back that he had to change his gait when he began to run. His wings threw themselves out level on their own and his feet felt lighter. A pump of his second arms and he did not touch down on his hands as expected. When he did touch them down it was much too hard, jolting through his shoulders. His back legs came forward to help and he managed to regain his pace.

The lake was approaching. Maybe he should slow to a stop and try again, he thought. A full moon lit the water, transforming the surface into mercury. He flapped harder; this time just as he pushed off with his stronger back legs. His feet did not touch before he flapped again. Cheers followed behind him. He kept flapping, glad to find the motion easy even with his full weight off the ground. His legs felt useless, so he pulled them up as he passed the lake edge. This was how he discovered that they were essential for weight balance. Just over the lake edge, he nearly stalled. Madly throwing his head down and his legs forward, he barely managed to keep flying. He pawed into the lake surface as he regained an acceptable flying speed again. A little altitude would give him some margin for error, he thought, flapping harder, and just slightly lifting his chin. That worked remarkably well, and the sudden easy lift made him try to shout his glee; it came out as a very strange call that echoed off the hills.

He was most of the way over the lake and needed to turn. Not knowing any better, he leaned like he would on a broom. The world slid around neatly, although it took some mad flapping at the end since he had lost too much speed doing it. There seemed to be a lot more people at the edge of the lake now. Harry hoped they had the sense to get out of the way, as he did not have much faith in a landing.

Something caught the corner of Harry's vision. A bird flew along beside him, diving and turning to keep pace. Harry grinned as he recognized the red-tail hawk. When he returned his attention forward, the lake edge and lawn were coming up startlingly fast. Concerned about slowing enough, Harry lifted his head too early and dragged his feet over the water's surface, sending plumes of lake water alongside before his paws found the mucky lake edge and his legs managed to make a running landing.

The students were cheering and Ron actually ran up and hugged him in glee. An otter came up beside him, shook itself before transforming into Hermione, who also put her hands around him as much as possible. Their eager touch took away the uneasiness that still lingered at transforming into something so strange.

Harry glanced up and found the teachers beyond his friends, their expressions unclear in the twilight. He must have tried to speak because something vaguely like "Uh oh" came out of his animal throat, making nearly everyone laugh forcefully. McGonagall stepped forward, followed closely by Greer, who was making comments that implied they should all be tossed out that very night.

McGonagall turned to the Potions professor. "Gertrude, do back off or I may have you make the appropriate point assignments." Greer, clearly confused by this, stepped back warily. Looking up at Harry, the headmistress said, "Looks like you managed, my boy."

Harry shifted his feet, mud was drying on his paws uncomfortably and pebbles were stuck between his toes, or pads he supposed they were. Hagrid stepped over, strangely at eye level. "Well, look a' you." He brushed the feathers on Harry's head back with an affectionate expression, then immediately pulled Harry into a bear hug. Harry put more membrane energy into the spell, afraid that if he transformed back now, he might be crushed.

Hagrid finally released him, sniffing and muttering how proud he was. Harry relaxed and let himself transform back to normal. His friends patted his arms and congratulated him. His hands were coated in mud, so he stood still until Hermione cleaned them with a spell. Her hair was wet from swimming, he noticed in amusement, although her robes were dry.

As they tramped past the teachers toward the main doors, followed by a circling hawk, Harry said to the headmistress, "Just wanted to make sure you didn't miss us, Professor." He then winked at Snape, who stood beside her.

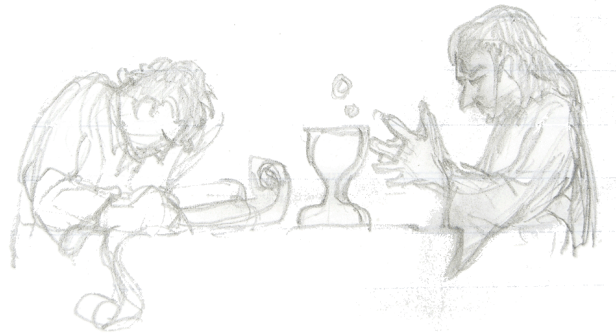
She smiled faintly, still looking serious. "I do appreciate that, Mr. Potter," she stated formally.

When the students were out of earshot, laughing and jostling as they stepped up to the main doors, McGonagall said to Snape, "I'll leave their punishment to you, Severus."

Snape drew himself up, spared a glance at Greer, and asked airily, "Punishment for what?" Greer's eyes popped out slightly as she started to fume. Directly to her, he added, "Having read every one of this school's regulations, I do not know of one that was violated this evening."

Greer put her hands on her hips. "Curfew?" she snarled.

McGonagall interceded, "Ah, yes, well, all houses were represented out here this evening. No point in knocking them all down," she stated easily before turning to head up the lawn. Greer grumbled as they all walked back at a sedate pace, enjoying the warm evening air. McGonagall finally said in admonishment, "Gertrude, they will be gone soon enough . . . just a few short weeks. Of course, others will take their place, as always happens." She fell thoughtful and turned to Snape. "Although, I do not think they will have equals for quite a while."



Chapter 45 -- Knock Down the Walls

In the common room it was a long time before everyone quieted down after their little Animagus romp. Harry accepted all of the congratulations and expressions of glee at his animal form. The younger house students began scheming how to become Animagi to find the next Griffin among them, since it was believed that one of them must be and it would be rather nice to have an ongoing mascot for the house. Harry shook his head in amusement as he half-listened to this. He had pulled out his unfinished assignments and was looking them over with a bit of dread; he was rather exhausted, and it was late.

As Harry stared with wavering focus at the parchment before him, the room gradually cleared out. Ron and Neville remained behind although they seemed to be revising rather than working on assignments. Harry was a little touched that they were giving up this much sleep for him. He reviewed his notes and sipped the hot cocoa Ron had fetched from the castle kitchen. Maybe if he just rested his eyes for a few minutes, he thought, then he might be refreshed enough to continue.

"Is he asleep?" Neville asked. Harry's head rested on his crooked arm, which rested in turn on the worn arm of the overstuffed couch. He wasn't moving much at all.

Ron leaned over to take a closer look. Quietly, he said, "Looks like it." With care Ron pulled the parchment out of Harry's loose fingers. "What's he working on?" he muttered. "Oh, Potions essay." He held it out to Neville. "Can you finish it for him? I know a Skiiving Note charm that will make your writing look like his."

Neville accepted the long parchment with reluctance. "I don't know . . ."

"You do all right in Potions," Ron insisted.

"I don't get graded as hard as he does." Neville read the half essay in silence for a long minute. "Harry takes these assignments as a personal battle, I don't know if he'd even want me to finish it for him, but I will if you *really* think I should."

"Maybe not then," said Ron, taking the long curling sheet back again. "What should we do with him? I can't stand to wake him--he's really out."

"I need to get to sleep as well," Neville admitted, glancing at his watch while rubbing one eye. "Think I'll skip running in the morning at this point."

"Well, there's an upside to late-night revising," Ron quipped. He stacked his books together and hefted them under his arm before standing up and considering Harry.

"Should we just leave him?" Neville asked casually, sounding like he was thinking ahead to being asleep himself.

Ron sighed and set his books back on the low table. "You know, he's the only student in this whole bloody school whose dad is also here." He pulled out his wand and thought a moment before casting a silver bird through the floor. Hefting his books again quickly, he muttered tiredly, "Let Snape finish his essay for him--I'm going to bed."

Neville hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, but then followed when Ron held the door open for him.

Harry felt something bump the fabric of his robe at the shoulder. This contrasted strangely with the dream he was having about playing Quidditch in the middle of a blizzard and trying in vain to catch the Snitch while wearing oversized, hand knitted, scarlet mittens.

"Harry," a familiar voice prompted him.

Sitting up sent painful kinks through Harry's neck, so he stretched his head in the other direction and tiredly considered his guardian. "I must have fallen asleep," he murmured, gazing bleary-eyed at the disarrayed and empty common room.

"Apparently," Snape said and held out a stone cup. "Drink this."

Inside the cup thick yellow and white liquids swirled in globs, but didn't mix. Harry sipped it and discovered it didn't taste anything like lemon as expected, but like musty curtains. His head cleared startlingly, so he drank the rest down while holding his nose. "What was that?" he asked as he handed the cup back.

Snape set the empty cup on the table and sat in the chair Ron had been studying in. "Farnsworth's Faffery, also called Slumber in a Jar. Feeling better?"

Harry felt like he had had a full night's sleep. "Much," he replied in amazement, expecting to feel the euphoric effect wearing off at any moment. His wakefulness held firm, however. "Is that potion restricted?" he asked, wishing he had known about it a long time ago.

Snape sat back, relaxed. "No. Nor is it difficult to brew. However, the key ingredient is hard to obtain."

"Which is?"

"Mummy powder."

Harry frowned at that disturbing thought. "Powdered mummy?"

"Powder of a unique fungus that only grows on undisturbed Egyptian mummies," Snape explained in a pedantic tone. Harry forcefully ignored his now churning stomach and turned to his parchments which someone had laid out on the table before him. Snape said, "Have enough energy to finish that now?"

"Yes." Harry picked up his quill and set to work. Snape leaned back in his chair and gazed at his steepled fingers before him. He looked to be settling in until Harry was finished.

Finally, after having to look up the Latin for wormwood, Harry wrote out the last line and held the parchment out before his guardian. Snape, who had until then been sitting in quiet contemplation, accepted it and started reading. Minutes later, he handed it back. "Well done," he said.

Harry rolled it up and put it in his bag. It was only three and he was rather wide-awake. His alternative Potions texts, with the marked pages, sat in a neat row in the bottom of his bookbag. He pulled them out.

Snape's eyes followed him doing this. "All set, Harry?" he asked.

"Yes. Thank you," Harry said sincerely.

Snape hefted his tall frame out of the sagging chair and shook his robes straight. "I shall see you later in the morning then," he said before departing.

Harry again thanked him and leaned back with *Potent Potions and Porridges*.

Morning light came through the room slowly enough that Harry did not notice it until the glare on the lamp base across from him made his eyes water. Warm orange light also glinted on the uneven glass in the windows on the far side of the room. Harry warmed Ron's unfinished cocoa and continued reading.

An hour later a voice disturbed his journey through useful moor plants. "You are still awake?" Penelope asked in concern.

Harry shrugged. "You're up early."

"I sometimes wake and cannot return to sleep," she said, adjusting her dressing gown.

To Harry's ear it sounded as though she did not like admitting that. He moved his books out of the way so she could sit on the couch. He looked into the stained mugs before him. "Sorry, I finished all the cocoa."

She grinned. "Dat is all right," she insisted. "Aren't you going to be too tired today?"

"I think I'll be all right," he said easily. She put down her toiletry kit, picked up one of the texts he had already finished, and flipped it open. He watched her do this, his eyes taking in her un-made-up, smooth skin and long lashes. A sleepy scent clung to her, reminding him of the night he spent with Tonks. Without conscious thought, he had leaned closer to her, something he realized only when she turned to him in question. He was busy sorting through the impulses coursing within him and really would not have kissed her, but it didn't matter, because she kissed him.

Harry leaned into her harder and put his arms around her almost desperately. He felt a bit like he had not eaten in a week, as he returned a rather devouring kiss. After a long minute she turned aside out of reach and said, "Maybe not in the common room . . . "

Harry froze, then quickly looked around the empty room. "Yeah, good point," he agreed, swallowing hard. It was much harder to let go of her and sit back than it should have been.

At breakfast Harry found his face heating up a lot, as in, every time he glanced at Penelope. She in turn spent a lot of time staring at her plate with a small grin on her lips. Harry forced himself to listen in to Hermione's and Ginny's conversation about test-taking strategies. The strange antsy excitement in his stomach lingered through the meal though, even when he started to worry about his N.E.W.T.s at the same time.

Harry handed in his Potions assignment with confidence, ignoring Greer's dark look as she accepted it. Malfoy turned in his right behind him. "Get help on that?" Draco asked in a falsely friendly tone.

"Professor always grades them like I do, so it wouldn't matter if I did," stated Harry even though the teacher in question was just feet away. Her eyes narrowed. Adopting an innocent tone, Harry asked, "Did you get Potion tutoring from Bellatrix while you had the chance?"

The other nearby students turned their way. Hermione, Frina, and Penelope came in at that moment, gossiping happily. Flatly, Draco said, "She isn't any good at Potions. Curses, though . . . " The last had a threatening ring to it.

"I could use some more practice before the N.E.W.T.s," Harry returned. "Let me know when you want to try them out."

"You should be so lucky to get a warning," said Draco in a very quiet voice.

* * *

Harry finally got a chance to pull Penelope aside on Sunday evening. They had all been studying in the Great Hall early in the evening but one by one the rest of them had drifted away, Ginny last, saying she had to meet another study group for a project. Free now to look across the table, Harry did so for nearly a minute, wishing there was no one else in the Hall. Thinking fiercely, he wondered where they could go to be alone that was not a broom cupboard.

She finally noticed his attention and looked up with that shy smile. Harry said, just as it popped into his head, "Want to go for a walk in the Rose Garden?"

"Right now?"

"Yeah."

She glanced down at her textbook and considered it before shutting it and saying, "Sure."

Harry grinned and they both quickly packed up their things and left. They dropped their bags just on the edge of the bailey and walked to the rose archway before the fountain. Harry watched for anyone else who might be around. With relief he decided that the garden was empty and took Penelope's warm hand. Maybe it was the torch light, but her eyes looked a little sadder than he expected to find them when she glanced up at him.

They walked slowly around the roughly circular path. There was a stone alcove with a bench on the far side, Harry knew, so he kept a lookout for it. "Here," he said, when he found it. He pulled out his wand and tapped one of the red roses on the corner of the path to turn it yellow, a signal that that area was occupied.

"You've been here many times, clearly," Penelope said.

"No," he insisted. "Everyone knows about the rose. Really." He sat down and brushed off her half of the bench. "Really, I've never been here with anyone," he said, worried she would not believe him.

She grinned at him. "I know that," she admitted. "Ginny said you had a girlfriend Cho, who finished school already, but that is all she knows about."

Harry scratched his brow. "It is really hard for us when you girls talk so much."

"I thought she would know."

"Ah," Harry said, feeling the mood slipping away into one of vague annoyance. His eyes had adjusted to the dim moonlight and he could see her grinning mischievously. Clusters of white roses glowed blue behind her.

After a pause she observed, "You never behave as I expect."

"No?" Harry returned, feeling at a loss for conversation as well.

"You are shy vit girls. Well, except Hermione. I would not have expected dat."

"Really?" Harry asked, just to say something. A haloed wisp of cloud was moving over the moon making it appear that the waning disk was sailing through the sky.

"And you are trying to goad Malfoy into a fight."

Harry thought about that one. "Hm," he muttered. "Maybe." Imagining a good duel with Malfoy did fill him with an eager raw anticipation. He pondered that pleasant thought as they sat in silence. Penelope sat back and sighed, seeming relaxed. It was nice just to get away from everyone and be in the quiet, Harry had to admit, for a little while anyway.

When her hand took hold of his, he jumped lightly he was so wrapped up in other, darker thoughts. She leaned closer, making him realize he needed to put his arm around her. Dark thoughts of dueling flittered away when she turned inward for a kiss.

It was getting on to real night, Harry thought much later, although he was reluctant to head back inside. It must be past curfew, he considered, then tossed that thought away. They couldn't give him detention for longer than the two weeks

remaining in the school year. Or, maybe Snape could, but Harry suspected he wouldn't. Harry dabbed his lips, which were raw from being wet. Penelope snuggled against him with a sigh, also seeming reluctant to move.

"So you will come visit me in Bern?" she asked, breaking the lengthy silence.

Harry lifted his chin and felt anxious as he realized, somehow for the first time, that shortly she would be returning to somewhere much farther away than England. "I'd like to, when I know my testing schedule. I've never been out of the country."

"No?" she asked in surprise. "You will like Switzerland--the mountains are beautiful."

Too bad it wasn't somewhere near Scotland, he thought wryly. What he said was, "We should head in. We may need a Disillusionment charm to get past Filch. He likes to hang around the doors catching people coming in late." They need not have worried, since Filch was rather occupied elsewhere.

They didn't meet anyone until the Grand Staircase, although in the corridor there was a strange set of green footprints on the floor going the other way. The Grand Staircase had many sloppy footprints on it in blue, yellow, and green. Students were gathered in the Entrance Hall in large clusters talking furiously. Justin, face red, stomped down the staircase, trailing yellow. At the bottom of the stairs he bent to look at the perfectly ordinary bottoms of his shoes and huffed in frustration. He seemed to be in Head Boy mode.

"Has anyone seen the headmistress?" he asked a group of Fifth Years. They shook their heads. Justin gave the Hall an annoyed once-over and caught sight of Harry. "Going out with a bang, eh, Potter?"

"What?" Harry returned, thoroughly confused.

Justin, sounding more fed up than Harry thought he could, said, "You will notice that no Gryffindors are trailing red."

It was true that Harry did not see any red footprints. "What's going on?" he asked. When Justin scoffed and walked away, Harry muttered, "Uh oh."

Malfoy strode passed, coming to a sharp halt when he spotted Harry. "Think you're funny don't you, Potter?" He shoved Harry, leaving a green hand-print on Harry robes.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry insisted, examining the stuff on his shirt. It looked like glowing paint, but it didn't smear or look likely to come off.

He headed down to the Great Hall with Penelope following, looking both bemused and amused. Behind him, he could hear Justin bemoan, "Cor! It's on your hands now too?"

Harry spotted Ginny, the Creevey brothers, and Frina sitting and reading, apparently unaffected by goings on. "Where's Ron and Hermione?" Harry asked. "What's happening?"

Ginny gave a great shrug. "Don't know," she breathed, clearly acting. Beside her the Creevey brothers looked innocent, maybe too much so, and across from them Frina flashed him a grin like a cat.

"Ron and Hermione?" Harry prompted again.

"The library," Ginny answered as though it were perfectly normal for them to be there, which it actually had not been lately.

McGonagall strode in just then and the room quieted. She stepped over to Harry, looking very stern. Her eyes flickered down to the green hand-print on his front as she said, "A word, Mr. Potter."

Harry moved to follow her quick departure, glancing back in time to see Ginny looking worried; he shot her an annoyed look in return. In the Entrance Hall they swept by Snape who stood grimly and actually growled lightly at Harry as he followed alongside. He was not trailing green, Harry was *very* relieved to see. There were many, many trails everywhere along the corridors and the door handles and moulding were spotted with finger-shaped blobs. Near a painting of a bog, were two small fingerprints that caused Harry to wonder if there were a hidden passage there that he didn't know about. He would have to come back later and check.

In the headmistress' office he was ordered to sit, which he did. Harry was beginning to feel a little bothered that they automatically assumed this was his doing, when he actually knew absolutely nothing. He was also feeling a little miffed at his friends because they hadn't said anything, assuming this prank was Ron and Hermione's, but at the moment it was his only defense so he squashed that reaction. "Professor," Harry said evenly, normally, but this was a mistake, as it made her gaze darken.

"A mere two weeks, Mr. Potter. That is all we have left." Professor McGonagall steepled her fingers with fidgety movements as she leaned forward in her chair. Snape stood beside the desk, arms crossed, brow low, eyes flinty. Harry would have considered him dangerously angry in a previous time. McGonagall went on, "Clearly Severus was correct--we were much too lenient on you earlier and you've taken liberties as a result, even with such short a time with in which to do it." She pulled out a file from a pile beside her, making Harry's palms sweat a little. He thought of denying knowing anything, but he had a sense that his delaying the two of them might help his friends cover their tracks, so he sat silent. The green paint substance on his robes had not faded, and he had a panicky feeling it might be permanent, which even he thought would be rather bad.

"Terribly childish of you all," McGonagall commented, but not so much to Harry as to the room. "Couldn't win the cup so you take it out on everyone else."

Harry bit his lip, thinking that she was digging herself a bit of a hole that might be useful later.

She went on, "I am reminded at the end of every year how maturity and age do not go hand-in-hand. Even for those who should have learned some sense of responsibility by now. Especially you," McGonagall added pointedly.

Flatly, letting a little anger show, he asked, "Why do you assume that I had anything to do with this?"

He knew he had caught her unawares, because she straightened suddenly in her chair and gazed at him uncertainly. She glanced at Snape in question before asking outright, "Did you do this, Mr. Potter?"

"No," he replied stiffly, anger churned in him as though looking for an outlet. "And I don't know who did it. Nor do I know what charm or compound this is." He poked at his robes again. When he looked up at his guardian, he had his thoughts un-occluded. Snape, who had a look of consternation before, dropped his arms in surprise.

"He does not know," Snape said.

"So where have you been these last two hours, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked, sounding unconvinced.

Harry re-closed his mind and felt himself flush warmly. "Not any of your concern, really, Professor," he said. "I wasn't planning any pranks at the time."

"It is mine, though," Snape pointed out sternly.

Harry looked away from them both, annoyed at this position he had been forced into. Jaw tight, he said, "I was in the Rose Garden with someone." He was beginning to wish he had been part of the prank, because he was starting to feel maybe the teachers deserved it. He began hoping his friends were planning another, in fact. Standing up, Harry said, sounding hard even to his own ears, "May I go now, Professor?"

"No, Harry, sit down," McGonagall said more gently. Harry did so, slowly. His anger solidified at her new conciliatory mode. She said, "I apologize for falsely accusing you."

Realizing a response was expected, Harry said, "Yes, ma'am," sounding unconvinced and a bit like Draco to his own ears.

She frowned, eyes a little sad. "I am sorry, Harry. The disruption this is going to cause for the last week of classes is enormous and we are a little testy as a result." She evaluated his closed expression. "Well, I don't suppose there is anything I can say." She sighed. "Haven't seen that temper of yours in rather a long while, though I see it just below the surface now." She frowned at Snape apologetically as well. "Go on then, Harry. Tell your friends that if I can come up with any proof, they will be in serious, serious trouble."

Harry stood up with a quick motion, gave his guardian a dark glance and departed. On the staircase down, he felt anger at Snape as well, maybe because he expected more loyalty from him. Sirius would have defended him whether he knew Harry had been involved or not.

By the time he reached the tower, Harry's anger had shifted, so that when he entered the common room and found his friends whispering and giggling, he gave them a dark frown. Hermione came over to him. "Did you get blamed?" she asked.

"Oh, I would say so," Harry snapped at her. His friends' faces fell worried from gleeful. "Couldn't tell me about it beforehand?" he asked, changing tacks.

"We didn't want you to get into trouble," Hermione explained.

Harry gave her a derisive laugh. "That worked."

"It is pretty funny though," Ron said with a broad grin. "The Slytherins are the only ones who got the hands because of how their door works." He laughed. "We put the Invisible Stoolie Goo on each house's entrance. The Slytherins have to push their door open."

Harry glanced around at the other grinning Gryffindors in the room. Clearly everyone was in the know. "I do have a message from McGonagall. She says that if she can prove it, you will be in serious, serious trouble."

"Only two weeks' worth," Seamus retorted, while beside him, Neville nodded.

"I wouldn't underestimate her. Or the Deputy headmaster," Harry added with meaning.

Ron said, "She can't prove it unless she raids the experimental brewing room at Fred and George's place. They were more than happy to make the Goo in colors for us, and they promise not to sell it for at least a year."

Harry, feeling inordinately tired, waved them off and went up to the dormitory. Kali had only been out once that day and she reached through the cage bars a bit frantically when he entered. He let her out and she scampered and flapped madly around the fortunately empty room. Finally exhausting herself, she dropped onto the bed, fanning her wings slowly and breathing fast. "I know how you feel," Harry said, lying back to stare at the inside of his drapes. He eventually roused himself to get into his pyjamas and set the alarm for early, since he was feeling wound up and looked forward to a run the next morning.

Bright and early, it was just he and Neville for the run. "Still mad?" Neville asked when they were out of earshot of the castle.

"I don't know," Harry replied. He had brought Kali along this morning, thinking she might like more flying, and she flitted along beside them over the lake, swooping and diving to catch dragonflies in her mouth or feet depending on the size of insect.

"That's an odd pet, Harry," Neville commented when they rounded the path by the train station.

"Hey, when I first met you, you were looking for a lost toad."

"True. My gran remembered that as the best pet, which it was in her day, and insisted that was what my uncle buy me."

They ran in silence until the last leg when they were approaching the castle again. Harry, feeling the need to talk, said breathlessly because of their fast pace, "I think I expected more loyalty from Severus, at least the benefit of the doubt."

"Really?" Neville said immediately, sounding as though that would have been an odd thing to expect.

Harry frowned, feeling not well understood and as though he should drop the topic. A minute later Neville said, "I would think he has a lot of loyalty to Hogwarts, since it protected him for so long." Harry had not thought of that. Neville went on, "It was just a prank, and the paint will fade in two weeks. It was timed to the school year by the Weasley twins."

"Does every Gryffindor know about this?" Harry asked in annoyance as they slowed on the lawn and finally stopped.

Neville swung his arms side to side before bending to stretch his legs. "Pretty much." He looked up. "Someone wants to talk to you, I think."

Harry turned to the castle steps and found Snape standing there, arms crossed, looking as though he had been waiting patiently for a while. "Gee," he muttered, "am I in trouble for morning runs now too?"

"Harry," Neville chastised him. Harry turned back to his roommate in surprise. Neville scratched his head and gave him a wry smile. "No wonder you were running so fast, you must still be miffed. Go on, then."

Drenched in sweat and relishing the cool breeze off the lawn, Harry walked up to the steps alone. When Harry arrived, Snape said, "A little talk, I think."

Harry would have snapped back at him, could feel his jaw wanting to move even, but Neville's comment made him hold himself in check. They had run fast, he realized by the clock as they stepped through the still empty Entrance Hall.

In Snape's office Harry took a seat and dried his face on the front of his t-shirt while Snape poured him a cup of tea and sat down at his desk. After a long pause he prompted, "Something you need to say?"

Harry set the teacup down without drinking any. His palms were sweating and he had to rub them on his exercise shorts repeatedly to dry them. "I thought you'd be more loyal to me," he said, feeling stung just saying it.

Harry didn't think Snape could have reacted more had Harry actually struck him. With a jerk Snape turned his head away, then stared at the ceiling and rubbed his hand through his hair. "It is more complicated than that."

"Not to me." Harry considered adding that Sirius would not have assumed he was guilty, and even if he knew he were guilty, would have stood by him anyway. But Harry sensed there was a bridge there that, once burned, would be difficult to rebuild. He left it at that.

"The school is a mess," Snape said.

"The school is still standing," Harry pointed out between sips of the good tea. The scent reminded him of too many things. He wondered idly about Candide, but decided it was not the right time to ask. "I'd assume the pranksters are smart enough not to do permanent damage."

"We are hoping that is so, since we have not been able to obliterate it or even render it invisible. It implies that other outside parties are involved."

Harry just shrugged, having no interest in being generous right now.

"This is the kind of trouble I would expect from my own house, especially given that Mr. Nott has returned and he and Mr. Malfoy have resumed their previous close confidence. I had been keeping an eye on them with little thought to poten-

tially more troublesome Gryffindors." After a lengthy pause Snape, while running his knuckles over his chin, conceded, "I perhaps should have taken your side or a neutral position, but I had no imagining that such an elaborate scheme could have occurred without at least your knowledge. I am surprised at your friends."

So am I, Harry thought. He finished his tea and pushed his cup away, eyes fixed on the front of the desk. "Well, it did," Harry stated and wondered idly if his friends had not told him because they had believed he might let something slip to Snape. He shook his head in frustration.

Quietly, Snape said, "This school is important to me, Harry."

Thinking back to Neville's observation, Harry said, "I know." It was, after all, important to Harry as well. After a pause he said, "Something else you wanted?"

"I was hoping . . . that we could reach some kind of understanding," Snape reluctantly stated, as if those words were foreign and required dredging up from somewhere.

"We have," Harry said. "It goes something like, you don't trust me, the school is of primary importance . . ."

"Harry," Snape said to cut him off during his hesitation. "This is best discussed when the school year is over."

"Can I go to Switzerland?" Harry tossed out, interrupting.

Snape blinked as he took that in. "If you wish. I presume you will keep your testing schedule in mind when making plans."

"Yep."

Snape gestured that it was up to Harry. He looked tired, Harry realized, then wondered how much sleep he had managed to get last night. Feeling like he should help a little, Harry said, "If I tell you something, will you not tell McGonagall where you learned it?"

Snape nodded, actually looking regretful.

Harry said, "The paint will go away on its own when the school year is over."

Snape raised a brow and tilted his head in acknowledgment. Harry stood and went to the door but Snape's voice made him pause with his hand on the latch. "Do try to stay out of trouble."

Harry looked back and returned, "Does it earn me anything?"

"You are thinking like a Slytherin," Snape accused him.

"Hm," Harry muttered with a frown before going out.

* * *

During the next day, the other students were annoyed enough with Gryffindor House that Harry felt things were pretty even all around. The school floors were ubiquitously colorful, at least in the centers of the corridors and green hand-prints were on nearly every desk, door, handrail, and the Slytherin table in the Great Hall. Some Slytherins had taken to leaving nasty messages, drawn with just a plain fingertip, on walls and tables. Ironically enough, there was no easy way to remove them or cover them over, though one message on the wall about someone's choice of boyfriend had yellow foot-prints across it by the next class break. Harry wore an older robe, one without a big green hand-print on it, though it was tight around the shoulders.

As they waited for Snape to arrive for Defense, Harry listened to Hermione whisper to Ron something about maybe it might have been better to have set the cancellation on the Stoolie Goo to something shorter. "Too late," was Ron's reply.

Hermione's face brightened, "Know what . . ." she began in an excited whisper, just as Snape entered. She swallowed whatever she was going to say and took up her quill.

"Well," Snape said, as he spun on his heel on the platform at the front. His patience sounded very short. "I was thinking of another review session today since your examinations are so close, BUT," he added, pacing a bit. "I think, perhaps a workshop on curse neutralization would be more interesting." Harry's friends turned to him in question, requiring that he shrug at them, since he did not know where this was leading. Snape went on. "Let's see, the desks perhaps. Everyone up, push all but . . ." He appeared to count. "You three," he said, pointing at the Durmstrang girls near Harry, "consider yourselves Gryffindor?"

Frina and Penelope nodded after a second's hesitation. Darsha shook her head.

"Smart girl," Snape said. "Over there." He pointed at the wall to the left. "Everyone except the Gryffindors, over on that side."

"Uh oh," Neville muttered.

Everyone leapt up eagerly, their new trails on the floor barely noticeable additions. Malfoy had a rather pleased grin on his face. Snape said, "The rest of you, pull eight desks to the side." He pointed off to the right. They all obeyed in worrisome silence. "Now, off with you." He pointed at Harry and his friends. "For twenty minutes, no more," he commanded them.

Harry and his friends looked at each other before collecting up their books and shuffling out with glances back at their classmates. When the classroom door boomed closed behind them, Seamus said, "You mentioned something about underestimating the deputy headmaster?"

"Twenty minutes," Hermione reminded them all.

"It'll be practice for the N.E.W.T. Come on," Ron urged. "Cocoa sounds good again." He headed off down the corridor and after a moment they all followed him down toward the kitchens.

Exactly nineteen and a half minutes later they stood before the Defense classroom door again. "Sorry 'bout this," Harry said to Penelope.

She smiled nicely and shrugged. Ron, spotting this, elbowed Harry hard on the arm. "Something you haven't told us?" he asked.

"What?" Harry returned too forcefully. Everyone turned to him then, but fortunately, the door opened.

Snape gestured abruptly for them to enter. Their classmates were sitting along the platform edge looking gleeful. Eight desks sat in the center of the floor, the other's pushed and piled against the left wall. Harry led the way in with some trepidation. He put his bag on the floor by the door as the others were doing behind him.

Back at the front of the room, Snape said, "All of the desks are cursed in different ways. All in a way that we covered, or . . . at least in a way related to something in your reading. You have ten minutes before you must all take a seat."

They all took that in before pulling out their wands and shuffling around to reach a desk. "Can we help each other?" Harry asked, eyeing Penelope looking under and around at the desk beside her.

"Since that will probably be more entertaining, certainly," Snape said. He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow as he took in the scene.

Harry bit his lip and tried to concentrate. How would one curse a desk, he thought to himself. There were too many possibilities. On the far side from him, Neville had removed a sticking curse and gave a shout before moving to sit. "One curse per desk?" Harry quickly asked Snape.

"I did not say that," Snape replied smoothly.

Neville froze, half sitting, and slowly moved away from the desk. He looked a little defeated to hear that. Harry ran through the basic un-cursing charms he knew to no avail. Beside him Hermione was going through a longer list. Harry stopped them all. "Everyone copy Hermione," he said.

They all quieted and Hermione started over. After a long string of incantations four of the desks had two curses removed each and grumbles from the watching students made Harry think they were making good progress. "Anyone have any others?" Harry asked them all.

Neville knew three more counter-curses, which released one more curse. Frina had a few strange suggestions, which, if the desks each had two curses, freed up one more desk. Three minutes remained. Into the game now Harry had them split into groups to each tackle a remaining desk. He, Frina, and Penelope worked on the one that still had two unknown curses on it. As time ticked down, they made no progress on theirs, although Hermione and Ron finished un-cursing one other desk, which Hermione sat in proudly. Ron took a previously un-cursed seat beside her, both raising their hands at their success.

"Time," Snape intoned firmly. "You all should be sitting, I believe."

Everyone shuffled towards a seat, except Penelope who said to Harry, "You shouldn't take that one," indicating the doubly cursed desk.

"It's all right," Harry insisted, blocking her with his arm from sitting down. He pointed at a safe desk off to the side. "Take that one." Ron was standing up to come over, concern in his gaze. Harry, feeling the weight of fate like he hadn't in long while, and refusing to let himself glance at his guardian, sat at the desk. He promptly passed out.

"Mr. Weasley," Snape sneered. "Everyone should be sitting."

Ron looked up from the hunched over, long, grey-haired figure of his friend with an appalled expression.

"It isn't permanent, Mr. Weasley," Snape commented tiredly.

Ron backed off slowly, giving Snape a baleful look. He sat down only because Hermione pulled him down. They looked around for the other cursed desk; Dean was sitting at it., but he shrugged, indicating nothing had happened.

"Well," Snape breathed, stepping down from the platform. "Not as satisfying an exercise as had been hoped. Should have listened to Mr. Malfoy and made it three curses per desk."

"What's wrong with Harry?" Hermione insisted.

"Sleeping curse," Snape replied. When Hermione slapped her hand on her desk in disappointment, he added snidely, "Too obvious, Ms. Granger?" He snapped his fingers before Harry, who lifted his head groggily before it fell back onto his arms with a thud. "Probably needs the sleep anyway," he quipped. "As well as an aging curse, both will cancel when he is removed from the desk. Mr. Thomas on the other hand will be inflicted all day." Snape said this last with an airy dismissal as he spun back to the front of the classroom.

"Thiw Tahw?" Dean said, then put his hand over his mouth.

"Dean?" Ron prompted in confusion as he slid out of his desk now that Snape's back was turned.

"Oh, a backwards curse," Hermione muttered. "Didn't think of that one either." She got up and followed Ron along with the rest of the students.

Ron lifted Harry up by his collar and examined his aged, sleeping face. "Cor, how old is he?"

The other students were gathering around as well. Snape replied, "About a hundred." He turned and studied Harry as well with a curious look.

Ron dragged his alarming looking friend from the desk and placed him on the floor. Harry's long grey hair shrunk away as did his wrinkles. He rubbed his eyes and looked up at everyone crowded around. "What happened?" he asked sharply.

"You were zonked by a sleeping spell," Ron said, giving him a hand up. "Right after you aged a hundred years."

Harry looked doubtful about that before stretching his arms and saying, "That would explain why I'm so creaky."

The room was rearranged to the muttered complaints of the other students, who clearly had hoped for a more interesting show.

After dinner, which was colorful and full of gossip about what Snape had done to them, the Gryffindors tramped up to the solitude of their tower. Penelope took a seat right beside Harry to study. Harry, not used to having someone insist on being so close all the time had to conjure a smile for her. He didn't mind, really, but it did feel odd.

* * *

Days later, Harry, feeling knotted up over several things, was walking aimlessly around the darkened castle rather than returning to his revising and his friends. When he reached the corridor with the Defense classroom, he couldn't fail to notice the light streaming from under the heavy door. He lifted the latch, pushed the door open, and leaned in. Snape stood in the far corner, wand out, facing the darkened windows. He held a book in his open palm near the light from one of the smoking lamps. When his dark gaze came up, he looked pensive and slightly wary.

"Hi," Harry said, stepping inside and re-latching the door. Snape stiffly returned the greeting and continued to stand as he was. Curious, Harry approached.

One-handed, Snape closed the book he held and dropped it to his side. With a shuttered expression, he said, "Something I can do for you?"

Harry shrugged and tried not to show his increased curiosity. "I was taking a walk to think. Saw your light," he added, gesturing back at the door. Snape turned and set the book with two others on the table behind him. His slump-shouldered posture reminded Harry of the old Snape just a little too much. "What are you working on?" Harry asked casually, his thoughts beginning to feel disturbingly suspicious rather than just curious.

Snape slowly turned back around, biting his lip. He looked reluctant to answer and Harry assumed he wouldn't. With his gaze focused beyond the far wall, Snape explained, "Something I should have worked out sooner. Especially since I have set myself out to be an exemplary teacher of Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"You are," Harry confirmed.

With a wry grin Snape looked down at his wand, running his fingers over it. "I have been relying on your teaching, Harry. In this, anyway." He studied Harry a moment as though looking for something in his gaze. "But it is unacceptable."

"What are we discussing?" Harry asked, concerned by Snape's dark tone.

Snape sighed before replying with yet another frown, "The Patronus charm. It will be tested on the N.E.W.T. and I have not covered it."

"Nearly every Seventh Year knows it already. Those that want to learn it."

"Because of *you*."

"And Hermione, Ron, Neville, and others." Harry scoffed. "You make it sound like I taught all of them myself." Snape returned to thoughtfully examining his wand. It still bothered Harry rather a lot that Snape apparently could not produce a Patronus; it implied that he could not think of anything happy enough to. It felt risky to do so, but Harry asked, "Do you want help with it?"

Snape laughed mirthlessly and turned to stare out the darkened window. "It is late--you should be in your dormitory," he said flatly.

Frowning, Harry said, "Is there a Bogart around the castle anywhere?"

"Why?" Snape asked without turning from the window.

"Because, before, one would turn into a Dementor when I faced it. Although that might not be true anymore," he added, thinking about it some more. This made him wonder what a Bogart would turn into for him, now. Maybe he would rather wonder than know for certain.

Snape shifted, rubbed his hair back. "I have a Lethifold. I had not considered actually having something to practice on; it had not seemed feasible. He turned around, fortunately looking less dark and more generally thoughtful. "I will fetch it from my office."

Harry opened the top book on the table, *Damageless Defense*, the one Snape had been holding when Harry came in. It had a pretty good description of the Patronus, he thought as he scanned it. The sound of something metal scraping on stone made Harry turn. Snape had just placed a small trunk on the floor. It had a row of heavy silver latches all around the lid. Snape looked around the room with his hands on his hips before sliding the trunk into the far corner and backing away from it. With repeated Alohamora spells he released the latches. They both watched a little tensely, but nothing happened.

"Maybe it died," Harry suggested.

"Only fire can kill it: A hot one of dried conifer logs."

They watched the unmoving trunk another minute. Harry glanced at the book again and asked, "How far have you got into this?" Snape didn't reply, but his gaze hardened visibly. Harry wished this were easier, but he was determined now.

Snape took the book and glanced over it as though to stall. He paced away and said, "I can get only vapor, not any sort of form."

"You're almost there, then," Harry said brightly, relieved Snape was doing that well. Falling into D.A. mode, he added, "You just need to think of something a little happier."

Snape did not react to that. Harry pulled out his wand and turned the long way down the room. He cleared his throat, and said, "*Expecto Patronum*." Vapor poured from his wand as glowing fog and solidified into a stag, which was nearly blinding so close. The stag started to turn and Harry canceled the spell.

"What were you thinking of?" Snape asked.

Harry paused, caught off-guard by the question. In the past he had thought of his parents, but now that felt too remote. "I . . . was thinking about the future, I think." It was true, he had not been thinking of anything in particular, just allowing himself to feel a fundamental optimism.

"Hm," Snape muttered and paced once. Harry was jarred from his own musings by Snape's outburst of dismay. He turned and saw what had caused it; the trunk was open and empty, and Snape was pacing the edge of the room with purpose. Harry joined him in searching for the Lethifold under the tables and desks.

As Harry looked under the table at the front, he found himself laughing. "This would be embarrassing to have to explain," he said.

"Most definitely," Snape agreed as he opened the door and checked the corridor before stuffing his robe under the door and spelling it into place. "The only consolation would be that because it involved both of us, Minerva could not simply hire you immediately upon firing *me*." Harry laughed again, even though he was uncertain the situation warranted humor. Snape shook out the first curtain on the end, saying, "You need a holiday if you are finding this that amusing."

Harry shook out the curtain nearest him. "I won't deny I need a holiday," he said forcefully.

When Snape shook the next curtain a dark form resembling a discarded cloak fell out of it. He jumped back and aimed his wand at it instinctively before dropping his wand hand, apparently disgusted with his own jumpiness. Harry made a noise of deep relief and stepped over beside his guardian. "Only dangerous if you are asleep," Snape sneered at himself. "I will not deny that I could use a holiday as well."

Harry gestured at the unmoving dark form on the floor. "Think of pouring hope out of your wand . . . that works for me. Give it a go," he urged.

Snape sighed in a defeated way, but he backed up and aimed his wand . . . and just stood there, eyes moving around the floor and the wall. He glanced sharply at Harry, who waited with infinite patience beside the first row of desks. With a frown Snape finally spoke the spell and a vapor curled out of his wand before fading out. Snape dropped his wand hand and rubbed his forehead harder than usual.

Harry crossed his arms and waited in a relaxed pose, not showing any of the distress he felt. "Maybe you are trying too hard?" he suggested. He wanted to turn away, but it felt important to show he had faith in this. Snape drew his lips in and raised his wand again, perhaps because the Lethifold had shifted ever so slightly, as though an unfelt breeze had ruffled it. With half-closed eyes Snape spoke the incantation again. This time the vapor curled around itself several times and twisted away. Harry at first thought it was drifting and dissipating yet again, but it actually had coalesced into an asp. The viper swam through the air and struck at the Lethifold.

An unearthly squeal somewhere between a swine and sea bird went up as the Patronus struck. Dark cloth and coiling, glowing snake tumbled together along the edge of the wall. The snake struck repeatedly, long teeth flashing as they battled.

Harry shook off his mesmerization. "If you want your Lethifold back you better cancel the spell."

Snape hesitated just an instant before he waved the charm away. He looked a little stunned. Eventually, he exhaled and stated, "An Egyptian cobra."

Harry shrugged, trying to seem like that was an okay Patronus, but he couldn't help grinning. "You did it though."

"Yes. Thank you for your assistance," he said stiffly.

Harry grinned more. The Lethifold lay small and kinked in the corner of the room, completely unmoving. "Need help putting that away?"

"No," Snape assured him. He waved a charm at the crate and pushed it over beside the dark creature with his foot and waved another charm at the trunk. Rushing air sounded and the Lethifold was sucked into the crate. Snape waved the lid shut and latched it all around before picking it up to take it back to his office. At the door Harry tugged the robe clear of the door gap and shook it out before draping it over his arm.

"Ever tried to become an Animagus?" Harry asked.

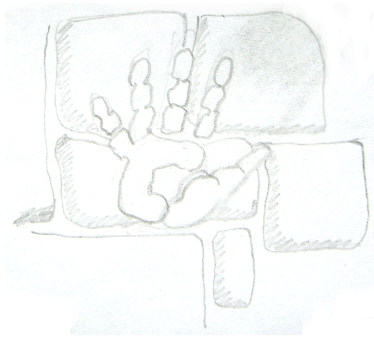
Snape raised his eyes briefly to the ceiling. "Yes, of course," he replied darkly. He paused to unspell his office door before saying, "Now I truly wish I had managed, given the animal I most likely would be."

Harry draped the robe over the back of the visitor's chair. "One of the deadliest snakes," he said.

"Yes," Snape agreed in a tone that made it seem as though his thoughts were a little far away, or long ago.

Harry frowned. "It's late . . . I better get to the tower."

Snape put the small trunk into a cabinet and locked it. "Good night, Harry," he said.



Chapter 46 -- End of an Era

"Okay," Hermione whispered, when they stopped at an empty corner of the second floor corridor. "I have an idea. Ron, you said your brothers could make any color of the Goo?" At Ron's nod, she went on. "We need clear."

"Clear?" Ron confirmed.

"Invisible color." Hermione insisted.

"Oh," Ron said, still trying to cotton on.

"You think that will work?" Harry asked, sort of understanding but also doubtful. He was keeping an eye out; some First Years were wandering in their direction, but slowly.

Hermione said, "The colors when they go on top of each other, completely hide the ones beneath. Well, owl George and ask him to try it and send us some if it works. A LOT of it."

Ron shrugged and said he would ask. Harry felt a little relieved that they had a plan, their fellow students were behaving surly toward them still and it would be good to move on from a prank that had long outlasted its novelty.

* * *

A few nights later, Harry crept down the staircases carrying a canister of invisible Goo and a homemade straw brush resembling a miniature broom. He had insisted on being allowed to do the Slytherin door. He had won with the argument that he was the only one for whom getting caught by the Slytherin Head of House would not matter.

A little nervous despite his assertions of confidence to his friends, Harry stopped before the Slytherin common room door and looked both ways. He imagined the conversation he would have with the headmistress should he get caught and had to take a slow breath to relax. Under his invisibility cloak he still had to pay attention, lest someone bump into him. With care, and starting right at the edge of the hidden door, Harry dipped the brush and began painting. The bristles made a lot of noise, grating loudly in the stone corridor. This made Harry realize that it was Greer whom he actually had to worry about down here. Setting down the canister of Goo, Harry wiped his hands well on his pants and pulled out his wand to put a Silencing charm on the brush. He returned to painting the floor, leaving a space for himself to get around it to do the door as well.

Finished with the floor, he considered that he really needed to do the other side of the door since that side got handled more by students pushing it to go out. Frowning, Harry shuffled over against the wall and waited, hoping someone would go in or out on a late-night errand. He should have come sooner to overhear the password, it now occurred to him.

Long minutes ticked away. Harry sighed. He had a lot of time before his friends wondered what happened, since they had said an hour and it had only been half that, at most. Harry was pulling out his pocket watch to check the time when a disgusted voice said, "What now, Potter?"

Startled, Harry jerked his head down the corridor. Draco stood there, arms crossed, sneer firmly in place.

Harry glanced down at himself, wondering if his feet were showing or he had left something on the floor.

Very snidely Draco breathed, "Yes, I can see you, *through* the cloak."

Harry pulled the cloak off his head. "How?"

"Someone taught me," he breathed haughtily.

Harry considered that. "Not Dumbledore I assume."

Laughing mockingly, Draco confirmed, "No. Not Dumbledore." He looked Harry over. "Not in enough trouble yet that you are out looking for more. Please, I can fetch Professor Greer, if that will help you."

"Reversing trouble, actually," Harry said, holding out the can, inside which sloshed an unseen liquid.

"Thank Merlin," Draco huffed. "What a hag it has been." With a distant expression, he made a hand print on the wall in a small space where there weren't quite as many.

"The floor and the door are done," Harry said, feeling gracious since this was Draco's territory. "Give it a try."

Haughtily, Draco asked, "Why is the floor still green with a thousand miserable footprints?"

"It doesn't work like that. Someone has to touch it and then something else." Harry gestured for him to walk over the floor then moved to remain facing Draco, hand not far from his wand pocket, although Draco seemed too self-absorbed to start anything.

Draco stepped briskly to the door and put his hands flat upon it before going back to the wall and obliterating his previous mark. "That's an improvement, I'll admit," he murmured.

"Open the door so I can do the inside of it," Harry suggested.

Draco sauntered back to the door. "Shooting star," he said and the door cracked open. He stepped back for Harry to open it. Harry, who didn't want to turn his back on Draco, gestured in return for *him* to open it. Draco scoffed condescendingly. "I don't even have my wand at the moment."

Harry's eyes narrowed in suspicion at that. "Why not?"

"I loaned it to someone--not that it is any of your business."

Harry gave him a doubtful look but reached to pull on the crack at the edge of the door. He glanced inside to make sure the room was empty before shuffling in to paint. As he worked, Draco stood aside, arms crossed, looking like an overseer. "So," Harry said conversationally. "I'm curious to know if you really changed places with your dad willingly." When no reply was forthcoming, he turned to the other boy.

"I don't think you'd understand, Potter," Draco said flatly. He shifted against the doorjamb to lean on it harder. "Or maybe you would. Father is certain you have Professor Snape under an Imperius curse, though he can't figure why you would bother. I, of course, know better. You missed a spot," he said, pointing at the lower corner.

Harry frowned at him, but then crouched to paint the lower part of the door with a crooked grin. "Sorry, forgot you Slytherins crawl out the door on occasion. You didn't answer the question."

In a less confident voice Draco said, "He insisted. Not that it is anything to you." His shoulder twitched then and with a huff he stalked inside. "He's my father . . . even though he did end up on the losing side." Draco spun back and in a more angry voice, said, "You won, Potter. You destroyed my father's Master. The Ministry took our fortune. You took my mentor. What else do you want?"

"Just to be left alone, I suppose," Harry said, dropping the brush into the canister and rolling up his invisibility cloak, careful to keep it clear of the Goo since he was unsure what would happen if it got some on it.

Draco laughed. "Well, that's something you'll never have, Mr. Hero." He gave Harry a sadistic smile. A door opened on the far side of the common room and Nott stepped out, holding out a wand. He stashed it away quickly upon seeing Harry there.

Harry glanced between the two of them, but their faces both had gone flat. "Going to pass your tests after this little time?" Harry asked Nott.

Nott just shrugged uncaringly, so with a sigh, Harry stepped backward, pulling the door with him to close it.

"Watch your back, Potter," Draco said suggestively before it shut completely.

"Thanks," Harry replied sarcastically.

* * *

The next morning, excited conversation filled the Entrance Hall as everyone marveled at their newfound powers to *remove* all of the colored paint everywhere. Some of the younger students were shuffling around the hall obliterating swathes of color, then leaping to get the last few stray spots.

"Well, that worked bloody well," Ron said in a tired voice. He patted Hermione's shoulder and led the way down the Grand Staircase.

At the end of the week, during Potions, Harry wondered what else his House had cooked up. Hermione, after scratching something madly in the margin of her notes that looked like arithmetic, pulled her wand into her sleeve and thoughtfully considered the bench to their right and one row ahead. Harry stirred his cauldron and observed her. Justin, Cory and the other Hufflepuffs at the table in question were busy brewing and paying little attention to anything else since the assigned potion, Ulgants salve, was the hardest they had ever been assigned.

Carefully watching his cauldron for the subtle fizzing indicated in the instructions, Harry spared little attention for his friend, until she whispered a spell. A moment later a very stressed Cory blurted, "Bloody hell," when his potion turned black.

"Mr. Corkrin," Greer snapped at him. "I'll not have that language in my classroom. Five points from Hufflepuff for that."

Hermione waved her wand slightly; Cory breathed a sigh of relief and returned to stirring his cauldron while dropping in toad toes, one at a time. Hermione rushed to add her own toad digits and stir, just in time, Harry believed, since the tiny bubbles had almost ceased breaking the surface.

Hermione next subtly twitched her wand at Mandy and Michael. Harry was beginning to worry a bit, but remained silent, since drawing any attention would only make things worse. Penelope and Frina were too absorbed in their brewing to notice a centaur galloping through, much less Hermione with her wand in her sleeve.

Michael spoke loudly, "Boy, I think my potion is the best, don't you?" he confidently asked Mandy. His tablemate glanced very doubtfully into his cauldron. Greer, attracted by his statements, veered that way.

"My boy, what are you on about?"

"Look, it's perfect," he said proudly to the teacher.

"You are surely addled by too much revising, Mr. Corner. That must be the most noxious Ulgants salve I have ever had the misfortune of smelling."

"No!" Michael argued.

"Five points from Ravenclaw for your delusion, Mr. Corner."

Hermione bit her lip and added diced rat brain to her cauldron. Harry was tempted to point out that her potion was not stellar at this point either, due to her distracted brewing. What he did whisper was, "Ron has been a very bad influence on you." When Hermione just shrugged, Harry added, "You should have used the Bragging curse on one of the Slytherins."

"Next," she assured him. "Bet it gets the opposite reaction."

At the end of a very long Potions class, Harry wished he could return to bed. He was honestly worried about Hermione, whose eyes looked a little wild with stress and determination. It would all be over soon, he reminded himself and tried to concentrate on his own revision tables.

At the end of lunch, they all trooped by the brass cauldron, which spat forth their N.E.W.T. schedule, folded neatly into a diamond shape. Harry caught his out of the air and moved aside.

"We have to get to Binns' class," Hermione pointed out urgently as he stopped to open it. He stashed it away instead and followed his friends.

As Binns started to lecture on Wizard Criminal Law in the nineteenth century, Harry opened his schedule in his lap. Defense first, followed by Care of Magical Creatures. Then after lunch, Potions and Divination; that was day one. He rubbed his eyes before looking at day two and again reminded himself that it would all be over soon.

"How's it look?" Hermione whispered.

Whispering back, Harry said, "Like a test schedule only a nutter could love."

Several students turned around and grinned at him. Binns droned on. Seeing Hermione jot something down, Harry picked up his quill and started listening more seriously to the lecture.

As they arrived for Care of Magical Creatures in the afternoon, they turned in their long, long essay parchments on blue wombats. Harry's and Penelope's along with Hermione's and Frina's were definitely much thicker rolls than the other students'. Hagrid tossed them into a wooden bucket, which he then placed beside the door to his cabin, and said, "Well, we should do a lit'l reviewing before yer N.E.W.T.s." He pulled out a ratty parchment that had tea and whiskey stains on it. Malfoy huffed in annoyance and Harry shot him a warning look.

Malfoy held up two fingers and mouthed "Two a.m. Astronomy Tower," at Harry with a challenging expression. Harry hesitated just an instant before nodding.

"Now then, Brinkenpops. Who kin tell me how to catch a Brinkenpop?" Hermione and many others raised their hand. "The rest of yeh fergot?" Hagrid asked loudly in disbelief. More people raised their hand. "Well, tha's better. Unicorns can perform wha' four magic functions?"

After dinner, Harry did something he would never have imagined he would do. He went to Snape's office and told him ahead of time that he was about to break the rules.

"I just wanted to warn you that I'm dueling Draco tonight," Harry said, standing just inside the door to Snape's office. Snape still looked like he needed a real night's sleep.

"You really feel the need to do that?" asked Snape after putting down his quill and rubbing his neck.

"Yes. I'm dying to do that."

Snape rested his chin on his hand and considered Harry. "Willing to tell me the time and place?"

"No."

"Overconfidence, Harry," Snape chastised.

Harry straightened his shoulders. "I'll let someone else know," he pointed out. "Since I need a second."

"Ms. Granger, please, or Ms. Weasley."

"Not Ron?" Harry asked, letting the door to the office close just in case anyone was walking by in the corridor.

"I must admit, I trust his judgment less than that of your other friends."

"Penelope?" Harry tossed out, curious what the response would be.

Snape tilted his head again. "Her magic is limited by low confidence or bad experience, or both. Her judgment seems fine."

"All of them, then?"

Snape hesitated, lips working in silence. "Do not allow the duel become an all out war, if you can help it."

Harry hadn't considered that. "Okay," he agreed, settling on Ginny in his mind and hoping immediately that Penelope didn't find out.

In the common room that evening it took a half hour for Harry to catch Ginny's eye to slip her a note without anyone else noticing. As soon as she surreptitiously read it, Harry wished he had made the reason clearer for why he was asking her to meet him at 1:30 that morning, because her eyes revealed a strange struggle. She slipped the note away without looking up at him.

* * *

"I'm sorry," Harry said first thing when he stepped down into the common room to meet Ginny. She wore a dressing gown over her nightgown and she waited with her arms wrapped around herself. He went on, "I should have been clearer. I need a second for a duel in half of an hour."

She straightened and blinked. "Oh. Okay. Uh . . ." She looked down at herself. "Let me go change, just a minute." At the stairs she added, "Or a few, since I have to be silent."

Five minutes later, she reappeared in her regular school robes, wand in hand. "Thanks," Harry said with feeling. "I appreciate this. Snape insisted . . ."

"You told Professor Snape you were dueling?" she interrupted in shock.

"It does make it harder to punish me if he hears about it later," Harry pointed out pleasantly as he held open the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"True," Ginny admitted. "Why me? Why not Ron?"

Voice quiet in the empty corridor, Harry replied, "Believe it or not, Severus preferred you over your brother. He also had faith in Hermione, but she needs sleep more than you right now because of revising."

"Huh. Maybe there is hope for my final grade after all."

"You aren't doing well in Defense?" Harry asked in disbelief.

"Practical is fine--I hate taking examinations," she complained tiredly.

They were ten minutes early, but Draco and Nott were waiting when they arrived, standing casually beside the stairs leading into the tower. Nott's face had thinned to skull-like during his absence for recovery, lending him a poisonous look.

"Thought you'd bring Longbottom," Draco said.

"He's too stressed from revising," Harry explained. "You don't accept my second?"

Draco shrugged. Harry looked to Nott who stood silent and unreactive, though he still looked calculating. He moved only when Draco did, to walk up the stairs to the tower. Nott and Ginny moved off to opposite sides of the large room, the last room before roof level. The telescopes were packed in trunks along one wall, and they would have to be careful not to damage them. The room was a little too small for duelling, which made it harder to counter what was spelled, which made it more dangerous.

Harry and Draco started back to back, and this time Harry remained silent and focused rather than taunting his old enemy. They parted, counted off, turned and spelled at exactly the same moment. Draco flew backward, struck with Harry's Blasting Curse. The white arc of light, that had emerged from Draco's wand as he sailed backward, spun its way slowly toward Harry. Harry had not heard the incantation that produced it. He tried a series of counter-curses to no effect. Across the room Draco was standing up using the wall, licking his lips in apparent anticipation of his opponent's fate.

"Come, now Potter, just one little spell," Draco taunted. "It isn't in any textbook this school would use, even with Snape teaching the class."

Harry found himself backing up and trying a series of blocks, but even the most advanced ones he knew had little or no effect. The arc now felt like a scythe inextricably approaching him. He swallowed hard and thought frantically.

"A Doppelganger," Ginny said insistently.

"I don't know that one," Harry shouted, still backing up.

Draco complained, "No help from the second until you are down."

"Like you don't cheat every time," Harry snapped, ducking down rather than backing all the way to the wall. The arc dipped as well, not fooled. Harry began to wonder frantically what it was going to do to him.

Ginny shouted, "Stand still and tap your forehead with the incantation *Doppelganger*. Quickly." Harry moved to the other side of the narrow oval on his side of the room and did as she said. Ginny added stridently, "Wait for it to form before you move."

Harry needed a lot of will to hold still while faced with the curved blade of light turning ever faster toward him. A shimmer formed before Harry's eyes, a shimmer like a mask with eyeholes. He dove aside just as the arc rotated in to strike, and looked back in time to see an explosion of light swallowed up by sparkles. As he got to his feet, Draco incanted something angrily, it sounded like a Fire Charm. Harry reacted without thought, putting up a Freezing counter. Another explosion erupted, though it swallowed itself rapidly.

Harry didn't flinch during the following barrage of spells and counters, and half a minute later Draco was down just as the door to the tower swung open.

"Well," Professor McGonagall breathed. "I should have guessed, but I continue to expect better of you, Mr. Potter." Filch shuffled in behind her, carrying his wide-eyed cat and grinning fiercely.

Harry, for the very first time, didn't feel her disappointment. He slowly lowered his wand hand and held her gaze steadily as she approached. He felt outside of this place, and this room, as though it had lost its meaning. Her eyes darted over his face. "Hm," was all she said before stalking over to the small white ferret trapped in a power pentagram on the floor by Nott's feet. "Undo this, Mr. Potter," she said, gesturing at the floor.

Harry hesitated, only because he was trying to read her mood. She had not commanded him; her voice was unexpectedly flat, conversational even. He waved the spells away. Draco reappeared in a heap and floundered to stand up. Nott watched him struggle for a few seconds before reaching down to help him.

"No second, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

Harry glanced around. A voice incanted a Disillusionment reversal before Ginny appeared and stepped forward.

"Nicely done, Ms. Weasley," said McGonagall. "Didn't see you there." She turned to the Slytherins "Fifty points from your house for each of you for duelling."

"What about them?" Draco demanded when she turned to leave.

"Unfortunately we don't have a system that accommodates negative points, Mr. Malfoy, otherwise I would."

Harry wondered if it had actually become that bad. He had noticed that their gems had seemed even more paltry than before, as though everyone in the House was now in the spirit of making the best of the situation. As he followed the headmistress down the staircase, he hoped a hundred points put Slytherin behind Ravenclaw, then thought of Snape and sort of hoped not, but then thought again of Malfoy and Parkinson and hoped so again.

At the seventh floor McGonagall turned on Harry and said stiffly, "I'll be informing your guardian, who can deal with you as he pleases." When Harry just shrugged casually, she stiffened. "Goodness, I hope Severus knows what he has got himself into."

Draco and Nott glanced back at them several times as they departed, glowering in defeat. Harry watched McGonagall stride away in the other direction, leaving Filch, who was muttering to his cat. As Harry watched the headmistress' robe billowing behind her, he mulled her comment over with a little concern.

"Best get along now," Filch said. "Never know what might happen to ya out late like this. Eh?"

Harry and Ginny walked away, reviewing the duel in low tones. "Thanks," Harry said, when they stepped through the portrait hole. "For the spell--it saved my skin."

She grinned, clearly enjoying that notion. "I had to learn that one a long time ago to make my brothers think I was in my room when I was out secretly practicing Quidditch."

"Good thing," Harry breathed. He gave her a wave as he headed for the boys' dormitory. She gave him a smile with just a hint of melancholy.

* * *

Hermione's strange new hobby of spelling her fellow students reduced over the next week, so Harry didn't bother Ron, the mad reviser, with it. Harry found himself ignoring most everything and holding dearly to the notion that it would all be over before he knew it, one way the other. They revised and quizzed each other constantly over the next week. Harry doubted anything could sink into his exhausted brain, but somehow it did, since he did better on Hermione's practice examinations at the end of the week than he had with the ones at the beginning.

Ron looked haunted and frantic during the day and he mumbled a lot in his sleep, which he didn't normally. The Durmstrang students were holding up much better, not seeming to dread the looming examinations the way the rest of them

did, although Darsha was less civil than usual as though sensitive to getting distracted. Harry didn't take it personally since he didn't believe he was at his best either.

Draco ignored him now, although Harry found Nott's eyes on him more often when he looked over at the Slytherins during class, making Harry think Draco's last words to him in the Dungeon were good advice.

* * *

The first day of N.E.W.T.s finally arrived. Nervous, even though the first test was his best subject, Harry took a seat at one of the old desks and focused his thoughts exclusively on Defense against the Dark Arts, valiantly calming the swirling in his mind of book pages and notes that tried to overwhelm him like a wave. Beside him, Neville, who had knocked the chair over while pulling it out, was apologizing with a stutter. Harry decided that he fortunately was not feeling *that* nervous. The old witch across from him gave him a nice smile, adjusted her tiny glasses as she studied him, then said, "Well, we'll go through the tests anyway, dear boy."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry agreed. Beside him he heard Neville saying, "Sir? Sir?" Harry turned and found that the middle-aged wizard across from Neville was staring at *him*. The man sat straight finally and tried to find his place in his parchments. "Well, uh, Longbottom, right? You probably aren't as dangerous as that one over there."

Harry scoffed loudly enough to carry, then cleared his throat when his testwitch looked up in confusion. She had pulled a silver pill box out of a large case beside her and set it on the table. "Curse neutralization first," she said in her plodding voice. "Remove the pin from inside the box." She backed up her chair as though expecting the worst to happen. Harry ran through the Curse Removal spells he had had copious opportunity to practice on Malfoy's wombat crate. The pillbox popped open and he held out the straight pin by its pearl end.

"Yes, very good," the testwitch said in relief as she scooted her chair closer in.

Harry turned to give a victorious grin to Neville and found his friend had already handed his pin over. Harry gave a low growl of happy challenge as the testwitch brought out three dolls and explained that one of them was charmed, one was cursed, and one was a transfigured stuffed bear. She informed him that he was required to determine which was which without undoing any of the spells.

Harry sat up and studied the three old cloth dolls with china faces. Other than being old and grimy in slightly different ways, they looked identical. He took out his wand and prodded one of them and nothing happened. Two tables down there was a shriek, the sound of a knocked over chair, then someone, maybe Justin, saying in great distress, "*That's* the cursed one. That one." Harry leaned back as far as possible before prodding the middle one. Finally, he shook himself and incanted the curse detection spell Snape used, the one on the right, still unprodded, flared red. "That one's cursed," Harry said.

The testwitch smiled sweetly. Neville cleared his throat. Harry glanced that way and found Neville's testwizard was putting away the dolls. With a groan of annoyance Harry scratched his head. How does one detect charmed? he wondered. With a blush ahead of time, Harry leaned over the remaining two and whispered, "Good dolly." The one in the middle opened its eyes. Harry glanced around to make sure no one else had heard him.

Next came a series of curses he had to counter. Harry did as instructed and stood before the desk, wand out. The testwitch was very gentle with her curses, seeming very reluctant to risk hurting him. They got through that quickly enough and the old witch smiled broadly as she made notes on her parchment at the end.

Harry and Neville finished at the same time. As they stepped away together, Harry said, "You were doing well."

Neville replied, "I'm sure you got a better score."

"I don't know," Harry returned with a smile. They returned to the corridor to wait for the next section to begin. "Is the Defense N.E.W.T required for growing plants?" Harry teased.

"They said they'd like to see it, because some things like *Magisterum* and *Pickwicker* can get dangerous, unexpected like. And there's an entire greenhouse full of *Pickwicker* at Waxman's."

"What do they use it for?"

"Treasure chests--try to break in and they swallow you whole. People like them for traveling abroad, because they're light."

Harry grinned at that image and leaned heavily against the wall. He sighed and thought ahead to the written test for *Care of Magical Creatures*.

Lunch was quiet all around. Students were either studying or had caught the general mood of pained panic and kept their conversations low in deference to it. Ron was cramming for *Divination* so Harry offered to quiz him and as a result lunch became a bit of a game, with Frina, Penelope, and Ron guessing answers in between Hermione's scoffing and eye-rolling. After a bit of this they switched to *Care of Magical Creatures*.

Harry felt confident about Potions. He had even looked up the instructions for Farnsworth's Faffery, just in case, although he thought it would come in useful at some point anyway. The written test was first. Harry, seated with his friends, waited for the signal to begin. The first question: *What ten potions use mossbeak?* was easy enough, although a few people groaned upon turning over their examination parchments. Two hours later, Harry turned his long sheet back over and stretched his shoulders. He shared a smile with Hermione and checked on Penelope, who looked less elated and more worried than expected.

The practical section was two potions, the Draught of Living Death and Moonstone Elixir. There were many ingredients to choose from, hundreds maybe. Several students stood before the supplies area with hands on their heads, looking distraught. Harry collected his needed ingredients and brewed with studious care. He finished with just five minutes to spare, and long after Hermione, but he was not going to unnecessarily rush this examination section.

Care of Magical Creatures was harder than expected and he was glad for the quizzing session at lunch since it gave him two answers he otherwise wouldn't have known.

At the end of the day, Harry, stumbled to the dormitory, fell onto his bed, and fell asleep. Penelope woke him two hours later. "Your friends wish to know if you are coming to eat," she said as she sat on the edge of the bed.

Harry eyed her there and considered that they were alone and that the common room sounded very quiet outside the dormitory door, so it was unlikely anyone would come in. He pulled her down onto the bed, feeling gratified just to put his arms around her.

Snape stopped by as Harry sat down to dinner. "And your testing went how?"

"Good," Harry assured him, feeling confident since he could list on one hand of fingers the questions he wasn't sure of from all three tests that day.

"Even Ms. Granger looks ready to be finished," Snape observed, looking over Harry's friends.

Hermione nodded tiredly, making them all grin..

* * *

The next day, Harry had his *Transfiguration* examination right after lunch. *Astronomy* and *Herbology* that morning were a bit of a blur. Unusually, tea was provided at lunch in big kettles. Harry drank three cups and as he left with his friends, wished he had drunk a fourth.

The hardest part of the examination was the globe transformation. Harry managed to get a wisp of smoke inside the delicate glass on his third try, just inside the time limit. Breathing out deeply in an attempt to overcome his utter relief, Harry waited for the next items to be set before him, a pair of baby chicks to be turned into cotton balls. Beside him, Lavender's chicks were leaping for freedom as white puffballs with legs.

At the very end, as the testwizard was straightening his score sheet, Harry said, "I'd like to do an extra credit transfiguration."

The middle-aged wizard with a birthmark in the shape of Wales on his brow, said, "Which one would that be? Oh, no, let me guess, Animagus?" At Harry's nod the man went on in an amazed tone, "There have been so very many of those this year. Well, go ahead," he prompted as though it had become rote.

With a frown, because Harry had hoped to surprise the man at least a little bit, he stood up behind the desk. The room was crowded, but there was just enough space. He hoped. He breathed deeply and tried to manage the spells through the veil of fatigue clouding his thoughts. Imagining Malfoy mocking him for not getting into the Auror's program, Harry felt the rippling pass over his flesh. A moment later he was looking down at the now diminutive wizard in old grey robes. The testwizard looked up at him, unblinking and stunned. The rest of the room had fallen eerily quiet.

Harry flapped his wings once to get the testwizard to shake out of his spell. The man blinked, appeared to consider ducking under the table, and quickly made a note instead. Harry released the membrane around himself and his view shrunk down to normal.

"Well," the testwizard breathed. "Interesting. Can you, uh, fly?" he asked, sounding honestly curious. Harry leaned on the back of the chair and nodded. "Well, full points for that, I would say. You are all finished." Harry stood straight and started to leave, only turning back when the testwizard said quietly, "Honored to have met you, Mr. Potter."

In the common room before dinner, Harry was wishing for a butterbeer, or a real beer, or mead even, anything to calm the crazy circling of his thoughts and the accelerated beating of his heart. Repeating to himself that it was all over didn't seem to help at all. Around him, his friends sat or, in Ron's case lay, on the floor, with expressions of shell shock and over-stress. Harry didn't want to move, even though he wasn't relaxed, because he feared tensing even one muscle more than it was already.

"I think it's dinner time," Ron mumbled from the floor, his gaze centered beyond the ceiling.

A minute later Ginny came down the staircase. "Shall I get you all trays?" she asked solicitously. They all twitched and shifted slightly but no one actually stood up. "How did it go today?" she then asked brightly.

"Pretty good," Ron answered in a muffled voice. He seemed to have rolled over and now had his face against the rug.

Ginny laughed. "Shall I fetch Madam Pomfrey?" she asked kindly, though it was clearly a tease.

Ron raised a finger over his head. "Just you wait!" he proclaimed, then lost energy and fell silent.

"Dinner," Harry said and managed to sit up. He thought food would help, or knock him completely unconscious. Either way, it would be an improvement.

The Great Hall was even quieter than usual. Some students still had N.E.W.T.s the next morning, so stacks of books and parchments littered the tables. Harry barely tasted dinner, would have sworn he had not eaten, except that he remembered serving himself and later his plate was empty. For once, Ron only managed one serving of everything, with his head propped heavily on his palm and his fork hand a little uncertain and slow.

Snape came by at the end of the meal. "Feeling all right?" he asked, sounding surprised to find them all in such a state. General nodding and grunts went around. Harry looked up at his guardian with a doleful expression of exhaustion, bringing Snape's hand to his shoulder. "How did your Transfiguration examination go?"

Harry brightened at the memory. "Really good. I got full extra credit and I managed the hardest practical just in time. So I think it went okay. A few questions on the written I didn't know, but only a few." His eyes fell half closed as this brief flicker of elation wore off.

Snape patted his shoulder. "Go to bed, Harry. If you cannot sleep, send me a silver bird--I'll bring you something."

As Snape turned to leave, Ron asked, "What about the rest of us?" sounding hurt.

"What about you, Mr. Weasley?" Snape prompted before he was distracted by Harry's head nodding to his chest and jerking up again. "Do you need to be hovered to your dormitory?" Snape asked.

"No, no," Harry insisted, standing up as a blind man might, with judicious use of the table to guide him. "I'll make it. No hovering." As he walked to the doors, his friends akliter behind him, he stated, "I'm going to make it out of this school without ever being hovered again."

* * *

The next day, mostly recovered from his examinations but with mixed emotion, Harry followed his friends down to the Great Hall for the Leaving Feast. Some of the portraits waved at them as they passed. Students were talking excitedly about the upcoming summer holiday and going home, but Harry remembered clearly when this was his only home.

When they reached the second floor, Hermione walked quickly ahead of them, confusing Ron, which confused Harry, as he had believed Ron knew what she was up to. Hermione stopped at the top of the staircase to look around the walls and then frantically around the people milling in the Entrance Hall. When they reached her beside the doors, she waved them back and continued to look around as well as watch the stairwell up from the dungeon. Ron and Harry shared a hopeless and worried look but did as she bade them. A minute later, she turned and said, "Draw Malfoy over there by the wall, will you?"

Harry considered suggesting something reasonable like: maybe she should take a Calming draught and go to bed early. Instead, he wandered over to the blonde boy and said, "So, given up finally?" mostly because he had been fantasizing something akin to this conversation.

"I told you, you won," Draco snapped darkly. "Trying to make me change my mind?"

Harry drifted toward the wall Hermione had indicated, the one beside the tall main doors. "That was before the duel," said Harry in a challenging way to ensure Draco's continued attention. Draco followed and Harry glanced over at his friends and saw Hermione chatting with Greer. Harry opened his mouth to say something in response when Greer, red-faced charged their way.

"Six points, Mr. Malfoy . . . eight points, actually it should be, four for each of your insulting remarks. And it should be more considering how well I've treated you this term."

"What?" Draco asked, truly, completely confused. He glared at Harry who honestly shrugged back. Greer stalked off while Harry wondered why Hermione was giving points to Slytherin.

McGonagall stepped down the staircase and into the Great Hall, freezing the gems. The students began whispering fiercely and glancing at the score. A few giggled even. Harry blinked and accidentally bumped into Ron as he rejoined his friends. Gryffindor was far behind in last, but the other three houses were in a straight tie with three hundred twenty six points each. Slowly, all of them turned to Hermione who looked much less frantic and very smug instead.

Ron shook his head and then put his head against the wall and laughed heartily. They all joined in as they walked into the Great Hall, until tears were staining their cheeks and Harry had to take off his glasses to dry his eyes on his sleeve. "I don't bloody well believe it," Ron kept repeating while they all sat down.

"They all won," Frina said as she and Penelope joined them.

"They all lost," Harry pointed out, still very amused.

Snape stopped beside them on the way to the front, looking disgusted. "I should have known." With a pursed mouth he looked over each of them before returning a narrow gaze at Hermione. "I should have known the paint charm was merely . . . a distraction."

Harry turned to his friend in surprise. She sat straight and leveled her face. "Oh, yes, of course." They all chuckled again, despite trying not to. Snape groaned and stalked away.

At the head table McGonagall said to Snape, "Well, I think this is a first."

"It was quite well settled," Snape crossed his arms and said in a low voice, "until someone deducted a hundred points for a mere duel. From only one house, I might add."

"I might remind you of the story Albus used to tell of the time three hundred years ago when Hufflepuff went a hundred points to the negative and all the students in that House disappeared. *Poof!* And no one could find them for a week until one of them owled from Iceland." She took a long sip from her goblet as though alarmed at the very notion of that happening while she was headmistress. "I'll confess I was a little afraid of even tempting anything of that sort."

Snape's brow furrowed farther, though he looked more concerned now. "I had not heard that story," he admitted. He picked up his goblet as well, peered into it and appeared disappointed by its contents. "Leaving Gryffindor's points alone did not change the outcome, in any event," he conceded.

McGonagall stood and brought the students to silence. "Well, we've arrived at the end of another year. I did not imagine it could be more memorable than the last . . . but somehow it feels so at this point." She managed a smile. "We seem to have no clear winner for the house cup. So . . ." She waved her wand and banners dropped down from the ceiling, swirled with the colors that had until recently marred the schools floors. The students frowned, except the Gryffindors who couldn't help grinning.

McGonagall went on, "I certainly do hope you all return to us safe for next year, those of you who are due to, of course. And to the rest of you, who are moving on, the best of luck to you all." Harry was certain her eyes came over to him at that moment. She adjusted her chair in preparation for sitting again and concluded, "But, we are all hungry, I'm sure, so let's eat."

A few owls flitted in during the subdued dinner. Errol, slow and as clumsy as ever, stumbled through a landing on their table. Harry found he had more sympathy for the bird than he had before so he helped it right itself. It held its leg out to him, even though the letter clearly was addressed to Ron. Harry took the letter and gave the bird a boost to get airborne before handing the letter over to his friend, who seemed surprised to see it.

Ron put down his fork and opened the envelope. When he fished inside, he gave out a strange squeal. "Look, look," he insisted to Harry. "My finishing present, look!" Harry examined the small stack of tickets Ron held. Little Quidditch players on broomstick circled the edges in orange ink. "Tickets to see the Cannons." He gazed heavenward. "Thank you dad," he whispered pathetically. "Hermione! Want to come? It is just four days away. Oh, what a perfect end of school present," he marveled.

"Sure Ron," Hermione agreed.

"And Harry," Ron said, gripping Harry's sleeve and almost making him spill his butterbeer. "And dad. And me. That's four. Uh, sorry Ginny," he said.

She shrugged. "That's all right . . . they're playing the Falcons."

"Don't like them, then?" Harry asked.

Ginny made a cutting motion across her throat after checking that Ron wasn't watching.

Dinner concluded quietly, which was fine with Harry's worn nerves.

"Do you wish to take the train with your friends?" Snape asked him as the Hall slowly emptied out. The Seventh Years were almost the only ones left.

"It's a little out of the way, but yeah, I think I would."

Snape nodded that he understood. "I will see you at home late in the evening, then."

"You can leave right away?" Harry asked.

Snape frowned. "I have much too much to finish. I'll bring it with me and come back when necessary. It is all paperwork this year rather than potions."

Harry's friends were standing up to go as well. "I'll see you at breakfast," he said as they moved to the doors, Harry with Penelope's hand in his. Snape nodded once and drifted ahead of them.

Suze angled past them at the doors and said to Harry, "Too bad you are all finished."

"I was thinking the opposite," Harry said, making her grin. He then had a thought. "Hey, do you go to the Falmouth home games?" When she nodded vigorously, he asked, "Are you going to be at the Chudley match? We'll be there, Ron got tickets from his dad."

"Yes," she replied eagerly. "Just in the bleachers though."

"That's where these are," Ron said, still clutching his tickets to his chest. "We can meet up then."

"By the banners," Suze suggested. "Do you need another ticket?" She fished in her small bag and pulled out a pair. "My parents don't particularly like to go and if I'm meeting people they'll let me go alone." She held the ticket out, wavering between giving it to Harry or Ron.

Harry reached out for it. "Thanks," he said. She smiled broadly in return.

As they walked through the corridors, Penelope said, "You are not intending that for me?"

"Can you make it?" When she shook her head sadly, he said, "I'll find someone to use it." At the very top of the stairs, Harry said, "I can't believe we're leaving for good."

"It *is* hard to imagine," Hermione agreed.

"I can't bloody wait to be out of here," Ron stated. "How many times have I wished to be like Fred and George I cannot tell you." He threw up his hands and announced loudly, "And we're alive!"

Harry and Hermione laughed while Penelope eyes widened in alarm. McGonagall came beside them. "Having a nice evening?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes, Professor," Ron said with great feeling. "A wonderful evening."

As she swept away, McGonagall said, "Good thing your N.E.W.T.s are completed, Mr. Weasley, I don't think you could have survived another."

* * *

The next morning Harry said goodbye to everyone, all the teachers, especially Hagrid, but not Filch who stood in the Entrance Hall glowering at them as they tramped by on the way out.

"Visit often, Harry," McGonagall said as he shook her hand yet again.

"I will, Professor." She retained his hand and tugged him back as he turned to depart. "And go easy on my deputy headmaster over the summer holiday," she stated quietly, but apparently in complete seriousness.

"Yes, ma'am."

The train ride required almost no time, it seemed, as though a time-turner sped it along the tracks back to London. On the platform, students were exchanging addresses and notes and saying goodbyes. Harry stacked his trunk and Hedwig's and Kali's cages onto a trolley. Hedwig fluffed herself, annoyed, as Kali sniffed her through the tiny bars.

Hermione restrained Harry as he started toward the gateway. "You can't take a Chimrian out in Muggle public Harry. An owl is bad enough."

He hurriedly dug out an old robe which he tossed over Kali's cage. Her needle-long claws immediately came through the fabric, moving it. Hermione waved an Impermeable Charm at it and the motion stopped. She then gave Harry a firm hug.

"I'll be seeing you, Hermione," Harry insisted.

She nodded, making the hair on her lowered head bob as she dabbed at her eyes. Ron shrugged and appeared vaguely embarrassed.

"I have to catch another train," Penelope said, glancing at the clock on the platform.

Harry gave her a hug and a kiss, while his friends found other things to occupy their attention. Then Penelope ran off, Opus pushing Penelope's and Frina's trunks with his own on a trolley. He shook Harry's hand as he went by, then waved to them all before disappearing through the archway.

Mrs. Weasley came and collected her children while Harry made plans to meet his friends as soon as possible, the next day if they could work it out. When they were gone, Harry took a seat in the sunny slice at the end of the platform, waiting for the next train back north again.



Chapter 47 -- The Game of Life

The next morning Harry bounded down the steps, forcing Snape to step backward out of his path. "Off somewhere?" Snape asked in surprise.

"Yep. Ron, Ginny, Hermione and I are going into London for the day," he replied brightly. He stopped and looking hesitant, asked, "That's all right, isn't it?"

Snape tossed one long-sleeved hand to the side and said, "Of course." Harry gave him a smile and went to the dining room where he grabbed up toast, quickly buttered. Snape asked, "You will be returning at what time?"

Harry chewed and made a thoughtful noise. "Late, maybe."

Snape thought a moment. "Not later than 1:00, if you would."

"Okay," Harry readily agreed. He was looking forward to the day with hungry anticipation. Before he stuffed the last of the bread in his mouth, he was already reaching for the Floo Powder.

"Have a good day," Snape intoned. Harry, chewing, just nodded. "Do try to exercise some caution." Harry waved him off and stepped into the hearth.

After stopping at Gringott's to change some Galleons into Pounds, Harry and his friends wandered the city in good spirits. They walked in pairs, Harry sometimes with Ron and sometimes with Ginny, who didn't seem to expect anything, which allowed him to relax. When it rained lightly they ducked into a sandwich shop, where they drank three pots of tea and talked for several hours. The sun broke through as they departed, so they walked around Regent's Park and rented paddle boats. A plantsman had to yell at them when their water fight got out of hand. He seemed a little confused as to how they were making so much water fly everywhere without using anything but their hands. Giggling, because they Harry and Ron had threatened, when Hermione sided with the park staff, to dump her into the water to make her transform, they walked toward the the exit to the park. By the time they reached the north side, the scent of food drove them to search for an early lunch.

Stuffed with Indian food, which Ron could not cease raving about, they took the underground to the Victoria and Albert. Feet aching after hours of strolling the many, many rooms, they found a pub and settled in to recover. Harry leaned his head back against the paneled wall, exhausted. Only four in the afternoon and this already felt like the longest, funnest day of his life. Hermione had taken off a shoe to rub her foot. Ron solicitously offered to rub it for her, making Ginny roll her eyes. Thirsty, they ordered another round of beers after the first quickly disappeared.

A few other patrons cheered at the football match that was on the tellie over the bar. Harry tried to follow it as Hermione and Ginny discussed shoes. It looked like a very boring game since the players were always stuck on the ground. He watched idly until he was distracted by an old man in an even older appearing cloak, approaching along the booths with a stunned expression on his face. Everyone hushed when he leaned on their table for support.

In a quavering voice he said, "So very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Potter," while holding out his hand. Harry returned the jittery handshake and wondered just how old the man was, since with his thin hair, age-spotted scalp, and

straggly sideburns, he was possible a hundred and fifty. As if reading Harry's thoughts, the man said, "In my day, it was Grindelwald, you know. We thought no one could get any eviler than 'im. Should never think that."

"Jake," the barman said, approaching. "You botherin' these youngsters?"

"It's all right, sir," Hermione quickly said. Harry had just opened his mouth to say something similar. He closed it and shook his head but the man approached anyway.

"No, it isn't," the barman said, putting a hand on Jake's arm, then pulling it back, apparently because he got a kink in his shoulder. "Come on, Jake," he insisted as he rubbed his neck in painful annoyance.

"Really, sir," Hermione insisted. "He's a friend . . . of an old friend." She squinted a bit at the old wizard and said, "You're Jacarro Sazelac, aren't you?"

The man smiled faintly. "Ay, you know this old bloke?" the barman asked, stunned.

"Pull up a chair," Ron insisted, when Hermione elbowed him. "Would you like something?"

"Scrumpy, but they don't serve that anymore," the man muttered nostalgically.

"How about cider?" Ron asked, and went to fetch it after yet another elbow in the ribs.

Jake leaned over to Harry. "Ya' got yourself some fine friends here, young man."

"You mentioned Grindelwald," Ginny prompted in an interested voice at the same time as Hermione asked, "Did you know Dumbledore well?" Harry waved them to silence as the barman returned with the cider.

"Don't believe a word 'e tells you," the barman announced loudly, exasperated, as he plunked down the drink. "Mad as a hatter. Shouldn't be on the street."

Jake sipped his cider and smacked his lips. "Cold at least. Yeah, Social try to pick me up sometimes. Never seem to quite manage," he stated easily as though amused. He took another longer drink and said, "I knew Albus Dumbledore. He was older than me, believe it or not, though 'e never seemed to quite look it, the ol' weasel."

"Did you fight Grindelwald?" Harry asked.

Jake half smiled, half frowned, as he considered Harry sideways. "Not in the sense you would perhaps think meaningful. I was Assistant to the Minister of Magic when Grinnwald made his announcement that he was king. *He* was a mad one--made the announcement to the Muggles too. That was a mess in itself. Fortunately most Muggle newspapers thought it a hoax. Then the fires started. He liked starting fires it turned out and them Muggles certainly noticed those.

"No, the only thing I found myself able to do was keep the Minster, Fishbane, 'is name was, outta Albus' hair while 'e fought him." He studied Harry for a long moment. "Albus was a lot older than you, young man, hundred maybe, but he lost his former mentor, Druis Xerxentot, the finest wizard in those days, in the very first battle. That woke everyone up, let me tell you. People refused to believe he was really dead to avoid believing things had got so bad so quick like. No one was used to fighting dark wizards back then, thought they was over all that long ago. Above it."

They all drank and listened raptly as Jake went on. Jake sipped his second cider slower than the first with much animated lip-smacking. "Fortunately, Grindelwald was a loner, though that just meant there weren't any stupid people dragging him back, neither. Albus put out a call for help for anyone who knew how to fight dark magic, which was considered beneath most witches and wizards back then. Now they teach it to you all, I hear, and don't I know who's doing *that* was. I did a little searching in the Ministry Archives for anything I could find and sent 'im an owl or two." He shrugged.

His bloodshot eyes took them all in one at a time. "Did you kids all fight Voldemort, or you just keeping Potter company now?"

"They stood in front of me during the final battle," said Harry with laugh of chagrin. "I was a little too distracted to defend myself."

Jake winked at them and toasted them sloppily with his mug. After a large gulp, he said, "Don't get to be my age--your friends'll all be dead." They all gave each other bemused looks while Jake finished his cider. "Well, the misses will be wonderin' where I'm at." He stood up shakily.

"The misses?" Hermione mouthed silently in disbelief.

"Gretel, my fourth. Don't have more than three wives. Second one's the best, remember that," he said to Harry, then chuckled as he shuffled out. When he was outside they all broke out laughing.

"Shouldn't encourage 'im," the barman complained when he came by later to collect empties.

Harry stared at the time and the last of their drinks. "Maybe we should go too."

Out on the pavement, they were walking a little unsteadily but the fresh air felt good. "Hermione," Ron said jokingly, "will you be my second wife?" This made them all double-over with laughter.

"No," Hermione replied forcefully, making them all laugh again. Harry had a hard time stopping giggling once he started. They stopped at a corner and looked around themselves. "Where are we?" Hermione asked.

Ron reached for his wand, and Harry had to shove his arm to get it out of sight of a group of women walking together in identical t-shirts and fake bunny ears. One wore a veil and little red horns. "Wha' was that?" Ron asked loudly, garnering sharp looks from a few of them.

One street seemed much quieter than the others. "Let's go this way," Harry said, starting out without waiting for a consensus. They walked a few blocks until they reached an area of nightclubs. Harry blinked down into the nearest one. "I love this place," he announced.

Ron laughed. "What are you talking about? You haven't been here."

"Yes, I have," Harry insisted. "With Tonks. Had a great time, well, 'til her ex tried to join us, but . . ."

"What?" the others all said together, moving in closer with avid expressions. Harry looked them over and thought over what he might add to that to improve things. Nothing came to mind. "When was this?" Hermione demanded, insinuating.

"Uh, maybe I don't want to say," Harry said, blushing.

"I think . . . we need another round," Ron concluded. He headed down the steps into the nightclub, Ginny's eyes following him in concern.

"Sounds good," Harry concurred.

In the club the barman gave Harry a friendly hello. Ron leaned over the bar, "Was he in here with a woman whose hair always changes color?"

"Sure, Tonks. She used to come in here a lot."

Ron elbowed Harry painfully before dragging him to the far wall where it was a little quieter. "Why didn't you say?"

Harry shrugged, wondering how he had lost control of his tongue. Hermione eventually brought over two drinks and handed one to Ron. Ginny gave the drink she held to Harry. "Not having any?" Harry asked, sipping gratefully from the straw to cover his embarrassment. She shook her head, looking grim and very Mrs. Weasleyish.

It was just after two when the door of the house in Shrewsthorpe creaked open, following no little fumbling with the lock. Ginny hauled a stumbling Harry across the threshold and stopped before a dark figure, outlined by the light from the hall beyond. She was very glad she had not joined the others in the last two rounds. The dichotomy of Snape as dreaded professor and Harry's guardian made her lick her lips nervously before she said, "Sir. Evenin', sir. Had to get a portkey to the station. Little worried about taking the Floo, you see," she explained, having had her brother Charlie knocked cold by landing on his head once after a night at the Leaky Cauldron.

Snape didn't respond or make any move to assist. Ginny tightened her hold on Harry's wrist at her shoulder and despite the extra weight it meant taking, urged him to step forward, hoping they both wouldn't tumble over Harry's drunken feet.

"Severus," Harry slurred in a greeting.

"You may just leave him here, Ms. Weasley," Snape intoned with just enough edge to chill anyone, let alone a student at Hogwarts.

Ginny cringed, extremely grateful that it wasn't her facing this. She wondered how Ron was fairing and whether he had let Hermione convince him to go home with her and make up an explanation tomorrow, as difficult as that would be. "Yes, sir," she said. "Ya' all right, Harry?" she asked. Not wanting to simply drop him on the floor, she propped him against the wall and gradually let go of him.

"Yeah, 's great," he managed, sounding happily out of place. "Than's."

Ginny backed up to the door, wondering if she should say something in Harry's defense. Harry straightened and pushed away from the wall, although he swayed a bit as he stood there. Snape's eyes were barely visible in the dark entryway. Ginny breathed deeply and said, "See ya' later, Harry." As she stepped out, she added quietly, "Probably much later." The door closed quietly and relatched when Ginny pulled tight on it from the other side.

"Hiya," Harry said, working his way down the wall a few feet. "Sorry. I'm a little late, I think."

"Hm." A pause ensued where Harry squinted at his guardian in the dim light. "Come with me," Snape finally said, apparently reaching some decision.

Harry pushed away from the wall and had to immediately catch himself on the other wall, but fortunately, the corridor of the entryway was narrow. Snape grabbed Harry's arm and hauled him firmly along with Harry barely keeping up as they crossed the main hall.

"Ow," Harry complained about the tight grip, but it didn't relax. "Where're we going?"

When they reached the toilet, Snape dropped Harry onto the bench across from the tub and turned the lamp up. "What were you drinking and how much?" Snape demanded.

Harry rubbed his arm where it had been clutched and thought that over. Snape roughly tweaked his chin up, making him reply, "Uh, mead, cider, coupla ciders, something bright blue. Those were good," he added in sudden memory.

Snape shook his head and went to the cupboard and searched among the myriad bottles. "I am tempted to simply let you suffer," he stated. "But you may have consumed enough to do you harm." He came over with a very small bottle of black liquid. "You do realize alcohol is toxic in excess quantities, do you not?" he asked snidely.

Harry considered that at length, not likely to come up with a response. Snape, with jerky movements, opened the bottle, lifted the glass stem out of it and held it horizontal so it would not drip. "Put out your tongue," he said.

"What is that?" Harry asked, never having seen it.

"It is going to make you empty the contents of your stomach."

"Wha?" Harry sounded dismayed.

"Because there is drink in your stomach you have not absorbed yet," Snape explained. His tone continued to harden. "Given your state, I expect you will inevitably do so anyway. You might as well make the most of it. Stick out your tongue."

Harry frowned and turned away. Even seated he was swaying as the room swung on an uneven axis.

"I am not giving you a choice," Snape pointed out, sounding vaguely malevolent now on top of stony. Harry, after a brief battle with himself, opened his mouth. Snape let two drops fall from the stem onto his tongue. Harry put his head in his hands to wait, moaning slightly. "I do hope you aren't expecting sympathy," said Snape.

With a hint of petulance, Harry said, "I just wanted to go to bed."

"You would have awoken most unwell in that case."

Harry frowned as nausea rolled through him. He fought it the first wave, but not the second.

When he stood straight from the toilet, he was handed a warm, damp cloth. Harry cleaned his face and rinsed his mouth thoroughly in the sink. His stomach felt better, but the room still reeled unnervingly. He dried his face and tried to hang the towel back up. Snape took it from him with a sharp motion and tossed it aside.

"What's wrong?" Harry demanded, glancing at his disheveled self in the mirror before looking quickly away, but not without straightening his shirt in a way that left it crooked on the opposite side.

"What is wrong?" Snape echoed in disbelief. "You are incapacitated with drink . . . that is what is wrong. Have you forgotten that you are a powerful wizard?" he demanded. "Did you consider what enormous damage you could do with that wand of yours in the state you are in?" Harry felt his pockets. "Did you lose it?" Snape asked derisively.

Defensive now, Harry snapped, "No, it's right here," as he pulled it from his back pocket. He didn't admit that it should have been in the wand pocket of his cloak. He did not remember moving it.

Snape crossed his arms, straightened, and sneered, "I admit, I expected better from you. Or more intelligent behavior, at least."

"Why are you being so mean?" Harry demanded, unable, presumably because of the alcohol, to fortify himself against the disapproval.

Snape hmpfed. "You may suffer in the morning then, if that is your desire." He pointed at the door to the toilet. "Go up to your room."

Harry gave him a dark look and tried to stalk past him angrily. He lost his balance, though, and had to catch himself on the doorframe. He clipped the bone of his shoulder and the pain made him angry. "You don't care about me," he muttered.

He didn't see Snape's eyes flicker to the ceiling in annoyance. "No, clearly not. Do you need help getting to bed?" he asked, sounding about as ungracious about the offer as one possibly could. Wounded green eyes came around to Snape, who huffed again in response. "You are hopeless right now," he commented. "Whatever it is, it is better left 'til morning. Come." He took hold of his charge's arm again and lead him across the hall to the steps. At the bottom Harry shook himself free with a jerking motion and stomped up on his own with generous use of the handrail.

Snape followed behind and stood in the doorway, watching Harry weave his way to the bed and fall on it. "I don't understand why I'm not allowed to have any fun. Just because you never have any doesn't mean you have to be so cruel," complained Harry, voice muffled by the duvet.

Snape stepped into the room partway, arms crossed, eyes dark. "It is not cruelty. I simply want to make it eminently clear that I disapprove of your behavior."

"S cruel," Harry insisted groggily, rolling over and putting his feet, shoes and all, on the bed. His face reflected pain as though he might lose control.

Snape stepped over and rather ungently removed Harry's shoes before dropping them on the floor and crossing his arms again. "Shall I have treated you in the manner my father did under these exact circumstances?" he asked, voice like a knife edge. "He took my wand and locked me out of the house, too incapacitated to even get out of the rain." When Harry didn't comment, Snape said more vehemently, "You think it is cruel to make certain you are not sick in your bed, to make certain you actually make it to your bed?"

Harry didn't want to accept that. He rubbed his eyes and said, "Do you have that pink stuff? My head is cracking open."

"You think you deserve it?"

Rubbing his temple now, Harry sat up on one elbow. Sounding close to the edge of control, he murmured, "Didn't I do everything I was supposed to? You said I did. I was tired of remembering being responsible." He rubbed his dry eyes then and added sadly, "I did everything."

"Yes," Snape agreed stiffly, "you did everything." With a slow shake of his head he went out and minutes later returned with a fizzing cup of pink liquid, which he handed over. As Harry gratefully sipped it, Snape said firmly. "Repeat this and you will be grounded for a week. No visitors. Repeat it again it will be two weeks."

Harry finished off the last of the liquid and sighed as the pounding in his head eased. "You're saying I'm not allowed to drink at all?"

"I am saying you are not allowed to lose control to it. There is a crossover point where your judgment about how drunk you are is impaired. Do not cross it again. I am surprised Ms. Granger let you, frankly."

"She was ahead of us," Harry pointed out.

"Good thing Ms. Weasley was behind, then, otherwise none of you may have found your way home."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, remembering Ginny turning down additional drinks. She had looked a little disapproving, he remembered now. Harry dropped back onto the bed, feeling almost normal. He watched as Snape went to the wardrobe, brought over a fresh set of pyjamas and dropped them on the foot of the bed. He then re-crossed his arms, still looking disapproving. "Are you set for the night?" he asked stonily.

Harry nodded and reached for his pyjamas which prompted Snape to depart.

Harry was awoken by a knocking on his door. He rolled over groggily, believing it to be in his dream. "Get up," Snape's voice said as he opened the door. Harry just groaned, reminded distressingly of his Aunt Petunia and every morning of the first eleven years of his life. "Up," Snape repeated.

"W' time is it?" Harry asked, his brain feeling as though it had an anchor tied to it, dragging him forcefully down into sleep.

"Eight. I am not going to allow you to sleep late simply because you stayed out late." When Harry didn't move he said, "Up, or I will teach you a spell you will definitely not enjoy." Harry opened his eyes, alarm shaking the lethargy off somewhat. Snape continued in a darker tone, "It would be ironic to use it on you as I learned it from your father that way."

"Oh dear," Harry murmured, forcing himself to sit up. "I'm up, I'm up," he insisted, rubbing his eyes hard since they were gritty and ached abominably.

"Breakfast will be on the table shortly," Snape said, making even that sound like a command.

Harry stumbled around the room and managed to put on some clothes, which was difficult as his eyes would not stay open very long at one time. Somehow he made it downstairs and into a chair at the table, where he propped his head up on his hand. He wanted nothing in the world more than to be back in bed, asleep, or at least attempting to sleep. Breakfast appeared. Snape poured him coffee and pushed it closer, even though it was well within reach.

"You must have had quite a bit. The 'pink stuff' as you call it usually renders one more recovered than this."

"I had a lot," Harry admitted, forking a sausage and chewing it down. He felt better almost immediately. "Ron must really be hurting," he said, then wondered where he had ended up since the last blurry thing Harry remembered was Hermione trying to convince him to come home with her instead. He also considered that it was nice of Ginny to make sure he got home. "So I'm not grounded?" he asked, thinking of checking up on his friends.

"Not this time. Some jubilation is to be expected when you finish school . . . though I am surprised just how much you indulged in," he added in a dark tone.

"You lose track like you said," Harry agreed, thinking he would definitely have to work out a way to avoid that. Harry buttered his toast and nibbled that down as he thought over the night before. "I'm sorry I said you were cruel."

"I wanted to make it clear I was angry with you. That feeling of lifted responsibility alcohol produces is a trap. I would let you despise me before allowing you to fall into it."

"So, if it does happen again . . . ?" Harry began.

Snape's eyes narrowed and his face, which had relaxed, hardened. "You will not like me, then."

"Yeah, I bet," Harry breathed, feeling cowed and little surprised to be so, especially after last night when he was feeling so independent and self-possessed. Harry sighed and moved his coffee in a way that cued Snape to refill it for him.

Harry took the Floo to the Burrow late in the morning. Mrs. Weasley gave him the usual hug, but it didn't have much feeling behind it. Ginny sat in the living room reading *Witch Weekly*. "Didn't expect to see you so soon," she said.

Harry sat beside her on the worn cushion. Mrs. Weasley headed back to the kitchen and started making cooking noises. Quietly, Harry said, "Snape wasn't happy, but I got off with a warning."

Ginny laughed. "Wow, didn't look like that was going to be the case last night."

"I blackmailed him a bit," Harry said, studying his fingers.

"You what? And how does one do that?"

"I reminded him that I did away with Voldemort," Harry said. "Think I can see Ron?"

"Oh, well." She thought a moment and leaned forward to look into the kitchen. "His punishment is YTBD." At Harry's questioning look, she explained, "Yet To Be Determined. But go on up, what can they do to you? Though, I'll warn you, Ron isn't feeling so good."

Harry glanced at the busy Mrs. Weasley and headed to the stairs. In Ron's room, his friend was lying in bed still a little greenish. "ello," he managed, upon turning his head to look at Harry coming in the door. "You look good," he accused. "How's that?"

Harry reached into his pocket and took out three small bottles, from which he poured out a splash of each into a grungy water glass beside the bed. He held it out to his friend saying, "Compliments of your least favorite Potions professor."

Ron managed to sit up halfway and accept it. "Who, Greer?"

"You never had Greer as a teacher."

Ron sipped the fizzing liquid. "I heard 'Mione complaining enough." He swallowed the rest of it. "Wow," he breathed, blinking brightly. "Get the recipe for that."

"He won't tell me so I think it's restricted."

"Who cares?" Ron exclaimed, sitting up. "No wonder you look so chipper. You get that last night?"

"After being forced to puke."

"I didn't need forcing," Ron said, slipping out of his pyjamas and into some clothes. "I need to go do damage control so this Quidditch match is still possible. Merlin, what was I thinking last night?"

* * *

Over the next days, Harry spent a great deal of time on correspondence. Friends and acquaintances from school all owled as the holiday began, saying how their time was going to be spent and providing addresses for the summer. Harry wrote back explaining his planned trip and his testing so many times he thought he should learn a parchment duplication spell. Even McGonagall wrote, wishing him luck on his continued application to the Auror's program. Harry wrote a very carefully penned letter back to her. As he sealed it up in an envelope he wondered why he had tried so hard, since he never did before and hadn't when writing her an essay just two weeks ago.

Harry also wrote a long letter to Penelope where he hoped her travels home had gone smoothly and giving her news of others from their letters. He sort of missed her already but he could easily get wrapped up in other things, for a while anyway, until he thought about being *really* close to her.

Snape came into the drawing room where Harry was working at the desk. "I'm almost done," Harry said, thinking his guardian wanted to sit there.

Snape waved him off. "I ordered you this," he said, holding out a large book, still wrapped in brown paper.

Harry opened it and read the cover. *Menacing Mastery*, it read. Harry pulled his head back and looked up in surprise. "This was in the restricted section at Hogwarts." When Snape gave him a look that implied he had incriminated himself, Harry explained, "Sometimes we were actually *allowed* in. But mostly not," he said as he opened the book. It contained a lot of very nasty things like disemboweling curses and inferno spells. "Thanks," Harry said. He set the book aside for later study and asked, "I can still go to Switzerland, right?"

"If you can fit it in, I don't see why not," Snape responded while he straightened the files stacked on the credenza.

Harry collected up his letters and the new book and stood to leave. "Thanks," he said again.

Snape shrugged lightly. "You are of age and may do as you wish . . . as long as it doesn't interfere with the peace of this household. Or threaten your future," he added with a sharp look.

* * *

The portkey to the Falmouth match dropped Mr. Weasley, Harry, Snape, Ron and Hermione between the circular towers of a small castle, overlooking an expanse of green lawn and, far below, a bay.

"Ugh, Pendennis," Ron grouched. "I think they do this to all the visiting fans."

"Where *is* the pitch?" Harry asked.

Ron pointed across the inlet to a similar castle on the other side. "Over there, in a spatial slice. Why did we not appear *there*, you may ask?" Ron continued to complain.

"Really?" Harry asked, trying to imagine a gap big enough to hold an entire arena. He could see an unusual number of people meandering around the towers across the way. A pair of gulls noisily flew overhead and the wind gusted onshore, making it almost chilly. A distant figure in a large orange hat disappeared as Harry watched him.

Ron put his hands in his pockets, looking happy to impart Quidditch history. "They've been extending the spells for two hundred years, from when it only seated three hundred rather than twelve thousand."

"Well, shall we go then?" Mr. Weasley asked. "Coast is clear. Heh, literally," he added with a crooked grin as he gestured at the empty lawn dipping down to hillside out of view and finally the ocean.

Ron quickly turned his bright cloak around so the autographed side faced out; he then took his father's arm. "Can't bloody wait to have the license," he muttered just before they Disapparated. Presently, Mr. Weasley reappeared, graciously offered Hermione an arm and disappeared with another *pop!*

"We need to find time for those lessons," Harry said, holding up his arm to be grasped.

Near the silver entrance, marked by tall, glistening banners, they found Suze waiting. She gave Harry a nice smile and greeted her professor a little shyly. Mr. Weasley introduced himself warmly, which brought her smile back. The area outside the seating was full of gregarious witches and wizards, some carrying drinks and snacks, others talking and gesturing broadly about the upcoming game.

Just as they found their seats, the sun came out, sweeping the blue-grey light from the stands and making the gilding on the banner poles sparkle. Blinking in the glare, even with the shade of his cap, Harry filed into a row between Suze and Snape. The stands were crowded even this early, maybe because the weather was so nice.

"You don't mind that I'm cheering for Falmouth?" Suze asked, pinching the corner of her grey cloak where a black falcon head logo resided with the encircling motto *Let us win, but if we cannot win, let us break a few beads*.

"No, not at all," Harry assured her. "There are other Falmouth fans in the visitor's section," he pointed out, gesturing at the two fans just down from them. ". . . so you won't be cheering alone, which is good, because I expect you'll be doing it often, if Ron's assessment of the Cannons' season is accurate."

"Sounds like it is," she opined a little pertly.

"Don't rub it in," Harry insisted with a smile.

"Want anything?" Ron shouted. "I'm going down for treats."

Harry leaned forward to look past Snape and Mr. Weasley. "What do they have?"

Ron started to list many things Harry had not heard of, such as Crusted Caterwauls and Delectable Delicates. "I'll just get you something," he finally said, seeing Harry's expression.

"Thanks."

Ron came back with something that at first Harry thought was an ordinary caramel apple, since it was red underneath, on a stick and smelled of caramel.

"Yum, a Cherry Bomb," Suze said beside him.

"Did you want something?" Harry only now thought to ask.

"No, it's unlucky to get anything before the game starts," she said knowingly.

"Ah." Harry started to take a bite of his treat only to have it spit a caramel-covered fruit ball into his mouth before he even got close. He pretended to expect that and chewed the sticky sweet. It tasted pretty good, actually. He tried not to imagine growing up like this, with regular sunny afternoons watching Quidditch, eating exploding candy. Tried, but didn't quite succeed. Snape was eyeing his sweet, Harry noticed when he glanced at him. "Want some?"

"No."

"Certain?"

"Quite," Snape replied in his driest voice.

Harry grinned and opened his mouth for another morsel; the treat was on target again. By the time the teams were being introduced, Harry had had his fill and given it up to Hermione who had originally insisted she did not want anything too sweet. She looked to be enjoying it from what Harry could see this many seats away.

The teams circled. Suze called out to a few of the Falcons by first name, shouting encouragingly. The Cannons fans in front of them turned around a few times in annoyance before finally ignoring her. For someone her size, she really could shout.

The Quaffle was tossed into the air and the teams became blurs of color. The Chudley first possession was wasted on a poor shot and Falmouth came back immediately and only did not score because a misdirected Bludger clipped the shooting Chaser's broom tail. As the game went on, Harry made himself relax, since he really didn't care who won beyond making Ron happy, and Ron seemed happy just to be here.

An off-key song started up among the more orange-clad fans. The words were not flattering at all. Harry glanced down their row and saw that Ron was mouthing the words and glancing at Mr. Weasley, who had his arms crossed and appeared sternly disapproving.

"You don't know the songs?" Suze asked Harry.

"I've never been to a match before."

"Really?" she sounded completely disbelieving.

"I went to the World Cup a few years ago. That's it."

"I was there too. Took months to talk my dad into taking me. Fortunately we left that evening; otherwise, I don't think I'd have heard the end of it."

"Good time to have left," Harry agreed.

"You were there that night?" she asked curiously after cheering a Falmouth goal.

"Yeah. What a night," he said at the memory. "Mr. Weasley sent us into the woods to get out of the way and we lost track of people and then someone sends a Dark Mark over our heads, using MY wand."

"Really?" she blurted, stunned and a little amused. A Cannon had fallen off her broom onto the turf and medi-witches were tending her.

"What are you discussing?" Snape asked when the crowd quieted.

"My last Quidditch match: the World Cup."

"Ah," Snape said somewhat snidely. "Surprising you wanted to go to another, given that."

Down on the field, they were picking up the fallen player on a large orange tarp and a substitution was announced.

"Someone used your wand?" Suze prompted curiously.

"Yeah, and there I was, trying to explain that I didn't know where I'd lost it. I didn't even know what the Mark meant-"

"Wait," Suze said sharply. "YOU didn't know what the Dark Mark was?"

"No," Harry insisted.

Her face twisted in doubt. "Professor, is he telling the truth?" she asked Snape.

The game restarted and Falmouth nearly scored twice, one shot after another, the second shot bouncing off the ring. The crowd groaned. Snape replied. "I assume so. Remarkably naïve boy, Harry was."

"See?" Harry said in chagrin.

The game continued. A Falmouth player fell and this time the medi-witches took their time moving him off the pitch. The referee called a rare halt to the game, bringing both Seekers to the ground in the center of the grass where they proceeded to chat like old friends. Harry sat back, wishing he had not given away his secret so quickly. But then, a commotion from down the bench made them all lean forward. Ron was red faced and Mr. Weasley had a hold of his cloak, which meant he had a hold, in a way, around Ron's neck.

"Ronald Biliious . . ." Mr. Weasley was stating furiously, "I cannot believe a son of mine would use such language." He tugged Ron before him in Harry's direction. "Harry, would you mind terribly changing places with my son, who is apparently incapable of holding his tongue and temper at a harmless Quidditch match."

Harry glanced from Hermione's pained expression to the gaping looks from the two grey-robed Falmouth fans in the next row forward and finally to Ron's beet-red face. "Sure, Mr. Weasley," Harry replied agreeably. As he stood and let Ron pass, he said goodbye to Suze with ease, knowing that she and Ron would not have difficulty discussing the game. Furious, Ron took Harry's seat and crossed his arms. Harry slipped down the row to sit beside Hermione, wondering how long it would be before Ron realized he was sitting beside Snape.

Harry said hello to Hermione, wanted to ask what happened, but the furtive glances from the Falmouth fans with bad haircuts just ahead of them made him hold back. The game resumed, but the crowd remained quiet. One of the Falmouth fans scoffed and said to the other, "Gee hope this one doesn't claim to have fought Voldemort too. What a numbskull the redhead was."

Harry narrowed his eyes and glanced at Hermione. "I see the problem," he said.

She leaned close. "You could take your cap off."

"That would be too easy," Harry returned, watching Falmouth score easily on a simple dodge play. The fans in front of them leapt up and did a strange little victory routine that ended with four hands slapping over their heads followed by bumped hips. "Maybe I haven't missed that much," he commented to himself.

"I would say," Hermione confirmed dryly.

The Cannons finally scored, off an admittedly dirty play involving a Beater-pinch that could have been called as a foul. Harry was glad he wasn't on a broom facing the oversized Cannon Beaters. One of the Falmouth fans spun on them and snipped, "That the only way you can score?" Harry, not really wanting to get into a position of defending that, simply shrugged. The man scoffed. "You friends with that loon down there?" he asked indicating Ron.

"Best friends," Harry replied distinctly.

"Amazing he has friends," the thinner man said, the one whose bad haircut left him with a triangular bald spot that Harry had to work not to stare at.

"Yeah," the chubby one on the right agreed gregariously. "Bet 'e also claims to be in the Order. Order of the Pigeon, wasn't it called?" he added with a laugh.

Harry glared at the man as the world tried to close in on him. He could feel the green haze, sucked in by his anger, hovering just beyond the sphere of his vision. His hand was on his wand pocket when Hermione jerked him by the elbow. "Harry!" she whispered harshly. He dropped his arm and shook himself. The first man was eyeing him warily now, but at least it quieted him down.

The score was eighty to ten and the Cannons' Seeker was diving, apparently for the Snitch. The stands rose up, but he either was faking or lost track of it, because he returned to circling high. The fans, happy to stretch, remained standing. Mr. Weasley turned from talking to Snape and asked how things were going. "Fine," Hermione replied brightly. "Harry's only gone for his wand once," she teased.

"Hermione," Harry quietly chastised her. Snape, eyes narrowed, slid past Mr. Weasley with purpose. Harry just heard Hermione's whispered apology as Snape came alongside him in the crowded space and put an arm around his shoulders, gripped hard, and leaned over him. "You what?"

"I was just checking that I had it," Harry insisted, surprised by the concern Snape was showing.

"No green visions?" Snape whispered matter-of-factly.

"No," Harry replied, which was mostly true. He was again surprised, this time by Snape's perception.

The chubby Falmouth fan turned and made faces. He nudged his friend and pointed over his shoulder. The other turned and said, "Ha, he's in trouble with dad?"

Snape looked up and after a pause said, "Something you need, Mr. Trellis?"

Confused, the chubby man asked, "Do I know you?"

"No," Snape replied darkly. "Nor do you wish to."

The man's eyes bugged a little before he turned to his friend. "Dad's a friggin' dark magic goon . . . wonderful."

Snape's eyes narrowed to slits and Harry asked with a touch of innocence, "Not thinking at all about where your wand might be, are you?"

Snape backed off and released him. "As you were, Harry," he said easily, but he remained standing beside him. Gradually, everyone returned to sitting on the benches when it became clear the game was going on a lot longer.

After Falmouth scored ninety and they were forced to watch the victory dance yet again, Hermione nudged Harry. He looked down and saw that she had her wand up her sleeve. With a malicious grin she whispered something, of which

Harry only caught the word "binding". Curious, he watched the two before them. Nothing immediately happened. After a minute though the one on the right began shifting oddly in his seat and stamping his foot. Finally as though exasperated, he reached down and tried to take his shoe off, unsuccessfully. Hermione covered a giggle. Another minute of frantic tugging ensued before the spell wore off.

To Harry's surprise, Hermione immediately nudged him again. She muttered something while glancing at the sky. Harry waited for the result, trying not to be too obviously amused. A gull passed close overhead, then another, one dropping on the shoulder of the left-hand fan's robe and the other on his head. Harry had to duck and pretend brush off his jeans to hide his laugh while the Falmouth fans cleaned up with discarded sweet wrappers.

This time, Harry nudged his friend, after furtive movements to pull his wand into his sleeve. "*Caldera Garmentia*," he whispered while pointing at the chubby man on the right, who immediately began fanning himself with the colorful team report in his hand and complaining about the sunlight. He had completely unhooked his robe, and was getting dirty looks from the little old ladies in orange in front of him, before Harry canceled the spell.

Snape leaned in. "I assume that was you."

"Why would you assume that?" Harry asked innocently and received a very doubtful raised brow in reply.

Mercifully, the Falmouth Seeker caught the Snitch ten minutes later. Ron groaned in genuine-sounding pain and put his head in his hands. Harry wondered how he could still have been that hopeful. "Better luck next time, I'm sure," Harry shouted to his friend as they all stood up and waited to file out.

The Falmouth fans stood on tiptoe, hoping to find a fast way out. The chubby one turned around with a frown at Snape, who apparently made him uneasy, which made Harry smile. The scorching sun was beaming down full time now and Harry pulled off his cap and wiped his brow unthinkingly. The man yelped in surprise, making Harry tense. He avoided the stunned man's gaze but it could not be helped. The man tugged hard on his friend's robe saying, "It's 'Arry Potter, it's 'Arry Potter." This got everyone else's attention as well.

Hermione gave Harry a sympathetic frown when it was clear that the top rows of their section had stopped shuffling toward the exit because everyone had turned to look for him. Harry stuffed his cap into his pocket resignedly. The two Falmouth fans moved away, pushed aside by others moving in. "Eh, did 'Arry Potter make yer shoe too tight?" The thin one asked the other excitedly as they were swallowed by the crowd.

"Oy, imagine that if 'e did," the other said, sounding bizarrely reverent. They glanced back with eyes full of amazement. Harry studiously avoided glancing directly their way. A wizened little wizard came forward from the surrounding crowd and shook Harry's hand in silence, nodding continuously. This cued others to move in as well. Harry shook a lot of hands before the stands emptied out and he could put his cap back on.

As they made their way down to the grass, a group in orange approached. It took a moment to realize it was the Cannons themselves, some still carrying their brooms. Ron grabbed Harry's arm to bring him to a halt and wait for the others to come aside. The team stopped. "Oy," one of them said, "We 'eard 'Arry Potter was here."

Harry glanced at Ron, who had gone moony-eyed, and shook his head. He slipped off his cap again and stepped around his friend who seemed to be stuck in place. The Keeper, a tall man with a ruddy face and dark hair pulled back in a short ponytail high on his head, came forward and gave Harry a powerful handshake. Beside him, Ron murmured, "Roybus Barbicon," kind of adoringly. Harry stepped back, "My friend, Ron," he said, pushing Ron forward.

"Wow," was all Ron managed, as his hand was shaken.

Handshakes went all around as they were introduced to the team. Harry got a bruising hug from one of the Beaters, a hulking woman with cropped hair who didn't seem to speak any English. "Natasha," Barbicon had to prompt to get her to let go. Natasha finally did, patting Harry on the head and looking teary-eyed. Barbicon then asked, "Can we get a picture? With the team?"

Harry shrugged, but then nodded upon seeing Ron's very hopeful face. They stepped onto the pitch before the goal posts and lined up. Snape and Mr. Weasley declined to get into the picture, but Suze was dragged into it, despite her clear Falcon affiliation. The team photographer, a man about Flitwick's size, bustled about getting everyone adjusted just so before firing off a flash pan that burned like a pyre while he took several pictures.

"Anytime you need tickets," Barbicon said to Harry after they broke up. "Just owl the office; you know our address," he said with a crooked grin and an elbow jab in the direction of Ron's cloak.

"Yep. And thanks for that."

The man made an odd noise like a hissing scoff. "'S nothing. Really." Harry realized then that the man was actually nervous talking to *him*. The man's gaze went distant. "Oy, Gregor come over here, meet our biggest fan," he shouted and gestured with his arm. Harry turned as a group of four in plain robes approached. They had a confident swagger to them, although they looked wary as well. "Falmouth Captain," Barbicon said to Harry, apparently noticing his lack of recognition. Suze sidled over beside Harry as the others arrived and rocked up on her toes while biting her lower lip.

"Co-opting our fans," one of the Falcons accused, indicating Suze.

Barbicon replied, "No, just a friend of Harry Potter's here."

"Ah, so it is," Gregor said dryly, his thin sandy hair tossing easily in the wind. He shook Harry's hand perfunctorily. Behind the captain, a bald man with one long eyebrow, lowered it an inch as he looked Harry over closely, making the hair on Harry's neck bristle. Harry shook hands with him too, not giving away his unease. The man's eyes sparkled strangely as they exchanged pleasantries. Harry introduced Suze to them who, unlike Ron, didn't seem to be moony at all, just interested.

When the four had sauntered off in the direction of the open end of the pitch, Harry said flatly, "Unnerving group."

"They're a little surly, all right," Barbicon commented with a shrug.

"No," Harry murmured, still feeling uneasy as though their recent proximity made him now require a counter-curse, "it's not that."

Barbicon pushed his shoulders back and watched the four Falcon's step out of sight. "Well, I'll be sure not to insult them to their faces anymore."

"I'd do that," Harry confirmed. He looked down at Suze beside him.

"I didn't like them," she stated, sounding confused.

Barbicon said consolingly, "The others are much nicer; too bad they didn't come out."

She adjusted her cloak which had been pushed crooked by the steady breeze. "I don't think I want to play for them."

"Four years is a long time," Harry said reassuringly. Snape still gazed over where the four had disappeared. Ron with Hermione beside him was chatting animatedly with the Cannons a few feet away, not paying attention.

"You can play for *us*," Barbicon said brightly, holding out his broom to Suze.

"What?" one of the others complained; "You were taken off recruiting, remember?"

"Yes, after I brought you in," Barbicon returned teasingly, his ruddy face pulled into a broad smile.

Harry grinned, thinking that Ron had picked the right team to cheer for. Barbicon held his broom out farther to Suze. "That's a Mortabella," Suze said, looking it over.

"Gift from my grandmum," Barbicon stated brightly.

"No," Suze said, shaking her head.

"No, really," the man insisted, sounding serious now. Harry wanted to break out laughing but held back. Barbicon went on. "What position do you play, Keeper?"

"You are teasing me," Suze insisted, clearly not happy about that notion.

Harry said, "He teases everyone, I think."

"'Cept this bloke," Barbicon said conspiratorially, indicating Harry. "Not sure what he'd do to me . . ."

Harry straightened and blinked in surprise, wondering how he appeared to this big man. Suze, giving Barbicon a doubtful look, insisted, "He wouldn't do anything." She accepted the broom though, and looked it over with an expert eye. "Can I really try this?"

"Sure. Just bring it back before the next match."

Suze looked to Harry who gestured that she accept. She shucked her cloak to the grass and kicked off. The team watched her circle and slalom lazily before returning to their conversations. Suze veered suddenly a few times, then headed straight at the tallest bleacher. Barbicon grabbed Harry's sleeve. "What's she doing?"

"Her favorite maneuver," Harry answered calmly. The grip on Harry's sleeve tightened as Suze accelerated and pulled a right angle diagonal at just the last moment to avoid crashing, then flew a fast corkscrew that tightened each turn ending in spin, which she halted perfectly level.

"Her favorite, eh?"

"So her opponent ends up in the hospital wing," Harry said.

After watching her slalom some more, Barbicon said, "You play Seeker, right?"

"Yep. I was out of the hospital wing by the next day," Harry stated reassuringly.

"Toss out the practice snitch," Barbicon suggested loudly. A blonde man frowned from the other group, but obeyed. The Snitch fluttered a moment just above the ground before taking off under the control of a pointed wand.

The Cannon's Seeker stepped over. "We aren't really having a tryout, are we?"

Barbicon shook his head as Suze gave chase to the Snitch and they all watched. "Broom flies like there's no one on it," he observed after a minute. After two, Suze had caught the Snitch despite it being rather controlled rather illusively. She landed with it in hand after one of those braking dives that looks like an imminent collision with the ground.

"Nice broom," she said to Barbicon as she handed it back. She was at least a little out of breath.

"When do you finish school?" the Cannon's captain asked in an innocent tone.

"Four years," Harry supplied

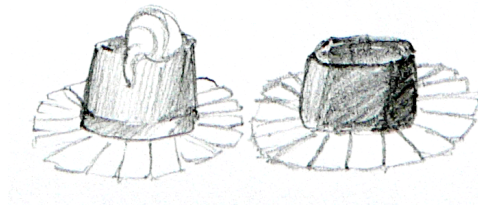
"Oh, good," the current Seeker breathed in relief. "I'll have broken my neck again by then, so that's okay."

Later, while they walked around the lee side of the castle to get to a portkey, Suze asked Harry, "Do you really think I can play professional?" She sounded very hopeful.

"You impressed their captain and had their Seeker worried," he pointed out. Seeing that more was needed, he added, "Why not? Just keep working at it."

She frowned thoughtfully until they came to a halt at a torn crisps wrapper weighted down with a smooth grey rock. "You were wrong, Professor," Suze said. When Snape turned to her curiously, she said, "Winning *won't* everything."

Mr. Weasley picked up the wrapper and the rock and held the wrapper out so everyone could reach it. Snape responded, "There *are* times when it is." His eyes flicked to Harry. "Fortunately, they are rare."



Chapter 48 -- Distant Shores

Harry finished a long letter to Penelope and sealed it up. The large white owl which had delivered *her* letter, waited on a chair back as he wrote. Harry handed the owl his reply, which it immediately departed with out the window, then took her scented letter to the drawing room, where his guardian worked on large piles of parchment. Snape looked up when he entered and dropped his quill down, seeming grateful for a distraction.

"The only time I can go to Switzerland is next week, since my Auror testing is the week after," said Harry. He was trying to not feel too hopeful about managing to arrange his first trip to the Continent.

Snape rubbed his temple thoughtfully, then said, "Are you eager to travel alone?"

"Um." He shrugged. "I've never gone very far before, so I guess not."

"There is an extensive library, the Bibliothèque Magie Vieux near Geneva, which I have always thought worth a visit. If you wish, we can travel together most of the way." He watched Harry think that over, before adding, while he slowly rubbed his long fingers together, "If you see this as some kind of right of passage, then by all means--"

"No," Harry replied quickly. There would be a lot of hours on trains, he considered. And finding one's way around unfamiliar places. "I'd like to have someone along. Can we leave on Sunday, then?"

Snape glanced over the parchments spread before him in thought. "I'll manage to make it work."

* * *

Harry was not familiar with packing for traveling, just for school. He put things in and out of his trunk, unable to decide if he needed them or not. He also had to consider that on Muggle trains, he would have to handle his trunk by hand, not magic, so he didn't want it to be overly full.

Snape stopped by his room. "Are you eating lunch?" he asked.

"I'm trying to pack."

"You will want a smaller container. Just a moment." Snape returned with a half-size trunk, red with silver corners and latch. "Do try to fit everything you need in that, without the use of magic, if possible." He started to leave but paused to say, "And come down to lunch."

During sandwiches and tea, Harry studied the itinerary from the travel agent, fascinated by the spell used for the animated logo of a witch on a broomstick with a big heavy trunk balanced on the back of it. Everytime the animation repeated the turnk had destination stickers from different continents. The schedule below indicated that it would take most of a day to arrive in Bern from when they departed. A very long day where they would try to maximize magical transport, which, as Harry expected, wasn't terribly organized.

First they would Floo to Canterbury where they had to catch the train and then a ferry across the Channel. Then they could Floo or take a train, a decision to be made when they arrived on the Continent, but it seemed likely that they would have to catch the train to Cologne, where they could definitely use another Floo network to Lake Constantz. Although, the travel agent warned them that the pub was hard to find and the lines could be very long at the hearth, but it was a pub, so they could manage to pass the time there or they could buy a token to hold their place and explore the old town a

while. Then onto the German-Swiss border where they had to catch a train again because foreigners were not allowed to Floo inside Switzerland. It all looked very complicated to Harry, and as adventuresome as it sounded, he was glad he would not have to navigate it alone.

That evening, Harry finally finished packing. He had sent letters to his friends, telling them in detail where he was going and for how long, now that he knew for certain. Hedwig's cage was empty and Kali was gnawing on the small stuffed bear he had bought her to play with. Elizabeth had promised to come and take care of both of them. Nervous and excited at the prospect of distant travel, Harry headed down to find Snape.

He found his guardian in the drawing room working on his endless piles of paperwork. "I'm all packed for tomorrow morning," Harry said, feeling as though that were some kind of major victory.

"Ready to leave, then? Ready for your first visit to the Continent?"

"Definitely."

"Ready to meet your lady friend's parents for the first time?"

Harry opened his mouth, then thought that over. "Maybe."

Snape continued on in the same matter-of-fact tone, "Ready to spend unsupervised hours alone with said lady friend?"

Harry tried very hard not to give himself away as he replied, "Yes."

"Take a seat, Harry. We should have a little talk."

Harry scratched his ear and pulled over a chair from the wall to before the desk. He did not like the tone of that. With crossed arms he waited for Snape to finish what he was doing. Snape finally did, putting his quill down and considering Harry for an uncomfortable span of silence.

Snape steepled his fingers and grimaced lightly. "We have never discussed certain things."

Harry's clothes suddenly felt too tight and his collar itchy. "Guess not."

"You need to be aware of certain things when you faced with a situation which may not be conducive to circumspect decision making," Snape said. Harry thought that had to be the most roundabout thing he had ever heard. Snape went on, "Going on eighteen, you almost certainly believe you know everything."

All the things Tonks had discussed during their one night together flitted through his mind, making him flush as well as making his collar damp. He didn't feel utterly ignorant, really, but didn't wish to argue that point either.

Snape had fallen silent. Harry Occluded his mind and looked up at him, cueing him to continue. "You need to be very careful, more careful than your friends need be. Your reputation is a commodity, one that can be traded upon by those with less than your best interest at heart."

Brow furrowed, Harry said sharply, "You think Penelope—"

Snape firmly cut him short. "I am not speaking of anyone in particular. I do not think it wise to completely trust anyone when we are speaking of things such as progeny you are not intending to produce. You must always take your own precautions, is what I am insisting."

"I understand what you are saying," Harry said, discomfort translating into anger as he spoke.

Snape answered the anger with a steely tone, "But are you knowledgeable enough to manage?"

Harry forced himself not to squirm; he really wanted this conversation over with. "Yes," he breathed, keeping his anger down. When Snape gave him a doubtful look, Harry asked, "You have a book I can read or something?"

Snape frowned and muttered, "No, unfortunately I was not thinking ahead."

"I really think I can manage." Harry was feeling more grateful to Tonks by the moment. "Really. I'll be very careful," he said as though by rote.

"Do so," Snape said firmly before returning to his thick stacks of parchment.

* * *

Ron and Hermione met them in Canterbury early in the morning to see them off. They walked down the quiet main street while waiting for the train, their luggage beside the platform disguised as two pet carriers containing very ornery rottweilers. After two groups of wizard tourists recognized Harry, he pulled his orange cap out of his day pack and donned it even though the clouds gave no hint of letting any sun through.

"You should get back to the station," Hermione said as they stood outside a crooked and sagging half-timbered pub. The whole town looked as though it might have been constructed over a swamp, the way everything leaned in different directions. They turned around and headed back to the gate, where they split up, Hermione giving Harry a nice hug and telling him to behave.

"Sure, Hermione," Harry laughed at her serious attitude.

Ron gave him a slap on the shoulder and told him to have fun *instead* of behaving. At the station Snape and Harry transformed their luggage back to normal when no one was looking and waited for the next train.

The ride to the coast took longer than Harry thought it would, and the train rocked a lot as it clattered along, much more than the Hogwarts Express. He watched the rolling landscape and could not help imaging instead the steep Alps from the travel brochure.

The ferry ride across the Channel left Harry believing that no Muggle child knew how to behave. The total journey felt impossibly long as he stared out the scratched window at the rain beating on the grey choppy water.

In Brugge they stopped for tea after a bus ride from the port dropped them in old town. Harry stared into his cup and thought the day had gone on a little long already, but at least the sun was shining part of the time and it was not actively raining. They sat outside on a cobblestone street beside a railing overlooking a canal lined with very old stone buildings. Harry kept forgetting where he was and had to remind himself this was not just some unusual part of Shrewsthorpe, Hogsmeade, or London.

"We should find the Floo network or local equivalent," Snape commented. "Muggle transport is proving more . . . annoying than anticipated.

"The travel agent wasn't exactly clear about getting across Belgium," Harry complained "She seemed to think it was small enough that any manner of travel would suffice." A tour boat went by, repeating the same historic point in seven languages. Harry could smell something wonderful cooking. "Do we have time for lunch?" he asked hopefully, even though it was only just after eleven.

"If they will serve it to you this early."

Harry flagged the waiter, who pretended that he didn't speak any English, forcing Harry to settle for the recommended dish. What arrived was an alarmingly large canister, steaming with a wonderful seashore and onion aroma. Inside it were more black mussels than Harry could imagine in one place.

After a minute of slow eating, the waiter came over and demonstrated with copious rambling French on the side, how to use an empty shell as a pincer to get the meat out of another shell. Harry thanked him and began eating with gusto. In the end he sat back and Snape finished the rest, including the curry and mustard mayonnaise, which hadn't appealed to Harry at all. As he had more tea and rubbed his full stomach, Harry decided traveling was all right after all.

It took only a quarter hour of wandering the alleys of Brugge for Snape to locate a wizard-run shop to ask how best to get to Cologne. The man told them to use the Booth network to go to Aachen where they could catch a train to Cologne. After a series of confusing questions, they were made to understand that the booth network was intended for wizard tourists and that it only went to a few cities in the Benelux region, since the Ministry had never finished building the network. He shrugged as if to say that its incompletion was expected. He sent them off to hunt for a Muggle photo booth.

They located one off the main square. Snape pointed to the sample photo on the side, of a slightly cross-eyed man, the signal that the booth was also a portal. They fed two Galleons into the coin slot, magically shrunk their trunks so they would fit beside their feet inside the booth, and slipped onto the seat. Harry pulled the curtain closed at the edges as Snape addressed the screen. *"Please select your destination,"* the screen read in flowing script. A list appeared beside a row of large red buttons down the side of the screen normally used for selecting photographic options. Snape pushed the one corresponding to Aix la Chappelle. *"Please wait for your turn on the network."*

"I thought computers broke around magic," Harry commented.

"Not always," Snape said as he sat back on the narrow bench. Falling into lecture mode, he explained, "It is easy to cast a spell to disrupt Muggle technology and many spells will do so, but it is possible to cast ones that will not, although it requires some skill."

Their turn on the network finally came up and after a flap of the curtain and a vibration of the floor, the screen informed them that they had arrived. Harry doubtfully peeked out, but indeed, they were now in a strange bus station. He slipped out and looked back into the booth, only to realize it lacked their trunks.

"That's not good," Harry said, peering back inside and under the metal seat. They both looked all around the outside of the booth and the surrounding area full of people. Losing his luggage made Harry feel very uneasy, as though he might not find his way home again without it.

"We will wait a few minutes before returning to see if it was merely left behind," Snape said.

After what felt like a half an hour but was probably only five minutes, the trunks materialized behind the booth, full size. Harry breathed out loudly in relief. "I will second that," Snape said as he pulled his trunk off the top of Harry's.

Since they were at the bus station, they caught a bus to Cologne. Harry expected to have to wait for one, but for once their timing was dead on and within minutes they were roaring down the autobahn at a good clip and the bus was mercifully quiet with almost no children.

Snape pulled out a French dictionary and began studying it. Harry wondered if he should have learned a few words of German before leaving or learned a polylingual spell. He decided to not worry since Penelope could take care of translations when needed. He watched the landscape go by as well as the occasional very fast German sports car, passing on his side of the bus, the left side, which felt odd.

Outside the Cologne train station, the blackened cathedral towered over them as they stepped off the bus. The sun shined brightly here, making Harry squint and pull his cap down farther over his eyes. They towed their trunks--Harry surreptitiously had put a Featherlight charm on his--up around the cathedral and down a side street into the old town.

It was busy here. Many people sat outside pubs at small, high tables drinking diminutive glasses of beer. Their trunk pulling garnered some strange looks from the well-dressed drinkers. At a corner, Snape pulled a parchment from his pocket and looked around at the addresses. It required three passes down the block but finally they found the pub, sandwiched between a violin store and a pizza shop. Harry was sure it had not been there on previous passes, and frankly, maybe it hadn't.

Inside, the Dom Brauhaus was crowded and smokey from many pipes. Harry followed behind Snape as he made his way around to the blonde, braid-sporting barmaid pouring drinks from a tap at a rapid pace. "We want to take the Floo to the south," Snape said to her.

"Ein minute," she growled and carried the tray of little glasses away. Harry watched her swoop around the room, replacing empty glasses with full ones before returning to repeat the process. "Talk to Guido," she said, nodding at a rotund gentleman in a cap with a feather and a very long pipe, sitting on a stool by a tall clock. "Haf a dreenk," she said, handing a glass to Harry. Since it was small, he accepted it and sipped it as they found a path through the tall hats and cloaks to the far wall. Harry didn't see any hearths in the place, even in the side rooms off the main one. The beer was refreshing, making him realize he was very thirsty.

"Good?" Snape asked, as Harry gulped half the glass down. Harry nodded, then held the glass at his side rather than swig the rest of it as he was tempted to. He adjusted his cap to distract himself. Snape took Guido's attention away from the unsavory gentlemen he was speaking with and began a crude conversation in pidgin-English about how to take the Floo.

"Ees four galleons each," the man explained. The man beside him snorted. Snape's eyes narrowed. "Ya, for you, tree then. Und, uh, two and ten for the yung man mit you. Dat includes enough powder to get to Vienna if you vish." He made it sound as though he were being generous.

"We wish to go to Lake Constantz," Snape explained, fingering his coin purse. "Or Basel if you think that is better for getting to Switzerland.

"No, no connection at Basel, or it ees a difficult one. You would have to take a Muggle taxi for a . . ." He waved his chubby hand in the air. ". . . tirty kilometers, forty. At Kreuzlingen, is only half a block to de train. Unless you have been before and can Apparate."

Snape shook his head and counted out the coins. "And the drinks are included, right?" he said. It sounded vaguely like a threat.

"Uh, ya. Fraulein Volf," he shouted to the barmaid and pointed at the two of them when she stood on tiptoe to look their way. The man put the coins away and pulled another coin purse out of his other pocket. He removed two large brass coins and handed them to Harry. "You are number fifty-three." He pointed at the tall clock beside him which Harry realized wasn't a clock at all but a big dial of numbers with three hands, one rusty steel, one brass, and one green copper. The brass hand was pointing at eighteen. The man said, "You vait for your turn, ya? Ven your number here, go up to stairs dere." They followed his gesture around behind him where the bottom of an old red-carpeted staircase could be seen through a doorway at the end, back dropped by a grimy stained-glass window. He waved them away and fell back into his low conversation with the seedy fellow who had slunk back against the wall. Harry had forgotten he was there.

The room was wall to wall with long tables pushed so close together that the benches touched. The end of table had just space for two across from each other. Snape strode over there and pointed at the two seats. One of the middle-aged men sitting there wearing a dark green linen coat said something in German, and when Snape didn't reply, he switched to English. "Dis is free."

Harry gratefully sat down, although he felt strange backed up against a wide witch behind him and forced to press against the man beside him to have enough space on the bench. The barmaid arrived with a faint smile and gave them each fresh glasses, taking Harry's warm one away. In the smoky warmth of the room the cold beverage was a relief. The rusty pointer on the dial moved two places. When the German wizards' conversation faded, the man beside Harry said something to him in German. The man across the table in the green coat said something with the word 'Englander' while gesturing at Harry. He then froze and looked a little surprised. "Solche grüne Augen," the man said and nodded at his fellow. Puzzled, the other turned to Harry, ducking to look under his orange hat brim. Across from him Harry could see Snape's alert gaze moving between them, even though he still casually sipped his beer.

The man beside Harry leaned close and said, "Dere is very famous English wizard with zuch eyes. He might wear a hat like this to hide his-" the man gestured shakily at his own forehead with a worn finger.

"Might he?" Harry asked, sipping from his glass.

The men exchanged an uneasy look and the one leaned over again and said conspiratorially, "Dere are no dark vizards here. None."

Confused by this proclamation, Harry replied agreeably if a bit doubtfully, "All right."

Seeming a little more nervous, the man said after glancing around, "You are hunting dark vizards, no?"

Harry laughed, which only apparently unnerved the man more. "No. Well, not yet anyway," he quipped.

The man in the green coat said, "You varn us, you start. Ve get out of the way."

Harry checked that the man looked serious and sat straight. "Do I look that dangerous?" Harry honestly asked the man before turning to Snape.

"Your reputation precedes you," Snape commented dryly.

"Do I really look more dangerous than *him*?" Harry asked the men disbelievingly, indicating Snape.

They appeared to give this due consideration before shrugging. "You are der junge der ablehnte zu sterben, ja? Uh, der boy who refused to die?" the man restated upon seeing Harry's blank expression.

Harry gave in, took off his cap and fluffed his hair back and forth to get it off his head. Wearing a hat all day was the only way his hair did not stick up in many directions automatically.

The man's intent bloodshot eyes went over Harry's face and scar. "You destroy the Mitternachtlord," he went on forcefully, darkly. "You can defeat anyone."

"Oh, I don't think so," Harry said, grinning at the man's insistence for lack of a reasonable response. A fresh beer replaced his glass, which he had not realized he had emptied. A glance at Snape didn't reveal that he cared if Harry had another. The brass dial was now on twenty-three.

"You let us know," the man repeated with a nod before returning to the conversation with his companion.

"I will," Harry reassured him. Seeing Snape's serious expression, Harry asked, "You want a warning too?"

"I expect at this point I will see it coming in time," Snape replied easily. When Harry frowned lightly at him, he continued, "Trouble does seem to follow you."

After another half hour, the dial finally approached their numbers. They stood and collected their bags from the floor. The men gave them nods and one gave Harry a sloppy salute as he moved to where their trunks were stacked by the wall. On the stairs to the first floor, Harry said, "I was sort of hoping no one here would recognize me." Snape responded with a doubtful tilt of the head.

The room above was also covered in old, worn, red carpet. A pair of witches, speaking gaily in German, were pulling their trunks out of the very large pink marble hearth. A man in a Muggle business suit was waiting impatiently for them to move on, tossing his brass coin in the air and catching it. As soon as there was space to do so he rushed forward, dropped the coin into a decorative stein on the mantle and tossed down a great deal of Floo powder after announcing Berlin.

Harry was glad there was no one waiting behind them as they struggled a bit to arrange their trunks inside the firebox. Harry remembered just in time to toss the coins into the mug and duck back inside before Snape tossed the Floo powder.

With a surge the red carpet was gone and they were spinning past fires and walls of stone and brick. Eventually they landed, unexpectedly on a nice carpet.

The hearth at this end was modern and almost Muggle looking with white paint and brushed steel on the hearth. A few wizards in steely grey cloaks stood chatting near a row of square windows on the far side of the room, but they paid no mind to the new arrivals. Bright engraved metal plaques pointed the way out and they followed the one which indicated it led to the Bahnhof. They charmed the trunks and carried them down a modern staircase, along a well-lit corridor and through a plain door into the middle of the train station. Minutes later they had tickets and were on the train, their trunks taking up most of the luggage space at the end of the car. Harry reclined his seat and let himself relax.

"Is it me or was that last part too easy?" Harry asked.

"They don't manufacture watches here for no reason," Snape commented as he pulled out his dictionary again and began reading. The train pulled away right on the minute printed on the ticket.

The low hills spread out beyond the windows, the sun glowing blindingly bright from patches of snow in the distance. Harry's eyes slipped closed with the methodic rocking of the train.

"You are missing the scenery," Snape said, tapping him on the shoulder.

Harry snapped awake as the train pulled into Winterthur and announcements blared incomprehensibly on the platform. As they pulled out again, Harry tried to keep his eyes open and watch the neatly farmed hillsides with their unusual-looking farmhouses. Little towns clung to high hillsides of green with roads snaking up and through them. Harry found himself unable to accept that this was still the same day they had departed Shrewsthorpe.

The world blinked out as they passed through a tunnel and out over a bridge as though the train had taken flight. Harry's eyes felt too heavy even for such a pastoral scene of fields backed by snow capped peaks, and hanging valleys and he fell asleep again.

Something chittered at Harry, something hard to catch a clear sense of beyond the spindly limbs, long fingers of unbreakable grip, and jagged teeth of grey stone. Harry opened his eyes and was disoriented by the black window, the tiny overhead lights brightening the blue fabric of the back of the modern seat before him with its empty black net. Two breaths later he remembered where he was. Snape leaned forward and turned to him questioningly.

Harry muttered, "Strange dream," as daylight returned out the window. Harry looked out over the landscape, at the clouds floated low just beyond the immediate hills, giving one the feeling of being on the top of the world. They paced a motorway for a short distance, bent around a hill and entered another tunnel. The sides of the car seemed to shift outward with a pop as they did so. The muscles in the back of Harry's neck twinged as he sensed the same scuttling dark creatures as before, only this time he was wide awake. The tunnel went on much longer than Harry hoped, considering his growing sense that, whatever they were, they were aware of his own awareness and were quieting to pay attention. Harry touched his wand pocket with a casual movement as he imagined that they might be clinging to the train despite its speed.

Snape leaned farther over their common armrest and studied him closely. "Something the matter?" he asked quietly.

Harry's sensed a shifting of the odd attention as though it were solidifying into malevolence. He balled his fist near his wand and asked, "You don't notice anything?" When Snape shook his head a little perplexedly, Harry hurriedly tried to explain. "Something's out there. What lives in mountains?"

"Many things," Snape replied, sounding like a lecture already. "Trolls for example."

Harry swallowed, thinking he could see daylight casting itself obliquely on the rock face beside him. "Not trolls. Small, nasty, sharp stone teeth, chatter a lot."

Snape's expression made Harry wish that he had not said anything, especially since the blast of full sunlight made the clawing sense dissipate completely.

"Not in your mind?" Snape asked carefully. Harry shook his head, dropped his hand to the armrest and forced himself to relax. Snape went on, "Your description resembles a Shetani, but they are usually only in Africa. They are quite nasty, though. Strongly attracted to magic, especially certain kinds."

Harry set his head right against the window and tried to look ahead for more tunnels. Only green slopes could be seen. "What kinds?" he asked, feeling like knowledge was his best hope for making it across this land of hills and tunnels.

Snape's lips twitched reluctantly. "I do not think you will have difficulty with them at this speed. Although they have been known to set traps," he added thoughtfully, then seemed to realize he should have left off the last. "Do not concern yourself," he insisted quickly, but since empty platitudes were not among Snape's best abilities, it did not come out well.

Another tunnel and the chattering made it difficult to sense the seat and the lights, as though the creatures meant to distract him to death. Then they were through again. Snape had a grip on Harry's upper arm, making Harry flush and shake himself back to embarrassed reality. "What kinds of magic?" Harry demanded to cover his lapse.

Again the reluctance. "The darker kinds," Snape finally divulged.

Harry's brow furrowed and he wondered what these things saw in him of such interest. As a narrow pure blue lake slid into view, he wondered perhaps if the trailings of Voldemort he still possessed carried the scent of darkness to these creatures. He didn't like that thought.

Open sunlight continued for a long time after that, almost long enough to forget. At the next tunnel he closed his eyes and Occluded his mind to no avail, but fortunately there seemed to be only a handful of the creatures making them much less bold.

"We will take a different route home," stated Snape, when daylight again filled the carriage.

Harry nodded. "Maybe I'll read up on them," he suggested a little glumly, thinking that knowing for certain they hungered after dark magic would not make him feel any better. Usually, he didn't think about his Voldemort inherited abilities, but at the moment, he dearly wished that he could exorcise them.

The trolley came by. Snape purchased tea and forced it on Harry with uncharacteristic urging. Harry gave in and sipped it. At the next tunnel, the warmth radiating on his hand seemed to keep him anchored and he did not sense anything. "They're gone," Harry said and took a scalding gulp. "You're right, trouble does follow me."

A half hour later, they pulled into Solothurn where Snape was visiting an old colleague before going on to the archie. He moved to stand, but hesitated. "I can skip my visit here and continue on with-

"No," Harry said firmly. "Go on." But he bit his lip as Snape collected his shoulder bag from above them.

"I'll see you in four days," Snape said. "Do behave."

Harry shook his head lightly. "Yes, of course."

As they pulled out, Harry espied Snape pulling his trunk along the platform. Harry gave a wave that went unnoticed and he remembered that the train windows were heavily tinted. With a small smile at how out of place his guardian looked among the nicely dressed Muggles, Harry sat back and thought ahead to seeing Penelope.

The train pulled into the Bern Bahnhof precisely at the scheduled time. Harry had already collected his trunk and day pack and was standing at the doors when they opened. Down on the platform, where he pretended his trunk was heavier than it felt, charmed as it was, he looked around and spotted Penelope coming the other way against the crowd, a broad smile lighting her face. She looked better than he had remembered, or perhaps it was just the stress of examinations being over which made her face seem to glow.

"Harry," she greeted him happily and gave him a hug. Harry returned the hug and didn't see anyone with her. "Did you haf a goot trip?" she asked, her accent thicker than he expected.

"Uh . . . yeah. Not bad. I need to read more about this area, maybe you have a book?" he suggested, the hair on his arms bristling in memory.

They started along the warning track toward the exit. "Not in English, but there is a bookstore." She hooked her arm in his. Harry gave her a smile, glad to see a familiar face among so many foreign ones.

She led him out faster than he could attempt to interpret the signs they passed giving directions around the station. "I live just down the hill into old town, on Rathausgasse, so we can walk."

"Rat house?" Harry echoed quietly.

"Rathaus, where the mayor works; I forget vat you call it."

Outside, the sun was still shining with the unnatural glare Harry associated with winter. They strolled along the covered pavement beside a brick street. Many people were out, walking quickly towing their shopping or pushing prams. Several blocks later, she stopped at a door beside one to a pastry shop and unspelled it. Inside, Harry hovered his trunk up the staircase and through another spell-neutralized door. Harry wondered at so much security, but didn't comment. Inside was a bright, high-ceilinged, sitting room with a kitchen off to the side.

With an apologetic grin she patted the couch. "Dis is the guest room, so you can put your trunk here." Harry did as she suggested, glad the trunk didn't look too imposing there. She grabbed his hand, "Come, I vill show you around de old town." On the way out down the steps, Harry wondered at her accent before deciding she must not use English much here.

They headed down a side alley to a wide street with a statue in the middle. Many other tourists were wandering here, pointing at things. The sun was finally low in the sky, lighting the stone with an orange glow. They walked downhill along the pavement, Penelope explaining about the bears they kept in the moat, about Albert Einstein. Harry, worn down from the very long day, was not taking much of it in. People here seemed to walk very fast and he felt it took all his attention to stay out of their way.

"Ah, my favorite shop," Penelope said energetically. Harry peered through the glass at a grand array of perfectly spaced, dainty chocolates. Inside, he let Penelope pick out a boxful. On the way out she hooked her arm through his. "I think you haf need of coffee," she said with a laugh in her voice. Harry was glad she wasn't unhappy that he was so worn out.

As they found seats in an airy, tall-windowed shop with a big brass espresso machine dominating the marble counter, Harry said, "I'm sorry I'm not very good company right now."

"You had long travels," she said easily, opening the elaborately packaged and wrapped box of chocolates and pushing it over before him. Harry selected a black and white swirled one; it tasted strongly of vanilla. "Good?" she asked eagerly. When Harry nodded, she said authoritatively, "Much better than Honeydukes," as though she had been suffering all this time.

Harry hesitated at that, but didn't argue the point. Despite sitting for most of the day, Harry wished only to continue doing so, although the coffee was making him more aware of the world around him. A couple in nice clothes sat at a table by the wall leaning in closely to talk. A woman near the window was reading a small book while pushing the stroller beside her to and fro.

"Ve can walk around tomorrow; the flower market will be in the platz in the morning. And my parents will be home by now."

Harry stared into his cup to gauge how much more he had to drink and was startled to find it empty. "Yeah, let's go," he said, glad not much was expected of him right now.

The door at the top of the stairs was open when they returned. Harry braced himself as they entered. "Mama," Penelope said to catch the attention of the couple opening the post at the table beside the window. "This is Harry," she said, sounding nervously proud.

They halted what they were doing and came over. Through the coffee static in his brain, Harry had the fleeting impression that they had only half-believed he existed. Penelope's mother, an oval-faced woman with dark hair, held out her hand, "Madeleine Toffen, Mr. Potter," she said, sounding very formal.

"Just Harry, please," he insisted, shaking hands next with Penelope's father, a balding man who squinted when he smiled. He seemed to have a hard time taking his eyes off Harry's scar.

Madeleine was saying, "We planned to go for a nice dinner, if you are up to it." Harry nodded, although he worried that when the coffee wore off, he might fall unconscious.

Cleaned up and changed into the nicest clothes he had brought, Harry sat on the couch waiting with Penelope's parents for Penelope to finish getting ready. Beside him on the end table was a white lacquer framed photograph of Penelope and a boy just a little younger, presumably her brother Robert, given the resemblance. Harry looked away from it and tried not to frown obviously. Penelope's mum tapped her fingertips together nervously. "Rather amazing to haf you here, Mr.-- Harry," Mr. Tideweather said, breaking a long silence.

"I've never been to the Continent," Harry said. "The mountains are very beautiful."

"It is much easier to travel now," Madeleine said, "Everyone is abroad now, it zeems, even so early in the zummer. But you should go to Paris, a young man like yourself, as zoon as you can."

Harry considered that they *had* planned on taking a different route home. "I don't have much time right now. I have testing for the Auror's program with the Ministry coming up next week."

Mr. Tideweather said, "Ah, yes," leaning forward and clasping his hands. "Peni said as much."

Another silence settled on the room. Harry was just figuring out how he might ask about dark-magic-hungry creatures in the mountains when Penelope came out, apologizing for taking so long. She looked pretty smart though in a short grey dress with a sweater over it.

They walked uphill many blocks with much turning left and right. Harry didn't think he could make it back on his own if he had to without having set a direction charm on his wand. His hosts didn't seem to think the walk excessively long, even though his feet were feeling sore when they finally arrived at the restaurant. The scents inside made Harry's stomach rumble.

Dinner passed sedately. Harry tuned out the conversations around their table which he could not understand anyway, turning it into a dull roar in his ears. Penelope's father talked about Penelope's plans for becoming an archivist, at the very library Snape was going to visit. Harry had not realized her plans were so well formed. When the topic had come up before, she made it sound like ideas rather than contracts. He wondered at that discrepancy and watched her attending to her plate closely. "But I'm sure you would find that boring," Mr. Tideweather was saying.

"Sounds interesting, actually," Harry insisted, thinking of midnight forays into the restricted section of the Hogwarts library.

"You should take Harry to Geneva, Peni," Madeleine said, shifting topics. "You have not been, correct?" she asked Harry, who shook his head. "You could stay with my sister," she said, then frowned lightly as though rethinking that.

Penelope looked up from her plate, looking slightly amused. "Aunt Vreni is fun to visit. Do you want to see Geneva?" she asked of Harry. Harry nodded, thinking they would be having a little more fun, if not around overseen by parents.

The next morning, a car horn woke Harry. The sound of the vertical blind clacking followed. "It is a taxi driver. They are not supposed to do that," Mr. Tidewater said from beside the window. Harry blinked and sat up on the flattened couch. "Did you sleep well?" his host asked. Harry nodded while rubbing grit from his eyes; he had had some very strange dream about flying his broom around the mountains looking for something, but it was fading fast as the morning sun poured into the room.

Right after breakfast, Penelope led Harry around the city, starting with the market and moving to the parliament. The city still looked very foreign this morning; yesterday's walk had not accustomed him to the look of the buildings and streets.

Harry's feet were very grateful when they stopped for lunch at a pizza shop on the main street. They sat at a small corner table, Harry stretching his toes inside his shoes. Cars rumbled by on the brick street and many pedestrians walked past the tall windows.

Harry took off his hat and fluffed his hair. A metal pizza tray clattered to the floor beside the next table and the waitress scurried to collect it up, glancing up at Harry in alarm. Harry frowned and listened to her apologize, he assumed, in rapid speech.

Penelope, who was reading from a ragged tour book of the city, did not seem to notice. "What would you like to do next? History museum or Art?" she asked.

Behind her, Harry watched the waitress explaining to the chef over the stainless steel counter that ran along the far wall. The chef seemed unsympathetic. "Art sounds better," Harry replied. Eventually the waitress came back, holding a small notebook very tightly while smoothing the page down with the other as she said something he couldn't understand. Penelope ordered and the waitress took the menus then hesitated before asking something.

Penelope said, sounding a little testy, "She wants to know if it is really you."

"It is really me," Harry said to the waitress, almost making Penelope giggle. The woman seemed confused by this, but went to the counter. "I didn't expect to be recognized here," Harry said, feeling like he had been cheated out of something.

Penelope looked disbelieving. "More Muggles here would know who you are than in Britain. It is not so . . . separate here, such news anyway."

By that evening Harry was certain this had been the longest day of his life. As they sat down back at Penelope's flat, he wished he knew a charm for sore feet, because sitting was not making them feel any better. Penelope didn't show any effects of the day at all. With eagerness she said, "We have seen most every major thing, so tomorrow we will go to Geneva." Harry's spirits, which rose at the first part, flagged significantly on the second. She went on, "Very famous city. Great shopping."

Harry who had taken out a significant part of what remained in his vault for spending money, felt a panicky twinge at that, but Penelope, who was making coffee, did not notice this. She brought back very small cups of coffee. "You are having fun, no?"

"It's, uh, *yes*," Harry replied. His feet complained at that answer. "I'm not used to so much walking, I think."

"Ah," she said and sipped her coffee. "No hike then to Kleine Scheidegg. It is my favorite."

"Uh," Harry began, but then realized that she was grinning too much.

"You can take the rail most the way, you know," she added, sounding chastising. Harry took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind; he was not keeping up well.

The first train of the morning dropped them in Geneva in time for an early breakfast. Harry bolstered himself with a big meal at a little cafe on the street. The city's narrow streets curved away, promising more exploring than could possibly be done in a day.

"We will not walk so much," Penelope assured him. "I am thinking of a short walk, then a long picnic by the water, then a boat ride."

"Sounds brilliant," Harry said agreeably as he put down his fork and drank his coffee. He had to admit, the coffee was like the chocolate, thicker and richer than he had ever had it. They wandered along the narrow streets, every one of which seemed to have cafes along them. Penelope turned down a quiet street and stopped before a wooden door and knocked three times and then three times again. The door, despite looking like it might swing inward, probably with a loud squeaking sound, parted quietly in the middle. Penelope stepped through and glanced back as Harry followed.

Inside was a small wizard museum, really the town house of an old wealthy witch who had lived in the 1800s. Every available wall had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and some doorways were half-blocked by freestanding cases. Every shelf was crammed with every imaginable magical item, some really useful like handmade never-out quills with gaudy silver decoration, and some really strange such as a self-stirring make-up tin. The whole place was musty, tickling Harry's nose.

On the first floor, Penelope beckoned to Harry to join her in the drawing room. "Dame Vera," she said, indicating the large painting of a woman in a shocking violet lace dress. Dame Vera straightened her skirts, then smoothed them before giving them a smile.

"Looks a bit like you," Harry observed.

"Very distant relative, actually," Penelope said. "I don't think I'll look that good at a hundred and thirty though." Vera primped her hair and smiled more.

The tall clock chimed and a real blackbird flew out of the little door at the top, cawed harshly eleven times as it circled the room before diving back inside. The clock resumed ticking.

A small middle-aged man with tiny glasses came into the room. "Thought I heard ze door," the man said, squinting at Penelope. "Do I know you?"

"I haf visited before. Penelope Tideweather, fifth cousin to the lady here," she explained, waving at the painting, who blew a kiss at Harry.

"Don' be such a tease, Vera," the man said to the painting. "Please, excuse her," he said. After looking Harry over, took off his glasses and cleaned them thoroughly before replacing them on his nose and frowning more. "Vell, if you have any questions, let me know." He disappeared again.

After the museum, the sun was intense and the shadows of the buildings starker than normal. Penelope led the way to a shop where they bought an array of cheeses, dried sausages, bread sticks, dried fruits and a bottle of wine. Most of it fit in Harry's daypack and Penelope insisted on carrying the rest, even though the overnight bag on her shoulder could not hold it. They walked down to the lake and along the tree-lined waterfront to a large park with rolling slopes leading to large circles of flowers. They found a relatively level spot still in view of the water and dropped onto the grass. For once Penelope seemed a little tired.

They spoke of minor things, such as how different Hogwarts was than Penelope had expected and how glad her parents were that she was home safe, even though they should not have worried so much. Harry wanted to ask what her plans were now, but found he didn't have the will to risk spoiling the lovely moment. Eventually, they ate their picnic, or part of it, and after the wine, Harry was very sleepy so he spread his cloak out and put his head down.

Harry woke later, when some seagulls cried out noisily overhead. Penelope's head was resting on his chest as she stared up at the clouds which had formed over the lake.

"You want to be an Auror?" she asked, apparently noticing that he was awake.

"Yes."

"It sounds dangerous," she said evenly.

Harry thought being an Auror sounded challenging and like something that would satisfy his hunger to be involved while also knowing what was going on. He didn't voice these things. When he sat up, he felt lightheaded. Penelope opened the sparkling water, poured some into a plastic cup, and handed it to him. Drinking it made him feel much better.

"Ready to go?" she asked.

Harry stood with a grunt at his aches from the hard ground. "Certainly. Where to?"

They wandered some more along the waterfront, took a Ferry down the lake to the next port, Nyon, where they disembarked. Harry noted as he turned back to look over the boat, that the long list of destinations on the sign beside the dock also read *Montreux* in all capital letters, making him wonder how Snape was faring at the library. He squinted across the slightly hazy lake and imagined one of the towns in the distance contained his guardian.

They wandered through the many pedestrians up to the main square before a turreted castle. "The Château," Penelope explained taking a seat at a cafe, whose tables were arranged in neat rows. A few seagulls hunted under the tables and chairs, quick to get out of the way. "It needs renovations. Soon they say." She ordered coffee for them both when the waiter appeared. Harry thought she sounded pretty good when she spoke French. She took out an old tour book. "It says the view from the Roman columns over the lake is nice and the museum very good. But it is such a nice day to be inside." She put the book away. "We'll walk over to the ruin."

They caught the ferry back as darkness fell quickly, rendering the apparent distance to the shore longer and the one to the mountains closer. They bought food from the little counter on the boat and ate that with the leftovers in Harry's day-pack. The ride went quickly in this direction even though there wasn't much to see out the darkened windows.

Penelope, taking Harry's hand as they stepped onto the quay, said, "We should find my aunt." They walked along a different part of the waterfront than they had earlier, the lights across the dark lake, glinting romantically on the ripples. Rising from the water the hills were visible as clusters of dwindling lights. Behind them, the ferry was plying its way back down the lake, its many windows brighter than the lights beyond it.

They walked along a big, dark, open expanse of concrete along the water that did not seem to have much purpose. Music drifted on the air from somewhere. Penelope stopped beside a grungy boat dock where two open motorboats were bobbing in the algae-filled water beside the quay. A rusty metal sign like a gate led to steps directly into the water. The air was swampy smelling here. Penelope urged Harry down one step, took out her wand, and tapped each pole. The air rippled and revealed a waterfront full of people sitting at an outdoor bar. The music was loud now. They stepped through and along to the last establishment where plants framed a stage where a band played and colored lanterns swung on cables in the faint breeze around the tall tables.

They had to wait for a table to open up outside, but eventually a couple left and Harry and Penelope took their seats. "Your aunt works here?" Harry asked as the waitress came by and Penelope ordered something in French.

Penelope pointed at the stage. "She plays bass."

Harry looked at the band for the first time and located the woman with bright red hair and black leather trousers playing an almost equally bright red, large, stringed instrument in the center back of the group. The song ended and another immediately started up. Penelope's aunt looked intent on her playing and not aware of them in the audience.

"American blues, you know?" Harry shook his head. Penelope went on, "Aunt Vreni is kind of the black sheep as you say."

"She seems to like playing music," Harry said as the drinks arrived. They were short glasses with ice, little straws, and slices of lemon, sweet and alcoholic. Snape's admonitions were trying to intrude in his mind even over the thrum of the music.

Many long songs and two drinks later, Harry excused himself to use the toilet. On the way back out, he found the side door first and took it, rather than work his way back through the crowded restaurant. It was quiet over here on the city side. Cars went by infrequently and the shop gates were all pulled down. He walked around the building to where their table was on the outside edge. As Harry came around the potted ferns, he noticed others were gathered around the table. Penelope, lit by the yellow and blue lanterns hanging overhead, gestured in an unfriendly way at one of the people. Curious, Harry slowed in the shadows to observe. He could almost hear them, but he couldn't understand what must be French, although it did not lilt, it sounded guttural spoken so low.

Harry stepped over quickly. "Friends of yours?" he asked.

The three young men backed off just a little, apparently not expecting him. One of them, with close-cut brown hair and a beard neatly trimmed around his jaw, said snidely, "You brought an Englishman back with you?"

"Not friends. Former fellow students," Penelope darkly explained to Harry. "They were just leaving." Harry watched in amazement as she reached into her coat pocket and pulled her wand into her loose sleeve. It was not a motion she tried to conceal although the wand was now hidden from casual view. Harry looked at each of the young men in turn; they looked cocky and sneering, though a little wary now. Penelope said something in French and received what sounded like a threat in return, though they were all speaking too low to really discern.

Harry stepped closer to Penelope so their shoulders were touching. "Why don't you leave now?" he said firmly, threateningly.

"Or vat?" One of them mocked. "You vill use a little British spell on us?"

"No. All I have to do is let go of her hand," Harry explained, showing them the grip he had taken of Penelope's vibrating wrist. Penelope looked about as furious as he could imagine her being. Murderous even.

One of them backed up but the other two just laughed. "She does not scare us. Nor do you. The English are as wimps at Quidditch and wimps at magic."

Another song had started up and the nearby tables which had glanced their way once were not paying them any attention. Harry narrowed his eyes at the boldest of them, the one with short brown hair and a long fringe. In a low voice, he said, "I destroyed Voldemort; I can certainly take on you."

The pair straightened at this news but did not budge. The third stepped back close and asked, "Vat did he say?"

"He . . ." one of them began dubiously.

"What?" Harry asked with a hint of mockery that felt much too good, "Don't recognize the scar?" The three looked more surprised and glanced at Penelope indecisively. Penelope still looked rather murderous. "Get lost," Harry said. "Or I'll finish off what she leaves behind." He released her wrist which she held stiffly at her side, wand not hidden anymore. Harry went on, "And you know, when we explain to your authorities, I bet they believe Harry Potter over you, so please, do try us."

The wariest of them urged the others to move on and they all left with repeated backward glances. Penelope was shaking as she put her wand away and flattened her hands on the tabletop. Harry pushed the rest of his drink over to her. She swallowed it and put it down hard.

"Dey vere insinuating tings about Robbie; like they knew vat happened but would not tell," she explained in a distressed voice. "Dey never proved what happened," she went on in general explanation.

"I'm sorry, Peni," Harry said, retaking his seat and squeezing her arm in his hand.

"Dese ones who ver bad but not so bad to get caught, vere zo cocky dis last year," she went on angrily, her accent thickening alarmingly. "I could kill them."

Harry picked up and twisted a napkin between his fingers. "Well, I have to say I know exactly how you feel."

Sadly, she went on, "I vas supposed to protect him, but I did not know how to do dis."

Harry closed his eyes on the lights inside the restaurant, the swinging lanterns. All kinds of old pain was washing through him. "I should have just let you have at them. Sorry."

"My parents vould be very disappointed if I did this," she said with a sad chuckle.

"I could have taken the blame without much trouble," Harry said. "I can't imagine they would do much to me, even here." He watched the band playing, unconcerned with anything but music. "When does your aunt finish?" he asked hopefully.

Penelope sniffled and dabbed carefully at her eyes. "Not 'til late, I don't tink. But, the zet, it should end."

"We'll go at the end of the set, then, when we can get the key," Harry said reassuringly. Penelope nodded, looking bleak.

The music finally wound down and the singer made some announcement in French before the lights on the stage went to half. Harry took Penelope's hand as they walked around to the back of the stage, and kept a close eye on everyone around, especially checking the shadows by the building.

"Aunt Vreni," Penelope called as the woman was setting her bass on a metal stand.

"Penelope!" the woman exclaimed in surprise. She jumped off the back of the stage and gave her niece a tight hug. "And who vould this be?" she asked of Harry.

"Didn't you get my owl?" Penelope asked, concerned.

Vreni waved her hand dismissively. "Ah. I haven't been to my flat since, uh, Wednesday. But if you need a place tonight, please." She fished in her pockets, then went thoughtful a moment before digging around in the pile off the corner of the stage to find a leather jacket from which she finally produced a key. She presented this to Penelope as one might a treat.

"Zo," Vreni said, putting an arm around Harry. This close he could see she showed her age much more than Penelope's mother. "This is your mensch? The one you told me of in your letters?"

Penelope bit her lip. "Yes. But, I, uh, might not have meant everything I wrote."

Harry smiled and straightened, lifting very thin Aunt Vreni to her toes, she was hanging so hard on his neck. Vreni let go but she pounded him on the back. "He is big strong boy, it seems," she opined approvingly. "You take good care of Peni, she write to me," she said to Harry.

"It was easy," Harry insisted.

"Ah, tha's good. Well," she said, patting his shoulder. Her gaze fixed on his forehead. "Interesting scar; you vill have to explain how you got it sometime. Over breakfast. Right now I have an appointment with the barman during my break." She stepped away, turned back and said, "I'll zee you in the morning." She gave a little wave and a smile.

"Was she serious?" Harry asked, grinning.

"She is renown for having no sense of current events, but I would not have thought she was that far out of things."

"I like her already," Harry said and offered Penelope an arm to lead her away toward the boat launch.

Vreni's flat was not as chaotic as Harry feared it would be. There wasn't enough stuff in it to be anything but neat. Just beside the door was an odd assortment of things like boots, documents, a book, a key, all in a random pile. Penelope straightened the few things in the room and went off to find bedding for the futon. The bedroom was more chaotic Harry saw, when Penelope opened the door to go in. Harry decided to survey the kitchen and amazingly found the refrigerator had enough food for breakfast, although it also contained many things that didn't need to be there, such as salt, sugar and bread. He poured himself a glass of water and refilled it for Penelope who was straightening the duvet.

She drank the water and went into the kitchenette. Harry looked over the small bookshelf of photography books, of all things. Penelope came back with two steaming mugs of cocoa, which he would not have imagined could be put together by what he had seen in there. Maybe the milk had been in the cabinet.

It was almost midnight when Penelope declared herself too tired stay up any longer and took her large shoulder bag to the toilet. She returned in a fuzzy night gown, scented with something flowery. Harry did the same, washing up and putting on his pyjamas. When he came back, Penelope was already curled up on the futon. He laid down beside her, hooked an arm around her, and tried to put the evening out of his mind. She turned toward and under him, and Harry decided that there were better ways to forget the evening.

The next morning, Harry was woken by noises from the area of the stove. Penelope and her aunt were cooking breakfast. Harry now realized the problem with not getting redressed the night before; he really should know better, he considered. He scooped his pyjama bottoms off the floor and put them on under the duvet, to Penelope's amusement from where she stood cutting bread at the counter facing him.

As they ate eggs and stale bread toasted to a crisp in thin slices, Penelope tried to explain things to her aunt. "Yes, I hear of this wizard," Vreni insisted, pointing at the table with her index finger. "Very bad wizard. But I do not understand," she said to Harry, "why you fight him zo many times?"

Harry sighed and put marmalade on his toast to have with his refilled coffee. "Took me a while to figure out how to finish him off."

"Oh," Vreni said, sounding unimpressed.

Harry shook his head and had to grin, as this certainly was a first. Penelope shrugged at Harry apologetically.

After breakfast, Penelope said, "We should check the train schedule, leave sometime this morning."

Harry nodded that he agreed. He and Snape were leaving early tomorrow, he realized in surprise. "Time went fast," Harry observed.

Penelope nodded with a sad smile.

* * *

The next morning, Snape was waiting on the platform when they arrived, wearing his cloak, his trunk beside him. Harry felt a rush at recognizing him there in the crowd. He placed his trunk beside Snape's and greeted him before pulling Penelope aside quickly, since their train was already beside the platform, doors open.

"No thoughts of revenge, all right?" Harry said, firmly to her.

She glanced away. "Okay," she said a little unwillingly.

Harry frowned but had no time to say anything more as Snape was putting their trunks aboard without help.

"You are Harry's guardian?" Mr. Tidewater asked when Snape stepped down from the carriage.

"Yes," Snape replied and shook the man's hand.

"He is a very nice young man. It was a pleasure to have him," Mr. Tidewater said in a very complimentary way.

With a sideways glance at Harry, Snape said, "He must have been behaving himself." He glanced at the platform clock and gestured that they should board.

Harry shook his head and Mr. Tidewater's hand. Madeleine kissed his cheeks before Snape tugged him to the imminently departing train. Harry waved to Penelope and shouted that he would write as he pulled himself up the high steps. The automatic doors hissed closed behind him as he cleared them, and the train lurched forward.

Author note: Mensch carries the Yiddish meaning.



Chapter 49 -- Silent, Steadfast, and Forebearing

Harry stepped rapidly across the Ministry atrium and stopped before the lifts. Everyone else waiting turned to stare at him. He gave them all an uncomfortable smile and tried to stay focused on the day ahead. His nerves were bothering him much more than he had expected. Last night's confidence seemed to have deserted him.

After one wrong turn, he found the correct room in the department of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry had been here before with Mr. Weasley and recognized some of the corridors. Desks had been arranged in a corner of a large room that looked as though it may be used for athletic workouts and given the scorch marks on the walls and ceiling, spell practice. The desks were nearly all full which meant there were fifteen applicants. Tonks had said there were rarely more than six. Eyes found his and went wide. He ignored them and took one of the remaining seats on the far side in the second-to-last row.

The young man next to him was Indian with shiny black hair that covered his collar. His gaze at Harry didn't waver.

"You are Harry Potter," the man stated in a heavy accent.

After a glance to confirm that the middle-aged wizard at the front was still waiting for something before starting, Harry held out his hand. With deliberate movement the man shook it. "Vineet Abhayananda," he said.

"Pleased to meet you," Harry said automatically. He pulled a quill and inkwell from his bag and set them out, noting that Vineet's dark eyes tracked him doing this.

"You and I are the only two not availing ourselves of a never-quill," Vineet said.

It took Harry a moment to get that. He glanced around. Everyone else did have a never-out quill. Harry preferred a normal one--dipping in the inkwell forced him to take time to think.

The middle-aged wizard at the front introduced himself as Reginald Rodgers, Senior Trainer, and handed out the examination parchments by walking the narrow aisles. He touched each quill with his wand as he passed--Harry presumed with an anti-cheating spell. The exam roll was thick and heavy. Rodgers stepped back to the front of the room and said, "Time." Harry unwrapped a foot of the roll and glanced at the first three questions. The fourth one looked easier, so he tackled that one first.

By the time he had answered the question at the end of the parchment, hours later, Harry was stretching his neck frequently. Vineet beside him sat in the same straight-backed pose, calmly dipping and writing. A glance at the clock showed that there was still half an hour of the four hours remaining. Harry went backward through the questions, editing his answers and trying to write something for the ones he had left blank. Of the row in front of him, one test taker had left early, one with very short hair had her head on her arm for a nap, and the other two slouched low in their seats, tiredly perusing their parchments.

Harry closed his eyes and thought about the first question. It asked what seven spells Marvin the Magnificent had used to destroy the Breakwater Banshee. Harry had heard of Marvin--a statue of him as a stooped old man graced the fifth floor corridor at Hogwarts--but he didn't know anything about Marvin fighting a banshee. The second question was a Potions one. It gave a formula and six variations and asked what effect the original potion and the variants would have. It wasn't a recipe he had ever encountered. Rather than leave the space blank, he made notes about each step and what the result would be. At the end it seemed like the whole thing would be inert. He wrote that the potion would do nothing, even though he strongly resisted that answer. Only the fifth variant would leave anything active. He wrote that down and thought that it would be a long complicated way to end up with a mild oxidizer. He noted this conclusion too and hoped it was not too flippant.

Five minutes left, and only the first question was blank. Harry imagined facing a banshee. He would definitely start with a Silencing Charm. He wrote down that he did not know what Marvin had done, but that he may have begun with that. Since Banshees have poisonous teeth, he wrote down two suggestions for that, then added three more ideas to disable the claws, including a Treacle Trap. That was only six. He mulled over what a seventh might have been until Rodgers called for a halt. Harry wished he had just known the answer. With a sigh he rolled it up and handed it to the head trainer as he came by for them.

Everyone was standing to stretch and Harry did as well. Vineet sat staring ahead, looking relaxed and out of place as a result.

"There will be a break for forty-five minutes and then the physical testing will begin," stated Rodgers. It was one o'clock. Some of the test-takers took lunches from their bags. Harry's stomach gurgled. Mr. Weasley had suggested Harry join him. Thinking that he would like that, Harry took his leave.

"Mr. Weasley?" Harry said, sticking his head inside the office door after a fast walk through the burrowish Ministry corridors.

"Harry! How did it go?"

Harry shrugged. "I probably got some of the questions right. More than that . . ." he finished with another shrug. "You said there was a tearoom? I only have a short break and I'm famished."

"Of course, of course." Arthur stood up and hustled him down to the end of the hallway. A cart with sandwiches sat in the break room with a can for money. Harry took a cheese sandwich and put in four sickles for it. He spotted a jar of pumpkin juice on the second shelf and paid a sickle for that. The tearoom was empty so they took the middle table.

Halfway through a quiet meal, Mr. Weasley said, "They didn't just give you a free ride on the entrance exams?"

"I didn't want one," Harry said in a difficult tone.

"Ah. I see. You are too honorable, my boy," Arthur stated sagely. "You make the rest of us look bad."

Harry gave him a doubtful face then jumped up as he saw the clock. "Gotta run. Thanks for lunch, Mr. Weasley."

"Anytime, Harry," he said with affection.

Back in the testing room, the desks were gone and the applicants, fourteen of them now, were pairing up on mats in rows on the floor. Harry spotted Vineet standing alone and stepped over to him. "Do you mind?" Harry asked.

"By no imagination could I," the man responded.

Many of the other applicants were doing warm ups. Harry stretched his legs the way Neville had taught him for running, just to do something. Vineet did a series of moves, kicked out and turned gracefully. Harry stepped back automatically to get clear. "What is that?" he asked.

"It is an Eastern Art of defense. I will demonstrate?"

Harry shrugged and stepped onto the mat as indicated. Vineet bowed and Harry watched his hands, which was a mistake, as a dark skinned foot kicked around and took his legs out from under him. Surprised more than anything, Harry got back to his feet. The landing on the mat had not even jarred him. The whole room stopped to look at them.

"Can you show me that?" Harry asked.

Vineet grinned, which Harry had not yet seen him do. He patiently explained and demonstrated the kick. Harry tried it a few times in the air--he needed his arms to counterbalance a lot more than Vineet appeared to.

"You may try it," Vineet said, stepping on the mat before him.

"Sure," Harry said. He gauged the distance to the other man's legs and rehearsed the move in his mind then twisted and swung his foot. His foot did not connect. Instead, Harry was airborne, rolling over Vineet back-to-back. He landed on the other side of the mat. With a challenging look at the Indian, Harry stood up again and hoped Eastern Arts were not a requirement of the Auror's program. "Should I have expected that?" Harry asked him, while trying to gauge the man's intent through his calm visage. The entrance of the training wizard cut off any reply Harry may have received.

Harry made it through the timed laps, the push-ups, the weights. None of it was really hard, although several of the applicants were like Vineet, in very good condition.

A set of basic spell drills came next. Harry breezed through his set and Vineet stepped up to follow. With great concentration the Indian completed his set as well. When he stepped beside Harry, Vineet's face was sparkling with sweat as though he had exerted himself greatly. Harry wondered at that. The other applicants all finished with varying degrees of ease.

Rodgers called them to order when the last applicant completed her drills. "Each of you, step up into the marked area in front of me. You will receive five spells, Radian, Figuresempre, Dragonian, Quiotidus, and Polaria Diarama. The spells will be in a random order. You are to block each one. Potter, why don't you go first?"

Harry regripped his wand and stepped into the area marked with yellow paint.

Rodgers said, "You are expected to stay in that painted area." He paused as though to be sure that was understood. "Ready?"

Harry nodded, mentally flipping through the blocks he would need. Rodgers spelled him with a Dragonian first. Harry managed a basic dome block to meet it, but the force of it made him step back anyway. He resisted glancing down after the spell faded, just stepped forward to approximately where he had started as the second spell came at him. A Chrysanthemum block handled the Radian and the Quiotidus that followed immediately after. Harry was breathing hard; Rodgers put more power into his spells than he was used to. The air was staticky with magic afterward.

Rodgers paused before the last one. "Ready? Since you know what it is, it is going to be loaded."

Harry blinked at that, wondering what the man thought the previous ones were. The Figuresempre that hit his Titan block almost collapsed it. Rodgers, seeing this, re-incanted it. Harry, adrenaline pumping, poured more into the block to counter it. The orange field around him solidified, thankfully, and Rodgers canceled the attacking spell.

Harry let out a breath as his arms dropped limp. Rodgers tipped his head to the side to indicate he could step out. Harry, relieved, did so. The rest of the applicants looked wary now as Harry stepped over to them, clustered in the middle of the room. Glad that was out of the way, he watched, relaxed, while one-by-one the others were tested. Eight were not able to stay in the box. One needed to be hovered out of the room to the Healer. Vineet, despite what seemed to be poor spell power, kept himself upright and in the box by sheer will and physical strength. He bowed deeply to Rodgers after the fifth spell was finished and stepped over to Harry.

"You made it look too easy, I think," he said, sweating hard again.

"Didn't mean to," Harry said in an apologetic tone.

After the testing Harry used the stairs down to the atrium. It was mid-afternoon and he felt as though it should be ten at night. This morning, he had planned for this afternoon to make a trip to Diagon Alley for a few things, but they seemed much less important now. He took his time walking across the large open space as he tried to decide what to do. He was down to his last handful of Floo powder, so if he did go shopping, he would have to remember to get more.

Deciding he would later regret not taking care of things, Harry shucked his robe by the lift and stuffed it into his bag. Up on the surface of Muggle London, he started walking. He came upon Vineet standing at a bus stop at the end of the first block. Happy just to see a familiar face where he least expected it, Harry gave him a nod and a smile. The Indian stepped smoothly out of the crowd and came aside.

"May I ask you something?" he said.

Harry stopped and shrugged.

The man hesitated as a group of Muggles went by, then hesitated further. Finally he said, "I have read everything I could find about what you did to the Unnamed One. It is mostly supposition, however." Harry looked away from the man's dark brown eyes and watched a red bus trundle slowly away from the stop. Vineet went on, "I am not wishing to impose, just very curious. I do not expect to make it to the apprenticeship, and I am thinking this is my only chance to talk to you. Kismet if you will." He smiled uncertainly.

"Why don't you think you're going to make it?" Harry asked.

"Ah." Vineet sighed. "My magic is not so strong. That is why I am working so hard on my martial skills in vain hope it will be a difference. You were convenient for a demonstration, I am forced to be confessing."

"Ah, I get it now," Harry said. "But I asked you to partner."

Vineet bowed slightly at that. "Kismet, my grandfather would say. His mother was a witch--it is my only inheritance of magic."

Harry looked him over. He thought that if he had even half this man's poise, he would be all set in everything.

Vineet went on, "But you have not shared with others, so I cannot hope to have you share with me. It seemed to me from the vague retellings that you used very little magic. I have taken much from that; it is what has led me here."

Harry stared at him in surprise. Relenting in the face of that, he said, "I was told I was using old magic, but I think my headmaster was using the term 'magic' a little broadly." Vineet's eyes became very interested as Harry spoke. Harry could not help but give in farther; a year was a long time and the story felt much less weighty. "I forced Voldemort to feel everything he was incapable of feeling. He couldn't handle that."

"How did you reach him to do this?"

Harry frowned. "I didn't have to reach him. I'd got part of him when he marked me." He gestured vaguely at his scar. "It got worse after he used my blood to give himself human form again."

Vineet's eyes were more intense. "I am not hearing that story."

"It was published in a pretty obscure place."

Vineet thought a moment. "Can you give an example, give me an example of what you made him feel? I am not understanding."

Harry waited for more Muggles to pass. "Voldemort never felt anything good. Love, for example. Need for . . ." Harry paused to try to name the emotion he had felt at the abandoned manor. "Need for caring, I guess."

"That is all that was required?"

Harry thought about that. "I suppose. I did have to catch him off guard to really win, which is too complicated to explain. Then I had to manage an Avada Kedavra with no hate in it after only reading a description in a book. Funny, they don't teach that one at my school," he added, attempting lightness. Thinking he should give Vineet some encouragement, he went on, "You are right that I didn't use much magic. I relied on my friends' magic, which was better than mine in some cases. Voldemort had most of his followers with him and they were not in a very good mood."

Vineet gave him a weak smile in apparent acknowledgment of his joke.

Harry continued, "You have to understand, and maybe this is something you will, that I was destined to destroy him, so some things just happened."

Vineet nodded at this thoughtfully. After a moment, he said, "My number of bus is approaching." He held out his hand and Harry shook it. "I am hopeful for seeing you again," he said calmly without any hint of hopefulness.

"Good luck," Harry said sincerely.

"Worth a thousand blessings of Shiva, I think," he said with a hint of amiability. Harry watched him step on the bus just before as it pulled away with a smoggy roar.

* * *

Harry gratefully stepped out of the Floo at home and found Snape in the drawing room. "How did it go?" his guardian asked.

Harry tilted his head to the side. "I have no idea." He told him the formula of the second question.

"You would get mud if you mixed those things together under those conditions, unless you are reciting it incorrectly."

"I think I got that one right then. The first three questions were really odd."

"To make the test takers panic, I should think. Did you?"

"I skipped them and tried to fill something in when I was done with the rest." He shrugged. "They are going to owl if I made the first cut with the schedule for my second day of testing." Snape gave him an odd look, forcing Harry to comment, "You don't think I won't get in. I shouldn't be in it if I don't deserve to be." Snape's expression did not change. Harry huffed and walked away.

* * *

Feeling like he deserved to, Harry relaxed over the next few days. He sat in the dining room before lunch, rereading Penelope's last letter and writing out a reply. He found himself expressing more of his hopes for this apprenticeship than he suspected she wanted to hear, but could not think of anything else to write about since it was all that was on his mind. Snape came down as Harry released her owl out the window.

While they ate, an owl with an official leg band from the Auror's office arrived. Harry tore open the envelope with some impatience and read the message quickly. "I am scheduled to go back in on Thursday, 8:00 a.m."

"Congratulations, Harry," Snape intoned as he buttered a second slice of bread and began making a sandwich out of the cold joint on the platter in the middle of the table. "Still feel you have been passed through unfairly?" he asked levelly.

"Um, no. It says I got the second highest score on the written examination. And the highest on the spell drills."

"I am glad that leaves no question in your mind. Or anyone else's, for that matter." He ate a bite. "It also bodes well for your N.E.W.T. results, which should be coming soon as well."

"Oh yeah, those," Harry said, as though he were trying to think about too many things at once.

"Worrying about Thursday already?"

Harry rearranged his sandwich which kept falling apart. "Guess so. They said that it's a kind of personality and character test. They want to make sure you won't crumple when faced with danger."

Snape put down his silverware a little loudly and looked at him. "You certainly have been well-prepared for that," he said dryly. "You would do best to worry less, I should think."

* * *

On Sunday, Harry stepped into the drawing room where Snape was buried again in parchments. They looked a bit like Hogwarts acceptance letters, which made Harry curious, so he approached and tried to read one of them upside-down. It was the familiar form letter all right. Snape looked up, prompting Harry to say, "Mr. Weasley said he would give Ron and myself Apparition lessons today, so I'm going to the Burrow."

Snape sat back and surveyed the piles before him. "I have not had much time, have I?"

Harry shook his head. "It's all right; Ron said his dad wanted to do it. And you need a break from teaching."

"Do be careful," Snape muttered, returning to the pile before him. To Harry's eye it looked as though he was signing the letters in McGonagall's name. He supposed it didn't matter, really, since the new students would not know the difference.

Harry stepped out of the Weasley hearth a few minutes later. Ron and Ginny were playing wizard chess on the couch with Ron leaning far forward looking more intent on the game than expected, making Harry wonder if he were losing. "Hi, Harry," Ron greeted him without looking up.

Grinning, Ginny said, "Did you hear?" When Harry shrugged, she went on, "Draco's hearing was on Friday."

Harry paused, he had not heard that it had been scheduled, despite being at the Ministry last week. He felt a twinge at the realization that people still didn't tell him things. Trying not to appear angry, he sat down beside Ron and said casually, "So what happened?"

Ginny hesitated, gauging him, before she replied, "He got eight months counselling."

Harry frowned. "He could use it, I suppose." He thought a little more as Ron aborted ordering one of his pieces to move. "He'd probably be killed in Azakaban."

Quietly, Ginny said, "That's what Dad said. The stated reason was for extenuating circumstances, given that he participated at his father's urging . . . that he wouldn't have for anyone else."

Harry felt that was probably true and as well that if Malfoy the younger stepped out of line again Harry himself might be in a position to haul him back into it, which he would enjoy doing. They waited for Ron as he looked over the board with a frown. Ginny glanced into the kitchen before saying quietly, "Dad was really angry at Percy because he argued at the hearing that if Malfoy or one of the other Death Eaters did something to Draco in prison, that he'd deserve it."

Ron finally made a move, then hit himself on the head. "I didn't see that; dang."

"Check again," Ginny said, clearly enjoying every syllable of it.

"Ron," Harry prodded. "I can't believe you are losing."

"Neither can I."

Mr. Weasley came down the rickety staircase. "Well, Harry, how are you? Ready for some Apparating?"

"Yes, sir."

"We HAVE to finish this game, Dad," Ginny insisted.

"Later," Ron said, standing up. "We don't want to make Harry wait."

Pointing at her brother accusingly, Ginny said, "Your chess set rearranges the board if left alone. Finish or concede. I'm not giving in on my best game ever."

Ron glared at his sister. "All right, I'll give it to you," he huffed, disgusted.

On the lawn outside the ever-sagging Weasley house, Mr. Weasley gave them a long lecture about Apparition safety. "No Apparating or Disapparating in view of a Muggle. No Apparating or Disapparating within the hearing of a Muggle, unless it is an emergency."

Ron grabbed a biscuit from a chipped, gaudily flower-patterned plate Ginny had brought out. It sat on the heavy wooden table beside them where Ginny sat munching and listening in.

Mr. Weasley continued, "No Apparating after alcohol until you have had at least a year of practice at it and then only if it is an emergency." Ron nudged Harry with his elbow, prompting Mr. Weasley to huff at them. "Now," Mr. Weasley went on, "The first thing you need to learn—"

"Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley's voice rang out from kitchen window. "I need you to help get the gnome traps down from the hall cupboard."

"Back in a flash," Mr. Weasley said and headed around the house to the door.

"So, Harry," Ginny said, chopping through a tiny red apple with a rusty knife. "Where's *your* dad today?"

"Busy."

When Ginny popped a small slice of apple in her mouth, Ron said, "You'll get sick eating those."

"What are they?" Harry asked.

Ginny pointed at a scraggly apple tree at the edge of the lawn. "I used a spell to ripen them."

"They're going to make you sick," Ron repeated.

"They're going to make you sick," Ginny mocked. "Not if you do the spell right," she countered and ate another piece. "What's Professor Snape do during the summer?"

"Today he's preparing the Hogwarts acceptance letters," Harry explained, helping himself to a biscuit.

"This year's letters will be signed by Professor Snape?" Ron asked, sounding dismayed.

"He's signing McGonagall's name to them."

"Oy, I still treasure my letter from Dumbledore," Ron commented bleakly. "Wonder who signed it?"

They fell silent in thought until Harry asked, "Where's Hermione?"

"Said she was busy," Ron said.

Ginny said, "She's getting private Apparition lessons next week. At the end they get a test and a license all in one day."

"Sounds expensive," Harry commented.

"It was her end-of-school present," Ginny explained.

Mr. Weasley came back out, brushing off his hands. "All right, where were we?"

"No putting radishes in your ears while Apparating," Ron supplied sounding bored.

Mr. Weasley put his hands on his hips. "I don't have to take time off on my free day to do this, Ronald."

"Sorry, Mr. Weasley," Harry said and hit Ron on the arm. Even though he didn't hit it hard, Ron rubbed that spot anyway. Harry was not keen on showing up for his apprenticeship, should he get in, unable to Apparate. He was hoping to at least be able to say he had applied for his license. They should have done this last summer, but with spending most of the holiday stuck at school where it was impossible, there had not been a good opportunity. He suspected his friends of holding off until Harry could also learn, but didn't really want to know if that were true because Harry might feel the need to yell at them for it.

"Now, most important," Mr. Weasley was saying, "is to concentrate completely on the spell. It is the best way to avoid Splinching yourself. Don't be distracted by anything while you're doing it. Stop, center yourself and . . ." He reappeared ten feet away with a *pop*! "It is that easy. Ron you first," he commanded.

Ron stepped over to his father and turned to face Harry with a bit of a slouch. Mr. Weasley became serious. "Imagine yourself shrinking away into something the size of a marble. . ."

Ginny interrupted, "Mum says imagine yourself folding up like a paper airplane."

"If the marble doesn't work, we'll go with that next," Mr. Weasley. "Now, close your eyes and give it a try."

"Do I always have to have them closed?" Ron asked in concern. "I want see where I'm going."

"Not always, but it helps when you're learning," Mr. Weasley said impatiently. "Cuts the distraction."

"I could plug my ears, then I wouldn't have to listen to Ginny," Ron volunteered.

"I've seen people learn that way," Mr. Weasley said. "All bundled up like a mummy and starting from a dark cupboard. Bad way to learn, really. Your cousin used to have to Apparate into the attic when she came to visit because she never learned better. Scared the bats. Anyway, we are getting distracted ourselves. Close your eyes." Ron did so. "Imagine yourself shrinking up into a marble-sized ball."

Ron opened his eyes, looked around doubtfully, then closed them again and silence descended. Nothing happened. Harry thought of eating another biscuit but didn't want to distract his friend with the noise of it. "Paper airplane," Ginny said.

"Can I try that?" Ron asked without opening his eyes.

"Go ahead," said Mr. Weasley.

After another half minute, Ron's arms disappeared, then reappeared as he made a noise of surprise. He patted his arms in a panic. "Oh. Good. For a moment there I thought I'd lost them." When Ginny giggled into her hand, Ron angrily said, "Let's see you try it."

Ginny immediately disappeared and reappeared just to his right.

"You've been practicing. Dad, she's not old enough," he complained.

"Just another month," Ginny said, strutting back to the table and starting to chop up another tiny apple. She gave Harry a cocky look.

"I think the twins taught her, although we never caught them at it. Now back to you and your wayward arms."

It took an hour for Ron to get through getting all of himself to go ten feet, then came the problem of explaining exactly how one knew where one was going. By the time Mr. Weasley did a roundabout explanation of how to imagine where you wanted to end up, it was time for dinner. As they went inside, Mr. Weasley said, just realizing, "We didn't get to you, Harry."

"That's all right, Mr. Weasley. I appreciate the lesson."

* * *

Harry woke early for his second examination. He had cheated a little: he had gone to bed very early and used a sip of potion to sleep soundly. After a reasonable breakfast he bade goodbye to his guardian and took the Floo back to the Ministry. Fewer people were around this morning, both in the atrium and down in the Auror offices.

Rodgers came out of a doorway as Harry stood in the corridor, wondering which door to knock on. "Ready?" he asked.

"Sure," Harry said, trying to sound confident. The other applicants had whispered odd things to each other about this test during the previous session. Harry wished he had listened more closely.

"Give me your wand." Harry handed it over and the wizard said, "Follow me."

Rodgers led the way down to the end and around the corner. He pulled a black silk scarf out of his pocket casually and told Harry to turn around. He put it over Harry's eyes and guided him, so blinded, down the corridor and into a room. Harry knew this because could hear his footsteps echoing. "Count to ten and remove the blindfold after I have gone. I will give you one piece of advice that a trainer gave me when I had this test." He sounded as though he repeated this frequently and that it was not something he was doing just for Harry. "Nothing in here will harm you. If anything will defeat you, it will be your own demons."

Harry stood blinded and didn't hear anything at all after that, not even a scuff of a shoe on stone. After a minute he supposed that Rodgers must be gone. He counted to ten anyway and pulled the blindfold off. The room was only fifteen feet square with rough stone walls and floor. The one fairy light did not add much illumination. He could not make out the ceiling in the paltry light, so he supposed that it was quite high.

Time passed. Harry lost complete track of it. Bored, he took a seat in the center of the floor with his legs crossed. After another long gap of silence, the fairy light went out. Despite believing he had been starting to anxiously hope for anything to break the monotony, the sudden darkness still startled him.

Feeling too vulnerable where he was, Harry got to his feet and felt his way to one of the walls. The darkness was absolute. Harry ran his hand over the stones and mortar just to sense something of his environment. He heard something then, like a small door opening, then a sliding sound resembling a cape being drawn across the floor. Another similar sound joined with it and Harry realized what it sounded like.

Harry imagined himself before the cage at the zoo and said, "*Are you here?*"

The sliding paused and a long silence ensued. The fairy light reappeared, brighter this time. A very large snake faced Harry, positioned for maximum effect when the lights came back.

"*Nagini?*"

"*Master?*"

"*I am not your master,*" Harry said. Nagini lowered her head and slowly coiled up. Harry stepped away from the wall and took a look around for the door she must have used. There was no sign of it. "*Been busy?*" Harry asked her.

"*Many scared humans these last days.*"

Harry laughed lightly.

Back in the Auror's meeting room, Rodgers commented wryly, "We don't ask on the application about Parseltongue, do we?" He sat at a small table where five other Aurors and older apprentices also sat watching the large crystal ball on the table. In it, Harry was taking a seat in the center of the floor, making odd hissing noises.

Tonks entered. "Harry's in?" She leaned over one of the other women and stared at the ball. "Why did you bother with Nagini? He captured her." She shook her head.

"They said no exceptions for him," Rodgers supplied.

The snake coiled beside Harry, it seemed to be showing him her teeth.

"*My poison has been taken,*" she said.

Harry peered into her mouth. "*Your new fangs actually look longer.*"

"*They are.*"

They chatted for a while, until the fairy light went out again. A bell sounded. "*I must go,*" she hissed. Harry heard the sliding fade and the small door close. He imagined that if one didn't know Nagini, that spending that much time with her might be unnerving.

The fairy light brightened again slowly. Harry remained on the floor, waiting. Expecting another long pause, he relaxed. After a few minutes, something shiny in the mortar of the floor caught his eye. He turned and saw that liquid was running in across the floor. Standing quickly, he stepped over to where it poured in from the join of the floor to the wall. It was dark and a little thick. Soon, it was lapping at his trainers as though the room itself were being submerged. He stepped back with a jerk when it coated his shoe in red. There was no place to go, though, and soon blood had filled his shoes and lapped at the hem of his robe.

Harry had never imagined that much blood. It kept rising. When it reached his knees, he started looking above him for anything to grab, or to test if the gaps in the mortar would allow him to climb the walls, but it wasn't possible. He leaned into the corner and forced himself to stay calm.

When it reached mid-thigh it halted, to Harry's relief. Then it drained quickly, leaving him soaked in it. He thought about taking off his robe, but as he shook it out, the remaining blood disappeared, leaving his robe light and normal. Even his shoes dried instantly.

The next break had to go on a long time again before Harry thought sitting on the floor to be a good idea. Eventually, when his legs ached, he relented and again sat in the center of the room. When a deep grinding sound started, Harry came alert again. Stone ran on stone mysteriously until Harry realized the walls were tightening in. The ceiling came down in a surge, making him duck to lie on the floor. Then the walls came in and Harry curled up as they pressed close.

The fairy light stayed with him, which at first he was glad for, but when it showed him only his feet, shoulders and knees pressed against unyielding square flint, he realized it was making it worse. Everything stopped for several minutes. Harry squirmed a little to get in a better position to breath. Then he waited. When the wall at his feet moved in suddenly another inch, he jumped severely, bruising his knees. He again calmed himself. It moved in again, and again he successfully fought instinctive panic.

Five shallow breaths later, the walls pulled away. Harry's hand shook a little as he put in on the floor to keep from falling over. He let out a few full breaths and returned to waiting, thinking that those three tests were about as unrelated as he could imagine and left him uncertain what to expect next.

The wait was shorter this time. A clang sounded. Harry spun around and scrambled to his feet to face an ogre that had appeared behind him. After reaching for his empty wand pocket, he forced his hands to his sides. The ogre clomped over to him. It wore only a wrap around its green belly. Muscles rippled on its hefty arms. Harry had not realized he was backing up until his spine met the wall. He chastised himself, thinking that Vineet would have stood his ground.

The ogre pulled metal rings from his belt. With immovable force he took Harry's wrist and locked the ring around it, then did the same to the other. He then grabbed the chain running between them and yanked Harry into the center of the room. Harry, knocked off balance, fell. He got back to his knees and watched as the ogre pulled something else from his belt. It was a whip. Harry could not prevent himself from jumping nervously at the first loud crack of it within a foot of him.

Harry stared at the ogre as calmly as possible as the whip snapped closer and closer. The whip was finally stashed away and Harry could not avoid releasing his next breath audibly; the last strike had touched his hair.

The ogre shuffled his warty, oversized feet closer and grabbed the chain again and locked it to a ring that had appeared in the center of the floor. Rings were added to Harry's ankles, but not without a struggle that he just could not hold back on. The chain between his feet was fed through a large ring to the chain between his hands. The ogre gave it a tug, pulling Harry into a curled position. With a grunt the ogre stood straight and the lights went out.

Harry, surrounded by total darkness, forced the chain to yield its slack so he could sit more comfortably. This he could think of as some kind of game, though he imagined that someone who had previously been a prisoner would find this difficult to endure.

The small door opened again and Harry scooted around on the floor to face the direction of the sound of it. The fairy lights came up to reveal a dozen or so perfectly ordinary-sized tarantulas. Harry relaxed. They scuttled around him, one taking a shortcut over his exposed shin. The feel of its pointed legs made him shiver. After a minute or so they stepped away and the small door closed.

Some time later. Harry blinked to clear his eyes and with a loud shuffle of chain, rubbed them under his glasses. The room was filling with an aqua fog. Tendrils of it curled out across the floor, issuing forth a disturbing light. When Harry smelled its sickly sweet scent, he tried to stand, but the chains were ungainly. He passed out, forced by the exertion to take a gasp of tainted air.

When Harry next awoke, his first thought was that his arm was cold and the floor was too rough. He blinked and sat up part way. His clothes were gone and he was still chained. He huffed in annoyance and sat up the rest of the way. There were three fairy lights now. Harry looked around at them and realized with a bad start that someone stood in the corner of the room.

Harry composed himself, put his knees up to rest his arms on and considered the dark form as it stirred and moved into the light. The blue lights revealed a wizard with severely styled, grey-streaked dark hair, wearing a cloak with a turned-

up collar edged in scarlet. He walked with a gold-tipped cane that reminded Harry too much of Malfoy's silver one. Malfoy, however, never had the opportunity to push Harry over with it, which is what this man did as he passed. Rubbing the spot on his chest where the cane had pressed, Harry sat back up, feeling slightly woozy as he did so. He shook off his unbalance and looked the wizard over as he circled, cane tapping on the stones. He did not recognize him at all. He supposed that he represented the ideal of a dark wizard. Harry tried not to scoff internally. Fake dark wizard or not, he really wished he weren't naked.

The wizard finally spoke. "Presumptuous one, aren't you?" he asked in a sneering tone.

"I don't think so," Harry replied easily.

The wizard gave him a derisive look. He circled some more. Harry stopped watching him since turning his head was making him dizzy. He looked up when the cane tapped him on the shoulder. "What would your mother think of seeing you like this?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "I never knew her."

"She would be appalled." The wizard caught the chain with his cane and jerked it, pulling Harry to his side. Harry was starting to really hate being restrained so. "She would wail and wonder where your pride was," the stranger went on mockingly.

"I doubt that."

"Do you miss her?" The wizard asked suddenly, leaning in close.

"Yes," Harry replied instantly, then wondered why he had catered to this bloke.

"How can you miss someone you do not remember?" the wizard sneered.

"I just miss having a mum. I see other mothers--I know what they do," Harry heard his voice coming out sounding hurt and thought he should rein in his answers.

The wizard circled more. Harry tried to hunch over to prevent access to his chain. The man laughed. "I can do anything to you that I like. How does that make you feel?"

"I don't like it," Harry answered. "Though it is somewhat more interesting than being in here alone."

The cane lifted his chin. "How touching," the wizard sneered. He circled some more. "Did you enjoy taking revenge on Voldemort?"

"Revenge would have killed me," Harry said, listening to himself prattle on with some alarm. "Any negative emotion and he would have taken me over. I didn't want to show him everything, but I had to--he had control of me. He used my hate against me."

"Have you ever taken revenge?"

"I tried to take it against Pettigrew. Wormtail, what an appropriate name . . . he *was* a rat and I didn't see anything wrong with him dying like one. Severus stopped me before I could go after him, pleaded with me not to do it." Again Harry was startled by how much he was saying. He wondered if being naked and chained had brought his sense of self down that far.

"Was fighting Voldemort the worst moment of your life?"

Harry immediately shook his head.

"What was?"

Harry thought about that, feeling strangely desperate for a good answer. "Maybe one of the times I thought I was being expelled or . . ." Harry stopped for a long time, not wanting to think about an answer.

Turning suddenly the man shouted, "Tell me!" in his face.

"I don't know!" Harry shouted back. "I have to think about it," he pleaded with him, frightened irrationally by the disapproval. "When Voldemort took me over, in the atrium upstairs, and taunted Dumbledore to kill us both. It was awful beyond words. I was pleading in my mind for him to kill me too, I so badly wanted it to stop." Harry breathed heavily in the wake of this.

"Name another time," the man demanded.

Harry's mind was racing. "What was in that vapor?" he asked, heart thumping as he considered that something was wrong with him.

"It was merely sleeping gas," the wizard stated reassuringly. "Tell me another time."

Harry face immediately crumpled. "Finding the mirror," he whispered and shook his head in remorse.

Sharply he was asked, "What mirror?"

"The mirror Sirius gave me. I would have known where he was," Harry's voice cracked as he spoke this. "I was such a fool. I believed Voldemort when he gave me visions that he had Sirius captive. So stupid. There wasn't anyone to help. I didn't trust Professor Snape. Sirius came to my rescue instead and died for it." A tear traced out of Harry's eye at this. His chains rattled as he put his hands up to dab at his eye.

Harry pulled off his glasses when the tears didn't stop. "He wanted me to live with him," he felt compelled to explain in an empty voice. He sniffled as he pressed his forearm against his eyes.

"Tell me another," the voice said after a few more circling steps.

Harry shook his head as he felt a liberating surge of defiance. "No," he said firmly. The wizard scuffed to a halt before him. A crystal goblet appeared in his hand and he poured something into it from a silver flask in his pocket. He held this out to Harry.

"Drink it."

"What is it?" Harry asked, suspicious.

"Veritaserum and two other complementary potions."

Harry glared at the man. Heat filled his face with blood. "You've already given me some," he accused.

The man nodded once and continued to hold the goblet out. "You have two clear choices: leave, or drink it."

Harry closed his eyes to force control through himself. He opened them and accepted the cold goblet. The liquid in it shimmered in the fairy lights. He asked himself if he wanted this badly enough as he stared into it. After a long hesitation, he drank it down. It was almost tasteless. The goblet disappeared when he tried to hand it back. The wizard resumed circling. Harry wanted to shout at him to stop but clamped his mouth down on it.

Tonks exhaled audibly. Everyone around the table leaned in close to the crystal ball now.

"Was he talking about Sirius Black?" One asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Tonks said. "His godfather."

"He's still going," another commented, impressed, while the first shook his head in confusion.

After a few minutes of circling hypnotically around Harry, the dark wizard said levelly, as though he were in total control, "Tell me another."

Harry tiredly thought about it. "The Dementors maybe. No." He could feel the potion changing his control, loosening his will. That alone made his eyes burn again. "The tea--the bark tea Snape blew across to cool." In his mind he saw the fire-light, felt Snape's arm around him, felt that queer resonance to some deep memory. "It was like it was my mother," Harry heard himself try to explain. He shook his head and felt that awful yearning again, although it was vastly muted by time.

"Doesn't sound very bad," the wizard mocked him.

Harry felt his shoulders relaxing. "He adopted me," he explained, relieved to find so little pain attached to the memory. "Took me home."

Tonks rubbed the back of her neck, uncomfortable with hearing this.

"They always get incomprehensible after the second dose," one of the apprentices complained.

Tonks stood straight and walked out. She stretched her legs by walking the length of the corridor. "Severus," she said upon finding him loitering near the lifts. She had owled him that morning when Harry had arrived to be certain he came to get him.

"They said he wasn't finished," Snape explained.

"He is still in," she confirmed, trying to sound as calm about that as possible. This was the first time she had understood why he and Harry had ended up in the arrangement they did and she felt like an interloper.

"It has been three hours," Snape observed. "More."

"He's most of the way. It is good you came--he's going to be wiped out when he's done."

This news made Snape look at her sharply. "Severus," she admonished his attempt to Legilimize her.

"My apologies. I am . . . concerned about him."

Tonks gave him a teasing smile. "I see that."

After a space, Snape said, "It is strange. I had considered parental instinct to be purely genetic. I have found it to be circumstantial instead."

She gave him a more reassuring smile than she felt. "The first task was a bit of a joke for him. We utilized Nagini to test for fear of snakes. We've lost two applicants to her already." She laughed lightly. "This, without announcing she was Voldemort's. Imagine if we had. Harry had a nice ten minute conversation with her." She threw up her hands. "No one has the slightest clue what they talked about." At Snape's relaxed and almost amused look, she said, "I'll bring him out here as soon as he's finished," before she took her leave.

Back in the room, the dark wizard demanded, "What else do you regret?"

Fishing for an answer, Harry replied, "I regret losing my parents."

"That wasn't your fault, was it?" his tormenter asked sarcastically.

"They were trying to protect me." Harry fell silent. "Born as the seventh month dies," he finally murmured.

"What?"

"Born to those who thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. They had to run, to hide, because of the prophecy," Harry said sadly. "Either must die at the hands of the other for neither shall live while the other survives. They died because of me." The weight of that felt much heavier than any of the others and was the least expected.

The meeting room had fallen silent again. "Shit, he knows more of it. It was supposedly lost," Rodgers said.

"Dumbledore knew it," Tonks explained. "I expect he told Harry."

Bleakly, Harry said, "I always said it the other way 'round for some reason. That they died *for* me."

The crawling aqua mist had returned. Harry glanced around for the dark wizard, not finding him. The first whiff of the gas knocked him out again.

When he next awoke he was clothed and the chains were gone. With relief he sat up and rubbed the grit out of his eyes. He hoped the whole thing would be over soon; he felt as raw as he had after defeating Voldemort--a state he had hoped to never descend to again.

The room went dark again. Gradually light returned but the room was gone. Instead, Harry sat upon a small pedestal overlooking infinity. Wisps like clouds or space dust drifted slowly past. He glanced down over the edge and found his spindly pedestal stretching downward into the mist like a needle. It made him a little dizzy, so he sat back straight and peered at what looked like a pterodactyl flying in the distance. He supposed that if he fell over the edge of the pedestal that there really wasn't any place to go except the testing room floor beside him.

Eventually the scene faded and darkness returned. Time passed. Harry grew eager to go. He stood up and discovered his wand was back in his pocket. He took it out and cast a Lumos charm. With more light the room looked smaller. Harry paced around it once. He was familiar enough with the stones making up the floor to remember that when the ogre had appeared, it had come from that direction there, while his back was turned.

Feeling re-energized, Harry stepped over to that wall and looked at it closely, but it didn't seem to have any opening. He stepped back and said, "*Alohomora*," to no effect. He then ran through all the unlock spells he knew. The eleventh one made a jagged crack of light, corresponding to the mortar joins, form in the wall. Harry grabbed it with his fingertips and tugged on it.

Rodgers stood in the corridor. "I actually was going to come get you. The last quiet time is to give you a chance to recover."

"Oh, sorry."

"No problem. You know a lot of unlock spells . . . two I've never heard. Follow me." He led Harry into the meeting room. Five people were collected there now. Rogers explained the setup.

Harry flushed. "Everyone was watching?" he asked, dismayed.

"All current Aurors and apprentices are allowed input on applicants," he explained. "Eventually everyone needs to know everyone else's weaknesses. We find this speeds up that process."

Harry dropped his eyes and tried unsuccessfully to accept that.

"You made it all the way through. You should be proud of that, whatever else happens." He urged Harry out of the room. "The afternoon applicant will be here soon," he explained as he gestured for him to follow. Tonks met them in the corridor and led him away.

The first thing Snape thought when he saw Harry turn the corner was that his eyes looked far too much like they did on the chocolate frog card. Harry's gaze found him waiting there and the strained look faded considerably, startling Snape.

"How did it go?" he asked when Harry reached him and received a shrug in reply.

Tonks replied instead, "He made it all the way through; that is most of the way to being accepted to the program." She patted Harry on the back. "Go have a nice quiet evening, maybe a glass of mead, or two."

"Thanks, Tonks," Harry said tiredly and felt a surge of affection for her attention.

They rode in silence in the lift. The atrium was bustling now, grating on Harry's nerves. Snape put a hand around Harry's arm to get him to step out of the lift and into the atrium. They waited in line at the first hearth. When their turn arrived, Snape held out the Floo powder and gestured for Harry to lead.

Harry couldn't remember being so happy to be anywhere as when he stepped out into the dining room. In a flash of green flame, Snape appeared behind him. "Perhaps I should inform Winky to prepare an early dinner."

"That sounds good. I could use some tea too. . . ."

Winky appeared in the doorway right then with a tray. Atop the tray was a steaming pot and a bowl of chocolates. Harry smiled at the elf and sat at the table, Snape across from him, after hanging his cloak up.

"An early dinner, if you will, Winky," Snape said.

"Yes, Master." She finished pouring tea, arranged things, then left.

Snape sipped his tea. The haunted look appeared and faded from Harry's eyes several times.

"Are you allowed to tell me what happened?" Snape asked conversationally.

"Only in general." He ate a chocolate. "They make sure you don't have any common phobias for one, by making you face them all. Then they make you face some other things that probably occur in the course of being an Auror."

"Such as?"

"Such as being interrogated with Veritaserum." At Snape's dismay Harry pointed out, "I seem to recall you threatening me with that at one point."

"I do apologize," Snape breathed in pained sincerity.

Harry thought of saying that he had not been naked and chained to the floor that time so it was okay, then he decided that he did not want Snape to know about that. He stared into his tea and Occluded his mind, just in case.

After a long while Snape asked, "Worth it?"

"I hope so," Harry replied wryly.

They sat in quiet conversation until dinner appeared. A large bowl of spaghetti with a cream and seafood sauce surprised them both. It smelled wonderful, so Harry served himself a large pile.

Snape stood and returned with a bottle of honey-colored wine, which he opened. He poured a large glass and placed it beside Harry's plate. "I am assuming Ms. Tonks knows of which she speaks."

By the time Harry finished his plate and half of the glass of wine, his eyes were failing to stay open. Snape stood and came around to pull Harry's chair out as he stood up with the help of the table and then made his way upstairs.

"I'm all right," Harry insisted as he sat on the edge of his bed after being followed up to his room. "Just really tired all of a sudden."

Snape backed off. "If you need anything, Harry. Even if it is just someone to talk to. Please fetch me . . . no matter the time."

Harry closed his eyes. The twisted up feelings inside him were pulling at the past, when he always felt this way. Painfully grateful that things had changed so much, he said, "Thank you, Severus," as he opened his eyes.

Snape considered him before nodding sideways and leaving him alone. Harry changed clumsily into his pyjamas and fell asleep even as he adjusted the covers over himself.

Harry awoke from an agitated dream about being chained, perhaps because that had been something new, rather than because it had bothered him. He fell easily back to sleep.

The next time he awoke, with a dream of revealing too much to McGonagall about some rule his friends kept breaking, a shadow was beside the bed. Harry turned his head to look at his guardian and realized that, in the darkness of the room, he could see Snape better in his mind.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Snape intoned. The edge of the bed shifted as he sat down.

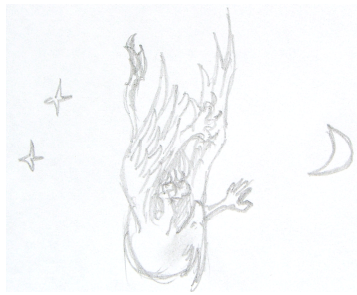
"I was having a bad dream anyway."

"Is there anything you need?"

"No. The dreams aren't really so bad," Harry mumbled and rolled onto his stomach.

As Harry drifted back off to sleep, he could see Snape moving away, closing the door, and stepping along the balcony.

Harry dreamed vividly of a cold stone floor, unyielding and cruelly bruising. Without the strength to lift himself, he lay upon it for a very long time, until his bare shoulder hardened to it with numbness. Having no strength to free himself, he might have lain there forever, aching and exposed to the damp draft and gritty rock. But he did not. Someone approached on silent feet and bent to lift him up. Standing was possible then and he could even sustain the heavy cloak that had been draped around him as he departed that cruel place.



Chapter 50 -- Tangled Up in Blues

The next morning, Harry felt a little empty as he stared at the ceiling. It was very early, barely five. Thoughts of yesterday's test made his shoulder twitch in embarrassment. The soft warm bed was a nice contrast from the floor of the testing room, so he closed his eyes and drifted there for another hour before finally getting up.

Tea was already set out in the library along with more chocolates. A half hour later, Snape came in and poured himself a cup before settling down with some correspondence. The morning passed in near silence. Harry wrote to his friends about his application being completed with sketchy observations about the examinations. At lunch the post arrived with a formal looking envelope he could only assume contained his N.E.W.T.s. Harry, with a little trepidation, tore it open. It felt like too much reckoning in too short a time. He flipped past the official documents and request forms for sealed copies to the results themselves, and was relieved to see that there was nothing below an E, which meant his Auror's application was still alive.

"Five Os and three Es," Harry said to Snape, who held out his hand to see it. Harry gave it over, heart beating fast.

"An 'O' on Potions. Nicely done," Snape commented. "I saw how hard you worked last year. It is good to see it pay off."

"Thank you."

After a pause Snape said, "It is good to see you doing well."

Harry, a little flushed, said, "You've made things much easier."

"If it is the least I can accomplish . . ." Snape said with a hint of his old snideness.

Harry grinned at it. "I'm sure you've done more, but at the moment I'm not in the right mind for making a list."

"And by no means do you need to come up with one."

After lunch Harry reread Penelope's last letter. The tone sounded a little pleading, making him anxious. She wanted to come for a visit, which he would like, but he had held her off until after his testing was over, which she had not seemed to understand the need for. Harry had wanted to talk to Ron about his situation with Penelope, about her living so far away. Ron was going to encounter a similar situation with Hermione, unless he could talk his parents into letting him live in London, which seemed very unlikely. Trouble was, last time he was at the Burrow, Ginny had been around and he didn't feel he could broach either topic. He should have Ron over, even though every time he suggested it, Ron suggested somewhere else. Harry was thinking he should insist.

He owled both his friends and invited them over for the next evening. Only after the owls had left, did he think to mention the invitation to Snape, who shrugged that he did not care. The parchment piles seemed smaller now, so perhaps Snape would be caught up soon. Harry hoped so; he wanted to ask him for an Apparition lesson.

Harry read the only chapter in the house he could find on Apparition. He even practiced a little in his room, but didn't manage much; at least, he didn't seem to have moved when he gave it a go. Worried he might get Splinched and have to be rescued--with all the chastisement that would entail--he put it aside until he could get some of Snape's time.

Ron and Hermione came the next evening for dinner. Snape ate early without saying he was going to do this and disappeared into the drawing room. Harry was just following him inside the makeshift office to ask if there was a problem, when the hearth flared from the dining room.

"Your guests are here," Snape said, his large nose buried in one of those large decorative policy documents.

Harry left it at that and went to greet them. Rather than waste the nice day, they sat outside in the garden while the sun set. "How are things with Penelope?" Hermione asked, leaning back into the ivy growing up the house. She and Ron sat on the stone bench, while Harry sat on a chair pulled out from the library.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. He missed her, but perhaps less than he expected after seeing her every day. On the other hand, a lot had been going on the last few weeks. "She doesn't want me to become an Auror," he said, pulling that out for something to say.

"I wouldn't either if it were me," Hermione pointed out. Ron bumped her arm. "Well, I wouldn't," Hermione insisted.

"And she lives too far away. No matter how good I get at Apparition I couldn't get all the way to Switzerland. She wants to come for a visit now that my testing is over. How are your lessons, Ron, got any farther?"

"Dad hasn't had time. Said tomorrow, maybe, if you want to come over again."

"I'd like that. Severus is still really busy." Harry tried not to wish Snape hadn't been promoted to Deputy Headmaster, but he kind of wished he hadn't.

Hermione sipped her mead and teased, "Harry, discovering parents aren't all they're promised to be . . ."

A tad defensive, Harry said, "He put everything down to take me to Switzerland."

Stars were starting to twinkle in the east. Ron rubbed his stomach. "Are we eating here? Not that I'm complaining or anything."

Harry stood and picked up his chair. "Yeah. Come on inside."

When they reached the table and sat down, dishes appeared. "Wow," Ron murmured. "What I wouldn't give to have an elf."

Hermione gave him such a disgusted look, Harry wondered why she never criticized him. She looked over and seeing his face said, "Winky is different. She really *needed* a home."

"Oh, of course," Ron said in a patronizing manner, then smiled, apparently to buffer it.

They talked until almost midnight. Yawning, Hermione suggested they should call it a night. Harry watched them depart in the hearth, before heading for the main hall. The lights were all out in the doorways on the ground floor. Upstairs he found Snape awake in his room.

"Your friends are gone?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded. "Yes. Good night, sir."

"Good night, Harry."

* * *

Harry came home from the Burrow after dinner the next day. The Apparition lessons had gone chaotically with the twins there teasing constantly, and eventually it had broken down into an impromptu Quidditch match with just one side attacking Ron at Keeper and Hermione, who played Beater magically from a comfortable seat on the ground, using her wand to hover and throw the Bludgers around.

Harry picked up the letter for him from Penelope and carried it to his room with a stop at the drawing room to say hello to his guardian. He almost asked when Snape might have time for lessons, but held back seeing the wild-haired look Snape had as he carefully filled out some strange form in red ink. Arrayed before him were jars of yellow and orange ink as well and apparently the lamp had run out of fuel because two large gutted candles were lined up beside the inkwells.

Harry swallowed a sigh and went up to his room. He took off his shoes and opened the letter. Each letter reinforced his sense that Penelope was feeling anxious and this one made it clearer. The letter was written in two parts, he could tell because of the angle of the writing. In the last, shorter, part she said she would visit that week and looked forward to seeing him. He folded up the letter and put it in the night stand drawer with her other ones. He feared she would find Shrewsthorpe a bit quiet in comparison to Bern. They would have to tour London, perhaps, for a day. He had a bad sense that he was missing something with Penelope. With a sigh he collected his pyjamas from the wardrobe and changed for the night, even though it was early. The skin on his arms was red, he noticed, having got too much sun playing Quidditch at the Burrow. As he pulled the covers up he felt anxious about her coming; maybe that was part of the reason he had told her to postpone coming.

* * *

Penelope arrived Tuesday afternoon and Harry went into London to meet her at Waterloo. In the crowded noise station he did not see her right away, not until she tugged on his sleeve from behind. She greeted him with a forceful hug and he took over steering her small trunk off the platform.

"We'll take the underground to the Leaky Cauldron and take the Floo Network from there--much faster," Harry informed her.

On the way, after talking about Harry's tests in more detail, they fell silent until reaching the wizard pub. Everyone greeted Harry warmly with a wave and a few handshakes. Tom came around the bar and introduced himself to Penelope who returned his handshake politely, but stiffly. Harry, not wishing to encounter the likes of Rita Skeeter with Penelope in tow, headed straight for the hearth.

Dinner was quiet. Harry at the beginning thought he caught Snape considering his guest a little more closely than Harry was comfortable with. But after the dinner dishes vanished, Snape sat back with a glass of sherry and appeared relaxed. Harry found himself short of topics, which he had not expected. He considered topics one at a time and discarded them during long silences.

Snape finished his little glass and set it down loudly. "It is a warm evening, perhaps you should go for a nice walk," he suggested.

Harry jumped at that suggestion. Outside, the air was sultry, and once their eyes adjusted, it was quite pleasant to be out. They turned at the first corner and walked through pools of light cast by the overhead street lights. A dog barked and ran up to the side fence to look at them through the slats, startling them both.

At one corner Penelope announced into the quiet, "I am thinking of looking for a position in London."

Harry stopped. "You are?" He considered that. "You don't want to work at the archives in Montreux?" he asked, confused.

"Vell, yes, but . . ." she began.

Harry felt his anxiety returning from the other night. He started walking again and pieced a question together. "Are you finding anything?"

She reluctantly answered, "Not yet. My training is not so appropriate here."

"Uh," Harry began, then said, "I don't want you to move for my sake."

She stopped this time. "Why not?" she asked, voice whip-like.

Harry swallowed. Instinct had made him say that, he decided. "Because . . ." Harry started to say, then decided this required some careful wording.

"I thought you loved me," Penelope queried flatly.

Harry stiffened at that word, and studied her distressed gaze. Something, a bat or a swift, dodged through the light above them, chasing insects. He took her shoulders in his hands. "I like you a lot--more than I've ever liked anyone before, but . . . I don't want you to change your whole life around for me." Harry felt good about that; it was exactly what he wanted to say.

Penelope frowned. "I thought you would want me around, no matter what."

"I like having you around. I like being with you," Harry tried to explain. He rubbed his forehead, feeling a headache teasing at him. In the odd light she looked exceptionally saddened. "Let's talk this over tomorrow, all right? You've had a long journey," he added, remembering his own condition when he had arrived in Bern.

In a brooding silence she followed him back to the house. She was friendly to Snape when they crossed in the hall on the way upstairs to see her settled into the guest room, but she fell silent again when they were alone. She unpacked a bit sloppily as though uncaring of things.

Quietly, Harry said, "I don't know what to tell you but how I feel."

"Tomorrow, like you said," she said bluntly.

Harry backed out and left her alone. In his own room, he dug out a book on dragon lore that Hagrid had given him last term, apparently having no idea that Harry would have no time to read leading up to his N.E.W.T.s, and tried to distract himself with it. It was fortunately an amusing book full of unwise Muggles and wizards and their bad encounters with dragons, like Marvin Murgatroid who believed so faithfully in the dragon repellent he had purchased from a vendor at the harvest fair that he walked straight into the karst caves of Slovenia and got by three stunned dragons before stumbling off an underground cliff when his torch ran out of pitch, just a hundred feet from the horde of gems he was seeking. Fortunately for Marvin he fell into the underground river and was swept out to safety, only singed on the top of his head.

Harry read halfway into the night, then lay awake for the rest. Achy and tired, he rose the next morning and found Penelope, talking pleasantly with Snape over toast. "Shall we go into London today?" Harry asked, assuming she would answer.

"Sure," she replied.

Snape departed for Hogwarts ahead of them, giving Harry an odd look on his way out. But Harry wasn't in a position to ask what it meant with Penelope reading the newspaper right across from him.

The day went well enough, albeit quietly. Penelope didn't speak much, but would answer questions. On the underground on the way to the riverfront and London Bridge, Harry asked, "Are those boys from your school bothering you still?"

"I don't see them normally. I rarely visit Geneva and they are actually from Strasbourg."

That made Harry feel a bit better. They visited the theatre and an old gaol and walked on the bridge which made Harry wish he had worn his cloak as the wind was brisk along the river. Penelope didn't seem to notice the chill in her nice woolen coat.

It was getting late when they reached the Tower of London. Harry suggested they find someplace for dinner before heading back. Her reply was a shrug, which almost made him say something in anger, but he held back. They had to walk a distance to find a place that looked casual enough, but they found a pub finally and had pies, which Penelope looked a bit dubious about. Harry kept waiting for some kind of comment, but none was forthcoming, nor was much conversation.

When they arrived back at the house in Shrewsthorpe, Harry felt a bit strung thin. Fortunately or unfortunately, Snape was not back from Hogwarts, even though it was rather late for him to be gone still. In the main hall, Harry said, "I don't know what you want me to say."

"Maybe dere isn't anything to say," she stated flatly, looking over the Celtic-framed mirror mounted under the stairs beside the door to the drawing room. The silvering was giving out along the edges where she drew her finger as she looked it over rather than face him.

"I don't want you to rearrange your life for me," Harry repeated. He thought that was pretty straightforward, really.

She spun on him. "Vell, thank you very much," she said sarcastically. "I just thought I meant more to you than that."

Harry had no answer to that since he was pretty certain he had not said anything in that regard, or even implied it. "I do like you," he insisted, then fell silent since he didn't want to get too argumentative. She stepped by him with an exasperated huff and went upstairs. Harry followed slowly, feeling his pride complaining along the way. At the door to the guest room he was surprised to find her packing "You aren't leaving now, are you?" Harry asked.

"Might as vell," she said through clenched teeth.

"That's silly. Leave in the morning at least."

"Silly vas thinking you cared."

"Aye," Harry said and hit himself on the forehead. The urge to shout at her almost overtook him, but he forced it down. Calmly, he said, "Leave in the morning, Penelope, please."

"Dere is an overnight train. I vill take that."

"All right, but you have to find your way from the Leaky Cauldron to Waterloo," Harry said. "And it's getting late."

"I'll take a taxi. I am not a clueless witch who cannot manage dis."

Harry listened to the hardened anger under the words. "I'm sorry," he said on automatic, then said, "I don't know why I'm apologizing, since I haven't done anything that requires it."

She had her trunk in her hand as she stepped over to him in the doorway. "No," she said with more than a hint of sarcasm. "Of course not."

He followed her down to the entryway where she collected her cloak, then to the dining room where she shoved her trunk into the hearth rather forcefully. Harry held out the Floo powder and took a handful himself.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'll take you to the station," he said.

"I can manage," she replied coldly.

He almost said, don't be silly, again, but stopped himself in time to say, "I *want* to see you off."

She pulled out her wand, wielded it with a wave, and stashed it away again. "I can manage on my own."

"Look . . ." Harry began.

"You look," she said, cutting him off. "You hurt me. If you do not want me here, then there is no point in anything." Her voice broke at the end but she covered with a dark look. "Certainly, I do not need your chivalrous help to merely catch a train home."

Harry poured the Floo powder out of his hand back into the canister. It was damp and sticky from his holding it so tightly. He set the canister on the table, held up his empty hand for her to see, again resisting expressing deeper anger by just a hair.

"Goodbye, Harry," she said and tossed her handful of powder down. With a whoosh she was gone. Harry dropped his hands to his sides and replayed the last few minutes in his mind. He couldn't figure out what else he should have said or done. He stalked out of the room, kicking the chair out of his path on the way. He dreaded having to explain what had happened when Snape came home.

He couldn't have told her to find a prospect in London, could he? That sounded monumentally unfair to her since she had something in Switzerland that she *wanted* to be doing. Harry certainly wouldn't have dropped his Auror application to move to Switzerland. With a groan he paced the hall once, looking for something to vent his frustration on. There was little here but a rug and a floor lamp that looked antique, although ugly. He turned from it before being tempted to smash it.

The Floo flared in the dining room. Harry stood in the middle of the hall, resisting hoping that Penelope had returned. He stood transfixed until Snape stepped out, looking over a stack of post. He glanced up at Harry, then down, then back up again.

"Something the matter?" Snape asked.

Harry frowned. "Penelope left," he said simply.

"Ah."

"Ah? What do you mean, ah?" Harry demanded, finding an outlet for his annoyance and anger.

"Only that. McGonagall and I just had a very, very difficult meeting with two members of the board and so I am going to stop at that."

Harry watched Snape walk into the drawing room, annoyed that he had not given Harry a better excuse to vent at him. Anger washed over him but he resisted the lamp and growled instead. He wished he knew what he should have done, while at the same time he had no desire to change his mind about what he had said. He stalked to the wall and slapped the unyielding stones with his palm. Snape came back out and stood in the doorway to the drawing room.

"You are going to say you saw this coming," Harry accused him sharply.

"No. I was not going to say anything," Snape replied in studious calm.

Snape's calm aggravated Harry more. "What was I supposed to do?" he demanded loudly. "Argh," he growled and again slapped his hand on the wall, this time producing a burst of pain. Snape's steady gaze didn't waver when Harry turned to him. Harry desperately sought someplace to channel his frustration. The world twisted and untwisted as though he were

transforming Animagically without will. Needing to escape the suddenly cramped hall and breathe, he charged through the entryway and out into the garden.

The road beyond the garden wall was quiet except for a few crickets. Harry stood looking over it, breathing heavily, trying to dampen his burning emotions. The world twisted again and suddenly he was completely free. Anger beat out of him, lifting him from the earth. He gave it free rein then and, without thought to direction, leaned forward into the wind and flew harder.

The dark earth rolled beneath Harry as he soared over it. He flew high, then dipped low. Hills were joyous when he flew low; he couldn't see beyond them until he pulled up over their crests at the very last moment, making his heart leap. He veered away from pockets of light that indicated towns, strings of sliding paired diamonds that marked roads. He flew toward the blackness of wild countryside, where starlight and the slivered moon provided the only glow. Harry forgot everything except steering away from light and beating his wings in long strokes and coasting on the buffeting air.

Harry flew over countless hills, rose exhilaratingly in the updrafts rising from the edge of as many valleys, flapped until his wings felt leaden and he couldn't draw enough breath to fill his lungs. He could no longer hold the Animagus spell reliably and the world kept twisting, the ground rearing up as though to strike him. In a square of lighter pasture, just angled to catch the moonlight, Harry made a desperate bid to land. It was too difficult in the steeply-shadowed moonlight to properly judge the distance to the ground, nor did he have enough strength left to brake his descent. Dark clover swallowed him up as he struck earth and rolled.

Harry came to himself some time later and moved slowly to check that each of his limbs worked. His side ached horribly when he lifted his shoulder off the damp ground to see above the thick plants surrounding him. A low, collapsing stone wall marked the boundary of the field he lay in. Over the top of a grey rise he could see the darker angled roof of a barn. He forced a deep breath into his lungs and staggered to his feet. Things did not look much better once he was upright. He made his way gingerly to the wall and sat down on a large, flat stone that only shifted a little when he did so.

Harry looked 'round as a night bird resumed chirping. He felt a little better in one way, having given himself something more pressing to worry about than Penelope. He forced in another deep breath and considered the dark landscape. The stars glowed thick overhead, as dense as he had ever seen them. The constellations were unidentifiable in the mélange of the sky and the Milky Way, a river of light, wound across with its own strange hue. He felt for his wand and with relief, found it in his pocket where it belonged. He wondered what he should do. He pondered his predicament for a while in an almost pleasant, semiconscious stupor, until he grew chilled with dewy cold. There wasn't a chance, given his state, of regaining his Animagus form and flying home, even if he knew the right direction. If he could Apparate, he would probably be back home now, he thought with annoyed regret.

Far down the undulating hillside there was a light. Harry could not see from here if it was a street light or a house light. The thought of making his painful way over there just to face the disappointment were it to be a street light held him in place. He could, he considered, try to flag the Knight Bus. He had no idea if it traveled such remote routes or only city streets. Wrapping his arms around himself for warmth, he imagined that he may have no choice but to try. Or to walk until he found a house and could use a telephone. This brought up the question of whom he would call. Hermione's disapproving face loomed up in his mind and he considered that maybe Dean would be a better choice, if Harry had had his number memorized. He could probably manage Hermione's number with some guessing.

Time passed. Harry knew this because the moon was now touched by the treetops of a small copse, which meant it was only going to get darker. Feeling a little lightheaded, he shifted down to lean back against the stone pile, rather than upon it. Relaxing, however, required giving in to the sharp pain in his side, so he sat tense, though warmer out of the wind. Memories came back as he sat there. One in particular stung hard: the night Remus interrupted their returning Pettigrew to the school by transforming into a werewolf. The memory seemed starker in this near darkness. So close they had been to saving Sirius. Regret rose at that, joining with his regret over Penelope, rendering him rather miserable.

After a time Harry felt more lightheaded, despite resting. He should have tried sooner for the one close light, he realized with some alarm. Standing was difficult now; his knees, which he had not considered injured, felt wholly bruised now and complained about taking his weight. Sitting higher on the stone again, he gathered his will to make his way across the field, plotting in his mind the exact path through the clover that he would take to get there. Like a countdown before a

Quidditch match he willed himself to stand up and go on one, two, three. Harry stumbled across the field which turned out to be much larger than it looked in the poor light. At the far wall he stopped and caught his breath, his side now felt like it actively had something stuck in it, something sharp and pointed. Holding his ribs, he lowered himself to this side of the wall and fought panic at his predicament.

The tantalizing light didn't look any closer. Harry closed his eyes and tried to will his body to obey and continue on anyway. Despairing now, at the cold and pain, Harry opened his eyes and rubbed his knees one at a time just to do something vaguely productive. He rubbed his eyes as his vision was disturbed. A strange red glow had formed around him, around his fingers and face, making it hard to see. Harry reached for his wand and the red disappeared.

Alert now, Harry held his wand at ready and looked around himself, at the amorphous dark stands of trees nearby, at the hill tops. Many minutes later, the glow returned, shorter this time but Harry couldn't detect anything nearby, friendly or not. The next time the glow came and went, a figure landed in the field at a bit of a run. Harry held his wand out and tried to stand. His next thought was that the cold must have penetrated his brain and he was seeing things. "Severus?" Harry asked in surprise, recognizing Snape in the red glow from his wand.

Snape stepped over to him, carrying two brooms. "You made it much farther than I imagined," he stated almost apologetically, transferring Harry's balance from the wall to himself. Harry leaned on him gratefully. "Hurt bad?" Snape asked evenly.

"No," Harry said, enjoying the quick warmth of his support and letting himself lean into it more.

Snape raised his red-tipped wand and looked Harry in the face. "Crash landing?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"A bit of one," Harry admitted. "How did you find me?"

Snape huffed and said, "Rather complicated spell that I did not have much faith would actually work. McGonagall owled it when I asked her for ideas. Harry flushed at the thought that McGonagall knew he had run off. Snape changed the spell on his wand with a shake to make it white instead with a Lumos charm. "You look as though you could use a visit to St. Mungo's."

"No," Harry pleaded. "I just want to go home."

Snape hovered Harry's broom and spelled it with a Sticking charm before helping him onto it. "You should not have left in that case," Snape stated with just a touch of snideness. "We will fly until we are within Apparition distance then Apparate from there. You came a very long way, Harry," Snape repeated, sounding astounded.

In the main hall of the house where they reappeared, Snape held Harry upright. "I should not have listened to you," Snape said. "You are injured. It is very dangerous to be injured in an Animagus form; the injuries do not necessarily translate safely to your human form."

"I think I landed as myself, if that helps. I don't want to go to St. Mungo's," Harry insisted, imagining the miserable stay in the crowded waiting room with everyone looking at him and wondering.

Snape held him there in the quiet hall, considering that. "To your room then. I'll contact a Healer." Snape then helped him upstairs.

"Thank you for coming for me," Harry said as he sat crookedly on his bed, favoring his side. When he rubbed his hair back, he was dismayed to find drooping clover caught there, tangled rather thoroughly.

Snape bent close and touched his shoulder. "You will be all right while I use the Floo?"

"Yeah," Harry assured him a little sharply, checking his hair for more debris. "I think I'll be fine if you *don't* call a Healer."

"You look as though you have broken a few ribs, at least," Snape observed. When Harry just shrugged, Snape stood straight and said, "Feeling better?"

"A bit," Harry replied quietly.

"Hm," Snape murmured before he turned to leave.

"She wanted to move here. With no prospects," Harry complained. "I couldn't let her do that." Snape turned back before the door and considered him. Harry went on, "I . . . It wouldn't be fair to her . . . I'm not sure I like her *that* well. I can't just suddenly start liking her enough to want her around enough to have her do that." He frowned, everything coming back again except muted by the pain.

They looked at each other. Harry finally asked, pleading, "What was I supposed to do?"

"I don't have an answer to that. Perhaps there isn't one."

"It wasn't good either way," Harry said. "Was I supposed to want her here no matter what?"

"You may have." When Harry opened his mouth then closed it without speaking, Snape added, "If you didn't, then I believe you did the right thing. It is worse to lead someone on. I'll be right back."

Harry listened to him go down the stairs. The ticking of the downstairs clock was louder after the footsteps faded. The pain was numbing now and he cared less at this moment about the world than he ever had. The footsteps returned. Snape stepped in and at Harry's request, brought him his pyjamas. Harry tossed aside his dewy clothes and put on his bottoms before pulling the duvet around himself against his chilled skin. Snape stood by the door, arms crossed as he considered him.

"I thought you'd be angry," Harry said.

"I was, briefly," Snape replied, eyes narrowing. "Then enough time passed that I asked Winky to fetch you and she informed me you were far out of reach." Speaking slowly, he went on, "It is not magic she is especially gifted with so it was difficult to ascertain just how far that was. It also seemed to be as much a matter of distance as a mood for her. In any event, failing her assistance, it was not exactly clear how to find you and the longer you were gone, the more likely it seemed that you were unable to return."

Harry frowned and shifted with a grunt to take the strain off his side. The door knocker sounded from downstairs, drawing Snape down to answer it. He reappeared with the Healer in tow.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, we meet again," the wizard said, removing his pointed hat and folding it into his pocket.

"We do?" Harry asked, squinting in the lamplight at the unfamiliar wizard with his thinning hair.

"Healer Redletting," the wizard said pleasantly as he set his worn case down before the night stand. "I was here last summer. You had a wizard influenza, bad case, so you may not remember."

"I remember not feeling well," Harry admitted.

"Well, at any rate, looks as though you've had a bit of an accident, young man." He bent over his case and pulled out a long wand of cherry wood. "So, what happened?"

Harry explained, "I fell. I was flying and I got too tired and I fell." The Healer was spelling Harry on the top of the head as he spoke.

"On a broomstick, then?"

Harry's wrist was lifted, pulse taken, a spell put on it that made it tingle, then the same with the other. "No." The Healer ceased and looked at him. "I'm an Animagus," Harry explained, wishing he could just lie down, that the man would finish quickly. Harry lifted his arm over his head on command, requiring a great deal of will against the pain, but his ribs were healed with a series of spells. The release from the pain was enough to make his eyes water. The Healer stepped back and appraised him before leaning in and prodding a spot on Harry's forehead where he hadn't realized he had been injured.

"Drink these," the healer commanded after rummaging in his bag for a handful of chipped old bottles. Harry obeyed, taking each sour potion in turn. He glanced at Snape then, who stood at the end of the bed, gaze inscrutable.

The wizard packed up his things, saying, "If he is lightheaded tomorrow, call me again or bring him in right away." He handed Snape a bill, which he paid in silence. And after an admonishment to not fly for a week or even transform, he said, "Good to see you again, Mr. Potter. Do be more careful." Then he put his hat back on, tipped it and left.

Harry shifted back on the bed, very pleased to be breathing easily. "I really thought you'd be angry," Harry said tiredly.

Snape's lips twitched but it was hard to tell if it was into a smile or a scowl. He stepped a little closer and said, "At the moment I am merely grateful to have retrieved you."

Harry, reminded all over again that it was good to have someone to rely on, said, "Thanks for that,"

Another twitch of the lips that this time resembled a wry smile. "It is nearly morning and you should rest."

Harry settled back on his bed and adjusted the covers. Trying to piece things together, he asked, "What was the spell you used to find me?"

Snape, who had turned to depart, turned back slowly. "It was a blood spell," he admitted. "One I did not expect to work. It made you a beacon I could follow at any distance."

"Aren't blood spells all dark magic?" Harry asked.

"Almost exclusively."

"I'm surprised you did that," Harry said, feeling uneasy.

Snape explained, "I was not going to try it, despite Minerva's suggesting it, until I found Kali frantic and had to assume you had met with something unpleasant. Fortunately, it was merely the ground."

Harry glanced at the Chimrian, or what he could see of her bundled asleep in the rags at the bottom of her cage. He then stared at the lamplight flickering on the ceiling. He still felt rather uncaring in general, but curious about this. "You didn't have any of my blood to work with," he pointed out.

"True. Nor was it convenient to obtain some from a living relative, a requirement of the spell," Snape said, sounding dry and teacherish.

The sky beyond the window was turning grey, making Harry's eyes heavy with the prospect of the long, exhaustive day ahead. "So what did you do?"

Snape stepped to the door, prepared to pull it closed behind him. "The only thing I could. Good night, Harry."

Harry's brow furrowed at the ceiling, now lit by the dawn. "You couldn't have used yours, we're not related," Harry said.

"No we are not," he agreed. "Good night." He closed the door.

Harry's brow failed to unfurrow as he fell asleep.

At a late breakfast Harry, feeling the clarity of a new day, said, "Sorry about last night." Snape tilted his head without comment. Harry regretfully went on, "You had to call a Healer, even."

"Feeling better this morning about the girl?"

"No, just embarrassed." Harry buttered his toast and crunched it down quickly to satisfy his famished stomach. "Do you think you could find the time to teach me to Apparate?"

"I thought you were under Arthur's tutelage."

Harry sighed and buttered another slice. "He isn't . . . he doesn't know how to teach, really. And Ron gets most of his time . . . not that he shouldn't," Harry added quickly. "Should have done it last summer."

"It did not come up, did it?" he said in an odd tone. When Harry looked up questioningly, Snape said, "It was much easier to keep track of you that way."

"Oh."

"Easter break, I considered it, but you seemed to need a break from learning. I will make time this afternoon. I expect you will catch on quickly, so it should not take long. You would have become out of practice during your time at school, in any event, so it is just as well."

Snape refilled his quickly consumed coffee, and Harry noticed the bandage wound around his left hand. "You did you use your blood," Harry said a little accusingly.

"There was no choice. Or there was, but it was to leave you to your own devices." Snape put his left hand back in his lap and sipped his coffee thirstily. "I tried using Kali's, as you and she must be bound by blood as that is the only way to create a Chimrian with that much empathy. That is actually how I received this wound." He held up his hand again momentarily, showing the stained bandage at the base of his thumb. "It did alter the spell, I believe, but since it worked, I did not take the time to investigate the intricacies."

Harry grinned then fell serious. "Dark magic always takes its toll, though. That's what everyone at Hogwarts always says."

"I do not plan to make a habit of it," Snape commented with forced ease. "Nor do I plan to care for your pets any time in the near future."

That afternoon, Harry stood in the main hall before Snape, who looked about to launch into a lecture when he stopped and said, "Doesn't that hurt?" indicating the large purple bruise above Harry's left eye.

"A bit."

"Certain you are up for this? It requires rather a lot of concentration in the beginning."

"Yes," Harry stated firmly, then wished he had not sounded so exasperated.

Snape put his hands behind his back casually and began. "Apparition is a form of relocation magic. But since it involves the caster himself or herself, it is quite different from other kinds. More hazardous, obviously because one is not working with an object or an animal that can be recovered easily or disposed of if necessary." He paced a few steps and continued with Harry's full attention. "Given that the caster is also the castee, some interesting magical capabilities become available, such as self awareness of the transformation at hand. When one is, say, hovering a book, one can only see what the impact is as the book moves or fails to move, or falls. In this case one *feels* what is happening instantly, making it possible to adjust instantly. With practice, Apparition truly becomes second nature as a result, unlike most magicks."

He stepped away a few strides. The silence made Harry realize that he had gone for weeks without a lecture, which made it very easy to follow every word closely. Snape said, "One could teleport without collapsing, the two stages of the spell, but it would require enormous power. Collapsing is modeled many ways by Apparators as everything from crunching down a sheet of parchment into a ball to letting the air out of a balloon."

"Fred and George imagine being folded into a paper airplane," Harry commented.

Still lecturing, Snape said, "It does not, in the end, matter what model one uses, just that it involve shrinkage of some kind. Is there a model you prefer?"

Harry wished he knew what his mum and dad had used; the paper airplane sounded odd to Harry although it had worked for Ron. "I'll try the ball of paper."

"Close your eyes then. Realize that you are not trying to go *anywhere*, just remain where you are. That is important at this stage in order to remain in one piece."

Harry did as he was told and stared at the insides of his eyelids. He imagined balls of paper, then paper airplanes, again tried hard to imagine himself as the ball of paper. He felt like he was missing something. He shifted his feet on the hard floor from standing too long and tried again, more determined this time. A *crack!* sounded and Harry jumped, only to realize he didn't have any feet. He fell on his backside as they reappeared.

"Do try not to panic," Snape said.

Harry wished he had not laughed at Ron and his arms as he stood back up and rubbed his sore bum, aggravated badly from previous injury, he realized.

"Again," Snape commanded.

Harry tried again. It took less time for the *crack!* to sound this time and when he opened his eyes he was whole. "How do I not make so much noise?" Harry asked.

"One thing at a time."

After three hours Harry could, for the most part, reliably get from one end of the room to the other and was feeling pretty happy about that. Snape rubbed his brow yet again. "I do not mean to put you off, but after the late night, I am inclined to stop for now."

Harry, feeling tired as well but still eager, agreed anyway because Snape looked rather worn down and that *was* Harry's fault.

* * *

Late the next day after a follow up lesson where Harry practiced Apparating in from the back garden, successfully avoiding all walls though with one close call near the lamp, Penelope's owl arrived with a letter. The owl was so tired that Harry carried it up to his room and gave it Hedwig's cage. It gratefully ate the cold meat he fed her and put her head under her wing. Hedwig, sitting on Kali's cage, fluffed herself in annoyance. She had to peck at Kali to stop the Chimrian sniffing at her feet.

"Behave yourselves," Harry chastised them all, taking Kali out while holding the letter. He sat down on the bed, Chimrian climbing around his shoulders as he read.

Penelope started her letter by apologizing for getting so upset but by the end, essentially said she felt it was warranted. Harry took out a quill and parchment and wrote out a reply. Remembering Snape's words of the night before, Harry explained that he could only be honest about how he felt. He tried to explain that her moving specifically to be near him

would not be fair to either of them. Also that his training was reputed to be very difficult and time-consuming and he would not have much time for anyone else for a long while and that this was very important to him even though he liked her very much.

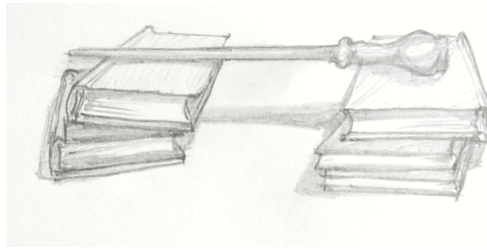
He reread the letter with a kind of sadness at the cruelty of making choices, but didn't alter it. He folded it up, added a note to the back about sending her owl along when it had recovered, and gave it to Hedwig, who seemed happy to go. For practice, he Apparated down to the hall and found himself without Kali, who squawking, flew down to meet him. "Sorry," he said to her as she regained his shoulder.

Harry strode to the doorway of the drawing room where Snape had returned to his parchments. He stood, lost in thought until Snape asked, "Everything all right?" Harry shrugged. "Recovering?" Snape then asked.

"In what way?"

"In any way, but I can only assist with the physical. The other you must work out for yourself," he commented, dipping his quill and pulling his sleeve aside as he returned to writing.

Harry watched Snape's precise writing, lit by the sunlight from the window behind, the nib making a low hollow noise as it moved. Kali chewing on his collar broke him out of circling thoughts this time. He sighed as he turned to go out to work on the garden, just for something to do.



Chapter 51 -- Uncertain Glory

Severus Snape completed the student record for the previous school year by filling in the very last entry in long columns of classes, teachers and students in green, red, blue and brown--in lieu of yellow--inks. At the bottom of the section's last page were logged notable events of which there were surprisingly few; the first one being the passing of the headmaster, noted by McGonagall in factual language. The sizable square dusty book containing the record had a thick leather binding that creaked ominously from its infrequent use and only bound enough pages for the compilation of the last hundred years. The book flickered occasionally with old spells applied to protect its utterly mundane contents. New spells had been put on twenty years ago: a locking spell and a content protection spell that had to be neutralized before writing in it.

Snape adjusted the soiled bandage on his palm, and turned the large stiff pages back to the previous year. McGonagall's hand markedly differed from his own; it rolled along unnecessarily curly and prone to flourishing beyond the small boxes supplied for each of the student's names along the left-hand side. Horizontally ran coded entries for classes attended and grade given, or a code for a footnote of which there were several, such as Crabbe's line of daggers and the note that he withdrew for family reasons. The same note was repeated for Goyle. It is always the foolish who pay in the end, Snape thought idly, noting that Malfoy and Nott were in good stead throughout. Nott, Snape would have in his House one more year, because of his missed year recovering from his injuries during the final battle. He considered that if the boy remained the quiet outsider, Snape's job as Head of House would be easier. Sometimes though, Seventh Year created unexpected changes in older students, drawing out leadership potential or the opposite--active disloyalty--where none had manifested before.

The notes section below the final name--*Zerxes, Saris*--comprised a tidy list in McGonagall's competent hand.

*Teachers and Aurors respelled the barrier to the Forest before classes resumed as Centaurs can no longer be relied upon to defend it.
Cancelled all Quidditch in the interest of safety.
Cancelled student Hogsmeade visits on 1 January for remainder of year.*

Snape swallowed, gripped unwillingly by the memory of everything spiraling down into doom. He had begun to seriously question his faith in Dumbledore about the time McGonagall had made the Hogsmeade note. The old wizard's opaque plans and gentle assurances had grown maddening that winter. The Ministry's assistance had constituted little help as the Order, Ministry, and others worked at odds to each other. The constant strain of his own dual role had rendered him unable to do more than mindlessly follow the orders he had been given. His own single-minded priority of avoiding exposing his disloyalty to the Dark Lord had overridden larger thoughts about the usefulness of what they were all doing. Even as he had realized this, during the rare quiet moment, he could do nothing about it.

It wasn't nearly long enough ago. Perhaps after another year, the memory of the stress would not be so acute.

Student, H. Potter, abducted from grounds during Easter break. Recovered from Forest by Headmaster and Prof. Snape.

Bloody lucky that, Snape now realized. Very, very lucky that Goyle and Crabbe had been as stupid as they were. Had they forgone their own petty revenge and turned Harry over to the Dark Lord they would have been richly rewarded, and the Order would have lost its single most important, yet unacknowledged member. Snape had not known at the time how very close that had been to utter disaster. Although, perhaps, just perhaps, Harry could have managed, could have overcome Voldemort rather than the other way around.

Dwelling on that imagining: an utterly desperate Harry as Voldemort's prisoner, was too much. He moved on to the next line and savored it joyfully.

Dark Wizard Voldemort broke spell barriers surrounding castle and entered with his followers only to be summarily dispatched by student, H. Potter.

Snape had replayed said moment in his mind countless times: the spells sizzling and flaring in all directions, the groans of the fallen Death Eaters, the shouted warnings, and above it all, Harry, wand aimed, his gaze full of the bright intensity of someone who has absolutely no thought of failure. Everything that Snape had endlessly derided as naiveté and weakness had in the end served as overwhelming power. Harry's shouted Killing Curse had held the high pitch of desperation, but it flared true. Snape now knew that desperation had not been born of fear but of a need to cast a spell that was not supposed to be possible, an Avada Kedavra containing no hate. Snape closed his eyes to better remember the wiry body falling in a halo of green light, skull-like face wide with shock.

Snape's mouth twitched. A moment joyful enough even for a Patronus, he thought as he closed the book and released the protective spell to lock in the contents.

Out in the back garden, Harry tired of going back and forth to an abandoned sheep shed on the edge of their village to practice his Apparation. He went up to sit on his bed, and played with parchment spells rather than writing to Penelope, who had not yet written back, although that may be because her owl had only left that morning. He lifted his head as the door knocker sounded from downstairs. Footsteps and then Snape's voice could be heard speaking to someone. When Harry heard, "Come in," he put his things aside and got up.

"Ms. Tonks is here, Harry."

Harry came fast down the steps and, with firm control, held his face from looking too hopeful. Tonks, whose hair was bright green and very short, grinned, "Congratulations, Harry." Harry, ecstatic, jumped forward and hugged her. "Easy there, mate," she teased.

Flushing, Harry released her and accepted her outstretched hand vigorously. Her smile was going straight through him, or maybe it was the affection in her gaze that was making it hard to grip her hand.

Snape's voice interrupted them, gaze watchful of Harry's reactions. "If you wish to make him truly happy, you will insist that he earned it."

"He did," Tonks insisted. "It was a good year to apply as well. Due to our . . . losses the last three years, we have the largest ever incoming class of apprentices . . . four."

"Did Vineet get in?" Harry asked.

"I am not supposed to give other results. There is an orientation meeting next Monday, you will meet your fellows at that time. I suspect you will be pleased with them." She winked, and smiled when Harry brightened more.

"Can I have a party to celebrate?" Harry asked his guardian.

"If you wish. Please keep it to fewer than twenty attendees, if you can at all manage."

"Tonks, can you come, uh, Saturday, tomorrow, I guess," he asked brightly, then felt awkward about being so blunt.

She smiled more. "Of course, I'd love to." She took her leave with another round of handshakes. Harry couldn't stop smiling and his face was actually starting to hurt from it.

After she departed Harry turned to his guardian. "I got in," he said brightly.

Snape crossed his arms and stared down his nose at him. "Of course you did." He considered Harry a long moment from that pose. "I believe I am missing something here."

"What?" Harry asked in alarm, quickly pouring on the innocence.

Snape's brow furrowed more, his stiff posture not easing. "You should go write out invitations."

"Oh, yeah." Harry turned to head upstairs, pulled to a stop by Snape saying, "Invitations to more appropriate companions."

Harry, hand on the railing, did not turn to look down at his guardian. "Yeah," he agreed dryly, before dashing upstairs, two steps at a time. At the top he said, a little flustered, "Maybe I'll go to the Burrow, tell everyone I was accepted."

"Be back by dinner."

Harry, now at the door to his room, replied, "Yes sir."

* * *

The next morning, Harry finally received a letter from Switzerland. He hesitated opening it since he had put everything out of his mind and didn't feel like picking it all up again so soon. The strange owl that had delivered her letter had not waited for a reply, so there was no hurry. Eventually, the unopened letter began to bother him, so he gave in and read it. This letter was a little more conciliatory, he was grateful to see, but in three separate places Penelope expressed a wish that things could be different. Harry could certainly sympathize with that, but he still felt he had made the right decision. At the end she noted that she had started as an assistant at the archives in Montreux and was looking forward to working on bigger projects.

Harry collected a parchment and quill and, with afternoon tea spread beside him, composed a reply. Snape came in, collected a cup and wedge of shortbread, watched Harry a few moments, then departed in silence. In the letter Harry explained that he had been accepted to the apprenticeship, which was what he had always wanted. The act of writing that out hardened something in him, making him feel hungry almost, as well as impatient for his training to begin. He explained that he still felt a lot for her and should she need anything he could help with, to please ask, and to please keep corresponding as he would like to keep in touch. He reread the letter before precisely folding it up and addressing it.

Snape stepped in and said. "Do you wish me to be absent for your party this evening?"

"No. Why?" Harry asked.

"In my experience, when one of your age holds a party, one does not want one's parent or parents around."

"I wasn't thinking it would be that exciting, especially since Headmistress McGonagall and Hagrid are coming."

Snape looked rather surprised. "Did you warn your friends that this was the case?"

"No, do you think I should have? Eh, they'll find out soon enough, and most of them are finished at Hogwarts anyway." Harry fidgeted with his pen and finally asked, "Can you try to be nice to Neville?" At Snape's questioning look Harry explained. "He has this challenge to himself to walk up to you and talk to you about something not school-related."

"Has he ever done that?" Snape asked aloud. "I don't actually remember an instance."

"Give him a chance, maybe?"

* * *

"Nice place, Harry." Dean said as he came into the hall from the entryway. "Nice town; tons of history."

"Thanks," Harry said as he poured a butterbeer for someone. He sensed that the returning students were disappointed to find the teachers in their midst, but his older friends took it as an opportunity to flaunt their new freedom. McGonagall shook her head as she was regaled with yet another story of mischief that had gone undetected.

"Knock it off, Ron. Headmistress will think we are all miscreants," Ginny complained when her brother explained about yet another secret scheme.

"Don't worry, Ms. Weasley. I already believe that," McGonagall bent down to tell her.

"Congratulations, Harry," Neville stepped over to say. After they chatted about the examinations for the apprenticeship, Neville turned and stiffened when he found Snape right behind him.

"Good evening, Mr. Longbottom," Snape said.

"Uh," Neville managed. "Good evening, sir."

"Ello Harry," Hagrid said from the entryway, where he was bent low to get inside.

"Hagrid!" Neville said and immediately escaped in that direction.

"Maybe not sneak up on him," Harry suggested.

"It is impossible to do otherwise with someone who does not notice what is happening around him." Snape moved off to join the other two teachers.

Harry topped off his own butterbeer from the metal pitcher sitting on the tea warmer and surveyed the room. Everyone seemed very happy. Harry marveled at how good he felt as well; he fairly tingled with anticipation. Tonks stood snacking at the other side of the table and gave him a wink. He smiled back in a restrained way, because he could see Snape eyeing him from Hagrid's shadow. Harry escaped by stepping over to Ginny and Ron, since he had not yet spoken with them.

"Thanks for inviting me, Harry," Ginny said, toasting him casually with her butterbeer glass.

Harry, honestly confused, said, "Why wouldn't I?"

Ginny smiled and shrugged, flushing around the ears. Ron lowered his brow. "You better not have designs on my sister," he said to Harry.

Harry pulled his head back from his friend. "Excuse me?"

"I don't mind if he does," Ginny commented slyly with a sloppy grin.

"And I thought this part of the room would be safer than the one by the teachers," Harry complained.

"Oh, it is," Ginny assured him with a wag of her eyebrows. "I heard you broke it off with Penelope," she said, very conversationally.

"Where did you hear that?" Harry asked, giving Ron a pointed look.

"Word gets around, Harry, especially word about you," she said. "In fact," she added, leaning in close, "I heard some great gossip about Lavender and this boy from Beauxbatons . . ."

"Scuse me," Ron groaned. "I'll skip this." He headed off to where Hagrid and Neville were talking near the staircase.

Ginny chuckled and straightened. "Always works." Harry had to grin. She finished her butterbeer and, tapping the empty glass with her fingers, said, "You're looking good, Harry."

"I am?" he asked.

"Yes, you. You look like you are getting along with things. Wish I was. Can't stand the thought of another year of school." Using her wand, she fetched the butterbeer pitcher from the serving table and refilled both their glasses, then hovered it back a little more carefully.

"What would you do instead?" Harry asked, curious.

"Work for Fred and George. They need someone to do marketing who isn't a looney. They'd make even more money than they are now. I've almost convinced them; the last three ideas I gave them were the bomb."

"That's great, Ginny." He leaned in a little and checked that Ron was on the other side of the room. "Better than training security Trolls," Harry commented with a grin.

Ginny had to put her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing aloud. Between giggles, she said, "Did he tell you they have a new pair of Trolls coming in next month at Gringott's?" When Harry shook his head, she went on, "They don't work for long, you know. Make enough to live on back in the mountains for years in just a few months, so they leave. The new ones are Romanian, apparently, don't speak any English. Gringott's gave Ron a Romanian phrase book to work from, so he has been going around the house practicing, *What color is this umbrella?*" She laughed harder. "As if Trolls would know what an umbrella is." Laughing so hard she could barely speak, she hit him on the arm and said, "Turns out they're color blind."

Harry chuckled, then with effort made himself stop because he couldn't laugh too hard at his friend. Across the hall, Snape and McGonagall were glancing their way. Harry said, "You know, he gets good at training Trolls he'll be ordering us all around and we'll obey without thinking."

She sobered. "There is that. Hey, that would probably qualify him for Minister of Magic. Speaking of which . . ."

Luna Lovegood wandered over. "Are you talking about the vote?" she asked in her slow, dreamy way. "Do you think Fudge will be supported? I heard Madam Bones is considering challenging."

"I heard that too," Ginny said. "I like her."

"So do I," Harry added, thinking of his hearing, oh so long ago.

Ginny and Luna fell silent. Finally, Luna said, "Are you going to publicly support Madam Bones?"

Harry shrugged. "I wasn't planning to. Why do you ask?"

"Why?" Ginny echoed in disbelief. "I expect you'd swing the vote."

Harry asked doubtfully, "Really?" Luna nodded too, making Harry shake his head. "I'll have to think about that." He didn't feel at all like getting involved, even though he had no real love for Cornelius Fudge.

The hall fell silent. Harry glanced around to see why and found Winky hovering in a very large, round, scarlet-frosted cake covered in sparklers. The lamps went down on their own, leaving the cake alone to light the big room. Harry approached the drinks table as it settled there, bathing him in no-heat sparks. He glanced over at the side wall by the mirror, where Snape and McGonagall stood in a position as though interrupted from talking. Snape broke away and came over to the other side of the table where he picked up the broad cake knife and handed it across.

"Thanks," Harry said, accepting it. As their gazes remained locked, he thought of adding something like, *for coming to get me*, or just *for everything*, but there were too many others around. He finally looked down at the cake instead. Several people shuffled their feet as though somehow realizing that they were intruding by being there. A stack of small plates ap-

peared at Harry's elbow and he began to cut and serve. Ginny stepped up for the first piece, took the plate and, on tiptoe, gave him a chummy one-armed hug and congratulations.

The party remained subdued as everybody ate and many went over for seconds, still leaving a very large section of the oversized, triple-layer cake. Harry moved to the darkened, narrow windows as he forked a bite into his mouth. Ron, Ginny, and Hermione made space for him to join their close conversation.

"You almost brought us to tears there, Harry," Ginny said, getting an elbow from Ron as though to shut up.

"What do you mean?" he asked, confused.

"Nothing, just kidding," she replied. "Think I'll get another piece," she breathed and stepped away.

Harry looked between his two best friends. Ron straightened and said, "So . . . uh, you start on Monday."

Harry nodded. "I'm really looking forward to it. Learning really powerful spells and getting to use them. Learning everything because you have to know it to defend against it." He looked at Hermione, who was biting her lip. "How are you getting on?" he asked her.

"Good. I started on Thursday, but already I have a month worth of work. Mostly research, but I get to summarize findings . . ." She faded off and said, "Congratulations, Harry."

"You said that already," Harry observed, feeling out of touch.

"You deserve it though," she insisted quietly, then took a deep breath and glanced at Ron.

Ron bumped Harry on the arm. "Everyone's really glad you got what you wanted, you know."

The party quieted down after one in the morning and guests started to depart. Eventually, it was just his closer friends, sitting around the dining room table with a small fire in the hearth lighting the room along with a single candle. Neville sat sideways on the end staring into the flames, a hot cocoa cradled in his hands. When Luna had departed, she had given Neville a kiss on the cheek, which had embarrassed him into shyness, but now he looked serious and brooding. Harry shifted his chair around to the end to face the fire as well.

"Hey, Harry," Neville said, swigging his cocoa the way Hagrid would whiskey. "Not still trying to carry the weight of the world, are you?"

Harry scoffed. "I can't even carry one girlfriend."

"Oh, sorry 'bout that."

"It's all right," Harry insisted.

Neville turned back to the flames. "I still find myself surprised that Luna, well, likes me."

"You two are perfect together."

"Really? You think?" Neville asked brightly.

"Yes," Harry assured him. He felt a bit sorry for himself in comparison, and sighed into the flames.

Neville turned back to the flames as well, looking pensive. Conversation went on behind them between Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. Quietly, Neville said, "I heard some things recently."

Half a minute later, when Neville didn't elaborate, Harry asked, "About what?"

Neville turned and put his empty mug on the table, then fidgeted with his empty hands as he leaned forward over his legs toward the glow from the hearth. "About the prophecy," Neville finally explained. Harry shifted in his seat and Neville went on without looking up, "Did you know it could have been me?" He sounded vaguely horrified.

"Yes. But Dumbledore insisted it wasn't you." Harry paused, and Neville turned to him. "He said my scar was the mark from the prophecy. But . . . he seemed to think it could have been either of us before that point, that Voldemort chose unknowingly."

Neville was silent a long while before he said, sounding self-effacing, "Good thing it wasn't."

Behind them, Ginny was telling a story about the Creevey brothers getting out of History of Magic for a week by convincing Madam Pomfrey's holiday replacement that they were allergic to ghosts.

Harry said, "You don't know what you can do until you have to. I remember hearing the prophecy the first time. I dearly wished it wasn't me, then I realized I couldn't wish it on anyone else, including you."

"You did all right, though," said Neville. "I wouldn't have. Imagine if it had been me . . . we'd all still have . . . Voldemort to deal with." His voice dropped at the name as though it still needed whispering. "You'd all have; I guess I'd be dead." He swallowed hard, turned back to look in his empty mug, then wrung his hands.

Harry insisted, "Neville. You don't know how things would have worked out. If the prophecy had gone the other way, you'd have had the power to destroy him. You could have done it."

Sadly, Neville said, "I'm glad it was you. Not that I would wish that on you . . ."

"It's all over with. Don't worry about it," Harry insisted. His eye was caught by something in the doorway. Winky had arrived with more cocoa, Snape behind her. Harry nudged Neville to get his mug out for a refill. Snape looked very serious as well in the firelight, his eyes taking in each person in the room separately. "What time is it?" Harry asked him, wondering if they were staying up far too late.

"It is 2:00, but it is no matter," Snape replied. "I was just . . . checking that everything was all right. I'm going to retire, in case you need anything."

"No. Good night, Severus," Harry said. Hermione and Ginny echoed this with 'Professor' instead. Neville seemed to have caught Snape's eye and they locked gazes before Neville looked away, back at the fire. Snape departed with a quiet swish of robe.

Long minutes later, Neville said, "I know he adopted you and all, but I don't think I could trust Professor Snape quite as much as you do."

"You mean . . . how could I trust someone who had once joined Voldemort?" Harry queried. When Neville nodded, Harry said, "Thinking about the prophecy has you rattled, Neville. Severus's all right, really."

"I know. I just . . . don't think I could. But he is very conscientious with you. Like a real dad . . . doesn't let you get away with anything." Harry laughed lightly and Neville went on more confidently. "I always wanted a dad; you're really lucky to have found one, former dark wizard or not."

Even more quietly, Harry said, "That pain never quite goes away, does it?"

Neville shook his head. "You still wish for your real dad?" he asked curiously.

Harry thought that over. "In a way. Maybe because I always have, not because I'm still missing him." The room felt colder, even this close to the fire. Harry had not thought about his parents in a long while and resisted dwelling on them now.

Behind them chairs were moving. "It's late and I have to get going," said Hermione. "I'm already out beyond my curfew." She touched Harry on the shoulder, said goodbye to everyone and Disapparated with a *pop!*

"Show off," Ron muttered. "We need to go too. Got any extra Floo powder?"

Harry took down the canister and after a round of goodbyes saw all his friends off. The house seemed very quiet as he made his way up to his room.

* * *

Harry arrived for his apprenticeship orientation with time to spare. When he was shown to the meeting room, he grinned to find Vineet already there. He shook the man's hand. "Congratulations," Harry said.

"I am surprised to find myself here," Vineet calmly returned.

"I'm not. What did you think of the personality test?" Harry asked.

Vineet shrugged faintly. "The written test caused me more difficulty."

Harry blinked at that. His attempt at coming up with a response was interrupted by the entrance of two other new apprentices. Rodgers followed behind with the two senior ones. "This is Kerry Ann Kalendula," he said, introducing one of the new admits. "And Aaron Wickem," he continued, indicating the dark-haired man who stood with a self-satisfied smirk on his face. "You all know Harry Potter, I assume, and this is Vineet A.K.A. Vishnu Abhayananda. You may have met the one year and two year apprentices in the program." He gestured behind him at the serious-faced pair flanking the door. "Munz and Blackpool."

The new apprentices took seats. Rodgers went on. "You will all be getting to know each other extremely well over the next months, so don't be shy. I have to collect one more person, or more specifically, I must rescue Ms. Tonks from a meeting with a Ministry administrator." He gave them a pained smile and departed.

The senior apprentices lounged near the wall, arms crossed. Their eyes gravitated toward Harry a bit more than to the other three. Kerry Ann broke the silence. She had very short, mousey brown hair that stuck up straight off her head a bit militaryish. "This is going to be fun," she said, glancing at Harry. "You as good as they say you are?"

Harry shrugged.

"I remember you from school," Aaron said. At Harry's look of question, he went on, "Kerry Ann and I finished in '93, she was a Ravenclaw, I was a Slytherin. Everyone regarded you with suspicion back then as I recall; though it seemed a bit much to pin on a Second Year and a small one at that."

"Yeah," Harry said remembering. "That Heir of Slytherin thing and the Basilisk."

A bit derisively, Aaron said, "Why would a Gryffindor be the Heir, anyway?" He laughed. "Speaking of Basilisks, what about that snake they had for the test?" Aaron went on, shifting topics. "Did you get past that one?" he asked stridently.

"What? Nagini?" Harry asked in amusement. "She was harmless."

"That snake has a name?" Aaron blurted in dismay. "It should be stuffed and put on display in the atrium."

"Why?" Kerry Ann asked, offended. "I thought it was cute," she teased him with a sly grin.

"I don't think I'd have said 'cute'," Harry commented. "What did you think of the snake, Vineet?"

"It was just a snake. Everyone calls me Vishnu, by the way," he said informationally.

Prodding at his calm, Harry said, "You were lucky they took her poison away. She attacked my best friend's dad once and he was in St. Mungo's for weeks because her poison kept the wounds from healing."

"That snake?" Kerry Ann asked. "How do you know?"

Harry grinned widely. "Nagini was Voldemort's pet snake," Harry said as though they all should have known that. They gaped at him in nearly comic horror, making him laugh. "Look at you," Harry scolded them teasingly. "She didn't kill your house-elf or nearly kill one of your friends, so what's the matter?"

"They locked me in a room with Voldemort's snake?" Aaron asked, appalled to the point of trembling.

"You are being lucky not to know ahead of time," Vineet commented. "She was just a snake, nevertheless."

Rodgers returned accompanied by Tonks. He glanced over them, then asked if anything was wrong. After explanations he shook his head. "We just wanted to use her to test your fear of snakes; telling you who she was would have complicated that. The only person who knew who she was, seemed pleased to see her . . . which was a little odd." He handed out several parchment booklets to each of them. "We are all a little curious what you two talked about, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "Old times. Her dental work." He winked at Tonks, who smiled back before falling serious again.

Aaron clutched his booklet until it crackled. "You talk to snakes? For real?" He looked to Rodgers uneasily. "Wouldn't that disqualify him from this program?" he asked their trainer.

Harry gave Aaron a dark look and Rodgers chuckled. "It hasn't so far," he replied in an easy tone. "We noticed that you didn't indicate it on your application."

"I left it off intentionally, sir," Harry said, flipping through the booklets he had been given. They were about the structure of the Ministry, with all the departments drawn on a big tree that ran sideways from one page to the next, followed by basic rules and policies. Another was an overview of the mission and schedule of the three years of the Auror's program.

Rodgers stepped back to the front beside the chalkboard and went over their training schedule. They would do spell training every morning followed by physical training and studies of law, procedures and spells in the afternoon. This was four days a week for now with one or two days of field training, Friday and Saturday, when they reached the three-month mark. He then went over each of their strengths and weaknesses so that they all knew them. As expected, no one had any significant weakness. Aaron's was in theories of spells and potions. Vineet's in his steadfast disregard of danger and his weak spell power. Kerry Ann needed to work on blocking and physical training. Harry's was described as having a lack of emotional balance. He almost complained about that, by pointing out how much he had improved, before he thought better of it.

"As for strengths," Rodgers went on. "You all have a lot of them, or you wouldn't be here. Aaron has steadfastly followed this calling for five years without wavering in applying and improving, so I expect him to continue to work very hard, which is as critical a skill as any in a program as long and difficult as this one. Kerry Ann scored highest on the written test, tying the record high score. Her emotional balance is excellent. Vishnu has superior physical skills and excellent knowledge as well as an almost eerie psychic balance. Potter scored highest on the spell testing and second highest on the written test. We also know from life experience that he is determined to persevere under the worst of circumstances."

Aaron turned to Harry when Rodgers paused. "So on the application, you just wrote, *Killed Voldemort* in big letters and sent it in, right?"

"No," Harry replied levelly.

Rodgers sighed. "We are going to go over the reading assignments and give you a tour, take your measurements for your uniforms, and then send you home for the day to start studying."

After complicated measurements and small talk, Tonks stopped Harry in the corridor as he headed out. "I need to talk to you. Come into the office."

She sounded very serious, making Harry nervously consider what might be the problem; certainly his wink had not been that unwise. Her office was a cubicle shared with the other Aurors none of whom were there. Harry borrowed another desk's chair and sat facing her, hands clasped in his lap.

Tonks frowned and hesitated before beginning, making Harry bite his lip. "It's like this, Harry. . . " Harry was certain something bad was forthcoming. "Minister Fudge is insisting that your apprenticeship fees be waived."

Harry stared in silence at her, trying to adjust to what she was saying.

"You probably noticed you haven't been sent a bill yet," she went on. Harry hadn't, but he nodded anyway. "I know you have insisted all along that you be treated the same as everyone else, and believe me I understand that, although Minister Fudge doesn't. But nevertheless, I also understand the Minister's position." She paused to gauge Harry's reaction. Harry wasn't reacting much; he was thinking that an expensive apprenticeship fee was not something he could afford. Tonks plowed on, "Frankly, I think Fudge is afraid of what would happen if the *Prophet* found out we were making you pay. But I don't think you *should* pay. . . Harry?" she prompted him for a reaction.

"Uh, let me think about it," Harry hedged, feeling multiple kinds of relief.

She seemed disappointed with that response. "All right. But get back to me soon. I have to tell higher-ups what is happening with it."

Harry stood, feeling transfixed by his dilemma. "Can I go?" he finally asked. She waved him off, already sorting through the parchments on her desk.

Study was what Harry did that afternoon and evening. His trainer strongly suggested that everyone finish two chapters a night from the six books they were starting with. Harry began reading while taking copious notes as he went, then realized he was not going to have time. He read the chapters without taking notes, but with an extra effort at memorizing. He decided to sleep on what to do about his fees. It occurred to him now that he should have asked Tonks how much the fees were, so he could better work out a plan.

Snape came into the library as Harry sat jotting down a few things from the more complicated chapter on spell theory. "They have you working hard already," he observed.

"Yep," Harry said. "It isn't supposed to let up, either, although we only have training four days a week right now."

Snape bent down and read over his shoulder for a minute. "Need help with anything?" he asked.

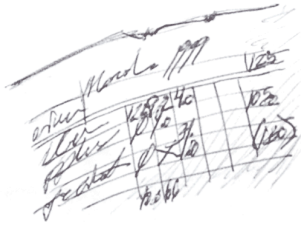
"Probably," Harry sighed. "But at the moment I am too overwhelmed to know what to ask." He shut the book and rubbed his eyes. "I hope I'm smart enough for this," he said, a little worried.

"You are, Harry," Snape said easily, resting his hand on Harry's back. "Give yourself time to adjust to a new kind of learning,"

Harry looked up at him and Snape raised a brow at his expression. Harry said, "I was just thinking how little you sound like yourself."

Snape stepped away, dropped onto the nearby leather lounger, and said, "It is summer holiday, Potter. I do not have to be Professor Snape right now."

Harry laughed at that, a bit harder than it probably deserved, but it felt good to do so.



Chapter 52 -- The Auror's Apprentice

The next day at training, Harry stood in the workout room with his fellow apprentices. He was amazed to feel very comfortable around them already. Rodgers came in, interrupting a story Aaron was telling about his grandfather trying to spell London Bridge into an arch on a bet. Rodgers was again flanked by the two senior apprentices, who looked unnaturally serious, and immediately sobered everyone's mood.

Rodgers picked up the chalk and rubbed it between his fingertips. "We are going to start with defensive counter-curses along with some incarceration spells, since stopping someone should be immediately followed by capturing them." He drew a diagram of arcs and circles on the board around a stick figure. "Who knows what this is?"

Aaron said, "It is a Titan block, kinda." Harry squinted at the diagram, having never seen spells drawn out that way.

"Correct," the trainer said, putting the chalk back down with a loud clack on the metal tray. "It is a modulated version of it. A properly modulated block or counter is indefeatable, which is how I want you all to be when you are finished here. But it takes a great deal of practice, a very great deal, even for those who think this stuff is easy." Here he gave each of them an eyeing in turn. Harry tried not to feel overly confident, but found it harder than expected to think that he might have difficulty. "Ladies first," Rodgers said, inviting Kerry Ann to the front.

Their trainer walked through the practical points of modulation and repeated a set of three drills with Kerry Ann until her spell dome showed signs of the distinctive nodes. It took over a half hour and she seemed very frustrated with herself by the end of it.

"Let's give it a go, then, shall we?" Rodgers suggested, stepping back to dueling distance and sending a weak Blasting Curse at her, which she countered and then another, which she did not, forcing her to stumble back when it struck. "Did you notice what happened there?" Rodgers asked. Kerry Ann shook her head. "I changed the attack, which we will cover eventually, but you have to change the counter to match or you will be worse than unprotected."

"I'm not sure what you mean," Kerry Ann admitted.

"You have to get a feel for it. And for the first blocks you learn to modulate it will take a lot of repetition. Then it will get easier."

Harry shuffled where he stood, thinking this sounded depressingly like Occulamency. Rodgers repeated the attacks about ten more times, resulting in alternating failures and successful counters.

"Next," he eventually said, indicating she could step aside. Seeing her bent head, he added firmly, "You are doing fine. Didn't I warn you this was difficult? Vishnu, you're next."

If Vineet did better, it wasn't by much. After many rounds, Rodgers said, "I think you are trying too hard. It is instinctive." He gestured for him to move aside and for Harry to come up.

Harry raised his wand and tried to produce a modulated Titan block. It took many tries and advice about how he should hold his wand and how much power to use before he could get the glowing nodes on the shimmering dome surrounding him. Kerry Ann and Aaron were discussing the fine points of what was happening with the spell, and Harry listened in for more help.

"Ready to try it?" Rodgers asked, stepping back.

Harry nodded and held his wand at ready. Rodgers raised his from the far side of the room, and Harry incanted the block as the Auror trainer started to speak the spell. Harry's first thought was that the incantation he heard didn't sound like a Blasting Curse, and second, he wondered why he was skidding backward on his knees.

The room had fallen silent after a gasp from Aaron. "You *thought* you were ready," Rodgers commented dryly. Harry's vision sparkled from the flash of his block exploding. He pushed himself to his feet and saw Rodgers raising his wand. "Again?" the trainer asked matter-of-factly.

Harry, his instincts for preservation coming to the fore, raised his wand, then quickly his hand. "Can I get a moment, sir?" he asked, since he had apparently lost his breath and had not yet regained it. Rodgers crossed his arms and waited with an impassive expression. Harry finally drew in a full, deep breath, straightened and signaled that he was ready. The next spell had a little less on it, and he blocked it all right, but it was still more power than the trainer had used on the others. It was repeated countless times as Harry tried to get a sense for tuning the block to meet each attack.

Finally, Rodgers signaled that he could step aside and that Aaron should take his place. Aaron looked a little worried but he did as well as any of them, which is to say, he needed a lot more practice. They worked on modulating two counter-curses, after which Harry felt bodily sore from getting knocked back so many times. If he had been using a normal block he would have done just fine, which made it all the more frustrating.

"We have time for one incarceration spell, a Prisoner Box. Aaron, stand there." He pointed near the chalkboard.

"Me, sir?" Aaron asked reluctantly, sounding a little childish.

"Yes," Rodgers confirmed, still pointing. Aaron trudged to the indicated spot and a moment later he was replaced by a little trunk, inside of which his shrunken face could be seen pressing against the barred opening in the side. A bit of his robe stuck out of the corner, unshrunken.

"Wow, you made that small," Kerry Ann said, resisting a wide grin.

Harry had never seen this spell and felt a little less picked on by their trainer since it wasn't him in the box. With a wave Aaron was released, red faced, which prompted Rodgers to say dismissively, "Get used to it . . . you will be practicing it on each other." He gestured at the larger part of the room. "Right now, in fact. Pair up."

Harry, wand in his pocket, waited while Vineet listened to the spell being explained. Then Harry stood still while a box slammed into existence around him, although it was fully as tall as him and very thin-walled.

"We need to give you spell-power exercises, Vishnu," Rodgers said while rubbing his hands together a bit fretfully. Vineet looked resigned, as though he didn't have much hope for that helping. Harry was put into a, thankfully, large box several more times before getting a chance to try the spell himself.

Remembering Vineet using him to show off his Eastern Arts, Harry shouted the spell and pointed, twitching the wandtip in a box shape. With a swirling whoosh his fellow apprentice was reduced to a red box about two feet high that looked suspiciously like the luggage Harry had taken to Switzerland, which he may have been thinking of as he incanted it. He looked to their trainer expectantly and received only a flat nod. Harry waved the spell away and Vineet stood straight.

"Perhaps we change partners?" the Indian suggested hopefully to the trainer.

Late that afternoon, Harry stepped out of the hearth at home. The house felt empty as he carried his bookbag across to the library. In the hall Winky came up from the kitchen and with hands rubbing nervously together, said, "Master out on errands."

"Thanks," Harry said to her. He dropped his bag inside the door, started to turn away and instead grabbed out one of the books about spell predestination and took it to the dining room, where he shucked his cloak and sat down to read with a groan. He read a chapter, then stretched his neck as he mentally reviewed the main points of it to help him memorize. His mind wandered a bit, resting briefly on Penelope before he realized that he had not seen Tonks that day to ask about the fee amount. He really needed to figure something out. Lord Freeland had offered to pay for his education, Harry remembered, but that felt the same as letting the Ministry waive the fee in the first place. His chest clenched at the thought of talking to Snape about it, so he settled his book back before him and started the next chapter.

Snape returned home to find Harry asleep at the table, his head cushioned on the crook of his bare arm. Harry woke to a light tug on the shoulder of his t-shirt. His neck complained when he lifted it.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Snape asked, sounding concerned.

Harry rubbed his eyes under his glasses. "Yeah, just a rough day." He pulled his sleeve up to look at his sore shoulder from the first hard spell; it was bluing now with bruises.

"What spell was that?" Snape asked.

"It was a Hopimi, our trainer said, which I hadn't seen before." Harry tossed his sleeve back down and ran his hand through his hair, trying to perk himself up.

Snape put his packages aside and leaned over the table. "It isn't that strong usually; didn't you counter it?"

Harry shut his book and pushed it aside. "It's complicated. We were learning the basics of modulation, you know, so the counter doesn't always hold and there was a lot of force behind the spell." Looking for sympathy, he added, "Our trainer is really tough on me."

Snape stood straight and gathered up his packages. "Good," he stated, with no hint of sympathy. Harry watched his guardian depart and stroked his shoulder gingerly.

* * *

The next day, they covered three more incarceration spells, one very similar to the web spell Harry had learned from Penelope, which allowed him to get it right on the third try, while his fellows were still struggling. This time he didn't expect any praise from their trainer, which was just as well.

After lunch, Rodgers stepped into the workout room and said, "More modulation practice. Potter, come up here."

With reluctant feet Harry did as he was told. Many bruises throbbed in unison as though urging him to disobey. He took his place and held his wand at the ready.

"Same as before," Rodgers said, and cast at him.

Again the spell took his breath away when it buffeted its way through the Counter and he almost fell to his knees, just catching his balance on magic-weakened legs. While he tried to take a breath, Rodgers voice said a little ruthlessly, "You knew what was coming. Try harder. Again."

Harry held up his hand to forestall, but too late, as the same spell was already coming at him. More desperate, and slightly disoriented, Harry brought up the counter as fast and forcefully as he could. This time, like a fluid, the shielding dome around him bent and arched rather than exploded. Bright spots on it slid forward and back. The attack wore off and his Counter faded. Harry sighed in relief at avoiding the hit.

"See how much better it works when you put some effort into it?" Rodgers asked snidely.

Harry considered arguing that he had been trying hard before, but he couldn't rightly argue with success. His wand hand jerked into position on its own, when Rodgers said, "Again. Let's make sure you've got it."

When Harry finally stumbled to the watching group, they looked uneasy, but Aaron, who went next, got a much easier round. Sympathetic half-smiles from his fellows made Harry feel a little better.

At the end of the day, Harry dragged himself home rather than follow Kerry Ann and Aaron to a pub as they urged. He wondered how they planned to finish the reading for the next day. One more day and then he would get a much needed break, he told himself as he put his books in the library. He found Snape in the drawing room reading long, red-edged parchments that Harry did not recognize.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked in the way of a greeting.

"Reading the minutes of past Hogwarts board meetings. Dull, but at the same time they sometimes make decisions or have discussions that we do not otherwise hear about." His voice dropped lower, sounding strategic. "Some we would like to know about."

Harry held back a chuckle at the notion of Snape applying his strategic conniving to something as mundane as school administration.

Snape re-rolled the gaudily decorated parchment and put it aside before asking, "How was your day? New bruises?"

Harry shook his head, "No."

"Your trainer has not eased up, I hope," Snape went on while he stacked more parchments into a beaten-up crate that resembled one Hagrid might have owned once, except that it was painted gold.

"No," Harry reassured him. "I just . . . got a little better," he admitted with reluctance, since it had necessitated getting beaten up a bit.

Snape turned from the crate and asked, snideness fully in force, "You learned to modulate a counter-curse in two days?" He almost sounded angry, his disgust was so complete. When Harry just shrugged, Snape stood up and came over.

"It was just a Titan," Harry explained.

"That is the easiest to modulate, but nevertheless," Snape huffed and stepped by him, shaking his head.

"Want to see it?" Harry eagerly asked his departing back.

"Perhaps later," Snape replied without turning around. "When I can trust myself to stick to a limited set of attacking spells."

Harry frowned slightly and took himself back to the library to read. Later, when Snape stepped into the doorway, Harry found himself ignoring him even though he had not given any prior thought to doing this.

After a pause Snape said, "Dinner is on the table."

Harry closed his book around a small leather marker and stood up without replying. As he tried to pass Snape, feeling as though he wanted to make a point by being reticent, he was grabbed up by the arm. Harry flinched as his tender bruises complained bitterly at being handled and was immediately released.

"Sorry," Snape muttered. Harry turned to him with a sigh, prompting Snape to say, "Certainly you are old enough to not require regular praise."

Something rebelled inside Harry. "I suppose not," he insisted anyway.

"If you do, perhaps it is time to grow up more."

Harry took a closer look at his guardian, who appeared soberly serious. The rebellion continued, solidified into arguments about his deserving some make-up consideration or just deserving in general, but he clamped down on them and frowned as pride came to his rescue. "Just as long as you aren't jealous," Harry snipped.

Snape turned away. "Dinner is ready."

Harry followed behind. At the door to the dining room, Harry relented, "I didn't mean that."

Snape stood beside the table set for two with covered silver platters in the center. "I do not like things to be too easy for you . . . it will lead you to be overconfident."

"It *wasn't* easy," Harry insisted as he dropped achily into a chair. "I got beaten up badly before I got it right. Rodgers pushed me into it out of sheer survival. He didn't do that to any of the others," he ended in complaint.

Snape still remained standing, gripping his chair back. "It sounds as though he expects more from you." Finally he pulled the chair out and seated himself. "Nothing amiss with that," he opined while lifting the lid of the largest platter to reveal pork chops.

* * *

Harry fell into the rhythm of his new program. Although he wasn't as good at remembering the details of their readings as Kerry Ann, he did better than Aaron, who did not seem to always do his assignments.

It was during the afternoon discussion section on Thursday that Rodgers announced that they were to return to the workout room for some spell drills so that the *Prophet* could take some pictures. At the groans he said, "P.R. is very important to us, get used to it. Put on some smiles; you are the darling class of the Ministry, after all."

"Potter is, anyway," Aaron quipped darkly.

"Scuse me?" Harry returned.

Rodgers scolded them both. "None of that . . . leave it in here." They followed him out in silence. In the workout room several photographers and reporters waited. Harry wished he and his fellows were not all wearing the black fuzzy one-pieces they wore during training. They looked like old-style Muggle swim wear except with a Ministry patch on the breast. "Here they are," Rodgers announced. "Our largest ever Auror apprentice class. Pair up and show them a few things, kids."

Harry paired with Vineet. They went through the basic blocking drill they had done every day that week. The *Prophet* photographer came over to photograph Harry, which he ignored as much as possible; although the flash was blinding him at the worst possible moments. When the drills were finished, Harry carefully placed himself between two of his fellows to make it hard to take a picture just of him.

Skeeter came over and gave him a chummy smile. "How are you, Harry?" She had her Quick Quotes quill out.

"I won't talk to you unless you put that away," Harry said firmly. His fellows looked at him a little sharply as did Rodgers.

She grabbed the feather out of the air and stashed it in her purse, from which she retrieved a normal quill. Not missing a beat, she asked, "How is training going?"

"Good. It's hard work," Harry replied smoothly. "The Ministry wants us all well-prepared for our eventual service."

Skeeter gave him a narrow look, which slid cleanly over to Rodgers. "What did you do, give them interview training the second day?" she complained. When Rodgers just shrugged innocently, she turned back to the apprentices. To Kerry Ann, she said, "How about you? Few witches in this department, how do you cope with that?" Kerry Ann was happy to go on about this for a while, until Aaron was shuffling nervously beside her. Skeeter asked Aaron if this was his calling, which he went on about for a few ego-filled minutes. She then asked Vineet about his home town in India and what they thought about his being here. After all this, she turned back to Harry. "How am I doing?" she asked impatiently.

Harry laughed. "Good. Better than expected." His fellows turned to him then, just catching on to his machinations.

She glared at him a bit before saying, "So, dating anyone?"

"No."

"Hm, why not?"

"None of your concern," Harry replied firmly.

She picked at her teeth with her pinky nail before re-poising her quill. "So what do you think your parents would say if they could see you now?"

"They would say this was too dangerous and they wished I would do something else."

"Really?" she asked in surprise.

"I'm pretty certain," he answered easily. "But they would let me do it anyway, I think, because I can't imagine doing anything else."

She looked at him closely before jotting that down. He gave her a nice smile and a flash bulb went off.

Rodgers announced that Minister Fudge wanted to give the press an overview of what the reorganized Auror office was hoping to accomplish now that Voldemort was no longer a concern. The other reporters and the *Prophet* photographer headed off with him. Skeeter pulled Harry aside. "You've changed," she opined in a quiet voice. "There's a story there alone. Sure you don't want to give me an interview?"

"You don't want to hold this over my head anymore?" Harry asked.

"I'm not making very good use of it, frankly," she commented as she smiled and waved to stall Rodgers, who had stopped in the doorway and looked back at them with concern. "Don't feel like relieving the collective guilt of the wizarding world?" Skeeter asked.

"They shouldn't be having that anymore."

"Potter, last time I asked you that question you nearly broke down on me," she pointed out. "Owl me if you change your mind." With a wide, patronizing smile, she finally followed their trainer out.

* * *

Harry went to the bookstore that weekend to order the next set of required books for his program. Two of them had very stodgy titles: *Magical Regulations: A History* and *Form and Policy for European Magical Administration*. Harry got sleepy just imagining cracking those in the evening. He also received a severe jolt at the price tag. The old wizard behind the counter at Flourish and Blotts waved half the pre-order price he usually insisted on when Harry realized how short his coin purse was.

"Pay when you pick up," he insisted kindly.

Harry considered going and getting more from his vault but he felt better dodging finding out exactly how little was left. Feeling a little stressed, he stopped at Weasley Wizard Wheezes instead of going to Gringott's. One of the twins was manning the counter and explaining to two little girls just how to arm their latest smoke bomb for timed release. They pocketed their purchases and snuck out whispering fiercely and giggling. Harry felt a little nostalgic watching them depart. He stepped out from behind the center rack of hard sweets and gum to be greeted warmly.

"Harry! Good to see you." The Weasley twin lifted a broom from beside the register and pounded the ceiling with it. "Oy! Fred! Come down!" he shouted upwards.

Pounding feet came down the back staircase. "Hey, Harry! Thought we had another emergency Sugarbeetle explosion, but it's just you," he said, shaking Harry's hand. He pulled a package off the rack behind Harry and offered it to him. "Try these--latest and greatest."

Harry opened one, smelled watermelon and popped it in his mouth. The backs of his hands turned green with stripes like a watermelon rind and the palms of his hands turned pink. It tasted good, though, like the real thing.

"Much better than the grapefruit," George commented, "which makes you look like a hag with kidney disease."

Talking wetly around the sweet, Harry asked, "How long before this wears off?"

"Five minutes or so. We've found that repeat business comes mostly from the lower-key stuff," Fred explained, straightening the remaining packages on the rack as he spoke.

"Sad but true," George added as though discussing real tragedy.

"So how is your apprenticeship, O Great Auror?" Fred asked.

"Not bad. My trainer has it in for me."

"The bastard," Fred commented. "Need anything for that?" he offered eagerly.

"No. I'll manage," Harry insisted, alarmed at the notion of making trouble at the Ministry. He popped another sweet when the color began fading from his fingertips. "I'll take a pack of these, though."

"Go ahead," Fred said. "No charge."

Harry thanked him as he put the plain brown sack of ten in his pocket. He didn't have any money on him anyway, he realized with a flinch.

* * *

Sunday, Harry took a break while the sun was shining to weed in the front garden. The back, an utter jungle of vines and nettles, he decided could stay in its wild state. It harbored more creatures than the front as well, and he felt fixing it up was tantamount to evicting them all, or that made for a nice excuse, anyway.

Elizabeth came by as he knelt, spreading out the tulip bulbs that had multiplied into tiny clumps resembling spring onion, too crowded to produce any flowers. "Hello," she said, leaning over the crumbling wall. She was smartly dressed, which he commented on. "Just had a recital," she explained.

"Oh," Harry said, feeling like he should have known that, although she would have had to have told him. "Would you like tea?" Harry asked, feeling suddenly and strongly like company.

Her face pulled into a nice smile. "Sure."

Harry laid the dug up bulbs into the shade of the ivy and tossed mulch over them before standing and brushing his hands on his trousers. "I'm glad you don't wear that hat anymore," she said as he led the way inside.

"Everyone knows I'm here," Harry explained. "It is useful still though when I'm out."

"You like to hide?" she asked as they walked through the main hall, with Harry wondering how he could have forgotten how pointed she was.

"I don't always feel like being mobbed," he said defensively as they sat down.

"Is it really a mob?" she asked doubtfully. Winky came in with tea just then--possibly record time.

"Took a half hour to get out of the Falmouth bleachers after everyone realized I was there, yeah." He took a biscuit while waiting for the tea to steep.

"They move on quickly though, I would think. You are so ordinary."

At that Harry crunched through his biscuit rather hard. "You make it sound like I'm boring," he accused her. She poured out tea for herself; it looked like it had steeped plenty, which meant Winky must have started it before Elizabeth arrived. He shook his head.

"I didn't mean that," she said sweetly. "Just that you don't seem to try to entertain everyone like some famous people do. Like this violinist I saw after a concert once, Alverna, his name was, kept a mob around himself by making jokes and keeping everyone in the conversation."

"Yep, I don't do that," Harry agreed, thinking of Lockhart.

* * *

The next week of training went much faster than the first and Harry marveled at how much he had learned already. Physical workouts had been added in the mornings before spell drills, and Harry slept soundly every night due to exhaustion and marveled at the luxury of it. Thursday during lunch he had an odd thought as he watched Aaron and Kerry Ann leaning together and talking. He realized with a flash of confusion that he had not seen Candide around at all this summer. Nor had Snape mentioned her, even once, that he could remember. During their afternoon sessions the notion would not leave him alone, nor would the sinking feeling that accompanied his mulling over explanations for it.

After their end-of-day assignments meeting, Harry headed off to Diagon Alley where he had seen a sign for the accounting firm she worked for. Part of him thought that he was doing this without enough forethought, but he couldn't stand to leave it until later.

The offices were on the first floor up a narrow staircase with rounded, sagging risers. At the top, rooms opened up off both sides of the landing. The one on the left was a good-sized group office. The door was open for the breeze and Harry looked in at the large tilted desks, the racks of four-foot-wide parchments rolled onto wooden rods, and the massive ledger books in tall, narrow slotted shelves. A lone woman jotted down numbers off a ledger before she closed it and handled it with practiced ease back to its slot. She gave the parchment to one of four owls that sat in a complicated two-sided cage in a wide window. The bird flew off.

Harry almost departed, but stopped when he noticed on one of the desks, the dismaying Demyse of Voldemort mug that he had autographed long ago. He stepped in instead.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked without looking up from hooking a large scroll over a rig on her desk just sized for it. Like a bizarre window shade, she pulled the narrow rod on the end down to hook it into metal loops at the bottom before attaching a handle for turning.

"I'm looking for Candide," Harry responded, fascinated by her spinning the long parchment to a particular section and starting to work on row upon row of narrow neat numbers.

"She's in a meeting with the boss. Should be out in a moment."

"I'll wait."

She picked up a battered, metal-edged ruler and used a brown ink quill to extend the grid lines with machinelike precision. The door opened on the far side of the room and as people meandered out of it, Candide said, "Harry?" in surprise. The first woman and the others from the meeting stopped and gaped at him.

"Can I talk to you a moment?" Harry asked her.

"Sure," she replied. "Uh, why don't we go across the hall," she said quickly, cutting a practiced path across the narrow aisles between the desks and their menacing hooks. At the doorway, she said, "I'll be right back, sir." A portly man in a three-piece nodded mutely in response.

The room across the hall held more storage for the massive scrolls. When she had closed the door, Harry said, "I'm sorry to bother you—"

"Goodness, don't apologize. It's good to see you. What can I do for you?"

Harry frowned lightly and tried to put his thoughts together. She plucked at his sleeve while looking over his clothes and asked doubtfully, "What is this?"

"I didn't change from training at the Ministry," he explained. At her questioning look he added, "Auror training."

She looked impressed. "Wow. Congratulations."

"Thanks. Look. I'm kind of cutting in where I don't belong, but you haven't been around, and, it's easier to ask you why that is."

She gave him a wry smile and rubbed her forehead. "I do miss being around," she commented with a strange reluctance. "But I don't want to get in the middle of things, Harry," she said.

"Severus asked you to go, didn't he?" Harry asked, fearful he already knew the answer to that.

She gave him a sad smile, which made Harry turn away in anger at himself. "It was more than that," she insisted, then hesitated. "I couldn't live with making things hard for you. Do you know how strange it was to imagine that I was giving the Hero of Wizardry nightmares?"

Harry closed his eyes and tried to take her words in. "I didn't want that much consideration," he complained in anger. He regrouped and said, "Are you still free? I mean . . . I know it's been a while . . ."

She smiled. "I don't get out much," she said, "so even after six months, I am, sad to say, still free." After a pause she added, "Have Severus owl me." Harry brightened, and she said, tweaking his arm, "You're a sweet thing, Harry."

He gave her a dark, dubious look, which would have withered some, but only made her laugh. She opened the door and lead the way out. The doorway of the opposing office was full of curious faces, crowded close. At Harry and Candide's appearance the eavesdroppers all tried in vain for casual poses. Harry ignored them and headed down the stairs, turning at the landing to say, "See you."

"Cheers, Harry."

"And here I thought you'd signed that mug yourself," Roberta said to Candide.

"That would be on top of many things you were wrong about," Candide returned levelly as they went back to work.

Mr. Fairsworth's face twisted a bit. "How do you know Mr. Potter?" he asked curiously as though seeking a networking opportunity.

"He lives with a friend of mine," Candide said.

"Which friend?" Roberta asked dubiously.

"A *very* good friend," she returned, giving Roberta a stern look.

Harry returned home after a stop at Gringott's, where he cleared out the remaining Sickles and Knuts, feeling better about leaving the remaining small stacks of gold alone. On the way, he plotted how to broach the topic of Candide. It was Thursday, he considered, as he conjured an idea. In the drawing room, firmly Occluding his thoughts, he said hello. Snape looked up from his correspondence and responded in kind. "I was thinking we should do something fun tomorrow since it's Friday," Harry suggested casually. "I need a break from studying."

"You have been rather shockingly diligent," Snape observed. "You have a suggestion?"

Harry shrugged honestly. "Going out to dinner, maybe?" He put his bag down and opened it to take out his books. Pretending to have just thought of it, he said, "I haven't seen Candy around this summer." Then he very carefully pretended that he maybe should not have said that, while appearing to think it over anyway.

Snape was studying him closely, rubbing his fingertips together. After a pause he said, "I doubt she would be available on such short notice."

"Oh," Harry commented distractedly, sounding just disappointed enough.

In measured speech Snape said, "I could owl her and inquire, though."

Harry shrugged lightly. "Sure. If you want to," he replied extra casually, although his heart rate was trying to give him away.

"Dinner, you are thinking," Snape clarified slowly.

"Sounds good to me."

"The place above the Inn in Hogsmeade is reputed to be nice," Snape said as though thinking aloud.

Harry almost suggested that he not go along, but then thought that would make his scheme too obvious, plus he really did want to go out; so he kept mum.

When Franklin returned midmorning the next day, Harry silently hoped Candide was smart enough not to say anything. Snape unfolded the small parchment as Harry held his breath. "She regrets that she is free and is very happy for the invitation," he stated slowly. "Does that make sense to you?"

Harry paused to think of an answer. "Maybe it would only make sense to another woman," he suggested.

"Perhaps," Snape said thoughtfully. "Nevertheless, we are meeting her at 7:00."

Harry turned back to his notes rather than have to Occlude his mind. "It will be good to get out," he observed neutrally with an upbeat tone.

"Yes," Snape agreed softly.

After lunch, Harry decided to take a look at his dress robes, which he would probably end up wearing that night. They were comically too small; it was as though they belonged to someone else. He went back down to the dining room, where Snape was still having tea. "Do I need dress robes for tonight? How fancy is this restaurant?"

"Quite, I think."

"I have to go early and pick up another set of robes. My old ones are *much* too small," he said in disbelief.

"Potter," Snape said snidely. "When was the last time you wore them?"

"Uh, Boxing Day."

"You are probably five inches taller than you were then," Snape commented "Maybe more." He set his cup down and stood up to face Harry. He looked down at him a moment. "Yes, I think you are taller than your father was."

"Really? I better stop growing soon then," he said and then observed, "I still feel short compared to you."

"I am much taller than average," Snape said thoughtfully. "We can go into Hogsmeade early and get you outfitted. And perhaps order some more of that marvelous tea."

At four o'clock, they took the Floo to the Three Broomsticks, which was busy enough to let them pass through unnoticed. At Gladrags the shop clerk gave Harry a dazzling smile.

"You're Harry Potter," the young lady said brightly.

"Yeah," Harry replied flatly. "I need a set of dress robes. For tonight," he added, and at that thought, felt grateful that he might have more pull than the average customer.

"Wow, well, I'll have to check with Mum, she does the alterations. Let's get you measured up first." He slipped off his jumper and stood up on a short wooden pedestal, moving as directed. "Right then," she said, when she finished. "What color?"

He glanced over at Snape's dark green robe as his guardian perused the far wall of the shop. "Dark blue, maybe?"

She grabbed a few off the rack and brought them over. "Filly?" she suggested. He shook his head. "Demure?" He nodded.

"That's a nice one," he said, indicating the one in her hand. It was velvet with quilted satin cuffs and collar. The color was that of a blue sapphire at midnight. Snape wandered back over to see it.

"It's a pricey one," she commented.

Harry froze. "How pricey?" he asked, suddenly acutely aware of the low value of the coins in his purse.

She looked at the tag, "Thirty-two galleons." She held it up, waiting for a decision.

That was a lot for a robe, even if Harry had that much money. He looked over at Snape and found himself in a very new position. "If it looks good on you, why not?" Snape asked.

The clerk unhooked it and handed it up to him. Harry slipped it on over his t-shirt and denims. She moved the nearby mirror so he could see himself in it. It did look good on him, but he hesitated, feeling very awkward about asking for money.

"Sharp," the clerk said. "You dating anyone?" she asked.

Harry gave her a dark look. Behind him, Snape said, "Not anyone in particular."

The clerk smiled at him more. "It only needs to be taken in on the sides and that can be done later if you want. You can come back and have that done, anytime. Or just owl it," she suggested with clear dislike of that option.

Harry still hesitated. Snape stepped over and looked him up and down. "You don't like it?"

"It isn't that," Harry said quietly, reluctantly.

Snape eyed him closely and said, "He'll take it. Cut the tag if you will . . . he will be wearing it out."

Harry frowned as he stepped down from the platform. The clerk used a spell to remove the tag and its tie. As she took it to the counter, Harry hung back, letting Snape follow her over to pay. On the way out she bagged his jumper and handed it to him with a glowing smile.

Out on the street, Snape observed, "We seem to have encountered a sensitive topic." It was, Harry thought; it made his insides knot up miserably, even as he appreciated the fierce blue movement of his new robes. When he remained silent as they walked slowly along the gravel edge of the stone street, Snape said, "You are remarkably low maintenance. An expensive robe now and then is really no matter."

With a small frown Harry said, "I'm going to need money for the next round of assigned books, too."

"Auror-assigned books are *really* no matter," Snape said firmly. They stopped at the corner where they would have to turn for Puddifoot's. A little impatiently, he prompted, "What is bothering you, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. He could just make out the collapsing roof of the Shrieking Shack over the other rooftop and he let it hold his gaze.

"Loss of independence, perhaps?" Snape inquired. Harry considered that, but just shrugged again. A pair of witches scuttled past, chatting simultaneously about frog canning recipes and *ignis fatuus* spells. When they were out of range, Snape said, "This is going to be an ongoing thing, I suspect. It would be unfortunate for it to cause this much distress every time."

Harry was not going to put his finger on his discomfort in the middle of High Street in Hogsmeade. He nodded to say that they should continue on to the teashop.

The teashop was empty and the bell on the door sounded too loud as they stepped inside. Snape took a seat at a table near the side wall. The proprietress came out and greeted them warmly. Snape ordered a pot, looking very out of place among the frills draped over every object.

After the tray arrived and the Madam departed again, Snape said. "This is the money left by your parents, correct, that is apparently running low?"

Harry nodded as he traced with his finger the letters *CD LUVS CC* carved in the tabletop. "It seemed like a lot a long time ago," Harry said, frustrated with himself. When he had first seen the piles he imagined that it couldn't run out. He sipped his tea; it was bitter, over-steeped. A glance upward showed him Snape waiting passively for him to say more. He thought about it longer, seeing that. His gut reaction to needing things paid for was to think of the Dursleys.

Harry put his cup down and sighed, "My aunt and uncle used money against me."

Snape straightened. "Ah," he said in understanding, sounding relieved.

Harry explained, "It was so nice to be free of that once I had access to my vault. They constantly complained how expensive I was, and how I was so lucky they had taken me in at all." Harry burned at the memory. "It was ludicrous. They

never bought me anything, not clothes or presents for sure. They barely gave me food." Harry cut his ranting short. "In any event . . ." he muttered before gulping more tea. This time he appreciated the bitterness.

Snape breathed in deeply. "It helps me to understand. Rest assured I will not use it against you."

"I don't even know how much you make," Harry pointed out, sounding difficult.

"Certainly more than enough to support two," Snape said firmly. "We'll put you on an allowance. That will spare you from having to ask." He took out a scrap of parchment and fetched a battered never-out quill from the counter. "What are your normal expenses?"

"Twenty for a few lunches out a week. That's in pounds."

"Goodness, what is Gringott's giving on those these days."

"Bad rates, that's one of the reasons I've been taking a lunch. It's been coming out to about a Galleon and half." He watched Snape write that down.

"And you've bought books at least twice already. The law books could not have been inexpensive."

"About twenty Galleons each round," Harry said with a wince.

"Harry," Snape insisted, "don't worry about it."

Harry went on, "The Minister wants to waive my fees, which are three hundred and sixty Galleons a year." At Snape's surprised look, Harry said, "Second most expensive apprenticeship among registered guilds . . . only alchemy costs more." Harry rubbed his fingernails. "I haven't decided what to tell them. But . . . I don't have any choice but to accept, I don't think."

"You really do not like taking anything from Cornelius Fudge, do you?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't like him."

"Would you rather accept it from Madam Bones?"

Harry scratched his cheek and considered that. "Yeah, I guess."

Dryly, Snape explained, "Hold on a week then . . . that is when the vote is. Minerva does not think he is going to survive it, and since she had taken over Albus' role of confessor to the Wizengamot, I expect she would know." When Harry did not reply, Snape returned to his list. "Fare for the underground, evenings out, presents for girlfriends?"

Harry averted his eyes, embarrassed. "The first two."

"Could easily be the third, if the shop clerk was any indication." He added the list together. "Rounded up, about eight Galleons a week."

"That much?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Save it if you do not need it." Snape said dismissively.

"Thanks," Harry muttered and dropped his gaze to his cup. He chafed at the situation, but realized it would be years, literally, before he was making his own money.

They drank tea in silence with Harry tapping his crossed feet against the chair leg in an unusual display of fidgeting. When it was time to leave for the restaurant, Snape arranged the empty cups on the small tray with the teapot. He started

to stand, then hesitated and leaned back in his chair with something resembling a sigh. "There are few things I would begrudge you, Harry. Frankly, you do not ask for much." Harry fidgeted more, really wishing the situation were simply different, but the only way to make it so would be to ask for money from someone else or from the Ministry.

"Thanks," Harry said again.

"I think you will get used to the situation," Snape said as they stood to leave. "As tangled as it is for you, apparently."

At the Middle Inn they met Candide, who was waiting for them at the top of the stairs outside the small dining room. "So good to see you two," she said with emotion, giving them each one-armed hugs. "Wow, you look smart in that," she said of Harry's robe.

They were shown to a table along the back wall below a gaudy brass cherub sconce that matched the shiny brown tablecloths. Candide told the waiter that they would start with champagne and he bowed and disappeared. "What have you two been up to?"

"I've started the Auror's program," Harry offered, mostly to get things straight in their ruse.

"Wow," she said, giving the same response as before. "Impressive. How long does that take?"

Harry sighed, "Three years."

"How is it so far?" she asked brightly.

"Good. A ton of work, plus I get picked on by our trainer."

She grinned crookedly. "Your trainer doesn't underestimate you, you mean?"

"Something like that," Harry said stiffly.

Champagne arrived and as they clinked their glasses, Harry had a feeling of being in just the right place. It was an unusual feeling, one he longed to capture and keep in a bottle for later if that were possible.



Chapter 53 -- Desperately Seeking Something

Unfortunately, Harry's mood from the nice dinner with his guardian and Candide was destined to be spoiled already the next morning. After their long night of conversation, closing down the Middle Inn, Harry didn't rise for breakfast until late morning. Snape was having coffee and reading the post at the table. He gave Harry an odd look as Harry pulled out the opposite chair.

"What is it?" Harry asked, unable to think what might be wrong.

Snape's lips crooked into a dark smile. He reached into the pile of letters and tossed over a magazine. "Candide owed this over after I informed her last night that we did not subscribe."

Harry stared at it, chest tight for a breath. It was him on the cover, nearly full size. The picture must have been taken during the press session at the Ministry, as he was wearing his Auror's workout outfit. Fortunately, with his face so big in the picture, only the collar and shoulder were visible. He swallowed hard and pulled it closer. *Witch Weekly's Most Eligible Bachelor* the headline proclaimed below.

"So I assume you did not know about that," Snape intoned. Plates appeared before them and he took up a butter knife as he added, "If you are looking that grim about the picture, I do not suggest you read the article."

"Who wrote it?"

"Who else?"

Harry, with an angry motion, flipped the magazine open and located the correct page. Across from an advertisement for Danzer's Dazzling Hair Cream, *Makes your locks sparkle*, was Skeeter's article. Hunch-shouldered and frowning, Harry began reading.

Harry Potter continues to amaze the wizarding world with his ongoing accomplishments but the one accomplishment he apparently cannot manage is locating a suitable witch to settle down with.

"I could have told her it didn't have to be a witch," Harry complained.

"I do not think their readership would like to hear that, frankly," Snape pointed out as he refilled both their coffees.

"And what is this 'settle down' nonsense?" Harry continued to grouse.

So what is Mr. Potter looking for in a potential mate, one may ask? When interviewed, his former school chums were eager to tell us.

"Oh, Merlin, whom did she talk to?" Harry muttered aloud.

"Would you like something stronger added to your coffee?"

Harry shook his head, distracted by continuing to read.

Ms. Pansy Parkinson assures us that Mr. Potter is only looking for the same thing as any young man.

Harry put his head in his hand and hoped the average *Witch Weekly* reader didn't read too much into things.

"He's always been attracted to the odd sort. Girls that do their own thing rather than follow the crowd. At school, it was always the brainy, deep, boring kind that he went for. I assume he hasn't gotten any more interesting since then." Mr. Potter's fellow schoolmate Portny Wereporridge says Harry always liked girls who are good at Quidditch or ones that speak a foreign language.

Oddly, parts of that weren't untrue, Harry considered. He cringed though, through the last part.

So ladies, are you of this sort? This reporter would like to hear from those readers who think they are the perfect match for Most Eligible Bachelor and Hero of the Year; let's call him still, since this year's hasn't been announced. Send me an essay and the best will be printed in this very spot! Perhaps a lucky one here can capture the most elusive of wizard hearts.

"What potion would make someone write this way?" Harry asked in an exasperated tone. "Flowery Befuddlement Draught or Swineherder's Seductive Swill?" he suggested, growing more annoyed rather than less. He watched Snape suppress a grin, dropped the magazine aside, and went back to his cold breakfast. Something teased at him though and he looked over at the post stacked high beside Snape. "So that pile . . . it isn't extra large because . . . ?"

"Would you like me to lie?" Snape asked.

Harry's shoulders fell. The pile was not *that* big, really. "Could be worse, I suppose. Although it will be weeks before it dies down."

"It is worse," Snape said casually. "There is a box by the window." He gestured over his shoulder. When Harry pounded his head lightly with his fist, Snape said, "I do apologize."

"For not blocking the owls?"

"For ever believing you could bask in this."

Harry shook his head disbelievingly, then cast his mind back a long, long way. "Ah, Mr. Potter, our new *celebrity*." Harry quoted, imitating just enough. Snape pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. Harry said, "First thing you ever said to me."

"I do remember that," Snape said, sounding regretful.

"Course, I was sure you were dark, you made my scar burn the first time you looked at me. But it wasn't you, it was Quirrell. You just happened to be next to him."

"I did not just happen . . . I was keeping an eye on him." Snape's brow furrowed and his gaze went far away. "True, we did not start out well, but you also aggravated me by not paying attention in class the first day."

"What do you mean?" Harry retorted. "I was copying down every word you said."

Snape looked undone. "You were?"

"Want me to fetch my notes?"

"No. I believe you," he said grimly. "And I do apologize. But . . . you should probably open your post."

Harry pushed his plate aside, appetite reduced after reading the article, or maybe it was last night's five-course dinner. "Yes, Professor Lockhart," Harry said and stood to fetch the box.

* * *

Harry was sorting letters on and off between reading his assigned texts and practicing spells on the fireplace irons when the door knocker sounded. He went to the door and found Elizabeth there, fringe wet from the hard rain. When she stepped inside, he took her yellow slicker and hung it up with the cloaks. "Come on in," he said easily.

"I hope this is an acceptable time for a visit?" she asked.

"I'm just studying," Harry assured her as he led the way to the dining room. "Oh, and sorting letters," he added darkly. She stopped at the site of the piles on the table. "Have a seat," Harry urged her. "I'm sure Winky will bring tea in a minute."

She sat down before the pile of colorful, scented letters, adjusted the top one to read the address, looked like she wanted to open it, but let it go and sat back with a sigh. The sound of it caught Harry's attention. Tea arrived as expected. He waited for Winky to depart before returning to figuring out that signal. Elizabeth was casually turning a few of the stray photographs her way.

"She's pretty," she opined about a woman with quite a head of Auburn hair who winked and waved from a pastoral scene of trees and grass.

Harry shrugged. He didn't disagree, but he also didn't know the woman at all, so it was just an empty image. Maybe Elizabeth saw more in it than he did. She certainly sighed again as she pushed it back into the folds of the letter it had fallen out of. After straightening and sipping her tea, she asked politely, "How is your training going?"

"Good. How are your music lessons?"

"Good. I am practicing for a concert in two weeks. The piece needs a lot of work," she added, sounding a bit tired at the notion.

"I've never heard you play."

"You don't have a piano."

"True."

They talked idly until lunch, when Elizabeth realized that she was late for an appointment. At the door as she put on her slicker, she said, "Come over tomorrow and I'll play what I'm working on."

"Okay," Harry said.

"At three then," she confirmed. She flipped up her hood and gave a wave behind her as she stepped into the garden and the rain.

Back inside the hall, Harry stopped by the drawing room. "Do you think I'm ready for the Apparition License Examination?"

Without looking up, Snape replied, "Probably."

Harry smiled. "Brilliant. Maybe I'll try to schedule for next week one day after my training."

"An excellent idea," Snape responded dryly, still looking for something in a stack of parchments.

Harry left him to it.

* * *

Harry knew where the Peterson house was, but had never been there. It was just beyond the small train station, a white house fronted by two-story balconies with white railings, everything very neat around the lawn. He pressed the fancy brass button beside the door and heard a musical chime from far inside. Mrs. Peterson answered the door after a minute, and gave him a rather glowing smile of recognition.

"Harry dear! Come in, come in," she urged, gesturing broadly. Harry stepped inside and immediately thought he should remove his shoes given the large expanse of white carpeting that flowed over every visible floor. Mrs. Peterson brusquely waved him off from doing so and led him into the back part of the hall, which opened wide with a curving row of bay windows, everything painted white, including the imposing piano angled to catch the window's light on the music. "Gerald, come say hello," Mrs. Peterson admonished someone in a side room that resembled an office.

A tall, balding man with black-rimmed glasses stood up and came over. "Ah, the young man I hear so much about," he said, though it did not sound as though he appreciated this, necessarily. Harry shook his hand. Mrs. Peterson disappeared up the wide curving staircase, calling for her daughter.

Harry put on a neutral face as he found himself getting a rather close looking over from Mr. Peterson. The man put on a half-smile that did not make it to his eyes. "The witches in this house tell some very strange tales about you," he finally said. "Especially out of that funny old newspaper my wife reads sometimes."

Uncertain how much the Muggle father of his friend knew, Harry said, "I don't know what stories they've been telling, sir."

Unless Harry could not read the man correctly, he seemed to think this response grudgingly acceptable. Upstairs, foot-steps could be heard approaching, deadened as though on thick carpet. Mr. Peterson nodded and said quickly, "If you plan to spend much time with my daughter, you and I will have to have a long talk." He backed off then and appeared generally amiable in the next instant.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied, feeling he was running into someone with Vernon Dursley's sense of the world, although this man must be more open-minded than his uncle if he actually married a witch.

"Hi," Elizabeth said brightly as she fairly bounded down the stairs before spying her father there. She slowed and, with more aplomb, led Harry to the sitting area by the piano. She sat down to play and began with no preamble. Harry sat back in a very comfortable, overstuffed chair and listened as quiet notes were interspersed with loud pounding chords. Eventually the music shifted into a confusing, loud playing that made him think there must be two pianos being played at once. He sat up and leaned forward, but he could see nothing more than Elizabeth's hair tossing as she played. He stood up and came around the side to watch her hands moving over the keys, trying to catch the melodies without much luck.

Elizabeth finally stopped and lowered her hands slowly, the piano resonating with discordance that only faded slowly. "That was the first movement," she said, resetting the music book before her to a new page. "Want to hear the second?"

He nodded but asked, "What was that?"

"Faust battling Mephistopheles. The composer is Rachmaninov."

Harry thought the music made more sense, knowing that. "Ah," he said, noncommittally.

"Rachmaninov did not tell the first pianist to play it what it was about," Elizabeth informed Harry.

"What is it called?"

"*First Piano Sonata*," she replied, and let her fingers trail over the keys as though playing a sequence from the music.

"A plain name for something that involves such a big battle," Harry said.

"Yes," she replied, setting her hands back on the keys. "I think he was hiding it. This next part has more of Mephistopheles and witches, as Rachmaninov knew them." She started to play again and the music became even more confused to Harry's ear, as though the piano were being played almost randomly. Between page turnings, Elizabeth was intent on what she was doing, hands moving rapidly up and down, her head jerking with each sequence. She made an error, fingers stuttering, which Harry could only confirm by her grimace, although she did not pause for it. Nor for the next. At a slow spot, she said, "I have to work on those bars."

The slow spots intermingled again with loud ones. "That is Gretchen," Elizabeth commented, which didn't clear anything up for Harry, who resisted shifting from one foot to the other for fear of distracting her playing, although the song went on a very long time to remain very still throughout. As the piece went on, it only grew more disturbed and finally it ended on that distraught note. Elizabeth sat back, looking for an appraisal.

"Wow," Harry said, for lack of anything more meaningful. His ears were ringing along with the wood of the piano.

She frowned. "I cannot get it all, though; it's too hard," she said, closing the lid over the keys with a padded thud. "I shouldn't have picked such a difficult, long piece, but it is too late to change. I'll have to simplify some of harder parts and some people will notice at the concert, but most won't." She ran her hand over the lid as though to dust it. "It is better to play slowly and accurately; that will sound faster than playing faster but poorly." She stood, her fingers still lingering on the white wood. "I have to work on it more. But it was good to have you come; it made me play all the way through."

They looked at each other in silence until Harry said, "You are really good at playing."

She shrugged. "I started at the age of four; one would think. . . Would you like tea?" she interrupted herself.

"Sure," Harry said. She led him to the front of the house, past her father's office. Harry was glad the man didn't look up from his work as they walked by.

* * *

Tuesday afternoon, Harry raced to the lifts after his training session was over. He distractedly returned a smile to the two chubby wizards in the lift who were carrying a battered metal crate that thumped from the inside.

"Illegal dragon kept as pet," one of them explained.

"In the Docklands, if you can imagine," the other went on.

"Like we could afford another Great Fire, ya' know," the first said disgustedly as Harry stepped out at level six.

Walking quickly, he made it to the Apparation Test Center just two minutes late. The small room was crowded and everyone turned when he entered. The greetingwitch took his name and told him to wait in queue for Group E.

"Hey, Harry," a familiar voice said. Harry stepped over to wait beside Colin Creevey, a little embarrassed to be taking the test with someone a year behind him at Hogwarts. Colin had his camera. "Would you take a photograph of me when I'm taking my test?"

"I'll do it for you, dear. You should have let me bring the ordinary camera," a woman sitting beside him said. "Oh, dear me, it's Harry Potter," she then blurted.

"This is my mum," Colin explained. Harry shook hands with the petite, wide-eyed woman. Colin then asked, "Do you want me to take one of you getting your test?"

"No, thanks," Harry said, thinking of being distracted by the flash.

"You can go ahead of me, if you want," Colin then solicitously offered.

Harry adjusted his cloak tighter around his workout piece. "No, that's all right really." He watched another Hogwarts student, Prissy Pritchard, as she was instructed to stand in the corner of the room. The testwitch backed up, clipboard in hand and observed as Prissy disappeared with a *pop!* Prissy came in the door to Harry's left and went back over to the witch as she noted something on her clipboard and accepted the wooden dowel Prissy handed her. Prissy disappeared again and again walked in the door with another rod, this one metal. After that, she was dismissed and another witch, middle-aged with homespun clothes, was called up and approached uncertainly.

"Group E," the greetingwitch announced. Harry accepted the clipboard with the written test and leaned against the wall to complete it. Colin gave him an energetic thumbs-up when Harry looked his way; it made Harry feel old for some reason. A few minutes later, Harry handed back his test sheet. The greetingwitch scored it quickly and with a patent smile, handed him a dowel and told him to wait in the next queue. Harry sighed and moved to stand against the wall beside another row of chairs.

Finally Harry's turn came 'round. The testwitch seemed confused to see him but, after fumbling with hooking a new comment sheet onto her clipboard, told him what to do. He was to walk down the corridor to the end where the floor was painted orange, leave the dowel in the tin there and come back. Harry did so. He then easily Apparated back to fetch the dowel and walked it back to the testwitch. She then gave him a list of four locations he might know in London, of which he had only been to St. Mungo's.

"You know the Apparation incoming area, in the cellar?" she asked.

"Uh, I've been there, but I wasn't really paying attention," Harry admitted, remembering the lift from the alley to the cellar. He had been carried most of the way, he remembered with a twinge.

She frowned. "Never been in the top o' the Tower, eh? Or Canary Wharf?" When Harry shook his head, she asked, "Do you think you can get to St. Mungo's all right? Don' want you trying if you can't."

Harry felt that he did not want to get Splinched during his test either. "How about the alley beside. I'll fetch the dowel by walking in. That I'm sure I can do."

"All right then, but remember you have a four-minute time limit," she said, flipping a miniature hourglass attached to the top of the clipboard.

Harry stepped back into the corner and closed his eyes on the many curious, watching faces in the room. It had been years since he was in the alley. He imagined the wall, where it was relative to the streets on either end. He had to think of the permanent things, not the empty wooden crates or the rubbish bins. Imagining his usual getting crushed into a ball of paper, he willed himself to the alley.

A car horn blared as Harry's feet met the pavement. He quickly looked back and forth, but it had echoed in from the street. Exhaling, he stepped around to the visitor's entrance rather than use the emergency one. After weaving his way through the waiting area and begging off that he was going to be late he rushed to the door to the cellar, grabbed up a metal dowel, and hurriedly Apparated back to the orange end of the corridor. Harry's elbow whacked the wall as he arrived, almost disastrously. Hurriedly he suppressed his relief at the near miss and quickly stepped back to the testing room.

"Just in time," the testwitch said.

"The St. Mungo's reception room was crowded and I don't get through a crowd quickly," Harry explained.

"Oh, yes," she said, sounding unsympathetic and then some. But she made a few notes and handed him a folded parchment to take back to the desk in the other corner.

"Thanks," Harry said, glowing with the notion of success.

She grudgingly gave him a half smile. "I speak Portuguese, you know," she offered coyly.

Harry turned back, requiring a moment to understand that. "Argh," he whispered, turning back around and striding to the corner desk.

Freshly written license in hand, Harry arrived in the hearth at home. As he brushed off the usual powdering of ash, he wondered if he could get eventually get enough distance to skip the grimy Floo to come home. He found Snape in the drawing room, sitting at the small marble table having little glasses of something with Candide. She gave him a friendly greeting when he barreled in. Harry composed himself completely and folded the thick parchment away into his pocket.

"Is that your license?" she asked eagerly.

"Yeah," Harry said, shrugging. "It was no problem."

"Can I see?" she asked, still undaunted.

Harry pulled it out and handed it over. As she *oobed* a little, he reminded himself that he had been taking the test with a group of recent sixth-years. She handed it back and he took out his old knitted wallet and put it in there.

"His other license is much more interesting," Snape said, peering over his glass at Harry with an odd sparkle in his black eyes.

Curiously, she asked, "Which one is that? Did they give you an Auror's Apprentice one?"

"No," Harry said, reopening the metal clasp on the wallet and pulling out his Animagus identification. "I think he means this one," Harry explained, trying unsuccessfully to read his guardian.

She accepted it and jumped a bit in surprise as she studied it, making Snape smirk. The Ministry had insisted that another person be in the photograph of him for size, which did make for a startling image of man and beast, even as small as it was. "That is your Animagus form?" she breathed, reading it over again.

"Yep. Want to see it?" Harry offered, prepared to change right there.

"No," Snape stated. "Out in the hall, if you must," he quickly amended.

She stared at the photograph again, making Harry assume his wings were flapping, which they sometimes did. She handed it back and stood after downing the rest of her drink. In the voice of someone whose poker hand has been called, she said, "Sure, I'd love to see it."

Snape was suppressing a small smile as Harry led the way out to the hall. Harry stepped away and transformed on the spot, held it only a few seconds, then changed back. It had grown very easy to do that.

"That's really something, Harry," she said, clearly amazed. "Very . . . red."

"Yes," Snape drawled, "And as long as he takes his broom for long flights, an actually useful form."

Candide stayed for dinner and Harry just escaped the card playing with the excuse that he had to study. The sound of conversation punctuated by the occasional laughter of Candide kept Harry from completely taking in his assigned reading. He disliked that it bothered him; they clearly got along well, and Snape really did deserve have someone.

* * *

The next day after morning drills, Tonks came in and said to them, "Want to go watch the vote? Should we take the kids to the gallery?" she then asked Rodgers.

Rodgers scrunched his face in thought, then said. "Sure. I think we're getting a new boss, so we might as well be the first to know."

Harry, who didn't normally pay much heed to the doings of the Minister of Magic, unless the man had it in for him, was nonetheless eager to watch the vote.

"Bones has indicated that she is mounting a challenge," Tonks said as they all tramped their way down the corridor to the lifts. They got off a level early and walked to the gallery entrance, where many people were queued and appeared to be arguing their way in.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley said as they reached the group. Harry greeted him and recognized some others such as Skeeter close to the heavy wooden door, which was propped open just an inch, or perhaps Skeeter had her foot in it. Mr. Weasley explained, "They haven't let anyone in yet. Still arguing over *who* should get in. Maybe I'll see what's happening." He pushed his way into the crowd.

A balding man with a goatee, wearing a set of fancy, though wrinkled, robes turned away from the door in frustration. "I need a smoke," Harry heard him say to Skeeter in an American accent. He pushed his way out of the crowd and fumbled in his pockets as he glanced up at Harry. His eyes did the usual fast blinking as he took Harry in. The man glanced back at Skeeter, then with a quickly narrowing expression put on a small grin and stepped closer to Harry. He took out his notepad and said quietly, "So, Mr. Potter, are you hoping Minister Fudge survives the no-confidence vote?"

Harry considered the almost snakelike quality of the man's eyes and said, "No comment." Tonks glanced across at him from her whispered discussion with Rodgers but did not give Harry any indication she cared what he said.

The man laughed a bit derisively and chewed his lip, clearly not dissuaded by that. "How about a different topic, then? Most observers feel that you haven't been adequately compensated for your rather extraordinary services to the Ministry. How would you react to that?"

"I didn't want anything beyond eliminating Voldemort," Harry pointed out.

Speaking low and quick as though he had some inside knowledge, the man said, "You aren't real, Mr. Potter." He made a thoughtful noise and asked, "What do you think of Amelia Bones?"

Harry shrugged and the man's eyes narrowed as he licked his lips. "That would be an 'I feel she would make an acceptable Minister of Magic,' then?" He spoke as though the two of them knew each other very well and shared old secrets.

Harry felt as though he had stepped into a duel that he didn't know the rules for, and so hesitated replying. The door to the gallery closed with a boom and Skeeter stalked over easily, the pressed bodies instinctively making a path for her. "Harry!" she greeted him warmly, making Harry feel strangely rescued.

"Ms. Skeeter," Harry greeted her a bit darkly, still unhappy about her most recent article.

"So, you've met Timothy Olsen. You have my condolences," she quipped. "He writes for the Salem Gazette, biggest wizard paper in the States." Skeeter put her arm around her colleague's shoulder. "Although the Bay Howler, is catching up, I hear." She poked the man in the ribs and released him in favor of Harry. "So. You. I get your photograph full size on the most popular magazine in Wizarding Britain and not even a note of thanks."

Harry favored her with a scathing look.

"We should run an exclusive series on you, Harry," she went blithely on. "My colleague here has been interrogating me nonstop about you since he arrived. His paper would pay well for an interview."

Harry managed a mild grimace to cover his reaction to the notion of earning Galleons. "No, thanks."

She plucked lightly at his cloak before straightening it for him. "Don't answer so quick. If you don't sit for an interview, he'll have no choice but to write his article based on my notes. And my notes go way back."

Harry frowned and ignored the eager look Olsen was trying hard to submerge. "Let me think about it," Harry replied.

She grinned widely before her head jerked at the sound of the gallery door opening. She leaned close and quickly said enticingly, "We can even do it at your place, safe territory."

"I said I'd think about it."

Olsen gave him a slightly hungry look before he followed Skeeter inside. Tonks was gesturing for them all to follow as well. Harry ended up on the end of the front gallery bench with Vineet beside him and Tonks standing behind him. Harry tried to offer her his seat, but she explained that they had been allowed in because she had claimed to be on duty, and indeed her eyes took in the gallery with a practiced eye for trouble. "Keep an eye on the American," Harry grouched. She patted him on the head from behind in response.

The Wizengamot convened in all their plum-colored glory with lots of stodgy language from a man wearing a tall black pointed hat who read from an oversized parchment. Behind him sat McGonagall, her glasses perched on her nose and her hair pinned up with something that sparkled in the globe lights. Harry found Amelia Bones two seats away to the left, looking eager and nervous, her hands rubbing together slowly on the bench before her.

Another wizened old man approached as the speech wound down and picked up another identical hat from the table beside the podium and donned it as he waited. This man seemed serious and nearly vibrated with restrained anger; Harry wondered who he was. When he gained the podium, he straightened the odd hat and said, "I, as oldest member of the esteemed and exalted Wizengamot, have been given the long-overdue honor of making the motion that we hold a vote of no-confidence in the current leadership. My reasons are many, as you are all aware from my repeated assertions before this body. I will not repeat them all now beyond the single most persuading argument that the current Minister of Magic is not fit for this position."

Harry glanced down at the floor where Fudge sat with his arms wrapped over his round middle, staring hard at the speaker and not giving away anything. Percy sat beside him, poker-straight, holding numerous folders primly in his lap.

The old man went on, "He has been involved in questionable monetary transactions which, although they were meant for a good cause on the surface, placed him in an untenable position with those of questionable background. He did nothing to hold the Ministry free of corruption and instead held it in inaction at our darkest hour. So . . . in the interests of the future of wizardry in England I am compelled to submit that we require more suitable leadership."

"Seconded?" A voice rang out.

There was a pause, then McGonagall raised her hand. Fudge looked startled by this, then sent daggers her way with his eyes. *Just try something*, Harry dared him from his perch in the gallery. The old man placed the hat beside the other one and retook his seat.

"Dissenting arguments to the floor," the voice said. Harry could not place it, it rang out so.

The hats sat untouched. Fudge moved as though to stand, then sat back, resignation in his pose. Harry felt disappointed; he wanted to hear him try to defend himself. "If it were this easy . . ." Harry whispered regretfully.

A familiar-looking goblet was removed from a small trunk beside the podium. A general shuffling occurred among the assembled as they pulled out slips of paper and wrote on them before folding or rolling them tightly. The cup was passed from hand to hand, row to row, flaring each time a slip was dropped inside. It sputtered as it was carried back down to the floor and placed on a pedestal beside the podium. Within seconds a slip burst from it, to be caught easily by the bearer.

Reading aloud, the man read, "Yeahs, thirty two, Nays, twenty. The Yeahs have it."

Harry was amazed that, although no one publicly supported Fudge, the vote was still that close. Fudge stood slowly, looking as though he wished to storm from the room. Instead he stepped down to the podium, considered the hats, but then waved them off as though disgusted by them.

"I'll keep this short, since you all clearly wish to move on to other orders of business. I have served this government my whole career and have been honored to do so. In this instance I believe I have been unduly criticized." He pounded his hand on the podium once. "I held this Ministry together at a time when competing interests were intent upon tearing it apart. The enemy was within as well as without and it wasn't clear who was truly with us. I choose to believe the best of some who proved to be against us. I won't apologize for that. I refused to follow the nay sayers who insisted the situation was worse than it appeared, but that was my prerogative, I believe, to lead us forward, not backward.

"If this body wishes to go backward, so be it."

He tried to remove a hat he hadn't donned, waved in annoyance at this, and climbed up to an empty spot on the end of a bench and took a seat with the rest of the membership. There was no place nearby for Percy to sit, so he stood against the wall at the top of the steps.

McGonagall stood and came down to the podium. "Since the floor is open for nominations for Minister, I nominate Amelia Susan Bones." This was immediately seconded. There was another nomination for an Alfred Arbuthnot that was also seconded. A third nomination was not seconded. A back and forth debate ensued with various members arguing the merits of each candidate, although it seemed as though the speakers didn't entirely believe what they were saying or that their statements were too rehearsed. Harry stifled a yawn as this went on for rather a long time.

Tonks leaned over him and whispered, "They have to make it look like they're taking it seriously."

"Ah," Harry replied.

Eventually, another vote was called and the Goblet of Fire was again pressed into service. This time it was overwhelming, with only one vote for Arbuthnot, which Harry suspected was Fudge's, which meant that Arbuthnot hadn't even voted for himself. Amelia Bones was sworn in with her hand on the largest crystal ball Harry had ever seen, the event was duly noted, a bit lengthily, by several speakers, the scribe's notes were given some special honor involving a thick wax seal and storage in a golden casket, after which, the meeting adjourned.

As they waited for the gallery to empty, Harry watched the members of the Wizengamot chatting on the floor. McGonagall looked to be congratulating Madam Bones. Others stood around them, waiting to do the same. Harry felt a keen satisfaction in watching Fudge's back as he left the room. Percy hung back, watching the proceedings from beside the door. He looked as though he wished to be more deeply involved, but did not approach the cluster around the new Minister.

With the gallery nearly empty, it had quieted enough to hear what was being said. McGonagall urged Bones toward the door with the words, "There is quite a lot of Press waiting for a word, I believe."

"Ah, you arranged that, I assume?" Madam Bones said coyly.

McGonagall looked around the floor, gave someone a smile, then glanced up at the gallery and seemed surprised to find Harry there. Harry gave her a little wave, which she returned. Bones turned at McGonagall's motion and glanced up as well. Her lips appeared to say, "Mr. Potter." She then leaned over to a man beside her with a notepad and spoke something to him before she swept from the room.

Back in their training area, Harry and the other apprentices started in on a short review of their readings before breaking for lunch. After lunch, Tonks pulled Harry aside and gave him a small scroll bound with red ribbon. "You've been summoned," she said.

"I've been what?" Harry asked as he untied the message. Inside was a request that he be at Minister Bones' office the next day at 10:00 in the morning. "Oh," Harry said. "What is this about, do you suppose?"

"I can't guess, Harry. Could be about any manner of things."

"Come on, Tonks," Harry cajoled, "I need some help here."

She laughed. "Harry, you don't need any help, honestly. Just be yourself. That's always my motto."

Harry held back on mentioning that, during the course of their short conversation, Tonks' hair had turned three different colors. "Easy for you to say," Harry said to her departing back.

* * *

Harry combed his hair a little more carefully the next morning and put on a nicer robe, after deciding that he did not want to spend the day in his dress robes. He could not show up to meet the Minister in his workout suit, so he might have to change back and forth; it depended on how they made up their training today.

At breakfast, Harry was fidgeting a bit.

"What is the matter?" Snape asked when Harry dropped his teaspoon loudly after stirring honey into his tea.

Harry shook himself and converted his uncertainty into impatience. "What do you think the Minister would want with me?"

Snape stared at him with a lowered brow, then sighed. "I should have learned by this point to expect anything from you, but apparently I have not." He put down the *Prophet* and said, "You have a meeting with the Minister of Magic, I presume." Harry fished the small scroll from his pocket and tossed it onto the table. Snape fingered it open and glanced at it. "Her second day in office, no less. That is a bit startling."

"Thanks," Harry grouched.

"Perhaps she just wishes to say 'hello' and to inform you that your fees are waived."

Harry relaxed at that notion. "Maybe." He quickly finished the rest of his breakfast and, even though it was early, gathered his things together to leave.

As Harry stood before the hearth, ready to go, Snape said "Harry" in a vaguely gentle voice, then waited for Harry to look up before continuing. "You have nothing to worry about. The Ministry owes you dearly. Very dearly." Harry scooped up a handful of powder and Snape added, "Just remember to congratulate Madam Bones at some point." Harry nodded, made a mental note of that, and tossed down the powder.

Harry was distracted through morning drills but, by the time he had changed back into his robes and headed to the Minister's office, he felt calm, as though he had simply run out of nervousness. And besides, Snape was right.

He had expected the Minister's offices to be in flux, but all was calm and everything was in place in the reception room. The door was open, so Harry stepped inside the dark wood-paneled room and looked around the floor-to-ceiling shelves full of heavy books. Two assistants sat debating over a parchment at the low table in the center. One of them finally looked up. "Ah, Mr. Potter," she said. "Please have a seat. Would you like some tea?"

"No thank you," replied Harry automatically. Upon taking a seat on the very soft couch which threatened to swallow him, he amended, "Uh, yes, I would actually."

She smiled as she nodded and turned to the service beside the door to pour out a cup. She handed it over and returned to the discussion about a magical expansion of Diagon Alley. Harry resisted leaning over to look at the maps spread out on the table, although he was sorely tempted to peek.

No obvious signal occurred, but minutes later the assistant stood up and said, "The Minister will see you now."

Harry set his tea on the table and stood to follow. As he stepped into the plush office where Madame Bones sat at the large, carved mahogany desk, he wasn't feeling much of anything, which was an improvement. Bones' warm greeting relaxed him immediately. "Mr. Potter," she said with feeling. She came around the desk, put her monocle against her eye, and shook his hand before looking him up and down as though confused. "You have grown a bit, young man," she asserted.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry replied, then wondered if that was the proper form of address. She didn't seem to note it as she smiled and returned to her desk, waving him to the plush, high-backed chair nearby. She let her monocle swing down on the gold chain around her neck. The assistant sat in a chair against the side wall, notepad out.

"So, Harry," Madam Bones began as she clasped her hands before her on her desk. "Is there anything we can do for you?"

Unprepared for that particular question, Harry hesitated before replying, "Uh, no, Minister, there isn't."

"Really? Nothing?" She waved her hand in the air. "I wanted to make certain you had everything you needed for your training."

"I do," he assured her.

"I was thinking we should be certain not to bill you for your training, since you are doing us the favor, as I see it, of pursuing this occupation." Before Harry could reply to that, she went on with a sparkle in her eye, "Barring that, I was considering naming a day in your honor."

Harry worked hard not to visibly react to what could be construed as a threat. "I, uh, could probably accept having my fees waived . . . though it isn't necessary," Harry quickly asserted, thinking that if Snape could not cover them, then Free-lander probably could. Laughing uneasily, he said, "I don't need a day named after me, though." Thoughts of the torment the Weasleys would subject him to over that made him cringe inwardly.

"Harry," she said forcefully, parting her hands placatingly. "What else can we do? We owe all of it to you."

"Um . . ." Harry began, then stalled.

When he didn't manage a reply, she stood and came around the desk to lean on the front edge of it near his chair. "We have most of a year to decide--it is only the second week of July--but I insist on marking it somehow. 'Harry Potter Day' does not hold any appeal?"

Harry nearly choked. In an almost steady, though slightly high-pitched voice, he replied, "No, not really."

"That was the first choice of everyone here," she went on in an oddly affectionate tone. "Well, we'll come up with an equitable name."

Harry resisted rubbing his suddenly prickling arms. She was considering him carefully through her monocle again while he tried to think of a reply to that. He remembered that he was supposed to congratulate her, but right then did not seem like the best moment.

"Forgive me," she finally said. "I'm still amazed by how much you've changed."

Shrugging was all Harry could think to do.

"Well, it is good to see you grown up so. You look like prime Auror material to me now. And I must say, I'm glad we didn't manage to completely alienate you from the Ministry." She removed her monocle again and sighed. "Well, Harry, as much as I'd like to have a long chat, I simply do not have the time."

Harry stood and they shook hands again, although Madam Bones didn't release his hand as she said over her shoulder, "Make a note, Rachel, that we are waiving Mr. Potter's fees for the duration. And the issue of what to name his day is still open."

"Thank you, Minister," Harry managed to say evenly. "And congratulations on your new position. It was good to see you get it."

Her eyes sparkled at that and Harry thought he could see inside her thoughts for an instant, because he found himself feeling acutely pleased to have himself on his side. He blinked and dropped his gaze as he stepped back to escape the queer sense he was getting. Her emotion felt more strategic than personal, but at least he felt *some* real affection in it.

* * *

After lunch, the apprentices were introduced to some of the inner workings of the Auror's office. "We can show you this," Tonks was saying, "because we finally got it back. During the Dark Times, Fudge had it appropriated to his offices."

Harry looked over the tall piece of furniture. It resembled a large, worn hutch with multiple crystal balls mounted into the upper cabinets on the shelves, some of those carefully balanced things that Dumbledore used to have so many of.

Tonks continued, "This is the Underage Magic Detector." She waved at a combination notepad, dome with something like dice in it, and oddly balanced arm resembling a giant compass. "And here is the Knight Bus Scheduler," Harry looked over at the indicated instrument, which appeared to be a spherical jigsaw puzzle that kept absorbing its pieces. New pieces appeared near a dial needle and the sphere rotated to fit them in place. "This is the Dark Magic Detector, but it is widely understood to be easy to fool. A simple Obfuscation Charm will confuse it, frankly." That item was in a covered box, which she didn't bother to open.

Harry gazed in fascination at the Underage Magic Detector since he knew it had given him away on multiple occasions. He hoped it would detect something while they were standing there, but it remained still.

Tonks wandered to a long, long row of cabinets. "This is the file room. All our recent and open case files are stored here." She patted the worn wooden cabinet beside her like an old friend. A drawer popped open and she pulled out a file. "For example, take one Rufus Ruffian, common thief, uses your basic Accio spell to lift wallets out of purses. Files should always have a perpetrator summary, or as we call it: the perp sheet, on the top, followed by every other official and sometimes unofficial . . ." Here she pulled from the center of the file a serviette with notes on it. " . . . document regarding the perpetrator: incarceration forms, judgments, etc." She handed the thick file around. "Take a look at a few to familiarize yourselves with them. Please put them back EXACTLY where you found them; the cabinets have been known to get vicious with sloppy filers."

Harry wandered down one row and back, running his fingers over the half-tarnished brass handles. He paused when he saw *Bertram-Black* on one of the drawers. He glanced up at Tonks, who was still chatting with Aaron, and pulled the long, long drawer all the way out. Sure enough, behind *Narcissa* was *Sirius*. Harry pulled out the file and flipped through it quickly.

"That was fast," Tonks commented from right beside him.

Harry ignored her as he paged through long reports regarding the incident where Sirius was reputed to have killed Pettigrew and numerous Muggles, followed by one detailing his escape, and then page after page investigating alleged sightings, and finally a report about his capture at Hogwarts and subsequent re-escape. Harry flipped back to the perp sheet and blinked at the capitalized, red ink letters reading *OPEN* for the case status.

"What does that mean?" Harry demanded.

"His status is hard to determine. Without a body to identify, that is the policy now."

Harry flipped again through the thick stack of parchments. "But . . . I don't understand. He isn't still wanted; is he?"

Tonks took the file from him and went back to the top page then studied the notes on the back of it. "Someone noted here," she pointed to the bottom of one of the report sheets, "that it is unlikely he killed Pettigrew. But what happened that day has never been officially established, so technically, I guess so."

"Tonks, that's nuts; he was innocent."

"Harry, there have been many more important things to worry about than whether his name's been cleared."

"Not to me."

Tonks sighed and put the file back in its spot and leaned on the drawer, which groaned in a way wood normally would not. "I realize that. But it would take a lot of time and effort as well as getting a hearing with the Wizengamot."

"What do I have to do?" Harry really wished he had known about this two hours ago when the Minister of Magic had asked if there was anything he needed.

"Let me think about the best approach, all right? Things will be a little more chaotic around here for a while."

"All right," Harry reluctantly replied, trusting her help.

That evening, Harry arrived home and plunked himself down in the library. Snape sat writing a letter at the small desk. "How did your meeting go?" he asked without looking up.

"She's waiving my fees," Harry informed him, realizing that it *was* much easier to accept it from Minister Bones rather than Fudge.

"So that was the purpose of the meeting?"

"Um, that and to threaten me with declaring May 10th 'Harry Potter Day'."

Snape's head nearly hit the small desk before him as it fell forward. He rubbed his eyes before lifting them, long moments later. "And the resolution of that?" he asked in a fearful way.

"It wasn't resolved," Harry painfully admitted. Snape mouthed the words slowly, then shook his head. "Basically my response," Harry said.

Snape folded up the letter he had been working on as he said, "Ah, imagine, Harry Potter: The Bank Holiday. If the weather were nice, families could have picnics in your honor." He sealed the letter in an envelope and began addressing it while continuing, "Children would run about towing balloons and kites with lightening bolts on them." Harry's noise of despair did not slow him. "The shops would sell official commemorative joke wands that sputter in green and of course the parade, let's not forget that."

Harry leaned forward and wrapped his arms around his head, half covering his ears. "Stop, stop," he moaned, but he was also beginning to laugh.

But Snape was warmed up now, apparently, and he sounded more amused than disgusted as he went on: "The largest float just before the end, would be a towering castle with a tall gold chair—"

"No . . ." Harry murmured, visualizing without will.

". . . and you, waving and throwing sweets to the screaming children lining the streets. Everyone would have the day off, so they could *all* be there. The Ministry could revive the annual dueling competition on that day and the winner would receive a —"

"Now that's an idea," Harry interrupted, forgetting the agony of seconds before. "Hm," he muttered thoughtfully as he tapped his finger on the arm of his chair. "A dueling competition," Harry said, trying on the sound of it.

Snidely, Snape pointed out, "If you are assigned to hand out the trophy, you are not allowed to compete."

"Do I get to judge?"

"Almost certainly."

Harry sat with a crooked grin. "I could live with that." When Snape sighed again, Harry asked, "Sorry you mentioned it?"

"I would take it over the parade," he replied.

"What, no picnics?"

* * *

Saturday morning, Harry sat on his bed, arranging the books on the nightstand shelf to be better able to review them before going to sleep. He stacked the books on the bed and put back the ones that were relevant to the next month of training, flipping amazedly through some of the early ones he had already forgotten about. At the bottom of the stack he found his photo album. The sight of it still made him pause. He had added a few photographs to the empty back pages, of himself with his friends from school, mostly shots Colin had given him, photographs that at the time had annoyed him but now he was grateful for. One page contained just Quidditch pictures, spellotaped in overlapping cutouts, which made him smile to himself.

Harry flipped to the front of the album and remembered something he had been meaning to do for a long time. He shut the album and put it back away. Moving with purpose he tapped the crystal egg by the window to make the vines shrink back inside, leaving colorful petals fluttering to the sill. He pocketed it and, as well, opened his trunk to pull out Sirius' mirror, which he put in the opposite pocket. Downstairs, he went to the library and pulled out the atlas. After a moment's hesitation and assuming that he could repair it later with a spell, he tore free the page he needed and folded it into his pocket. Still moving with purpose, he collected his broom, made sure he had a working compass on it, and stepped back in to stand at the door to the drawing room.

Snape looked up in question, glancing at the broom without a change in expression. Harry began, "I, uh, have to do something. I'll be back later."

One brow went up, but Snape just asked, "What time?"

"Dinner, I'll be back."

Speaking slowly and dryly, Snape said, "And I sense you do not want to tell me where, so what would you suggest I do at that time when you have not returned. I am not certain I can repeat that spell, as it was a bit accidental as well as dark. Perhaps you should find a companion."

Harry thought fiercely, impatient to leave. "I'll tell Elizabeth. If I'm not back, you can ask her." Harry was Occluding his mind, so even though Snape stared at him doubtfully, he accepted this with an annoyed tilt of the head.

Harry turned and went out the front to walk down to the station and beyond to the Peterson house. Mrs. Peterson answered almost immediately when Harry pressed the bell.

"Harry!" she said, clearly pleased to see him. "We weren't expecting you, were we?" she said kindly, as though concerned that things might not be as she wished them for a visitor. Harry propped his broom by the door and she led him into the hall.

"No, sorry to just call unannounced, but I need to speak to Elizabeth."

"Oh, of course, she is up in her room practicing. Go on up," she said sweetly, indicating the curving staircase with its thick white carpeting.

Harry followed where she indicated and walked down the quiet carpeted hallway, but he didn't hear any practicing. A knock on the only closed bedroom door didn't get a response. Harry carefully turned the handle and peeked in. Elizabeth sat at a long black keyboard with headphones on, playing rather vigorously but making only deadened thumping noises with the keys. She noticed the door open, however, and looked over, her face brightening instantly.

"Harry!" she said loudly in greeting before pulling her headphones off and standing up. "Didn't know you were calling," she said in a normal volume. "Come in."

"I just have a moment; I need you to do something for me." She stopped uncovering the nearby chair which had about six decorative pillows crammed onto it, and stood to listen. Harry said, "This is a bit awkward. I'm going off to Godric's Hollow and I don't feel like explaining that to Severus, so I'm telling you so if I don't get back by dinner he can ask you where I've gone."

Her brow furrowed, amazing him with how fast she could put on a disapproving face. "Okay," she said, though she clearly didn't follow.

"Look, it is too complicated to go into right now," he said, but felt defensive, so he added, "But the short version is that I want to go visit my parents' grave, which I've never been to before." She instantly looked more sympathetic, so Harry went on, "My dad and Severus hated each other when my dad was alive and even after; well Severus did anyway. So I just didn't feel like getting caught up in explaining, since this is something I really want to do."

"All right, I understand," she said, sounding honestly understanding.

"Thanks," he said and turned to go.

Her voice pulled him back. "Want company?"

"No. No thanks. But thanks for asking."

Outside in the Peterson's back garden, Harry fastened his cloak and unfolded the map. He studied the immediate roads and lakes before refolding it. After a quick Disillusionment Charm, he was airborne, up through the old trees, and following along the hills, heading south by the compass.

As he flew, he discovered that the markings on the atlas were a little approximate and hard to locate below him. Often he would have to fly much farther on faith before finding confirmation of where he was. He turned a little west and flew faster when he was absolutely certain of his location.

It took hours to get where he was going, making Harry very glad he had left so early in the day. It was barely noon when he reapplied the Disillusionment Charm and circled lower around the village of Godric's Hollow. It was small enough, sandwiched between two steep hills, to take in on one wide turn around its quaint houses and cottages, arranged along only a few narrow streets. A woman was digging in a boxed flowerbed before one small house and a car was going by on the main road at a sedate pace. On a side road at the crest of a hillside leading away was a small graveyard. Harry was assuming they were buried here without really knowing for certain. Hopeful, he landed on the gravel drive that led in an arc through the neatly lined up stones and propped his broom against a large willow that stood at the edge of the hill looking over neat square fields that fell away and rose up the next hill.

It had looked small from the air, but the graveyard held a lot of stones, Harry discovered as he wandered along the gaps, skipping the really old section as well as the newer area by the entrance. Some of the new stones there had faces engraved on them, making him feel watched. He hesitated at the grave marker of another Potter, a Harvey who had died in 1942. The gap in Harry's knowledge felt acute as he tried to assess the likelihood of relation; it made him want to fly right then to Little Whinging and accost his aunt, preferably with a potion or two on hand to help.

Shaking off the fantasy, he walked on, past a row of Morgans and Cadogs and around to the next row and stopped, taken by surprise to find himself faced with such familiarity as the names of his parents. He was also surprised by how hard the finality of those engraved letters hit him. Too many years wishing they would show up to take him away from the Dursleys, he supposed.

Harry knelt in the soft earth, reached into his pockets, and placed the crystal egg on the pedestal supporting the gravestone, then the mirror beside it with a sticking charm. For good measure he added a sticking charm to the egg as well. He glanced around afterward, biting his lip, since he had forgotten to check that no one was watching before working that little bit of magic. But he was alone. He sat back on his heels to look over the stone. *In Memory*, the granite face read. Harry felt it should say something more meaningful like *Died Fighting Evil*, then wondered who had been in charge of erecting it; Dumbledore, he would have expected to come up with something more than this, and Sirius probably had been arrested before he could be involved. Remus seemed more likely; Harry could see that kind of straightforwardness from him. Certainly the Dursleys had nothing to do with it, or if they had it might have read *Got What They Deserved*.

The sun was trying to cut through the clouds, bouncing light off the crystal egg. A little sprout of vine had already begun to emerge, heartening him, because the cold stone would look much nicer with some green and flowers.

Harry, who before had dearly needed to tell his parents things, now found he had things he wanted to ask instead. He wanted to ask if he was really doing what they would want in becoming an Auror. He wanted to ask why they had trusted Pettigrew. He wanted to know a thousand little things about what it was like when they were all together, the time for which his memories were all Dementor inspired. This left him feeling adrift rather than the closure he realized now he had been intent on during the long journey here.

Standing finally and brushing off his knees, Harry looked around. The wind felt brisk when he stood upright, chilling with the sun behind the clouds. The urge to move on overtook him and with a last check that he was still unobserved, he collected his broom, repeated the charm, and took flight.

It was easier finding his way home than expected. He flew northeast to the y-shaped lake, straight north to the big river valley, followed that to the motorway, then followed the main road into Shrewsthorpe. He landed earlier than expected since he had been flying quite fast, at only half past four.

Inside, he found Snape at the dining room table, having tea. He looked up as Harry sat heavily in the chair opposite. Snape's eyes narrowed, making Harry realize that he had sighed out loud. "Tea?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded, he was hungry as well as thirsty. The biscuits tasted really very good as grumbly as his stomach was. That adrift feeling came back like a wave threatening to sweep him away. He tried to lift his teacup, but set it back down rather than risk spilling it, as it was steaming hot.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Snape asked.

"I went to visit my parents' grave," Harry confessed.

"Oh." Snape rubbed his forehead lightly. "Surprising you did not just say as you were leaving."

Harry shrugged. "I didn't know how you'd react and I just wanted to go."

Sounding befuddled, Snape said, "I certainly would not have objected. Quite a distance on broom, Godric's Hollow."

A chill ran over Harry's arms hearing Snape throw the name out so casually. "I'd never been there. Wasn't even sure they were there," Harry said, feeling the need to talk now as desperately as he had needed to go. He fiddled with his tiny teaspoon. "So many things I want to ask them," he said, sounding sad to own his ears. Forcing control on himself he looked across the table to Snape, who had rested his chin on his knuckles. But Harry found he could not stay silent. "Do you think they'd've let me train to be an Auror?"

Snape straightened and appeared to consider that. "Your father was never one to limit his risk-taking, but people can behave very differently when it concerns their children, rather than themselves. So I do not know."

Harry stirred his tea and put the spoon back down on the saucer. With a hint of pleading, he asked, "Do you think they'd be proud of me?"

"How could they not be?" Snape immediately retorted and then frowned. He shook his head slowly as though a little angry. Harry waited tensely for him to speak. Finally, Snape said, "Perhaps I was premature with you the other evening . . . perhaps you do still require praise."

"I don't think that's it." Harry said, feeling much more anxious than that.

Snape rubbed his forehead harder. "It probably did not help. I will try to keep my disgust with your despicably easy spell acquisition to myself next time you wish to demonstrate something."

Harry sighed again, feeling oddly better. "Who put up my parents' gravestone, do you know?"

Appearing surprised by the question, Snape shook his head. "I don't know. Why?"

"It just doesn't say much."

"Have it changed to something else," Snape suggested.

"Hm," Harry murmured, considering that from a safe emotional distance now. "What should it say?"

"Perhaps," Snape said flippantly, "Something more meaningful and recognizable, such as: *Here lie Harry Potter's parents*."

Harry fought a grin, despite himself. Relief had settled on him unexpectedly. "Do other wizards live in Godric's Hollow?"

"Goodness you are full of questions. I do not know. Not unlikely, but I do not know for certain." After a pause, he said, "Other questions?"

"Um," Harry said, certain there were. He scratched his head and asked, "Have you ever forgiven my father?"

"No," was the immediate response.

"That's all right. I probably wouldn't have either."

"Wouldn't or haven't?" Snape asked, sounding a little dangerous.

"Wouldn't," Harry repeated.

"That's better. No reason for you to hold it against him," he tossed out as he stood with his teacup. "Especially after all this time."

"What about you?" Harry asked.

"What about me?" Snape demanded; although Harry could hear that the harshness was superficial. "I'll bear my grudges as I see fit." At the door he turned back and in an utterly different tone, asked, "Anything else you need?"

"No," Harry assured him, feeling a smile on his lips.

Snape hesitated as though to be certain before stepping away. Harry stared into his teacup and the random array of leaf bits in the dregs, feeling strangely calm.



Chapter 54 -- Distant Family

Harry was in a rush to leave Monday morning, having been slow getting ready to go. He crunched down a piece of toast and looked over a packet that had arrived by owl earlier that morning. He stopped to examine it even though he did not have the time. Pulling open the string revealed a parcel of letters. Harry glanced at the top one; it was from Skeeter, explaining that these were the best of the essays they had received at *Witch Weekly* and would he please let her know which he preferred. Or instead, it further said, tell her when she could schedule an interview that week with her American colleague before he returned to the States.

Harry folded the letter into his pocket and set the packet aside. "Gotta run," he mumbled to his guardian, after taking up another piece of toast. "See you this evening."

"Have a good day," Snape intoned as he sipped his coffee while reading the *Prophet*.

Harry spent the day wondering what he should do about Skeeter. He thought of asking Tonks' advice, but he didn't see her that day during training except once down a corridor when she looked to be in a hurry. The whole department seemed to be in action about something, although no one explained to the apprentices what it was and late that afternoon, Rodgers asked them to finish their last drills on their own.

They all agreed, and paired up as he dashed off. The workout room fell silent beyond the sizzle of spells. Harry concentrated on his modulation as Vineet ran through the sequences, randomizing occasionally from the normal order. They switched attackers and Harry ran the spell sequence back at his new friend. He always felt a little bad doing this as he could see the extreme effort the other man put into his Countering. Harry kept his attacks tempered for fear of injuring the other when his blocks failed. At a break, Vineet was, as usual, breathing heavily from the effort. Harry bit his lip and gave his partner an encouraging nod.

"Beating up on your fellows?" a familiar voice said from the doorway.

Harry turned and grinned as Snape entered. "Hello, sir."

Aaron came over to them with Kerry Ann trailing reluctantly behind. "Hello, Professor," he said in a friendly greeting.

"Mr. Wickem," Snape said in surprise, giving him one of those close lookings over. "You must have had a major life turnaround to have reached this point," Snape observed. "You didn't even sit for any N.E.W.T.s at Hogwarts as I recall."

Taken aback, Aaron said, "I did later." He shrugged a little sheepishly. "My dad hired tutors for me. . . for a few years. Then I took them."

"This is his fifth time applying," Kerry Ann contributed with a sparkle of mischievousness.

Snape still looked suspiciously at Aaron. "Well, you are to be commended for your persistence, I suppose."

Aaron, sounding put out, said, "Did they just let you walk in here, sir?"

"There is no one around at the moment in the outer offices. But, in any event, I am friendly with Mr. Moody, who is the only one I would be concerned about encountering." Dismissing Aaron, he said to Harry. "I received this, this morning." He handed over a folded letter.

Harry turned away and opened it. It was a request from the Wizard Family Council for a one year interview to be conducted within two weeks. Harry folded it up again and handed it back.

"In the interest of responsiveness, I made an appointment for this afternoon. I assume you are finished here?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied. "Let me get my things." Hurrying, Harry simply pulled a cloak around his workout piece. When he passed by the room again, his fellows were gathered in a tight cluster, talking in low tones. He gave them a wave and said he would see them tomorrow.

Down on the second floor, they checked in with a greetingwitch who directed them to the last office on the end. "Office" was a generous description for the very cramped space. Harry figured it would be easier to Apparate to get behind the desk. A stout witch with very long, black- and red-streaked hair looked up from copying notes onto a parchment form. "Ah, the four-fifteen, then, right?" She looked between them there in the doorway and then beyond them, a little mystified. "I need to talk to the child . . ." she said.

Harry stepped into the small space between the desk and the wall where a low bench provided a seat. Faded pictures of laughing children on colorful broomsticks hung on the wall. A small shelf at desk level was lined with miniature rocking horses, except they were unicorns or centaurs, and a few dolls. "That would be me," he admitted with a touch of embarrassment.

"Right, then," she said slowly, opening the file on her desk without taking her eyes off him. She glanced inside the file with a look of consternation and, apparently recovering, said to Snape, "You'll be called in in about a quarter of an hour." She waved him off and he closed the door while backing into the corridor.

She clasped her black, neatly polished nails before her and said, "So, Ha-. . . Mr. Potter. I have a series of questions I need to ask you. Your answers won't be shared with anyone outside this office, including your guardian, so you should be as honest as possible." She gave him a patent smile as she took out a quill and opened her ink bottle. From one of the drawers she took out some child's blocks and placed them on opposite ends of a line marked on the desk. One had a yellow smiley face and the other one had a pink sad face with a small tear. She held out a small white pyramid to him.

Harry noticed the numbers along the line upside-down to him. "I can give you one to seven without those," he said.

She chuckled to herself. "Oh yes, probably you can." She scooped them off and put them away, for which Harry was grateful. She looked at her sheet and asked in an ultra-friendly voice, "From one to seven then, where seven is very happy, how happy are you to be living with your adoptive family?"

"Seven."

She noted that. "Give me an example of something in the last year that made you happy." She waited with quill poised as Harry hesitated, thinking. In a prompting voice, she said, "Seven is a very strong response."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, holding himself from fidgeting. He was very happy, but "why" was a harder question to answer than he imagined. "It's a lot of little things," he said, mostly to stall.

"Such as?"

Parties with my friends and pink stomach medicine, Harry almost said, since that came to mind. Sleeping potion at night when he had problems with dark dreams sounded like an even worse answer as well as did the answer, having someone to come fetch him when he flew off and crashed. Frantically generalizing that, he said, "Having someone to take care of me."

She looked a little doubtful, but made a note of that. Feeling defensive, Harry added, "I've never before had someone I could go to who I knew wasn't going to turn me away."

"That is the main reason for answering seven?"

"That and having someone to talk to," Harry insisted. At her more doubtful look, he explained, "Not many people are willing to discuss Voldemort."

She moved on very quickly to the next question. "Do you have a room of your own?" When he nodded, she asked, "How do you like it?"

"Six."

"Not seven?"

"The window is small, but that is normal for the house."

"Are you kept to a regular bedtime?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "Mostly."

"How much work are you given around the house?"

"None. I get scolded when I do any," he replied. At her look of surprise, he explained, "I'm informed, repeatedly, that the house-elf is supposed to do most things. I do the gardening because I like to get outside sometimes. I don't get scolded for that anymore."

"Ah," she said knowingly. "Never lived with an elf myself," she said flatly. Harry could not interpret her tone. She moved on before he could decode her reaction. "Think of the most severe time you were punished in the last year. Got it?"

"Uh, yep."

"How happy are you with the fairness of it?"

Harry thought about coming home drunk and Snape's reaction to that. He also thought of the day after the four Death Eaters attacked and only now realized that, earlier, Snape had totally backed down. Harry recalled the incident starkly; the disappointment, anger, and even distress he had caused his guardian had felt like punishment at the time. Harry hadn't felt that this time; Snape had been unhesitatingly harsh, but Harry probably should not have gotten into such a state. "Six," he finally replied, then remembered how unfair the false accusation about the prank had felt, but he didn't amend his answer.

"What was the punishment?" she asked.

"Uh, a stern talking to," Harry supplied.

"What did you do to deserve it?"

Harry didn't feel like admitting he had come home pissed. He chose to consider the previous incident last summer. He looked down at her notes. "How confidential is that?"

"Very."

"Inside the Ministry even?" Harry queried.

"They are reviewed by my superior and by the council if there is a question."

"Just put down that I disobeyed then," Harry said.

"Does that happen often?" she asked with a sour expression.

"No, not at all," he replied and immediately wondered at that. He did not consider himself the obedient sort. Harry had grown warm in the cramped office so he pushed his cloak off one shoulder.

"Are you obedient the rest of the time?" she asked a little sarcastically.

"I don't think so. I agree that I messed up, that's why I think it fair."

She was looking him over now, frowning at his outfit. "Just out of curiosity, what is that you're wearing."

Harry glanced down and frowned at himself. "I came straight from training," he explained. "I'm in the Auror's program." He flipped the cloak off his other shoulder, exposing the Ministry patch on the upper breast of a glowing wand across a broken, black pentagram.

She blinked at it. "You're an Auror's apprentice?" At his nod, she said. "One could assume you could take care of yourself, then."

"I like having a family and a home," Harry retorted in a hard tone.

She smiled lightly. "That wasn't what I meant," she said gently. "I meant it with regard to this interview which is intended to assure that the council has not made a placement in error." She turned the parchment over. "The next few questions are a little more difficult. Has anyone in your adoptive family ever asked you to lie about something that happened?"

"Yes." At her concerned expression, he added, "But only so the previous Minister of Magic could take credit for it." He added a little smile. "And we are back to the reason that I got punished."

"I see," she said a little quietly. She scratched her cheek thoughtfully and said, "Has your guardian ever physically harmed or threatened to harm you?"

"No." Not since he has been my guardian, Harry silently amended.

She gestured at the door. "Ask him to come in, then."

Harry stood with effort from the low bench and opened the door. Snape was leaning against the far wall, looking grim. Harry wondered at that but merely said, "She wants to see you," while shooting him a questioning look. But Snape didn't meet Harry's gaze as he followed him back in. They sat side by side on the bench, with Harry having to consciously not look at Snape in concern over his mood. He wished he had some clue as to what was bothering him all of a sudden.

"Mr. Snape," the casewitch said. "You fall into our 'D' category of adopting adults because you have no other children, you are single, and you are male. The only category lower would involve non-human heritage."

Harry looked up sharply but held his tongue. If it had been Hagrid adopting him, he would have given them hell for that. Snape seemed to withdraw farther as she spoke. Harry heard something in her tone now that had been absent before; it spoke of knowing more than she wished to.

When Snape looked over at Harry finally, she interjected in a formal tone, "We can send Mr. Potter out for this conversation if you wish."

Snape hesitated before replying, "It is not necessary."

"As you wish," she said. "How would you describe the quality of your own home life as a child?"

Snape stared at his fingers and answered stiffly, "Poor."

Harry closed his eyes a long moment, wishing this were not happening, and thinking that Snape must have seen this coming. The casewitch went on. "That is another mark against you, I'm afraid. And how would you describe your own abilities as a parent?"

Quietly, Snape said, "I am usually out of my depth."

Harry stared at him, stunned. The casewitch looked self-satisfied. "That's not true," Harry argued vehemently.

"You are not the best judge of quality parenting, Potter," Snape pointed out.

Harry yearned to shout at him for what seemed like disloyalty to what they had. Angry now, Harry said, "What difference does it make, as long as I'm getting what I need?"

"Are you?" the casewitch asked.

"Yes," Harry replied insistently. Snape's unexpected uncertainty was making him panic. He wondered where the obnoxiously confident wizard he had expected to come in had gone off to.

Snape straightened and crossed his arms. "Although confident I can do better than your relatives . . ." he said with an unexpected, deep-seated anger, ". . . I am rarely certain I am doing the right thing for you."

"Like when?" Harry demanded.

"A hundred times a day, Harry," he insisted evenly, coldly.

Harry put his hand on his forehead. "I have no sense of that."

The casewitch cleared her throat. "Constantly questioning your decisions is not a sign of bad parenting, quite the opposite."

Shaken by what Snape was saying, Harry said stridently, "Severus, you are the only reason I'm in one piece right now." He gestured at the wall beside him and the rest of the Ministry beyond. "I found out last week that Sirius never got off the Ministry wanted list. A year ago that would have sent me over the edge."

"Part of that is simply maturing, Potter."

"And you don't think you had anything to do with that?" Harry asked loudly, sarcastically, voice booming in the tiny room.

"Hey there!" the casewitch interjected sharply. They both fell silent and Snape closed his mouth on whatever retort he was preparing. She gave them a smile. "You are clearly doing fine," she said as she made a note on the bottom of the parchment before her. "Both of you." Snape straightened and looked away.

Back in their own dining room, Harry, his voice pained, asked, "Why didn't you say something before?"

"I assumed it was obvious," Snape replied as he put his gloves into the pocket of his cloak. Harry watched him unhook it and swing it off to hang it up.

"I'm very happy here with you," Harry said. "I thought *that* was obvious."

Snape considered him before challenging, "There is nothing you would change?"

Harry's shoulders fell. Hesitantly, he replied, "I wish you weren't going back to Hogwarts in September, but I understand you have to."

Snape stared at him. "That is all? Your complaint is that you wish me to be around more?" His tone of disbelief had a bit of his normal sneer to it; Harry was happy to hear it.

"Yes," Harry insisted defensively.

Snape shook his head as though to clear it. In his normal tone of slight impatience he said, "Your birthday is at the end of the week. I keep expecting you to ask if you can hold a party."

"I just had one for getting into the Auror's program," Harry pointed out.

"You are turning eighteen, Potter. Multiple parties in one month should hardly be viewed as excessive by one your age. The alternative is a nice dinner out, just Candide and one of your companions, whichever is in favor at the moment."

Harry wanted to argue that last comment, but held back because the combative atmosphere had just faded. "That would be fine."

Snape said, "I admit to preferring something quiet myself, but it is truly your choice. Especially since my father wishes to visit and I told him Thursday."

"A nice dinner out would be great. The last one was very nice," said Harry primly. Snape nodded a bit formally and left the room, leaving Harry feeling strangely disconnected given how much had finally been said.

* * *

The moment Harry had been dreading finally arrived with the tapping of the door knocker the next evening. Moving reluctantly, Harry went downstairs to let Skeeter and Olsen in. Skeeter was wearing a violet robe, but Olsen was in khakis and a pale blue button-down shirt. He looked around keenly at the house as Harry led them into the drawing room. Snape appeared immediately as they took seats.

"Do you want me here for this?" he asked Harry.

"No, that's all right," Harry said easily.

Snape looked the two over with mild suspicion. Olsen said, "Your guardian, Mr. Potter?" He stood up and held a hand out to Snape who accepted it with clear doubt about him.

"Yes," Harry replied.

"Would it be all right to ask you a few questions at the end?" he asked Snape.

"Unless they were very good questions, no," Snape sneered and actually managed to startle the man slightly.

Olsen recovered quickly and said confidently, "I'll think of some," as though making a promise.

Snape departed with a last glance at each of them. Olsen pulled out his pad and started to ask something, only to stop as Winky brought in tea. "Is that a house-elf?" he asked in amazement.

"Yes," Harry replied. "You've never seen one?"

"There aren't many in the U.S., so no." Winky bowed and departed after pouring. "I thought only old wizarding families had them?"

"That's mostly true," Skeeter replied, pushing her hair back with her long painted nails.

"This *is* an old wizarding family," Harry pointed out.

"Aren't you an orphan?" Olsen countered, sounding concerned.

"I've been adopted into an old family."

Olsen still looked concerned. "Yes, but hasn't part of this fight been about the difference between pureblooded wizardry and mixed wizardry?"

"You mean the lack of difference?" Harry asked.

Olsen waved his hand, "Well . . . yes." He jotted something down on his notepad, looking confused. He read over some pages of his notes and finally said, "So, what I really want to get at for my article series is, who is Harry Potter?"

Skeeter, sitting with pen poised as well, didn't seem to think this odd. "Who did Ms. Skeeter tell you I was?" Harry asked. He pushed the plate over to the other side of the small table. "Want a biscuit?"

"Oh, sure," Olsen said. He held one up. "Looks like a cookie. Good though," he said munching as he talked. "What did Rita say? Well, nothing I can pull together easily. It's a good story though: the orphan left on a doorstep, doesn't know he's a wizard but it turns out not only is he a pretty darn good one, he is supposed to save the world from evil." He flipped through his notebook yet again. "But everyone knows the comic book story and it doesn't say much about you except you have a lot of dumb luck. And bad luck. Where I come from, we don't put much stock in prophecies." His derisive look was back again.

Harry sat thoughtfully before saying, "I did what I was supposed to do. I didn't have any choice."

"Your duty," Olsen said almost playfully. "Like a Gilbert and Sullivan character."

Harry's eyes narrowed, but something about that had struck an exposed nerve. "I'm real," he insisted.

"That's good," Olsen said. "What do you value?" he shot out quickly.

Harry thought that over. "Not being hunted down by dark wizards."

Olsen tilted his head. "That wasn't what I meant. What motivates you every day? What drives you to take action?"

"I want to learn more magic, powerful magic. That's why I'm in the Aurors program."

"For what use?" Olsen returned, sounding diligent.

"So evil can't rise again," Harry replied a little snappishly.

Olsen bent over his notepad and breathed, "Now we are getting somewhere."

The interview went on in this vein, with Harry eventually finding the right way to answer the questions, but only after having most rephrased. It was a little exhausting, although Olsen didn't show it at all.

". . . and speaking of your guardian," Olsen said as Snape came to hover in the doorway some time later. "Willing to answer a few questions, Mr. Snape?"

"Professor," Skeeter corrected him.

Olsen turned to her. "I thought he taught high school?"

"Still 'professor'," Skeeter said.

"Sorry 'bout that, Professor. Please," he indicated the chair.

"What is your question?" Snape asked, not moving except to cross his arms and stare more fiercely down his nose.

"I've been trying to figure out this unrealistically altruistic young man here that we all owe so much to. I guess I would ask you why you waited so long to adopt him and why you finally did."

"There is no simple answer to that," Snape said, dismissing it.

Undeterred, Olsen insistently went on, "But, in talking to Harry, it is clear he values this admittedly late family very highly."

Snape looked the man over. "Harry's situation changed drastically after Voldemort's defeat. I adopted him as soon as it was realistic to do so, from many perspectives."

"Not sorry you didn't do so sooner?" Olsen returned.

Soberly, Snape replied, "It would not have worked out sooner."

"And you don't care to tell me why . . ." Olsen prodded.

"Hardly." To Harry he said, "Almost finished here?"

Olsen interjected, "What do *you* think motivates Harry?"

Snape appeared to consider this. "His sense of fairness." As Olsen jotted this down, Snape demanded, "Are *you* finished now?"

"I just need a picture or two. Or Rita, you said you had some stock shots?"

Coyly, she said, "I have some recent ones of Harry in a smashing little outfit. . . "

Harry groaned.

As they departed, Olsen said, "Very pleased to meet you, Harry. I'll owl you my drafts for your comments in a few days."

"All right," Harry replied, trying not to sound surprised. Skeeter waved a vigorous goodbye as she opened the garden gate. Harry shut the door and said to Snape, "You think he'll really send a draft? Skeeter never does that."

"I don't know why he would say that, otherwise."

Back in the main hall, Harry asked, "Do you think agreeing to that was a really bad idea?"

Snape sighed. "I did not particularly like the interviewer, but he did not seem to harbor any ill will toward you."

"And he paid seventy-five Galleons for it."

Snape looked taken aback, but said, "And you refer to me as Lockhart." After more thought, he said, "I'm afraid in this you will have to find your own path as I have little experience with it. I trust you have enough sense now to not get taken advantage of. Or if you do, it will be a lesson well-learned."

* * *

Thursday evening, Harry put on his new dress robes and tried to comb his hair down. It needed to be cut, he realized, but that would have to wait. Trying to put on an optimistic mind for their guests, Harry stepped into the library and pulled out a book to pass the minutes until Shazor and his second wife, Gretta, arrived for dinner.

Snape stepped into the doorway a minute later, looked Harry over quickly, and appeared to relax marginally. "Fortunately, they only visit once a year," he grumbled. After a moment's thought and an uneasy glance around the room, he quickly asked, "You don't consider them to be any kind of grandparent figures, do you?"

"No," Harry easily admitted, seeing Snape's vaguely distasteful expression.

"Good," Snape breathed.

"Candide isn't coming to dinner?" Harry asked.

"I wasn't considering subjecting her to them," Snape explained. "She would undoubtedly feel differently, just so you understand." The doorknocker sounded, drawing him away.

Harry got up but waited in the hall. Shazor came in, looking greyer and more imposing than Harry had remembered. Gretta was all smiles behind him.

"Harry!" she nearly wailed in greeting and surged upon him, bracelets jangling. Harry resisted backing up as his cheeks were patted. "My, my, my, my, my," she marveled. "Look at you. You have grown into something . . . else." She turned him bodily as though to show him off. "Hasn't he, dear?"

Shazor stepped over and gave Harry a looking over. "He's a bit taller," he said dismissively.

"Don't listen to that," Gretta whispered. "You are something to see, my dear. And that picture on the cover of *Witch Weekly* didn't do you an ounce of justice, which I wouldn't have imagined." She continued on as they moved to the drawing room for drinks, "And they had *more* letters from that little essay contest. Have you chosen one yet?" she asked eagerly.

"I haven't seen them," Harry said, uncertain how to explain that he was blackmailed into an interview and the payout was not having to read them. Skeeter assured him that she would pick a winner and only needed to have a thing or two autographed for prizes.

Gretta accepted a glass of something smoky over ice and sipped it. "Oh, did we remember the gift?" she asked her husband.

Shazor, with a flat expression, removed a small box from his pocket. Gretta grabbed it up and handed it to Harry with a "Happy birthday!" and a doting smile. Harry hesitated before opening it right then but did so. Inside was a mechanical cricket in an oversized painted matchbox. Holding it gingerly, Harry held it up to the lamp.

"What is it?" he asked curiously.

"It predicts the weather," Shazor explained.

Gretta added, "There are instructions on the bottom of the box."

Harry turned the box over and peered at the very tiny diagrams on the bottom. While the others talked about the vote and Bones' expected policy changes, Harry followed the instruction for determining the wind the next day at noon. He placed the little metal insect down on the table beside him and faced it north, then when it chirped once, he tapped it with his finger. It chirped six times and hopped northwest.

Harry, thinking of planning trips on broomstick, waited for a break in the conversation to ask how accurate the cricket was.

"Very accurate," Greta assured him. "Especially about rain."

"That is because it always rains," Shazor pointed out snidely before turning back to Severus and continuing on about some obscure Muggle Obliviating policy.

Harry tried out a few more of its predictions about temperature and precipitation before putting it back away. It was rather beautifully painted with glassy onyx bead eyes. "Thanks," he mouthed to Greta as he set it aside on the table and opened a butterbeer for himself. She smiled broadly back before listening in politely to the conversation.

By the time dinner arrived, Harry was quite hungry. Winky had outdone herself in making a roast duck with a crispy brown skin surrounded by a ring of colorful vegetables.

"You managed to find a rather fine replacement for your other elf," Shazor said, sounding jealous.

"Harry did that," Severus explained.

"Ah," Shazor muttered, almost dismissively. Harry pondered as he ate, whether the man assumed Harry could do that easily, whether Harry had just been lucky, or whether it meant something else. Harry eventually served himself the other duck leg and decided he didn't care.

After dinner, Harry really wanted to excuse himself to do some reading; this being his birthday weekend, he was not going to get much reading done later. He bit his lip and wondered how to go about that. Severus' eyes flickered over to Harry after the coffee materialized. "Do you have studies to attend to?"

Harry nodded gratefully and stood up. Greta made a disappointed sound, but Snape explained that Harry had quite a lot of reading for each session of his training. Harry said goodnight and after fetching his books from the library headed to his room where he very gently closed the door. With relief he spread out everything on the bed, sat back propped up on a pile of pillows, and continued the chapter he had started before dinner on basic Muggle police procedure.

Down in the dining room, Severus was considering having another glass of sherry as a means of easing the evening along.

Shazor set his coffee down and smoothed the tablecloth out with his long hand. "How is the boy's training progressing?"

Severus almost snapped that Harry was not a boy, but held back by reminding himself that he still referred to Harry that way with his fellow teachers at Hogwarts. "He is doing startlingly well, even given that I am quite familiar with his ability to learn new magicks. His trainer, fortunately, works him very hard; according to Harry, harder than his peers, which I am quite pleased to know."

A little airily Shazor asked, "It is all inherited, though, correct, this easy magic?"

Severus refused to be baited. Casually, he replied, "I assume. His parents both were rather good at magic or they would not have survived to have him."

Shazor set his empty cup down with a light clatter in the saucer. Winky appeared in a sparkle, pot in hand, to pour him another steaming cup before sparkling away again. Severus had to work hard not to grin crookedly at his father's taken-back, unwillingly pleased expression. "The rest of the Wizarding community does think the world of him. He is starting to finally appear to deserve it," Shazor commented when he had recovered.

Severus felt himself to be looking into a mirror, though a distorted one. The memory of his own jealous reaction to Harry felt like a poison he had swallowed that was still working on him, albeit slowly. "If you are wondering if I take credit for it, I will inform you that I do not. To my mind he is merely an ordinary teenager." Severus silently considered that that in itself was a triumph.

"Unusually humble of you, Severus," Shazor stated, sounding as though he were trying for sarcastic. With his coffee at his mouth, he muttered, "Does seem unlikely to be *your* doing."

Gretta filled in the ensuing silence. "He is a lovely young man. It is a wonder the house isn't filled with lovely young ladies seeking his attention," she marveled.

Severus did pour himself more sherry. "A few intrepid ones do brave their way in. I don't believe Harry wishes to be distracted from his training; although given time he may change his mind about that."

Much later in Harry's room, a light knock sounded on the door before Snape opened it and leaned in. "Do you want me to come down to say goodbye?" Harry asked.

"Yes."

Down in the hall, Harry tolerated a pinch on the cheek and a hug from Gretta, followed by a perfunctory shake of the hand from Shazor. "Good luck with your training, Mr. Potter," Shazor intoned.

"Thank you, sir," replied Harry while wondering why the man had gone so formal.

The pair departed and Snape returned from showing them out. He passed Harry with a strange expression on the way to the drawing room.

"Everything all right?" Harry asked his back.

"Yes, quite," Snape replied dismissively without turning around.

Harry started to accept that, but then followed into the room. "You're certain?"

Snape stood from arranging files on the side table, seeming surprised to find Harry there. He looked Harry over more appraisingly, which Harry had grown unused to. It made him feel uneasy as well as curious about what he had missed. "Quite certain," Snape stated reassuringly, eyes narrowing momentarily as he continued to study Harry, although his gaze didn't look threatening, more oddly affectionate. "You should return to your studies as you will not have much time this weekend, I believe."

Harry could spot a diversion that obvious, but shrugged. He picked up the box containing his painted cricket before he moved to the doorway and turned back. Brushing a bit of fuzz from his dress robes, he asked, "I didn't displease your dad or something, did I?"

"By. No. Means," Snape stated. "Go back to your studies, Harry," he repeated.

"All right," Harry breathed, giving in.



Chapter 55 -- Past Present

"You invited Elizabeth?" Snape asked in surprise.

"You said whomever," Harry pointed out.

"Yes. I simply expected . . . perhaps Ms. Weasley."

"Really?" Harry asked in disbelief as he adjusted the gold cufflinks on his new, expensive Muggle suit. It felt odd on him, but in the mirror he had looked shockingly formal and respectable. Aaron had recommended the tailor and, fortunately, Harry's fears of ending up looking like Aaron had not been realized.

With a shake of his head, Snape said, "Never mind. Anyone is fine."

When they were all assembled in the main hall, Candide, after *oohing* over Harry and giving him a birthday hug, said, "I made reservations at a very nice place in London. Popular with my boss at the office, so I thought it'd be nice even though it is Muggle and it has a convenient spot to Floo into. I can't Apparate all the way to London, I don't know about Severus here . . ."

Snape raised a brow but didn't reply.

"Glad I brought my long cloak," Elizabeth said, hitching it firmly around her, presumably to protect her clothes from the soot.

They arrived in a nicely carpeted alcove with a long corridor coming off of it. Candide used a charm to remove the ash from her hair. Elizabeth shook off her cloak, revealing a striking blue suit. Harry, thinking he would try a little, took her cloak and held out his arm to her. She smiled and accepted it with a graceful movement and let him lead to the restaurant. He was so well behaved that he didn't even turn around with a dark look when Candide commented, "Aren't they cute?"

The maitre d' took their cloaks and led them directly to a table in the middle of the high-ceilinged main room. As water arrived, everyone gave Harry the gifts they had brought.

"Hope you like it; I wasn't certain what you would like," Elizabeth said apologetically.

"I don't need anything, so thanks," he insisted, stacking the three boxes in the middle of the big round table to save them until dessert.

"Would sir like to order wine?" the waiter asked Snape, holding out a tall, leather-bound list. Snape took it and the tuxedo-clad man disappeared.

Harry relaxed with the indirect lighting, the smell of the food, conversation, and the clink of silver around them. He could really get used to this, he thought. As water was being poured, he gave Elizabeth a smile, which she easily returned.

"This is nice," she said. "Thanks for inviting me. Kind of unexpected, really . . ."

Harry shrugged, glad to have had someone to invite. Behind him the maitre d' was saying, "Your table, sir." Harry saw Snape's eyes dart up sharply, peering darkly at something just over Harry's shoulder. A very familiar voice said, "Didn't think they'd let your kind into a place like this. What is the world coming to, I have to wonder?"

Harry pushed his chair back with a jerk and stood up. He found to his surprise that he was looking eye to eye with his Uncle Vernon, rather than up at him. Dursley seemed surprised by this as well as by Harry's attire. "You are, uh, looking better than expected," Vernon muttered.

"Yes, it only required two years separate from you to undo the damage you did to him," Snape stated nastily.

Harry drew a breath through his teeth; he really wished Snape had not said that, at least not in front of Candide and Elizabeth. Candide, looking concerned, whispered to Snape, "Who is this?"

"This is my Uncle Vernon," Harry said, making sure it did not sound like an introduction. He looked next to Dudley, who was standing behind his father, also dressed in a huge three-piece suit, working on acquiring the same number of chins, it appeared. "And my cousin, Dudley." He glanced around and found Petunia standing on the far side of the next table, looking very sour. "My Aunt Petunia," he informed them with a hand-sweep in her direction. Candide and Elizabeth leaned to the side to see her better, both looking amazed and curious.

"I suppose these are all weirdoes like yourself?" Vernon asked, indicating their table.

"Yes," Harry replied dryly, "Of course." He had thought he was over these people, since he rarely gave them a passing thought, but faced with them here, memories rose up and circled like hot whispering ghosts. He forced his breathing to slow.

Vernon turned away. "I want a different table," he demanded of the maitre d'.

"This is the only table available," the man insisted. Harry sat back down, wrestling internally. They didn't matter, he insisted to himself. It was hard to ignore them at the moment though, as Vernon had the attention of the entire restaurant.

"That table in the corner is empty," Vernon bellowed.

Red-faced, the maitre d' explained with forced patience, "It is reserved. For someone important," he added in a tone that knew how insulting it would come across.

"I am your most important guest; I brought three big clients here for lunch last month alone."

Harry was distracted by Candide topping up his wine. When he did not take the hint, she pushed it closer. "I'm sorry to have picked this place," she said, plunking down the heavy bottle beside Harry's presents. "We should go somewhere else."

"No," Harry insisted, tuning out the argument behind him as he had tuned out so many in the past, very similar in that he was being discussed in the third person, as always.

"You lived with them?" Candide asked, clearly wanting to understand.

Snape made an aborted motion to restrain her. "Yes," Harry replied. "Just ignore them." Behind him, Dudley was arguing as well now, but faced with the embarrassment of being thrown out, they were winding down and taking their seats while still grumbling. Harry took a sip of wine and licked his lips, forcing himself to taste it. He wanted to forget them completely but all he could think of was that it was unfair to lock a child in a cupboard for a week at a time, for any reason, that it was unfair especially to lie about what happened to a child's parents, to make him think their deaths weren't important.

"Harry," Snape's whip-like voice beside him shook him loose from his musings.

Candide raised her wine glass and put on a smile. "Well, for what it's worth, happy birthday, Harry, and many more." They all clinked their glasses. Harry noticed Candide's eyes flicker over to the next table and narrow intensely. It made him suspect she had a fierce side he had not seen directly, and he half-wished she would pull out her wand and show it.

Elizabeth only made minor conversation over the soup and all of it very remote to their situation. They didn't really know each other well enough to make easy small talk, Harry realized. After fishing for a topic, they discussed the difference between magical and Muggle education with each concluding that they wouldn't have liked the other's school very much.

Later, while they waited for cake, Harry finished his glass of wine and leaned back in a much less caring mood. His full stomach probably had something to do with that; it wasn't something he would have associated with the Dursleys, for certain. Harry watched Candide's eyes stare beyond his shoulder for the tenth time.

"Lord, I can't imagine," she muttered. "No wonder you wanted to live somewhere else."

Harry's cake arrived, presented by a troupe of waiters who also rushed about pouring champagne. Eighteen sparklers burned atop the cake, lighting the whole table. They all wished him happy birthday again as the sparklers fizzled to glowing red curls which were quickly pulled out before the cake was efficiently cut and served, the remainder set on a side table. Harry began to wonder if the waiters weren't actually house-elves charmed to be taller; they moved so quickly and silently.

After downing his tall, sparkling glass in one go, Harry reached for the presents. Candide's was on top, so he gave her a grateful smile and opened that one first. Inside was a set of magical bookmarks, the kind that remembered multiple pages. They were gold, square on the outer edge with the insides cut out, each in the shape of a different breed of dragon. "Thanks. I was admiring these the other day at the shop . . ."

"Not the kind of thing to buy for yourself," Candide finished for him.

"No they aren't. Thanks." The next box was the largest, from Elizabeth. Harry savored the smooth feel of the glistening wrapping paper before opening it. Inside was a hat, a stylish dark grey one like someone might wear in a Muggle film. "I thought you didn't like me wearing a hat?" Harry asked to cover his near dismay.

"I don't like that *orange* hat," Elizabeth clarified.

"Ah." Harry pulled out the fancy felt hat, complete with small maroon feather, and put it on.

"Oh, you look good in that," Candide opined, sounding too honest to ignore. Harry couldn't imagine looking like himself in this thing. He smiled and placed it back in the box.

"Thanks," he said.

"Better than the other one," Elizabeth insisted, sipping her champagne, unperturbed by his lack of enthusiasm.

The last box was small and a little heavy, bringing back a mix of memories that hit harder with the Dursleys so near. A glance at his guardian showed Snape with one of those looks that implied he was seeing way too much. Harry unwrapped the gold paper and found a soft leather wallet. "Thanks," Harry, flipping it open and closed again. He pulled out his old knitted wallet, which seemed even more worn and dingy in this setting. Hermione, who had knitted it, would think he had used it long enough, he decided, in fact may be appalled to find him still using it. He transferred his identification and address notes to the new one before pocketing both.

As they ate cake, Harry with great relish since he was reminded now of numerous cakeless birthdays, another familiar voice spoke his name.

"Your table is right over here, sir," the maitre d' said to Lord Freeland as Harry turned.

"Yes, yes, I'll get there when I get there," Freeland said dismissively. With a smile Harry stood up to greet him. "How are you doing, Mr. Potter . . . well, looks quite well, doesn't it? My stars." He released Harry's hand. "And Professor Snape, good to see you as well. And what lovely ladies, I have not had the pleasure." Introductions went around.

"Excuse me," Vernon's voice intruded, "But aren't you Lord Freeland?"

"Yes," Freeland replied in a doubtful voice. Harry stepped back to avoid being bumped aside by the beefy elbow of his uncle. Vernon had gone into his ingratiating mode, which made Harry's dinner turn over.

"Vernon Dursley, Director of Grunnings Holdings, we could discuss a bit of business if you had the time. Oh, this is my nephew, Harry, whom you apparently know, as shocking a notion as that is."

"Shocking?" Freeland echoed in confusion. "Everyone knows Mr. Potter," he added with a laugh of disbelief.

"Do they now?" Vernon asked. "Oh, this must be that Vold-e-mort thing, right?"

Freeland looked about as befuddled as decorum would allow. "I should say."

Harry explained, "My uncle is a Muggle."

"I see," Freeland muttered. "But that is hardly an excuse for not understanding who *you* are, Mr. Potter."

"He doesn't like wizards," Harry also pointed out.

Vernon was eyeing Freeland suspiciously now. Freeland grinned out of the corner of his mouth. "I doubt you really wish to do business with me then, sir," he said with a demeaning edge. He turned back to the table, ignoring Vernon, who now looked a touch apoplectic. "We'll certainly have to have you all over for tea . . . oh, a birthday. Yours, Mr. Potter? I do apologize for not remembering that. I do wish you the best."

Vernon had stumbled back to his table where he sat looking purple around the edges, as though the world had ended.

"It's all right sir, really. I appreciate your sentiments," Harry said easily to Freeland.

Freeland looked to be thinking of heading to his table where a waiter still stood patiently to pull out his chair and arrange his things for him. "You are fine young man, Potter. You need anything at all, just owl."

"Thank you, sir."

"Good evening to you all," he tipped an invisible hat to the table and stepped away, leaning heavily on his cane. Harry noticed then that the table was set for one. He sat down again, feeling a little bad about that.

The rest of the evening went by without incident and Harry managed to forget his relatives so much so that he didn't notice them leave. Snape glanced at his pocket watch a few times as they drank coffee before suggesting they depart as well. Harry thought he looked uneasy and strangely in a hurry.

They returned to Shrewsthorpe, Harry a little grudgingly because he wanted the evening to go on as long as possible. Snape told Harry to leave his cloak on and he mysteriously led the way out to the garden where a familiar cat sat atop their wall.

"Good evening, Harry," Professor McGonagall intoned after transforming mid-leap to the ground.

Harry returned the greeting, unable to hold back his surprise at finding his old headmistress hovering in the darkness of their garden. "What brings you here?" Harry couldn't help asking.

"Delivering a present for you, my dear boy," she replied with a smile.

"You needn't have gotten me anything," he insisted.

She stepped back to the garden wall and looked each way down the street. "Oh, it isn't from me. It is from someone you are almost certainly not expecting a gift from."

She grinned broadly then as a rumble filled the street. Harry walked over to her near the gate and looked both ways, but nothing appeared in the pools of light on the blacktop. The wind was still and the trees looked akin to statues. The rumble grew louder. McGonagall seemed to be looking for something specific in Harry's face she studied it so closely.

Harry was about to give in and ask what the noise was when, with a clanging boom, something fell out of the sky. He blinked in shock at the sight of the largest motorbike he had ever seen, ridden by the largest man he knew. Hagrid killed the engine and swung his leg off the seat.

"Arry," he said emotionally. "She's all yers."

"What?" Harry managed. The thing was monstrous. Unrealistically so.

Hagrid held out a set of silver keys which Harry accepted in a daze. "A flying motorbike," Harry murmured distantly, dusty memories tugging at him.

"Aye," Hagrid replied proudly. "The very one I brought you away on the night You-Know-Who attacked you and your folks."

Harry dropped the keys, but caught them again before they landed. "I've been on that motorbike?" he asked. "I used to dream about a flying motorbike. You're giving this to me?" he confirmed with Hagrid, catching up.

"No, no, I'm just deliverin' it. Yer Godfather left it to you for your eighteenth birthday," Hagrid said. He gave Harry a powerful shove toward the street. "Take 'er for a spin."

Harry stepped into the road and around the glistening chrome handlebars, trailing a reverent finger over them at the memory of Sirius. After a long minute he said, "I, uh, don't know how to ride it."

Hagrid came over. "Let me give yer a lesson then." Harry watched carefully as Hagrid demonstrated the clutch, the shifter, the brake, the throttle, the altitude throttle. "Ger on, we'll take 'er around ter block."

Harry slid onto the seat in front of Hagrid's bulk and watched intently how Hagrid kick-started the machine with a toe flip--Harry doubted he could manage that--before they roared away down the road to the edge of town, where they turned around in the gravel carpark of a closed antique shop.

"Take the handlebars," Hagrid said and then immediately let go.

Harry made a desperate grab and made a few alarming over-corrections before they were rolling true again.

"Now, the altitude throttle is here." Hagrid said conversationally before wrapping his hand around Harry's left and giving a back twist to the handle that shot them into the air. Harry's vision swam, though it was hard to tell in the darkness whether he could really see or not. Hagrid released his hand and they started to fall. "Now, keep 'er steady," Hagrid shouted.

Harry frantically adjusted the handle until they were level. With an exhale of relief he twisted the right handle backward and they shot forward, making Harry very grateful that Hagrid was behind him, because he was certain he would have slid right off the back otherwise.

"Take 'er easy, there, Harry," Hagrid chastised.

Harry turned the handlebars and the bike, despite being five hundred feet off the ground, responded smoothly by turning. Harry looked down at the end of the turn. He had no sense of where Shrewsthorpe was. Several clusters of lights that could be towns dotted the world below them. They cruised slowly while Harry tried to get his bearings.

"O'er there," Hagrid said eventually, "little more to the right."

As it turned out, Harry was almost on target. He reduced their altitude and brought them down on the street, right before the house for a relatively smooth landing. Hagrid got off the back and Harry remained sitting meditatively, arms wide to hold the humming handlebars, feeling pure happiness. He eventually realized that everyone stood waiting for him, so he steered the bike inside the garden and parked it before shutting down the motor.

"You can quiet 'er with the knob here," Hagrid said, demonstrating a silver knob below the speedometer with the label *Roar*.

"Excellent," Snape said from close behind Harry. "It has one redeeming quality, at least."

"It's brilliant," Harry breathed. "Thank you for bringing it," he said to Hagrid and McGonagall.

Hagrid gave him a hug. "Never thought I'd see ter day." He brushed his eye and slapped Harry's shoulder, knocking him aside, although Harry recovered quickly. With two rounds of goodbyes, he and McGonagall stepped onto the street to walk to the train station, Hagrid over the wall, McGonagall through the gate, Hagrid said, "You take care of 'im, now, Severus."

"Oh, but of course," he said with a voice colored in sarcasm.

Elizabeth and Candide took their leave as well, each with last birthday wishes. When they were alone in the house, Harry said, "You could have vetoed that, couldn't you?"

Snape paused and turned. "In theory, but not in practice." He paused. "Not given how much Mr. Black still means to you."

Harry felt unwilling to counter that, even though it solidified some distance between them. "Thank you for letting me have it," Harry said sincerely.

In an exasperated tone Snape said, "Do try to be cautious on it. It isn't a rational way to fly, unlike a broomstick."

"It is just the same as a broomstick," Harry insisted. In the main hall Harry had a thought. "Can I ride it to the Burrow tomorrow for the picnic?"

"You will have to get up early to do so, I believe, since it will require considerably longer time than the Floo."

"Okay," Harry agreed, eagerly anticipating everyone's reaction to his arrival at the Weasley place.

That night, Harry, despite feeling very happy about his big shiny present from his godfather, couldn't sleep. He raised his head to peer at the clock to find that it read ten minutes to midnight. He plunked his head back down on the soft pillow, reminded unwillingly of his much less comfortable bed at the Dursley's, of his grudgingly allowed stay in a bedroom rather than a broom cupboard. With a huff, he rolled over onto his back and tried to think of something else.

The door creaking faintly distracted Harry from trying to sleep and he turned his head to find Snape in the dark doorway. Standing half inside the room, Snape asked, "Having difficulty sleeping?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted

With a shuffle of robe, Snape stepped over and with his wand, waved up the lamp to an orange glow. "I suspected that your rest would be disturbed."

Harry frowned and finally said, "I keep remembering how unfair and cruel they were. They really hated me." He sat up slightly, using the pillow as a backrest and glanced at the clock again. "Funny, I used to lay awake the night *before* my birthday because of them."

Snape clasped his hands before him, still holding his wand. "You have a minute remaining. Anything else you would like?"

Harry shook his head, amused at the thought that Snape appeared ready to conjure anything he might request. Snape flicked his wand at the clock, halting its faint ticking with the minute hand just before the twelve. "Are you certain?" Snape asked.

"Yes." Downstairs, the grandfather clock chimed twelve times. While staring at the frozen clock, Harry said, "I used to always be wishing for something to be undone, like for my parents to not be dead, or for Voldemort to not exist or to not be my responsibility, or even to just not be in trouble for something," he added more lightly. Meeting his guardian's dark gaze, he said with a shrug, "But everything is pretty good right now." He wished Sirius' name was cleared, but that wasn't something likely to be granted this instant, by this man.

Snape waved the clock to resume running and gave Harry a twitching half-smile. "Do let me know if you think of anything," Snape said as he moved to the door.

Oddly, Harry felt a twinge, watching him move in the dim light. "Good night," Harry said, to cover it.

"Good night, and happy birthday."

* * *

The next morning, Harry came down the stairs at seven sharp. Winky brought coffee three minutes later, just as Snape came in, reading a letter. "My mother is suggesting we visit," he said as he pulled out his chair.

Harry shrugged that he could survive that. He added more sugar to his coffee and opened the *Prophet* just as Snape stole half of it. Harry said, "You're up early. Do you want to fly with me to the picnic?"

Snape gave him a shocked, disbelieving look. "I do not think so."

Harry tried to focus on the paper, on an article about a run of cursed tinned fish showing up in Muggle shops. Mundungus immediately leapt to Harry's mind for some reason. He turned the page of the paper. "You're certain?" he verified minutes later.

Snape put his half of the paper down with a sharp rustle. "Why would you imagine I would wish to?"

"Because it sounds like fun," explained Harry, fishing in his mind for enticements. "That and I'm sure you must have been jealous of Sirius at school because of it." He actually had no idea if Snape even knew about the bike before it came up as a gift, but Snape's expression closed down as it went distant, making Harry believe he must have. Continuing in a bright tone, Harry said, "You can ride it whenever you like. Imagine how annoyed he'd be at that thought."

Snape thought in brow-furrowed silence before saying, "You truly wish me to travel with you?"

Harry kind of did. "Yeah. I think it'd be fun." Breakfast arrived. "If you like, we can even ride it to visit your mum."

Snape's dark eyes glazed over. "Hm," he murmured. "Or my father, as Gretta wants us to visit *them* as well before the school year begins."

Holding back hard on grinning too much, Harry replied, "Sure. Or both, since your parents don't owl each other, it would work twice."

Snape rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "If you wish, we can go together to the Burrow this morning."

Harry brightened more. "Excellent. This will be great."

Out in the garden, after a quick breakfast, Harry sat in front on the huge seat that probably could have held three of his friends in a pinch.

"You are certain you can operate this machine?" Snape asked, sounding dubious.

Harry scanned the controls; there seemed to be more of them than he remembered in the darkness the night before.

"Yeah. Just give us a Disillusionment Charm and I'll start 'er up." Snape pulled out his wand and complied. Harry put the key in and turned it to the line marked as *Go* before jumping on the starter. To his relief it coughed to a rumble, forcing him to shove in the *Roar* knob to quiet it. It fell so silent, he feared that it had stalled, but then noticed the handlebars still shivered with life.

"Hang on," Harry commanded. He glanced back to see Snape grabbing the sissy bar in his right hand, his left he wrapped around Harry.

"Should we carry a broom as well? As backup?" Snape asked.

"Nah," Harry said, twisting the left handle backwards as slightly as possible. They hovered a foot off the ground. Harry turned it farther and they rocketed into the air. When they achieved a good altitude, Harry hovered again.

"A little less yelling, perhaps?" Snape suggested dryly.

"Brooms don't do that, you have to admit," Harry shouted over the wind. He turned them south, sighting along the main road.

After twenty minutes Harry managed to relax into the ride and watch the landscape slide by beneath them. At first their speed had seemed insanely fast, but he was used to it now and it almost felt sedate, although the air buffeted them continuously around the windscreen.

It required two and a half hours, including a little time to get lost, but eventually the distinctive Burrow rose into view in its field, the dirt drive meandering a long distance from the remote road it connected to. People wandered around the front of the house, setting up tables. Harry pulled out the *Roar* knob and watched them stop and turn, a wide grin stretching his face.

They landed in a cloud of dust on the drive and Harry immediately had to throttle back to keep from getting thrown off on the bumps. He clutched and raced the engine a bit as they freewheeled up to the house and came to a stop. The Weasley twins banged their way out of the side door and came running, catching up with the group who were coming over. Harry recognized his other housemates from Hogwarts as well as Ron and Mr. Weasley, who gazed rapturously at the bike. He killed the engine so he could hear them.

The sudden silence felt like deafness, until one of the twins' shouts of glee went up. Snape swung himself off the back and brushed his robes flat. "Wow," Ron breathed. "Where'd ya' get that?"

"Sirius, if you can believe it," Harry responded. "Left it for my birthday."

"I thought I recognized that monstrosity," Mrs. Weasley stated, slightly disapproving. This only added to the appeal of it in Harry's mind. Some of the others grinned as well.

"And what charms does it use to fly?" Mr. Weasley leaned close to ask. Harry could only shrug, since he knew nothing about it. Mrs. Weasley looked very relieved that Harry did not know.

"Well, lunch is on if you're hungry," Molly said, drawing everyone but Ron and Dean away from the motorbike.

Harry looked the bike over in detail with them until their stomachs forced them to the food table. His friends kept marveling about the bike as they ate. "What a monster," Dean said, biting into a sandwich. "What a great present."

Harry agreed heartily, but then caught a glimpse of Snape's closed expression farther down the long uneven row of tables. Harry managed a smile for his friends as they chatted on about their holidays and Sirius' old bike.

While the cake was being fetched from the kitchen, worrisomely, by Fred and George, Harry wandered over to where Snape stood, filling his cup from a spout on a large ceramic lemon-shaped urn. Harry glanced around to see that they were alone before saying, "I don't want you to feel like you're competing with Sirius."

Snape stared into the worn plastic cup. "A bit of a one-sided competition, really."

Harry thought that over. "One-sided which way?" he asked, honestly curious.

Snape's dark eyes came up. "You tell me."

Ginny and Hermione walked over at that moment and dragged Harry back to the table. "Cake time," Ginny announced. Eighteen pinwheeling fireworks lit the long, chocolatey, broom-shaped cake, shedding sparks over everything in cycling colors.

"I can't blow those out," Harry said.

"Just cut the cake so we can eat it," Ron prompted him impatiently. Harry braced himself through the off-key song, accepted the knife, and quickly cut the broom handle into pieces and onto plates, eagerly accepted. When the seeking hands disappeared, Harry cut two more, one of which he forced on his guardian, who was observing from the far end of the table.

While everyone devoured cake, Harry said quietly, "There is no competition, or if there is, you've won it already."

Snape shook his head. "This should be dropped; it is your birthday after all and your marvelous present should not be soured. If you choose to idealize your dead godfather, you have every right to." He frowned and put down his cake with only one bite taken out of it. "Even that may have come out wrong," he breathed, sounding frustrated.

A game of Quidditch was being organized in the field beside the house. The new makeshift pitch was well surrounded by trees that had been growing mysteriously fast over the last five years. Harry watched teams being selected by some kind of colorful, flashing lottery spell. "Don't worry about it, Severus; I think I understand." Harry then teased, "Want to play some Quidditch?"

"Beater?" Snape suggested.

"I don't know how they're choosing positions," Harry said, walking toward the group with a grin. Snape sometimes refereed matches at Hogwarts, but Harry had never seen him play.

They joined the cluster of people as they were sorted into two groups. Ron was saying, "Ginny you are dragon," he said, as a spell drew a crude symbol in the air before her. "And, Harry," he said, waving his wand at Harry's chest causing a Pegasus to appear there. "Peggy for you." He pointed to the left of himself. "And . . . are you playing, sir?" he blurted in surprise at Snape.

"Course 'e is," Mr. Weasley said chummily, putting a hand around Snape's shoulder. "Aren't you?"

"I was considering it. What positions are available?"

Mr. Weasley responded, "Um, Keeper for you, I think. Right Ron?" Ron looked ready to protest, but swallowed it.

"Yeah. 'Course." He waved his wand. "Dragon, o'er there," he pointed to where Neville, Ginny and Fred stood with a wide variety of expressions.

Ginny looked amused in contrast to the other two. "You good at Keeper, Professor?" Snape gave her a haughty look in reply.

The rest were assigned to teams and George explained the boundaries. Charlie let his wife Gretel play and went to sit beside Hermione on a picnic blanket. They had just enough brooms. Harry wished they had brought theirs as he let Gretel have the last one that looked air-worthy. The absolute last, an unfinished pine-handled model with lots of extra twine to hold the errant half-broken bristles down, didn't look like it could possibly fly. It jumped into his hand on command though and managed a wobbly takeoff.

"All right there, Harry?" Ron asked, passing him easily.

Harry waved his Beater bat at him. "I'll just swing harder to make up for it," he threatened.

The makeshift goals were made up of bicycle tubes, a Muggle hula hoop, and a woven grape vine that resembled an old wreath more than a piece of sporting equipment. "Everyone in position," Ron shouted. When everyone quieted and flew to the center of the field, he said, "Call your own fouls and losers have to wash the dishes . . . and anything else Mum needs done."

He tossed up the homesewn Quaffle and immediately rose to fight with George for it. They weren't playing with a Snitch and only had one Bludger that the twins had brought. Harry found himself better blocking opponents with his body rather than using his bat, making him even with Neville, who had a much better broom but was not practiced at Quiditch and didn't have the heart to swing hard when the Bludger came his way.

"Longbottom," Snape said from his position guarding the posts. "Hover here. Not quite so obviously in the foul zone," he corrected waving him back. "There. When they are making a scoring run, be there. Like Potter is doing on the other side. Fred Weasley can handle Beater on his own for us."

"Ye- Yes, sir."

After over an hour of pretty unspectacular, but amusing, play, the score was a mere twenty to twenty. Snape turned out to be a rather decent Keeper as was Mr. Weasley on Ginny's broom since he could intimidate those coming at him with embarrassing or amusing stories from their childhood. George was taking rather personal runs at Professor Snape, to no avail. Gretel was good on a broom but not accustomed to the fast passing George was, slowing him down when they made a run toward the goals.

"Neville, you are hovering in the way on purpose," George complained after shooting the Quaffle wide on one particularly fast flight at the right-hand goal.

"I'm supposed to be," Neville pointed out in distress. "I'm on this team."

Mrs. Weasley tramped over from the yard of the Burrow and yelled that they had five more minutes.

"Mum's calling the game," George said, when Ron grumbled. "She wants help with the dishes."

"Next score wins," Ron announced, taking up the Quaffle and passing it to Ginny, who called a time-out. Harry flew slowly over to Mr. Weasley and watched as the other side congregated near the posts, leaning in close to plot out a play.

"What do you think they'll come up with?" Harry asked.

Mr. Weasley shrugged. "Whatever it is their TIME'S UP!" he shouted.

Harry took up his position. He had to think pretty strategically to get where he wanted to be in time to have a swing at the Bludger with his bat. The other side took up a formation. Ron passed to Ginny who was racing down the pitch with the Quaffle, eyes firmly on the center goal post. Snape left his position, taking up the bat Neville held out as he passed. He raced straight to the Bludger arcing slowly through the pitch and took a hard swing, sending it straight at Mr. Weasley, guarding the middle post. Startled, Mr. Weasley moved out of its path, leaving the goal open. The Bludger swung around in another arc back to the pitch. Harry urged his slow broom faster, trying desperately for his first real swing at the thing all game. Ginny dodged twice, Quaffle in her throwing hand, trying to outwit her father as he rose back into position. All the players were coming in fast in anticipation of a score. Harry met the Bludger and swung as hard as he could, guessing at Ginny's next move.

Harry's aim was too good; just as Ginny released her throw, the Bludger smashed through the old fragile broom she rode and she started to plummet. Harry dropped the bat and reached for his wand, but Neville and Fred were in his way and he couldn't move fast enough to get a gap for a spell. Several people shouted and those on good brooms dove for her. Harry was leaning hard on his broom but it wouldn't move nearly fast enough. George managed to grab hold of her sleeve, breaking her fall until the fabric tore, Ginny's one hand flailing for George's broom the other holding the useless broken handle of her own broom. Two other figures nearly collided, reaching her just a few feet before the ground. After a bit of grappling, frantic on Ginny's part, Ron and Snape hovered her to the field.

Harry arrived at a run, since that was faster than flying. "Thanks," Ginny was saying. "Didn't fancy an afternoon at St. Mungo's."

"I'm sorry, Ginny," Harry apologized.

"That's all right," Ginny said, recovering quickly. She examined the broken end of the handle before sticking it in the ground and leaning on it, breathing out in a release of tension.

"These brooms aren't as good as the ones at Hogwarts," Ron said to Harry. "Especially not now."

Ginny stood straight and glanced around. A little reluctantly, she said, "Thanks, Professor."

Snape nodded as the other Weasleys muttered similar things. "Ginny scored, didn't she?" Ron asked, changing the topic.

"I didn't see," Harry said.

"She did," Mr. Weasley said. "Dishes for us: Harry, George . . . Gretel," he said, remembering their team.

"Just don't say anything to Mum," Ginny said. Everyone agreed that would be the best thing.

Fred said, "Oh, I'll take the broken broom, then. Buy another used one to replace it." Everyone agreed that was a good idea. Fred fetched the bristle end and did a Reparo which wouldn't let it fly, but would let it pass any glances. He gave Ginny his broom to carry back to the house.

Harry didn't at all mind doing dishes standing between George and Mr. Weasley. Mrs. Weasley gave them an earful for making the birthday boy help, but everyone insisted losing was losing. Gretel did her part by cleaning up outside, using magic to put everything in the shed. Harry could see her steering one chair at a time around the side of the house as he scrubbed a tall stack of soaking, mismatched plates. The warm water on his hands relaxed him, which he needed since he felt a little strained and guilty.

When Mrs. Weasley headed to the living room to sit with the others, Harry quietly said, "I'm sorry about what happened," to Mr. Weasley.

"Harry, don't worry about it," Mr. Weasley said softly, sounding honestly forgiving about it. "Merlin, if you knew the trouble these kids of ours have been in over the years." He glanced into the seating area over his shoulder. "But, uh, best to not say anything anyway."

"Yeah," George said, nudging Harry with his elbow as he dried dishes and put them on a stack. "Such trouble, you don't know. We've had dark wizards hunting us down all our lives."

Harry was ahead of George on washing and waiting for Mr. Weasley to add more dishes to the sink

"You are pretty fast at this, Harry."

"I've been hunted by the Dursleys all my life. I always had to do the cleaning up," Harry explained, taking up the large pot just put into the sink. "Now the house-elf does it."

"Must be nice," George said. "I could afford one now. Think, uh . . ." he trailed off. Harry glanced at Mr. Weasley and found him giving his son a strict look. Harry wondered that no one ever criticized *him* directly.

Finally they finished and the last dish was hovered into the cabinet. They joined the others around the cold hearth. Harry was surprised to find Snape sitting between Ginny and Fred on the coarse, green and orange plaid couch. He didn't look relaxed exactly, but at least not too stiff. "Goin' ta win the house cup this year, Ginny?" Fred was asking. "You *are* our last hope."

"Last chance, at least," George chimed in.

"She is going to work on her N.E.W.T.s" Mrs. Weasley stated, setting out fresh bottles of butterbeer on the low table and taking her usual chair by the hearth after tossing her apron over the back. Harry took a seat on the arm of the closer, plain orange couch, beside Gretel.

"As usual," Ginny said, "I have no say." When Snape turned to her, she asked, "Have any brothers or sisters, Professor?"

"Goodness no." Snape replied.

"Oh, so you didn't have this many people mapping out your life."

"Oh, yes, not having siblings would have saved you from that." Snape said. "No, much better to have every last expectation, hope and vicarious living piled onto one child. A considerably better situation."

Ginny remained silent, taking that in.

Snape asked, "So, Ms. Weasley, do you find yourself steered to a particular career with no arguing allowed?"

"No." Ginny said. "They want me to go into something with a career path. They haven't-"

"Do you find you are forced to engage in activities where your success is strictly measured to a standard your parents have set because they base their own worthiness on it?"

"Why would they do that?" Ginny asked, clearly mystified. "You're saying I'm better off with all these hooligan brothers?" she demanded. "Don't tell me that," she huffed and sat back with her arms crossed, although she almost looked like she conceded part of the point.

Fred looked up at Harry and said, "So Mr. Auror-to-be, how's your training going?"

"Good. Tough." He rubbed his shoulder. "I'd show you my bruises, but they've healed. Our trainer really hammered on me the first few days."

"Where is that Tonks?" Fred said indignantly, looking around as though he might find her.

"On duty today," Harry explained. "Tonks isn't as hard on us, but she isn't in charge of training."

"A duel!" George announced, finger in the air. "Fred and I against Harry."

"What?" Harry asked, laughing. "Two against one?"

"If you want it even," Fred said, "we can have Ginny join our side too."

"Or Ron," said George.

"Or both," offered Fred. They were both sporting their famous grins, making Harry laugh. Fred jumped up first and they both hauled Harry outside backwards by his elbows. The others followed at a more sedate pace, but looking expectant.

Clouds had moved in but the afternoon was still warm. "We haven't covered tactics for more than one opponent at a time," Harry pointed out.

"Listen to you," George complained, poking Harry in the chest. "Stand there, now," he ordered and jogged over to where Fred stood, wand already brandished. Harry shook his head and took out his wand. It was like seeing double, staring at the two of them in their identical red jumpers and black knit trousers. Fred said, "Give us a countdown, eh? Ron?"

Harry spread his feet to balance better and held up his wand. He didn't think he could do two boxes at once, but maybe . . . Ron's count hit three and Harry waited, giving the twins the first shots. Strange things came at him. One was a twisting column of red composed of miniature dragons; the other spell approached like a swarm of confetti. Harry had only two sessions ago managed a modulated Chrysanthemum block but he tried it now anyway; it glowed warm and ripply around him, meeting both attacks and bending to absorb them. Harry was vaguely aware of a gasp of surprise from someone.

The block dissipated and Harry, just as Fred muttered, "Uh oh," and looked about to run, incanted a web spell wide enough to catch them both. And it did for just a moment before George used a blue flame to cut out of it, leaving it to wrap Fred up tightly. George was breathing heavily and aiming his wand with a very intense look. Harry waited, curious what he was going to use next. George chewed his lip and shouted, "*Awabayazashi!*" which Harry definitely had not heard before. Transparent spheres about a foot across came rocketing out of George's wand. Harry ducked, but George just aimed lower. Harry jumped to the side, and one of the spheres tried to eat his arm letting him know what they planned for all of him. He shook the sphere off and tried a heat charm, then a Titan block, on the approaching line, both to no effect. He continued to dodge then rolled far enough to the side to get a shot in and shouted a Prisoner box charm. The last platoon of bubbles flew by and popped well beyond Harry as the rest of the Weasleys came over and stared down at the two-foot square red box with silver hinges and George whinging from inside, "Someone get me out."

"You? I'm first," Fred complained, still sawing at his net with his wand transformed into a bowie knife.

"Excellent spell," Ron said with feeling, tapping the box with his toe.

"Hey, cut that out!" George's high-pitched voice complained.

Harry released each of them with a wave and they straightened slowly, rubbing their necks. George said, "All right, we'll call it a draw, then."

"I don't think so," Mr. Weasley said, slapping his son on the back. "You lost."

"We needed more time to prepare," the other twin complained.

"It was your idea to duel," Harry accused them but then laughed. "I do this all day long at training."

As they walked back inside, Ron said, "And you have years to go; think how bloody amazing you'll be by then."

"You have to be better than everyone you might encounter. Takes a while," Harry said, paraphrasing his trainer. He looked to Snape but his guardian was walking ahead with his back to them. "Fred and George weren't trying to kill me."

"Not this time, anyway," Fred assured him with a challenging look.

* * *

That Sunday, still dwelling on his birthday and the past, Harry felt the need to return to Godric's Hollow. It was a nice day, uncloudy and warm, even during breakfast. Snape was surprised when told, but covered it quickly. "As you wish," was all he said.

Flying at the top speed of his broom the trip seemed to go even faster than his flight home last time. He really should work on distance Apparation so he could just arrive instantly; although as soon as he considered that, he thought it lacked something.

A groundskeeper was picking up twigs along the fence and only glanced up once at Harry, who was glad he had stashed his broom quickly after landing, as he had not seen the man there in the shade. He went straight to the grave and sat down on the warm ground. In the sunlight, everything looked better and the ivy from the crystal had grown to frame the stone nicely with colorful flowers. The mirror looked the same, reminding him of regrets he should bury and move on from.

Harry had realized the one question he *really* wanted to ask them: whether they were all right with him taking on another parent in Snape. In his mind, sitting here, he could imagine that they probably wouldn't be. "But he's loads better than Vernon and Petunia," Harry heard himself arguing aloud. A glance around showed the groundskeeper putting a lawnmower back in an old van on the far side of the gravel drive. "I finished what you started. Everything. It's my turn now," he said quietly, then brushed away the tear that had streaked down his right cheek. He wrestled himself back under control and stood up. "You're not here to complain, you know."

The day grew warmer, by the minute it felt. Harry shed his cloak and put it over his arm, grateful for something solid to occupy himself with, if only for a moment. He considered saying goodbye but decided they couldn't hear him, making it a little silly.

Harry's back still complained from flying hunched over for speed so he needed to take a walk. As well, he thought he smelled chips frying and this made his stomach rumble insistently as he had not had lunch and it must be around 1:00. Harry followed the low iron fence to the entrance which was framed by a black iron gateway bearing the name of the village in a gothic script along the top. It looked grim, as though it were a Halloween decoration.

Around the corner on the main street, Harry found the source of the scent: a very small shop, barely more than a shed, selling lunches and ice creams. Harry went up and ordered chips, then sat down at the adjacent picnic table to wait for them. The young woman in a frilly pink apron brought them out a few minutes later and Harry began eating, even though they were almost too hot to hold between his fingertips.

As he ate, a woman with two small children came to the window and ordered ice creams for them. The older child, maybe five, tugged on her mum's jumper edge insisting on chocolate twist. Ice creams were handed through the window, making Harry decide he would need some as well. The woman doled one cone out and then took the other, glanced at Harry as she did so, and nearly dropped it, generating a squeal of disapproval from the older child who helped catch it with fingers digging into the fast-melting treat. The child happily licked them off, though, rather than complain about it.

The woman glanced at Harry in consternation again before grabbing up a handful of serviettes and wiping off her hands and the child's, who wasn't very interested in having this done and moved away toward the table to avoid it. The woman helped the girl onto the bench across from Harry and said, "I'm sorry to be rude, but you remind me of someone." She laughed wryly. "I've never seen you here before."

"I'm just on my way through," Harry explained. His remaining chips were getting cold, so he returned to eating. He wasn't used to introducing himself, but he did so anyway.

The woman said her name was Patricia Mathers, then chastised her daughter for trying to steal her nose with her chocolatey fingers, before saying, "Potter, my! My second cousin married a Potter and you are the spitting image of him from the photographs."

Harry's insides swelled. "You're my mum--Lily's--cousin?" he asked in disbelief. "And, I guess, Petunia's as well."

The woman froze in amazement, eyes far away. "You can't be . . . the Potter son . . . the baby who disappeared that night the house was destroyed."

"He didn't disappear," Harry said a little smartly. "He got taken to the Dursley's. I got taken," he corrected himself, shaken by this notion of relatives, no matter the remoteness.

"NO," she uttered in surprise. Her mouth worked silently before she said, "They never said. We all wondered."

"Oh yeah; they pretended I didn't exist," Harry explained.

"Gracious," she said in horror. As Harry stood up to order an ice cream, she asked, "You aren't still with them now, are you?"

"No, fortunately. One of my teachers from my boarding school adopted me."

"Oh dear. That is rather tragic, isn't it?"

Harry, who didn't see it that way, said, "I don't think so."

"I am sorry. I'm being ever so rude I think," she said when Harry returned with his double cone of double chocolate.

"No. I'm really thrilled to meet you, honest," Harry insisted. "Other than the Dursleys, I didn't think I had any relatives."

"So what brings you to Godric's Hollow?" she asked curiously, before helping her young son eat the rest of his treat.

Harry nodded in the direction he had come. "I was visiting my parents' grave."

"Gracious," she said again, sounding moved.

Harry ate in silence until she said, "You should follow me over to meet my sister, Pamela; she would be thrilled to meet you as well." She laughed lightly. "You know, you used to be one of the scary stories we told as kids, because no one really knew what happened that night." She looked up with narrowed eyes as though gauging him.

Harry involved himself with his treat, not sure how to respond. Eventually, he said, "I'd love to meet more relatives."

"And gossip about the Dursleys," she added with a sly grin.

"That would be ironic," Harry said firmly, making her laugh.

She wiped her mouth and said, "My, it is odd to meet you. You are such a legend here."

Harry thought that she didn't know the half of it. When their ice creams were finished, she asked, "Where is your car parked?" When Harry gestured vaguely, she said, "Oh, yes, over by the cemetery. Come on, my sister's place is just two streets over. If you want, of course."

"Yes, I'd really like to," Harry insisted. He stood and followed.

She rambled on about the village as they walked, her children running ahead and returning many times before they arrived at a modest cottage painted bright blue. She rang the bell and then knocked. A similar looking woman came

around the side. "Patty," the new woman said in greeting. "And who is this?" Her eyes narrowed at Harry when she noticed him.

"Pammy, guess who this is," Patricia said vehemently. "Just guess."

"Hm," Pamela said, looking him over. "He looks familiar. But I don't know." She looked more like she didn't *dare* guess.

"So, who disappeared the night of the Potter fire?"

"No!" she said. "You're the Potter boy? Oh my," she marveled. "Well, you look none the worse . . . except for that scar."

Harry rubbed it. "Got it that night, actually."

"Really?" Patricia shook her head. "You don't know how very odd this is. It'd be like that man with the claw hand at the drive-in suddenly showing up." When Harry laughed, she added, "Well, you have the family sense of humor I have to say."

"Let's take him to Mum," Pammy said eagerly, tossing her work gloves on her porch step and stepping away as Patricia led Harry down the walk. Her children followed with handfuls of gravel. "So what happened to you?" she asked, sounding thoroughly entranced.

"I got left on Petunia's and Vernon's doorstep."

"By whom?" Pamela asked.

"That's a little hard to explain."

"Why is that hard? Or don't you know?" Patricia asked as they walked down the street, then straight even though the drive turned. A meandering path led forward through a thicket. "Mum lives in the house over there. Doesn't like crowds," she explained, sounding like she knew that was funny. They walked along a stone wall toward a small stone house at the other side of a field. The children led, depositing the gravel along the wall.

"What's hard to explain?" Pammy echoed.

"It just is," Harry insisted and they let it drop.

Patricia slowed as they approached the house to say, "Edward Evans died about five years ago, just to let you know; your mum's first cousin."

Harry shook his head to clear it. "I'm not used to keeping track of this," he said.

They walked straight in with a sharp knock, while the children occupied themselves in the unmown lawn. A clock ticked loudly in the next room off the entryway. "Mum!" Pamela shouted. Mother Evans came in the back door with an empty laundry hamper with clothespins stuck up along the edge. She was plump with a frayed apron and very grey hair. She found her cracked cat-eye glasses on the mantel and peered at Harry.

"Well, hello there," she said in greeting. She held out her hand, "Polly Evans," she said with a decent grip.

Harry let that name wash over him. "Harry Potter," he said. The woman froze and looked him over very closely.

"My stars, so you are. Wherever did these two dig you up from?"

"The ice cream shop," Patricia said. "He's here visiting Lily's and James' grave."

"Well, my boy, sit down and have a spot of tea, please." She gestured at the dark flowered couch in the close sitting room. Harry took a seat with the sisters across from him. He studied the room; it had a few doilies but not an excessive number. Other than that it was perfectly ordinary.

"So what do you do?" Pamela asked, picking up a wooden coaster from the table and tossing it and catching it as though she always did that.

Harry fished for an answer. "I, uh, just finished school. I don't have a job yet," he hedged, not prepared to make up an acceptably close story and not wanting to lie to blood relatives.

"How do you like living with your teacher?" At Pamela's questioning look, Patricia explained, "He was adopted by his teacher rather than live with the Dursley's any longer."

"How long ago was that?" Pamela asked.

"About a year," Harry explained.

"That's all? You were stuck with that bull Vernon all that time." "And Petunia the Pill?" They both shuddered. Harry felt happily vindicated.

"I was in school most of the time the last seven years, so it wasn't that bad." Although, it had been, he thought.

"What school?" Pamela asked brightly.

Harry shrugged "A school in Scotland. You've probably never heard of it." Mrs. Evans came back in with the tea and moved everything methodically from the tray before sitting beside him and pouring for everyone.

"Sorry I've no biscuits; don't usually get visitors."

"I just had an ice cream, anyway," Harry said, sipping the strong black tea.

Patricia said, "Mum, ask him what happened that night. He wouldn't tell."

"Patty, have some semblance of manners," Mrs. Evans scolded. "I'm sure he was too young to remember."

Patricia said, "You know the Dursleys lied about him being there. Can you imagine?"

Mrs. Evans frowned deeply. "Yes, I can," she said quietly, making Harry wonder.

Conversationally, he asked, "Did you know my mum?"

Her eyes flickered up to him over her teacup. "Yes, my boy, I did." She gave him a wink.

Harry went quickly back to his own tea.

"So the end of the mysterious legend," Pamela said, sounding like she felt the loss of it. "My dad always swore he saw you carried away by spirits."

"One spirit," Patricia corrected. "A really big one, though, he said."

Harry put great effort into swallowing the gulp of tea he had in his mouth. Very casually, he said, "No, I was told it was a man on my father's friend's motorcycle."

"Why didn't he wait for the police?" Pamela asked in disbelief. Harry could only shrug that he didn't know.

Mrs. Evans said with a slowness that conveyed its own meaning, "You know we really have lost touch with things. But the last year has been much calmer the papers all say."

Harry tried to figure how to reply. "They are much calmer."

"They ever catch whoever firebombed your parent's house?" Mrs. Evans then asked.

"Yes. He came to see me at my school. I made him see things my way." Harry said.

"What are you two on about?" Pamela asked. Patricia looked warily curious.

"Nothing, nothing," Mrs. Evans said before reaching over to pat Harry on the back with more affection than he expected. "It is good to know you have gotten on so well," she added. "I thought about you now and then over the years. I think everyone did."

Patricia nodded. "The Mysterious Potter Baby," she stated.

"The Boy Who Lived," Harry corrected her.

"That what they called you?" Patricia asked in surprise. When Harry nodded, she said, "They still call you that?"

"No," Harry said, laughing.

"What do they call you now, my dear?" Mrs. Evans asked with a knowing look. Harry leaned over and whispered in her ear his title from the Chocolate Frog Card. She patted him on the back again as the sisters complained vigorously about not hearing.

On the way out, as he was escorted to the road, insisting that he could find his "car", they all urged him to keep in touch. Harry gave them his address and accepted Mrs. Evans'. "Come by for the holidays, if not sooner. I'm sure after Vernon and Petunia you could use a nice family gathering. Bring your guardian, too."

"Uh, I'll certainly invite him along, but he isn't really your type," Harry struggled to explain. "Uh, he's a little standoffish."

"Why'd you let him adopt you, then?" Pamela asked, sounding as though she disliked him already.

"I like living with him. And he keeps me in line," Harry continued to struggle.

Mrs. Evans said, "Remembering your father, that is worth a lot."

"So I've been told. Repeatedly."

Harry said goodbye and received hugs from each of the sisters who looked honestly sad to see him leave. Harry felt buoyant at the thought of his newfound family and fairly skipped back to the willow and his broom. After a check for anyone around, he walked back to the grave. "Thank you," he said, before kicking off and zipping away at top speed.

Back at home he found himself alone. He bit his lip and put his broom and cloak away before taking out the slip of paper with the address and putting it in his album upstairs, where it seemed to belong. Then he took it out and copied it into his notebook before returning it to the album. He needed a photograph of them, he realized. Next time he would take a camera.

Harry sat, flipping through his books without really reading them when Snape came to the doorway. "Hi," Harry said. "Guess what?"

"I do not know," Snape said, crossing his arms and leaning on the doorframe.

"I met my mum's cousins, purely by accident while I had a bit of lunch before leaving. They're very nice, although a little overly curious about me."

"Muggles, all of them?"

"Yes. Although Polly Evans, who married my mum's first cousin, whose name I don't . . . no, Edward, his name was, knew I was a wizard and that Mum was a witch. Her daughters don't know, though." He put the album away. "I'm very happy to find them, though. My aunt and uncle never told me anything. They'd get angry when I asked."

"A good trip then?" Snape asked in a tone that made Harry wonder about hidden meaning.

"Yes," Harry said, feeling he had settled things with his parents for the moment. Still buoyant, Harry jumped up and said, "Can we do some distance Apparation?"

Snape's lips quirked slightly. "After tea." Harry followed him to the railing and Snape said, "I ordered your books for you while I was on Diagon Alley."

"Thank you," Harry said.

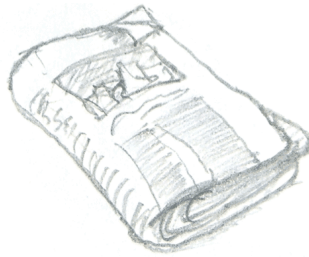
"You are going to know more about wizard law than even Albus did by the time you are finished."

"I'll start forgetting before it gets that far," Harry returned.

Snape stopped at the door to the dining room, took a breath, and said seriously, "I realize, Harry, that I may not be everything you require in the way of family." He held up his hand to forestall Harry's protest. "I also realize now that you are not very clear on what you may be missing in order to ask for it. Nor, unfortunately am I likely to know either." After rubbing his brow, he added, "What I am getting at is that if you feel the need to spend time with the Weasleys or these new cousins, you should most certainly do so."

Harry nodded and quietly said, "All right."

"Now that that is out of the way . . ." He gestured for Harry to sit at the dining room table. "We can discuss localized steering, which is often necessary when arriving someplace from a distance."



Chapter 56 -- Big Wide World

Harry, now all of eighteen but not feeling much different from seventeen, stepped into the workout room for Monday's training. Aaron was already there, lifting weights with the kind of concentration only he, out of the four of them, put into it. He greeted Harry, put down the mini-barbell and stood up from the worn, wooden bench. Harry slipped on a pair of fingerless gloves and sat down in his stead.

Aaron pulled something from his bag and, glancing nervously at the doorway, held it out. Reluctantly, he asked, "Could you do me a favor and autograph this for my mum?"

Harry gave him a very dubious look, but he put down the barbell and took up the offered item. Aaron quickly found a never-out quill, clearly not wanting to be discovered in this situation should anyone else arrive early. Harry asked her name and signed it quickly. He laughed as Aaron stashed it back away and breathed out in relief. "She's been making me nutters about that; thought she'd forget eventually." He picked up the larger barbell and hefted it to chest height. "She wants to know when I'm inviting you home for dinner," he breathed.

Harry laughed. "How does she cook?"

"My mum does *not* cook. She *has* a cook, who does a pretty good job. Don't humor her. Don't even joke about humoring her," he insisted, disgusted, continuing to lift and lower the weight.

Harry laughed again and adjusted his grip on the small barbell before starting another set of repetitions.

Aaron said, "You know, Potter, you're all right. If I were you, I'd be the most obnoxious bloke in London." He stood up to stretch his shoulders. "I'd walk around, like, yeah, I offed that bastard, Voldemort, you want a piece a' me too?" Between Aaron's goofy posturing and the odd voice he was using, Harry had to chuckle more. Aaron dropped his arms. "So why don't you do that? Seems like a wasted opportunity."

"I . . ." Harry shrugged.

"Come *on*, Potter. You out-dueled *the* most powerful wizard in the world and he wasn't one to fight particularly fairly."

Harry set the barbell down and unhooked two of the smaller weights from it to do a final set of light repetitions. He sat up and sighed. Sounds from the corridor made him believe the others were arriving imminently. "In actuality I defeated him with emotion," Harry explained.

"What?" Aaron appeared nonplussed. "What kind?"

A little sheepishly, Harry replied, "Love, mostly."

Aaron now looked horrified. "No, no, no. You can't do this to me," he insisted. "You can't destroy my fantasies like this." He sat down heavily on the other bench. "Ugh," he moaned.

Harry, thinking this was a little over the top, argued, "It was the only way."

The others came in then, ending the conversation.

This month they were doing less defensive spell work and starting on poison and venom neutralization as well as curse-averting potions. Harry, thinking he would be less bruised by this, eagerly settled himself at a bench in the crowded 'laboratory' that was really a large broom cupboard off the corner of the Auror's offices. His fellows seemed indifferent to the change in topic. Vineet sat opposite Harry with his dark fingers interlocked as Tonks explained the potions that were kept in stocks and what could be quickly mixed from them. They practiced mixing a few and then brewed some base potions as well. Everyone did well enough at this although Aaron was clearly bored by it and let everyone know it.

The day went by quickly. Harry pocketed the list of newly assigned books and headed up to the street. It was nice out, so he decided to walk to Diagon Alley. The pavements were crowded with people and the streets were full of cars barely keeping pace with those walking. The scent of coffee distracted him as he stood waiting for the lights to change at a busy intersection where the cars were aggressively pulling onto a roundabout. Behind him was a coffee shop. It was only a few more blocks to the Leaky Cauldron, but Harry went in anyway, thinking it looked more welcoming and airy than the wizard pub.

Inside it was an oasis of quiet beyond the clatter of saucers and the hiss of steam. Harry took his order to a table in the window and gratefully sat down. He opened his bookbag and, with consternation, considered the title of the book he intended to read: *Magical Mayhem A Guide to Current Laws of Wales*. Casually, Harry pulled out his wand and tapped his bookbag with the spell *Wodeidolon*, then pulled out his now-safe books and placed them on the table.

An hour and two cups of tea later, Harry was still reading intently. The quiet chatter inside and movement of the people outside the broad window somehow made it easier to keep concentrating, maybe because, unlike at home, he didn't feel so cut off from the world. His change of books was interrupted by someone saying, "Harry Potter?"

Harry looked up and recognized the speaker. "Uh, Tara, right?" he said, remembering with a little effort.

Tonk's ex-boyfriend's date from Easter holiday appeared honestly surprised that he remembered her name. "Yes. How are you doing?" she asked slowly while looking him up and down once.

"Good," Harry replied. "Lots of studying for my program," he explained, gesturing at his stack of books.

Her brow furrowed. "You're studying Wodehouse?" she asked in confusion.

"Oh," Harry laughed. "Not exactly." He held the open book out to her so she could read the chapter title *Lawful Interrogation Procedure*.

"Cute charm," she said, glancing at the cover, which read *The Butler Did It*. She returned the book and excused herself to pick something up from the counter--something tall with whipped cream on top. She came back and hesitated before asking, "Do you mind?"

Harry did have the best table. "Sure," he said, pulling his books to his side of the round marble tabletop.

"Are you liking the Auror's program?" she asked after a few minutes of sipping her drink.

"Yes. Quite a lot." Harry set the new book he had just picked up aside, thinking that talking to someone sounded much more interesting just now than a chapter containing just a long list of lawful truth potions and charms. "So, uh, how is Rick?" Harry asked.

She rolled her eyes and frowned. "I haven't seen him in a month," she admitted and her frown didn't disappear after another frothy sip of coffee.

"Oh. Sorry," Harry managed; although he didn't believe Rick would be good for anyone.

She looked far away a minute before saying. "Had to find a real job because I told him off, but I like it better where I am now."

Harry, grateful he hadn't utterly stepped in it, prompted, "And where is that?"

"I work for an N.G.O. doing fundraising," she explained, sounding like she really did enjoy that. "It helps to know a lot of people, which I do."

"Ah." Harry didn't feel like taking the hit on his pride that asking for clarification would involve.

She smiled faintly and said, "So, you . . . dating anyone?"

"Um. . . " Harry thought about Elizabeth, then thought some more. He usually enjoyed his neighbor's company, and she was nice about coming along for his birthday dinner, and his relatives properly incensed her. "Sorta, maybe, but not seriously," he quickly added.

"Oh," Tara said, sounding a little disappointed. "Do you like parties?" she eventually asked.

"Yes," Harry answered eagerly.

"Well, I sometimes get invited to some very nice parties but I haven't been going because I don't . . . have anyone to go with . . ." She struggled a bit. "I was just wondering if you might want to go, sometime?"

Her faint pleading seemed to be plucking directly at Harry's midsection. "I think that'd be fun. Owl me . . . and if I'm not busy -- 'cause I study all the time -- I'd certainly like to go." He pulled out his small notebook, wrote out his address and handed over torn-out page.

Appearing truly touched, she bit her lip and said, "Thanks." After fidgeting a moment, she said, "You know, you're really nice. I wouldn't have expected that."

"Someone else said that recently," Harry observed. "Neither you nor he has really seen me wound up."

She stirred her drink and waited for a revving lorry to go by on the street. "So what winds you up that badly?" she asked innocently.

"Uh, let's see . . . " Harry thought back and remembered flying off without regard to his own safety. "A complete misunderstanding with my previous girlfriend did."

"Tonks?" Tara prompted.

"Uh . . . no. It's like this: Tonks is my trainer, really my boss, and . . . we haven't ever dated or done anything; if you get my meaning?"

Tara actually grinned in amusement, relaxing Harry. "Yeah. I get it," she said, smiling and almost laughing. Harry felt great relief in not only admitting to the situation, but being understood.

Tara put her empty glass aside on an unoccupied table. "It was nice meeting you again," she said as she stood up. "I'll owl you if a decent party comes up. Okay?"

"Sounds good. I could really stand to get out a little more," Harry admitted.

She grinned and lightly shook her head. "Don't you get invitations to things all the time?"

Harry fell thoughtful and shook his head. "No. I get together with my friends, but they're really busy now; it is getting harder to arrange."

"I'll owl," she assured him. Then she was gone.

He watched her disappear into the stream of people outside on the pavement, noting at the last moment that she certainly dressed better than anyone else he knew.

* * *

Harry arrived early for his training because Kali had woken him that morning, restless in her cage. He had taken her down to breakfast, which had seemed to satisfy her, and she easily went back into her cage when he needed to leave. The Ministry corridors were quiet and Harry's footsteps echoed lonely. He stopped at the doorway to the workout room and stared down to the far end where the files were kept. After a long moment of indecision, he set his bag inside the door and walked down, glancing to each side to see if anyone was around to notice him. The rows of desks he passed were empty although he could hear a distant conversation.

Inside the records room he stepped by the hutch and the spinning Knight Bus orb. Some notes had been made by the Underage Magic Detector, but Harry ignored them and went straight to the files. A quick glance at his gold pocket watch indicated he had fifteen minutes, at most. The label on the third cabinet in the first row read *Ashford-Azeek*. Harry pulled it out and scanned down to Avery's file.

Harry immediately wished he had brought his bag, which had a notebook in it. He found scrap paper and a battered never-out quill and jotted down the Death Eater's last known locations. Avesbury, Devonshire, Torquay. In the reports section of the file were one interview after another, of people the Aurors had talked to about where Avery might be hiding. Frustratingly, Harry could not get a sense from glancing over the notes of who might be hiding something. The last interviews were dated three months ago.

Feeling a little let down by the organization he was working hard to please, Harry carefully replaced the folder and closed the drawer. He pocketed the notes and walked silently back to the empty workout room.

That evening, Harry arrived home to find the articles from the American interviewer in the post, in a nice gold-foil, spell-sealed tube rather than an envelope. He took the long scrolls into the library to say hello to his guardian.

"How do they look?" Snape asked of the articles.

"I just opened them." Harry put his things down and sat on the lounge to read.

This reporter found Mr. Potter living in a modest home in a very small village just south of the Scottish border. He is intent upon the most obvious of careers: that of Auror, or dark wizard hunter.

More background followed, which Harry skipped over.

Mr. Potter has fashioned himself a family of sorts out of longtime friends and a teacher of Defense Against the Dark Arts from the prestigious school of wizardry, Hogwarts.

Harry realized that he had ceased to care if anyone found that out. It felt completely normal now to consider not only Shrewsthorpe as his home, but Snape as his guardian. It seemed that far more than a year must have passed since he had moved in. And with a few distant cousins, he was really quite well set up and feeling proud of that. Harry lowered the parchment and watched Snape as he read from a large book at a tall, spindly-legged table. His hair had fallen forward as usual, leaving Harry only a glimpse of brow and aquiline nose. Through his hair, his eyes rose to consider Harry.

"Something in the article?" Snape asked.

"I . . . was just thinking the last year . . . seems much longer than a year." Harry shook his head as he gave up explaining and turned back to the long scroll in his lap. Maybe he just wished it had been and that made his feelings stretch back farther.

Yes, Mr. Potter is as pleasant and well mannered as some have reported. He never bragged to me once, although it was clear he was proud of his accomplishments, and the list is quite long for one his age. One would think the British Ministry of Magic would in the future allow him

to retire seven years early to account for his previous years of service. This seemingly gentle young man leaves behind him a long trail of dead and captured dark wizards and witches, all of whom sought him out rather than the other way around.

After my visit and numerous conversations with British magic folk I have determined that they have no more understanding of Harry Potter than we do. Everyone who has met him, relates a different impression of him, overwhelmingly positive. The very few I could find who expressed dislike of him, did so I would say, based on mistaken information, or because it turns out they lost something when the Dark Lord was defeated and peace returned.

Harry read through to the end, surprised to find nothing offensive besides one quote from Percy Weasley that made it sound like Harry had been very lucky rather than being skillful. He followed that by accusing Harry of immediately currying favor with the new leadership at the Ministry. Shrugging it off, Harry read the last part again.

If I had to summarize my impressions, I would say that Mr. Potter is soldiering on well with his life. He will be an Auror because, like a soldier, it is all he knows. He appears confident in the path he is following and one assumes, given his skills and the rather protective guardian he has acquired, that he will most certainly succeed as he says, in "assuring that evil does not rise again."

Harry let the parchment roll itself up.

"Is it all right?" Snape asked. He was sitting back from the desk now with his arms crossed, giving Harry the impression that he had been watching him for a while.

Harry shrugged. "I thought it'd be worse. It isn't bad." When Snape held out his hand, Harry stood and gave the scroll over. "He had trouble digging up anyone who would say anything bad about me."

Snape unrolled the thick parchment. "Whom did he find?"

"Percy Weasley."

Eyes moving over the lines, Snape commented reassuringly, "I doubt Molly and Arthur subscribe to the Salem Gazette."

Harry considered that before understanding it, and he agreed that they would be the only ones hurt by Percy's comments, since Harry certainly wasn't.

* * *

Wednesday, after a day of getting knocked around while they covered offensive blocking spells, Harry, rubbing a tender elbow, arrived home. The house was quiet, leading him to assume Snape was out.

Harry put his bag down in the library, truly not feeling up to any studying. He went down to the kitchen and took down the big tin of chocolate biscuits. Winky sat on a wooden bench beside the low fire, polishing silver with slow, methodical movements. Swallowing his second biscuit, Harry asked, "How are you, Winky?"

"Winky very good, Master Harry," she replied in a reassuring squeak.

Harry took another biscuit, closed the tin, and put it back on the shelf. "Do you know where Severus went?"

Her big eyes blinked once. "Master upstairs," she said with an odd keenness.

"Oh," Harry said. He took his uneaten snack up the half flight to the ground floor, then up to the first. Snape wasn't in his bedroom, but across the main hall one of the doors was ajar to the little-used rooms on the other side. Harry stepped around and pushed it fully open. The room served as a kind of attic to store older books that didn't fit in the library as well as trunks of unneeded things. Snape looked up from where he sat on one of the trunks that had been pulled to the middle of the floor, sorting through a crate of books.

"Hi," Harry said casually. Some other things had been rearranged in the room since Harry had last been in here, months ago. A spare door had been balanced over a trunk to create a makeshift table, though it had a sheen of dust now.

Snape nodded in greeting as he flipped through the index of the book in his hands. He put it aside and Harry bent down to pick it up. It shivered in his hand and squirmed as though to get away. Startled, he almost lost his grip on it. *Fulsome Fascination*, the title read when he managed to hold it steady.

"What are you looking for?" Harry asked. The book's index didn't hold much fascination for him, he had to admit; it seemed heavy on annoying hexes. All of the books here seemed to be of the darker variety.

Dismissively, Snape replied, "A book I remember acquiring once, but cannot seem to find."

Harry put the hex book down and stepped around to the horizontal door, noticing that it was splattered with something dark. His toe caught unexpectedly on a gutted-out candle melted into a mortar join in the floor. Harry stared then at the floor, at the charcoal and chalk pentagram upon an apex of which he had stumbled. Chilled, Harry said, "I don't remember this."

Snape swept his hair back and looked over. "I didn't completely straighten up from the Beacon Spell I used to find you." Harry's chest twisted as he looked around again and realized the splatters on the dusty door must be blood. Snape was saying, "And apparently Winky has no interest in doing so."

Harry picked up a skull with a melted candle atop it from beside the rigid and academically straight lines of the diagram on the floor. He put the skull away on an empty shelf at eye level. Swallowing hard and feeling rather bad, he said, "I'm sorry, Severus." He could easily imagine the scene, that cusp of falling into the execution of black magic spell and he didn't like that imagining with anyone he knew, especially Snape. "Please don't repeat it."

Snape sighed and pushed the crate aside with his foot. "Minerva insisted that dark magic done reluctantly was not the same. I am not so certain of that." Harry turned from the skull and considered his guardian with a pained expression, prompting Snape to add, "It is all right, Harry. I certainly have no desire to repeat it, nor anything like it, so no harm has come of it." He fell deeply thoughtful a minute before quietly adding, "When I was your age I would have considered such a spell merely a tool, not a trap that can ensnare one utterly. Understanding of that danger is worth a great deal, I believe." A bit lighter, he said, "And I cannot be much of a Dark Arts Defense teacher if I have completely lost touch with the Dark Arts." He spoke with forced easiness that did the reverse of settling Harry's concerns.

Snape pushed the crate of books aside, stood, and with a flick of his wand, shifted the spare door to lean back in the corner where it had originally been. "Don't look so regretful, Harry. We all make our choices." He urged Harry out of the room.

"Do you want me to help look for the book?" Harry asked, curious what book it was.

"Hogwarts' library has a copy. Minerva has a copy. I shall simply borrow one."

Downstairs, Harry said, "Ron and Hermione were going to go out to a pub tonight. I told them I'd meet them there, I assume that's all right?"

"Of course," Snape said. "Return by 11:00, if you will, since you have training in the morning."

Harry nodded and headed upstairs to change into Muggle clothes.

Ron was most of the way through an ale when Harry finally found them. He boisterously welcomed Harry and pulled out a chair for him. "Shoulda brought a date, Harry," Ron teased him.

"I suppose I could have," Harry said, thinking aloud.

"Oh, do tell," Hermione said eagerly.

Harry told them about his visits with Elizabeth. She sounded more appealing in his retelling than expected and his friends gave him reassuring noises and insisted that he bring her next time.

"Or . . . " Ron suggested, waving for another ale, "You could bring the winner of the essay contest, though my mum swears the second runner-up sounds like a better match."

Harry accepted a glass of water from the barkeep and ordered an ale. "I haven't read them."

"You what?" Ron blurted.

"Skeeter picked the winner," Harry explained.

"Bloody . . . can't wait to tell Mum," Ron said laughing. "Thinks she has you all figured out from your choices."

Harry shrugged but didn't suggest Ron tell his mum to start subscribing to the Salem Gazette.

"Shall we eat here, or go somewhere else?" Ron eagerly asked.

Harry barely swallowed his first frothy sip. "I just got a drink. *You* just got a drink," he blurted.

"Just makin' sure we have a plan," Ron commented.

"I think you're getting a little round in the middle," Harry observed.

"He is," Hermione agreed with a frown.

"No!" Ron stood up and looked down at his abdomen, drawing it in flat. "Look."

Hermione poked him in the ribs and he lost his fine posture. "No, definitely a paunch coming in there," Harry insisted.

"Told you," Hermione said. "You are going to have to ease back on the eating or face looking like your mum."

"Yeah, and how will you dodge the goblins at Gringott's?" Harry contributed.

Ron sat down and considered his beer with a frown. "What else is there to live for but food?" he asked placatingly.

* * *

The next morning, Harry was pleased when Tonks stepped into the workout room rather than Rodgers.

"Well," she said with a grin. "I have you all for the next few sessions because we are going to be working on Metamorphia." Everyone made noises of interest at this and she grinned as her hair turned an exceptionally bright pink with long curved spikes. "We'll be working on this in session every few months and will expect you to practice on your own in-between. It takes a very long time to learn for those not naturally predisposed." Her grin broadened as her hair instead fell straight and zebra striped. "And some of you may never manage more than the simplest metamorphosis. So we will start with the very easiest and most useful ones. For you guys that will be mustache and beard."

"Can't I learn how to charm on a beard?" Kerry Ann demanded, hands on hips.

"Ah, sure," Tonks agreed. She closed her eyes a moment and out of her face sprung a long flowing white beard of the stateliness Harry had only seen on Dumbledore. With the zebra hair it was quite a sight. "All right then," she said, moving along.

"You're keeping that on, are you?" Aaron asked fearfully.

Tonks stroked her beard thoughtfully. "I think I like it," she retorted. "Now, Metamorphia is less like Animagia than you might expect. Animagia is an external reflection in animal form of an inner enchanted spirit or personality. Metamorphia is a general form of Transfiguration specifically of a body part."

Harry frowned at that and tried not to wince. Tonks stepped up to him and Harry made his expression go neutral. "Now hair is the safest thing to start with, as it isn't alive and it grows back if things go really wrong. You can also safely practice on your fingernails and the surface of your skin." She walked by Harry to stand before Vineet. After staring hard at him, her hair went dark and short and her skin tinted nut brown to match the Indian's.

Vineet looked surprised then said, "You could have any suitable boy in my village looking so."

"Don't tempt me to take you up on that," she laughed, and Harry felt a strange heat in his gut which he forced himself to ignore.

Tonks changed back to her usual self and stepped back to the front. "So you can see the ultra-convenience of disguise being a Metamorphmagus provides." She pulled mirrors for each of them out of a box and they all sat down to try out some spells on their hair.

By lunch Kerry Ann could turn a lock of her hair blonde, but the rest of them hadn't any success. Harry found himself thinking that if he could manage a mustache, he would think that a major victory. The three guys split off for lunch as Tonks and Kerry Ann were intent on a conversation about Metamorphmagus eyeliner.

* * *

Friday before settling into his studies, Harry thought he would very much like to get out of the house. It was not the nicest of days, so he thought he might like a visit with someone. Ron would be busy at work until evening, same with Hermione. With his cloak tossed over his shoulders Harry walked down to the Peterson house.

Unfortunately for Harry, Mr. Peterson opened the door. "Mr. Potter," he said levelly.

"Afternoon, sir. Is Elizabeth at home?"

"She is late returning from her lesson. Won't you come in?"

"Thank you," Harry said, seeing no clear means to back out. He followed the man into the back of the hall where the piano sat. With the clouds the room was not quite so utterly white, more an unpromising grey. Harry remained standing because his host had not sat or suggested Harry do so.

Mr. Peterson was not one to mince words. "My daughter speaks of you quite often, but not in ways that make exceptional sense to me. I am curious, Mr. Potter, what exactly do you do?"

"Uh, I'm in training with the Ministry of Magic, in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

Peterson's brow lowered as he took that in. "*Magical* Law Enforcement," the man echoed, sounding doubtful.

"Enforcing magical law. I'm training to be an Auror, which is someone who hunts dark wizards or witches."

"Oh, yes, that Thrimbol business we had. With the uh . . ." he waved his fingers in the air.

"Dark Mark," Harry supplied.

"Yes, that. Bad business." He looked Harry over yet again. "From what I understand you were rather wrapped up in it all."

Harry admitted, "Yes, sir. Rather."

Another pause ensued during which Harry couldn't think of anything worth volunteering to a Muggle father. Mr. Peterson eventually said, "And you have been around here a few times these last weeks, visiting Elizabeth."

Harry scratched his chin and tried hard not to fidget further. "Yes, sir." He wondered with some concern how much later Elizabeth was going to be.

"My wife thinks rather a lot of you, almost a celebrity kind of worship. Knows all kinds of meaningless trivia about you."

"Really?" Harry asked, honestly disturbed.

"Implies I should be enamored of you as well," Peterson went on, looking vaguely disgusted in a polite kind of way. Harry started to defend himself, but fell silent when the man went on, "They insist you are the most famous of your kind in the world."

"Um . . ." Harry said, but then shrugged instead of replying.

"Are you?" the man asked, clearly not sure what to believe.

"I suppose," Harry replied.

"What does that mean, I wonder? You're never in those raggy papers they sell at the corner tobacconists as far as I ever notice."

Harry, trying a bit to sway the man, replied, "When I was traveling in Germany and Switzerland, everyone knew who I was. An American interviewer paid rather a lot of money the other day to talk to me. Is that what you mean?"

Mr. Peterson took that in. "Yes, that is what I meant. And your intentions toward my daughter?"

"Uh . . . having a chat now and then," Harry replied, since he honestly hadn't thought beyond more than that and wondered if it would be safe to.

Harry glanced back at the lights framing the door, but the movement he saw there turned out to be just the tree branches waving in the wind. Mr. Peterson wasn't finished. "And you are in the Snape household now . . . for some reason."

"Professor Snape adopted me," Harry stated, feeling a bit of hard anger coming up. It stabilized him unexpectedly.

"That doesn't particularly recommend you, I'm afraid," said Peterson almost airily.

The room and Mr. Peterson zeroed strangely into focus suddenly, from the fine fabrics on the chairs to Peterson's slicked-back, thinning hair. The article the American wrote rolled through Harry like a slow water wheel. With barely suppressed anger he said, "Professor Snape is the only father I have really known. I lost everything, my parents, my godfather, the first sixteen years of my life to the battle with Voldemort. A battle that had been going on for decades before I was born. How I chose to piece together a life after finishing what hundreds before me had started but couldn't complete is certainly not your concern, sir."

Their eyes remained locked as Mr. Peterson said, "What you do with my daughter *is* my concern. I am not certain you are fit company for her, Mr. Potter, and while she lives here, on *my* money, that is *my* say."

Harry had an odd imagining, of Snape saying these things to someone, perhaps Tonks, and meaning them just the same. He imagined repeating this conversation to Elizabeth or even her mother and the difficulty that would cause. The second consideration brought his anger up short because he didn't wish to cause that kind of trouble. Harry shrugged with pretend dismissal of the issue. "Good day then, sir," Harry said, gathering his pride around himself. "I guess you won't be telling her I stopped by to say hello," he added before turning to let himself out.

Outside it had started to rain. Harry felt red anger threatening then retreating as though he balanced on it and with just a nudge, it could tip irrevocably either way. He slowly walked back home, even though it meant getting wet, half-hoping he would encounter Elizabeth on the way. He didn't and the spray from the passing cars was only making him wetter as he had to walk in the road alongside the train station.

Back home, he tossed his wet cloak down in the entryway and marched inside. He was standing in the hall balancing between righteous anger and pride when Snape came down the stairs.

"You look a little put-out," Snape commented, stopping before him on the way to the drawing room.

"It's nothing," Harry stated, clearly not meaning it.

"It is a little wet for a long flight; do try to keep it short."

"Thanks," Harry snapped at him, pride badly stung by the comment.

"Harry," Snape chastised, then immediately relented. "I should not have said that. Come and dry off, I'll start a fire." He gestured to the dining room. Harry followed on grudging feet and took the chair Snape placed close the hearth that, after a quick spell, was roaring high and emanating intense heat.

Snape stood in silence for a minute beside the hearth studying Harry before asking, "What is it?"

Harry shrugged, considered explaining, but instead sat even more slouched.

"You were in good, although restless, spirits when you departed just a short time ago. Did you encounter something unpleasant?"

Harry frowned into the flames. "Mr. Peterson."

"Ah," Snape muttered and pulled a chair over beside the hearth as well. "During your birthday dinner you did not give the impression that you had anything serious with Elizabeth."

"I don't," Harry snapped. "Sorry. He reminds me of my Uncle Vernon. And he doesn't like me."

"One in a million, then," Snape jabbed lightly.

Harry shook his head, tried to get angry, but found himself chuckling lightly. He crossed his arms and sighed. "I just went over for a visit. Nothing more," he argued.

"Perhaps he knows something you don't," Snape commented.

"Like what?"

"Such as Elizabeth's feelings for you."

Harry blinked in surprise. "You think?"

"I merely suggest it as a possible explanation for his strong reaction to you."

Harry pushed his chair back since he was overheating. "He doesn't think we're the right kind of people."

"We?" Snape queried, almost forcefully.

"Yep," Harry confirmed.

"Is that so?" Snape breathed, sounding distant. After a minute of silence he stood with a sweep of robe and set his chair back at the table. "Some people are not worth pleasing, as I am certain you are aware."

"I know. It bothers me though."

Snape leaned toward Harry over the back of the chair. "Only because you are so unaccustomed to it," he said snidely.

Harry started to argue, but then stopped himself. He finally said, "Everything a wizard would think is a positive, he believes is seriously negative. I don't know how to deal with him and don't *like* dealing with him."

Snape stood and stated, "Then don't," before departing the room.

* * *

As Harry read, distracted by wondering what his friends were up to and wishing they had all made plans for the weekend when they were out the other night so he wouldn't be sitting here reading, he grew hungry for dinner. The clock read almost half past 6:00. Harry rose to ask Snape if he was ready to have Winky serve dinner. In the hall, he found the door to the drawing room closed. That was unusual. Harry considered the latched door and listened to the silence before knocking.

"Come in," Snape's voice emanated from inside, reminding Harry of visiting the dungeon, something he hadn't thought about in a long while.

Snape stood behind his desk, intently reading an old book. "Do you want dinner?" Harry asked.

Surprised, Snape glanced up at the clock on a high shelf above the mantel. "Yes, indeed." He snapped the book shut and set it on the desk. The binding was too old to read at a distance.

Curious about the book, Harry casually asked, "What are you working on?"

"Spells," Snape said dismissively while waving the issue away with his hand.

"For class?" Harry asked as he followed his guardian to the dining room.

"Perhaps. I am not certain yet what use they may have."

Still curious, but reading Snape's ongoing dismissive tone, Harry dropped the subject.

* * *

When Tara's party invitation came by owl the next morning, Harry replied immediately that he would join her, mentioning it as a foregone thing to his guardian as he folded the note card over for Hedwig to take away. "I'm going into London for a party."

"With Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger?" Snape asked.

"No, someone else I've met a few times."

Harry read and gardened that day, and as well took a rolling ride on his motorbike. He considered taking it to meet Tara, then decided he was not familiar enough with London to manage that without getting lost, which he definitely did not want to do.

The address was in Soho, just down the street from the Floo node Harry had learned of from Tonks, and he had used it again tonight without getting noticed by the couple sitting close before the hearth in the room. Though it had ceased raining, the streets were wet and dark. Harry traced the many Muggle electric lights reflected in the pavement as he

walked. Tara met him outside the private club hosting the party. She gave him a smile that didn't fade as she looked him up and down.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice," she said as she hooked an arm through his and stepped toward the bouncer guarding a battered metal door. She showed her invitation and was invited to pass.

Inside it was loud. Red and blue lights flashed in fast sequence, illuminating many dancing figures in the center of the room. Around the periphery, people stood in groups talking and drinking. Tara waved to a few people as they navigated a path to the bar, all of whom peered curiously at Harry in the undulating light.

Tara yelled an order to the barman and leaned back on the bar to survey the room. When their drinks appeared she took a big swig and led the way to another room setup as a large lounge with low, square leather couches and tables. The sound was just tolerable here.

"So, what do you think?" Tara asked loudly.

"Of the party?" Harry confirmed. At her nod he replied, "It's a party," and shrugged. After a long silence he asked her about the place she worked. This turned out to be a good bet, as she went on about this for ten minutes easily, until someone interrupted to say hello.

"Fernidad Fairsworth," the man said, holding out his hand to Harry. "Everyone calls me Frilly."

"Your dad an accountant?" Harry asked as he accepted the hand.

"Yes. You know him?"

"We've met, very briefly." Harry skipped explaining that he was the boss of his adoptive father's girlfriend.

"I didn't catch your name . . ." Fairsworth prompted.

"Harry, Harry Potter."

"Are you really?" the man said in excitement, making Harry better understand his nickname. He turned to Tara. "Good catch, girl!"

"Just a date," she insisted.

"Did you win the essay contest?" Fairsworth asked, all aglow all of a sudden.

"What essay contest?" Tara asked in confusion.

"Don't ask," Harry grumbled.

Fairsworth gestured broadly. "Get up girl; make the rounds with the Boy-Who-Lived. Come on!"

"I'm not showing him off," Tara snapped. "He really is just a date."

Fairsworth tweaked Harry's chin, freezing Harry in surprise. "If you were my date, I'd show you off," he teased. "I'll send some eyes your way then," he said with a wink and departed back to the room with the dance floor.

"I really didn't invite you to show you off," Tara insisted.

"It didn't seem like it," Harry said, rubbing his chin.

"Though, you are a very notable rebound date," she admitted.

"I'm feeling a bit rebounded myself," Harry muttered quietly, thinking of Mr. Peterson.

The two of them spent quite a bit of time dancing among the gyrating throng, in between getting to know each other a little, but at 1:30 Harry insisted he had to get going. The music had quieted just a little and more people were sitting or sleeping in the lounge area, but the dance floor was still crowded with layers of arms and heads flickering in the lights. Half-empty trays of food covered the boxy tables and the fine carpeting was littered with spilled food and drinks. Harry's fourth drink sat untouched in the middle of one of them. Three felt like plenty tipsy and he was not risking getting beyond that.

Tara followed Harry to the pavement when he put aside her entreaties to stay longer or to go on to a late dinner. In view of the bouncer and in the shadow of a tree below the streetlight, Harry said, "I really have to go. My guardian is very strict about curfew."

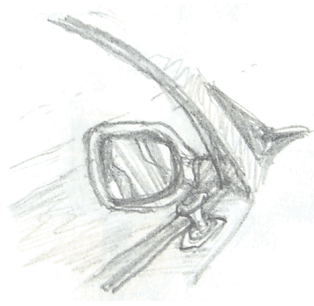
She frowned. "You are just a kid, aren't you?" It could have been an insult. Harry wasn't certain, but he shrugged it off nevertheless. "Well, all right," she gave in. "Thanks for accompanying me," She sounded honestly grateful, although she frowned again after a glance back up at the dark windows of the club.

"I had a good time," Harry said. It was true that dancing in a loud, crowded club was far better than sitting in the quiet library at home on a Saturday night.

"Can I owl you again?" she asked as he said goodbye and turned to go.

"Sure," Harry said with a smile.

At home, Snape was already asleep. Harry washed up and went quietly to his room and to bed, where sleep came over him almost immediately. Dreams woke him once, though, odd dreams about shadows moving in flickering red light. Since the light wasn't green, Harry shook them off and went back to sleep.



Chapter 57 -- Transitions

"Harry! Come on in," Hermione said when she greeted him at the door. She led him into her parents' house and up to the first floor where Ron sat cross-legged on the rug, packing books into boxes.

"It's unbelievable," Ron muttered. "It's like she 'as every book Flourish and Blots ever sold!" He looked up. "Oh, hey Harry! Come give a hand, will ya?"

"Why don't you just use a Pack Spell?" Harry asked as he stepped in and around the many piles on the floor.

"Uh . . . Hermione's afraid of damage," Ron said, glancing carefully up at her.

"Is your Pack Spell any better than his?" She demanded of Harry, but in a teasing way.

"Uh, let me just . . . help Ron, then," Harry said. He took a seat on an already taped box to easily reach the teetering towers of books, presorted by size beside flattened boxes and a roll of tape.

Hours later, they hovered the last box down the stairs to a stack beside the front door. A distant rumbling sound shook the house, and Ron looked around in alarm. "It's just the garage," Hermione said with a laugh.

"Oh."

Mr. and Mrs. Granger came in from a side door. Mrs. Granger surveyed the many stacks of boxes. "Hermione, dear, I told you you could keep as much here as you wanted."

"I want them all with me, though," Hermione insisted sheepishly.

"Do I smell food?" Ron asked.

Mr. Granger waved two large paper bags. "We stopped for some take-away."

As they settled around the small table in the kitchen to eat, Mrs. Granger said, "So how have you been, Harry dear? We don't see you around nearly often enough, and I'm afraid with our baby . . . " She gave Hermione a half-hug. ". . . moving out, we probably won't get much chance to see any of her friends."

Hermione lightly rolled her eyes. "It is just too hard to commute, Mum. And we can't have the hearth put on the Floo Network. We've been over this."

Ron gave Harry a secret smile as Mr. Granger chastised his wife, "She's not a child anymore. If you can't let your kids go when they get a good job at a solicitor's office, when can you?"

Harry opened one of the little white boxes in front of him. A mass of transparent noodles filled it to the brim. Mrs. Granger handed him chopsticks and a plate. "I think I need a fork," Harry admitted.

"Me too," Ron also confessed. Hermione used chopsticks deftly to serve herself some rice and gave them both a superior glance. "I don't eat with wands," Ron insisted.

"So, are you still living at home, Harry?" Mrs. Granger asked, still sounding misty.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, what a dear boy," Mrs. Granger praised him.

Hermione rolled her eyes again as she ate a chunk of chicken soaked in thick brown sauce. "Mum, you are making me wish I'd moved out sooner."

"Hm. Well, it is awfully nice of you two to help Hermione get her things moved."

Harry was grateful for the hearty food, because by the end of the evening, he had carried more heavy boxes than he could count from the boot of Mr. Granger's car up three flights of steps. Hermione insisted they couldn't use any magic in such an open Muggle place. The one time Ron tried to cheat on this, a Muggle came down the building steps at a run and he had to stash his wand inside the box he had been carrying.

Eventually, the three of them collapsed between stacks of boxes in the flat. "Can we order more Chinese?" Ron asked hopefully.

"I'll make something," Hermione said as she pushed herself to her feet and wandered over to the kitchenette.

"Oh dear," Ron muttered.

"Hey, it comes out of a box, all right?" Hermione snapped, shaking the package of pasta. "I can follow directions as well as the next person, better even, I should hope."

"Can you bring Winky next time you visit?" Ron muttered.

"Are you moving in too?" Harry asked.

"Are you kidding?" Ron asked disbelievingly. "My dad nearly disowned me just for hinting at that. Aye."

Harry arrived home in the darkened dining room five minutes after curfew. The hall was also near to darkness, with only two candles lit in the chandelier, high up near the ceiling. Harry crept up the steps past Snape's room, risking a glance inside, only to stop when he saw that his room was unoccupied. Harry looked across at the darkened rooms on the opposing balcony, then leaned over the rail and saw that light shined in a line under the closed door to the drawing room.

"Huh," Harry whispered to himself, but trusting Snape's assurance that he didn't wish to further pursue any dark magic, he continued on to his room and changed for bed.

* * *

A large box with a clothing company seal arrived in the post one evening. Harry took it from the three burly owls which were carrying it. One of them nipped him as he untangled the last of the string from its feet. "Hey, there," he chastised it.

He set the box on the table to open it, sucking his finger between attempts to unknot the twine. Snape looked up from his tea, pulled out his wand and tapped the box, which obediently untied and sprang neatly open.

"Thanks," Harry muttered.

"It amazes me what you do by hand," Snape commented critically as he tucked his wand away. "Especially considering that you are hardly lacking magic."

Harry studied the contents of the box; a set of black robes were neatly folded inside. Memory set in and he said, "It's my official Auror's robes," as he pulled them out and laid them across his books. They were made of a black silky material with velvet edging. He fingered the strange thin gold chain that ran from the side of the collar to the shoulder. "Dress robes. Full Aurors have three chains. Tonks said we almost never have to wear them," he commented, thinking how odd they looked. When he set the box aside, he asked, "What's this?" of a black cloth bar spellotaped into the bottom of it. It had three bronze pips on it each with a very tiny pattern of stars.

Snape held his hand out for the bar and examined it. "They represent your three medals for special service to Hogwarts." He put down his teacup and stood up before the robes.

Harry took the pin back and looked at it again. The black cloth of the bar had tiny ridges on it and space for more pips. "Why would the Ministry give me this?"

"Hogwarts is operated for the Ministry of Magic, Harry, so they recognize that your service was to them as well." He took the bar back and affixed it to the upper left breast of the outer robe before holding it up to Harry. "Try it on."

Harry shucked off his house robe and pulled the new one on over his t-shirt and jeans. It had really looked too big despite being measured for him, but it fit perfectly. Snape tugged on the shoulders to pull it straight on him. "Come," he said, leading the way to the decorative mirror in the main hall. Harry's first thought was that the chains on the shoulder weren't as strange when he was wearing them. His second thought was that he didn't look like himself, really, much too broad in the shoulders and strong in the jaw, which was accentuated by the high collar of the outer robe. Snape stepped up behind and considered him in reflection. The memories and yearnings the scene churned up unbalanced Harry and he glanced away, down at the shiny fabric.

"What's wrong?" Snape asked.

"Uh . . ." Harry hesitated, shaking the material out even though it hung perfectly.

"Does the robe evoke something unpleasant?"

"No." Harry turned around to face Snape, putting his back to the mirror. Snape reached out, unhooked the bar and repinned it straighter. He again tugged on the dark velvet rolls at the shoulders to square it. "It fits you well. I assume it was measured to fit."

Harry turned back to look at himself through the worn silvering of the old mirror. With a furrowed brow he observed, "It reminds me of the Mirror of Erised."

"It what?" Snape asked in near total disbelief.

Harry tried impatiently to explain. "The way you were looking at me."

"I wasn't aware that I was looking at you in any particular manner." Snape studied the scene before asking quietly, "You imagine this to be the Mirror of Erised?" as though stunned by asking. "You truly are that happy with your situation?" he asked quietly.

"I said I was and I meant it."

"What is wrong, then?"

Mind cast back in time to the attic at Hogwarts, Harry said, "The first time I saw the Mirror of Erised, my parents were standing behind me, looking at me the way you were, as though they were so proud of me." It had been the first time anyone had ever done that and that ache came back with the memory.

"Are you feeling guilty for appreciating this because it is me instead of them?" Snape asked, sounding curious only.

"No," Harry assured him. "It's not that." He sorted through the emotions straining in him, wanting to explain. He considered that there was no shortage of witches and wizards proud of him now, so he pushed the old memory aside. He met Snape's black eyes reflected in the mirror and spoke the next thing that loomed up inside him, the emptiness of losing that reflection when Dumbledore took the mirror away and the realization that it wasn't real anyway. "Having something just means . . ." He paused to shrug. ". . . that I could lose it." Speaking that fear made it too real and he wished he had kept it in.

Snape stepped closer, resting a hand on Harry's arm. "I do not intend for that to happen," he stated in all seriousness. "I do intend to be here for you, for rather a long while."

Harry bit his upper lip before saying sternly, "Intent hasn't helped much in the past." He tried to dismiss the issue even as it struggled for more acknowledgment. The ache in his chest signaled that he was losing the battle.

Snape slipped an arm around him, half covering Harry's dark new robe with his older, faded one. "I am used to surviving," he asserted in a low voice. "If doubt about my continued presence is your concern, please don't let it be."

Harry gave Snape's reflection a small wry smile. He wanted to feel secure but it didn't seem entirely possible to, even with the heat of his guardian seeping through the back of his robe. Too many bad experiences reminded him of the foolishness of being certain. He straightened and pushed the unease from his expression. A different Harry gazed back at him.

Snape released him with a pat on the arm. "I am proud of you, Harry. I realize I do not say it often . . . if at all." He hovered, as though looking to see the reaction to his statement. "And your friends are correct: at the rate you are progressing you will make a superb Auror by the time you are finished. Just don't get overconfident by what you see here," he added as a warning.

* * *

Harry sat mixing practice potions in the Auror office. Behind him, Aaron was urging Kerry Ann to mix something odd for him to drink to get out of visiting his mum's for dinner that evening.

"Purple spots with green stripes?" Kerry Ann suggested, half-serious, as she sorted through the bottles and baskets before her.

Glumly, Aaron said, "She won't notice that."

"Um, boils are easy, but you won't want them on your bum, just your face."

"Did that as a kid," Aaron grumbled. "Worked the first four or five times, but I think she'd get wise."

Bottles clinked as Kerry Ann went through the stocks on the supply table again. "Take Harry with you, then she won't notice you're there."

Harry finally turned around. Aaron looked thoughtful before shaking his head sadly. "I like Potter too much to do that to him."

"You know," Harry said, "you need to visit Weasley Wizard Wheezes for some real help."

"That place the hordes of tykes are always gathering in on Diagon Alley?" He sounded doubtful.

"I'll take you there this afternoon if you want. Fred and George will be thrilled to help."

"Can they charm me to turn into a man-sized chicken every time my mother utters the words, 'find a nice to girl to marry'?"

"Uh. . ." Harry scratched his head, wondering if he should rein Aaron in before things got really bad, or just let the Weasley twins have a go. "Maybe. Be careful what you ask for, though," he felt obliged to warn.

"All right," Tonks said, rushing into the room. "We have to let you all off an hour early." She started to leave then stuck her head back in the door. "Don't get in anybody's way as you go out; everyone's on edge."

"What's going on?" Harry saw fit to ask before the door could close.

It reopened. "That would qualify as getting in my way, Harry," she chastised, then once again nearly departed but stuck her head back in. "But, someone's cursed the Bakerloo tube line, Muggles're trapped, it's a mess." She disappeared for good then.

Aaron tapped his fingers on the narrow bench before him and said in annoyance, "Think we'll ever be useful?"

Vineet calmly said, "Presumably after our three-month examinations, the field experiences will prove more meaningful."

"What?" Aaron said.

Vineet repeated, "We begin field shadowing in just a matter of weeks—"

"No, not that. I heard the word 'examination'." He sounded distraught.

Kerry Ann crossed her arms and considered him. "You didn't take some kind of potion to pass the application examination, did you?"

"No. I just hate examinations: revising, reviewing, cramming, cracking . . . caffeine. I thought I was done with that," he grouched.

Harry hadn't remembered this either but he had not reread the training schedule booklet since it was first handed to him. "Let's go up to Diagon," he suggested, "since we are getting off early." Everyone agreed and they walked through eerily quiet offices to the workout room to collect their things.

* * *

Diagon Alley was at its sunniest yet and Harry was very glad he had suggested this. Aaron and Kerry Ann stopped before the Apothecary window just as they entered the alley. Harry and Vineet waited behind them. A fully laden shopper stopped before Harry and, in apparent shock, dropped all of her packages. Harry flinched, but Vineet took it in with his usual detachment, picking up two parcels that had rolled his way as Kerry Ann and Harry helped. "Oh dear!" the witch, portly with very large glasses, kept repeating. Kerry Ann settled the packages back in the witch's arms and opened the wall for her.

Aaron patted Harry on the back. "I take it back . . . you are dangerous."

Harry growled and followed behind as they moved on slowly through the crowd. "Harry!" a familiar voice shouted, followed immediately by a unintelligible admonishment. Harry turned and found Suze at a table outside Fortescue's, her parents beside her, Mum leaning over to whisper something with an expression that put Harry in the mind of Aunt Petunia. Smiling, Harry crossed over to that side of the alley.

"Haven't seen you in a while. How are you?" Harry asked.

Suze grinned back. "Not bad. Bummed that summer's going so fast. Boy you've gotten tall," she observed, voice tinted with jealousy.

Harry, who had no desire to spawn such jealousy, moved to introduce Vineet. "He's in the Auror apprenticeship with me."

"These are my parents," Suze said. Harry shook each of their sober hands. "Want ice cream?" Suze asked brightly.

Mrs. Zepher began, "Suze, dear, I'm certain-

"Sounds good. Great day for it." Harry turned to Vineet. "Ice cream?"

Vineet nodded solemnly and Harry pulled over chairs for the two of them. Aaron and Kerry Ann must have gone on ahead; Harry couldn't see them through the many shoppers. He pulled his chair closer to Suze's and waved to the proprietor, who came bustling over and insisted on bringing Harry his usual free sundae.

Mr. Zepher, an average looking man in above-average robes, cleared his throat. "Very honored to make your acquaintance, Mr. Potter."

Harry was saved from responding to this proclamation by the ice creams arriving. He settled for a polite smile and nod.

Vineet intoned, "You will be corrupted by such special treatment."

Harry really could not tell if he was serious. "Um," Harry stared at the dish, at the faint smoke wafting off the freshly scooped spheres of white in their pool of black sauce. "It's melting; we'll debate it later."

"So, um, Vin . . . eet, right? Where are you from?" Suze asked, seeming fascinated by him.

"Cuttack,"

"Ah. Where is that?"

"Very close to Bhubaneswar, which is very famous, so maybe you have heard of it."

"Nope. Sorry," she confessed and ate the last two spoons of her ice cream quickly. "So you are going to be an Auror too?"

"I do hope to manage this," he stated, sounding far less certain than expected.

"Don't let his modesty fool you," Harry teased and gave his companion a nudge with his elbow, which softened his stern expression. Harry, however, had learned to look for subtle clues in dark eyes, and saw the taint of doubt there. He frowned and said, "Vineet's taken me down many times."

"Only if you do not have your wand out." Vineet crossed his arms. "Which is rarely the case. My magic inheritance is not so powerful, you see."

Suze looked doubtful about this statement as she looked up at his dark countenance.

"Wondered where you'd got to," Aaron said, coming up from behind, Kerry Ann in tow, already with two big packages from Madam Malkin's.

"Aaron, come meet Suze," Harry said. "She's the Slytherin Seeker."

Aaron shook her hand vigorously and then pulled over yet another chair; it was getting very crowded around their table. Leaning far forward so they were eye-to-eye, Aaron keenly asked, "Thought maybe I recognized you. So, tell me about next year's team."

Suze's eyes fairly glowed as she explained each team member and her hopes for new replacements. Her parents smiled weakly through this. Finally, she wound down and asked, "Are you coming to the matches?" while her eyes darted from Aaron to Harry.

"Most certainly," Aaron replied gallantly. "Harry? Coming to watch Gryffindor lose miserably without you?"

Harry asked, "You've been going to all the matches since you finished school?"

"Nearly all. I rather like Quidditch and my house used to always win. And they will again, right Suze?"

"Oh, definitely," she agreed, grinning at Harry.

"How 'bout you, Vishnu?" Aaron asked. "You have the physique of a Chaser. Do you play?"

"I thought you said your name was . . . uh . . . " Suze said.

"Only Mr. Potter . . . and my father, refer to me by the name Vineet," he dryly explained.

Harry accused, "You introduced yourself to me that way."

"Well, it *is* my name, but it is not what I am accustomed to being called."

"Why didn't you say?" Harry asked, pushing the last of his melted ice cream aside.

Vineet hesitated, an unusual thing. "I did not wish to correct you," he finally replied.

"What?" Harry blurted. "Why not?" The Indian appeared suddenly quite uncomfortable. Harry couldn't accept that someone with the calm confidence of this man wouldn't just say what was on his mind. "Vineet, you . . . can say whatever you want to me." Harry balked simply at having to say that and at the same time, shook himself for still using his name. "It seems like an appropriate name for you though," Harry observed, half to himself.

"Yes," Vineet agreed as though Harry had said something more meaningful than Harry could grasp.

Aaron clapped them both on the shoulder. "Well, ice cream's finished. Let's get on to that store."

Kerry Ann laughed. "Everyone is overawed with Harry, except Aaron, who behaves like a boar."

Harry, shaking his head, stood, said goodbye to the Zephers and told Suze he would see her at the first Hogwarts' Quidditch match. On the way down the alley to the twins' shop, Harry glanced at Vineet and found him as calm and detached as ever. "Do you want me to call you Vishnu?"

"It does not seem appropriate now," came the quiet response.

"Okay," Harry gave in. They walked around an outside display of used broomsticks that took up half the alley. Eventually, Harry uncomfortable with the notion of someone he was a little awed of being in awe of him, tried to say, "You aren't . . . you can't . . . hmf." Harry remembered their very early conversation after the written test, when Vineet admitted he had been inspired to apply because of Harry himself. "Oh well," Harry said. They had reached the shop anyway.

Fred was minding the store and he greeted Harry warmly. "And who are your fine companions today?"

"These are the other apprentices," Harry explained. "This is Kerry Ann, Aaron, and Vineet."

Fred leaned close to Harry's ear. "This isn't some kind of bust, is it?"

Harry laughed. "No."

"Ah, good," Fred said jovially. "'Cause if they are half as good as you, I'd just turn over my wand now."

Aaron leaned forward and said cockily, "We are all better at magic than Harry is."

Fred looked alarmed. "Dark magic will never be the same." He then smiled broadly. "But, what can I do for you?"

Grimly, Aaron said, "I require . . . assistance."

"Sounds intriguing," Fred breathed, rubbing his hands together. "I like a man with broad ideas about his needs."

Kerry Ann, who had wandered over to the joke magical-object shelves and was examining a joke Remembrall, quipped over her shoulder. "He just wants to fake illness to get out of dinner with his mum."

"Ah," Fred said with happy relish and swooped around to collect a box from behind the counter, which he presented like a prize to Aaron. "Let me introduce you to our Advanced Skiver's Snackbox." He flipped open the lid with a practiced hand, revealing wooden dividers with multicolored sweets in each. "Arrayed before you is the foremost collection of artificial illness concoctions available anywhere. Well, at least in Europe . . . we aren't sure about China," he added as an aside. "Each column affects a different part of the body. Depth of color affects degree. You may stagger, mix and match. Whatever's needed. All are rigorously tested to guarantee the minimum of negative side effects. That is, other than the ones you're trying to simulate."

Aaron leaned over the box and read the little brass labels on each column. "*Hand, Face, Hair; Stomach & Tract* . . ." Here he stopped to grimace. "*Musculature, Skeleton, X-tra limbs*." He looked up at Fred. "Seriously?" he asked.

"Oh, skeleton is not as hard as you might think. Nor as painful."

"I meant the limbs."

"I'll let you know a little secret. That column was the end result of the accidental combination of the previous two concoctions." Fred closed the lid. "Gets you out of anything though." He held the box out, politely with two hands. "Interested?"

Aaron sighed. "Yep, I'll take a box."

Fred swooped away to wrap it up in a nice bag. He dropped in a scroll as well. "Included is a free sample of our latest invention, Hidden Insult Letter Parchment. The first time the receiver of your letter reads the middle sentence of your missive they will believe it contains one of three random insulting phrases, but when they subsequently reread it, it will have disappeared forever. Custom insults are available upon request for volume orders." With a pleased grin he handed the bag over.

Aaron had pulled out the innocent looking sheet tied with a bit of blue ribbon and appeared terribly thoughtful. Kerry Ann hooked her arm through his and dragged him from the store. Fred called Harry's name as they reached the door and when he turned, he tossed Harry a bag of the watermelon sweets and gave him a little salute.

Out on the street, as they made their way back down the alley, Aaron said, "I remember those nutters from school. How did Hogwarts survive?"

"The twins quit early," Harry explained with a laugh and held out his bag of sweets. Aaron immediately accepted one. Kerry Ann declined with a look of alarm. Vineet hesitated while giving Harry a bit of scrutiny, then took one as well.

"Hello, Harry," a familiar voice said from behind him.

Harry turned to greet Ginny, then introduced her to the others. "You're here alone?" he asked, seeing her Hogwarts list in her hand and no other redheads in sight.

"Yep." With a sly look, she said, "You could keep me company . . ."

Harry chuckled, "I suppose. We finished early today, so I'm free now."

"They abandoned us, you mean," Aaron drawled.

At Ginny's questioning look, Harry explained, "Our trainer got called away for an emergency. They're really short-handed."

"That's presumably why there are four of you," Ginny commented.

"We *know* that's why there are four of us," Kerry Ann replied.

Aaron was examining his hands. "Hey, this might work, and they taste great."

"Only five minutes of effect," Harry warned him.

Someone bumped hard into Ginny as he passed in the crowd. "Excuse me," Ginny sarcastically commented.

The figure turned and Harry recognized Nott Jr. "If there weren't quite so much ruffraff the street would be clearer," he muttered directly to Ginny.

What happened next, Harry almost missed by blinking. Ginny dropped her wand out of her sleeve and started to raise it but a blue sphere of light appeared to restrain her. She jerked her hand hard against the resistance and it was released, but Vineet was holding her wand. "Truly you do not wish to do that in such a crowded place?" he intoned with an undercurrent of threat.

Ginny was gaping at her empty hand. "How did you do that?" she asked in complete surprise. Nott too was considering Vineet with intent curiosity. Vineet handed her wand back without a reply. Harry and the other apprentices exchanged impressed looks.

With a glance at Nott, Harry said, "I'll follow you to the bookstore. Come on." He waved goodbye to his fellows. Ginny pocketed her wand with a faint blush and a dark look at Nott before she stepped away with Harry.

At Flourish and Blotts, Ginny headed to the textbooks, while Harry wandered upstairs. On a small table at the end of a shelf Harry found Muggle-proof book covers -- *self adjustable to any size from tome to trade*. Harry picked up a package of these and not finding Quidditch books as interesting as expected, headed back downstairs. He found Ginny crouching before a bargain bin that looked unlikely to hold books for any years past third. When she spotted Harry, she stacked the loose ones back in quickly and turned to the table of new releases, appearing flustered. She turned to Harry and after a moment asked, "Do you still have your seventh-year Potions texts?"

"Yeah. Do you want to borrow them?"

"Could I?"

"Sure. I'll owl them over or you can grab them on your way home."

She turned back to the table, turning a book called *Quick Magical Meals* over to stare at the back of it. "There are so many new books on the list this year," she said with a frown.

"You can borrow the Defense ones as well, or did you get those from Ron?"

"They're all different this year. Professor Snape said he found much better ones. . . but much better means . . ."

"More expensive?" Harry finished.

She frowned. "Yep." She flipped through the books in her cauldron and huffed. "Bill's buying a house and Mum and Dad gave them part of the money for that, and I stupidly said . . . well anyway, I thought I had enough."

"What other books do you need?" asked Harry.

"I don't want you to do that," she said, reaching for the list in her pocket, but not pulling it out.

"How about . . . as a birthday present," Harry suggested just a bit playfully.

It had the desired effect. Ginny blushed and curled her lips into her mouth. "I suppose . . . I need *Tabor's Triumphant Intermixes* yet."

"For what class?" Harry asked, taking the list from her.

"Potions. I swear if Lockhart had written Potions texts, Greer would be assigning them."

Harry peered into her cauldron. "You have everything for Defense, it looks like. Except the optional book." He went off to find *Prodigious Protection* by Basel Batterings.

Later, when they had checked out and stood at the store's hearth, Ginny held her hand out for the other shopping bag Harry was carrying for her. He withheld it and said, "You can stop by and get the others right now if you want. You need to start reading ahead."

"You must be a fun date, Harry," Ginny commented, but she dropped her arm.

In the dining room in Shrewsthorpe, Harry removed her books from the shopping bag that also contained his purchase and arranged them on the table by subject. "I'll fetch the others for you."

"Thanks."

As Harry's footsteps faded up the stairs, Snape stepped in. "Ms. Weasley."

"Hello, sir."

"Prepared for another year?" he asked, almost amiably.

"Yes, sir. Looking forward to being finished, to be honest."

A little airily Snape said, "We will try to make it worth your while." He noticed the books on the table and picked up the Potions one. "Is this what Greer assigned?" he asked in dismay as Harry returned.

"Hello, Severus," Harry greeted him.

"Yep," Ginny confirmed. Harry gave her the other books he had, including his N.E.W.T. preparation books. "Too early to think about that," she groaned but picked one up to peruse it.

"Staying for dinner, Ms. Weasley?" Snape asked.

Ginny froze, mid-page turn. "Sure," she replied, mood immediately brightening.

As she served herself from the platter of roast chicken, Ginny dreamily said, "I have to have a house-elf when I get a place of my own. I'll just hide the thing from Mum when she visits."

"And your dad," Harry, sitting across from her, pointed out.

"Think so?"

Harry nodded knowingly.

"Piffle," she breathed. After several silent bites, Ginny said, "So, Harry, I gotta ask, why Ms. Fashion Queen?"

Harry froze, believing she was referring to Tara and utterly unable to fathom how she knew they had gone to a party together, although it had turned out to be a rather nonromantic evening. Snape too seemed interested in the answer to this. "What?" Harry managed to ask.

"Betty C., the winner of the essay contest?"

"Oh," Harry said and then huffed. "I don't know how to explain this. . . "

"I mean *really*," Ginny criticized. "So not your type. Come on, didn't the second runner-up just have you pegged?"

Harry bore the accusing look from his guardian, started to speak, but then heard something in Ginny's tone. "You wrote the second runner-up essay? I glanced at it; I'm certain I didn't see your name."

Ginny blushed fiercely. "I used a pen name . . . wait, you *glanced* at it?" Harry didn't reply. Ginny frowned and muttered, "I was going to win the contest and surprise you at the date."

"Skeeter didn't promise a date with me," Harry returned.

Ginny served herself seconds on potatoes. "She *implied*, I thought." She forked potato into her mouth, swallowed and asked Snape, "So what do you think of Romeo here?"

Snape lifted his chin and said, "As long as he stays out of trouble, he may do as he pleases."

Harry focused firmly on his bean salad. Ginny followed up with, "So what do you consider trouble?"

Sternly, Snape replied, "Harry is well aware of what constitutes trouble."

"Hmmm," Ginny hummed. "So funny to see someone keeping you in line, Harry," she mused with a smile. "As opposed to just the teachers at . . . oops, I guess that's still true."

After seeing Ginny off, Harry, despite great reluctance, went to the library to review. Snape followed and took a seat at the small desk in the corner and opened an unusual purple-covered leather book and began to read. The first book Harry had pulled out, one on the history of Wizengamot decisions involving detention, didn't hold Harry's interest. He reached down to the shelf where his new gold bookmarks were arranged, started to grab the one with an outline of a Welsh Green, but then decided on the Bulgarian Burcock instead. None of the books he needed to read from seemed all that interesting. Yawning, Harry decided to write a few letters instead. Because his nose was buried in his file of loose letters, Harry did not notice the odd attention Snape gave to this sequence of activities.

Harry found his most recent letter from Penelope. It was almost two weeks old, the longest gap in their correspondence yet. The letter was only one page and talked a lot about the changes of summer, which she observed more than most anyone Harry knew, or maybe in the mountains these things were more obvious. When Penelope mentioned at the end of her letter that her parents were off to Egypt for three weeks, his thoughts slid to Elizabeth. After visiting her rather often, Harry had stopped, and he wished he felt better about doing so. As upfront as she was, he missed talking to her. Or perhaps it was because she was so blunt and made others around him seem to be extra careful of his sensibilities. Well, except his guardian, of course.

Harry picked up a quill from the shelf beside him and penned a letter asking Penelope for advice. He dearly hoped she wouldn't be offended but once he considered it, he found he wanted her thoughts on the situation of his desire to avoid a conflict with Mr. Peterson. Just writing it all out seemed to help reduce his frustration, although he had probably not described his neighbor's father in a particularly fair light. He sealed the letter up and called Hedwig down to take it away. She hadn't gone any great distance lately, but she flew off agreeably, the letter clutched in her claws.

A barn owl arrived shortly after. Harry recognized it and found himself eagerly opening the letter from Tara. She wanted to know if he was free that Saturday. Doesn't give much warning, Harry thought to himself, as this was Thursday. Ron and Hermione had discussed getting together, but nothing definite. Harry mulled over being the odd one in a threesome versus inviting Tara along, which he resisted doing before he himself had gotten a chance to get to know her. In the letter Tara suggested visiting a castle followed by a quiet dinner in the village where she lived, which sounded very appealing. Harry penned a note back saying he would be happy to join her. Her owl took the note back out the window as though ordered by its mistress to return quickly.

Harry found himself not reading very much after that, but spending a lot of time staring at the page before him. He had to admit that having someone as attractive as Tara wanting to spend time with him made it easier to give up the battle with Mr. Peterson. He resisted weighing the two women in his mind since he didn't *really* know if Elizabeth liked him more than just friends. Well, he was looking forward to Saturday, anyway.

* * *

Friday, after helping Hermione and Ron assemble furniture--mostly bookshelves--for Hermione's apartment, Harry gratefully sat down to dinner at home with Kali on his shoulder. Ron's and Hermione's patience had grown short with each other and Harry had insisted that Snape wanted him home for dinner as a way of giving them some space.

The clouds hung dense overhead so candles had been lit on the table even though it was not particularly late in the evening. Harry liked the candelabra; it was a heavy, soot-blackened ironwork figure that made one think of flying serpents. His Aunt Petunia would have tossed it in the dustbin while wearing a thick oven mitt, just in case. Snape came into the room, and held out a letter addressed to both of them. It was from the Weasleys and it invited them to dinner next week.

"Sounds nice," Harry said, hoping they didn't feel obliged after they had had Ginny over.

"I will respond to them, then," Snape said, putting the letter into the pocket of his dressing gown.

As the meal arrived, Kali climbed down to perch on the back of the neighboring chair and sampled the scents from closer in. Harry fed her some choice strips of rare roast beef which quickly disappeared. Snape didn't seem to care that she was there; in fact, he seemed distracted. Before the dessert course he went out of the room with purpose and returned as Winky carried in a tray with ice creams, including a tumbler with a teaspoonful, which the elf placed before Harry. "For the beast," she squeaked.

Harry laughed and held the small glass up to his shoulder where the now sleepy Chimrian was drooping lazily. She sniffed the tumbler curiously but didn't seem to grasp that it might be edible. Harry put the tumbler back down and reached for a spoon from the tray, which Winky had unusually left on the table and more strangely, had six spoons on it in a little pile. Thinking that he would never understand elvish behavior, he selected one from the bottom of the pile and dug into his ice cream.

* * *

Saturday, Harry carefully put on nice Muggle clothes, followed by his cloak to protect them, even though it was too warm. He had accidentally spent so much time getting ready that he was in a rush when he called out to Snape that he was going and wouldn't be back until late. Snape was ensconced in the drawing room as usual and Harry didn't wait to hear a reply.

Harry was in a hurry because he had to use the Floo to get to Twickenham on the outskirts of London, then use a broom to get to the village of Appledown where he was meeting Tara. In Appledown, after a rushed flight, Harry landed in a shadowy alley and tried to straighten his wind-blown hair with his hand. He gave up with a sigh, put an Obsfucation charm on his broom and, just in case, set it upright beside a shop dustbin.

Just before the street, he backed up and tucked in his starched white shirt more carefully and shook out his cloak. He shouldn't be so concerned, one part of him insisted, but another part reminded him how smartly dressed Tara always seemed to be. With another sigh, he stepped onto the pavement and walked along toward the castle.

As he passed a pub with tables crowded up to the street, someone said, "Nice cloak," in a less-than-complimentary way. Harry turned, hesitated, and then fixed his gaze on a soft-fleshed man in his twenties, holding a cigarette and a beer glass in the same hand. His mates were chuckling. Without intending to, Harry studied each of them as though gauging whether they represented real trouble. They all sported red-rimmed eyes as though the drinking had been going on since lunch. Harry took in their clothes and appearance as he had been instructed: colors of hair, shirts, jackets, who had facial hair or glasses, who seemed nervous. None of them looked bright enough to make any decent trouble, frankly. By the time Harry's careful scrutiny returned to the original speaker, the man looked wary. Harry scoffed and with a swish of his cloak, walked on.

At the gate leading to the museum, Tara greeted Harry warmly, all smiles. She had already paid the admission, so he simply followed her inside the grounds. They wandered across the lawn to a half-ruined tower, its fair stone lit attractively in the late afternoon sun. It wasn't necessary to read the cracked plastic signs as Tara was happy to impart all kinds of local history as they circled what had apparently been a dovecot. Harry found himself liking how unselfconscious Tara was about being outgoing, it was a nice change from how she had been before.

They crossed over to a white gravel path that led to a small fountain surrounded by a few sculpted shrubs. "I'm doing all the talking, I think," she finally said sheepishly.

"If you want me to give the tour," Harry teased, "it will either be very short or very silly."

With a bright laugh, she said, "Go ahead then."

They were just at the heavy oak doors leading into the main castle; only a smaller, man-sized door was actually ajar, built into the larger door at the seam. Harry stalled until they were inside, beside a grotesquely ornate, eight-foot high chest. Harry turned from the sight of it and the pained faces carved into the corners. Taking a deep breath, Harry began, "Well, who'd you say . . . oh, yes, the Whithershin's family crest, seen here . . ." He gestured at a faded wooden shield on the back of the massive door, composed of a rearing white dog beside three black blades. "Portrays the dreaded sword fighting Chihuahua."

Tara's burst of laughter, quickly covered, echoed through the large hall. Another older couple turned from where they stood before a large red tapestry and gave them dismayed glances.

". . . that protected the family fortune, formally hidden in the keep."

They moved from the entrance toward the center of the hall, where a very long table surrounded by age-discolored chairs barely made a dent in the space. Tara forced a straight face and pretended to listen attentively.

"Unfortunately, the family suffered a serious blow in the fifteen hundreds, when the doves, which the Chihuahuas had been trained to not attack, carried the jewels away to a rival's kingdom."

The other couple had moved on so the two of them stepped to the tapestry which had been considered important enough to be printed on the ticket. It displayed a hunting scene with many dogs milling in a pack and one dashing figure on horseback large in the foreground with a horn just hovering at his lips. The trees behind him obscured the other riders.

"Then what happened?" Tara asked.

"Oh, well, the duke was forced to ransom all the attractive furniture to his rival; hence we are left with what you now see here. All but the famous . . ."

"*Call to the Hunt*," she supplied, fighting a grin.

"All but the famous *Call to the Dogs* which was the duke's most prized possession. For reasons that are unclear." Tara still looked expectant, so Harry went on as he thought things up, "The tapestry survived only because when his rival came to take away the home decor, it had been folded up to be used as a bed for the attack Chihuahuas. The rival's famous words

are remembered to this day, *That is a very big dog bed for such small dogs*. But he was fooled, and we can be grateful that we can still enjoy this tapestry here today . . . rather than ten miles down the road at the next castle museum."

Grinning, Tara shook her head. "Okay, so I'll take over the commentary again . . . for a little while."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

"Really?" she said, laughing, "I didn't get that sense at all."

After seeing what Harry hoped was every last room of the castle, they sat outside on a stone bench in the fading light. Swifts dodged around overhead, black against the deep blue of the sky.

"The reservation's not for another half of an hour," Tara said, glancing at her wristwatch. "They'll light the torches when it gets darker; it is a really romantic spot when they're burning." Her gaze was far away as though seeing the scene in her mind.

Harry glanced around them and seeing no one watching, pulled out his wand and aimed an Ignitio at each of the torches framing the doors and the corners of the castle. Tara stiffened and glanced quickly around before relaxing with a chuckle. After Harry stashed his wand he looked over at her again, surprised to find her smile gone.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"Nothing." She shifted as though thinking of standing up. "We can go a little early. . . "

"You didn't like me doing that?" Harry asked.

"No, it was really sweet of you to do that."

"Oh." Harry remembered Penelope's sudden sad turns and swallowed a sigh.

They sat in the quiet, flickering light until it was time to leave. Harry had toyed with the thought of shifting a little closer, but Tara seemed too inwardly focused.

She returned to herself when they reached the restaurant. It was finished inside with glass and wood and despite being rather elegant still felt boisterous. Harry forgot about her earlier funk, until she returned from the ladies room with a very dark expression.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She huffed, "He has no reason to be here."

"Who?"

"Rick. He's over at the bar, buying drinks for my oldest friends."

"Oh . . . ignore him," Harry said.

"Good idea."

After that, Harry imagined he felt eyes on him but he shook it off. Tara's friends came to the table. Harry was introduced to them all and they soon returned to the bar, taking their loud conversation with them. It felt quiet in their absence.

"He doesn't even live near here. . . " Tara griped out of the blue as they ate.

Chastising, Harry said, "Do I have to start giving you the history of this restaurant to get you to ignore him?"

Tara nearly spit out her potatoes, but her smile was worth it.

After the long meal Harry fetched his broom and re-met Tara on the pavement. "You've got it?" she asked.

Harry nodded. He was holding his hand behind his back so he didn't draw attention to his Obsfucated broom. "I should get going. I have a bit of a flight to get to the Floo network."

"Don't go all the way back to Twinkenhams. You should just take the Floo from my parent's house."

"If that's all right, it would be easier."

Strangely resigned, she said, "Come on," and gestured for him to follow. He did, until the end of the road where she stopped beside a Citroen parked before a shuttered bakers.

"You have a car," Harry observed.

"Yeah," she said, unlocking his door by leaning over inside. "Get in. My parents live two miles out of town."

Harry took the passenger seat, which seemed to wrap around him, unlike the big seats in either the Weasley-borrowed cars or his Uncle Vernon's car. "This is yours?" he asked conversationally, adjusting the little louvers for the air vent beside him. The car seemed full of little adjusters.

She put the key into the ignition, but dropped her arm without turning it. "I'm afraid, Harry, that you may be mistakenly thinking that I'm a witch."

Harry froze with his hand on a little knob beside the window whose little movements seemed to magically make big movements in the side mirror. "I might be," he admitted. But then thought that, actually, he was not really surprised.

She breathed out, which sounded loud in the enclosed space. "I also am thinking that you probably wouldn't go out with a Muggle, or even a Squib," she stated slowly.

"Oh, no. I don't care," Harry quickly said.

She stared at him in the dim light. "How can the great Harry Potter not care?" she challenged.

"The what?" Harry asked, sounding dangerous.

Her mouth worked silently before she said. "You really don't care?"

He let go of the interesting little mirror adjuster after getting the headlights approaching from behind to not shine in his eyes. "No. I really don't."

She finally turned the ignition. "I should have said something sooner. I'm sorry."

"I think because Rick . . . well, I may have assumed. You never really pretended that you were a witch."

She looked around them before pulling out of the parking spot. "True." They rode in silence until slowing on a quiet street where the houses were far apart. Tara said, "My mum and dad are both magical, but not particularly so. They moved here because they wanted me to grow up a normal Muggle. I wanted horses when I turned twelve because I couldn't ride a broomstick, so they bought me and my brother one each even though I'm certain it was a strain to manage it."

"You have two horses?" Harry asked, glancing into the dark shapes that could be barns behind the house they had parked beside.

"I have three now. Do you want to come over and ride them?"

"I'd love to," Harry replied, remembering the beasts at the Freeland estate. Wanting her to not feel like she was missing out, he said, "In some ways they seem better than a broomstick."

"I'll owl you. I'd really like that; I don't get out here much I'm so busy. I keep expecting my parents to suggest selling them." She got out of the car and came around to Harry's side. Lights had come on in the front of the house. Quietly, she said, "Okay, second confession of the night. I did not tell my parents I was out with you, and I hope they don't utterly embarrass me, but I couldn't make you fly back to Twickenham, so please bear with them."

She opened the front door of the house and a female voice from the back called out, "Hello dear. I didn't think you'd have time to stop by."

"My date is just going to use the Floo, if that's all right," Tara called out, gesturing quickly for Harry to go into the room on the right, which was small but nicely decorated with curly antique furniture. Harry moved toward the grey marble hearth along the side wall. Many ugly vases lined the mantle as well as a crystal ball and a family portrait taken in front of what must have been a Quidditch stadium although a Muggle might think it a Middle Ages fair.

The voice was closer, "Of course dear, but shouldn't you offer the young man some tea?"

Shouting back, Tara said, "No, he really has to get going." She whispered, "If I tell her you have curfew, that'd be worse." She kissed him quickly on the lips, "I had a nice time."

"Me too. Thanks for the tour," Harry said, fighting a flush. He propped his broom in the crook of his arm to take out his canister of Floo powder. He stopped rushing when a matronly woman came into the room, drying her hands on a tea towel.

"Well, dear, you should introduce us at least. You think your dear mother doesn't take an interest in your dates because you are moved out, but she does. Hello, dear," she said kindly, holding out a hand, which Harry shook after juggling the canister back into his pocket.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am."

Her smile faded after her eyes roamed his face. "My goodness, you look . . . just . . . you are, aren't you?"

She hadn't released his hand and her grip had grown tight. "Yes," Harry admitted, relaxing his hand in the hopes that she would give it up.

"Mum," Tara prompted and Harry was freed. Harry expected some kind of impressed pleasure at her recognizing him, but it failed to materialize. Tara's mother backed into the hall with a polite smile and shouted. "Gerald, come down here." Harry at least found Tara equally confused. Footsteps sounded on stairs and then a very average looking wizard in a worn dressing gown, holding a smoldering pipe appeared in the doorway. "Yes, dear?"

"Come and meet Tara's date for the evening," she said evenly. She seemed to have recovered herself, because she did a proper introduction.

"My," was Mr. Terrance's reaction, also thoughtfully subdued.

Harry found himself going on alert, even to the point of feeling around himself for anything dark, although he only ever sensed things at random rather than at will. It seemed an ordinary house.

"Harry really can't stay for tea," Tara prompted.

"Perhaps next time, dear," Mrs. Terrance said kindly, sounding normal now. "Although it would be interesting to here how you met."

"At a coffee shop," Tara supplied at the exact instant Harry said, "At a dance club." He fell silent and let Tara amend. "Well, we did meet very briefly earlier this year at a dance club, but uh, we had more chance to talk at the coffee shop. Well, Harry needs to get going," she insisted, steering Harry around to face the hearth. "I'll owl you," Tara said as Harry departed.

An owl arrived from Tara the very next morning. She apologized for her parents and asked if he wished to go riding the last Friday of the month. She promised her parents would be on better behavior, that they somehow were under the notion that Harry himself could be dangerous. Harry sighed and replied on the back of her letter that he would love to try riding and sent her owl back to her.



Chapter 58 -- Snape's Story

"You pick up spells very easily," Vineet commented to Harry as they practiced at the end of a long Monday's training.

Harry *was* feeling a bit proud of the Diamona Block he had learned that day but he was also sensitive to his new friend's limitations. Aaron he didn't mind beating out on nearly every new spell. "Not always," he insisted. "Some things, Transfiguration for instance, takes me a long time to learn."

"You are trying to be making me feel better, I think."

Harry grinned but didn't deny it. As Vineet used a Chrysalis to block Harry's Figuresempre, Harry glanced over at someone entering the workout room and brightened when he saw it was Snape.

"You are late getting out," Snape said. "I suggested Arthur not wait for us."

Harry glanced at the clock. "Ey, sorry," he said. "In that case, look at what I learned today." To Vineet, he said, "Give *me* a Figuresempre this time."

Vineet obliged and Harry put up his new block. "Sloppy, Potter," Snape criticized. At Harry's surprised look, he went on. "Wand at a 54 degree angle, flat to you. Focus more on the corners of the energy or it will not repel anything significant. Do it again."

Harry adjusted his wand as best he could and nodded for Vineet to hit him again. The yellow crystal around him did look brighter this time and glowed with harder edges.

"Corners," Snape reiterated. "You need to create the nodes in your mind for them to exist in the block. Your block is far too rounded."

"Excuse me," Rodgers said as he entered the room and stepped over. "But who are you?"

Snape turned to the trainer and gave him a close once-over. "I am Severus Snape."

"This is our trainer, Mr. Rodgers," Harry supplied, feeling static forming between the two men. "And this is Professor Snape, he teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts School." Rodgers expression narrowed rather than relaxing. "Are we released, sir?" Harry asked. "I have someplace to be."

Rodgers waved him off without taking his narrowed eyes off Snape.

Harry glanced at Vineet to nod at him in thanks. "I'll get my stuff," he said to his guardian and left the room.

"I don't believe it," Rodgers said in a low voice. After a long pause he added, "What are you doing with Potter?"

Snape crossed his arms. "I am picking him up; he has a dinner appointment," he replied flatly, as though the man might be dim.

Rodgers snorted. "You don't remember me, I suppose." He stepped closer to Snape's long nose. "What are you doing free?" he asked quietly. The other apprentices stopped practicing at that question and turned to listen.

Snape raised a brow but didn't respond. Aaron stepped closer and said, "Sir, he does teach at Hogwarts. I can vouch for that."

"I don't care about that beyond a passing interest in who the idiot was who trusted him around that many children," Rodgers said, still matching Snape's challenging gaze.

Harry returned, bookbag slung over his shoulder. He opened his mouth to say he was ready but paused; he hadn't seen a face-off like this one since Snape and his godfather had pulled their wands on each other at Grimmauld Place. With a quick stride Harry went over. "What's wrong?" he asked, looking between them.

Rodgers turned to Harry. "Why is this wizard picking you up?" he challenged.

Harry, startled, looked to Snape and back to his instructor. "I don't know what you mean."

"I don't want him in here again," Rodgers said sharply to Harry before he turned back to Snape. "I don't know how you managed to stay out of Azkaban, but—"

"Wait a second," Harry interrupted. Anger filled him as he stepped forward. "Where do you get off . . . ?"

Rodgers grabbed the front of Harry's robe and pulled him short. "You don't know what he is," he breathed quietly. "I do."

Burning purpose filled Harry like it hadn't in a very long time and he didn't fight it. "Don't be ridiculous--of course I know," he snapped back at his trainer.

"I will not have Death Eaters in the Auror's training area," Rodgers snarled back. Behind the trainer, Aaron dropped his wand. He bent slowly to retrieve it. "They're all supposed to be in Azkaban, Potter," Rodgers went on angrily.

"Why haven't you caught them then?" Harry mocked him. "Why is one still free? Why did I have to help catch the last six?" Rodgers jaw tightened. Forcing calm over himself, Harry added, "Severus isn't who you think he is. Talk to Tonks, or Shackbolt, or . . . Headmistress McGonagall. You're jumping to conclusions." With a frightening jolt Harry realized that the only person who had the influence to convincingly vouch for Snape was dead.

"Harry," Snape prompted from closer to the door.

Harry turned to him. As he did, Rodgers grabbed Harry's sleeve. "Why are you defending him? What is he to you?"

Harry jerked his arm free. "My dad." A wand hit the floor again. At Rodgers befuddled expression Harry added, "He adopted me over a year ago." Harry turned again and headed for the door, his thoughts churning crazily.

"I saw him in seventy seven," Rodgers announced loudly in a newly calm voice, a voice that hinted at power and righteousness. "I am pledged to cleanse society of those such as him."

Harry spun back, cloak flipping out behind him. He stalked back over until he was toe to toe with Rodgers. "How dare you?" Harry breathed. Pure white fury coursed through him now, masking his alarm and filling him with raw purpose. "Did you share Voldemort's thoughts for three years? Feel every strong emotion he felt, frightened when he was angry and utterly terrified when he was joyous?" Rodgers leaned back as Harry went on, building in volume. "Were you taken over by him and used as puppet against every fiber of your will until everything you cared about was gone? Did you steep yourself in his snakelike mind to make him experience every last ounce of pain you'd ever felt until he was too incapacitated to fight back so he could be killed once and for all?"

Rodgers took a small step back; Harry immediately shifted forward to meet him. "Did you inherit his inner vision of his servants?" Shouting then, Harry went on. "I have a green world in my head with a black shadow for every one of his marked followers, and you have the gall to assume I don't know when I am standing next to one?" Harry finally stepped back, breathing heavily. "How dare you stand there and judge him, and assume I don't know who he is."

After a rigid pause Snape said, "Harry, if you have left any bridges . . . at all . . . standing, you should perhaps not disturb them further."

With a last sharp look at his trainer, Harry turned, glancing around the room as he did so. The other three apprentices stood stock still, eyes wide as they tracked him. Harry shook his head in frustration and stomped out, verifying that Snape was close behind.

The lift began to move upward into the next floor and Harry hit the lever to stop it. He knocked his head back against the cage. "I lost it," he said, still short of breath, heart rattling in his chest.

Snape sighed. "So I noticed."

"I panicked," he whispered. "I realized the only person who can protect you is gone."

Calmly, Snape said, "At the risk of sounding like my father, that is not quite true." He pushed the lever back and they started moving again. "Though I have no desire to see it come to that. Still feel up to the Weasley's?"

Harry shook his head and said, "But let's go anyway. They're waiting."

They stepped out into the relatively quiet atrium. Harry said, "Where did he know you from?"

"It took me some time to recognize him, but I believe I remember him being sent by the Ministry to infiltrate the inner circle. He was not adept at Occlusion and it was immediately obvious to me what he was doing. Someone at the Ministry must have also recognized his lack of ability, because he disappeared before anyone else suspected. This was before I had gone to Albus," Snape added more quietly as he fished in his pocket for his small canister of Floo powder.

After a pair of witches went by, talking in low tones, Harry said, "This is something I've left lie and I wouldn't ask except I feel like we are under attack, but how long was that?"

Snape held the shallow canister out for Harry. "Five months," he replied casually, though Harry could hear unease in it. "Go on," Snape said to make him go first.

Harry stood inside the hearth and said, "The Burrow," as he tossed the powder down. Many turns later, his feet slapped the hearth at the Weasley's. He stepped out quickly so Snape could follow, feeling uneasy about leaving him behind. He relaxed marginally when the flare sounded behind him.

"Harry, dear," Mrs. Weasley said in welcome as she came over and gave him a hug. She had on a horrendously mismatched dress and apron. Harry apologized for their late arrival and gave her a hug back, feeling the need for the external support. She said, "The others owed that they would be late as well. So busy those two."

Arthur Weasley stepped over from the dining table. "Well, there you are."

"Sorry to be late. Got, uh, caught up in something."

"Have a seat. Have a seat," Arthur invited, gesturing at the worn old, orange couch. "Hello, Severus."

Harry gratefully sat down and put his head in his hands as his emotions swung wildly. "Have you something strong to drink?" Snape asked.

"Of course." Arthur went to a strange crooked red bottle on the shelf running along below the ceiling. He took down three bright orange little cups and dusted them with his sleeve before pouring into them. Snape immediately handed the first one to Harry.

Harry shot him a pained expression as he took it. "My, my," Arthur said, "Care to tell us what the matter is?" Cup in hand he sat down beside Harry and considered him.

Harry took a swallow, choked violently and immediately took another. He held his little cup out for more. When Arthur didn't notice the hint, Snape handed him his serving with the admonishment, "Slower this time." Harry sipped it but still coughed.

"What happened?" Arthur prompted again.

"I yelled at my trainer after he threatened Severus," Harry said glumly and then blinked. "Do you think I can get kicked out for that?" he asked, considering, only now, the broader repercussions. Ginny came down the stairs then and stopped on the last step in surprise at those words.

Snape pulled over a rickety, straight-backed chair and sat down across from him. Molly stepped over and crossed her arms to listen. Methodically, Snape said, "In my experience with administrative matters, which is what any action to remove you would come down to, what is critical is how it would read if it were reduced to a memorandum." He waited for Harry to look up before going on, "In this case the memorandum would read, Harry Potter, in parenthesis, THE Harry Potter, became incensed with his Auror trainer when the man questioned his judgment on a Voldemort-related issue."

"He what?" Arthur asked stridently. Snape held up his hand and Arthur sat back, looking intently between them. He sipped his drink and waited, postured as though at the theatre.

"Mr. Potter proceeded to detail for Mr. Rodgers, perhaps too forcibly but in his case, understandably, his personal experiences, mostly traumatic, with the aforementioned dark wizard. Mr. Potter should be familiarized with the rules for decorum and procedure regarding Ministry apprentices, etc."

Harry looked up at him with a grateful expression and a small crooked smile.

"What did Rodgers say?" Arthur asked, refilling his own cup, garnering a slap on the shoulder from Molly for doing so. "Easy day tomorrow, dear," he pointed out as he toasted her coyly.

"Do I get one?" Ginny asked, taking a seat beside her father. Her mother gave her a doubly sharp look.

Harry said, "He recognized Severus from his . . . real Death Eater days."

"Uh oh," Mr. Weasley uttered.

"Asked me why he was there looking for me. Said he should be in Azkaban. That even though he was my guardian, he still should be." Harry drank the last of his cup and didn't even cough this time.

Arthur sat back, cradling his drink. "Hm," he murmured in thought. "I can see why that would upset you, all right. But don't worry, Harry, the public relations battle would be over in a week, tops." Harry gave him a confused look, and he said with grin. "All you'd need is two interviews in the *Prophet* tearfully saying how the Ministry after all these years has decided now of all times to take away the only family you've ever known. *Bam!*, he'd be free. Guaranteed."

Harry stared at him mutely.

Arthur hit him on the arm. "You, my boy, have political capital to burn and you've studiously avoided spending even a Knut of it. It's all sitting there, like King Midas's riches, just waiting for you to need it."

"You really think that would work?" Harry asked doubtfully.

"I know it would," Arthur said with certainty.

Harry gave Snape a pained look, making Snape look down at the table between them. The Floo flamed and Ron stepped out, brushing the ash from his hair. Behind him Hermione arrived as well. "Sorry we're late, we-"

"Just in time, dinner is ready," Molly said jumping up to go into the kitchen as though she had forgotten something.

"You missed hearing Harry's troubles," Ginny chastised her brother.

"Wha?" Ron prodded.

Harry summarized as they settled around the table and other than Ron's suspicious glance at Snape, as though he may have been overlooking their old teacher's past, they reassured Harry that Mr. Weasley was most likely correct.

Harry looked over the faces of his friends glowing in the candlelight, and felt very grateful he had come tonight. "Thanks," Harry said to Mr. Weasley as he picked up his fork.

Arthur leaned over. "Harry, any Ministry employee who questions your judgment about Voldemort deserves to lose his job."

* * *

It was after midnight when they returned home. Seeing the dark, quiet dining room made Harry think about the immediate future and tomorrow's training. He leaned his head against the mantel and waited for the hearth to flare again. Finally, it did and Snape stepped out of it. "Are you all right?" his guardian asked.

Harry exhaled loudly. "I need to know what happened," he said reluctantly.

Snape stepped to the table and laid his gloves upon it before leaning against the back of a chair.

When he didn't reply, Harry said, "I know you have a meeting to go to at Hogwarts in the morning, but I'm having a hard time imagining going back to the Ministry tomorrow without knowing what I'm defending against."

After a long silence Snape said, "Sit down."

Harry shucked his cloak and took a seat at the table. Snape stepped to the hall and the steps down to the kitchen to ask Winky to bring tea. He returned and sat across from Harry, but didn't speak right away, just examined his fingertips. Tea arrived. Winky looked uncertainly between them before taking the tray away.

"I was a sixth-year at Hogwarts," Snape eventually began. "Theodore Nott was a seventh-year I admired for his intelligence and because he was never, ever pushed around."

Harry dropped his head and stared at his own hands as he listened. He heard Snape pouring two cups of tea, and reached out for his without looking up.

"Nott would not have paid me any mind had he not needed assistance in Potions. He needed help especially to prepare for his N.E.W.T.s. I spent a great deal of study time tutoring him, was honored to do so. While this was going on, I became aware that I had fallen under an aura of protection from him. Not an overt one, in fact, more powerful because it was not." Snape paused to sip his tea. "In the end he used Legilimency to learn Potion techniques from me when my tuition wasn't clear enough for him. At the end of the year he suggested I learn Occlumency so no one else could do that. I had not known either existed until then.

"I spent the summer studying both Legilimency and Occlumency. I had to practice on strangers which forces one to become adept very quickly. The prospect of returning for seventh year without his presence was daunting. I owled him to

ask his advice. In his reply he asked how serious I was about making something of myself, so a week before Hogwarts restarted I met with him. The transformation he had undergone in just the months since the school year had ended was phenomenal. He had such confidence, such an air of power. I wanted that, like I had never wanted anything before. Your tea is cold."

Harry shook his head at that transition. He topped up his cup and sipped it as he tried to pull himself back to the present. "I'm sorry," Harry said.

"It was hardly your fault."

"Still," Harry insisted quietly, eyes glancing away at the stone wall to the right.

"Nott introduced me to two others--a witch and a wizard who were reluctant to show their faces. It was clear Nott respected them though, despite this quirk. I returned to school and almost forgot the introductions, until Nott owed me with a request for Veritaserum. It isn't a difficult potion but it was forbidden to students. I brewed it in an attic that weekend and owed it back to him. He asked me to meet him at the Hogshead on the following weekend. He brought me a potions manual full of forbidden recipes, asked me to mark off the ones I could make.

"I was eager to please, so anything I thought I could work out, I checked off. He made a list of what he wanted. I told him I needed Galleons for ingredients. He gave me a purse-full. Told me to keep what I did not spend."

Snape looked up at the dining room ceiling, gaze far beyond it. "I learned more about Potions in the east wing attic than I did in any class. I needed other equipment so I started doing poorly in class, so that I could convince Professor Beezel to let me do extra credit. I recall to this day how pleased she seemed at my eagerness to improve my marks. That was the first time I realized how ignorant they all were. Or perhaps more generous . . . how trusting.

"Except the headmaster."

Harry grinned lightly and finally met Snape's eyes.

"Never said a word," Snape went on. "But I always sensed that he knew. Eerie feeling in the world, that. You could never imagine what was going on in his mind because his motivations were utterly opaque."

Snape took a deep breath before continuing. "I finished school and, within a week, Nott paid a visit. My parents discovered the potions manuals and the Galleons and after a loud confrontation with them, they threw me out, which was a mistake on their part because it made my answer to Nott much simpler. Nott treated it as automatic that I would be accepted into the Dark Lord's organization, at *some* level. He groomed me for a few weeks while I stayed with him and then took me to the next Summoning.

"In retrospect, it was rather comical. Nott had been promising I would meet the Dark Lord. I never actually believed him. Ludicrous, I had thought, to just be introduced to the living evil bane of the wizarding world. Nor did I actually *want* to meet the most reviled wizard alive. Who in their right mind would? So I never argued the point or asked when exactly that might happen.

"One night he came to my room at one in the morning, told me to change into the hooded robe he had brought, and took me to Voldemort." He paused to refill Harry's tea before going on, "Perhaps you of all people can appreciate what it is like to be so utterly terrified that you feel nothing."

Harry nodded as he blew across his cup.

Snape laughed harshly. "I was praised later for my poise." He shook his head. "At the Summoning, the Dark Lord approached me. I remember Nott bowing and scraping, which was the first beginnings of my doubt, if you can imagine that. I Occluded my mind and the Dark Lord asked me something and I answered--answered as though I were standing beside myself watching. They were easy questions to answer. Of course I wanted power. Of course I wanted to belong."

Snape stopped then. The teapot was empty. Harry swallowed consciously, unable to find any words.

Eventually, Snape continued, "I didn't mind brewing for them, by any means. One can easily get buried in an interesting activity and ignore that the result, somewhere else, is extortion, blackmail, torture, and even murder." Snape's tone fell darker, "There is no excuse for that, or forgiveness, for letting oneself be a pawn." He lifted his empty cup and tossed it violently against the stone framing the hearth.

The motion and noise startled Harry, who gripped his empty cup fiercely as though to protect it. The air beside the table sparkled and Winky appeared.

"It's all right, Winky," Harry reassured the elf.

Snape looked sharply at her and she said, "Winky not allow anyone to be hurt."

Snape's look darkened at the challenging tone in her squeaky voice. Their gazes locked for a long time. "Go," Snape finally ordered her.

She hesitated, clearly troubled by her conflicting impulses. Harry said gently, "He's only angry at himself. Go on."

She took a half step away as she twisted her tea towel in her hands. "That is worst, Master Harry," she insisted.

"Don't concern yourself," Harry said. "Don't try to help." When Snape's dark look redirected toward Harry, he explained. "She's offered before to intervene."

"In what way?" Snape asked angrily.

"I don't know. I simply told her not to."

Snape stood and faced Winky down as she was backing away toward the door.

"Severus," Harry said. "Please. Her instincts are to deal with someone like Barty Crouch Jr. You have to take that into account."

Snape straightened and turned away from her with a snapping motion. She hovered in the doorway. "I not allow Master to hurt another or himself," she insisted.

"We understand that," Harry said. "It's not going to happen. Go on." He motioned her away. She finally left, looking very unhappy.

Snape dropped back into his chair. "Where was I?" he asked in an annoyed tone as he rubbed his forehead.

"Pawns."

"Yes." He pushed his hair back. "At the next Summoning, I gave myself over."

"Why?" Harry asked in disbelief, pained at the thought.

"I felt I had no choice, which was clearly not true in retrospect. One always has a choice, even if it is an alternative of death." Snape paused again, looking pained also.

"After that I was trusted completely and given much more to do. I followed Nott and Malfoy as they went about their task of bringing down what was left of the Ministry power structure. I was alarmed at how little actually remained. No ordinary witch or wizard understood how dire things were. Ordinary paths of justice and administration had been hollowed out and were merely shells to be manipulated for the those with old influence or for our organization when needed.

"I was impressed with how careful they were about remaining invisible, even when it cost them. Nott frequently commented that if the Ministry were so weak it deserved to be torn down. He started to sound reasonable, in his own twisted way."

Snape fidgeted a moment before he went on. "But Malfoy and Lestrage were another thing. They loved it most when someone held out." He swallowed hard, looking unwell as he remembered. "Power and the right to torture those they saw as beneath them were all they wanted. The intricacies of the politics were a distraction to them. I was sent out with them one night to *encourage* someone to see things our way.

"I stood by and did nothing. Nothing. Except absorb the hatred and loathing of two perfectly ordinary people who had a thousand times more honor than I did."

Harry bit his lip. "That wasn't the Longbottoms, was it?" he asked with great reluctance, only because he knew the question would haunt him until it was answered.

Snape shook his head. "But it might just as well have been," he replied. "The next chance I had in Hogsmeade, after an ordinary drop, meaning giving money to someone in exchange for something they've collected that we wanted, I went up to the castle." He laughed lightly. "The doors were spelled. They would not allow me entrance."

Harry held his breath. "What did you do?"

"I went around to the gamekeeper's cabin. Realize that at the time I did not know Hagrid beyond his name. But he answered the door quickly enough, considering the late hour. I told him I needed to see Dumbledore, which was very difficult because it meant I had failed, utterly.

"He said he would try his best, which was not the most reassuring at that moment. But presently he returned, told me to follow him, and took me up to the headmaster's office. I was shocked to gain such easy entrance. What if I had been sent to do him harm?"

Harry broke in, "You couldn't have touched him."

"At that time I did not realize how powerful he was. I always figured no truly powerful wizard in their right mind would settle for such a position. In any event, he listened to my story and then simply waited, for what I wasn't certain. I filled in more details and still he remained silent, and so bloody patient it was downright aggravating."

Harry grinned lightly.

"I finally simply apologized for having to be there, for being too bloody stupid to have fallen into the whole thing, for needing help at all. And he smiled." Snape shook his head at the memory. "He asked me if I really wanted to defeat Voldemort . . . threw his name out, just like that. When I replied, yes, he told me to unOcclude my mind.

"Having decided that the last time I had given myself away was a major mistake, it was very difficult to do so again. He told me that he understood and to return when I felt ready. I could not do that; I could not leave without some hope. So I did as he requested."

Snape clasped and unclasped his hands rhythmically before continuing.

"It was very different being suddenly beholden to someone who had no desire to have anyone be so. He said he would be in touch. I insisted he make some request of me and I will never forget what he said. He told me to preserve what was left of myself and hold it dear because I was going to need it."

Harry flipped the teacup around in his hands nervously. Eventually, turning it upside down to let the dregs seal it to the tabletop.

Snape went on, "Over the next month, he asked a few small things from me, informational things, which I willingly provided. Then that fall he suggested I seed the idea with Nott of planting a Death Eater within Hogwarts, which was a bastion they could not penetrate. Have something befall the current Potions teacher." When Harry's eyes went wide, Snape said, "With Beezel complicit in the scheme, since she was considering retirement anyway. She mysteriously fell ill before the next school year and a replacement was sought in a hurry. It was made to appear that rather a lot of convincing was required to secure my place. At first I was a temporary fill-in and only after exemplary performance was I made permanent. Always I complained to my fellows about Dumbledore's lack of trust. Only McGonagall knew otherwise, although I knew she doubted me, nonetheless."

"How long did that go on?" Harry asked in pure curiosity.

"I am not certain. She was always grudging about granting me any leave, even after the Dark Lord's apparent demise after attacking you."

"She still is, I think," Harry commented, feeling the need for some lightness.

"It used to be worse," Snape said forcefully. He stared at the far wall for a long time, deep in thought.

New uncertainties were haunting Harry now but it was nearly two in the morning.

"You have more questions," Snape stated without looking at Harry.

"They can wait."

"I would prefer to get this over with," Snape said tiredly.

"Then they aren't that important," Harry said. He mostly wanted to know how much Snape had been forced to do in the spirit of remaining above suspicion, but at the same time, was afraid to know.

Snape broke the silence by quietly observing, "It is ironic that this should be coming back to snare me now."

Harry mulled that over. "You were putting it behind you?" he asked, hopeful that might be true.

In a surprised tone Snape said, "I have moments when I feel so--to which I credit you--so perhaps my mother was right."

"If that works for you, you may have it. I don't mind giving it," Harry said.

Their eyes met for a time. Snape finally said. "I have to admit, I sometimes feel as if I've won." At Harry's curious look he went on. "I cannot equalize the harm I did; it isn't possible. I cannot get even with your father, because he isn't here to confront. Nonetheless, I have been feeling free of it, as though I've risen above it and it no longer matters nearly as much."

"It doesn't matter as much," Harry confirmed.

"Is it possible I've won?" Snape asked, sounding as though he were addressing someone not present. "You, Harry, are in the unique position of judging if I have."

"Only *you* can, I think," Harry returned reluctantly.

Snape laughed lightly, but not in a totally sane way. "I adopted my enemy's son and treated him as my own. What more could I possibly have done to prove I am beyond the trap of my hatred for him?"

Harry didn't have a reply. That assertion was too tangled for him to dare address.

Snape went on, sounding very tired now. "And if amendment were possible for what I did, you are the only vehicle for it."

A little uneasy, Harry asked, "Is that why you adopted me?"

"No," Snape replied firmly. "I did it because I enjoyed your companionship and was tired of being alone. If that is a better reason," he added flippantly. "Mostly I did it because you seemed to need it and Dumbledore had faith that it was the right thing to do."

"That's an okay reason," Harry opined. "And I did need it."

Snape fell silent as though he had emptied himself of speech. Harry rubbed his eyes; his mind begged for quiet and sleep. He wanted to say something about his determination to protect Snape, but he could not find a way to do it without hitting his guardian's pride. Instead, he put a hand on his shoulder as he stepped by. "That's enough for me."

"You have some potion remaining, if you need it?"

At the doorway to the hall, Harry replied, "Yes. Good night, Severus."

Snape turned his head in his direction so it was in profile. "Good night, Harry," he said tiredly.

In his bed, Harry finally managed to slow his twisting thoughts and relax, although he didn't really sleep, nor did he feel like taking any potion since he wanted this time to think. He must have dozed lightly, though, because he was awakened by an approaching shadow in the green haze of his sleeping mind. Harry lay still, pretending to sleep, mostly because he didn't want Snape to think he had found his story disturbing enough to keep him awake. Eventually, Snape departed after hovering for nearly a minute.

When he was alone, Harry rolled onto his other side, wishing there was something he could do to change everything.

* * *

The next morning, Harry arrived early for their first session. The other three came in soon after, eyeing him with surprise and wariness. Aaron sat beside him and leaned close. "Was Snape really . . . ?" he started to ask when Rodgers stepped in. The trainer looked Harry up and down once, and ordered with a frown, "Potter, a word."

Harry followed him out and down to his office. It was a shared space and he gestured that he needed to be alone and his only present officemate, Rogan, retreated with a nod of hello at Harry.

"Sit down," Rodgers ordered flatly.

As he obeyed, Harry replayed in his mind Snape's comment about the memorandum. Rodgers was a long time in continuing, but finally he said, "I spoke with Tonks, and Kingsley, whom you apparently know as well. They supported your assertions." Harry didn't react except to relax a little. Rodgers flipped through a file that had Harry's name at the top. "Mad-Eye, who did the background check for your application, was also apparently unconcerned about your living arrangements."

Harry wanted to read the notes Moody had scrawled crooked on the white parchment Rodgers held, but he didn't want to obviously lean over to do it. Carefully, Harry pointed out, "Moody was in the Order too."

Rodgers looked Harry over before saying, "I am bothered by doing nothing--bothered a lot. I cannot believe the W.F.C. let him adopt you. They refused to give me a copy of your one year review unless I had an investigation number."

"I can summarize it for you," Harry offered.

Smartly, Rodgers replied, "Don't bother. I can imagine you told them what they wanted to hear."

Very calmly Harry said, "I told them the truth. I don't have to lie to tell them I couldn't be happier to have him as my guardian. I wouldn't be here in this program if he hadn't helped put me back together." Harry gave his trainer a intense look as he said, "I needed someone who understood for that. Someone who understood everything, including being marked by Voldemort."

Rodgers winced. "I can't just leave it. What about a hearing--a closed one--before the Wizengamot? Let them hear his story and decide what should happen. Surely you must trust their judgment?"

Harry wondered at his trainer negotiating at all. Flatly, he said, "I was before them once. They were going to break my wand for defending myself and my Muggle cousin against two Dementors. At the last moment they moved the location of the hearing and the time, to try to keep anyone from coming to help me at it."

Rodgers' face twisted in a frown. "You have to work closely with them as an Auror, Potter, so try to dredge up a bit more respect than that. When was this?"

"The Umbridge Era."

Rodgers rolled his eyes. "Oh," he said with a frown of remembrance.

"What are you hoping to accomplish?" Harry asked. "Are you just trying to soothe your own conscience?"

Rodgers gave the question due consideration. "An annoying but fair question," he huffed. "You know what is ironic, Potter? I've been trying to provoke that reaction out of you since you started. I thought it'd be easy. I expected you to be the ultra prima donna, that you were playing it nice and that you wouldn't hold up under pressure. I had finally admitted I was wrong, when out of the blue you hit me with that tirade."

"You threatened the only thing I care about," Harry said darkly.

"You're serious aren't you?"

"Completely. I like having a father. It isn't something I'd ever thought I would have." Harry wondered if he should hint at the P.R. battle he'd start if necessary, but held back.

"And given a choice between this program and him?"

Harry raised a brow. "You have to ask?"

Rodgers tugged at his hair. "I'll lose if I take you on, I know that. You hang in the wings most of the time, but I have a sense you understand what power you really hold. I'd hate to lose you in any event; you're a marvel with a wand, and when you talk about dark wizards you sound like one of the twenty-year veterans in this office."

"I do make mistakes," Harry said.

"Everyone does. Surviving to not repeat them is all that matters."

After a pause Harry said quietly, "That's what Severus did."

"You know his whole story? And you can in good conscience live under the same roof?"

"Yes," Harry assured him.

Rodgers sighed in defeat. "All right, Potter. I'll let it go."

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely, not hiding his relief.

"You were way out of line, though," Rodgers said stiffly. "You are on probation for a month. Don't step out again or we *will* have a hearing."

"Yes, sir," Harry said obediently, then stood when Rodgers waved him off.

"Whenever it bothers me that he's free, I'll just remember that you are keeping an eye on him."

Harry paused with his hand on the door latch. "He doesn't need it, but if it makes you feel better, consider that I am, sir." It was true that Harry didn't know *everything* Snape was working on. Maybe he would be a little more curious from now on, or maybe not.

Back in the workout room, drills had already started with Tonks in charge. Harry took up a pairing with Aaron, who gave him a questioning look.

"Did you work it out?" Tonks asked.

"Yep. A month's probation for stepping out of line."

"A month?" she asked in surprise. "Well, from what I heard, you probably deserved it."

At the end of the day, Harry was tired, but the house would be empty when he returned. He hung around the meeting room where they stored their bookbags until Aaron and Kerry Ann left. "Do you feel like dinner, Vineet?"

The Indian looked up in surprise. "You are inviting me out?"

"Yep."

"I am a vegetarian, do you mind Indian food?"

"Not at all. I'd prefer a Muggle place since it will be quieter," Harry said.

"There is a wonderful tandoori place in King's Court, but I am leaping ahead . . ."

"No, sounds wonderful."

They arrived at the restaurant after a short underground ride and a longish walk, which Harry enjoyed as a chance to clear his head. As they took their seats, the waiter greeted them warmly. "Vishnu, good to see you. The usual?"

"Yes, plus something for my friend. The lamb?" At Harry's nod, the waiter smiled broadly and departed for the kitchen.

The restaurant was sparsely populated and no one paid them any attention. Vineet sat quietly for a long time. After their samosas and beers arrived, he broke the silence by saying, "You are a mystery to me."

Harry bit into a steamy pocket filled with curried stuff and quickly drank his beer. "Me?" he asked in surprise.

Vineet nodded his head, looking very serious. "Your guardian, whom you defended so powerfully, once served the Un-named One. I cannot understand this." He sounded disappointed as well as mystified.

"It was only for a short time and it was a very long time ago," Harry pointed out.

Vineet shook his shiny-haired head more solemnly. "To be marked he had to give himself over. There is no path back from that."

Harry put down his beer and smoothed the white table cloth with a brush of his hand. Equally solemn, he said, "There is if I make one for him."

Vineet gripped his beer glass hard and gave Harry a very long look. "And you do this?"

Harry hesitated, thinking over the last year. "I have to," he replied, feeling unsteady with the realization. He was experiencing a clarity that felt detached from this place of spiral carved wood and jeweled paintings of calm, contorted figures. "It's the path I am using as well."

In silence Vineet considered this at length. Harry waited for some kind of verdict from him, felt that he needed one. The waiter brought little metal dishes of roasted eggplant, tandoori lamb, and chickpeas in tomato sauce. Harry thought he had lost his appetite to emotion, but the scent wafting from the table made his stomach growl.

As they served themselves, Vineet said, "You are doing too much in one turn of the wheel."

"I don't get that."

Vineet shook his head. "It is not a Western notion," he said evenly. As he tore the naan and used it to scoop up sloppy chunks of eggplant, he commented, "I hope you make your path well to carry two on it."

"I'm not working on it alone, so I think it will be all right," Harry said, feeling lightheaded with these notions.

This comment seemed to make Vineet curious, but he let the topic go in favor of eating with a serious expression.

Later at home, Harry studied in the dining room so he could greet Snape when he returned from Hogwarts. He felt secure now and relished in it.

It was after nine when the hearth flamed green. "Hello, Severus," Harry said in greeting.

Snape, looking a little worn out, returned the greeting and sat across from him with bothering to remove his cloak. Like clockwork, Winky brought tea to the table. As he poured, Snape asked, "How did your day go?"

"I convinced Rodgers to let it go," he replied, forced to cast his mind back that far in the day.

"Thank you, Harry."

Harry took a chocolate biscuit off the tray. "You're welcome," he said easily before he bit into it.



Chapter 59 -- An Unexpected Test

Harry sat down in the library to take some notes from his reading, which he always seemed to be a day or two behind on now. His quill wasn't with his letter parchments where he usually kept it. On the desk was a tin of six bright new white quills. Harry stepped over and selected one after a brief deliberation.

He was finishing up a chapter when Snape came in and sat down with a sigh, clasped his hands before him, and considered Harry as he scratched away with the quill. Harry closed up his books before addressing his guardian's silent gaze.

"I am actually all finished with Hogwarts business," Snape stated, tapping his fingers together idly.

"Congratulations," Harry offered lightly.

After a moment Snape inquired, "How are you doing?"

"Good. Yesterday we did rejuvenation potions and curse averting charms as well as cursed object recognition, which was very easy, and it was a nice break from getting kicked around practicing counter curses," Harry replied. Snape for once failed to ask if Rodgers was still being hard on him.

"Would you like to do something?" Snape asked after another long pause.

"Um, like what?" Harry asked, surprised by the question.

Snape shrugged and tapped his fingers more. "What would one normally do on a sunny Friday?"

Harry considered that. The world of possibilities was pretty broad if one considered it. "How about the zoo?"

Befuddled, Snape echoed, "The zoo?"

Harry considered that that was his favorite place as a child. "Yeah," he insisted. "Have you been to the zoo?"

"Yes, the one in Chester, a very, very long time ago. . . to get an ingredient for a potion." He shot Harry a haughty look.

"I won't ask."

"Just lion whiskers . . . and they were rather easy with an Accio spell. Woke the lions up for once; everyone was quite excited to actually see them moving."

Harry chuckled. "So the zoo, then?"

Snape pushed himself to his feet. "Why not, Potter?" he breathed, sounding put-upon.

"Come on. It'll be fun," Harry insisted, happily putting his books away to finish later.

On the second bus between Chester and the Zoo Harry wished they had ridden the motorbike. Getting to the old part of Chester by Floo had been very easy, but after that it was rather a hassle. Eventually though, they arrived at the entrance.

Past the gates Harry stepped immediately over to the elephants. One stood very close to the tilted railing, dragging its trunk over the dusty ground to pick up stray bits of straw. After a minute Snape said, "There is much to see, this being the largest zoo in the country."

"Is it?" Harry asked, pulling himself from some reverie he had apparently fallen into. After passing over a bridge and stopping beside a small herd of what looked like donkeys, they were faced with signage promising far too many animals. One sign promised endangered dragons, of all things. Harry insisted on following that way. The dragons turned out to be of a very non-magical variety of lizard called komodo dragons, although the sign insisted that their bite was rather nasty and could result in a slow, miserable death. Looking the unmoving animals over, Harry figured that assumed you were asleep when the came upon you.

Harry let Snape lead this time and after long stops at the Orangutans and Chimpanzees, they stepped into the cool, dark interior of the reptile house. Harry stopped before the boa constrictor and waited for a group of loud pointing children to move out of hearing. Snape had apparently moved on as well because he wasn't in sight either when Harry said hello to the snake.

The thick, coiled reptile raised its head and sniffed the air with its tongue. "*My, you aren't talking to me, are you?*" the snake asked in an accent.

"*You must have been born in Brazil,*" Harry observed.

"*Where else?*" the snake asked, sounding a bit rude.

Harry shrugged and since a family with a toddler was fast approaching, chasing the youngster, Harry moved on. It required a bit of wandering to locate his guardian, but he eventually found him before the glass niche of the Asiatic king cobra. He seemed to be studying it rather intently, tipping his head to the side even.

"Your kind of snake," Harry teased.

"Yes." Snape turned away from the glass. "Make any new friends?" he asked a bit snarkily.

"No, actually."

"Pity."

Outside the reptile house, children were gathered around an ice cream stand. "That looks good," Harry said of the treats going by, gripped in small, happy hands. He fished in his pocket and came up with only Knuts and Sickles. "Got any Muggle money left?" Harry asked.

"You want me to buy you an ice cream?" Snape asked, sounding artificially put-upon again.

"Yeah."

"And you are how old now?" he jabbed, although he went over to the stand and returned presently with a chocolate-dipped treat on a stick for Harry and a lemon ice for himself.

"Thanks," Harry said, peeling the wrapper away and sighing at the wonderful frosty aroma inside.

"You could send Winky for such treats . . ."

"Not the same," Harry insisted dismissively. The treat was melting fast in the sunshine, so Harry took a seat at one of the nearby, umbrella-shaded tables. This also had the advantage of getting upwind of the camels. Snape pulled out the zoo map and sat across from him to eat his ice and peruse it.

"I am thinking that given the size of the orchid collection that a bit of . . . ingredient collection may be in order."

"Can't take you anywhere," Harry scolded him with a grin and squinted into the sunny surroundings.

Snape's brow furrowed as he turned the map over. "Are you enjoying yourself, Harry?"

"Very much, thanks." Harry bit through half of the last of the treat surrounding the wooden stick and after swallowing, said, "You know, you seem . . . less like a parent and more like a friend now."

Snape considered him briefly before saying, "As long as you do not step out of line . . ."

Drawing the last of the hard chocolate and cream off the stick with his teeth, Harry muttered, "There is that."

* * *

Sunday, Harry with trowel in hand, was putting the finishing touches on a small repair to the garden wall when someone cleared her throat nearby. Quickly wiping wet mortar off his nose, Harry turned and found Elizabeth leaning on the gate. This reminded him that he had noticed last week that the hinges were coming loose from the wooden post, probably due to their excessive rusting.

"Hi," Harry said, trying not to sound too welcoming.

"Haven't seen you around," Elizabeth observed in a friendly tease.

"It's been busy." As he scraped off the trowel on the edge of the bucket, Harry fished for something to say. "How did your recital go?"

"Pretty good. Most people were impressed I'd even tried that piece."

There was not much time to get water into the bucket to rinse it before the cement set. Harry stared down at it, trying to decide how to approach this dilemma; he dearly wished to avoid trouble. "I have to get this washed out," he explained, indicating the bucket.

"Okay," she said brightly but frowned instantly after. When Harry reached the door, she asked, "Is something wrong?"

Harry turned back, scrubbing again at the smear of cement drying on his nose. "Nothing I can fix," he admitted.

"What does that mean?" she asked, leaning over the gate to see him better. "What's the matter?"

Waving the bucket again, Harry said, "I gotta go." He didn't give her a chance to speak further.

After cleaning up, Harry returned to the library. This time when he needed a quill he found the tin on the desk so densely packed with swan quills it itself resembled a kind of bird. He blinked at it, trying to imagine what would necessitate owning so many quills. Snape was busy with a letter and Harry, rather than interrupt, simply pulled one out. He didn't like that one; although he could not have expressed exactly what he disliked about it. It was brand new, bright and unused, just like the others. He selected more carefully this time and moved to sit back on the lounger, but Snape's voice brought him to a halt.

"Why did you choose that one?" Harry's guardian asked with an unexpectedly sharp edge.

"What?"

More slowly, as though Harry were a first-year again, "Why, did you select *that* quill out of a tin of forty quills?"

Harry looked down at the feather in his hand, at the clean, professionally cut nib at the end of it. It flipped easily around in his fingers as he tried to understand the question. "I don't know," he replied, even though Snape seemed adamant about receiving a good answer.

Snape stood suddenly and clapped the single, small drawer to the tiny desk closed. "Come with me," he ordered and strode from the room, pulling a bright purple book from a shelf on the way out.

Snape led the way upstairs to the first unused bedroom. "Stand there."

Harry glanced uneasily at the pentagram on the floor. "Here? Why?"

Snape's lips twitched ever so slightly. "Trust me, Harry."

Shrugging internally, but still uneasy, Harry complied. The room suddenly felt colder in a bone chilling way not caused by drafty architecture.

Snape opened up the purple book Harry had seen him with the last few days and began to read from it, *"Fevered minds and Adepts both tread the plane which gives no consideration to distance as the spatial dweller experiences it."*

"Is this a spell?" Harry asked.

Snape paused and looked up. "No. Not yet, anyway. I am very curious about something."

Harry, unaccustomed to being the focus of Snape's studies, fell silent and watched his guardian's dark eyes moving along the words beyond the veil of his hair. He read silently for a minute before lowering the book.

"Close your eyes," Snape ordered. When Harry did so, Snape went on, "Do you remember the train ride through the Alps?" Harry nodded and Snape asked, "Do you remember the creatures you noticed in the depth of the rock?"

Harry did; he could not forget them, the sound of claws scrabbling on stone, the odd chittering. He gasped as he heard it again as though the creatures were right there in the room. Jerking in surprise, Harry jumped out of the diagram, heart rate escalating. He and Snape stared at each other until Snape calmly said, "Sensing them again?"

"Yes. Right over there." Harry indicated the nearby wall with a wide gesture.

Snape took Harry's shoulder and muttered offhandedly, "Well, that is southeast," as he steered him back into the center of the diagram. Harry swallowed hard and tensed, expecting that the creatures would return. Snape said, "Close your eyes again- do not fret so; they cannot reach you . . . I don't expect." After a pause he added, "Do not summon them, in any event."

"How would I?"

Snape, who had started to read again, paused and said offhandedly, "Well, you do not want them here, correct?" At Harry's vigorous nod Snape dismissively added, "Simply continue to wish them to be somewhere else." He went back to the book. Finally, he snapped it closed and said, "Close your eyes. Remember the Dementors' mind-web?" Harry nodded from behind his eyelids. "When you sense the Shetani-"

"Is that what they are?" Harry interrupted.

"It would seem so, your description is quite accurate. Nevertheless, when you sense them, is a similar web present?"

"No. With the Dementors I could feel the tethers; this is just like being in the same room or very close-by." Harry stood tense, eyes closed, dearly hoping he could not hear them chittering again.

"Remain as you are," Snape commanded. It sounded as though he were moving around as he spoke. Harry smelt burning wax, but he held still as instructed. A moment later he heard something else, sounding like a cloak dragging over a rough surface, a Lethifold perhaps, which made him turn his head around, open his eyes, and look out the door of the room. But there was the ordinary hall illuminated by the large chandelier. Candles now burned at Harry's feet, at each apex of the pentagram.

When Snape saw his alarm, he said, "You are in no danger, Harry. What was that, by the way?"

"I don't know," Harry answered quietly. He wished to move out of this disturbing spot. "What are we doing?"

"I am most curious about something. Just a minute more. Close your eyes again and tell me what happens."

Harry did so. The room was quiet, only a distant car could be heard on the road outside. It was quiet enough that Harry could hear one of the candles flaming high beside his foot. Something shifted behind him, low through forest undergrowth, even though the stone floor was actually behind him. He didn't turn this time, but relaxed into observing instead. In a dizzying sequence Harry imagined a dense old forest, an isolated island battered by waves, an endless vista of dunes and finally an old cobbled street. "I . . ." he began to explain, then gave up for lack of words.

"What do you sense?"

Harry couldn't explain. Nervous with the strangeness of it all, he listened hard to the scrabbling movement behind him. But it wasn't the only noise, many other things around him made noises. The chittering of the Shetani was just one of many, he realized with a severe start. Things slithered, moaned, hissed, and worst of all, turned his way with queer, disquieting interest.

"Can I step out now?" Harry asked, voice wavering.

"Yes."

With a sharp exhale Harry stepped between the candles. The room returned to mundanity, leaving him dizzy with relief. Snape considered him expectantly. "That was really strange," Harry said.

"What was it?" Snape asked, ducking to snuff the candles.

It was easier to speak without Snape's eyes upon him. Harry said, "At first there were all these places, like stone streets, deserts, seas. Then it was just dark and all of these *things* were around me. I don't know what they were. The Shetani, but also something like a Lethifold and lots of other creepy things. Hundreds or more of them," he added, voice faltering again at the very notion.

Snape stood straight and placed the candles on the shelf where Harry had put the skull. With the purple book in hand, he turned to Harry and said, "I am not certain how to tell you this."

Thinking that sounded as though Snape were going to pronounce him to have some kind of terminal illness, Harry held his breath while prompting, "What?"

Snape sighed, appeared to consider flipping open the book but tucked it again under his arm instead. "You show signs of not only Astral but also temporal vision."

"What does that mean?"

"Out of three bookmarks bearing various sleeping curses you chose the weakest. Out of six spoons you selected the only one not holding a cold metal charm. Out of six quills you selected the only one taken from a bird still living. Out of forty you still managed the same."

Startled, Harry asked, "You've been testing me?"

"Yes. And you passed them all without conscious awareness," Snape went on, sounding impressed and concerned in equal amounts. They considered each other in the dim room a long moment before Snape solemnly stated, "You are growing very powerful, Harry." Mouth dry, Harry did not speak as he contemplated that in silence. Snape pushed his straggly hair back and said, "You are gaining deep magicks, the old kind which Albus insisted you had potential for, usually when one of the staff would question his actions regarding you, either his overprotection or his complete lack of protection."

Harry pushed aside old memories that comment brought up. He knew he was very good at Defensive spells and all of the subduing spells, but he did not understand what this other power meant.

This time Snape did flip open the book after examining it. "Your experience with the Shetani induced me to order this book. It is a reprint of one written four hundred years ago. Most consider it to be irrelevant to so-called 'modern magic'."

Harry's mind worked fast around the words Snape was saying. "You don't think the Shetani sensed . . . you know, some kind of remnant of Voldemort?"

"No."

As much as Harry disliked imagining dark creatures trailing him because he carried some scent of the Dark Lord's essence, it was worse to consider that they were attracted to him *without*.

Snape gave him a half-smile. "You are capable of sensing the plane they are on, which exists with only loose regard to this world's notion of place or distance. That is why you sense so many at a time."

Harry calmed a little. Snape's clarification at least explained why the room had seemed so very crowded with dark creatures; he was sensing a whole world's worth at once.

Snape flipped through the book, his gaze beyond the pages. Regretfully, he shut it suddenly and said, "I cannot guide you through this . . . at least not with what I know at present. And unfortunately, no one has taken this sort of magic seriously in a very long time, so it is unclear where you might find guidance."

Gesturing at the floor, Harry said, "But if I don't step into a device, then . . ."

"You were not in one on the Swiss train, but you *were* in their territory," Snape interrupted. More forcefully, he said, "No one, but a Mage Adept could, without a complicated spell that would require a week of research in an extensive library, detect which quill out of forty was from a bird still living. The book suggested that test and I so doubted you would sense an anomaly in the feathers, I very nearly did not conduct it. I tested you twice because I believed you had beaten chance the first time." He gave Harry yet another quirk of the lips and stepped closer. "Imagine my surprise when you dropped that feather with dismay and selected, from thirty nine others, the Radiant one, as this book refers to it."

Harry pointed at the book. "Can I borrow that?" Snape immediately held it out. It was a heavy one for its size. Harry tucked it under his arm, pretending it was as light as it should have been. "Is there something, you . . . want me to do differently?"

Snape gestured for them to leave the room. "As always, be watchful."

The dark creatures were the watchful ones, Harry thought with a shiver. On the stairs Harry said, "If I start seeing these things all the time, what should I do?"

"Get used to it, I would think," was Snape's dry reply.

* * *

Monday, Harry returned home from the Ministry and picked up his post from the table, including a reply from Penelope. When opened, it turned out to be longer than the last few letters from her and for a moment he feared she had indeed

been offended. Instead, her tone implied she was touched to have been asked for advice about a potential new girlfriend. Harry decided that she probably didn't mind reading about his having difficulties. She suggested he work out how to get Mr. Peterson to know him better, which did not appeal to Harry. Penelope didn't seem to believe that anyone could dislike Harry for long.

Her other point, which reminded Harry of yesterday's encounter, insisted that he be at least somewhat honest with Elizabeth, rather than avoiding her, which was very unfair. Harry again found that twist in his middle that strongly resisted causing a fight between father and daughter. She was right though; Harry would have to figure out something to tell her. Perhaps he should just tell her about Tara so that she would not harbor any romantic notions. Although, that might not make any difference to Elizabeth's father.

Carrying the letter and his bookbag, Harry stepped into the library to find Snape packing books into a small trunk. The date hit Harry hard as he realized August was fast drawing to a close.

"When do you return to school?" Harry asked, stashing the letter in a folder with others to be answered.

"I need a few days for last minute class preparation, so this upcoming weekend at the very latest."

Harry considered that he should tell Ron and Hermione he wouldn't meet them on Wednesday in order to spend more time with his guardian before he departed. Snape's continuing interrupted his thoughts. "Minerva has indicated that she will cover my House for me so that I can return more weekends than I normally would--perhaps once a month or so."

That didn't sound very often to Harry, but he didn't comment. Snape stood straight and rested one hand on his hip. "You will stay out of trouble, correct?"

"I'll do my best," Harry returned in a difficult tone. Snape turned back to his packing and Harry sat down with his books and tried to read, without much success.

When Snape headed out to shop for some potion stocks, Harry set his book aside and rested his chin on the heel of his hand. He had a home now, he considered, as well as an elf to take care of most everything. Really, he was doing quite well, he argued with himself.

Harry had just reopened his book when Snape reappeared with a stack of small brown boxes which he placed in the trunk. He then stood beside Harry and said, "Have you truly only read two pages in all this time?"

"I took a nap while you were out," Harry explained flatly without looking up.

"Ah," Snape said, apparently satisfied with that.

Harry's silence at dinner eventually prompted his guardian to drum his fingers impatiently on the table while waiting for pudding. "This grim mood is not because I am departing, is it?" Snape challenged. When Harry merely shrugged, Snape said, "There isn't any choice."

Harry flipped his fork around in his fingers. "I'm used to having someone around to get spell help from," he complained, ignoring his better sense to keep quiet.

Snape crossed his arms and said, "You may owl me at any time."

"I'm not looking forward to coming home to an empty house."

"Winky is always here and you may have friends over whenever you wish."

Harry put his fork down. "True. Even overnight."

"You are supposed to be *avoiding* trouble," Snape commented sternly.

"Yeah, but how would you know?" Harry taunted.

Snape chastised, "Now you are behaving as a Slytherin, Harry."

Harry dropped his napkin on the table and left, skipping the cobbler. In his room he started rearranging the books in his nightstand, something he needed to do more often. He had finished with that and was making some random, messy notes for training out of a book on curse reducing amulets when Snape stepped in. Without speaking, he placed a plate holding a large square of cherry cobbler on the nightstand as well as a fork.

"You missed dessert," Snape stated.

"Thanks," Harry said.

"I'm beginning to believe this separation will be good for you."

Harry took a bite of the cobbler, which had apparently been reheated for him, and said, "Yeah, I really should get back to remembering what it was like not having a parent."

"Hm," Snape said. "I suppose I should be grateful I don't see this side of you often."

"What side?" Harry demanded smartly.

"This difficult and selfish side."

"The Slytherin side?" Harry taunted, putting his fork down rather loudly against the plate.

"Not precisely," Snape said, his mouth flickering into a strange smile.

"What?" Harry snapped.

"You are behaving like your father," Snape calmly observed.

Harry, without much thought, reached out to throw the plate at the far wall but his arm was caught and held firm before it reached the china. Still gripping it, Snape sat before him, also on the edge of the bed.

"It is difficult to know how to manage you when you are upset about something as striking as my departure." When Harry gave in and relaxed, Snape released him. "But it is best for you; you are hanging onto odd aspects of childhood, I believe, to prolong needing a parent."

Harry frowned, feeling embarrassed, prompting Snape to say, "That is more like it. At your age you should be railing against my presence, against my expressing any advice."

"Who's going to help me with my complicated blocks?" Harry complained. "And my seeing weird dark things around me."

"There are any number of Aurors to assist you," Snape pointed out.

"It isn't the same."

"I am just an owl away for advice and I believe that Christmas will be upon us far faster than you expect." Snape sat straight and added, "You are a perfectly capable young man and it is time you proved it."

"Yeah, I know. I just . . . I haven't had enough chance . . . I don't know." Harry tossed his hands as he gave up explaining.

"A little time on your own at your age and you will be grateful to be unsupervised, I believe. But, please, do remain in control."

Harry gave in. "I'll try."

* * *

During training the next day, they did leapfrogging drills. Rodgers, who now treated Harry with an equal brusqueness that he used with the others, paced before them and said, "So, you are entering a building occupied by dangerous opponents. Each member involved in the engagement must advance separately under cover of the ones behind. At a clear sign from the leader, the farthest back will then advance, leapfrogging ahead. He had drawn a diagram on the board with arrows like a Quidditch play. "Let's give it a try in the corridor out here. I've warned everyone we are drilling.

They went up and down the corridor many times until everyone remembered to only move on signal, and only move one at a time. Aaron had a habit of forgetting he wasn't the last person and Vineet wasn't much for staying low.

Rogan ribbed Harry a bit when he was briefly crouching in the doorway of the office. Harry just shrugged, refusing to be embarrassed. "Chasing Voldemort down the corridor, Harry?" Rogan prodded.

"I've chased Voldemort through the Ministry, thank you," Harry replied primly. Vineet passed him, leaving just Kerry Ann behind him. Practice was helping him keep track of everyone without effort.

"True," Tonks agreed, stepping in and patting Harry on the head as she went by. With him crouching this was an easy thing to do. "No teasing the trainees, Rogan," she chided.

Rogan pushed his chair back just as Kerry Ann passed, running well in a crouch, and asked, "When do we get to duel them? That's what I want to know. We just hear them bumping around in the training room all the time."

"You want to duel Harry?" Tonks asked Rogan with a laugh. "Harry?"

"Anytime," Harry breathed eagerly and at Aaron's hand wave upward, he dashed away.

At lunch, the four of them sat around the workout room and ate, relaxed and warm after their running about. Aaron had taken to looking at Harry for long periods of time when Harry wasn't looking back. As they ate, it was one of those times. Harry met his far away stare. "What is it?"

Aaron sighed. "I've been remembering all those times at school when Snape would lay into someone for a screw-up and as first or second year s that would scare us whiter than the Bloody Baron." He took a sip of his juice and went on, "But later, we'd laugh at ourselves, at how easily intimidated we were. Not that we stopped doing exactly what he said . . . Do you remember that?" he asked Kerry Ann.

Kerry Ann, looking sheepish, quietly said, "I never stopped being intimidated by him. No offense Harry. I was always really grateful I did well in Potions so that he ignored me."

They fell silent. Aaron eventually said, "But he really was . . . eh? What *was* he doing at Hogwarts then?"

"Spying for Dumbledore. Keeping track of Voldemort's inner circle and their plans."

Kerry Ann crumpled up her paper bag; the noise of it was unusually loud. "He got marked just to help the Order?"

Reluctantly, Harry said, "Not exactly."

She hesitated in tossing the brown paper ball into the corner rubbish bin. "That's freaky, Harry," she said, sounding judgmental.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he thought of a retort. "Uh, oh," Aaron said, distracting Harry, who immediately backed off on his anger.

"It's hard to explain," Harry apologized. He glanced over at the silent Vineet, who was rolling up his empty lunch sack, face void of expression.

"Well," Aaron said, standing and stretching his arms over his head and to the side, "I can't tell you, of all people, to feel differently, but I keep getting the wobbles thinking about it all those years at school."

"You don't know him very well," Harry insisted.

"As I recall, he isn't easy to get to know," Aaron pointed out. "Even as a Slytherin, if we asked him anything personal or said anything friendly to him, he would just sneer or glare, or worse yet, take you down with a biting insult." He pushed his desk aside to clear the floor. "Hard to imagine anyone getting beyond that. He isn't like that anymore?"

Harry stood and pushed his desk to the wall as well. It vibrated loud on the wood floor. "He can be. I look past it."

* * *

The week went by very quickly. Harry peppered Snape with questions about all kinds of things, from should he check the post for bills, to could he move some other books to the upstairs room to make space and could he use the desk in the drawing room. Snape sent Winky off and two hours later, Harry had a desk of his own in his room by the window. It was an old roll-top, its varnish darkened warmly with age.

"Thanks," Harry gratefully said when it was in place.

"We should have gotten you one sooner," Snape insisted.

Harry pulled the top closed with a dull thud. "It's going to be really quiet around here."

"Invite friends over," Snape said as though that were obvious.

"If I actually have all of my reading done . . . I'm going to miss getting help with my spells and my reading," Harry went on, sounding down.

Snape spun with a swish of his robe. "You will survive," he announced, as he departed the room.

* * *

Harry was dreaming. He dreamed that he was wandering through the graveyard in Godric's Hollow, desperately looking for something. The place was empty of people and the air hung utterly still. The rows of stones appeared small and forlorn, their print too deteriorated to read. The frosted grass crunched underfoot as he walked toward the tall, iron gate at the entrance; fog snaked around the black metalwork, obscuring half of it. Harry passed through and onto the narrow, misty road. "Severus!" Harry called out, wondering where Snape was. His voice sounded faint, even though he believed he shouted loudly.

His cousins, Pamela and Patricia, stood in the road as he reached the crowded houses of the village proper. They argued that he shouldn't be looking for Snape; that he wasn't an appropriate guardian for Harry; that there was something not right about him. They told him that he should go back to the graveyard. Harry argued with them, but they continued to insist. When Harry looked up and down the road, they quieted and watched him cautiously as he decided what to do. All the streets were now lined with tall black iron gates, leading to houses, leading to stone walls. The tops all read something different but none of them made any sense. One read *King's Cross* and another *Hogsmeade*.

"Why won't you help me look for him?" Harry argued, hurt because he had thought they cared enough to do this for him.

"The legend should remain," Pamela declared, as though in explanation.

Harry called out again as he walked away from them. Pamela's small children stood before him in the road, holding bundles of wands in each hand, almost too many to grasp. They watched him approach without any change in expression.

The sound of pounding feet woke Harry at the same time a furious scratching from one of the cages did. The door to his room flew open. "Harry?" Snape asked in concern.

Harry grunted and shifted the stifling covers down. The dream flickered through his mind. "I was dreaming," he explained groggily.

Snape reached the bed and turned up the lamp a little. "Oh," he muttered, sounding relieved. Across the room Hedwig fluffed herself and put her head under her wing. Beside her, Kali was clawing at the air through the bars, though she quit after a moment.

"Did I wake you?" Harry asked sleepily, rubbing his scalp.

"I would say," Snape intoned dryly. He took up Harry's dressing gown from the bed post and donned it over his shift before sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"Sorry," Harry murmured.

"No matter," Snape said dismissively. "Were you having a nightmare?"

Harry thought over the dream. "More a dream than a nightmare; I just couldn't find you."

"That would explain your calling my name."

"Uff, sorry." He fluffed his pillow and set his head back on it.

"You already apologized." Despite his snide tone, Snape reached a hand out and rested it on Harry's shoulder. "You are all right?" Snape asked.

Harry shrugged his shoulder under the warm hand. The uneasiness from the dream hadn't let him go yet and he was grateful for the contact.

"What was in your dream?" Snape prompted.

"I'm looking for you and it's very important that I find you. I'm walking around Godric's Hollow and my-"

"You were looking for *me* in Godric's Hollow?" Snape interrupted in disbelief.

"Yes, and my cousins won't help me look for you." Harry left off the part about them believing it better for him not to find Snape. "I don't know why I was dreaming it all," Harry added. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's all right," Snape said in a dismissive and tired voice.

Sleep tugged at Harry, making him close his eyes. After a span of silence from his guardian, he put the dream aside in his mind, relaxed and allowed his head to fall to the side. The lamp glaring in his eyes went dim, down to a corona around the edge of the wick. As sleep pulled him down, vestiges of the dream made his arms convulse. The hand lifted from his shoulder and a moment later fingers pushed the hair back from his temple, then trailed again through his hair.

"Hogwarts is not so far away, Harry," Snape intoned quietly.

Harry grunted in response, nearly asleep.

Snape sat back and considered his charge. The oblique orange light from the lamp gave the muscles in Harry's shoulders and neck strong definition, accentuating the effects of his training, which, along with his solid jawline, made him appear fully adult. It also perhaps explained why so many otherwise sensible young women would wait forever it seemed, for him to make up his mind. Snape could imagine feeling jealous, but after seeing his father's petty jealousy, he was no longer tempted to it. Pride was what one was supposed to feel at this and it was surprisingly easy to with this reminder of Harry's dependence on him. He brushed at Harry's errant fringe again, and the young man didn't stir at all.

Quietly, Snape said, "I never imagined, Harry, that we would reach this." Harry's over-attachment was the sort of thing Snape would have expected to resent, but did not. He was beholden to Harry and it all seemed to balance out. Even though he could recreate old memories and feelings, he could not truly imagine things different than how they were now. The past was only a dim shadow of existence, and not worth considering as a possibility for the present.

The wind picked up the corners of the thin curtains on the window and seconds later, hard rain began splattering against the sill. Snape raised his wand and lowered the sash. Lightening flickered on the droplets splattering the panes and a rumble rattled them. Harry made a sound in his sleep and shifted as though dreaming again already.

* * *

Thursday morning, the day before Snape was to depart, Harry didn't communicate much, mostly because he could not think of anything to discuss. He kept thinking of things they should plan to do like museums, or Quidditch, or the theatre, which were now not possible. Frowning, Harry finished his breakfast and collected his scattered books together.

"Have a good day, Harry," Snape intoned as Harry stood before the hearth.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled before departing.

Snape watched the green flame retreat, sputter a few times around the grate, and then disappear for good. To himself he could admit reluctance to ending the summer; by next year Harry truly would be an independent adult, perhaps even moved out of Shrewsthorpe to more convenient London. Next June felt very far away indeed.

That evening, Snape finished rechecking his packed files and closed his trunk, hopefully for the last time. By hand he tugged the handle to drag it nearer to the door to the dining room and his stomach reminded him that it was well past dinnertime. 9:00 the tall clock in the hall read. Well past. That morning, Harry had not said when he was returning; Snape had assumed that like every other evening that week, Harry would forgo other activities and return straight home.

At 9:30, Snape went down to the kitchen for a cold sandwich. Winky made one up in short order and handed it to him on a tray. When he reached the balcony before his room, Snape could not resist checking Kali's mood. Harry's empathetic Chimrian was grooming herself calmly. At his approach her head snapped up and sniffed the air interestedly. Snape gave her a chunk of cold roast which she eagerly devoured. This made Snape wonder why, if Harry was going to be late, he had not feed her at breakfast. Considering that if this were an ordinary evening, he wouldn't have thought twice about Harry staying out late, Snape pushed his concern from his mind and retreated to his room to eat and relax with a book.

After 1:00 a.m. and another check of Kali, who was sleeping rather soundly, Snape began to feel anger. Harry's quiet and abrupt behavior that morning now seemed a prelude to some kind of plotted difficulty. This felt in complete keeping with the Harry of the past, the one whose inability to conform to the most basic rules had many times put Harry himself, his friends and even the entire Order at risk. Severely angry now, Snape stalked back to his room and went to sleep.

Morning came on, bringing Snape's owl to the window with a letter from Candide. Snape had put her off to, he expected, spend the evening with Harry. The note wished him a good school year and promised to make it into Hogsmeade as often as she could manage.

Harry's bed had not been slept in, but Kali slumbered peacefully on. Hedwig fluffed herself and chewed on the wires of her cage, an entreaty to be released for a morning flight. Snape fetched her fresh water, but left her in her cage. Down in the kitchen Snape confronted Winky.

"Do you know where Master Harry is?"

"I not knowing, sir," she squeaked as she added wood to the fire.

"Can you find him?"

Winky shook her head and wiped her hands nervously on her tea towel. Her large eyes seemed to ask for forgiveness for not carrying out that order. "Master angry, but Winky not know. Winky not mean to be bad elf."

In the dining room fury threatened to take Snape. He paced once, breathed out deeply and took up a parchment, intending to warn McGonagall that he may be late. Instead, he tossed the quill aside and paced several more times. Taking up the Floo powder instead, he contacted the Ministry Aurors office and insisted on speaking with Tonks, the only one there he felt willing to attempt to explain to.

"Hey, Severus," Tonk's head greeted him.

"Good morning. Have you seen Harry?"

"This morning?" Tonks asked, clearly confused.

A tiny cinder was pressing into Snape's kneecap and impatiently he snapped, "Since last night."

"No," she said, implying further confusion. "Come over here where we can talk."

Snape appeared in a hearth in the atrium, since he could not travel directly to the secure hearth the Aurors used for communication. As he stalked to the lifts he began to have the first inklings of doubt.

"Harry didn't come home last night?" Tonks asked through the cage as the lift came down to her level and before the gate could be opened.

"No."

"Let me get a hold of the other apprentices, see if they know where he was off to."

Snape waited with thin patience as Tonks used the office Floo to contact first Vineet, who insisted that Harry had been asking Kerry Ann's advice about what shop to visit, then Kerry Ann. The apprentice Auror witch looked to have been woken up, but she squinted in thought as she floated in the magic fire and said, "Yeah, Harry wanted to buy a gift for his guardian . . . oh, hello sir. Uh, I suggested Manfred's."

"On Knockturn Alley?" Snape returned sharply.

"I go down there during the day sometimes. It is just the second shop in. How could *Harry* have a problem?" she explained, sounding a bit defensive. She looked between them. "Do you need me to help look for him?"

"Yes," Tonks said. "Come down as soon as you can."

Tonks stood and considered the cold hearth in silence before saying, "Odd." She then fetched Shackbolt, the only other Auror on duty who was in the office.

"He didn't show up at home yesterday afternoon?" he confirmed in surprise.

Snape, unable to find words to defend his only taking action now, nodded mutely.

* * *

Snape and Tonks walked up and down Knockturn Alley. Harry had indeed gone to Manfred's and had been sent off with a gold-tinted, non-reactive, ultra-low-expansion glass cauldron. The shopkeeper behind the counter gestured at another just like it on a tall metal stand. Snape felt as though he had been kicked in the chest. Tonk's voice sounded far away as she asked in a mostly routine voice, "Did he say where he was going next?"

"Hm," the older wizard muttered as he expansively rubbed his roughly shaven chin. "Mighta said somethin' 'bout finding proper gift wrap, whatever that means. Pretty sure he headed back out to Diagon." The man gestured with his thumb in the vague direction of Gringotts.

After five hours of this, and all leads exhausted, Tonks insisted Snape return home to see if any messages had arrived and to take a needed break.

At home, there were no owls waiting and no post of interest. Kali was awake and blinked at him groggily before shaking herself and flapping her wings to get to the pedestal at the top of the cage. Snape opened the door, thinking that if she were still a juvenile, she might have grown antsy from the separation and lead him to Harry. She had no interest in leaving the cage and almost seemed disoriented. The doorknocker nearly made Snape jump when its tapping sounded from downstairs.

Snape went down to the door and yanked it open. A young woman he didn't know stood on the slate path. Another woman, most likely her mother given the similarity, stood beside the gate with her arms crossed.

"Excuse me," the young woman said. "Harry Potter lives here, correct?"

"Yes," Snape murmured, trying to get a handle on her thoughts, they slipped away strangely.

"My name is Tara Terrance, I'm a friend of Harry's. He was supposed to come over this afternoon for a picnic, but he didn't show . . ."

Snape's eyes narrowing may have brought her to a halt, because she stopped and closed her mouth. "Come in, won't you?" Snape invited in a not particularly welcoming tone. The woman at the gate leaned on the wall, apparently prepared to wait without concern. As he led the way into the hall, Snape asked, "When did you last see Harry?"

"Yesterday evening, said he needed to find some silver and green gift paper." Snape scoffed oddly and she hesitated before going on. "I ran out to Harrods for him and met him at the underground with it. He said he was in a hurry."

"What station? No, just a moment. You should tell this to one of the Aurors."

"Aurors? Is Harry missing?" she asked in shock.

Snape crouched before the hearth and said, "Yes," in a pained voice.

Moody, unfortunately for Tara, was the one to appear. Tara backed up a step when she caught sight of his broad, rough form coming out of the hearth and glanced at Snape in alarm.

"She has a bit more on Harry's last whereabouts," Snape explained before pacing away to let Moody take over.

In halting speech Tara repeated her story. Moody listened and then fixed her with his magic eye. "You a squib my dear or just a Muggle?"

Snape turned suddenly at that in surprise, as Tara said, "I'm a Squib. Both my mum and dad have magic, though not very strong."

Snape rubbed his head while shaking it. He was certainly not going to make it to the staff dinner and needed to owl McGonagall. Digging out a quill from the stand on the sideboard, he jotted out a quick note and went to fetch Franklin to take it away.

"You done with her?" Moody asked.

Snape turned and with a last glance over Tara, said, "Yes."

Moody showed her to the door where she halted and asked the Auror. "That's Harry guardian, right?"

"Yes," Moody replied in a tone that made it clear only limited questions were allowed.

She swallowed. "Do you think he's angry Harry's dating me . . . I mean, someone without magic?"

"I don't think 'e cares about anything 'cept finding Harry. You think of anything, owl the Ministry or here, whichever is closer."

With a sad mouth she nodded and stepped out the door. Moody closed it again on the scene of Tara's mum putting her arm around her daughter. "Constant vigilance," he muttered.



Chapter 60 -- Enemies and Friends, Part I

Harry lifted his head from the hard surface it rested on. His temples pounded as he did so, making him wince. Feeling as though he were badly hung-over, he raised himself and sat back on his knees, trying hard to keep his swimming head level.

Light came in through a high window, illuminating a long, empty cellar, empty except for the bars spanning floor to ceiling, boxing him into the corner. Harry blinked into the gloom and recalled his last memories. Black cloth and a choking struggle were all he could remember, that and a painful, failed attempt to Disapparate. Harry fingered his neck and found a thick necklace there. He felt an aversion to it that made him believe it was cursed. Its links felt oily in an unhealthy way and it did not have a catch. Harry listened and not hearing anything tried again to Disapparate, imagining the alleyway beside St. Mungo's as a destination, since he last remembered being in London. A searing jolt like high voltage electricity went through him and the cage stubbornly remained around him. Gasping, he remained on his hands and knees until he stopped shaking.

* * *

The Floo flared as Snape sat at the dining room table. He glanced up so fast he almost pulled something in his neck, but it was McGonagall bending and entering the room.

"Your note was most abrupt, Severus. Am I to understand Harry is missing?" she asked in a speaking-to-an-errant-student voice.

Snape nodded and returned to perusing the last few days' issues of the *Daily Prophet* for any kind of clue.

"Merlin." She pocketed the note and stepped up beside him to read over his shoulder. Snape rested his head on his hand and gazed unseeing at the wrinkled parchments before him. McGonagall asked, "What happened?"

Keeping his face down, Snape explained, "He didn't come home last night. I . . . assumed he was being difficult. He had been during the week . . . was unhappy about my departing." He pounded his forehead once. "I did not imagine that he was in difficulty." He finally sat up and waving his arm upward argued, "His Chimrian has been perfectly calm. She reflects his every mood and I assumed. . ."

McGonagall clamped a hand over Snape's shoulder. "Severus, calm down. Start at the beginning, and this time, no self remonstrations." Snape managed the first part, but not the second and at the end, McGonagall said, "You don't know this young woman though?"

"I have not met her before. This was to be only their third date. She did pass Moody's scrutiny."

"Well, that is a fairly difficult test. Not sure I would pass it." She pulled out the chair across from him and sat down as though intending to stay a while.

"There is no reason for you to-" Snape began.

"Clearly, you are in need of company, Severus," she interrupted him. "Have you tried the Beacon Spell again?" When he shook his head, she asked, "You said it worked last time."

"It did, but I have not tried again."

"Why not?"

"I cannot repeat it," Snape growled impatiently. At her curious look he said, "Firstly, though it worked last time, I botched the spell and twisted the magic." Snape thought back to the dark room, the phosphorescent pentagram glowing as though already activated, a beacon of darkness, beckoning with unreined power. "I do not even know if it was my blood or the Chimrian's that effected the magic. Or even a combination."

"You used his pet?" She asked in surprise. "I hadn't considered that."

"It used *me*."

"That would have complicated the spell all right."

The memory of Kali's screech when he nicked her still made the hair on the back of his neck tingle. *Please don't repeat it*, Harry's voice replayed to him, a plead from someone who could look into the darkness the way everyone else looked into a cellar. Standing suddenly with the need to move, Snape whispered, "I cannot approach the dark that closely again."

In a most serious tone, McGonagall said, "Forget I suggested it then. Harry needs you to come back to."

With a flinch he said, "It may in the end be the only way . . ."

The Floo flared again and Tonks entered. "Well, I just came from Malfoy Manor."

"And . . . ?" Snape asked dangerously.

"I honestly believe they don't know anything. Draco answered all my questions, that is, after he had stopped laughing hysterically at the notion of my errand. He wasn't hiding anything, I'm quite certain." She paced once along the end of the table and stopped before the much taller Snape. "I'm sorry I don't have anything positive to report. The entire Auror staff and apprentices are out looking for him as well as every Weasley available. We are trying to keep this quiet if we can, the press are going to go bongo when they find out; I'd rather not put you through that, or Harry when he returns."

Snape crossed his arms. "I appreciate that," he stated. "If I were to help look, where would I best start?"

"We need you to stay here in case he contacts home." At Snape's deep frown she paused and argued, "Someone may need to respond to that instantly." Tonks touched his arm. "I know that doesn't sound like much, that it sounds like doing nothing, but it is important." When he didn't respond, Tonks went on, "If we don't find a real trail by tomorrow, we have to go to the press, because at that point we are going to need their help. We are going to have to appeal to everyone who may have seen him. Fortunately, he is easily recognized and anyone who saw him last night would remember."

Snape acquiesced by sitting down, though he felt vaguely lightheaded doing it.

"Holding out, Severus?" Tonks asked in concern.

His only reply was a quiet scoff. Tonks took her leave after a shared frown with the headmistress. Snape rested his forehead hard on his hand again, feeling the weight of past actions he had chosen to forget until now.

McGonagall asked, "Have you eaten?" Snape replied with a very small shake of the head. "Well, I like to keep my strength up in a crisis, do you mind if I request something of your elf?" Snape waved her toward the door without looking at her.

She returned presently with a plate of beans and toast.

"You truly need not stay," Snape repeated. "I know for certain you have pressing duties."

"They are unimportant. Not that I would have admitted that yesterday, mind you." At his doubtful expression, McGonagall put down her fork and said meaningfully, "Unlike you, Severus, I have not repaid Harry for what he did. I cannot in fact imagine doing so. Standing vigil with you for a few hours is the least I can do." She picked up her fork and stabbed a few beans on the end of it.

Snape, for his part, ate the bitter memory of mocking Harry's godfather for being stuck in precisely this position.

* * *

Harry paced his small space a long while before relenting and sitting down to wait. Nothing happened for several hours. The sunlight faded to grey shadow in the little window high on the wall, leaving him in uncertain dimness. Harry began to suspect that this was part of his first apprentice testing somehow and started to relax and try to guess what was coming next, certainly not a snake, he expected. Having exhausted every crazy idea for escape, he was resting against the corner wall when footsteps and a spill of light came down the steps at the other end of the narrow space.

Harry's brow furrowed as he recognized the man approaching.

"Well, Mr. Potter," Rick Rothschild said in suave greeting.

"Rick," Harry grudgingly returned but didn't stand up.

"Ah, you remember me. I am so pleased by that." He grabbed the bars and pressed his face through them. "Do you like my little nook? I had an expert make it, just for you."

"Oh, that's nice," Harry said, sounding as bored as possible.

"You would be the ungrateful sort," Rick snorted as he stepped back and paced nervously.

"What do you want?" Harry asked, making it as rude sounding as possible.

"Oh I have what I want." Rick grinned then and turned a sideways look at Harry. "You are missing a date, aren't you? Tsk, tsk, and Tara so does not like to be stood up."

"That isn't what this is about, is it?"

Rick laughed. "You should have stuck with Tonks; she was much less caring about a canceled date." He waved his hand as though to dismiss Harry. "The elf will bring something to eat and anything else you might request . . . that won't allow you out." He stalked away back up the steps.

Harry slid down against the wall and gathered his scattered thoughts together. No prison was perfect; there had to be a way out. And by now everyone would be looking for him. He would much prefer to get out on his own than be subject to rescue. While his eyes traversed the bars and the walls, top to bottom, he let his mind wander to generate ideas. When

none came to mind, he fingered the necklace with distaste and pulled on its seemingly thin links to try to break them. He woke up some time later with his face pressed into the stone floor, remembering only a flash and exquisite pain.

* * *

Early in the morning, Hermione and Ron arrived in the Floo in Shrewsthorpe. Snape still sat at the table, alone, as McGonagall had departed a few hours before to get some sleep.

"Morning, Professor," Hermione said. "Is it all right if we wait here for any news? We were out all night looking and need to rest our feet but we can't bear to go home and wait."

Snape slowly lifted his head before gesturing abruptly at the other chairs across the table. Ron gave Hermione a very worried look at the state Snape was in. Hermione took out a map of London to study, while Ron put his head on his arm to nap. A quarter of an hour later, Winky brought breakfast plates and set them down. Snape shoved his away; Winky caught it at the table edge before it could spill and took it away in silence.

After an hour of resting, the pair departed to return to the search. "It will turn out all right, sir," Hermione said as Ron stepped into the hearth ahead of her. "Harry is always very lucky, you know."

"Fools and children," Snape muttered cryptically. "He is no longer a child."

"Is it all right if we come back later?" Hermione asked carefully, ignoring Ron's dissuading glare. When Snape waved his hand ambiguously, she said, "See you later then, sir."

As they walked across the weekend quiet of the Ministry atrium, Ron said, "Snape didn't look so good. With his hair all crazy, looked a bit like he used to."

"Yeah," Hermione agreed. "You know, I'd thought Harry had gotten more than his share out of the adoption, but seeing Snape just now . . . maybe I was wrong. Just as well Tonks told him to stay put."

"Maybe that's *why* he isn't doing so good," Ron commented. "I wouldn't want to be sitting and waiting."

* * *

Harry spent a cold night with a single blanket. He had talked the house-elf into a charmed chamber pot as well as a wash basin so he at least was basically comfortable. When he had tried to convince the elf that it should talk to his own elf Winky, it had begun banging its head on the bars. Harry had to tell it he had changed his mind to get it to stop. Now in the dimness he thought that a good sign; it meant the elf was tempted to help and had to punish itself for the temptation.

Bored, Harry had taken his shoelaces out of his shoes and thought about weapons or tools one might fashion from them. He imagined Lestrage sitting in Azkaban, collecting things from which to fashion a wand. Harry didn't know how to make a wand. Vowing to learn the first chance he got, he unbraided his laces yet again and shook them straight. Picturing home with longing, he wondered what Snape was doing right then, as he was supposed to have left for Hogwarts Friday for a staff party. Harry worried now if he had, assuming Harry was just off somewhere. Harry dearly wished he had told Snape exactly when he was coming home from the Ministry. The last minute present idea had turned out rather poorly. Apparently Rick had followed Tara from her flat, or so Harry assumed.

The elf brought a snack, making the tray materialize inside the bars with a snap of his fingers. His oversized eyes ached as though with worry.

"What's your name?" Harry asked as calmly as possible. With its lips pressed tight together the elf shook its head and whined a little. "Do you know an elf named Dobby?" Same basic response except a bit disapproving. "So you've been ordered not to talk to me?" A nod. "Have you met Dobby?" Another nod, along with a frown. "Kind of a bad elf, I think," Harry opined, guessing the creature's thoughts. Another nod, a bit more emphatic. "Good elves always do as their masters say," Harry commented. This time the house-elf didn't respond, although he looked regretful as his ears drooped.

The elf must have heard something because it suddenly cocked its head and disappeared. Harry was just thinking of repeating some of Dobby's comments about how much better off house-elves were with Voldemort gone, thinking maybe he could blur the notion of master a bit. Maybe when it brought dinner.

* * *

Ron and Hermione returned to Shrewsthorpe first thing the next morning at Hermione's insistence. "I think Professor Snape needs looking after, honestly," she stated. Ron frowned and stopped arguing.

Snape stepped in as soon as they arrived. "I don't suppose there is any news?" he asked, not sounding particularly hopeful.

Hermione shook her head. She didn't want to explain how frustrated the Aurors had become with all their leads extinguished. Hermione honestly had thought she and the Weasleys had been given something to do just to get them out of the way, but when they had returned yesterday evening, Tonks had grilled them for details in a sadly desperate manner.

As soon as they sat down, Winky brought breakfast, big plates of steaming potatoes, bangers, toast and butter, and roasted tomatoes. She arranged them on the table and departed. Ron expressed utter delight and began eating with his usual vigor. Hermione looked across at Snape, staring blankly at a point beyond his plate. She had a feeling he hadn't eaten at all since Harry had gone missing. Swallowing past a lump in her throat, Hermione tried to think of something reassuring to say, but all of the optimism of yesterday morning had leached away, pushed out by the ache in her feet from the miles of walking around London.

"The press will descend shortly," Snape stated to no one in particular. "That will certainly improve the situation," he sneered.

"Tonks seemed to think-" Hermione began.

"Yes," Snape interrupted, "she seemed to think we needed a circus."

"I don't think there is any choice, Professor," Ron piped in.

Hermione had not had the guts to say that. She hoped he didn't say anything else about how negative the Aurors had grown as the clues had run out. She put down her fork and dragged Ron back to the Ministry as quickly as his plate emptied, needing to move.

Tonks, stuttering from too much pepper-up, gave them an assignment to go along the streets in Knightsbridge asking anyone out this early if they saw Harry Friday evening or night. Same as previous days, they were given copies of both Muggle and wizard photographs to show to people. Exhausted but energized by being given a concrete task, they headed back out to the streets.

* * *

The next morning, stiff in the joints from the cellar chill, Harry stood up and paced to work out the kinks in his body. Rick came down, fairly skipping with pleasure.

"Are you just going to keep me here?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"I have so many ideas for what I'd like to do to you, that I just can't choose between them. I will soon; have patience," Rick assured him.

"You broke up with Tara," Harry said, disgusted.

"She tossed me. Got some odd ideas from somewhere. Seemed to think she could get by without me. That men could be *nicer* than I, more attentive." Rick's mood shifted severely. He stepped closer to the bars where Harry stood in his cage. Harry carefully avoided giving away that he was considering snatching his hand out to grab the man and perhaps pull his head forward into the bars as the elf had done to punish itself.

Rick did lean just a little farther forward as he said, "I own her. Every bit of her success was my doing. She's ignoring that. Pretending. Parades you around like a prize . . . I was almost satisfied with that, I have to say," Rick added with a queer laugh. "Especially since you couldn't even see it." Harry must have given away his thoughts of doubt, because Rick sneered, "Yes, you aren't dumb, are you? Just don't get around much apparently."

Harry forced his gaze to harden. It was true that he did not like what Rick was saying. The denials didn't come to mind as easily as he would have liked. Harry, pretending more distress at that, leaned heavily on the cage.

"Poor Mr. Potter; finally the seeing the tru—"

Harry snapped a hand out through the bars, just brushing Rick's Italian sportcoat before a jolt of paralysis froze him and he sank to the floor, the world tilting helplessly around him until it fell still when his cheek rested on cold, gritty stone. Something snarled in the darkness beyond his vision before falling quiet as though to avoid detection.

Rick had jumped back, but he stepped forward immediately and crouched on the other side of the cage. "You can't take any action, Potter. Didn't I tell you this was created just for you? You can't Disapparate, you cannot strike out. You fooled me though. Not many people manage that." He stood then and brushed his suit flat. "I have to be at the club soon, acting normal. I will see you this afternoon."

That prospect did not appeal much to Harry. Drawing upon his frustration, he used the bars to pull himself to his feet with no little effort and snapped, "What? You're just walking away? Let's just settle this now." Pleased with how strong that came out, he put on an appropriately challenging face in time for Rick's turning around.

Rick ran his hand over his coat front. "This is an Armani; I don't want to get blood on it."

"It would be yours if you did," Harry countered.

"No. I like having you here to toy with, Potter. I'm not ready to give that up to short-lived satisfaction just yet."

The door to the cellar closed and a half a minute later a door farther away. Growling to himself, Harry stalked to the corner and with a groan settled down. His limbs still vibrated from the jarring spell that had incapacitated him. The odd snarl he had heard reminded him of standing in the pentagram; he assumed that at the moment of the curse engaging, he was seeing the Dark Plane again. Harry chewed his lip as he meditated on that in the dank silence of his prison. The book said that his vision of that plane existed outside normal distances. Could he convince one of these creatures to take a message for him, he wondered. The idea had an appeal in that Rick certainly would not expect it. His severe aversion to the creatures kept him from attempting anything more than thinking it over. He had no desire to owe them anything; he would rather owe Rick, at least for now.

* * *

Ron and Hermione had never spoken to so many Muggles in so few days. They were nearing the end of one of the last streets leading to the underground stop Harry should have departed from after he rendezvoused with this Tara person who had brought Harry gift paper. Hermione wanted to meet this mysterious person whom Harry had never mentioned. She thought that she should have asked for a photo of her as well as she pulled Harry's out for the hundredth time and showed it to a small round man busily carrying plastic crates of drink bottles into a very small shop.

"Good morning. I wonder if you could help me . . . " Hermione began tiredly. The man stopped and looked down at the photograph she held out. "Did you happen to see this young man Friday evening or night?"

The man shook his head and hefted another crate. They didn't look heavy but maybe the man had moved too many already. Inside the shop a very similarly shaped woman yelled, "What they want, Elmer?"

"Lookin' fer someone," he yelled back to her, even though they were only five feet apart at that point, about as far apart as one could get inside the shop. "See anything Friday night, Gladys?"

She waved a hand in the air as though fanning away a fly. "No. Oh . . . that funny lamp from the box at the kerb; show them that, Dear," she yelled, which at least made some sense as he was all of ten feet away at the pavement now, hefting another crate.

"They don't care 'bout no lampshade," he grumbled. "Lookin' for some boy, they is."

Ron and Hermione considered each other with shared pain. There wasn't much else on the street, but Hermione started to back away and thank the man, saying they needed to move on.

The lady inside was bent down over a large pile of wrinkled printouts. "Nice paper though . . . think I'll save it for Christmas," she said, pounding ferociously on a small calculator as she flipped through the crispy invoices.

Hermione froze, mid-step. "Can we see the, uh, lampshade?"

Ron looked very miserable as Hermione held up to the sunlight a sliver of the gold-tinted glass from the fancy cauldron Harry had purchased that night. And half an hour later, after the Aurors had gleaned what they could, she gingerly placed the box on the desk in the drawing room in Shrewsthorpe. Ron had flinched from that half of the errand, so Hermione had sent him home to sleep. She wished for his support, but not his witnessing, as Snape reacted to the package. He beat out Ron for misery as he carefully placed one of the larger curved pieces of glass on the table before him before collapsing back in his chair to stare at the ceiling.

After a very drawn out minute Snape said, "Fancy a bit of dark magic, Ms. Granger?"

"No, sir," she immediately replied, then wondered what he meant by that. She didn't want to ask, though, since he was making her quite uneasy.

He sighed and quietly commented, apparently to himself, "I thought not." He pulled himself together and said, "You took this to the Ministry, I assume?" At her nod he waved her away.

She stopped at the doorway, trying to find something worthwhile and encouraging to say. Snape's eyes came up to scrutinize her without his head moving. "Harry always gets out of these jams, you know," she said, finding herself worried about Harry in a much broader sense than she previously had. Snape didn't reply, just returned to fingering the jagged gold glass.

Hermione, not really fancying Snape in this mood for company, let herself out. She didn't see Snape force the snaking curved edge of the shattered glass to bite the skin of his finger, nor did she hear the answering screech of Kali in her cage directly above him.

* * *

Harry spent the very long day alternating between sit-ups and push-ups as well as makeshift exercises using the immovable bars of his cage. He spent a long time reexamining the mortar of the stone wall while the light on it was good. It was freshly reworked and very hard, given that his only scrapping tool was a fingernail. Sitting down in the corner in the one spot where no points of stone pressed into his back, Harry made himself again recount every conversation he had had with Tara where Rick may have been mentioned, even in passing. The list of facts from this was short: Rick worked at a bank with his father, he moved in the same circles of people that Harry had met at a few parties. He thought much of himself and his family but not in the pureblood way of a Malfoy, more in a money-is-power way of a Muggle.

There must be a way out, Harry insisted. He imagined that if Snape knew he were missing he could repeat the Beacon spell. Immediately the chill from the pentagram device filled him and Harry dearly hoped Snape did not attempt it. Harry would sit here for quite a while to have his guardian avoid that. Of course, Snape could not know that.

Harry dangled his laces out straight and one at a time, let them snake onto the floor to form a five-sided star. It did not feel very active. He tried again, slowly lowering the laces neatly while imagining the pentagram in the upstairs room at home, how it felt like a gate to another place, and this time felt a wavering chill. He studied the feel of it, closed his eyes and listened to the distant scratching and scuffling. Like playing a child's game, he picked up the laces and tried again, experimenting. Perhaps there was a way out of this prison in a direction his keeper never imagined and perhaps Harry could tolerate it given what was at stake.

The next shoelace pentagram made Harry's skin prickle and itch, but Harry, imagining Snape considering the same, kept at it.

* * *

"What is this?" McGonagall demanded when Snape had ignored this question the first go-round.

Snape was kneeling, precisely rechalking the floor in the upstairs room. She had had difficulty finding him at first; the elf had to tell her where he was. "You will not do this," she snapped vehemently. Snape ignored her and began studiously sharpening a new cylinder of phosphorescent chalk on a board with sandpaper nailed to it.

"Severus!" She snatched the chalk out of his hand and gripped it tight enough that the sharp edges crumbled.

He considered her with a hooded expression. "So you will do the spell, I suppose?" he intoned.

She looked to be considering that. She glanced at the diagram on the floor and considered the chalk and her glow-dusted fingers.

Snape said almost in a taunt, "It is a well-tuned node. When Harry stands here he senses the Dark Plane."

She exhaled, apparently in release of a long-held breath. "No one is doing the spell." She pulled out her wand and obliterated the lines on the stones, scattering coal and chalk dust to the edges of the room.

With chilling calm Snape said, "I do believe it was *your* idea, originally. Was it not?"

"I believe I misunderstood the spell. Come, Severus." She gestured to the door. "All other avenues have not yet been exhausted."

They sat down at the dining room table; the crystal ball she had brought perched between them on a chipped, black ceramic stand.

Hands clasped before him, Snape said, "This is beyond exhausted avenues."

"Give me a chance, Severus. I did rather well at this in my own school days."

Taunting now, Snape returned, "So well that this is the first time you have taken out the quartz orb since then."

"Perhaps. How did you know that?"

"I guessed," he scoffed.

She held up her hand for quiet and then passed it over the sphere three times. Snape waited while she peered into the light-speared depths of the orb, first leaning forward with her nose close, then back as though relaxed.

"See Harry yet?" Snape mocked when a decent time had passed.

"No, but I think I see where I dropped that earring of my grandmother's I couldn't find." At Snape's derisive glare, she said, "At least I'm getting something. Sybil'd be telling us Harry is-" She cut herself off.

Snape crossed his arms. "Yes, do go on," he sneered.

"Well, she always sees gloom. Can't help it apparently."

* * *

Fingering the slithery chain around his neck for the hundredth time, Harry wondered if he could transform out from under it. It was a risky thought. The debilitating zap he had received from an earlier hard tug on it confirmed that it was the magic behind his limitations. It was too short to accommodate his Gryffylis form and he flinched as he imagined getting garroted by its magically indestructible links. Frustrated and with nothing to take it out on, he returned to sit-ups.

Rick appeared in the evening, disgustingly buoyant. "Want to see?" he asked as though bursting with needing to share something. When Harry didn't react, Rick unfolded the copy of the *Daily Prophet* that he had hidden behind his back and held it up for Harry to see.

Missing! read the very large headline. At the top of the column was printed, *Family, friends, have not seen Wizard Hero for three days*. Below was a photograph in front of his house showing Rogan and Rodgers interviewing Snape and someone who looked to be Elizabeth. The scene had a lot of movement in it considering the setting. Snape turned from Rogan and found the camera with a fierce, determined expression.

This cheered Harry rather a lot. Everyone, but everyone was looking for him. Rick pulled the paper around and read out loud, "*Distressed girlfriend Elizabeth Peterson states that Harry is not the type to run off without leaving word*. Now isn't that interesting . . ."

"She's just a friend. A neighbor," Harry stated.

"Really?" Rick laughed mockingly. "What will Tara think when she reads this?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm not lying. My guardian or Elizabeth herself will explain," he said calmly, making Rick frown. "You'll be amused to hear that her father severely disapproves of me."

After a long pause Rick said, "You are joking of course."

"No. But you don't have to believe me."

"Tara's parents must have loved you," Rick said.

Harry wasn't so sure, but he didn't say that. As bored as he was, he wished Rick were still off somewhere else.

"They liked me, at first. Fickle sort they were." Rick sounded angry now. "You don't have a problem with fickle people, do you? Everyone loves you."

Tiredly, Harry said, "No, they don't."

Challengingly, Rick demanded, "Name one person who doesn't."

"Draco Malfoy. Everyone in Azkaban. That's a lot of people." Bored with this meaningless conversation, Harry turned away and sat against the wall.

"I'm not done with you yet."

"I'm done with you," Harry retorted.

"We'll see about that," Rick muttered and stalked off.

Harry dearly wished Rick had left the paper behind. His memory of the photograph was pretty good, but he wanted to see it again. He wanted to see Snape looking ready to blast through an army of Trolls to come after him. It made him feel gratified and whole, even as he stared at the unyielding bars before him. When the noises upstairs quieted, Harry yet again prowled and shook every bar mount for any sign of weakness in his cage. Then he unwrapped his shoelaces again.

* * *

By dinner, the Snape dining room was full of guests: Harry's friends attracted by the article. Snape wandered down and was startled by how many more had arrived since only an hour before. Suze gave him a shy smile of greeting when his eyes fell down to her. The room became quiet as they noticed him standing in the doorway and the newcomers murmured, "Professor," in greeting. He balanced between annoyance and a kind of uplift at knowing he did not worry alone.

The door knocker sounded and Snape went to answer it, beating out Hermione, who had apparently appointed herself hostess. Hermione returned to her seat beside the hearth with a blush. Tara was at the door, speaking to her mother beside her. "I'll owl you when I need you to come Floo me home," she was saying. "Professor," she turned to Snape. "May I wait here for news?"

"Everyone else is," he said tiredly and gestured for her to come in. Tara's mother gave her daughter a hug before Tara followed Snape inside.

"Oh," Tara said at the door to the dining room. Everyone turned to curiously consider the newcomer.

Snape gave her a light push. "Have a seat, Ms. Terrance," he intoned before departing to the sanctuary of the drawing room.

Tara made her way through the crowded chairs to the corner beside a bushy-haired girl. "Hi," Hermione said. "Have we met?"

"I don't think so," Tara replied, glancing around the room a little uneasily.

"I can introduce you," Hermione offered. "How do you know Harry?"

"We've gone out a few times."

Hermione found this very interesting. "*You're* dating Harry?"

"Yes. What do you mean by that?" Tara asked. Hermione grabbed up the copy of the *Prophet* to stash it away, at the same moment Ron grabbed it up to show it to Tara. "I've seen that," Tara said to cut them off.

"Oh." Ron sounded disappointed. "That's Elizabeth over there," he said, pointing her out by the window. Tara considered the other young woman before shrugging. Ron said, "I don't remember you from Hogwarts. . ."

"I went to a day school in London."

"Huh," Ron said, "You and Elizabeth are the only two witches I've ever met who didn't go to a wizardry and witchcraft school."

Tara started to speak, but then simply explained, "I went where my parents wanted me to go."

"That would explain why you know how to dress so nicely," Ginny offered from beside Ron, sounding a little jealous.

"The average witch or wizard does have trouble getting that quite right," Tara agreed before falling broodingly silent.

The Floo flared and Candide stumbled out, obviously in a hurry. "My," she breathed at the group. "Where is Severus?" she asked.

"Drawing room," Elizabeth supplied and started to stand to show the woman where, but Candide had already gone into the hall.

"Severus, why didn't you owl?" she demanded in the drawing room. "I thought you were at the school."

"Something came up, obviously," he snarled.

"Well." She looked Snape's disheveled self over once again. "Anything I can do?"

"Do you have any ideas where Harry might be?"

"No. I wish I did."

"Then no, I don't believe you can help," he stated dismissively.

She stepped over to him. "Severus, I'm sorry. What happened?"

Reluctantly, Snape explained, even about his delaying. She plunked down in a nearby chair and sighed loudly at the end of it. "Don't blame yourself," she said. "Like you said, he's run off before. Are you certain he's in trouble, even now?"

"He would not run off this long, for any reason."

"Okay, so you've gone through his list of enemies. . . the ones not in Azkaban?"

"Many, many times," Snape replied tiredly. "There is nothing you can do. You should go."

"Severus—"

"If you wish to see me at my worst, by all means, do stay," he sneered.

"Severus, I just—"

"There is nothing you can do," he snarled again.

With an annoyed frown and roll of the eyes she stalked off. "I'll be at my parents. Owl me if anything happens, or if you do want company."

* * *

Harry curled up in the dimness, his arm for a pillow, thinking that if it were not time for bed, at least he could pretend. Candles flickered feebly in a wall niche across from him, which kept utter darkness at bay but it wasn't bright enough to keep him awake. Despite the hard floor and the thin blanket wrapped around him, he fell into a light dose to be awoken by dinner sliding through a gap at the bottom of the cage. A crossbar reinforced the gap, so Harry had already dismissed it as a weak point. Rick stalked away without comment. Harry thought it a little strange that the house-elf had not brought the food, but it woke his stomach, which hadn't eaten since dinner the previous day.

The meal was a little salty, so he drank all the water in the pewter carafe, even though it tasted metallic. He considered the empty jug, wondering at its potential as a weapon whenever Rick returned. The hammered metal seemed to swell and shrink as he studied it. He blinked his eyes and rubbed them but the effect only grew worse. An ear-pounding clattering

let some part of his mind know that he had dropped the carafe, but he honestly could not remember letting go of it. The suddenly colorful floor heaved the same way, making him instinctively duck down to avoid being tossed by it. His hands told him it was still and solid, despite his eyes telling him otherwise, a distressing disconnect.

Harry crawled backward frantically until he cracked his head against the stone wall. The bars were undulating, breaking loose and snapping at him with dragon heads that had spouted from their ends. He fought them off with his hands until he was too exhausted to lift them and fell unconscious.

* * *

McGonagall sat in the drawing room, keeping Snape company, an increasingly difficult task. Snape paced incessantly and tugged hard at his now-wild hair. A screech brought him to a halt. They both ran to the stairs where Snape fiercely ordered back into the dining room the few guests who had also heard Kali.

In Harry's room McGonagall shut the door behind her and held her hand on the knob. Kali screeched again, although it ending in a mewling. She fluttered inside her cage, throwing herself against the bars. Worried she would injure herself, Snape opened it wide. The Chimrian launched herself out of the cage but fluttered to the floor, unable to fly. Her head turned from side to side as though startled by things the two of them could not see.

Moving very slowly so as to not disturb her farther, Snape reached down to pick her up, ignoring McGonagall's admonishment. But Kali was beyond them, it seemed, and didn't notice who was holding her. She screeched weakly again and he stroked her vivid violet back to calm her. He closed his eyes and cradled Kali with immense care as he took in the implication of her state.

"I must do the spell," Snape stated. He turned to place Kali on the bed.

McGonagall was upon him. "Severus-" she began to argue, obviously troubled with needing to.

Snape held up the Chimrian. "Don't you see this?" he asked, voice unsteady.

"I do. And believe me . . ." she paused for control. "It pains me immeasurably. But if the dark abyss is so close, it cannot be risked."

Snape cradled Kali when she cried again, stroking her until she quieted. "It is not your place to decide this," he said angrily.

"Harry would not want you to risk it, no matter what was happening to him," she stated firmly. "I know that for certain and I'll defend that in his absence."

"I must . . . do something," Snape whispered.

"Calming his pet *will* help him," she said. "Their moods are tied both ways."

Not only had the Chimrian calmed, it had fallen asleep in the crook of Snape's arm. He stood still for a long while, staring at the trunks stacked in the corner of the room. "You were right."

"I was? About what?"

With a strange smirk Snape said, "About the things happening to him driving a parent mad."

McGonagall stepped closer and brushed his housecoat sleeve with her fingers. "You've done marvelously, Severus, and you must realize how hard it is for me to say that to you."

Snape laughed in a huff, but fell dark again. "I made a grave error this time. It may not matter at all."

Fiercely, she said, "All of it *always* matters." She stepped away, flustered by her own vehemence. "Keep hold of the animal as long as it will let you. That *will* help him."

When McGonagall returned to the room later, she found Snape asleep, propped up on Harry's pillows with Kali curled on his chest. Loath to disturb him, she tiptoed out and closed the door with a quiet click.

* * *

Morning came with a mixture of bad and good senses. Harry felt both queasy and sick as well as oddly relaxed and rested. Rick stood beyond the bars, looking amused. "You should have seen yourself. That was really quite brilliant." When Harry didn't even so much as flick his eyes to his captor, Rick went on, "Ever have that? It's called Raving Splendor, by the purveyor, who requests that he remain nameless. Bloody popular with the dance crowd."

Harry wished he could empty his sour stomach on Rick's shiny brown shoes, but they were beyond the blasted cage. Barring that statement, he did not wish to move at all, since that would make his brain slosh painfully in his skull.

"Effing brilliant, watching the great Harry Potter crawling around like a panicked cockroach." Rick laughed breathily, bent down and pushed a plate and another pewter carafe through the bars. "Here, have some breakfast, on the house," Rick invited cheerily before skipping away.

* * *

The dining room had emptied out overnight of everyone except McGonagall. Snape sat across from her before an untouched plate of breakfast scramble and toast, Kali curled in his lap. The Chimrian also refused to eat, even the softest strip of bacon fat from McGonagall's plate. She turned her tiny fox-head upward to Snape and whined at him. In response Snape pulled her more comfortably into the crook of his arm.

* * *

Harry sat miserably in the corner of the dank cellar, his whole body aching. He longed for solid sleep on a real bed with a real pillow, longed for it dearly. The chill that filled his bones from the cold stone had become a constant, ordinary companion, as had the feeling of defeat that he found himself unable to will away. To be caught and toyed with like this by an incompetent wizard after everything he had managed to survive made him groan miserably into the cloudy greyness leaking in the small window. Depressing helplessness made him pound his forehead on his bent knee. It did not help that his only current prospect for getting himself out involved interacting with demons.

Snape's words returned to him about not letting his guard down. Harry had failed in that, he supposed with a sigh, even though he had only been walking along an ordinary street just steps from an underground entrance. He certainly couldn't have been expected to see this coming, he argued defensively, even to himself. He imagined Snape's disappointment when he finally did get home and hoped it was tempered somewhat by relief at having him back safely.

Harry managed to doze part of the morning despite his discomforts. When he awoke, thirsty and hungry, he again espied the tray and carafe just inside the cage. Harry never imagined before what torment could be caused by such a simple object as that carafe. His fuzz-covered tongue and hairy throat cried out so for water, but he simply could not risk drinking it. At least the droplets of enticing sweat had dried from the hammered pewter as the water had warmed; those alone had nearly driven him mad with thirst.

Voices roused Harry from a dull state that may have constituted meditation in one inclined to it. The cellar door opened and footsteps, two sets, made their way down, accompanied by Rick's entertaining voice. "I do believe you will be pleased," Rick was saying. Harry watched as the person he would least like to see in the world at that moment stepped across the cellar, surprise flickering over his usual scowl. Draco Malfoy came to a halt well shy of the bars. "Come, come," Rick invited him closer.

"You do have him," Draco said in clear amazement. "Quite a catch," he opined with what Harry heard as unease.

"Eff off, Malfoy," Harry muttered.

"Smashing, isn't he? Just a charm," Rick prattled on happily. "And a real enemy, Potter, you were right," he said, indicating his companion. "Railed against you all the way here. Truly despises you."

Draco stepped up to the cage. "How did you manage . . . ?"

"Oh, well. I admit, I spent a few pounds. Show him the Gratatorq, Potter." When Harry didn't react, he clarified, "The chain." Harry, having nothing else to do, hooked a thumb under the oily necklace and held it up from his collar. Rick went on. "A pretty penny for that, I'll admit. Potter looks like such hell because he can't resist testing and retesting its power."

Draco said a bit snidely, "So you didn't actually best him."

"Well," Rick began defensively. "What does it matter if I bought a bit of an advantage . . . ?"

Harry, seeing lingering horror in the bright blue depths of Draco's eyes, determined that he might just be able to get him. At least he was freer than the house-elf. "Does to Draco," Harry commented.

"I wouldn't necessarily say that, Potter the rotter," Draco snipped back.

"Gloating Draco? Just because you once beat me in a duel without extra help . . . "

Draco blinked at that, his mind working that discrepancy. "Did you?" Rick asked Draco with great interest. "Do tell where you learned to duel?"

After a significant hesitation Draco said, "My father taught me."

"Ah, yes, Malfoy . . . " Rick said, "that name does ring a bell somewhere."

Both Harry and Draco favored Rick with disgusted expressions, neither of which the man noticed. "Of course you have heard of my father," Draco snapped.

"Have I? Well, yes, of course, such an old family, Malfoy." Rick still looked thoughtful.

Harry, unable to take it, demanded, "Why do you *think* I hate him so?" From his seat on the floor, Harry gestured at the blonde young man. "His father was a Death Eater. More than that, he was Voldemort's Lieutenant," he explained in annoyance.

Rick now gave Draco an alarmed looking over. "Aye," Harry muttered tossing his hand. Draco in return gave Rick a smug smile. "Who did you think would be my enemy?" Harry snarled at his captor.

Draco looked over the cage with a keen eye. "Really quite interesting. Is the Torq absolute?" he sounded as though he were shopping for one.

With crossed arms and a superior tilt of the head, Rick replied, "If you mean will it kill him should he manage to escape? Yes."

Harry bore the bright blue eyes again, unable to gauge them. He pushed himself to his feet with effort and staggered over to them. Draco actually stepped back from him, making Harry wonder how wild he appeared at this point. "Everyone is looking for you," Draco said.

Rick laughed, "Yes, ghastly fun, isn't it? I usually only make headlines in the financial pages when Dad's bank has an announcement. The front page, even of just the *Prophet*, is much more entertaining." He put his face up to the bars, letting the metal press into his cheeks. "Poor orphan Potter, no family to rely on, no one to give him a leg up in life," he said with a pout.

Harry swung out to smack him and actually managed a weak slap before the necklace dropped him to his knees. He fought it though, with every ounce of will he had, he fought the muscle quivering effects of it and lunged again at his captor, who despite his apparent proclivity for buying magic, did know how to use a wand and an instant later Harry was tossed back by an arc of flame.

Back heaving against the searing pain on his chest, Harry didn't get up again right away. He did lift his head when he could to favor Rick with a dark look of hatred, a calculated one that he kept from overwhelming him. It worked; he didn't hear anything scrambling in the dark around him, although the notion of letting the *things* loose to do as they wished was sounding more appealing, just to get this over with.

Rick sneered, "You don't learn, do you Potter?"

"Stubborn damn idiot," Draco agreed. With a forced smile, he said, "I have to admit that, despite the amusement of seeing Potter reduced to this, I really do need to return home for an important luncheon." Harry rolled his eyes and scoffed as he patted the seared skin beneath a blackened cut in his shirt.

Rick apparently was not ready to lose his audience. "Must you? I could give him a wand and you two could duel. I'd like to see that."

"Perhaps next time. I think Harry has . . . found a better *teacher* than he had before." He turned to leave without looking back at Harry, who desperately wished to know if there was a message hidden in that. "If you could show me out?" Draco asked, sounding haughty and bored.



Chapter 61 -- Enemies and Friends, Part II

Draco arrived home by Apparating into his own foyer. He felt disgusted, both by Rothschild's simpering highbrow attitude, unearned, in Draco's mind, but also by the state Potter had been reduced to. It was one thing to plot and attack a rival regularly, but to capture and work upon them with no chance for their recovery lacked all sport.

"Hello, dear," Pansy said as she crossed through the hall in a flowery Japanese-inspired dressing gown. Draco's mother had insisted Pansy move in as a companion for her with the expectation that her son would marry her in due time. Draco himself remained undecided, although the situation had grown on him far faster than he would have imagined, perhaps because not only did he have regular companionship, but he now lacked most of his mother's.

"Interesting errand?" Pansy asked from the door to the sitting room where she had paused, posing slightly. Draco had apparently spent the last three minutes simply standing there, deeply in thought.

"Yes. And I have another I must run before lunching."

"Must you?" she asked in an almost simpering disappointment.

He nodded distractedly and Disapparated on the spot.

The doorknocker sounded at the house in Shrewsthorpe. Snape, assuming Harry's friends were again congregating for the day, was surprised to find his former Slytherin student in the garden instead.

"Professor," Draco muttered, seeming in a bad mood.

"Mr. Malfoy."

"You look like hell, sir, if I may say so," Draco commented after looking him up and down.

Snidely, Snape asked, "Something I can do for you?"

"Most likely not," Draco muttered. "But you look in need of assistance. . . aren't you going to invite me in?" he asked, very put-upon. Snape stepped back and let the haughty blonde boy into the entryway and then the hall. Draco looked around. "Humble but acceptable."

Snape rolled his eyes. "If you are here to insult me, I do hope you can manage better than that."

"Potter means that much to you then?" Draco asked, sounding honestly mystified, if not a little nauseated.

Snape didn't reply, just stared down his nose at the young man.

"I have to say, it's a struggle, but pathetic wizardry steeped in Muggle money rather than grand magical tradition galls me more than wrongheaded, raw magical power."

"What are you on about?" Snape snapped impatiently.

Draco sighed. "I know where Potter is."

"You what?" Snape asked sharply.

Speaking slowly and clearly, Draco said, "I don't intend to be involved beyond telling you what I know. Suffice to say, I wasn't involved. I may hate the sniveling little *hero* but I would express it by flattening him with a well-timed spell and letting someone scrap him up to haul to St. Mungo's, not the continuous beating down he is presently receiving. Pathetic, really."

With a voice of deep, dark danger Snape asked, "Where is he?"

Draco explained about his odd morning, the invitation by owl, his visit to an outlying area of London. As he turned to leave, he added, "Oh, and the Torq is a fatal one. I suggest you approach very carefully if you wish to have anything to take to St. Mungo's."

* * *

Four Aurors and one very insistent Snape Apparated onto the property beside the Rothschild house. Rodgers had only grudgingly spoken to Snape during their hurried meeting at the Ministry, and was shooting him vaguely baleful looks as they assembled. Their little assault group was hidden from the view of the elderly witch who lived there by two massive, untrimmed willows. Moody hobbled up to the tall hedge separating the lawns and stuck his head through a gap.

Snape stood with his wand out, ready to rush the place, held back only tenuously by a fast-weakening will. Rodgers stepped sideways up beside him, severely testing Snape's limits, although Snape didn't give any indication of this. Moody was taking his time, it seemed. Quietly, Rodgers said, "I suppose you think you could train Harry better."

"Reggie," Tonks hissed.

As though speaking to a simpleton, Snape stated in an even more hushed voice, "If I believed I could better train Harry, I would be training Harry."

"Hmf." Rodgers' eyes narrowed as though looking for the trap in that. Moody continued to show them his cloaked backside.

Still quiet and a tad malevolent, Snape said, "I could have turned you in. I had no reason not to. Lestrangle would have used you for torture practice . . . if you were lucky."

Tonks glared at Snape. Shacklebolt whispered, "I know a really good muting charm."

"We may need it," Tonks threatened, hands on hips as she looked sharply between the two of them.

Fortunately, Moody returned at that moment. "Loaded all right that house is. Layered alarms and traps. Looks like the work of at least four skilled wizards, some of whom didn't like each other, I'd guess by the looks of it. The charms are almost at odds. Kind of like these two," he added with his usual distorted grin.

Snape held out as the Aurors argued about the best approach, aggravating him into a kind of madness of inaction. Moody said, "No one is getting close without setting off the spell alarms. They'd catch a warlock, a babe even they are so sensitive. Any person."

"Any *person*?" Snape interrupted.

With his finger Harry traced and retraced the bright, gemlike quartz vein in the stone beneath his hand. His utterly bored mind seemed capable of latching fiercely onto anything of even vague interest. The cellar was dank again; the candles had gutted from that morning, leaving the air without their warm honey scent. Achy beyond memory, Harry shifted yet again to find a comfortable position to sit in.

Across the room something fell to the floor, slapping lightly. Harry blinked and tried to look into the dim corner beyond the dusty air flowing in the ray of light from the high window. A held breath later, a faint scuffing sound emanated from the left of the stairs and a sleek black serpent slithered into view. It moved with purpose, straight for Harry, who gaped at it in shock. It passed between the bars and stopped. They eyed each other, black eyes on green. "Severus?" Harry managed to whisper.

The snake cruised effortlessly over to him, lifting its head to eye level, revealing a tan throat, tongue flicking out. "*Good to ssssee you,*" the snake hissed. Harry reached out to brush the smooth scales by the second band, unsure if he were hallucinating. The snake bumped his arm awkwardly.

After checking that there was no immediate sign of Rick, Harry said, "I'm so glad you're here."

The snake hissed like a laugh, "*Sssstrange to understand you this way. I assssume you would like to go home?*"

Harry's eyes burned at the very notion and he only risked nodding. His mind was working again, though, despite the pounding headache that had only come on strong since morning. He stood and scooped the weighty snake up in his hands. "Hide beside the steps over there. I'll lure him down." Released, snake slithered over to the shadow of the staircase.

"Hey, Ricky Rothy!" Harry taunted at the darkened steps.

After a pause a voice from the doorway at the top said, "God I hate that name. What do you want, Potter?"

Harry studied the dark outline of the snake turning and curling in the shadows. "I've been thinking about what you've been saying about family."

Slow footsteps descended into the cellar. "Have you now?" Rick drawled in a toying manner. He walked right up to the bars, smirk firmly intact. "And?"

"I'd like you to meet someone."

Rick glanced around the cellar, almost startled. Not seeing anyone, he scoffed. "Who?"

"My adoptive father." Harry gestured with his chin for Rick to turn around again.

With another scoff Rick did so, but then leapt backward into the cage bars at the sight of an eight-foot, banded Egyptian cobra, hood wide and mouth hissing. "Yah!" he exclaimed and tried to scramble away, but like a shot, the snake lashed out. Harry, who had not imagine Snape would actually do that, had to replay the lightening-fast strike in his mind. Rick grabbed his wounded thigh and fell, writhing, onto the floor. An instant later Snape had morphed above him, wand extended. Harry considered he should definitely ask later how he had managed that.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rothschild," Snape sneered. "You have fifteen minutes to live, give or take." It was not clear whether Rick had heard any of this over his piteous groaning. Snape felt around in Rick's pockets, taking his wand. Louder, Snape demanded, "Where is the key to the cage?"

Rick actually sobbed once in extreme pain and gestured up the stairs. "Mantel, in the silver chest . . . please . . ." he pleaded as Snape dashed away. He put his head down on the stones in abject agony to wait. Snape returned in less than a

minute with a miniature set of silver rods set on a crosspiece. He tapped this against one of the bars, setting up a musical vibration in the key. A section of bars swung loose.

Snape immediately returned to his victim. Harry started to come around to assist. "Don't!" Snape ordered him frantically, holding up his hand, palm out. Startled, Harry stopped just inside the door. "Release the protective spells on the property," Snape demanded. When Rick ignored him in favor of harsh gasping, Snape impatiently fished a tiny bottle from his pocket and forced a droplet between Rick's lips. The effect was immediate. Snape handed him his wand, while pressing his own to aim at Rick's heart. Snape said, "You haven't been given enough remedy to survive more than an extra ten minutes, or worse, a whole extra hour of flesh consuming misery."

Rick, appearing defeated and angry, waved and muttered a series of cancellations. From upstairs came the sound of the front door opening and many footsteps scurrying. Snape grabbed Rick's wand back away and gave him the bottle of remedy, which the man frantically tipped into his mouth while uttering whining noises.

"Harry!" Tonks greeted him and rushed forward to restrain Harry from stepping up to meet her. "Stay there, kiddo," she said with worrisome uneasiness. "Whegh, you need a bath."

"Sorry," Harry apologized tiredly and got a pat on the arm from Tonks.

The other Aurors were taking things out of a small trunk they had brought down. "Get him a chair," Moody growled and Rodgers went to fetch one. When he returned with an exotically carved one, Harry was made to sit, just inside the cage. Moody leaned his scarred face close to examine the chain with his roving glass eye. "Hmf," he muttered. "Burning it's the best, I think."

"What?" Harry asked in alarm.

"Get the dragon-proof collar out," Moody ordered, ignoring his question. Too many people were moving around Harry for him to keep track of, and they were all talking about him in the third person. Someone held out a padded flame-proof collar from a dragon training suit which was slipped under the chain and fastened around his neck.

"Just peachy, Harry," Tonks said reassuringly. "What do you think?" she asked Moody, "Just cut it?" Murmurs of debate went around.

"That will take care of it," Moody said with a grunt that spoke of inherent undesirability.

"Better idea anyone?" Someone asked. Harry just wanted to go home. To be stuck at the threshold to freedom like this strained his fragile nerves. "This might hurt a bit," Tonks said. "Hold yourself."

Fingers touched Harry's left hand and he moved his eyes--all he could move--to see that Snape had crouched down to reach him through the mob. Harry gripped his hand as everyone braced for the chain's reaction to being attacked. The ignition was rather spectacular for something so small. A blinding light and heat flared against Harry's face and the collar jumped chokingly tight for an instant before the chain broke into pieces.

The remainder of the chain floundered on the floor, sizzling like a firework until Tonks stamped it out and hovered it into an evidence sack.

"Would've taken him out for certain," Moody stated darkly and gave Rick, who was bound against the wall, a look of utter disdain.

Tonks handed the sack to Rodgers and stalked over to her former boyfriend. "Well, this about tops it," she growled at him disgustedly. Harry did not care one ounce for the man at this point, perhaps because Snape had gotten even for him, at least partially. "Can you take him in?" Tonks asked Moody. "I might kill him just for the heck of it." Moody hesitated in case she might change her mind before hauling Rick to his feet and growling at him.

Harry had to hold back a grin at Rick's alarm as he took a proper look at the old Auror. "What makes you think I won't?" Moody asked.

"We need a debriefing, Harry," Tonks began, "down at the Ministry."

"He needs a Healer . . ." Snape began.

Harry held up a hand to stop him. "It's all right. I'm okay," He insisted, although his head was still pounding from the hallucinogenic potion and lack of water. He felt obliged to give it a good show in front of his future colleagues and stood unsteadily with his guardian's hand on his arm.

"We'll keep it quick," Tonks assured him.

Even though giving his version of events should have been easy, it felt like a kind of torture to the utterly exhausted Harry. Snape hovered in the background in the Auror meeting room, looking ready to pounce on anyone, even Harry himself. Moody frequently grunted in doubt as Harry tried to explain what had happened.

"I was thinking about other things. I think I heard a boot scuff on the pavement and I was starting to turn and pull out my wand, and then I couldn't move. Or it hurt to move and something was around my neck."

Harry considered that Vineet for all his meager spell power, would not have bothered with the wand, and would have left Rick as a heap on the ground without even breaking a sweat. Tonks lifted the evidence sack and dropped it on the table. Harry hadn't managed much of a look at the necklace when it was on him; it hadn't been long enough to pull into view. The few remaining tiny blackened links were odd hoops with a crosspiece fitting into the next hoop.

"I don't want to go around . . ." He was going to say that he didn't want to go around as paranoid as Moody himself, but he changed his mind and closed with, ". . . always worried I'll be attacked. It was Muggle London."

Moody grunted again disapprovingly. Harry bolstered his pride as best he could and listed what had transpired during his four days of captivity. It worked best to isolate himself from the memories as though speaking of someone else's experience. He skipped his experimentations with pentagrams and found himself downplaying the horror of the hallucinogens to save face. He finally arrived in his telling at the moment Snape had appeared, and gave his guardian, who was still hovering impatiently behind Tonks, a grateful look.

"You are a mess, Harry," Tonks finally said. "We have enough for now and you *really* need a bath," she complained.

"I can't help it," Harry retorted.

"Ah, there's that temper," Tonks playfully pointed out. "Severus, why don't you take him home."

Those words could not have been more welcome. After repeated reinforcement from everyone about how good it was to have him back, Snape led him to the lifts and up to the quiet atrium. The few people they met along the way gave him extensive greetings and asked where he had been. He waved them off and waited for Snape to disappear in the Floo.

Snape appeared in his dining room, which was again full to the brim with all manner of guests. They all looked up with sad hopefulness at his appearance. Snape did not speak, just reached back when the hearth flared again to offer Harry a hand into the room. He took it gratefully as he was feeling dizzy from the journey. When he straightened up, he gaped at the room, filled with his former housemates, some neighbors, many Weasleys, and Hagrid, who was using a large trunk as a seat.

"Harry!" the room erupted, setting his frayed nerves on edge. Hermione ran around the crowded table and gave him a hug. "Sheew!" she exclaimed with a wrinkled face.

"Let me get a bath," Harry insisted, fending off the others who descended on him. Snape cleared a path to the hall for him and he gratefully followed.

Safely in the toilet, he peeled off his clothes, kicked them into a corner, and suggested that they be burned. Snape was adjusting the taps and when he turned, noticed the blistering burn below Harry's collarbone. "I'll get you a poultice for that or the water will be quite painful."

Harry lowered himself into the blessed bath while Snape pawed through the cabinet and began quickly putting something together at the sink. Harry added copious bubble bath to the water and started to wash up. "It's all right, Severus," Harry said, although as he did, a wave of water splashed the flaming line and he changed his mind. "Thank you for coming to get me, yet again," Harry said with crushing gratitude. Snape glanced back with a pained expression and Harry went on, "I didn't know you'd managed to become an Animagus; you didn't let on at all. I would have helped you with it, though you apparently didn't need any. It's a useful form," Harry added into the silence, blathering, perhaps for lack of having anyone to talk to for days.

Snape finally spoke in a lecturing voice, "We needed to get through the spell barriers, which were extensive." He came over with a shallow bowl full of a green paste. Harry leaned back and let it be dabbed onto the stinging red line that wrapped around his shoulder. "Let that set before getting it wet," Snape instructed him and placed the remaining portion in easy reach. "Need anything else?"

"Dinner. Water. Lots of water."

Snape went to the door just as it opened and Winky stepped in, delivering a tray. Harry drank thirstily from the glass even though he had had two at the Ministry. Dinner was a thin chicken stew, the scent of which made his stomach grumble fiercely. Snape still hovered after Winky departed. Harry hungrily spooned stew into his mouth before halting before his stomach rebelled. He noticed Snape's furrowed brow. "What's wrong?" Harry asked.

Snape snorted softly. "I did not do well by you, Harry."

"Seems like you did to me," Harry countered, setting the soup aside to let his stomach settle. He picked up the cloth and washed his arms again.

"When you did not come home in the late afternoon, I assumed you were being difficult. The search for you should have started twelve hours before it actually did."

Harry squeezed out the washcloth and re-soaped it to stall. "I shouldn't have been behaving so badly last week. I'm sorry for that. I had a lot of time to think during the last four days. A lot of time." He rinsed the cloth out again without using it and again rubbed soap into it before holding it between his hands. Staring at the quickly dissolving bath bubbles and the bright pink of his knees showing through, Harry said, "You're a wonderful guardian, Severus. Having met *your* dad, I'm guessing that's why you need to hear that."

Snape's frown didn't disappear but he did straighten from his deep slouch.

Harry went on with deliberate calm, "I've got so much out of being with you, beyond even your willingness to bail my bum out of the bad situations I seem to get into."

Snape's dark eyes considered that before his lips twitched slightly and he moved to the door, opening it a crack. "I will let you finish."

Harry peered up at him, finally taking the time to really look at him. "You look like hell, Severus."

"Fell completely apart," Tonks said, as came through the bathroom door, taking the handle right out of Snape's hand. "Hasn't slept. Hasn't eaten. Not a thing. Go on," she ordered him, pointing around toward the kitchen. Bowing his head, Snape quickly strode away.

Harry cut himself off from watching Snape depart with concern and instead fumbled with covering himself as the bubbles had faded to the tub edge. "Tonks!" he complained, reaching for and knocking the bubble bath bottle into the tub with him. She fished it out and added a copious amount before running the water again. It foamed nicely and he relaxed.

Quietly, she teased, "Not like I haven't seen it before. . . "

Harry, blushing until his face felt hotter than the tub water, snapped, "Still."

She chuckled. "I just wanted to talk to you a bit before heading home for a long sleep," she said with affection. Harry relaxed as the bubbles had reached chest height now. He dunked his head and began washing his greasy, gritty hair. Tonks said, "You weren't stuck there real long, but I want to make sure you understand what can happen to someone held captive like that." Harry stretched his neck to one side. He didn't want to think about it, really, but Tonks plowed on, "Mostly I want to make sure you don't withdraw, which is a common reaction."

Harry sank down into the suds until only his head was exposed. "Is that why I feel like curling up into bed about a hundred times more than I want to go back and see my crowd of friends who are waiting?"

"Yes. Resist it. Visit with your friends for as long as you can stand. Everyone's been deucedly worried about you, Harry," she added somberly.

"I've been bloody worried as well. Rick is a lunatic."

Tonks rubbed her long pink fluffy hair back. "I'm really sorry about that, Harry." They both fell silent and Harry started washing his feet with great fastidiousness, just because he could. "Tara is here by the way. Just found out what happened to you, although no one knows the connection."

Harry froze with the cloth between two toes. "I'll have to talk to her," he breathed.

"One thing at a time," Tonks said. "Maybe I *will* wait for you. I'll see you upstairs," she said as she departed. *Checking up on him*, Harry thought with a little annoyance.

The door opened again as he bundled himself in soft, lovely, clean towels, but it was Snape this time, simultaneously eating a biscuit and carrying fresh clothes. "Thanks," Harry said, "forgot to ask Winky." He accepted the t-shirt off the top of the stack and slipped it on.

"Are you certain you do not require a Healer?"

Harry nodded. "I'm fine," he insisted, glad to be able to say that. A little food had rendered him almost normal feeling and the hot water had eased his aches. Just some sleep and he would be back to himself, he was certain.

Fully dressed in marvelously clean clothes and in his favorite maroon dressing gown, Harry let Snape lead him out with an arm around his shoulder. "You should say hello to your friends," Snape commanded as they made the steps to the hall.

The hall was a welcome sight with all the lamps lit, the center of what he considered home, and he was finally warm from the bath all the way to his stiff joints. "You're taking orders from Tonks," Harry accused him. "There shouldn't be two of us doing that." Snape's lips twitched every so slightly upward. Flush with gratitude for being home and with affection for the steady hold around his shoulder, Harry quietly said, "I love you, Severus."

Their footsteps stuttered to a halt halfway across the hall floor. Hermione came to the doorway of the dining room, face flush with a smile. She must have sensed something because she hung there, hesitating, with her hands on either door-frame. Distress flickered over Snape's features before they relaxed. Softly, he said, "Come, Harry, your friends have been most worried about you." His easy tone was in contrast to the fiercely tight hold he had on Harry's shoulder as he steered him toward Hermione.

His much shorter friend stood on her toes to give him a hug. Behind her, others came to their feet to greet him as well. "How did they find you? Tonks wouldn't say," Hermione complained.

Harry looked to his guardian and Snape didn't reply. "Severus, you didn't-" Harry began with concern, but was interrupted by all the others coming over to welcome him back.

The bunching around him finally eased when the Weasley twins gave up congratulating him gregariously and repeatedly. Beyond them stood Tara, and beside her, Elizabeth. Harry blinked, recovered his poise, and said, "Hi," to both of them before pulling a rather pained looking Tara aside.

"Look, I-" she started to say before Harry cut her off with a whispered, "Don't worry about. It wasn't your doing."

"Are you all right?" she asked. "He didn't hurt you or anything, did he?"

Harry, very aware of the attention the full room was giving them, said lightly, "No. Not really."

Winky came in with trays of small sandwiches and squares of cheese. "Wow," Ron whispered. "How'd she know I was hungry?" He grabbed Harry and sat him down at the table, before the tray and beside Ginny. "You look like you haven't eaten. First dibs."

Harry took a sausage sandwich and looked around the room. "When I'm an Auror and out. . . doing something dangerous, you aren't all going to sitting here like this worrying, are you?" he accused them all.

Tonks stepped over beside him and took up a stack of three little sandwich triangles filled with marmalade. "Yes, Harry, I think they are," she said sympathetically, patting his shoulder. "This just came for you, by the way." She held out a letter.

Harry handed it to his right, to Tara, to have it opened, since he had a sandwich in his hand and eating seemed more important. Elizabeth leaned over to look at it curiously. It was then that Harry realized how very surrounded he was by girl-friends past and potential, and he dearly hoped they didn't get to talking together too much.

"It's from the Minister of Magic," she said. "You want me to read it?"

Harry thought that over, but before he could answer, Ron grabbed the letter away and began reading aloud. "*Dear Harry*. . . Wow, the Minister refers to you as 'dear?'" Ron marveled before going on to the generally grinning room. "*So very glad to learn that you have returned home safely.* Awwwww. . ."

Harry grabbed the letter away and stashed it in his pocket. "I wanted to hear that," Hermione complained.

After eating enough to feel unwell from it, Harry listened dully to his friends' low chatter and fell into a pleasant stupor. He was bone tired though, and soon rested his head on his folded hands on the table.

"Is he asleep?" someone asked.

"Might be," Hermione whispered.

The entire room grew silent as Snape stepped around the table and lifted Harry's arm over his shoulder. "Come on, Harry. Time to go to your room."

Harry's eyes fluttered open and immediately closed again, heavy as lead. "G'night," he muttered at the doorway and it was echoed by his friends who were now gathering themselves to depart.

In his room, Harry sat on his bed and watched through a veil of half-sleep as Snape brought his pyjamas over to him. Harry stared at them, wondering where the energy to don them might come from.

"Do you need anything else?" Snape asked.

"You repeated that spell; didn't you?" Harry said a bit accusingly. "I didn't want you to do that." He frowned deeply, feeling guilt like a serpent in his chest.

Quietly, Snape said, "I didn't, although I also wished I had, seeing your condition. I used that explanation with Ms. Tonks, but she did not believe me, I think, partially because I knew more than your location. Nor did she insist on the truth since she was far more interested in locating you."

Sitting straighter on the edge of his bed, Harry thought that over with his slow brain. "So . . . wait, don't tell me . . . Malfoy?"

Smiling faintly, Snape nodded. "But at his request, no one is to know that."

"Oh. All right then." Remembering his rival's dropped hint, Harry decided he should have been confident that Draco would go for help. He hoped though that he didn't feel Harry owed him too much; he couldn't bear that. While getting changed into his soft pyjamas, his tired mind conjured some dates. "Tomorrow's the first," he realized aloud. "You shouldn't be here," he insisted in some alarm.

Snape grinned inwardly. "I do need to leave tomorrow but the students won't arrive until evening on the Express. It will be fine."

Finally changed with his clumsy hands, Harry clambered under the covers, deeply anticipating a night in his warm bed. Before he lay back though, he said, "You can go tonight. I'll be all right."

Snape balked and approached to stand directly beside the bed. "As welcome as this sudden streak of independence is, I will depart after breakfast."

"If that'll work out." Harry straightened the duvet, relishing its soft cover and plump warmth. "I realize . . ." he began, keeping his head down. After a hesitation he continued, "I realize now that it doesn't matter if you're at school; you'll come for me if I need you."

"Of course," Snape softly said.

A tad sheepishly, Harry said, "I guess I knew that before, but now I really do. I thought maybe you'd already left for school and didn't know I was missing."

"What? Harry . . ." Snape scolded.

Explaining quickly, Harry said, "You said you were leaving, I didn't know you would worry enough to think something bad had happened. I figured by Monday the Ministry would notice."

Snape appeared disappointed and dismayed even, as he sat on the edge of the bed. "I worry about you constantly," he admitted quietly.

Harry's face wrinkled up and he said, "That's a tough job."

"Yes. And I wonder sometimes how Albus managed to retain such an appearance of aloofness from his concerns for you. I do not even have Voldemort to worry about," he added in chagrin.

Harry, feeling a burst of honesty, stated darkly, "I want to get Avery."

Snape fell thoughtful before saying, "Do work though the Ministry on that. Please don't go it alone."

"I also want to clear Sirius' name."

"You may have an easier time with the first." At Harry's confused expression, Snape explained, "The first the Ministry can trumpet; the second will only cause controversy. NOT . . ." Snape went on quickly when Harry started to complain fiercely. " . . . that I don't agree that it should be done. I am simply explaining the reality to you." He brushed his unkempt hair back and said, "You know I had thought that you and I had grown to know each other, but I am discovering many things, including a girlfriend, that I did not know about." He didn't sound angry, only mystified. "Do try to keep me somewhat informed by owl if you will."

"I'll try."

Snape stood. "And if you have difficulty sleeping tonight, do come fetch me."

"I don't think that will be a problem." Harry punched the soft, goose-down pillow behind him. "I've been fantasizing about my bed for four days running." He plopped back on it with a sigh.

"Sleep well, Harry."

"You too."

Harry slept so soundly that he didn't stir even a breath any of the three times Snape came to check on him. The third time, at just before 4:00, Snape hovered longer, taking advantage of the exhausted sleep that kept Harry from rousing to the dark inner vision he must be having of him so close. Snape was not one for flights of fancy but, standing there, he wished dearly that his charge no longer saw him that way, that somehow his shadow could be torn from that green world. He fretted also about the future, when Avery had finally been captured and only he himself was the very last free, former Death Eater. Would Harry's grace about this remain the same?

Unaware of his guardian's musings, Harry slept deeply on as though anchored to it, if one could be so, by plush bedding. Snape stood straight and considered that if Harry chose to withdraw his forgiveness, then that was certainly his right. But as long as he needed his guardianship, it seemed unlikely.

* * *

The morning began bright and sunny. Harry, though loath to leave his wonderful bed early, did so to have a long breakfast with Snape.

"Owl to tell me about the new students, all right?" Harry said as they discussed Hogwarts during hash on toast. At Snape's nod, Harry added, "I want to make sure the Gryffindors are making enough trouble for you."

Appropriately grim, Snape stated, "No fear of that."

Reveling in ordinary, future plans, Harry said brightly, "I'm going to go to the Quidditch matches with Aaron, so I'll see you at the first one if not sooner."

"Minerva would almost certainly want you to stay for dinner in that case. I expect to return for a weekend before that."

Finally, Snape was ready, his small trunk beside the hearth. Harry gave him a quick hug. "Have a good school year. Don't sneak around the castle as a cobra too much; it's an unfair advantage over the students." Snape smiled with his eyes, but refrained from comment. Harry added, "Unless you're going to scare Filch, then it's all right." Harry realized that he was stalling and stepped back, forcing his ongoing comments to cease.

"Do behave, Harry, and owl every day for the next few days, if you would."

Harry nodded only and watched Snape take up his trunk and depart, accompanied by a *whoosh* of flame.

After breakfast the owls began arriving, as well as a scattering of friends from the night before, the ones who could get away from their other responsibilities. Winky gave them breakfast and most had to depart soon after. Harry wandered to

the sideboard where the owls had been dropping the post. A few packages were there, including one from Candide. Harry unsealed the box from Honeydukes and ate a few. Everything seemed to taste a lot better than he remembered. He penned a quick thanks to her along with reassurances as to his state of mind and sent Hedwig off with it.

When he was washing up, Harry noticed that his burn had begun to sting again. Most of the blistering streak on his chest had turned white, but two sections of it were still a flaming pink. The wound looked angry, as though it would leave a scar. The leftover poultice beside the bath had dried up, but ten minutes of hunting in the library produced the instructions for *Creamed Barbadosis Hydrating Plaster*. Ten additional minutes later Harry had it mixed from the ingredients in the bath cabinet. The relief was instantaneous and, satisfied that he could continue to do without further help, Harry confidently continued getting dressed.



Chapter 62 -- Field Work

The house was silent. Harry tried to get used to the routine of the silence and at first found that it allowed him more opportunity to think, but later in the day, the stillness itself became a distraction. He propped Kali's cage open so that she could follow him when she wished and return to it when she didn't. Her occasional interruptions worked well to keep the empty house at bay. His impromptu time off was only one day; hopefully his pet would go back into her cage tomorrow when he needed to leave.

Mid-afternoon, Harry headed outside to work in the garden, since the sun was intermittent and he yearned to get some on his skin. A few residual aches in his back made bending repeatedly a bit unpleasant so he pulled out his wand and thought a bit. A Scourgify took care of the leaves that had collected between the plants and the wall. He didn't know a spell for weeding though, so gritting his teeth lightly, he crouched to pull the worst of them up by the roots.

"Hello," a pleasant greeting came from the road. It was Elizabeth.

Harry returned the greeting, stood and brushed off his hands.

"How are you doing?" she asked, sounding as though she very much cared about the answer.

"Not bad. My pride hurts more than anything else."

She grinned. "The *Prophet* has been pretty easy on you. Have you read it?"

"Merlin, no," Harry breathed miserably, making her laugh lightly.

"They have taken an offended stance aimed at Rothschild not respecting Wizardry's indebtedness to you."

Harry scratched his head. "Have you been studying a bit?" he asked carefully.

With a blush she admitted, "A bit. Michalmas term starts in a month."

"Ah." Harry glanced around the garden and put his wand away.

"Hopefully your pride can recover," she said helpfully. Harry wasn't certain if she were teasing. She went on, "The *Prophet* didn't say where the Torq had come from. I was curious, so pulled out one of my old magical history books and found a chapter on them."

Without thinking ahead Harry asked, "Your dad let you read books about the history of magic?"

She laughed, "Are you kidding? He encouraged it once he realized how miserable most of the history is."

"Goblin wars," Harry stated sagely, making her laugh again.

"Giant wars. Don't forget those," she contributed. After a pause she fell serious. "Don't feel too bad. Torqs were used to keep magician slaves you know. They use your power against you, so it doesn't matter how powerful you are." At Harry's interested look she asked, "Do you want me to bring the book over?"

Harry thought he would prefer to forget about it for the time being. "Maybe some other time."

She gave him a chastising tilt of the head. "What did the Torq look like?"

Harry shrugged. "I only saw it after it had burned up. But it did look a little odd."

A tad impatient sounding, she asked, "Well, what ward was it composed of? You know, was it made up of ankhs or five pointed stars?"

"It was an ankh shape," Harry interrupted, realizing now what the links had looked like.

"Nile Valley. They made the best wards," she stated knowledgeably. "When I was young, I was fascinated by Egyptian Wizardry: whole tombs protected by a few powerful carvings, so many mysterious objects they've dug up and they don't know what they do, or how to recreate the ones they've figured out."

"Rick said he had the Torq made for me," Harry stated thoughtfully.

"Huh. That must have cost him."

Harry brushed the drying dust off his hands again. "It did."

* * *

The next morning Harry rose early and sat at the table perusing the *Prophet* until breakfast appeared. He had been away from training long enough that he felt excited at the prospect of it and arrived at the Ministry early. He strode across the atrium, returning a rash of greetings from everyone in his vicinity. He was feeling good, relaxed and strong, not to mention blissfully free to walk around where he wished. Just before the lifts, a saccharine sweet, though somehow harsh, voice brought him to a scuffling halt. Harry turned slowly, drawing confidence into his posture as a shield against the prospect of facing Rita Skeeter.

"Mr. Potter," she said again. A flash went off; he held himself from blinking repeatedly in its wake.

"What do you want?" Harry asked with his own false sweetness.

"An interview, of course." She blinked her long lashes coyly, although from her the effect was counterproductive.

"I'm due in the Auror's office in two minutes. I'm terribly afraid I haven't the time."

"Two quick questions in that case," she insisted while looking in her robe pockets. She swore lightly when she pulled out her cigarette case first, and then her notepad. "How did they find you?"

"A complicated spell," Harry replied. Given the work he had had to do on Draco, it certainly seemed like a magical spell.

"Which one?"

Harry put his hand over her notepad and pushed it down away from the quill. "Telling you brings up difficult questions for people I'd prefer to protect."

"So, I won't bring it up if you give me a longer interview."

Harry tilted his head and looked at her. "Is it worth that?" he asked plainly.

She frowned at her notes. "Probably not. Second question, when is the hearing?"

"I haven't gotten a notice yet."

"You're ruddy helpful. One more then. Were you injured?" She waited expectantly, short, sharp quill poised.

"I got burned. Here." He drew a line over his robes with his finger. Giving in with a sigh, he added, mostly because he really didn't want her mucking around finding out about Draco, "And he slipped me a hallucinogenic potion. That was ghastly." He jostled his head at the memory of the transformed world attacking him. "I have to go," he begged off.

Before he could reach for a lift button, she said, "Good to have you back, Harry," with something approaching sincerity.

Harry turned his head and said, "Thanks. The horror! You'd have to find something else to write about."

She laughed lightly and stepped away, photographer trailing obediently.

After everyone had assembled in the workout room and Harry lived down his fellows' ribbing, Tonks said, "I have your examination results . . ." and proceeded to pull out a long sheet.

Harry made a noise of dismay and when Tonks turned to him, he asked, "You gave the first examination?" When he received a nod, he quickly challenged, "Was it yesterday?"

"Yes. You seem to have missed it," she said, writing the results on the board for the other three. Vineet seemed to have done the best on the written by a wide margin.

"Can I take it now?"

"No." She went on writing.

Stung by this, Harry complained with vehemence, "What am I to do then?" This seemed grossly unfair.

Tonks turned and considered him. "I think you need another day off, Harry." Harry banked his anger and denied that. "You're certain?" Tonks asked kindly. At Harry's vigorous nod she appeared doubtful. "You were waived through the exams. Complaints?" she challenged.

Harry shook his head and noticed that Kerry Ann appeared to have just beaten out Aaron in blocking, making him suspect that she was holding back during drills.

Tonks departed and as they waited for Rodgers, Aaron said, "You would have failed in the escape test anyway, Potter."

"Was there one?" Harry asked, honestly curious.

"NO," Kerry Ann snapped sharply, her anger aimed at Aaron.

Vineet who had sat silent until then, his intricately painted wand sitting before him on his small desk, said reassuringly to Harry, "Mr. Moody did not believe your situation to be escapable."

Moody, off all people, believing that did make Harry feel better. Turned out it was just as well he hadn't gotten out, since the necklace would have killed him. Sighing a bit, Harry sat back and they all waited for Rodgers to appear. Harry found an unexpected new capacity in himself for waiting, as one quiet minute stretched into the next. He considered that he certainly wouldn't be waiting four days, probably four minutes, which wasn't really very long and relaxing would make it seem to go by quickly. Aaron and Kerry Ann whispered gossip about various Ministry officials, trying to top each other with inside knowledge.

Rodgers finally hurried in, set them to doing drills, and disappeared again. Harry paired with Kerry Ann for counter-curse practice. This was growing a rather dull, frankly, since they hadn't added any new ones lately. Rodgers didn't reappear after they were finished and Harry suggested they move onto offensive spells.

"Harry's favorite," Aaron teased.

"No, they aren't," Harry retorted as Aaron pulled out the hard rubber dummy which hung from a metal hoop on top of its head. It was faceless with no hands or feet and with worn maroon paint covering it.

"Sure seems like it," Aaron countered. The dummy swung to and fro as its platform was positioned. "Ol' Stubby here thinks so too."

When the platform was locked to its bolts in the floor, Harry aimed and hit it with a moderately hard blasting curse. It blew straight out, and rocked hard against the bolts when the dummy swung back.

"Well, maybe," Harry conceded, finding pent up violence within himself, most likely from his imprisonment. He proceeded to take it out on the dummy, and the others allowed him longer turns at it without comment.

Rodgers returned, apologizing for the delay in a rare display of contrition. "We really need to get you through this so the rest of us can catch a break." He stepped over to Harry and handed him an official looking envelope. Before he returned to the front of the room, he was already lecturing from the readings. Harry slipped open the spell-sealed envelope and found what he expected: a hearing notice for a week from then. He quickly folded it back away and listened more closely to the discussion of layered illusions.

During lunch, Harry begged off eating with his fellows, saying that he wanted to run an errand. The others headed off to the exit and Harry, notebook in hand this time, returned to the file room, intent on taking better notes from Avery's records. He didn't have an excuse to be looking about, so he snuck down quickly and shut the door behind him. It was unoccupied, the only movement from the Knight Bus orb.

Harry found the correct file and opened it on top of the lowest cabinet. Thinking again, he closed it and took it up, tucked under his arm back to the empty Aurors' office. He sat on the floor, out of sight behind the last desk and borrowed a never-out quill from the absent Shacklebolt.

Not five minutes passed before footsteps and voices approached. Harry rolled his eyes at his poor luck. They had all left for lunch not ten minutes before. The voices stopped in the corridor, speaking low. This in itself caught Harry's attention. Without trying he listened in as Tonk's said, "I know. I agreed with his acceptance. He is exceptional on nearly every other factor."

Rodgers followed with, "I was overconfident. I thought it was a detriment we could fix, but it's clear he is already compensating more than I would have thought possible."

Harry sat in complete stillness, wondering, with a bit of trepidation, who they were discussing. He should have finished all of the reading last night, a voice in his head chastised him. Tonks sighed, a long one. "I'd feel rather sorry if we had to send him off. He has such, I don't know, faith in his own destiny."

Harry felt a tingle in his chest as though it might refuse to breath should he try to. All kinds of minor difficulties he had been having lately now loomed large as he sat there, staring at what looked like a mouse hole under the desk, against the opposing wall. He swallowed hard.

"Destiny as a Muggle perhaps. He doesn't have much more magical power than one," Rodgers commented.

Harry's chest didn't feel much better upon realizing that they were discussing Vineet.

Tonks said, "Let's wait until the six-month review. Give him a little more time."

Their voices moved away. "It isn't going to make any difference," Rodgers pessimistically stated before they were out of range.

Harry stood up off the floor, expecting to be stiff from the hard surface, but found that he wasn't too bad. When the path was clear, he slipped back down to the file room.

* * *

On the third of the month an owl arrived, one of the brown school ones. Snape had sent a long letter, although the small angular hand indicated it had been written rapidly. He mentioned that Minerva hoped Harry was recovering well from his ordeal. He summarized the new students, good, bad and indifferent. Harry smiled at the vision of intimidated first-years huddled in the Defense classroom, in awe of the simplest demonstration. Snape also discussed the new Transfiguration teacher, Mr. Cawley, brought in because McGonagall had decided to only teach sixth- and seventh-years. Harry started to write out a reply but had to stop because he was late leaving for the Ministry.

"Next Friday will be the first field training for two of you," Rodgers explained when they settled in at the Ministry. He pointed at Harry and Kerry Ann. "And that Saturday, the other two of you. Now, don't get too enthralled, this is just routine patrol you will be shadowing. Rare is the evening when anything happens and your Auror won't be called to anything dangerous unless it is absolutely necessary and you may be taken to a safe house or sent back here instead of being allowed to follow to anything significant."

Despite their trainer's playing it down, Harry was very much looking forward to Friday. So much so that he goofed up his invisible ink mixture that afternoon and it came out sparkling like a Muggle electric marquee. Well, Harry considered, his fellows seemed like they needed a good laugh.

* * *

That Saturday Harry had Tara over for dinner. He had picked her up outside the Leaky Cauldron and brought her home in the Floo. She was quiet all through eating and no amount of cajoling, joking, or blame-taking would draw her out more than an inch. Winky even made duck for the occasion.

When he escorted Tara back and they stood in the dim crowded wizard pub, Harry said, "Every thing's all right, really."

"I feel really bad about what happened . . ."

"I'm used to it," Harry insisted. People were taking an interest in them, so he stepped toward the back alley where it would be quieter. She resisted, tugging toward the front door instead.

"I'm not supposed to be in here," she breathed. At his questioning look she explained, "When I was a child and with my parents, it was okay."

"You're with me, no one will bother us about it." But he glanced around at the people eyeing them, including the barman, and led her out the door to the pavement.

Outside she said, "You shouldn't have been put through more on my account." When he tried again, she said, "Look, I'll owl you." She gave him a light push back toward the grimy pub door.

That didn't sound so good, but Harry had already argued himself out. "Good night then," he said wearily before ducking back inside the obscure wooden entryway.

* * *

Harry stood outside the door of Courtroom Ten, idly studying the soot-coated dungeon walls. Tonks had sent him off early to Rick's hearing and now he waited, getting annoyingly nervous as the minutes passed. He reached for his pocket watch, despite promising himself that he would not pull it out yet again. Wear had dulled the edges of the golden wings to a mat finish. He fingered it without opening it, thinking how very perfect a gift it had been at exactly the right moment, a pleasant thought that took him nicely away from the here and now.

The large iron bolt on the door clunked over, pushed from the other side. Harry stashed the watch away, stood with his hands at his sides, and tried to relax. An elderly witch in fancy black robes gestured for him to enter and Harry did so. The tiered seats on the sides were three-quarters full and the benches on the end where the Wizengamot lorded even more so. The scuffling and murmuring stopped as Harry stepped across the floor, following the witch who had let him in. Rick sat in the hard-edged wooden chair in the middle of the floor. He appeared to want to cross his arms but the chains wouldn't allow it. He could just interlock his fingers over his lap and they hung in the air, clenched and wiry. He ignored Harry's entrance and continued to stare at the floor beyond his knees. A nicely dressed, portly man with a ferret-like expression stood near him--a barrister, Harry assumed.

The witch took up a seat at floor level, where she apparently was monitoring a dictation quill. The long transcription parchment already had many feet of roll filled up. Harry stopped short of the little table there and looked up at the benches. In the front was Minister Bones and her assistants with stacks of files and notes. Harry also recognized Marchbanks and a few others. On the bench above the Minister's sat McGonagall. She gave Harry the smallest of smiles but didn't lose her standard serious disposition.

"Mr. Potter," Madam Bones began, sounding slightly pompous. "Thank you for coming. Let it be recorded that Harry James Potter of 23 Tottlywold Road, Shrewsthorpe was present to give testimony. Mr. Potter, the court would appreciate you recounting the events of August the twenty seventh through August the thirtieth of this year, if you would please."

She sounded dismissive almost, as though asking him to recall what he had had for breakfast. Harry dove in though. He had been thinking through everything since last night, cutting into his sleep in an effort to recall details as well as plot out how best to gloss over Malfoy's involvement. No one interrupted him as he summarized getting taken by surprise in Knightsbridge nor his initial observations of his cage, and he held the blush of embarrassment at bay during the worst of his story, when he had drunk the hallucinogenic water.

"Just a moment, if you will, Harry," Bones interrupted him. She sounded normal now, almost sympathetic. "We don't have a charge for deceptive administration of a psychotropic potion on the sheet, do we?" she asked her assistant.

The witch beside Bones found the right parchment as the dictationwitch unrolled her own to look back to where the charges had originally been read. Harry leaned slightly over to see it better, trying to determine if Rick had already mentioned Draco in his own testimony, as Harry was not keen on getting into a conflict of facts. He had believed he would be present for the whole proceedings, but it turned out he was only called down for his own part. Uncertain, but hiding it as best he could, Harry waited while they sorted out the exact charge to add.

"All right then. Please continue, Mr. Potter."

"Well, the next day was pretty much the same as the previous ones, except I was afraid to drink the water provided and the wash basin had been taken away so there wasn't any other. I don't know how much later it was, because it was hard to keep track of the time, except in general by the sunlight coming in the window. But in late afternoon, rescue arrived. Um, my guardian, Severus Snape came past the property spell barriers in the form of a cobra."

Rick's eyes came slowly over to Harry, his brow furrowed in faint confusion. Harry was certain he was wondering why Harry had skipped over part of the story.

A middle-aged wizard with a large birthmark on his balding head asked, "Is he a registered Animagus? I don't remember that we have anyone currently living who takes the form of a serpent."

Harry hesitated, "I don't know. He only mastered it in the last few weeks." Harry had been so concerned about Draco that he completely failed to consider that he might end up telling the full Wizengamot that his guardian had acted illegally. He pretended that nothing was amiss, but inside his thoughts had picked up speed. The barrister beside Rick was jotting something down on a small notepad in his hand. Rick still looked calculating. Harry quickly tried to gauge if leaving Draco out was to Rick's advantage and whether he could be expected to leave it be if it weren't already too late.

"And then what happened?" Madam Bones prompted.

"Severus, my guardian, bit Mr. Rothschild and then forced him to bring down the barriers . . . in exchange for the antidote to the venom." Some shuffling occurred at that. Harry looked around the benches and was very surprised to find McGonagall fighting a grin. Harry himself tried to smile at the sight of it. He cleared his throat into his fist to cover. "Then the Aurors came in--took the Torq off of me--cut it off with a dragon-proof collar to protect me when it burned." Harry sighed in relief at finishing.

Bones went over the pile of notes with a furrowed brow, stopping at a sheet occasionally before moving on. She appeared to be looking for something in particular. "Mr. Rothschild in his questioning by the Aurors, not under any coercive potion, I'll add for the record, mentioned something about 'showing off to Potter's enemies,' or something of that nature, the notes are not clear. What does that mean to you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry felt he owed Draco a good try at loyalty, even though Harry himself believed it was in the other's best interest that everyone know what he had done. Perhaps in his own circles it would get him expelled, and for Draco, the right circles were probably rather important. With a hint of sheepishness Harry asked, "May I have a quick word with the Minister?"

Bones appeared taken aback, but recovered quickly. She stared at him with her widely spaced eyes as she considered that. "Take us off the record Madam Scribner, if you will."

The official quill was plucked from the air and held, twitching. Harry stepped around and up before the first row of raised benches. It probably wasn't a normal place to be walking, given that it was only a half a shoe wide. Bones looked up at him with an expectant expression. Harry leaned over and whispered, "The person who is actually responsible for my rescue does not want it known that he is involved, and I feel obliged to honor that." He straightened slightly to better see her expression. She appeared dubious but it quickly dissipated. McGonagall just before him, looked ready to give him detention.

"Who?" Madam Bones mouthed.

Harry leaned forward, much closer, and whispered, "Draco Malfoy."

"You are quite serious?" she asked, befuddled. Harry nodded soberly. Quietly she breathed, "Who knows what goes through that boy's head. All right, then."

Harry turned and saw that Rick and his counsel were conferring. Walking carefully back along the ledge, Harry went back to the steps and returned to the floor. He looked around at the side tiers and found some familiar redheads, who waved, as well as Skeeter, quill moving busily. The dictation quill was returned to the parchment.

"I withdraw my question from the witness," Madam Bones announced when the quill was in place. It scratched that out. The audience murmured for a few seconds before falling quiet again, but the room now felt tense in a new way. "Does any other member of the court have a question for this witness?"

The barrister stepped forward a half stride. "I do." He had a deep rolling voice that oozed confidence. Sounding a tad patronizing, he said, "Mr. Potter, during your stay in my client's cellar, did you at any time feel that your life was in danger?"

"No," Harry admitted. "Not until later when I found out the Torq would have killed me had I managed to escape."

The man shuffled his broad feet as though dusting the floor. "My client did not fully comprehend the power of the magical object he had procured from North Africa. He couldn't even comprehend the language on the packaging."

"W-" Harry began. He had been about to ask the smug man why it was that Rick had told Draco that it *would* kill him. He closed his mouth. Angry now, partially at himself, Harry stated firmly, "He let that thing torture me. Many times. Bragged about how he had bought it just for me. And when I did start to fight it significantly, he used a flame spell to knock me back."

The man's mouth twitched every so slightly. "Precisely my point; my client didn't believe himself safe should you have broken through the bars."

Harry gave them man a disgusted look and stared him down, truly tempted to try a little delving into his beady eyes. Harry regrouped and tried for something incontestable. "He wasn't very concerned with my well-being."

"So, after this dire affair you must have required treatment then? St. Mungo's perhaps? Or at least a Healer house call?" The barrister didn't look anything like a snake, but his mind sure moved like one, Harry thought.

"No." In the man's gleaming gaze, Harry added, "My guardian was the Hogwarts Potions master for twenty years. He made up a poultice for my burns. Otherwise, yes, I would have required a Healer."

The barrister paced with that floor-dusting motion of his feet. "Mr. Potter, how many of my client's girlfriends have you dated?"

Harry crossed his arms. "Former girlfriends. And two."

"And how many did you sleep with?"

"Is that relevant?" Harry retorted.

The barrister turned his wide brown suit to the benches. "I intend to demonstrate that Mr. Rothschild was driven mad with jealousy by having to compete with so esteemed a suitor. So I request that the witness be forced to respond."

"Mr. Potter?" Madam Bones prompted.

Harry's stomach dropped a few inches. "One." Harry dearly hoped anyone present from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement believed that he were referring to Tara. Out of the corner of his vision, he thought he could see a few of the assembled smiling at his discomfort. He felt he had been exposed and pushed back with, "If Rick were mad with anything, it was loss of control over those he was accustomed to keeping under his thumb. He is not a very nice boyfriend."

"That is hearsay, Mr. Potter," the barrister chided him. "Unless you are asserting that you have also dated my client?"

"No, I haven't." Some small chuckles echoed off the old stones. Harry wished he were better at this, wished it were a duel of spells rather than words.

"Other questions?" Madam Bones asked after a pause."

The room remained blissfully quiet.

When he returned to the Auror's office, Harry found, upon quickly pulling out a quill and scrap of parchment, that his hands were not entirely steady. No one was around in the office and he could here banging and sizzling in the workout room. He jotted out a quick note to Snape warning him that he had revealed his Animagus status. Maybe he had registered already, or sent in something, Harry hoped, as he folded the note while heading down the corridor where the two staff owls were caged. Neither were there. Harry headed around the corner and much farther along until he came to the Muggle Artifacts office, his fingers mentally crossed.

"Harry!" Mr. Weasley greeted him happily, even though he appeared to be literally buried in paperwork. "How'd it go then? Out already?"

"I'm finished, the hearing is still going on. I need to borrow an owl. Kind of an emergency, although a personal one. The department ones are out."

Mr. Weasley jumped up and squeezed Harry's arm as he passed and led the way down to the narrow cupboard beside the file room where the supplies were kept. "Here, let's see," he muttered while looking through stacks of yellowed old envelopes. "Ah, here we are." He held out an envelope that bore the label *Official Use Only by Reg. 453 Subsec. C Para. 2*. "Put 'er in there and airplane it up to the mailroom and they'll send it along."

Harry stared at the staid envelope. "Er, the issue is already one of getting in a bit of trouble with the Ministry."

"It'll be all right. Send it on." When he saw Harry's hesitation, he asked, "What's the matter? It didn't come out that you're bunking with the Minister's niece did it?" he teased and hit him on the arm.

"No, thank goodness," Harry breathed in relief, thinking of Tonks.

"Harry?" Mr. Weasley blurted, sounding quite concerned in contrast to his jesting seconds before.

Harry waved him off. "It's about Severus." He stared at the envelope. "Maybe Minerva will warn him," he thought aloud.

Soberly, Mr. Weasley asked, "Warn him about what?"

"When they came to get me away from Rothschild, Severus and the Aurors, Severus slipped through the spell barriers as a snake. He just worked it out and I don't think he's registered." Harry waved his arm in the direction of the lifts. "I just told the entire, full . . . assembled . . . purpled, Wizengamot that!" Harry rubbed his brow, hard. "I didn't see it coming. I am not very good at that sort of thing . . . talking to the assemblage without digging myself in deeper."

Mr. Weasley took the envelope away and began addressing it. "That, my boy, unlike magic, requires a lot of practice."

"Magic requires practice," Harry countered, not sure if he had heard him right.

Mr. Weasley took the note to Snape put it in another smaller envelope, addressed it *Prof. Snape*, hesitated, then added *only* with several underlines. "Not for you I hear," he teased. He put this envelope in the other, sealed it and handed it to Harry.

It was addressed to *Ginny Weasley, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry, Hogsmeade*.

* * *

When Harry arrived home, feeling as though two full days had passed rather than one, he found a sizable pile of post waiting. He set the letter from Penelope aside, feeling that was too much to take in on top of the rest of the day. The others looked to be from the tail end of well-wishers, probably spurred by notices of the hearing that were in the *Prophet*. He stacked those neatly as well and left them on the sideboard. The box of half-eaten Honeydukes still rested there as well. He carried it to the table and proceeded to eat all but two of them.

In the evening a barn owl arrived with a letter from Snape. It was short. *Assumed that was going to come up. Registration paperwork at Ministry already.*

"Could've told me," Harry complained to no one, but he felt acutely relieved.

An hour later another arrived--a long-eared owl with an orange face. It insisted on handing the letter directly to his hand personally before flapping back out the window. The letter was from Shacklebolt. It read: *Tonks has been out in the field all afternoon, but she told me to be sure to tell you the verdict. The full Wizengamot found Rothschild guilty on most of the charges and sentenced him to seven and a half. --Kingsley.* Harry frowned lightly and wondered what the result would have been if he hadn't been protecting Draco. Seven and a half years was a long time, though, and Harry would be a well-practiced Auror by then. Harry considered with twisted relish the notion that Rick might come back and try something.

* * *

Friday was slow arriving, but it finally did, and Harry reported to the Ministry twenty minutes early, since he could not just sit at home waiting for the clock hands to move. Kali had picked up his anxiety and bounded about his room in a maddening manner as he wrote a quick note explaining his upcoming day to Snape. Harry, rather than cage her for the

afternoon, had simply shut the door to his room. That may turn out to have been a huge mistake, but as he stood in the corridor waiting to find out his assignment, he didn't care.

Kerry Ann arrived five minutes later, looking equally eager and decked out in very stylish Muggle clothes. Between the parties and being out on patrol, Harry was thinking he should save his allowance and start buying some nicer things to wear.

"The moment we've all been waiting for," Kerry Ann announced when she stepped up beside him.

"Definitely."

"Potter, what are you on about? Haven't you been involved in just about everything up 'til now?"

"Not really," countered Harry, who was just checking that he indeed had his wand and observing that he still had not gotten the damage on it repaired from his fight with Malfoy senior at Hogwarts. He polished it up a bit on the corner of his cloak before stashing it away.

"Not really," she echoed mockingly. She shook her head as if to clear it and came to a kind of attention as the office door opened before them.

Tonks and Shacklebolt seemed a little surprised to find them there. Shacklebolt chuckled and said, "Well, not lacking in eagerness; that's good. Kerry Ann, you're with me."

Harry broke out in a grin, then bit his lip to quell it. "Come on then, Champ," Tonks said, tugging him down the corridor by his sleeve. The unexpected thrill of getting to shadow Tonks was piling onto his excitement, leaving him exuberant and very aware of her fingers on his arm. By the lifts, Tonks paused and said, "Okay, some ground rules. . . are you listening?"

Harry, taken aback, said, "Yes. Don't I look like I am?"

"You look a little far away, frankly."

"No, I'm listening," Harry insisted as he checked yet again that he had his wand in his pocket. "I'm really happy to have drawn you to shadow," he explained a little shyly.

Tonks put her fists on her hips and stared at him. "Harry," she began in a disbelieving voice. "I drew *you*. Everyone wanted *you* as their shadow. There are old, semi-retired Auror's here like Mad-eye, who don't have to take any apprentices out, who joined the draw for you."

"Oh."

Tonks tugged on her ear and, shifting to an official tone, said, "Rules for tonight: first off, no taking action without my *specific* instruction. Got that?" At Harry's nod, she went on, "Now, obviously if things got very bad and I was out of action, then you'd be *expected* to act on your own, but that isn't going to happen. Second, I do *all* the talking. Third, I want you always just behind my left shoulder--so I know where you are without looking--at all times, keeping it zipped."

Harry's brow lowered but he nodded to that as well and, just in case, didn't comment.

"Let's see. Those are the most important. Well, let's stick with three rules for now. Any questions before we head out?" When Harry hesitated in thought, Tonks chided, "You can talk right now, Harry."

"Where are we going tonight?"

"Liverpool. We're just going to circulate and ask a few questions of some people I haven't followed up with lately."

Harry nodded and as they rode up in the lift, regretted that it wasn't Devon where he might hear something about Avery. After arriving by Floo powder in the hearth of an unused room at a place called the Black Horse, Tonks took something out of her pocket and made a note on it. Harry wanted to know what it was, but didn't want to demonstrate that he couldn't be silent for all of two minutes. Tonks then Apparated both of them to an alleyway where she lightly kicked the sole of a homeless man sleeping there.

"Shafer, hey there," she shouted. Harry quickly moved to stand just off her left shoulder, which was the best place anyway, as it was upwind.

The man raised blood stained eyes to squint suspiciously at the two of them. There was an empty bottle clutched in his left hand, partially covered by a heavily wrinkled paper bag.

"Whatcha wan'?"

"Seen anything bad in the last week?"

"Las' week?" he guffawed. "You think I remem'r the las' week?"

"Seen anything bad?" she repeated plainly.

"Huh, le's see . . ." he gave this due consideration. "Freddie was complain'n abou' gettin' hovered without 'is consent. You know how they is."

"Okay, we'll check that out. Thanks." She strode purposefully away, Harry following quickly behind.

"Can I ask a question?" Harry prompted when they were a distance away but not yet to the street.

Tonks stopped so fast, Harry ran into her. "Sure."

"So, what about Freddie?"

"Harry, there isn't anyone named Freddie."

"Oh." Harry considered that while looking over a stack of broken pallets beside a wide door. "So, why were you trying to get anything out of him?"

"Because no one assumes he sees anything, but he has eyes."

"Why didn't you just Legilimize him then rather than . . ."

"I did."

"Oh."

"Rule four, no make that rule twenty-five--I'll fill in four through twenty-four later--if I go all glaze-eyed while talking with someone like him, just carry me off and get a shot of something; I'll come right around."

Harry blinked at that. "All right," he answered uncertainly.

"Any more questions?" she asked, hands on hips, although she didn't seem impatient otherwise.

Harry shook his head and followed when she turned to exit the alley. He was thinking that Tonks had not previously seemed like the rules sort. This kept him from having to wonder how he could have been so confused about what Aurors did.

They circled downtown, talking to various witches and wizards slouched in tucked-away smoky pubs or living above hidden little shops all around the city. Hours later when they returned to the Ministry, Harry with a serious yawn upon stepping into the quiet atrium, it felt like a wasted evening.

"Did we learn anything?" Harry had to ask as they took the lift down to the offices.

"Nothing specific. It's all patterns, Harry. Sometimes, someone will say something, usually in normal conversation, that will make some ongoing mystery fall into place, or sometimes we'll be having a meeting here and I'll remember some otherwise meaningless observation that helps someone else's investigation. You have to keep your ear to the ground. Otherwise, every investigation would have to start from scratch."

She yawned as well as she dropped into her desk chair. With her head tilted way back to look at the ceiling, she said, "Go get us coffees. I have to show you how to fill out reports."

It was late, nearly one in the morning, when Harry finally made it home. Winky came up from the kitchen to ask if he wanted dinner. Harry's stomach, which had only received a random bite or two of poor pub food all evening, readily agreed to a real meal. Before eating, though, he desperately needed to shower off the city grim. He then fetched Kali who, other than taking a liking to clawing the old curtains, had not done any real damage while left to herself.

As he ate, Harry hoped that field work got a little more interesting, otherwise being an Auror might bore him to death--if it didn't wear his feet to the bone first. Kali curled up on the next chair and slept, bored by these thoughts as well.

* * *

Harry began living life through letters. That weekend they poured in, including a Muggle post one from his Polly Evans. The letter was full of standard hopes that he was faring well and it closed with an invitation to visit anytime. Harry folded that one and put it in the photo album, folded between the last two pages.

Ginny's letter was full of excitement over the new school year, for which Harry was glad; he didn't think she should waste it, academically or otherwise.

Tara wrote a short note saying she was taking a trip to Brussels for her job and expected to be gone a few weeks, at least. Harry sighed aloud, making Kali raise her head curiously; Tara had said she was planning to avoid that assignment. A few angry retorts came to mind and he was tempted to send them off in a letter, but resisted. He really should be more patient, after all, they had only been out a few times, and unlike his school days when that was quite significant, he was learning that it no longer necessarily was.

Penelope wrote as well, a letter that read like a lighthearted diary entry about her job and her family. Harry found himself again pulling out parchment and explaining his dating predicaments to her. Doing so made him feel hopeful that something could be resolved.

Alone now, Harry became diligent about things he noticed needing to be done around the house. That weekend he weeded the front garden and actually went clothes shopping. Since he had to go into London to exchange Galleons for pounds, Harry went to Marks and Sparks. Although the mannequins looked fashionable, Harry found that the racks of those particular clothes put him off. He ended up with three white shirts and two brown trousers--brown because otherwise he had headed all the way into London to buy Hogwarts uniforms.

He met Ron and Hermione at Hermione's flat for dinner. Hermione had apparently taken past critiques of boxed pasta to heart, because she had attempted a roast this time. Ron sawed away gamely at his piece and declared that it tasted great as he jawed away at a bite.

Hermione frowned at her plate. "I didn't imagine it would turn out so tough. How does your mum do it?"

"Slow roasting," Ron said, still chewing.

"Is that it?" Hermione asked. "I didn't have time. I thought if I turned the oven up a bit I could quicken things."

Harry cut a very small piece to avoid chewing. The potatoes were good and he said so. Hermione sighed. "At least we'll be eating out in Spain."

"Spain?" Harry prompted.

"Mione and I are going on holiday, you didn't hear?" Ron said in excitement. When Harry shook his head, Ron said, "I've always wanted to go to Spain. We're leaving next weekend."

"Sounds great," Harry said, finding odd bits of jealousy rising up, but he forced them down.

Hermione said, "It will be good to escape the parents."

"Haven't you?" Harry asked.

"Somehow, no," Hermione replied, sounding mystified. "So, how are things with you, Harry? Getting by on your own?"

Happy to have a chance to explain his multiple friends-who-were-girls dilemma, Harry went on in a rambling manner about Tara and Elizabeth, ending with, "Tara has been really hard to get through to since the Rick incident. She says she feels bad."

After a pause Ron said, as though stating the obvious, "She feels guilty."

"Apparently," Harry agreed. Ron and Hermione shared a look. "What?" Harry demanded.

His friends proceeded to have an eye-to-eye, silent argument about who would explain. Finally, Ron said, "Harry, you remember after Sirius fell through the veil?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, not sure where this was going and a little wary of the direction.

"Do you remember how guiltily you felt? You let it overwhelm everything. Well," he thought farther, "that's when you weren't blaming Snape. But anyway, you . . . were *really* hard to get through to."

"What Ron is trying to say," Hermione stated in her factual voice, "is that you have to be patient. Some things people have to work out for themselves."

"Oh," Harry said. He didn't feel like reliving those memories all that closely, even to glean anything helpful for dealing with Tara. "You'd think she'd get over it. None of it is her fault."

"Yeah, exactly," Ron said. "Like that."

Harry gave him a disturbed look and Ron returned to sawing his meat into too-large bites.

* * *

Harry spent most of his evenings studying in the library, his books and papers slowly taking over the room. As he was trying to organize things, he found the purple book still on the desk where he himself had placed it with the intent of reading it the next chance he got. He was beginning to wonder if it didn't have some kind of repelling charm, because he never went near it. That thought alone made him to pick it up and flip through it while taking a seat on the lounge.

He almost immediately knew why he hadn't read it earlier; it made him feel a bit queasy and not particularly better-prepared. Phrases like *emotive cleaved pathways to the dark plane* and *mentally distressed visions of land crustacea and amphibia hybrid animates* left him little desire to read on. He pressed on for ten pages in any event, his mind wandering to other things

constantly as he did so. The text was full of strong warnings and admitted guesses about what it called Interstitial Magical Forces. With a heavy sigh, Harry closed the book and put it back on the small desk with a dull thud.

He clasped his hands behind his head and stared at the over-full bookcases on the other side of the room. He wished Snape were there. In his last owl his guardian had mentioned that he would be home in two weeks time. The clock ticked loudly in the hall, reminding him how very quiet it was.

* * *

At the Ministry, Harry and Vineet sat on one side of the workout room behind a temporary floating curtain while Aaron and Kerry Ann worked on the other. They had a crate of discarded objects from around the Ministry, including old dented or even melted tea kettles, broken quills, and something that looked suspiciously like shackles, but they would have to go on a Troll they were so large.

"How about a yellow teapot?" Harry suggested. Vineet nodded and tapped the kettle with his wand to add that illusion. "And the shackles?"

Talking low also, he said, "Perhaps change the size down to human?" When Harry shrugged, Vineet tapped the heavy rings with his wand but they only shrank marginally. The Indian frowned and stiffened. Harry added the illusion himself, brushing off his fellow's failure to do so. He felt bad, but didn't let it show at all.

"Let's leave half of them normal to confuse them," Harry suggested. "We're finished," he announced to the room.

They tested each other's skill at illusion negation by exchanging crates. Aaron and Kerry Ann watched in amusement as they removed each item. Harry pulled out a hot pink, drastically oversized tea cozy and complained, "No double illusions."

"It isn't," Kerry Ann countered.

"Oh." He held it up to Vineet. "What do you think?"

Vineet held it at arm's length and considered the quilted, floppy thing. He tapped it with his wand once and it turned into a standard chair pad, albeit a hot pink one.

"Brilliant," Harry happily said. "That's one for us."

"Darn," Aaron complained.

In the end he and Vineet won handily. "It's not fair," Kerry Ann complained, "they left most of theirs untransformed."

"Nothing wrong with that," Rodgers stated. "Clever of them, I'd have said."

Harry grinned and gave his partner a wink, but Vineet still sported a faint frown. He had to know, Harry thought, that he wasn't meeting the trainer's expectations. Harry's smile faded as he took out a blank parchment and quill for their review session. He liked Vineet and didn't want to see him go, but didn't know how to prevent that.

* * *

Friday arrived with no field training scheduled and with his friends on holiday. Harry considered looking up some other friends. He went up to his room and opened his notebook. As he flipped to the pages of addresses, he passed his old notes about Avery.

Friends forgotten, he went and grabbed his broom, stood in the hallway a long time deep in thought, then instead put it away and went out back to the motorbike. With its cover removed it gleamed in the low morning light. Harry packed up a lunch, put on his warmest cloak and rabbit-lined gloves, and skillfully took off from the small, back garden.

Harry ran the machine flat out so that it only required three hours to arrive on the cliffs above Torquay. He parked the bike and looked down at the lush trees and grey sand of the beach. The wind was cold off the sea and Harry thought it just as well Ron and Hermione were in Spain rather than one of the blanket-wrapped, picnicking couples on the shore.

He rolled into town with the roar knob out just enough to be convincing. As he parked it beside the railing of the quay itself, he realized he hadn't thought this through. Well, he would just have to do as Tonks showed him--wander around and talk to people.

Within an hour Harry discovered that nearly everyone there was from somewhere else and many asked him questions about his motorbike that he couldn't answer. The explanation that he had inherited it seemed to satisfy even the most ardent admirers and further explanation that the departed godfather who had left it to him was too dear to sell the bike took care of the few who seemed ready on the spot to purchase it.

Parking the bike back where he started, Harry wandered into a game room where a few otherwise difficult looking teens were playing. Two younger ones, who were dressed less nicely than the others around town, were playing together on a machine that had four colored sets of knobs and buttons. The little blips of light on the screen took a minute to resolve into a little green figure shooting arrows like Robin the Hood and a brown Norseman throwing tiny axes. Large numbers of small trolls were pouring into a corridor on the screen and at the same rate being killed and disappearing. This equilibrium continued rather a long time.

"Behind you!" the boy shouted, startling Harry, who just resisted turning around as the warning was for the girl whose figure spun to shoot arrows of light at two trolls sneaking up from the other side. Eventually the trolls were overcome and the screen scrolled as the figures ran through a doorway. The boy wiped his hands on his pants during the pause.

"Do you live here?" Harry asked.

"Got a pound coin?" the boy asked.

The girl didn't answer so Harry assumed he himself was being addressed. "Yep."

"Put it in then," the boy insisted. The slot that ate coins was lit and Harry slipped in the pound. The machine made an electronic swallowing noise. The boy asked, "Want to join? You can be the knight."

"I'll watch." After a pause he said, "You get a lot of tourists here."

Some grumbling. "That's all we get here. Including you," the boy pointed out.

"No natives you'd rather not have around?" Harry teased, fishing.

"Sure, loads," the girl finally piped in. The figures were opening a treasure on the screen and distributing weapons including something labeled *Magic Potion*. Harry thought maybe this game looked like fun after all. More trolls died in vast numbers. The electronic sounds became urgent and the boy swore. He then said, "Got another pound?" Having not found anyone else to ask questions of, Harry fished in his pocket found another Muggle coin amongst the Sickles.

"Thanks," the boy said. The music became happier. "You looking to move here or something?"

"Something," Harry said. Even after following Tonks around for uncountable hours, he found himself uncertain how to make requests that didn't give away his motive. By no means did he want to warn Avery that he was looking for him. In the end he spent half of an hour and two more pounds, making small talk and bantering with the rather fowl-mouthed youngsters.

The electronic quest was still going strong as Harry made ready to depart. "Is there an evil wizard at the end?" he asked.

"There is no end," the girl replied flatly, hands never ceasing on the colorful plastic knob and buttons.

That evening, tired from his long journey, Harry heard a knock and glanced at the clock, surprised that anyone would call so late. He went down and found Candide at the door. "Hi," Harry said. "Come on in." As she stepped into the entryway and removed her heavy cloak, Harry pointed out, "You can use the Floo if you wish."

"I didn't know if you'd mind."

"I don't mind, but Severus isn't here this weekend, you know," Harry informed her.

"I know. I wanted to talk to you." Her voice had an unusual flatness to it.

Harry led her inside to the dining room and stoked up the fire to warm the room. "I'll tell Winky to bring some tea?"

"Thank you," she said as she settled at the table.

Harry returned from the kitchen and sat across from her. The fire felt good on his legs as it roared in the hearth. "What do you want to talk about?"

She frowned and hesitated. "Has Severus said anything to you . . . about, uh, me and . . . the future?"

Harry thought a moment to be certain, but then shook his head. With a sigh she sat back and clasped her hands. Harry said, "That doesn't mean much. He rarely says much of anything personal, really."

"No, he doesn't," she agreed with a dismayed laugh.

Winky came in with tea and a bowl of bonbons, bowed and departed. Harry poured for both Candide and himself. "What do you want to know?" he prompted, wondering about the mega-chocolate treats and the expected need for them.

She laughed lightly again, but it sounded defeatist. "I've been sort of expecting . . . hoping perhaps, that he's thinking . . . you know." Harry blinked at her before shaking his head that he still didn't understand. She clarified, "That perhaps he was thinking soon of asking me to marry him."

"Oh." Harry stirred more sugar into his teacup. "He hasn't said anything about that."

Yet again, she sighed. Harry asked, "Is there a reason you don't just ask him?"

"If you ask a man too soon. . ." She waved her hand dismissively and added knowledgeably, "It isn't good. Can derail everything. Even if it might have worked out in the end."

"Oh." Harry ate a bonbon.

Long moments of silence later, she confided, "My real problem is I don't know how to answer anyway."

"Er, why not?" Harry managed to return, feeling well out of his depth but having to stick with it.

She looked a little sad then. "This woman I work with, Roberta, she says the most horrid things about Severus." Candide winced and went on, "Started bringing in old *Prophet* clippings when I didn't believe her. Not that the *Prophet* is the most stellarly factual publication."

Harry straightened in his chair and added yet more sugar to his tea, sipped it, then added more tea, just for something to do. He was leaving her hanging, but he didn't know what to say.

Finally, she went on, looking pained, "I'm trusting you, Harry. You, of all people, have entrusted Severus with your well-being. I can't put that together with what Roberta insists . . . "

A little sharp, Harry asked, "So what does Roberta insist?"

Candide hesitated, "That at Hogwarts, he . . . practiced dark wizardry. That he was friends with known servants of Voldemort--wizards who in fact died battling Aurors or in the final battle." Her eyes were searching Harry's face, although he wasn't giving anything up, his flat look may have been sufficient.

"Harry?" she prompted, pleading.

Harry placed his cup and saucer back on the tray. "You have to speak with Severus about this."

"Why won't you talk to me?" she demanded.

Harry exhaled hard, fishing for a good reason. "Because everything I have is hearsay." This was a bit of a lie, but it sounded good; it was a word the legal books used a lot. "You need to talk to him."

Looking downcast, she said, "So you're saying it *is* true. I don't get this."

Harry stood and repeated firmly, "I'm saying, you need to talk to him, not to me."

She grimaced lightly and stood as well, cueing Harry to go and fetch her cloak. "Take the Floo from here," he suggested.

After hooking her cloak around her neck, she dropped her arms heavily and gazed at him. "I trusted you, Harry," she said accusingly.

"I didn't tell you to do that," Harry retorted, feeling anger now, at the way things were, more than her insinuations specifically. Harry went on, "Severus is very important to me, but I can't be his proxy when you have accusations to level. I'll defend him as an adoptive father all day, but I wasn't at Hogwarts when your friend and my father were and my father died before I could possibly ask him any questions about Severus." An unwelcome desperation was trying to take hold of Harry. He fought it off as she considered that.

"He'll be around next weekend, right?" she asked, sounding unhappy.

"Yes. That's what he told me."

"I'll come back then," she stated and, moments later, she was gone.

* * *

Hunting Avery lost its appeal for Harry that week. He had been plotting how to get to Devon for a few hours and now when he thought about it, it seemed likely to be fruitless. He threw himself instead into working on Sirius' case. During a long lunch break one day, he pulled all of the related files and borrowed a desk in the Auror's office to spread them out and compose a summary as Tonks has suggested when Harry had pressed her about how he should start.

Staring at the old files, clippings, interviews, evidence photos, and wanted posters, Harry felt that this was the most important thing he should be doing. It wasn't right that his godfather, of all people, was still officially considered Voldemort's associate.

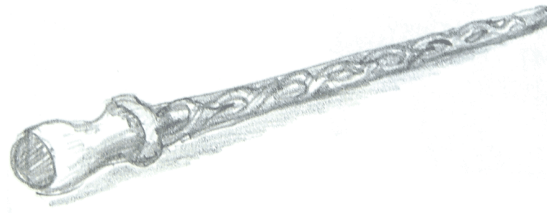
Harry was just starting to jot down a few notes when the owner of the desk returned. Shacklebolt looked over Harry's shoulder with interest. "What are you up to?"

"I want to clear Sirius' name. You knew him. Don't you think he should be?"

"I have to admit I hadn't thought about it before. But as I do so now, I certainly think it should."

Harry collected up the files and moved to Tonks' desk. By the end of lunch, if nothing else, he felt he had a much better feel for how to read case files as well as how to read various Aurors' handwriting. Moody's was definitely the worst, a shaky bit of work that was always crooked at a thirty-degree angle, even when horizontal lines were available as a guide.

In the file room, with Moody's handwriting on his mind, Harry quickly restowed the documents in their proper drawers, and even quicker, headed down to *Portnoy-Pterido* and pulled his own file. It wasn't the right file though, not the one Rodgers had with his apprenticeship paperwork. The one in the drawer here was from his hearing for underage wizardry and misusing magic in the presence of a Muggle. It looked just like one of the other case files: coversheet with basic description; notes from investigators, including Umbridge. It was a thin file at least, he considered as he put it away. Unlike all the others, which were heavy and thick with repeated investigations.



Chapter 63 -- Haunted by the Past

That Friday, Harry and Kerry Ann again waited in the corridor outside the Aurors' office. They were both a little more confident today, their eagerness tempered. Tonks and Shacklebolt came and collected each of them.

Shacklebolt said, "You want this one?" to Tonks as he held out a parchment.

"Either one," Tonks waved the sheet she had. "Harry's familiar with Mungo's, right Harry?"

"I've been there," Harry replied, mystified by the question.

"I'll take the hexing report then," Shacklebolt said. "Come along, Ms. Kerry Ann, we have a real assignment this afternoon." They stepped down to a lift.

"Do *we* have a real assignment?" Harry asked hopefully.

Tonks nodded. "We do, an easy one. Can you Apparate to St. Mungo's?"

Harry nodded and a moment later they were in the incoming area in the cellar. Harry followed Tonks, careful to stay just to the left of her back all the way, even up the lift to the fourth floor. He began to recognize where he was when they reached Ward 49.

"I'm looking for Healer Strout," Tonks said to the first official-looking person they encountered. The small old witch with a volunteer's badge on her robes gestured that they follow her and at the end of the long corridor she knocked on an office door.

When the door opened, a witch working at a desk immediately looked up and said, "Ah, they did send someone. Come in. Come in. Have a seat." Tonks led the way in and closed the door. Harry took one of the old straight-backed chairs before the desk, looking around at the colorfully painted office. The shelves beside him held a collection of strangely and even impossibly shaped glass vials and bottles, some that turned in on themselves so that one could never pour anything into them. When he looked back to Healer Strout, she was gazing at him, befuddled. "The situation doesn't warrant such, uh, attention does it?" she asked, looking between him and Tonks.

Tonks, who had toned herself down to grey-blue hair and blue robes, said dismissively, "Mr. Potter here is just following me around, pay him no mind."

Strout thought that a very odd suggestion, based on her glazed look. "All right," she agreed anyway, sounding confused.

Tonks had a little notebook out. "So, tell us what happened."

Strout clasped her hands before her and said, "Well, at around five this morning Mr. Lockhart simply walked out."

"What?" Harry blurted, suddenly very alert. "Sorry," he immediately apologized to Tonks.

"Familiar with Mr. Lockhart, are you?" Tonks asked him.

"Just a bit," Harry returned darkly.

Strout spoke into the gap after that. "Note, that we normally don't allow our patients to just walk out. There are spells to keep them in and a night nurse. The night guard downstairs, as well as the greetingwitch on duty at the time, said he seemed to be a perfectly normal late visitor who just needed directions out."

Harry thought of commenting about how odd that was, but kept quiet. Tonks scratched out some notes. "Can I see his records?" The Healer handed over a file that was lying out on her desk. "Did he have any visitors in the last week, last month?" Tonks asked as she flipped through the thick folder.

"The staff said he hasn't had any visitors for months. *Witch Weekly* sent a reporter for some sort of *Where are they now?* article in June. That is the last anyone remembers."

Tonks handed the file back. "You deemed it suspicious?"

"This kind of sudden recovery after this much time is very unusual, and the hospital director remembered him as having an unsavory past. Although I've always considered him charmingly harmless."

Tonks stood. "Let's take a look at where he's been staying."

They followed Healer Strout down to the ward. Inside, the faint scent of deteriorating lethargy made Harry breath shallowly. Tonks looked around and under the one empty bed. Posters of Lockhart, yellowed at the edges, waved from the wall behind it. Harry watched Tonks look around, crouching to look under the bed when she did. Tonks then attempted to interview the occupant of the next bed, who apparently believed he was a broomstick, because he would suddenly stiffen, put his arm up, go completely deaf and would make a noise like rushing air, which Harry assumed meant he was flying somewhere.

While Tonks worked at this, Harry looked down to the end of the ward where the Longbottoms had been last time. Mrs. Longbottom, looking far older than Harry remembered, was sitting on her same bed, holding something tan and fuzzy, stroking it methodically. The bed beside hers held a curled-up figure who didn't stir. Harry wanted to go down there and say hello but he remained where he was, diligent for the moment, just off Tonk's left shoulder.

Tonks finally gave up and seeing the blank gaze of the other nearby bed's occupant, sighed. She jotted down a few notes and then stared at the notebook in thought.

Harry asked, "Do you mind if I go down to the end?"

Tonks' gaze turned to the last bed's occupant, who appeared to be gazing at them, or perhaps just through them. "Think she can answer questions?"

"No," Harry admitted. When Tonks shrugged, he went and stood at the foot of the last bed. Mrs. Longbottom didn't look up at him. "Hello," Harry tried, feeling pained by the scene. He could see now that she held a small stuffed lion and, without looking at it, was brushing its fuzzy mane back.

Tonks came quietly up beside him and they shared a sad look. When Harry turned back, Mrs. Longbottom was holding the lion out to him. "No, you keep it. Thank you, though." She held it out another moment before tucking it close, gaze still very distant.

On the way out, Harry tried to shake his glum mood. Tonks was quiet as well.

Back in the offices Tonks pulled out a fresh parchment and asked Harry to go check for an existing file. Harry went down the quiet corridor to the file room. The lights were down so he took up a lamp from beside the door and pulled out the drawer *Liechtenstein-Lovey*. Sure enough, there was a *Lockhart, Gilderoy* there, a relatively thin one. Harry perused it on the way back. It held an identity sheet, a letter from Dumbledore, and a mental health assessment that ran five pages. The letter from Dumbledore was in pretty couched language.

Mr. Lockhart, it seems, has been deceiving the public about his skills as a dark arts defender. He is reported by two of our students to have made threats of the most heinous kind in an attempt to perpetuate this deception. I expect that his current state renders his previous actions null and void.

Tonks read over the pages. "Who were the two students, do you know?" she asked, sounding strangely like she did not expect him to know.

"Ron and I," Harry replied.

She sat back and perkily asked, "Oh, well, do tell."

"You don't know what happened when the Chamber of Secrets was opened?" Harry asked, surprised.

She glanced at the report. "Ninety three is before my time, although this is sounding familiar from stories people in the Order used to tell about Malfoy. Something about a cursed diary, right?"

Harry proceeded to explain what had happened and how Lockhart was going to let Ginny die and wipe his and Ron's memories. The memory made Harry more angry now than he remembered being at the time.

"Well, no wonder you don't like the guy," she commented, making more notes. She flipped her battered quill back and forth over her chin thoughtfully. "I don't know what to think of his disappearance. It doesn't seem dastardly, just odd." She proceeded to write up a report for their visit to St. Mungo's and when she finished that started another one on the events at Hogwarts. Harry felt very odd being formally interviewed after all this time. The memories of it came back clearly, though, after he started in on them.

When she ran out of questions she finished filling out the forms, dating, spelling, and organizing them into their folders, which she handed to Harry to file.

When he returned he said, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"What is that thing you have in your pocket? You write on it when we arrive somewhere it seems."

"Oh. Just this." She pulled out a small battered slate tablet framed with wood. After more fishing around in her pocket, she pulled out a white stick. "I use it to check in. I'm pretty bad about that but if I say when I arrive in a new city, they lay off me about it. I can also use it to sound an alarm by drawing a star on it followed by a message." Quieter, she leaned closer and said, "Usually when I have an emergency, I don't have two hands free to write out a message about it."

It was six; too late, Tonks thought to head out again on patrol. Harry was a little reluctant to go home, but he said good-night rather than ask what she was doing that night, as he was sorely tempted to, and collected his things.

At home it was raining hard. Harry stared at the streetlight-highlighted droplets on the window and wondered exactly when Candide planned to visit. Snape hadn't returned yet, his owl indicated it would be long after dinner, but not exactly when. Harry now thought he should have stayed in London, it would be better than sitting here in his room feeling doom settling around the house. His mood was topped off by Snape's note that morning saying that he hoped Harry was free to visit his mum's coven on Sunday.

The rushing sound of the Floo emanated from downstairs. Harry methodically put his things away and stepped down. Snape was in the drawing room, exchanging some files from a small trunk. His cloak was tossed over the chair and Harry caught a whiff of Hogwarts castle on it.

"Good evening, Harry," Snape greeted him.

The door knocker sounded. "I'll get that," Harry said.

Candide was at the door, very wet. "Come in." He didn't repeat that she could use the hearth. He led her into the dining room where the fire was already burning high. "Wait here, let me break him into this."

This startled her. "Thanks. But don't ruin it for me, if you can help it," she pleaded lightly.

Harry rubbed his hair as he walked back to the drawing room. "Uh, Severus . . ." he started, but then stalled. Snape's brow furrowed as he turned, gazing at his charge through his hair. "What is it? Who is at the door?"

"Candide." Snape stepped toward the hall, but Harry restrained him. "She stopped by last weekend," Harry explained quietly before he closed the door and silenced it. "She had a lot of questions that Roberta brought up. Ones I told her she should ask you." Harry regretted now not having owed Snape with at least a warning. Snape moved slowly as he took that in. His hand dropped to the chair back beside him by measure and eventually gripped it. Harry went on, "She thinks you may be considering marriage—"

"What?"

Harry flinched at the tone and realized he had blundered in where he had been specifically warned not to go. "She just wanted to know if that might be true," he attempted to recover. Snape looked essentially appalled. "That's what brought up the other questions," Harry went on quickly, mentally chiding himself.

Snape's eyes dropped to the floor before he straightened and said, "Well, let's see what they are."

"Do you want me to talk to her?" Harry asked before Snape reached the door.

"No. I'll do it." He sounded fatalistic.

Harry trailed a distance behind Snape. He felt he should follow because he couldn't simply go up to his room and hope for the best. In the dining room Candide sat with hot cocoa, which she put down when they appeared. "Severus," she greeted him.

Snape stepped in and leaned on the back of the chair across from her. "Harry informs me that you have questions you wish to have answered." Harry frowned at the tone that sounded similar to one used with his House students.

She looked as though she regretted being there and Harry wondered if he should have just tried to explain, but he hadn't wanted to have a hand in convincing her to break up with Snape. Candide asked, "You remember me mentioning Roberta before?"

"Yes," Snape replied. Harry marveled that he could put that much derision into a single, small word.

Candide rubbed her hands together, glanced at Harry, who managed a look of sympathy, and finally said, "I need to hear you say a few things aren't true."

"Such as?" queried Snape after a delay. The two of them appeared to be opponents suddenly, rather than lovers. A painful transition to observe, making Harry drop his gaze to his toes and just listen.

With feeling Candide said, "I'm trying to preserve something here; at least help a little, Severus."

Coldly, Snape returned, "You've already made up your mind."

"I don't want to believe these things, but why would the *Prophet* print . . ." She winced. With more certainty, she asked, "Were you friends with someone named Nott when you were in school?"

"Yes."

"You were friends with wizards who ended up serving Voldemort? Including one who killed himself rather than be captured during the final battle?"

"Yes."

"Is there ANYTHING that isn't true?" she demanded, distraught. More quietly, she said, "I've spent months defending you." Gesturing, she said, "You have Harry Potter, of all people, with you . . . how can . . . ?" She frowned and challenged, "How?"

Snape held completely still for a long time, staring her down. Finally, he said, "Potter, you've been taught a Protean Charm correct, and the Indiceffector?"

Harry froze, skin chilling. They had covered that spell but had only practiced it very briefly on pre-charmed ink blotters with hidden messages. He didn't respond.

Snape turned his dark, hooded gaze back over his shoulder at him. "Potter?"

"I won't use it."

"Are you an Auror or not?" Snape snarled at him, as nasty as Harry had ever heard him.

With a hard swallow Harry shook his head. "Not if you ask that of me." When Snape huffed in disgust, Harry insisted, "It isn't who you are."

"What do you know about who I am?" Snape demanded, although he sounded like he really didn't want to be arguing.

Harry stepped over beside him, desperately searching for the right thing to say. Across the table, Candide stood transfixed with faint horror. Snape rubbed his left arm inside his sleeve where his mark would be if it were revealed with the spell he was demanding of Harry.

"I don't get it," Candide muttered, pained.

"Don't get what?" Snape taunted her. "You've been in denial," he pointed accusingly. "You have wanted to be."

Her mouth worked before she said, "You weren't . . . aren't really . . . ?"

"Really what?" Snape demanded. Candide appeared very sad then. Her eyes took in Harry without reaction. In a low voice Snape mocked, "You can't even say it."

Her jaw ground then before she angrily asked, "All right, then. Were you really a Death Eater?"

"Yes," Snape returned, sounding cruel.

Her fiery anger vanished again, "How could you?" she whispered in pain. "How could *you*?" she demanded of Harry.

Snape appeared to take more of an affront at the second. "Let me talk to her alone, Severus." Harry urged, taking him by the arm and tugging in the direction of the door. "Please," Harry pleaded.

Snape tugged his arm away and stalked off. In the distance a door slammed.

"I trusted you," Candide whispered accusingly.

"So keep trusting me or make up your own mind in the first place," Harry countered angrily. "I don't appreciate you hurting him," he went on, pointing at her to emphasize.

"Hurting him?" she mocked. "What could hurt a Death Eater?" she asked, mouth twisting at the words. "Merlin, to think I was hoping he'd want to marry . . ." She cut herself off and appeared rather sad.

Harry leaned over the table and stared her down. "You don't understand anything," he spat at her. "About him or me."

"Clearly," she returned, eyes bright with unshed tears. "Bloody Merlin," she whispered, grabbed up her wet cloak in a bundle, and brushed past him.

Harry couldn't let it go at that. He followed her out to the garden and into the rain, which pounded straight down in grey-brown sheets. In the road he grabbed her sleeve and pulled her around. Following her, he had prepped his story about Snape healing him because he understood, but in the wet road, reflecting the headlights of the passing cars, what he said was, "I thought you cared about him. What, were you just pretending?" He was furious, he realized, perhaps dangerously so, because the reflected headlights looked green now, rather than blue-white.

"I can't keep caring for someone like that," she said retorted. "I don't know what kind of spell he has you under."

"None!" Harry snapped angrily. "If you only knew," he muttered, forced to stop by what might have been a chittering sound, although over the torrential rain it was hard to tell. The swirling water in the road appeared to hold eel-like shadows that moved against the reflections on the surface.

"Harry!" she shouted in alarm. He had stepped backward into the road as a car approached and had to leap back to the relative safety of the gravel at the same time the headlights swerved.

"Go," he ordered in fear, not sure what was real around him and what was rain, not sure what might find passage through his anger from the dark plane as the purple book implied could happen. "Go!" He insisted, and she hurried off with a worried glance back. In it, Harry saw great concern and it made him feel rather badly about how messed up things had gotten.

Back inside, Harry realized how very wet he was. Snape stood silhouetted at the end of the entryway, face in shadow. "Sorry," Harry muttered as he peeled off his dripping jumper and hung it up without bothering to ring it out. Control came only with putting the last few minutes aside and he did that, with effort. With nothing else to say, he stalked by Snape, leaving puddles of rain in his wake on the stone floor.

* * *

Breakfast was the quietest Harry could remember. Snape ate sparingly. Candles lit the table because of the heavy grey sky outside. Harry's circling thoughts kept generating arguments he should have used with Candide. Perhaps he would owl her after Snape departed. On the other hand she seemed to have ruined his weekend with Snape and that made him think it not worth the bother.

Around noon Harry carried the wizard chess set into the drawing room where Snape sat working his way through a pile of post. "Would you like a game?"

Snape looked only at the board in Harry's hands, already set for play. "Perhaps. When I have finished with this."

"All right." Harry hesitated as he searched for words that were out of reach. Earlier in the week he had had all kinds: about his first field experience, about the purple book, but they didn't fit in now. He had hovered too long and forced himself to turn. Snape's voice caught him just outside the doorway, "It is all right, Harry."

Hurt anger flowed into Harry as he turned. "No, it's not. It isn't fair to you."

Snape sat silently before sighing and saying, "As you yourself have pointed out, it is impossible to make someone understand difficult events for which they were not present, no matter how familiar one is with that person otherwise." He shuffled the parchments before him with a dismissive air although it didn't look entirely convincing.

"Don't you like her?" Harry pressed, thinking of all the times, although infrequent, she had been over or Snape had gone out to meet her. "Seems like you must."

"It is no matter," Snape replied. Then after another pause, "Give me half of an hour and we can play a game."

* * *

It was with a kind of dread that Harry came downstairs early the next morning. Facing the duel drag of the memory of Friday night and the prospect of a visit to Snape's mum left him unenthusiastic about the day. Snape sat at the table, however, looking pretty much himself. Harry wondered at his taking something like that in stride, or perhaps he was just too used to being treated that way.

"Still want to take the motorbike?" Harry asked, since a light drizzle was falling.

Snape stood and snidely asked, "Don't know any repelling charms, Potter?"

"I know several now, thank you very much, and I think you are reverting to speaking to me like I'm one of your students."

Snape straightened and patted Harry's arm. In a concessionary tone he said, "You can provide the charm then, and we'll take the bike."

The flight took less than an hour, even at a speed slow enough to let the charm work effectively against the oncoming mist. Harry, feeling ungenerous, put the *Roar* knob at halfway, which, in the quiet of the countryside, was rather loud. An entire contingent of the curious waited around the rose gate when they landed in a burst of damp dust and a loud thunk and clatter. Pretending that there was nothing out of the ordinary, Harry put down the stand and dismounted after Snape.

Ratta and Princess, a little taller but still rail-thin, gaped at the bike from either side of their mother. Beside her, Anita, Snape's mum, appeared more appalled than the rest, who wore wide varieties of expression. The Covenelder's voice cut through the silence. "Welcome back," she said graciously, giving Harry a wink as she towed him inside by the hand.

The furniture in the community building had been rearranged to support a group luncheon because of the rain. Fruits, most not normally in season, were already set out in bowls. Harry tried to say hello to the young girls but they were stiff and formal with him, and he suspected it wasn't his entrance. He tried crouching to talk to them, to be closer to their size, but he couldn't get more than one word answers out of them and lots of fidgety shyness, no matter the question. Their large eyes appeared almost disappointed as they took him in.

Introductions went around as everyone took a seat. Harry sat beside his guardian and across from Anita. After general small talk, Anita said, "So, Harry, rumor has it you were kidnapped."

Nearby heads snapped up at that. "You've been following the news a bit," Snape offered. "Just for our visit?"

In an unfathomable tone, Anita replied, "I was thinking it would be nice to have something to talk about with visitors for once."

"Not a rumor," Harry replied easily. "Girlfriend's former boyfriend."

Caroline quipped, "One reason not to have any men around."

"Women can be just as bad," Anita countered, making Harry wonder whether she always took opposing sides, and as well, just whom she was referring to. Harry took a deep breath and served himself more mashed potatoes, working to avoid being baited. He fervently hoped Snape did the same. Anita sighed. "Four days though. No one could find you?"

Harry tried to decide if he were just reading things in where they weren't. After further reflection he decided her tone was just a little wrong. He met her dark brown gaze levelly. In a voice that came out with far more depth than he ex-

pected to hear from himself, Harry said, "There is so much to what happened that you cannot know, especially not from reading the *Daily Prophet*, that I have to warn you that treading suggestively into it, isn't going to gain you anything but the reverse of what you are hoping for."

Beside Harry, Snape calmly put his utensils down and wiped his hands. "You need not defend me, Harry," he stated softly.

"I sat in that cold cellar hoping you would not attempt to find me, because I knew what it would take for you to do so." Harry caught Anita's shifting gaze, and clarified, "The blood spell it would take to do so."

Her gaze flickered and she started paying more attention to her plate. Beside her, the covenelder asked, "So the business of hunting dark wizards is still profitable . . . that's good," she stated cheerily as she topped up his tea with her shaky hand. "Gives you something to keep busy," she added as though discussing stamp collecting. Harry found his lips curling into a reluctant smile.

After the meal Harry tried again to draw out the two girls. He sat with them in the corner of the room while they worked at drawing with chalk on the tan tile floor. "What's that?" Harry asked Ratta.

"It's a witch on broom stick, silly," she replied. Harry cocked his head and finally saw that, glad he hadn't guessed that it was a tree and a lake.

"Do you talk to snakes much?" Princess asked, drawing one in white chalk.

"Not much call for that, really," Harry admitted. Explaining that he had last talked to Snape that way, didn't seem wise since Anita would shortly hear about it.

Princess kept up the questions. "Do you do lots of magic?"

"All the time. We practice at the Ministry nearly every day . . . hours at a time."

"Show us something," Ratta cajoled.

In another part of the room, someone had taken out some sort of homemade stringed box instrument and was apparently tuning it. The first few sounds didn't bode well. "What would you like to see?"

"Well, obliterate this, so I can try again."

"Not my snake," Princess snapped, leaning over to guard her drawing with her arms.

Harry took out his wand and carefully cleared away the purported witch. Ratta blew a few times to clear the remaining dust before starting again on a remarkably similar drawing. "Teach us a spell. A Hover spell," Ratta suggested.

"Sure," Harry said, happy to comply, happy also that they were losing their stiffness around him and being their cheerful, demanding selves. A crude wooden ruler sat on the floor. Harry moved it and demonstrated the spell a few times, showing them the flick at the end in particular that made it work. "Want to try?" He offered his wand.

"Harry!" the sharp voice of Snape came from over by the bookshelves where he stood chatting with Caroline, Anita and a few others. Snape shook his head once, very sharply. Harry, confused, withdrew his wand from Ratta's approaching grasp and with his eyes, asked for clarification from his guardian. Snape didn't respond.

"Just a second," Harry said to the girls. He stood and went over to the group. The various expressions didn't make much sense. "What's wrong?"

Softly, if not a touch stridently, Snape explained. "They do not want either of children touching that wand . . . or, more specifically, one which has been used to cast an Unforgivable curse."

Harry stared at Snape as he took that in, then looked down at the dull finish of his wand, at the gouge still marring the handle. He shrugged and stashed it in his pocket, although something inside him rebelled. "All right," he muttered, feeling strangely betrayed as well as confused.

He returned to the two girls who were adding wings to the snake to make it into a dragon. "No spells," he explained when Ratta looked at him questioningly.

"We learn them all the time," she countered, sounding confused as well.

Harry exhaled, "Not from crazed Aurors," he said, very quietly.

Ratta had good ears though. She looked up at her mother in a way that indicated she knew boundaries were being laid down and that she might chose to push them. Changing to grey chalk, she went back to adding puffball clouds around her witch and the dragon and didn't say anything for a while.

Harry was still feeling rather ambivalent when they departed. The mist had lightened, so he ran the bike flat out after making altitude; until Snape tapped him on the arm. Harry throttled back to the pace they had used outbound, but Snape tapped him again. Harry slowed farther yet, until the wind was low enough to hear over.

"What's wrong?" his guardian asked, his hand gripping Harry's shoulder harder when a gust of wind struck.

Harry stared off across the rich green quilted landscape. Cars snaked along on a major road below them. In the far distance a slice of sunlight hit a lush hillside that was free of the usual stone walls that cut up most of the landscape. Anger rose as he found words. "They think I'm stained," he said over his shoulder.

"They think your wand is," Snape countered.

"There isn't any difference. You believe it too," Harry accused, pinning down the feeling of betrayal.

Snape leaned closer and spoke normally since he was just beside Harry's ear. "By no means do I think that. I simply understand their concern and did not consider it something worth debating, unlike many other of their narrow-minded assumptions."

"It bothers me," Harry turned his head to say.

He felt rather than heard Snape sigh. Snape's free arm tightened around him reassuringly. "I don't want you to think I am not on your side, because I am. We should discuss this when it is easier to do so."

Harry throttled the bike up, forcing Snape to tighten his hold severely. His voice rang in his ear against the wind, "Do not nurse this anger all the way home, if you would."

By the time they landed and parked in the back garden, Harry felt numbly angry and still vaguely betrayed, although not by Snape, which was just as well, because his guardian was blocking the path to the back entry. "Look at me," Snape ordered. Harry grudgingly raised his gaze. "I was sharp with you--don't look away--because I have read a bit about covens of that sort and the purification rites they might have considered using had they deemed the girls in need of it."

Harry backed off on his anger and let it flow out of him as though it were water. "Oh."

"You are not soiled. Your wand, however, does have a shaded history--"

"Yeah, I just shared minds with Voldemort and see the dark plane on occasion," he snapped sarcastically.

"That . . . has nothing to do with it," Snape retorted.

Harry laughed darkly. "No?"

"It doesn't and you know it," Snape argued. He shook his head, pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. "Potter, you have me wishing I knew what Albus would say about now. That . . . is a first."

Harry laughed despite himself.

"Harry, you are so far from evil you wouldn't even cheat at a game of chess." Snape grasped Harry's upper arm and urged him inside since it had started raining again.

Frowning, Harry asked in true curiosity, "Why would anyone bother playing chess if they were just going to cheat at it?"

"Precisely," Snape returned. Inside the hall, he turned back to his charge and said with unusual feeling. "Please do not let it wear at you. You are the very epitome of good wizardry."

"Why would it matter then?" Harry asked, still finding annoyance at the whole episode. "And besides, what did they want? *Someone* had to destroy Voldemort. What, they want that bad wizards should stick around until some other bad wizard and they happen to kill each other at the same time?"

Snape took Harry's shoulders firmly in hand. "Stop it." Harry looked away, still discovering twisted emotions rising up in himself. "You are so far from being dark, you don't even qualify as off-white. Let it go. There is a reason they live in a coven . . . it is to escape the real world and the real choices and sacrifices it presents. You, of all people, have sacrificed too much to let them get to you."

Harry's shoulders relaxed in Snape's grip and he let go. "Much better," Snape uttered before stalking away.

Harry took out his wand, the twin to Voldemort's, and studied its worn and marred surface as he rotated it around before stashing it back away in his pocket.

That evening in his room, Harry took out the last Muggle letter he had received from Polly Evans, the widow of his mother's cousin. It occurred to him now that he could have dropped in for a visit on his way to Torquay, had he thought of it. Since the trip had not been useful otherwise, he now regretted the oversight. He sat down and penned a letter back to her, warning that he may take her up on her offer that he call anytime. After the day's visit to the coven Harry felt in need of reassuring relatives, and the memory of his last visit to Godric's Hollow still made him feel warm inside.

He stashed the letter in his bag to post from London the next day, but then wondered if that were the best idea. Pamela and Patricia might wonder why the letter came from nowhere near where Harry lived. He would have to step out in the morning and post it from the box outside the train station.

Snape departed that evening, seemingly in a vaguely dark mood. He gave Harry a pat on the shoulder before taking down the tin of Floo powder. Harry watched him flare away, not sure who to be angry with but wanting to pin it on someone, otherwise he would feel helpless. Candide seemed a good candidate, but by the end of a long evening of finishing all of his readings, Harry found Anita to be a better reason for his dismay. When he finally did crawl into bed, he fell immediately into a hazy, dream-filled sleep.

* * *

During morning drills the door opened and one of the senior apprentices, a small man by the name of Augustus Munz, slipped inside the workout room followed by Rogan and Shacklebolt. Rodgers turned curiously their way. "We're just watching," Shacklebolt insisted.

This morning they were practicing the nine standard physical counter-curses for heating, freezing, overwhelming olfaction, disorientation, static charge, muscle weakening, blinding, deafening, and short term memory loss. Given the number of spells to choose from, one had to pay careful attention to one's partner. Initial wand motion gave most of them away,

but Kerry Ann was getting clever and changing spells part way through her cast. Harry had already suffered quivers and the gagging stench of sulfur so he was concentrating pretty hard.

Rodgers eventually called a halt after they had been at it long enough to get bored with the drill. "Something up, Gussie?" he asked the older apprentice.

"They wanted to, uh, see how things were going," Munz replied with a shrug and a crooked smile that dominated his small face.

"They're looking for a duel," Harry supplied. When Rodgers gave Harry a disapproving look, Harry added, "Ask them."

Rogan was smirking and Shacklebolt had crossed his arms as he leaned back against the wall with easy confidence.

"Are they, then?" Rodgers said. "Trouble is, I don't want to have to explain later to Madam Bones what happened to our fine, young apprentices."

"Just apprentice. Just Harry," Rogan explained.

Kerry Ann crossed her arms, wand angled out. "Yup, we're chopped liver."

Rogan went on, "It is tormenting to hear the sizzle and crack of spells at one's desk all day long without getting a chance to play a little as well."

Rodgers rubbed his eyes before saying, "Tristan, really, I can't risk a real duel. You want to come help with drills a few minutes--that's fine."

Shacklebolt used his broad shoulders to push away from the wall. "Drills then. Well Miss Kerry Ann of the chopped liver, let's see what you have."

The two of them moved into opposing positions and the rest stood aside to watch. Kerry Ann gave a snort of confidence as she raised her wand. After Shacklebolt counted down from three, Kerry Ann ran her usual trick, starting with an ice curse and changing to a stench one at the end of the motion. Shacklebolt turned his head as though he could escape the odor and had to regroup to finish a fire curse which Kerry Ann had plenty of time to counter.

"Hm," Shacklebolt muttered but another curse was flying his way already and all he could do was block, but he was fast on the rebound, faster than his opponent expected and ice crystals crackled into existence on Kerry Ann's sleeves and the tips of her hair as she barely used a heating charm on herself in time.

"Drills, Kingsley," Rodgers criticized. "A little less power if you would."

Kerry Ann was snapping the ice out of her hair and looking dangerous. After another countdown she simply fired a blasting curse, which was easily blocked although the floorboards rumbled with the aftershock.

In a teasing voice Shacklebolt said, "Remind me to stay on your good side." He let her use him for target practice for three more rounds before holding up his hand to call a halt. Kerry Ann looked annoyed that she hadn't gotten through.

"Potter next?" Shacklebolt asked hopefully.

"Potter last," Rodgers said, and gestured for Vineet next.

Harry tried not to bite his lip as the Indian, stepping with his usual light muscular power, changed places with Kerry Ann. He and Shacklebolt exchanged a few sensory curses which even if they had hit Vineet, he would not have let on. When Shacklebolt said, "Something with a higher hazard quotient then?" Harry stiffened. A flashing barrage flew between them, until Vineet's wand, struck by a Snaking Wind charm, flew out of his hand and skidded across the floor. Harry picked it up, noticing the worn, onion-shaped gold filigree that decorated it. He pretended to look it over to give his fel-

low apprentice a chance to catch his breath. From the look of the faded red and green and perhaps yellow paint, he realized that it must have been completely painted originally, as opposed to just highlighted as he had assumed.

"This is really old," Harry observed as he handed it back.

Vineet accepted it and said diffidently, "It was my great grandmother's who got it from her grandmother who told her it was from the most famous Bengali wand maker." His face had the usual sheen of sweat from exerting himself and he seemed willing to take advantage of the break.

"It must have been really beautiful when it was new. British wands don't look anything like that."

Exhaling as though he had finally caught his breath, Vineet said, sounding a little difficult, "They aren't anything like this one. A British wand barely works for me at all."

After a few more rounds, Rodgers called a halt this time. Vineet stepped to the wall beside Aaron, who gave him a light punch on the arm as a gesture of solidarity.

"My turn," Rogan insisted. Aaron stepped up and faced him, looking determined. Rogan began to count down from three but Aaron cast at him somewhere around one and a half. Rogan just managed a block with a few backward steps to catch himself.

"You want to play it that way?" Rogan complained.

Harry had always thought jumping the count a Slytherin dirty trick, but when it was his cohort pulling it, it seemed less so and he grinned as Rogan shook his head disgustedly before counting again. This time he matched Aaron at the two with a shiver curse that made Aaron drop his wand. "Happens to everyone," he excused himself as he picked it up. He didn't even look as though he had done it on purpose.

Harry's turn finally arrived, along with a brief argument between Rogan and Shacklebolt.

"You drilled with two already," Rogan complained.

"I have seniority," Shacklebolt countered.

"I'll duel both of you," Harry offered.

"No, you won't," Rodgers snapped.

Harry shrugged. He stood in position and waited, holding his wand lightly at his side with just his fingertips--ready to aim and gesture a number of spells that tugged at him like leashed animals eager to be released. Rogan finally won out and Shacklebolt scuffled over to the others and leaned back against the wall beside Vineet.

Rogan counted down and Harry let his instincts battle for him. It was easy that way, his hand and mind working together to throw a blinding curse, strong enough to make his opponent blink, even though his counter was on time, followed by a modulated block for a shiver curse. With real danger not a concern he let himself fall into an almost meditative rhythm of block, cast, block, cast. He jolted himself out of it when he saw something different flicker across the Auror's brown eyes. Rather than wait for the beginning of the oncoming spell, Harry put up a modulated Chrysanthemum block and immediately reinforced it. Something resembling sideways driving rain streaked like comets of light through the air and hammered at his block, which began to dissolve and clearly wasn't going to hold through the end of the barrage. Desperate, Harry cancelled that block and immediately cast a Titan, all forward, with as much power as he could put behind it. In the gap, balls of energy sizzled through and struck him, stinging his arm, shoulder, and a dozen other places, although the pain faded quickly. The Titan rushed forward as a wall and exploded, taking the rest of the onslaught with it. The room was silent in their wake.

Harry didn't even take a breath before he aimed and shouted, "*Rbuumitai!*" One of the spells Fred had used on him at his birthday party. In that instant Harry was aware of his trainer opening his mouth as though to chastise Rogan, who looked puzzled by Harry's incantation. The next instant all of it was blotted out.

Fred had not put this much behind the spell. The light in the room dipped to a coal red and a column of one-foot-long, red, green and gold dragons streamed out of Harry's wand. Still on instinct, Harry cancelled the spell with a jerk of fear that he didn't actually know what the dragons would do, as they had not reached him the only other time he had seen this spell. Rogan tried an icing counter, but it didn't slow the creatures down and they swarmed over him as though they were actually liquid and wanted to encase him. Rogan fell, struggling, and Harry started forward, panicked now as he had no idea how to counter the spell's causetum. Fortunately, he didn't get two steps before the effect vanished.

Coughing, Rogan sat up straight and felt about himself as though to verify he was whole. Both Shackbolt and Rodgers had reached his side. "Well, you deserved that," Rodgers said, "for using a Flamesickle on an apprentice."

"Sorry," Harry said as Rogan was helped to his feet.

"What?" Rogan asked, confused.

Harry didn't want to explain that he had not only unwisely used a spell he couldn't cancel completely, but whose effect he didn't even know. He shrugged as though he were gamely apologizing. Rogan brushed himself off and accepted his wand from Rodgers who had picked it up for him. "Should have let Kingsley have him," he grumbled as though through wounded pride. At the door he turned and asked Rodgers, "When do we change shadow assignments?" while sending a calculating glance back at Harry. Just before the door close, he conceded, "Fair win, Potter."

Harry didn't think so; he thought he should be more careful.

* * *

The next day they were off an hour early again. Aaron, with his usual spirit, organized another Diagon outing after they had finished all their drills without supervision. He insisted with a chuckle that they leave a note on Rodgers desk promising that they would use the extra time for readings. This seemed to amuse him no end, enough that Harry was amused by Aaron himself. Kerry Ann headed off her own way saying this was a good time to catch her mum before she left for work.

The remaining three of them stepped through the wall after Apparating into the Leaky Cauldron and into the clear sunlight, which only seemed to show the grime better. Aaron stopped before the owl emporium and peered in the window. "I need a new cage," he said. "I want something a little nicer than these though. I should just find a Muggle bird catalog, I guess."

Harry looked in as well and was about to suggest going inside to look, when he turned and found himself facing Draco Malfoy, cloaked to his ankles even in the heat.

Aaron said, "Well, look who it is," in a less than welcoming tone.

Draco turned a haughty expression to him before his light eyes returned to looking beyond Harry. "Leave us alone a second," Harry said to Aaron.

"You sure? You and a Slytherin?"

"Aaron, you are looking at the Wizarding world's only honorary Slytherin. It's all right."

Aaron stepped away, taking Vineet with him. Harry could see them both glancing back as they sauntered to the next store and stopped before an outdoor rack of marked-down, dented cauldrons.

"Thanks," said Harry quietly to his former nemesis.

Draco snorted a little laugh. "I don't want you owing me, Potter."

"Oh, good," Harry quipped, trying for brightness. "I'd prefer that."

Draco half looked behind him in the direction of the cauldrons. "Those your little Auror friends?"

"Yep."

"The Ministry must be desperate." Draco smirked. "As usual."

With his own snide expression Harry countered, "They only need to be better than you, Draco."

Draco smiled strangely before he dropped into seriousness, exhibiting that fast mood shift of his father's. "Grateful, Potter?" he asked in a keen hush.

Evenly, Harry replied, "Yes, I am."

"Hm." Draco moved as though to depart, but stopped to say, "Don't expect me to bail you out every time."

Almost laughing, Harry replied, "I won't. Believe me."

Brow raised in a vaguely disgusted manner, Draco stepped away.

Harry released his pent up breath and joined his friends. "How is Mr. Malfoy?" Aaron asked sarcastically.

"I get the sense you don't like him," Harry teased.

"Hm," Aaron murmured, still watching Draco weaving his way down the crowded alley as though to make sure he didn't try anything.

Harry fingered his wand inside his pocket and had a sudden thought. "You know I need to make a visit to Ollivander's. Come along with me," he urged his friends.

Aaron seemed far away still. "I think I *will* try Eeylops," he said and headed that way.

"Want to come along, Vineet?" Harry asked, trying for innocent. Vineet didn't reply right away, and had he been Snape, Harry would have reinforced his Occlumency. Before the other could ask anything, Harry took out his wand and held it up to show the gouge, now worn and well-soiled along the bare, unvarnished cut. "Draco's father did that," Harry explained, remembering. "I keep meaning to get it repaired." He tilted his head invitingly, "Come on."

Vineet followed in silence with a shuttered expression. Harry, if pressed, would have guessed he was actually angry. Harry, for his part, was determined to test his inkling.

The bell on the door rang musically as they entered the dim shop. Harry had forgotten just how high the full shelves were, and just how many wands they held. Vineet even seemed to be distracted as he looked around.

"Ah . . . my dear Mr. Potter," Ollivander said with feeling as he approached the counter from the back. His light eyes considered Harry in detail as he almost methodically placed his hands on the counter and leaned toward him. "Wand still treating you well, I hope?"

"The magic is fine, but I need a bit of a repair."

Ollivander accepted the wand and, handling it with a delicate touch, turned it this way and that, peered down the length of it, appeared to stare through it even. "So much power from such a simple thing," he observed softly. After a slightly

longer examination of the damage, he smiled and took it aside to a crowded little work area with a large lamp and lots of tools and bottles and rags.

Harry waited with poor patience while Ollivander worked. He had to force himself not to stand on tiptoe to try to see better what the sparkling spells in yellow were all about. A small crate of fine wood chunks in various odd shapes was perused and a sample selected and more sparkling spells ensued. Ollivander stopped and bending down, blew on the wand, as though to hurry the drying of glue. Bottles were opened and various vapors assaulted them in an eye-watering succession.

Presently, the shopkeeper straightened in the midst of fine polishing. When he finished, he presented Harry's wand back to him from the depth of a red velvet polishing cloth. Harry blinked at it in surprise; it was so clean and shiny he barely recognized it.

"Thank you," Harry said honestly and, after turning the like-new wand over yet again in his fingers, pulled out his coin purse.

"Four Sickles," Ollivander said, as though pained at the notion of charging him.

Harry plunked the proper coinage down on the counter.

Ollivander slid the coins to his edge of the counter and held them there with his long, boney fingers. "And your friend here?" he prompted.

"I have a wand," Vineet stated dismissively.

"He has a really interesting one," Harry quickly said. "A really old one."

Ollivander tilted his head almost birdlike and considered Vineet. He clasped his hands at his chin, making his sleeves fall away from his pale, age-spotted arms. "Yes, you would have a Jaina wand then, no?"

Vineet shook his head before relenting and handing it over from his pocket. "It was my great-grandmother's."

"Of course, of course," Ollivander said, oddly reassuring, as he studied the wand. "Kshatriya then," the shopkeeper murmured thoughtfully. "A Jaina wand makes very little sense, in British context."

"I agree," Vineet said. He had lost his cold edge and now seemed interested in the shopkeeper.

Ollivander held the wand before himself, in both hands, pinkies outward. "Are you in the market for a replacement?" he asked neutrally.

"No," Vineet replied stiffly. "It would dishonor my family to consider such a thing."

"Ah," Ollivander uttered, as though that were something he didn't know. "You do realize that it has been altered from its original . . . incarnation, shall we say?"

This was clearly news to the Indian. "How is that?"

Ollivander held up the end of it. "It has been re-cored, I am quite certain. Mixing budrose and unicorn mane is most unusual." He said this in a way that implied it was to be avoided. "I suspect it originally was cored with something more appropriate."

"Such as?" Vineet asked, truly curious apparently, and as Harry had hoped, completely pulled in by Ollivander.

"Dragon spine, perhaps. Let's see," Ollivander said, glancing up at the high shelves. He placed Vineet's wand reverently on the counter before the Indian and hopped up on his sliding ladder and, with surprising ease for one his age, climbed up

to the far corner above the door and, after some searching of labels, withdrew two long boxes from the very bottom of a very tall stack. He returned with them and spent some time deciding between them without opening either one.

"Manticore heartstring," he announced and paused to evaluate that statement with Vineet.

Vineet didn't take his eyes off the slim, dusty box.

Ollivander opened it. "Thirteen and three quarters inches . . . approximately. Sandalwood." Harry's eyes went wide. The wand Ollivander held was brightly painted red and yellow with gold filigree. Ollivander glanced at Harry and explained, "Years ago, I had a flying carpet salesman who used to supply me with these. Not much call anymore. Immigrant Bengali children want British wands, and since they seem to work well enough for them . . ." he shrugged his boney shoulders and held out the wand to Vineet. "Care to try it?"

Vineet started slightly as though he had just arrived via Apparation. He reached out for the wand and appeared quite surprised as he grasped it, although there wasn't an outward reason for it. His eyes roamed over it, still surprised.

"Give it a go," Ollivander suggested casually. "Give it a wave, or hover that old chair in the corner or something."

Vineet, with a long glance at the old worn wand on the counter, aimed, swished, and flicked. The chair smashed into the high ceiling and wood chips rained down. Harry put his arm over his head to protect himself.

"That seems to be your wand, young man," Ollivander stated dreamily.

Vineet was in shock and didn't move. "How much?" Harry finally asked.

Ollivander didn't take his eyes off Vineet. "Eh, ten Galleons."

"That's all?" Harry, with a glance at his immobile companion, took out his own purse and handed over the gold coins.

"I am more pleased to have found it a good owner after all this time," the shopkeeper said, pocketing those coins along with the previous Sickles. He turned to Harry and asked with a gesture at the counter, "Do you think he would like this one, uh, tuned and re-cored?"

"I don't know. I'll ask him later," Harry said dismissively and took up the wand himself. "Thank you, Mr. Ollivander."

"Anytime, my dear man. Anytime." With a last concerned glance at Vineet, he disappeared into the back of the shop.

"Vineet?" Harry prompted, in serious concern.

Vineet blinked slowly and said quietly, "I would have refused. For anyone but you, I would have refused. I knew what you intended." With a long sigh, he lowered his forehead into his hand. "I have worked so hard . . ."

Harry was very grateful that they were alone in a quiet shop because Vineet looked ready to break down.

"It's all right," Harry tried.

Vineet, head still bowed, looked the wand in his hand over again. In an almost empty voice, he said, "It was a ruse . . . always overcompensating some other way. I have been loyal to my ancestors, why have they no reward for that?" He wasn't asking Harry; it wasn't clear if he expected an answer, but he fell silent as though waiting for one.

Harry resorted to shaking his friend. "Hey," he said sharply. This finally brought Vineet around.

In an unsteady voice Vineet said to him, "I am humbled by your-"

"Stop that," Harry ordered him. "You're standing there, telling me about high expectations you can't imagine living up to, a dead family legacy you can't argue against . . . you're telling *me* that?"

Vineet straightened up as he considered those words. Harry held out the other wand for him. Vineet put them side by side in his hand and pocketed them. After a soft exhale he said, "I am looking forward to tomorrow's training . . . more so than usual."

Harry laughed. "Just be careful not to kill anyone or take out any large blocks of London between now and then all right?" He led him to the door. "You've been forcing your power through that mismatched wand all this time. Goodness knows what you've boosted it up to."

"I have never had a spell with too much power."

"You did just now," Harry said, as they were stepping out, indicating the remains of the chair.

"I should be paying for the chair," Vineet said, turning back.

"It was an old chair," Harry assured him as he took him by the arm and steered him into the now, too-bright alleyway. They didn't find Aaron, which disappointed Harry. "Should we take you back to the Ministry now?" Harry suggested.

"I will wait until morning," Vineet said, much closer to his usual calm.

Harry, buoyant with the knowledge that Vineet would easily pass his six month review--as long as he left the Ministry intact in the meantime--grinned and suggested an ice cream to celebrate.

As they ate--Harry double chocolate, Vineet boysenberry--Vineet fell into a deep, inward silence. Harry didn't interrupt it, just watched the shoppers as he spooned cold goodness onto his tongue. He was enjoying the fact that fewer people became startled upon seeing him there. Only one child squealed and pointed until shushed by an apologetic parent.

Vineet pushed his empty bowl aside. "You have been most patient with me."

"You *are* a slow eater," Harry stated, deliberately misunderstanding.

Vineet shook his head but a faint smile played at his lips. "There are many more possibilities now."

"I'm glad for that, Vineet. I like having you around." Harry wiped his fingers again and tossed the serviette into the pool of brown milk in his bowl. "You are really good at illusion detection."

"Such things are no effort. I was hoping that we would cover barriers as well before the next review. They are also being easy for me. Although I do not think it would have made enough of a difference, no matter how rare a skill it is."

Harry fought a frown but pushed it away with thoughts of tomorrow morning. Thinking of the note Aaron left their trainer, he stood and made his goodbyes with a last admonishment, "Be careful heating your tea."

Vineet replied before they parted, "I generally use the stove anyway."

* * *

Harry arrived very early for training the next morning, but he still found already Vineet in the workout room when he arrived. The Ministry was still quiet and the department corridors empty. Harry yawned and put his bag aside.

"Let's see what you've got," Harry challenged.

The dummy was still set up from the previous afternoon. Vineet stretched his shoulders back and aimed a blasting curse at it. The stout metal beam of the stand bent a few degrees with an animal-like squeal and, rather than rock up, the dummy snapped out straight as though it were hollow and light before crashing back on its hook and shuddering.

Harry twisted his mouth and reluctantly asked, "That was the lightest you could manage, wasn't it?"

Vineet stood thoughtful, brow low, and didn't respond. The door opened into the silence and Rodgers stepped in before looking up at them in surprise. "You are both rather early."

Harry, who had been anticipating this previous to that last spell, now felt a little uneasy about the forthcoming revelation. "We've, uh, been working on Vineet's spell power."

"Oh," Rodgers said as he arranged some books on one of the desks. "That's good. Any progress?" he asked in an informational tone.

"Uh, a bit too much, in fact," Harry admitted. Vineet seemed content to let Harry do the explaining.

Rodgers shifted his attention to them and closed the book he had opened. "Too much?" he confirmed doubtfully. He left the books and stepped over to them, almost immediately noticing Vineet's wand. Rodgers' face went a little dark. "I do remember suggesting that."

Vineet held up the blond wand with its yellow and red rounded diamonds outlined in gold. Harry supplied, "He took a little convincing."

Very quietly, Vineet admitted, "I have difficulty saying no to . . ." He nodded at Harry. ". . . the destroyer of the Un-Voldemort."

"Ah," Rodgers muttered. "Well, let's see something. Try a freezing spell on the dummy."

Vineet lifted his arm and aimed his pale wand, but held back on the spell. Rodgers was patient through the long seconds the Indian hesitated. Finally, Vineet cast the requested spell. With a crackling roar, ice grew in a wave to encase the dummy, stand, the floor leading away to the wall. A frozen waterfall formed up the wall behind the dummy and even spread out onto the ceiling. The air felt a little chilled as the ice crackled quietly to itself.

"Ah," Rodgers muttered again. "Some kind of power attenuation is definitely in order." His eyes traced the mass of ice before them. "No drills for you for a while." Without another word, he went out.

Vineet held his wand at arm's length and stared at it. "It is odd to realize that one is not who one believed one was."

"What?" Harry asked. Vineet shook his head rather than elaborate.

Rodgers returned with a box of feathers. He pulled one of the desks aside, sat Vineet down, placed a feather before him and told him to practice hovering it. The first feather shot to the ceiling and fell in a crumpled ball back to the floor. Rodgers said, "Working on that is your assignment for today." Then as though to soften that, he added, "I'm sure I don't need to ask if you've memorized the readings . . ."

"Congratulations, Vineet," Aaron said when the others arrived and everything was explained. Vineet was concentrating on a less-than-average abused feather and didn't react to being slapped on the back. When this one kamakazied into the ceiling, Aaron jested, "Maybe you should get a half-working wand."

Rodgers, arranging things on the front table said, "That will probably only prolong his learning to control his power. But . . . if it comes to that."

The other three of them went through their usual discussion and drills. Vineet worked on feathers through the day until their afternoon preview of the next week's training.

"Any luck?" Rodgers asked as Vineet moved his desk back into the group. When Vineet shook his head and kept his eyes far away, Rodgers said, "Give it time. It's something most people learn naturally as their power grows."

They broke for the day. Aaron departed with a reminder to Harry that the first Hogwarts Quidditch match was that weekend. Harry insisted he couldn't forget that. He was slow packing away his things into his bookbag and eventually only he and a rather somber Vineet remained.

"There is a saying . . ." Vineet began. Harry hoisted his bag and waited for him to continue. "I believe it is something about careful wishes."

"Be careful what you wish for," Harry supplied.

Vineet's shoulders fell a little. "That is the one."



Chapter 64 -- Just Visiting

Harry met Aaron in the Hog's Head. He had suggested meeting there mostly because he expected that it would be less busy on a Quidditch weekend. Harry found Aaron at the bar, talking gregariously to a stranger shrouded in a brown hooded cloak. Harry, a little alarmed by this, stepped quickly over.

"Hey, Aaron," Harry said casually, looking over the other figure, or what little he could see of him or her. "Who's your friend?"

"Oh, uh, I don't know his name," Aaron admitted. "I didn't catch your name," Aaron said to the figure. The figure simply shook its head.

"Aaron," Harry said, hitting the other man on the arm, hard enough to be noticed. "You haven't traded anything with this man, or played any games of chance, have you?" The figure turned its head as though to listen better but didn't raise it enough for Harry to see any of the face.

"He did suggest that for later," Aaron replied easily.

Harry stood dumb an instant. "Aaron, you cannot be this naïve. Please tell me you aren't."

"What's the harm in a game of cards?" he asked, sounding defensive.

"I don't even know where to begin," Harry groaned, half to himself. "Come on, let's get seats a little early."

"You don't want a butterbeer? I want to finish mine." He resisted Harry's pulling him away from the stained and greasy bar.

"Take it with you," Harry insisted, hauling hard enough to get the other to move off his seat and into the midst of the tables. He left him there and returned to the obscured figure still slouched at the bar. Leaning close to the hooded ear he said, "No gambling with Aurors."

The figure turned enough that Harry could see a pointed chin with a light brown, scruffy beard. "Who are you to order me around?" the man mocked in an oily voice.

"Harry Potter," Harry snapped. A glass smashed to the floor at the corner table.

After a pause the figure said, "Oh. All right then." Then after a pause: "He didn't have anything worth taking anyway." He held out his hand with something in it. Harry cupped his hands and caught the leather pouch that dropped into it.

At the door Aaron asked, "What did he give you?"

Harry held the pouch out. "Your wallet."

"Oh." Aaron accepted it, peeked inside, then pocketed it. At the gate by the lake he said, "That is really quite embarrassing. Why did you suggest meeting there?"

"Haven't you been there before? That place is always quiet and I didn't want to cause a stir."

"Well, you did that anyway," Aaron observed, sounding moody.

A few ducks swam in the shallows of the lake as they walked by, a long tentacle following stealthily. "You were a Slytherin," Harry said. "I assumed you could take care of yourself."

The stadium came into view over the lawn, banners alight in a stream of sunlight piercing the clouds. Other visitors were walking alongside now. Aaron quietly said, "Contrary to you, Potter, I've led a pretty protected existence. Not by choice." He took out his wallet again and looked through it before putting it back away.

Harry relented on his chastising tone. "Well, don't trust anyone who hides their face. That's a pretty straightforward rule."

"I thought he had a deformity or something," Aaron defended himself.

"That's awfully sweet of you to believe, but that usually isn't the case."

They reached the arch that led into the arena. Harry followed up to the visitors' section which was only sparsely populated this early. Aaron went right to the very front row and took a seat; Harry followed, enjoying the breeze, the sound of the banners snapping, the scent of the lake and freshly cut grass.

"Missing Hogwarts?" Aaron asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied, surprised by his companion's observation.

"I recognize that look." Aaron sat back and breathed in deep. "I considered flunking seventh year, just stay longer. Often later wished I had."

Grinning broadly, Harry teased, "Severus must have been glad to see you go."

Aaron sighed. "His threatening me was probably the reason I didn't repeat a year, just for fun. I'll never forget him telling me I should have more pride. I had barrels-full of pride, I just didn't care about some things."

"Grades."

"For example."

The game began soon after the teachers filed into their stands. Harry resisted waving until he saw Snape's eyes searching the stands in their direction. Snape nodded in return and beside him McGonagall waved as well. The teachers made for a motley assortment in their section with Flitwick about one fifth the size of Hagrid two down from him. Sinistra wore some kind of glittery gold band around her forehead and Trelawney's diaphanous cloak kept trying to float over the edge of the stands beside her.

Finally the teams came out. The match was Slytherin against Hufflepuff, leaving Harry little dilemma about who to cheer for. Suze looked good. Only slightly taller than last year and just as thin, she moved like a razor around the pitch. The game went on a long time, making Harry wonder if they hadn't gotten a better Snitch just for the match. Harry didn't catch sight of it until Suze did and then only because she veered towards it. The final score of 220 to 20 left the Hufflepuffs slumped as they made their way off the grass.

"Should have held them scoreless," Aaron criticized sagely as they stood to depart. "The Keeper better improve that sloppy sideways block before the next match."

Down on the grass Harry walked away from the departing crowds and into the arena, where the green-clad Slytherins were congratulating each other. Snape, towering over Suze, put a hand on her shoulder and leaned down to speak to her. Her eyes shifted to far away, bright with victory. Harry forced down a twinge of complicated jealousy just as Snape's eyes came up at their approach; at least, Harry hoped he had managed in time.

Snape's look did soften just a micron as he said, "Hello, Harry. Ah, Mr. Wickem," he greeted the other in flat, doubtful tones. To Harry he said, "Minerva is expecting you for dinner."

"All right, I'll meet you there." He congratulated an ecstatic Suze before the Slytherin team moved to the changing room and Snape joined the teachers congregating near the base of the tallest arena tower. Harry walked with his fellow Auror apprentice. When they were on the lawn and apart from the others, Aaron asked, "Do you get to sit at the head table?"

"I don't know," Harry replied uncaringly, because Aaron sounded jealous.

"Hogwarts dinner sounds nice. I have to go to dinner at my mum's."

"Again?"

"Every weekend," he grumbled.

Harry didn't think that so bad. "That's nice." Aaron gave him a vague look of disgust. Harry said, "I wish I had a mum to visit for dinners."

"Potter, are you trying to make me feel guilty for wishing the hedge-hags my Mum imagines in the shrubbery were actually after her?"

"No," Harry immediately denied, then thought again, "What?"

Putting on a falsetto voice, Aaron said, "So nice to have an Auror in the family, then I can call someone to clear the ferocious nymphs out of the hollyhocks." He quit the voice. "Honestly." They stopped where they needed to split up for Aaron to return to Hogsmeade.

"Do you want me to come to dinner with you next weekend?" Harry offered.

Aaron fell thoughtful for a long time. "She would leave me alone about that then--just won't give it up. I'll let you know, I suppose. Give into that, who knows what she'll ask for next." Aaron headed off over the freshly mown green, looking glum. He turned and said, "See you on Monday, Potter. Have fun."

The teachers exited the arena, keeping a stately pace. When they came upon Harry, who stood waiting for them, McGonagall greeted him with, "Good to see you, Mr. Potter."

Harry glanced over the familiar faces, encountering one new one, an ordinary looking wizard with short brown hair. Harry's scrutiny drew him forward just as McGonagall introduced him. "This is our new Transfiguration instructor, Cathal Cawley."

Cawley eagerly shook Harry's hand. "Honored to meet you, Mr. Potter," he said breathily, reminding Harry suddenly of Quirrell; although, the man didn't stutter at all.

"Likewise," Harry returned, trying to shake old memories.

During the walk to the castle, Harry found himself eyeing the new teacher as though trying to see through his disguise of normalcy. Snape interrupted Harry's visual interrogation. "Did you enjoy the match?"

"Yes," Harry replied, then in a low voice, he asked, "Did the headmistress approve you using a professional Snitch?"

Snape's eyes glittered. "She did authorize a slight upgrade in school equipment, yes." He walked with his hands clasped behind his back, looking almost relaxed.

"Making sure Suze gets her shot at going professional?" Harry teased.

Snape didn't reply, just kept walking, a smug look upon his face. Harry turned away with a grin and found Cawley disquietingly close at his shoulder.

"Mr. Potter, so very good of you to visit. The staff do so speak of you in such fondness."

"Do they?" Harry asked in disbelief. Glancing around, he found the teachers otherwise occupied in conversation, with Greer pointedly ignoring him, and Snape still looking straight ahead.

Cawley almost sounded hurt, "You sound surprised."

Harry considered all the times he had been caught, and not caught, at things that he had previously been assured would get him sent home. A little loudly he proclaimed, "Their memories must be failing." This perplexed Cawley more. Harry took the opportunity to ask, "So how long have you been teaching?"

"Just started," he proclaimed in excitement. "I studied for three years under a Yoruba witch in Brazil and I thought I was ready to move on, even though I rather fell in love with the country. Ever have a capiriñas?"

"No, can't say that I have," Harry replied, uncertain what that might be.

"Ah," Cawley sighed, apparently remembering one just then.

They had reached the Entrance Hall, but it was still an hour before dinner. Harry followed Snape to his office where he said he needed to do some work. As Harry closed the door behind him, he said, "I hope I'm not bothering you."

"Of course not . . . have a seat," Snape said in a welcoming tone he never used with students. Harry did so, clasping his hands over his stomach, relaxed. He wanted to ask if Snape had talked to Candide at all, but decided against it.

As Snape marked assignments he asked, "So, what did you do in training this week?"

"We started on illusion negation."

Snape paused to look up. "Interesting. Are you learning to see through an invisibility cloak?"

"That's one of the last things. But few manage that, we've been warned. Right now we are working on detecting basic changes like color, size, or shape." Harry rethought that and asked, "Why, hoping I'll teach you?"

"Hm." Still marking with his green quill and flipping rapidly, Snape asked, "And is the topic presenting any challenge for you?"

"No, it's easy."

"That's good," Snape opined, although there was something odd in his tone.

"So what about this new teacher?" Harry asked.

"He seems acceptable, but I have not delved into that in any depth. I will have to at the end of the first term when he has a performance review."

Harry stared out the window. "He seems suspicious."

Snape lifted his quill and looked up with brows low. Very doubtfully he asked, "How so?"

Harry shrugged. Thinking aloud he said, "He seems too normal." Then he added after further thought, "No new Hogwarts teachers are ever what they seem."

"Few of the old ones are either," Snape pointed out. "Except perhaps Binns."

Harry chuckled.

They arrived early in the Great Hall. McGonagall insisted that Harry sit beside her with Snape on the other side of him. As they took their seats, she said affectionately, "It is very good to see you, Harry."

"Thank you for the invitation, Professor."

She leaned close. "Please, do call me Minerva. And how is your apprenticeship?"

They talked until the hall filled with boisterous students. McGonagall asked, "Shall I publicly welcome you?" she asked.

"Oh. That isn't necessary," Harry said. "I know everyone."

She smiled and a moment later platters of food appeared on the tables. Harry hadn't caught the signal and his stomach rumbling distracted him from wondering what it had been. The meal went quickly and soon the empty, soiled plates vanished. As things wound down, more students looked up at the head table, eyeing *him* he assumed, since McGonagall was always there.

As they waited for pudding to appear, a small student in a blue uniform hesitantly approached their table. He had a bushy head of curly brown hair that dwarfed his small face, although even its bulk couldn't compete with his wide eyes. The head table sat on a raised platform, forcing the boy to rock up on tip-toes to peer up at Harry.

"Come on up, Mr. Van Eschelon," McGonagall invited.

The boy was so small he had to climb rather than take a large step up. Harry wondered that children started Hogwarts so young.

"M- Mister Potter," the boy managed as he clutched his hands together. He glanced back at the Ravenclaw table as though for advice. More wide eyes there and the smaller students made motions to urge the boy on. Harry tried hard to find a friendly feeling face to calm the boy's obvious fear.

McGonagall cut in smoothly. "Harry, this is Erasmus Van Eschelon, a first-year, if you had not recognized that."

"Hello, Erasmus," Harry said in the lightest voice he could manage.

Erasmus shot worried glances at Snape and the headmistress before saying, "We . . . uh, hi, uh, we wanted to welcome you to Hogwarts . . ."

Welcome? Harry almost echoed in disbelief.

" . . . and, uh . . . " Another glance back at the end of the Ravenclaw table where many small faces wore pained expressions. " . . . and we are really, really honored to have you here . . . "

Harry now realized that he should have allowed McGonagall to make a little speech at the beginning of the meal. The gap between himself and this dear place took a bounding spread as the student went on, leaving him less homesick and more adrift.

Erasmus' eyes dropped to where his feet fidgeted fiercely. Harry didn't dare interrupt and lengthen the boy's torment. " . . . and we think you are a really great wizard." He was speaking to the platform now, but utterly unaware of it. "Well, and we all owe you a lot." His head finally lifted. "Well, that's what I . . . we wanted to say."

Harry wasn't ready for his turn in this. "Well, thanks. I appreciate that."

Released, a relieved and flushed Erasmus ran back to his table looking strung out, as though he had faced . . . well, Voldemort. Harry turned to his left. McGonagall picked up her chalice of mead and said, "In just over a month you have reached legend status around here."

Harry said, "At least the teachers-"

"I was referring to the staff," McGonagall interrupted him. "The students are yet another matter."

A bread pudding had appeared before Harry and he pulled it closer and picked up his fork. He didn't want to be a legend; he wanted to have this place, this first home, as a kind of refuge. He had forgotten that it wasn't static; that it had a life all its own. Beside him, Snape patted his arm. Harry turned to him and he said, "I do try to point out to them how truly awful you were at Potions, but they just get angry with me."

"I appreciate that," Harry said. The gulf between himself and the room full of school chums had yawned too wide. He swallowed his first bite hard and pushed his plate away.

"All right there, Harry?" Snape asked softly.

Harry nodded. Very quietly, so that McGonagall couldn't hear, he said, "I didn't come here to terrorize first-years." After further thought, he added, "I didn't realize how small they were now."

"Same size as always. Some come smaller . . . such as you."

"I was smaller than him?"

"Yes."

Grinning, Harry said, "And you were still cruel to me."

Snape crossed his arms and leaned back haughtily. "You should not have taken it so personally."

Harry pushed his chair back and shook his head. "Think I'll go visit with some friends," he said eagerly. He stepped along the staff table and around down to the Gryffindor table. Overhead, above the thousands of floating candles, the ceiling raged in darkening blue without a single cloud. At his approach Ginny brightened and made space beside her. Harry quickly fell into conversation with her, the Creevey brothers, and the others he knew well. He was greatly relieved to find them the same as before, if not a touch taller and bolder.

* * *

Harry's training the next week was difficult and wearing. They learned countless illusion charms, some for things as large as a building that required many witches or wizards work together by combining their magic. Harry had assumed that this would make a spell easier, the way having someone to help carry a couch made that easier, but it didn't. In actuality it made the spell much harder because the other person's magic was much more likely to disrupt your own. Getting the spells to combine rather than interact required intense concentration.

Vineet participated only marginally, since he was still working on control. But he was surprisingly good at adapting his own magic to another's. Most of the time during training, he had a variety of Hogwarts first-year tasks before him, some transfiguration, some charms. His patience with himself seemed to be growing thin finally. While the others packed up for the day, Harry went over to Vineet's corner to try and cheer him up a bit. Unfortunately Rodgers followed suit, so Harry toned down his own reassurances. "You look frustrated, Vishnu," Rodgers observed. He gave Vineet space to respond which went unused. "Do realize that we will give you a lot of time and help to work this out." He sounded unusually concessionary.

Vineet frowned as he stood and collected the various half destroyed little objects into a box. "I am not accustomed to lacking discipline," he explained unhappily.

Rodgers turned to Harry. "Anyone at Hogwarts specialize in teaching attenuation that you know of?"

"I can ask," Harry said eagerly. "I'll owl right now, in fact."

Rodgers nodded, looking displeased about having to ask, which Harry attributed to the communication going through Snape. When they were alone, Harry said, "Vineet, go a little easier on yourself." When Vineet appeared surprised, Harry explained, "I read you like a book, you know."

"The possibilities seem to have closed as fast as they have opened," Vineet observed.

"Everyone's going to help," Harry insisted. "It will work out. Someone at Hogwarts will be able to help, or Headmistress McGonagall will know someone who can." Harry wished a bit that Dumbledore were still there to help, but squashed it immediately.

Vineet picked up his things to depart. "You are all being very kind."

In the corridor Harry went down to the end and around to where the large Department owl cage sat. He dropped his bag, and examined the quill provided in the tin beside a pile of scrap parchment. It felt cold and strangely slippery and he knew from that feel of it that the bird that had given it was dead. Wondering at such a pointless skill, he opened his bag and took out his own quill. After brushing some scattered downy feathers aside, he leaned over to write to Snape in the small space before the cages.

When the short letter was finished he put it in an official envelope. As he penned the address, an unfamiliar voice approached down the next corridor. He slowed to listen to what sounded like someone speaking to themselves.

"Ay, the Ministry wouldna made the Bludger rule change if it hadna been for that incident in Yorkshire." "Overreacting, I'd say." "As usual." "Hey, can we see the Department of Magical Games and Sports?"

"That's down a few levels." That voice Harry recognized: Mr. Weasley. "We'll get to it if you wish. Not really much to see . . . although the trophy room is nice, except uh, last year, when the trophies all went invisible in protest over not getting polished up for a while. They're all there now though . . . we're pretty sure."

Harry fanned the envelope to dry the ink and grinned at that

"Eh, what's the male squad then?" The strange voice asked and the footsteps stopped.

"What? Oh, that's Ms. Tonks. Uh, I mean, she changed the sign again. It is supposed to read *Magical Law Enforcement Squad*." Harry hadn't noticed that vandalism and grinned more as he opened the cage to hand over his letter to whichever owl seemed more eager to take it.

"Eh, the Auror's office must be here as well, then?" "Oh, dark wizard hunters." The voice said, still sounding a bit double on the personality.

"Yes, just around the corner," Mr. Weasley explained, sounding the tour guide again.

The other voice dropped lower. "Oh, does that mean . . . Harry Potter is here?"

Harry's eyes went to the ceiling. The footsteps were moving again. "Well, yes," Mr. Weasley was saying, sounding confused. "He's in training with us." Harry glanced at the distance back to his own corridor, then thought he should say hello to Mr. Weasley and his guest. Torn, he shut the cage door and the remaining owl tried to peck him before he got his hand clear. The other owl had gone out the other side of the cage and into the darkness of the ventilator shaft leading to the roof.

"Ooh, what's 'e like then?" "Dangerous, eh?"

Harry shook his head, still hoping that someone at Hogwarts knew something about teaching attenuation. Everyone here at the Ministry returned a strange stare when asked as though the notion of *reducing* one's magic had never before occurred to them.

"He's very nice. Really," Mr. Weasley insisted. They were about to turn the corner. Harry toyed with the notion of taking his wand out, then decided that would be childish, although potentially amusing.

"Oh," Mr. Weasley said, coming to a halt. "Ah, hello, Harry."

"Oh, you're funnin' us-" A very redheaded, freckle-faced man of about thirty stopped and let his mouth fall open. He stood beside another identical man who looked equally surprised. An older, rotund woman in a pink coat with a huge flowery purse in her arms stood beside them.

"Hello, Mr. Weasley," Harry said.

"How are you, my boy? This is my, uh, Great Aunt Milli and her grandsons Vincent and Cuthbert."

"More Weasley twins?" Harry couldn't help asking. The very notion unseated him.

Mr. Weasley smiled. "Well, yes, but . . . much better behaved than, uh, Fred and George."

"I would say," came the haughty proclamation from Milli.

The stunned and perhaps fearful expressions hadn't relaxed on the twins.

"Just sending an owl, then?" Mr. Weasley asked, clearly to change the topic.

"Yep." Harry was tempted to add, *thought I'd drop my Death-Eater father a note*, just to rattle the highly rattleable a bit more. "Nice to meet you all," he said automatically. "I should get going home."

"Course, my boy. Family picnic this weekend if you'd like to come." While Harry tried to formulate a reply, Mr. Weasley added, "There'll be a Quidditch match or two, of course."

"Oh," Harry said, solidifying his decision at that prospect. "Great. I'll try to make it."

One of the twins found their voice. "You're . . . you're coming to Arthur's house?"

Feeling cruel, Harry said reassuringly, "I promise to only invite one Death Eater along."

"Oh, can Se- . . . I mean, uh . . ." Mr. Weasley struggled, while his relatives gaped for real now at both of them.

"I doubt he's available, but I'll owl him," Harry stated easily.

Mr. Weasley recovered himself. "All right, then. Love to have him." He gestured for the aunt and twins to follow. "Still lots to see." The troupe followed slowly, eyeing Harry as they passed. Mr. Weasley said, "And here are the Auror offices, right here." As they made it to the lifts his voice carried back, "Goodness, with our luck we may even get to meet Madam Bones." Harry put his quill away into his bag and shouldered it, waiting for sound of the lift to descend and take the whispering away.

Harry arrived home exhausted; he had diverted to do some much needed shopping, and even though he was rather beat, he wandered outside in the low evening sunlight to check the front garden. The roses, small and wildish, were blooming yellow and faint pink. Rather than weed or trim, he sat down on the rarely used stone bench and leaned back against the ivy-covered wall of the house. After the last few days training, just staring at the tree limbs rocking in the breeze, the birds flittering about, the cars going by, seemed a worthwhile way to spend some time.

Harry thought he heard something by the side wall, a high-pitched kind of chattering. He sat straight and looked that way in concern. A few leaves shifted as though something passed under them and then stilled. A bit alarmed by the thought that, in his exhaustion, he had let something through from the dark plane, even though he didn't sense it otherwise, Harry took out his wand and watched the shadowed areas of mulch between the plants for any signs of movement.

"Hey, Harry," Elizabeth greeted him. "I was thinking you might be out on a nice day like this."

"Huh?" Harry asked, startled and worried about her safety.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Harry leaned forward to look around the plants better, wand still at ready. "I thought I saw something."

"Probably just a gnome."

Harry stood and stalked over to the corner of the stone wall. "A gnome? This garden doesn't have any." Harry thought he saw another leaf move so he issued a narrow blasting curse at it. A squeal sounded and a tiny figure, like a mutated potato, came barreling out, shaking its fist at him before stalking off. Embarrassed, Harry dropped his wand hand to his side. "That's the first one I've seen."

"My mum has a heck of a time with them. That and fire salamanders and iridescent bottle beetles. But that's because she insists on using magic to garden. Since you don't, I'm surprised they come around."

"What?" Harry asked in surprise.

"They aren't attracted to gardens where no magic is used. Didn't you know that?"

Harry put his wand away. "I didn't know that. I used a little the other day."

Sounding overly knowledgeable, she said, "If you stop, the magic will fade and they'll lose interest again."

Harry watched the leaves of ivy move in series as something crawled around under it. "Maybe I'll do that. It was just one Scourgify." He turned to her finally with his full attention. She was wearing all pink today, jumper and long pleated skirt; it was a bit much on the eyes. "How are you doing?"

"Good. Just one more piano lesson before term starts. How are you doing?"

Harry shrugged. "It's too quiet," he admitted. "I'm not used to being alone, I guess."

"I don't like being alone either," she volunteered.

"Sorry," he said, shaking himself. "I'm behind on my reading and really need to catch up, so I should get back to that."

"Cheers then," she said, "All right if I write you from school?"

"Of course. I'd like that."

She smiled and put her hands in her skirt pockets and walked away.

* * *

"You're in luck, Harry," Tonks said when he arrived for his field shadowing on Friday. "It is so busy today, we have to go out on a call. Here," She handed him a little wood-framed piece of slate; a thin white stick adhered to the frame by a charm. "You should have one of those in case we get into trouble."

Harry barely got it pocketed before she grasped his arm and the Ministry flickered away. They stood in a field, a few sheep grazed near the far fence, considering them curiously. Harry waited to be told where they were but knew not to ask. Tonks was too distracted to give details and led them quickly away after glancing at a crumpled parchment. She pulled her wand out and unfolded her sleeve down to hide it. Harry followed suit, glad to have worn long sleeves. His heart beat faster, just holding his wand in the middle of the unknown.

She stepped on the electrified fence and gestured for Harry to step over. He turned and did the same for her. They walked along a path beside the field until they came to a round stone house. A brooding old village was visible over the crest of a green hill. The front door of the house was ajar. Tonks circled the structure once before pushing the door open and stepping inside. Harry followed behind and felt as though he moved through an invisible curtain. The air felt strangely oily and clingy. He breathed in, expecting to smell it, but all he smelled was yesterday's stew and old candle smoke.

Tonks stepped through the first arched doorway on the left and stopped. When she moved aside, Harry saw what had attracted her in that direction. A witch lay on the floor, grey robes spread behind her as though she had fallen in the middle of dancing. Her black hair obscured most of her pale face.

"Is she . . .?"

"Dead? Yes." Tonks stalked around the room like a bloodhound, looking at everything without touching anything. As she roamed, she went on, "You can tell when you walk in. That oily feel to the place. Look for a wand in the other rooms. Don't touch anything."

Harry recovered from the surprise of Tonks stating exactly what he was sensing. As he turned away, Tonks cast a few spells, one of which made the floor glow white with ghostly dark footprints, hundreds of them. Harry longed to stand and watch spells that they had not yet learned, but he did as he was told and hunted around the main room for a wand. There were a lot of figurines around the place, of cats, bats, rats and a few birds. All of them tall and elongated; some functioned as candlesticks and had old wax adhering to them. He didn't find a wand.

Voices sounded outside the front door. Harry rushed that way and found two children before the front step. Their conversation abruptly stopped at his appearance. They were dressed as Muggles but Harry was certain they recognized him or something about them gave them away. Thinking quickly, Harry asked, "Were you here earlier?" They immediately became evasive, eyes shifting. "Did you see someone here?" Harry then asked.

The boy and girl looked at each other. The boy reluctantly said, "We didn't see anyone today. But the witch who lives in the forest there . . ." He pointed to a dark range of trees in the distance. "She was here yesterday and there was a big fight."

"What are your names?" Harry asked. After a hesitation they gave these up and Harry forced them into memory. "Go on home," he said. "We may have questions for you later." He waited and watched them depart with many curious glances back.

Inside Tonks was still at work. "What'd you find out?" Harry relayed what he had learned and she commented, "Kids often have the best memories and they notice everything. Wand?" Harry shook his head. She put her hands on her hips and surveyed the body. "Could be a good thing. The person who killed her may have taken it. Ollivander always remembers and it makes for good evidence, although circumstantial. Let's seal the house and check out this lead before taking her in. She isn't going anywhere."

In silence Harry followed her outside where she put a strong, but short-lived, barrier on the small house. "Have to love stone," she commented. "Holds spells so nicely once you find its resonance."

Harry almost asked when they would be learning barriers, but swallowed it for later. They walked down the road a quarter of a mile to the copse at the end of the sheep fields. It was a nice day for a walk, but Tonks was spending it watching the ground around the way, casting the occasional spell to reveal footprints.

A small path led into the trees just beyond a stone wall. Darkness enveloped them as they entered. Within the trees it was starkly quiet and the air ripe with leaf decay. It wasn't far to the shack, which looked all the size of a large privy on the outside, but inside went on for room after room of dusty clutter. The sliver-shaped hole in the shack door was replicated hundreds of times around the walls, letting in curved shafts of dusty light.

Tonks circled around and came back a while later and huffed, "Nothing."

On a table, a box had been knocked over and some gaudy jewelry had tumbled out. Harry reached for a bracelet that, unlike the other silver things, wasn't tarnished. He tilted it to see the diamond cut pattern on its surface.

"Harry, are you touching things?" Tonks asked, part surprise, part chastisement.

"She's dead," Harry said, feeling a slipperiness on the metal that seemed to vibrate with something of its recent and frequent wearer.

"What?" she asked, stepping over to him across the crowded floor.

Harry held up the bracelet as though that might clarify. "The owner of this is dead." Tonks didn't reply right away, just studied him. "You don't believe me?" he asked.

"No, I believe you. I didn't know you could tell that."

Harry turned the bracelet in the light. It had a row of little blue stones along the median, one missing. "I didn't know regular objects could be Radiant," he said distracted by that new knowledge.

Tonks put her hands on her hips and looked around the room again. She pulled out her little slate and jotted something on it with annoyed motions before stashing it back in her pocket. "Well, where is she?"

Harry, forgetting to be silent, and thinking aloud said, "Maybe that was her at the cottage."

Tonk's face twisted in an intrigued manner. "You're right. We don't know who that is." She glanced around the cluttered room. "Wonder if there's a photo around here."

"Who would keep a picture of themselves around?"

"Maybe if someone else were in it. Someone handsome," she said suggestively. With the both of them looking, it only took a few minutes to find a small silver frame with a very old photograph of three people in it: a woman and an older couple, posed like parents behind a woman. "It will have to do." She grasped his arm and they reappeared outside the cottage. A man paced before it, agitated. A few others, including the boy and girl who had come to the door were also standing in the middle of the lane, looking skittish. They all stared at Harry as he and Tonks approached the house.

"Do you live here?" Tonks asked the man.

"Yes, but I can't seem to get in." He sounded annoyed.

"That's because we sealed it. You didn't contact the Ministry?"

The man shook his head, looking mystified. Tonks pulled out her sheet and frowned at it. The man took Harry in for the first time. "Are you really Harry?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

"What's going on?" the man asked.

Harry silently waited for Tonks to reply.

After hours of questioning and evidence collection they left the Reversal crew in charge of clean up and returned to the Ministry. Harry wrote out reports while Tonks dictated because she insisted his handwriting was better than her dictation quill and besides he could amend as he saw fit while writing. Indeed, Harry discovered when she reviewed the first report, she didn't really care what he wrote, nor that he left off his observations about the bracelet.

It was eleven by the time they had finished and Tonks was yawning an average of once a minute. She took the parchments from him and stuffed them into folders. "So, what do you think?"

"About . . . what happened?" Harry asked.

She sounded deceptively casual, as though she may be testing him. "Yeah. Bit of a conundrum. Tell me what you think happened."

"I thought we weren't supposed to guess," Harry hedged.

"Hypothesizing, as long as you are willing to throw it away at the first sign it is in error, is all right." She waited.

Harry rubbed his brow and said, "Uh, there were different versions of what the fight was about, but maybe the witch, Bernice, set Mr. Doormouse up by going into his house and killing herself there." After he had said it, he wished he hadn't.

Tonks appeared thoughtful, however. "Fits the facts, as unlikely as it seems. Any other theories?"

Harry shrugged. "Someone else who knew they were fighting yesterday set Doormouse up and killed Bernice there to set him up. He seemed honestly confused although I didn't particularly like him."

She took her feet down off the desk and rubbed her eyes. "And he didn't seem like he had had a Memory Charm, which is one way to show up at a scene of your own crime." She yawned. "I remember back when I thought this was the start of the evening around this time. Must be grown up when you look forward to going to bed."

Harry blamed the long day for his finding the insinuation in that. The thoughts that followed were not conducive to criminal reports. He rubbed his eyes too.

"Harry?" she prompted, voice lower than her professional one. Harry froze on the cusp of even more distracting thoughts until she went on, "Any other strange skills you're hiding from us?"

With a glance around her desk and the nearby ones Harry pointed at her blotter, "That's cursed. The door is cursed. Rogan's tread cleaner is cursed. Your earrings are cursed. . . why are you wearing cursed earrings?" he asked in confusion.

She fingered the left one. "They're charmed for beauty," she countered.

Harry examined each of them again. "No, they're cursed."

She plucked one of them off and held it up. "No wonder I look so bad in them. How can you tell that so easily?"

"Things just feel wrong, slippery and unclean and I'd like to get away from them or get them away from me."

"Hm. Good skill to have." She tossed the earrings with a musical clinking into the rubbish bin. "Others?" She asked in a tone that implied she expected he would hold back if given the chance.

She knew him too well. "Can we talk about the other over a drink?" Harry asked. "A Hagrid-sized bucket of mead sounds really very good."

"No," she replied.

"Damn." He swallowed. "Promise you won't kick me out of the program?"

Her face shifted to half-amused and she propped one foot back up on her desk. "What? You're still seeing Voldemort in the afterlife?"

"Not exactly."

Her propped up foot hit the floor. "Not. Exactly? What *are* you seeing?"

Harry, reluctant, but feeling obedient, said, "I see the Dark Plane. And once I time-travelled with my mind I think . . . " He trailed off because her expression of shock was too much to talk through.

"What exactly is the Dark Plane? It's been awhile since I've heard that term." She sounded befuddled and it hurt to have her of all people be so about him.

Harry quoted the book for lack of a better description, although he found the description lacking, "It is the alternative existence for the most evil subset of creatures. You know, like Lethifolds, or the Shetani, or Black Skanks. Things that crawl out of the cracks in the wall but you don't know how they do that. They do it by entering our world, our plane, at that point."

She stared at him thoughtfully. "You see these things? Is this because of the Dementors--because you were part of them?"

"I don't see the Dementors in the Dark Plane. Mostly I see Shetani, which are African demons and apparently plentiful." To assuage her odd look, he quickly added, "But I only see them when I'm very angry or I'm in an expertly-diagrammed node." He left off about fearing that they could enter this world through him; he couldn't bring himself to say it.

She put the files together on the desk and handed them to him. "If it gets out of control, tell someone, all right?"

Harry straightened the files a bit more before carrying them away. "Yes. Of course," he agreed.

Being in the file room reminded him of past filings, so when he returned to the office he asked, "What's happened with Lockhart?"

She was chewing on a sweet from her desk and held one out to him. "No one's seen him," she replied around the chewy stuff in her mouth. "Surprising really, given his mental status before." She pushed the drawer closed with her knee and hooked her cloak around her neck and made it turn hot pink to match her hair. "Some posters are up, no owls yet that have led anywhere. I'll let you know if anything comes up, since you have a personal interest."

"Thanks," Harry replied, wishing he could be a little more involved and did not have to wait to be told things.

* * *

The next morning, Harry rose very early, just after dawn, ate a bite and dropped a quick note to the Weasleys saying he wouldn't make the picnic, dressed warmly, and went immediately out to the back garden to uncover the bike. A narrow-minded determination had overcome him from the day before and he had to take action. He pulled the map out of the pannier and flipped through it. County Devon was easy to locate, and Godric's Hollow was just off the best route. Devon was also dauntingly large. More determined than dissuaded by the size of the task he had set himself to, Harry stashed the map into his jacket pocket and stood the bike up off of its stand.

The flight gave Harry a lot of time to think as he skirted along just below the low clouds. He grew short of breath up here, but it didn't make him dizzy as flying higher could. Below him the hills stretched out in a mutely colorful patchwork with the occasional spot of glowing green where the sun managed to cut through. Flying silent and fast, Harry arrived over his first stop in just an hour and a half. Using a broom compass, he had kept his path straight and direct and that helped the time rather a lot. He landed hard on a remote two-track, that from the air he could see connected to a narrow blacktop road that led into the village. Even as he rode along the ground, he kept the bike silent, not willing to destroy the peace of the place. It was a rather nice day, he considered as he parked at the end of the street that led to Polly Evan's property. Just enough breeze moved the leaves in the alcove of shrubbery where he left the bike. Before going along the grassy path, though, he walked back down the narrow lane and knocked on Pamela's door. No one answered and the gardens felt quiet as though the next door neighbors were out as well.

At Mrs. Evans' house the door was answered promptly. "Harry dear. I did so hope you would drop in," she welcomed him. "Come in, come in." Big pots were boiling on the stove and a metal loop of cage with hinges sat on the small counter beside it filled with steaming empty glass jars. "Just putting up a bit of jam, don't mind me." Her beefy arms raised another cage out of the boiling water and she set these on the small, stained table across from the stove. "And how are you?" she asked as she worked.

Harry shrugged but then realized she wasn't looking. "All right. Rough day yesterday," he confessed.

"Girl troubles?"

"Murder," Harry returned.

"Oh my. What exactly do you do, young man?"

"Do you know what an Auror is?" he asked, very happy to be free to explain. She shook her head and shifted a pot full of bright red soupy strawberries to a different burner. "It is a dark wizard hunter. A magical law enforcer."

"Is that what you do?" she asked in surprise, pausing to retie her apron.

"I'm in training to do that. Takes three years. But we have field work days where we follow a full Auror on duty and sometimes, even though they try to keep their assignments easy while an apprentice is with them, they can't always manage." Harry remembered that oily feel of the house and rubbed his cheek as though to clean it off. "After battling Voldemort all those years, they're short of Aurors at the Ministry."

He watched her use a metal funnel to pour some preserves into each of the many, many jars. She was efficient at it, as though well practiced, and her arms, while they looked soft and fleshy, were apparently quite strong because she didn't rest them until the pan was empty. Using the same cage contraption, she lowered little metal lids into the boiling pot and shook it. While she waited for these, she considered him thoughtfully. "Surprising occupation for you to have. I don't remember your father nearly as well as your mother. I suspect he would approve. I don't know about Lily though."

"They aren't here to complain," Harry pointed out.

"No. Tragically, they are not." She raised the cage and using a clean, though worn, white towel, placed each sterilized lid on a filled jar, adjusting them so the seals were perfectly aligned. "So what did happen that night we lost James and Lily?"

"Voldemort came."

"That the one whose name some wouldn't say? I remember your father complaining about something like that."

"Yes."

She dipped screw top rings into the boiling water next, then stirred the other pan filled with what appeared to be blueberries, presumably destined for the remaining empty jars. Harry's mouth watered at the thought. "What did this Voldemort want with Lily and James anyway? What could they possibly have done or had that would have driven this . . . wizard to such destruction?"

"He didn't want them. He wanted me."

She looked doubtful. "A baby?"

Harry laughed lightly. "There was a prophecy that said I would destroy him. Well, actually that someone born at the end of July of parents who kept defying him would destroy him. It could have been another boy that I know, but it wasn't."

"And you did destroy him?"

Harry nodded.

She used a towel to pick up each jar and tighten down the lid and then set them on the far end of the counter in a little warm, bright red line. "And rather than settle down into some well-deserved peace and quiet you are out chasing murderers."

"Essentially. Peace and quiet makes me nervous."

She laughed this time. "Ever since you visited, I've been going back over those days. At my age memory makes for pretty good company, even ones that ended up tragic. I remember your mother as so full of life. Headstrong. Wouldn't take no from anyone when she wanted her own way, brought everyone around to her thinking instead so they forgot they had disagreed in the beginning. She and Ed, my husband, were playmates on and off as children. Ed knew she was a witch and when we met and he was writing to her at that school, he told me. I'd never been so surprised." She chuckled. "I was jealous of her, I think, I remember it made me feel better to believe her beauty and ability to get her own way was some kind of magical trick. Thinking back, I don't think it was, actually."

Harry stood silent, watching her finish up the blueberries. He had been drawn into her memories and didn't want to return to the present until he had to. Eventually all the jars were sealed and lined up, except one that was only a quarter full. She set that one on the table. "We'll just have to eat that now."

Over toast, heavy with butter and runny blueberry topping, she asked, "So you are out from under that terrible prophecy now, right?"

"Yes, thank Merlin."

She chuckled and shook her head. "Well, I'm sorry you missed the girls. They went on a shopping expedition for the day."

Harry wiped his hopelessly sticky mouth and fingers. "I'm glad we got a chance to talk, though." He glanced at the time. "I should get going, I have to go to Devon."

"On broomstick," she asked, sounding half teasing.

"On motorbike . . . a flying motorbike. Did you ever meet my godfather, Sirius?"

She thought a long time before shaking her head.

"A friend of my father's from school. Anyway, he died a few years ago and left me this wonderful bike for my eighteenth birthday." He stood up and tried to collect up the dishes before being waved off.

"Sounds like just the right toy for a boy like you," she teased and followed him to the door. "Come again soon, Harry. And bring that guardian of yours."

"You're certain?" Harry asked.

"Yes, of course. Come for dinner when everyone is here."

Harry tried to imagine Snape in that environment, then shrugged. "Owl . . . or write and let me know when," he corrected himself.

"No pet owls here," she teased and waved goodbye as though he were already at the end of the property.

The remaining flight to Devon went by very fast and again he landed on a deserted narrow lane, this one surrounded by trees. After canceling the Disillusion charm, he pulled out the map again and studied the road network into Exeter. He memorized his route and pulled away, remembering at the first turn that he had better adjust the *Roar* knob for realism.

Harry rode in the thickening morning traffic, feeling confident about his riding as he steered between two cars slowing for a stoplight. More people were rising and getting on the roads as he journeyed toward the city center. So many of them. Feeling daunted, Harry pulled into the car park for one of those chain restaurants Dudley had always begged to be taken to. He parked in the corner and closed his eyes, trying to let the fatigue from rising early pull him into a doze.

"You all right there?" A voice very close asked.

Harry jerked straight and looked at the scruffy man in faded coveralls getting into the car two spots down.

"Oh yes. Thanks. Just, uh, resting my eyes. Late night."

"Yeah, I know 'bout that. Nice bike."

"Thanks."

The car pulled away. Harry pulled out the map and held it open in his lap before dropping his head and trying again. No one bothered him this time as the familiar haze of green pulsed into his mind. A light wind tickled past in the vision in a different direction than the real one tugged his jacket. Harry woke up completely, stretched his neck and tried again. That in-between state was hard to maintain, but he wasn't going to give up. This time he got a glimpse of something dark and ephemeral in that world, off to his left, a little distance away. Uncertain if direction meant anything, he started the motor-bike up again and rode northeast, intent on finding out.

Harry repeated this for many dogged hours before being forced to stop for an early dinner. His neglected stomach complained bitterly as he waited at the counter of a snack shop for his order to be assembled. He took it over to a table beside a forlorn city tree at the corner of a quiet side street. A group of children in rough clothes were playing football with great enthusiasm and much shouting. A car approached and they quickly collected their ball and stood as an honor guard might while the vehicle rolled past before returning to their game as though uninterrupted.

Harry closed his eyes and let himself doze. The shadow, which he found more easily this time, didn't seem any closer. Sighing, Harry bundled up the paper from his meal, tossed it in the rubbish bin, and decided on a walk down the shop-filled street he could see across the nearby large intersection.

Putting Avery out of his mind for a while, Harry wandered along, looking for things his friends might like, or that even he might like. Most of the shops were full of discounted and disarrayed things, but at the corner a display rack of fingerprint-marred sunglasses caught his attention. Excited by a sudden notion, he hunted through the rack for the nicest pair with mirrored lenses and found a very stylish pair with bright mirroring and a nice aerodynamic shape. He paid for

them plus a hard-sided case in which to store them. Humming happily to himself, he walked on, determined now to have a good look around.

The beginnings of sunset were showing themselves on the sky when Harry finally returned to his motorbike. The long flight home seemed too much at that point. It occurred to him that London was closer. Hermione had offered to let him stay at her flat on many previous late evenings. In his mind Harry took her up on the offer as he rode the bike out to a deserted narrow lane lined with stone walls and twisted the altitude throttle.

As he approached the lights of London, Harry strengthened the Obsfucation charm upon him and considered that he also knew where Tara's place was. After circling down over the right area, he had to find the underground stop and then follow along above the rooftops to her street. Buildings were odd things from above, covered in looming metal structures of unfathomable purpose and great hazard to someone flying low. He carefully circled her building and decided which windows must be hers. Orange light filled the curtains inside. Harry carefully lowered the bike to window height and pulled out the *Roar* knob just a tad. This wasn't sufficient to generate any movement of the curtains and it attracted glances from below that looked puzzled before looking away. Harry pulled out his wand to make the Obsfucation charm on the bike itself as strong as possible while allowing her to see him. "Tara!" Harry shouted.

After a long pause the curtains moved and then moved aside. She looked down through the glass, so he shouted again. Her eyes came up and went wide. She worked the window open and demanded in shock, "What the devil are you doing?"

"I wanted to see you," Harry explained. "Want to go for a ride?"

She looked down and back up at him, gauging the distance to the ground. "Um. Why don't you park that and come up instead?"

"Okay," Harry agreed amiably.

"Harry you are crazed," she said as she let him in the building door.

"Why?"

"Why? What if someone saw you?" she demanded.

"No one but you could," Harry said.

At the door to her place, she said, "No? You can do that?"

"Yep, Aurors need to do it all the time so they can see each other but no one else can easily."

She sounded satisfied as she said, "Oh." Her place was three rooms. She gestured that he should take a seat at the table. "I was just making tea; do you want some?"

Harry felt sleepy from the long ride. "Sure. Thanks."

She pulled her hair back before she checked the flame under a kettle already heating on the stove. "You startled me."

"I didn't mean to," Harry said, just thinking that if he didn't return home tonight that no one would know.

She pulled out cups and milk. "You know, Harry, I wouldn't have thought of myself as old at twenty-two, but I think I'm too old for you."

"Why?"

"Because you should date someone who wants to go for a midnight ride on a flying motorcycle. I think I'd have to work myself up to that."

Harry watched her rinse the cups with tap water and considered that Ginny probably would go with him. He could fly up to Hogwarts and even if McGonagall were standing there ready to give her a month of detention, she would hop right on. Tara took out a box of tea bags, revealing a row of boxed pasta, one of which tried to fall out when the cabinet door was opened. Harry said, "People without house-elves eat a lot of that."

She smiled as she poured kettle water into the cups to heat them before shaking them out into the sink. "Yes, we do."

As he sipped his tea, Harry considered what his friends had said about dealing with someone else's guilt. He wasn't sure he could wait it out, nor did he know what to say. "I like you a lot," he tried. Her eyes dropped. Wrong thing to say, but that meant there might not be a right thing.

Harry tried to take the roads to Hermione's flat, but it was far too tedious to wait for even the light nighttime traffic and streetlights. He pulled into an alleyway, did a quick spell to check for lurkers, applied several layers of Obscuration and Illusion charms to himself and the motorbike, and took off straight into the air. At nearly roof level and accelerating, he clipped the right handle on the metal bar of a curved guard for the permanent ladder that led to one of those metal monstrosities so many roofs had. The loud clang echoed up out of the alley and the bike tilted crazily when the handlebars twisted with the blow's force. Fortunately for Harry his excessive acceleration upward bought him enough time to right things and only the rubber wheel squealed eerily against the sheet metal of a large exhaust hood as he managed to get level.

Breathing heavily, he hovered just above the dark roof until he recovered himself and his heart slowed down. Probable headlines in the Muggle paper flashed before him *Mystery Flying Motorbike Crashes in Central London* or more hopefully *Foolish Hotroder Rides off of Five-Story Building*. Flying now with paranoid and meticulous care, Harry steered his way eastward, very grateful the bike was behaving normally despite the mishap. When he arrived near his friend's flat, he patted the empty front tank to express his appreciation for its hardiness and dipped lower to land where the light was least concentrated.

Hermione greeted him at the door, very pleased to see him.

"Gotta beer?" Harry immediately asked, forgetting to say much more than hello.

She laughed. "Sure. I think so. I shopped just yesterday. Good thing you didn't drop in before then; even the mice have been complaining about the empty kitchen."

Crookshanks winked his glowing eyes from his usual perch atop the bookcase. Harry closed the door behind him and toed his shoes off. "Thanks," he said, accepting the cold bottle she handed him. After a refreshing swallow he asked, "Doesn't your cat get them?"

She was quickly straightening the room. "You mean the mice? No. Turns out he makes friends with them, pushes cat food under the counter for them if you don't watch him. It was only Pettigrew he thought worth hunting."

"Good Crookshanks," Harry praised the furry thing as he passed under its watchful gaze. He dropped into a worn squishy chair and tried to relax. Hermione watched him take another sip of beer before giving in and getting herself one as well.

Harry leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling a long minute before remembering that he was a guest and should probably not fall asleep. "So where's Ron tonight?" Harry asked. Hermione made a small face in reply. "Something going on?" Harry then asked, looking for more subtle clues this time.

"Nothing new." She scoffed and looked unhappy and tapped the bottle with her fingers. "It's just that he won't consider moving out of the Burrow. We have little . . . ongoing arguments over that, and since we had one after the picnic, he didn't want to come over."

"Oh." Harry considered that sounded likely of Ron all right. "I wouldn't want to move out either, even to live closer to the Ministry. The ride in the Floo can be a little long and sometimes I swear I get diverted past some strange area where the fireplaces all smell like they have burnt offal in them, but I like living at home."

"That isn't the same, Harry." She sat back and looked at him, straight in the eyes, which Harry found disconcerting, or maybe he just wasn't used to it. "You just got a family. It'd be odd if you gave it up already. And besides you're alone now anyway."

Harry bounced his feet before crossing them at the ankles to stop it. "Yeah."

"Not liking it?"

"Takes some getting used to."

"I like it," she stated with relish. "I spent all evening just reading." With a wave, she indicated the stack of books on the cardboard box beside the couch which still served as a side table.

Silence descended again. Harry eventually said, "I could Floo home from here and come back for the bike tomorrow," although he didn't feel like getting rocketed and spun around for long minutes as tired as he was.

"You can sleep on the couch. 'Course it isn't the most comfortable."

"I can transfigure it into a bed." He eyed the space. "There's room, if you don't mind."

"I want to see you do that," Hermione challenged. She stood up and gestured for him to go ahead.

Harry didn't move. "What?" he asked, confused.

"I want to see you do that--a bed that lasts more than five minutes."

Harry shrugged, stood, and pushed the short squishy chair he had been sitting on out of the way. He pulled his wand out of his enlarged inside jacket pocket and incanted, "*Dormilanequoris*," while gesturing in wide wand sweeps. The couch stretched, shifted and flattened into an ordinary bed. It even had sheets, all tucked in with sharp corners. "Hey," Harry said, "I could use that spell to pretend my bed was made. Are there any bad magical side-effects to turning a bed into a bed?"

"Uh, I don't know. Where did you learn this spell?"

"Oh, Aaron, one of the other apprentices. We sometimes get left to ourselves when things are really busy and last week, we took turns showing off our favorite spells."

Hermione bounced her hand on the bed. "You've never done this spell before? This is the first time?"

"Well, I have a bed at home. The need hasn't arisen." He sat down hard, testing it. "Not bad. He said it would last six hours at least. 'Course he sometimes makes things up and says the opposite of the truth to suck people in, but, we'll see," he stated pleasantly, simply glad the spell had worked when challenged by his old friend.

Hermione was giving him a strong glare. "Harry, I can't believe you just did this spell for the first time!"

"Oh, come on," Harry retorted. "You who always got everything in class before everyone else."

"Well . . ." she hemmed.

"Now, for example, Flitwick never showed us how to detect illusions and you have a big charm to hide the four boxes stacked beside the bookcase."

Hermione rolled her eyes and picked up her wand off of the brown-board side table. She waved it. Tried again. And then finally got up to tap the invisible boxes directly, making them flicker into view. "Hm," she muttered, looking at her wand. "I was pretty proud of that. Took me an hour to get it right before my parents visited. I didn't want them to see I hadn't found space for everything I'd insisted on moving out. I didn't want to leave anything behind; it didn't seem like moving out if I did that."

She sat on the end of the bed. "What else have you learned?" she asked, sounding vaguely melancholy.

Harry, happy to show off a bit, crossed his legs on the bed and said. "Okay, this might not come out quite right, but watch this." Harry closed his eyes to concentrate, and tapped his chin while muttering, "*Aspecticeḏo*." He then rubbed his chin to feel if it had worked. A grizzly beard now indeed sprouted there.

"Hey, you look good like that," Hermione said. "Did Tonks teach you that?"

Harry scratched at the beard as though it were a rash. "Yeah, but she is too good at it to be really good at teaching it. Don't tell her I said that though."

She stared at her wand before stashing it away. "I haven't learned anything new in months. No, I learned a how to control a note-taking quill." More quietly, she added, "It's not really a spell though." She sighed lightly. "So what are you doing in London?"

Harry frowned and adjusted himself on the bed. "I stopped in at Tara's flat. She . . . wasn't really in the mood for my company."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said in sympathy.

"No. It's all right. I don't really know her all that well." He shrugged. "I still kind of like her though."

Even more sympathetically, Hermione said, "You flew all the way to London to see her?"

"No," he admitted, and only because this was one of his oldest friends did he add, "I was in Devon . . . hunting Avery."

Hermione gave him a level look. "Does the Ministry know you're doing that?" When Harry shook his head, she huffed. "Why don't you at least tell them?"

"I'm only a trainee. I'm not allowed to do anything."

She crossed her arms and appeared to be considering chastising him. "So, find out anything?"

"No." Harry tossed his wand in the air and caught it again. "I got my wand fixed and cleaned by Ollivander." He held it out. "Looks like new, doesn't it?"

"You're changing the subject."

"No, I didn't find out anything. I even went around trying to fall half asleep to sense him, but I couldn't zero in at all on him."

She picked at her nails a little nervously. "You . . . can *see* him though?"

"I think so."

A silent moment passed. "Does Severus know you are doing this?"

"I told him I wanted to." Harry put his wand aside on the cardboard box. "He told me to work through the Ministry."

"Which you aren't doing . . . "

Harry shrugged. "I'm useless at looking for him--even though I can sense him sometimes. Maybe he is still lying low."

Hermione looked vaguely uneasy as she considered that. She finally uncrossed her arms and stood up. "Well, I have to do some things in the morning. If you don't mind . . . it *is* a little late."

"No, that's fine," Harry said agreeably. "Thanks for letting me stay."

She shrugged and smiled, looking like her old self, which made Harry realize that for the most part, she didn't. With more emotion than it warranted, she added, "You're welcome anytime, you know. Why don't you use the toilet first?"

Later, when she went into the bedroom and closed the door, Harry slipped off his shirt, belt, and socks and got into bed. The transfigured bed felt very solid, not at all like it might change back at any moment. Deciding it was best to assume it wouldn't, Harry closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

The traffic noises outside kept Harry awake for a while before exhaustion took over. As soon as it did, Harry snapped back awake with a start. Footsteps sounded and Hermione opened her bedroom door. "Harry?"

"It's all right," he assured her. He rubbed his hair back a few times and felt it bounce back up in all directions. Remembering the sense of a shadow hovering, Harry said, "Avery is in London. He's much closer to here than I sensed him in Devon." He sniffled and lay back down. "Sorry to bother you."

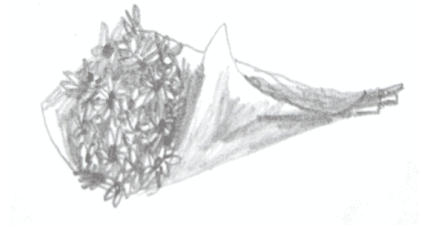
She stood there in her frilly nightgown, the sound of her breathing eventually slowing to normal and falling silent. "Don't apologize, but please don't go after him alone."

"I'll come fetch you then . . . when I find him," Harry sleepily offered.

She snorted. "I don't think I'd be much use to you."

"Sure you would." Harry rolled over and curled up slightly. "You'd say, 'Harry don't be stupid--owl for someone else to help'."

Her laughter filled the darkness. A car went by and its lights traced over the ceiling and wall as it turned. "Good night, Harry," she finally said, and went back to bed, leaving the door open this time, making Harry wonder that everyone he knew thought he needed looking over while he slept.



Chapter 65 -- Mum Galore, Part I

Sunday, Harry put on the nicest non-dressy clothes he owned. He had first tried on his Muggle suit, but that looked inappropriate for Sunday dinner at a friend's mum's house. He wondered how it was that no matter how many clothes he bought, nothing in his cupboard ever seemed quite appropriate.

He met Aaron at the underground stop, the last one on the line. His fellow Auror trainee looked a little nervous. "Thanks for coming. I told my mum I'd invited you but didn't tell her you'd agreed. I didn't know if you'd come to your senses at the last and back out."

"I really don't mind," Harry insisted, still not understanding how anyone could not appreciate Sunday dinners with his mum. Aaron carried a narrow sack which might contain a wine bottle and his other hand held a bundle of bright yellow flowers. Concerned, Harry asked, "Should I have brought something?"

Aaron held out the flowers. "You *did* bring these," he said.

"Cheers then," Harry thanked him, taking them.

They walked nine blocks before reaching a nice house at the edge of the village. A white enamel cast iron fence ran around the property and one very old tree shaded things nicely. On the broad porch Aaron used the doorknocker, looking pensive. Harry, not used to holding bunches of flowers, held them behind his back because he felt like a bride holding them in front of himself.

The door swung open quickly and a plump, dark haired woman in a flowered muumuu greeted them with a broad smile. "Oh, my! Look who it is." She tore her gaze from Harry over to her son. "Aaron, my dear boy, good to see you, and in such esteemed company, no less." She held out a hand, not so much to be shaken but palm down, fingers half-curved. Unsure what that meant, Harry freed a hand from the flowers and managed a strange handshake. Her gaze was affectionately intent, and she smiled as though nearly crying.

"Where are my manners?" she proclaimed loudly. "Come in. Come in. Please!"

She hadn't let go of Harry's hand, so he had no choice but to follow. In the beautiful front hall with its glowing marble floor and bright rugs she stopped and said, "You are much taller than I imagined, Mr. Potter. You don't mind if I call you Harry do you?"

"Not at all," Harry replied, getting a hand squeeze and an extra affectionate smile in return. "These are for you," Harry remembered the flowers in his other hand.

Surprisingly, this didn't get his hand freed when she accepted them. "Oh, my dear boy, how sweet. Mr. Plumley!" she called out.

A dour man in a tuxedo with a pointed nose and disproportionately heavy face stepped in as though just waiting to be summoned and accepted the flowers with a very small bow. In a formal tone he said, "I shall retire these to nice vase for you, madam."

Mrs. Wickem turned Harry toward her for further inspection, apparently, and patted his captive hand with her now free one. "Well, you have turned out rather handsomely, haven't you?" she asked, looking him over with an appraising eye. To

Harry's utter amazement, she reached up and patted him on the cheek as she said, "But you certainly look like you need a good meal, you poor thing. Come. Come." She finally released him but this was only to better wrap him up bodily and lead him away to the next room as one might an invalid. They entered a parlor with high windows and a marble and iron table set with a staggering array of glass and tableware, like nothing Harry had seen before. The yellow flowers were already in a blue and gold Asian vase in the center.

Harry turned back to shoot a teasing look at Aaron and found that his companion appeared pale and horrified. Harry gave him a questioning look to no avail. The parlor was huge and it was a long walk to the table in the center. Mrs. Wickem took it with a slow stride, soft, broad arm firmly around Harry.

"You know, Harry," she said in a soft voice. "I so clearly remember that fateful day seventeen years ago when the papers declared that evil had been banished. They seemed quite unable to explain exactly how that had come to be. The only possible explanation was that an infant somehow defeated him." She paused and *hmm*ed in memory. They had reached the table. Harry was beginning to anticipate manipulation, so when she turned him to face her, her soft cheeks reminding him only vaguely of Aunt Marge, he didn't resist. She went on, "I thought to myself, that must be one strange boy. And one so simultaneously fortunate and unfortunate."

She gestured at a chair and graciously said, "Please have a seat, and I will see what the progress is on lunch."

Harry thanked her and pulled out a surprisingly heavy iron chair. Aaron took a seat beside him, adjusting the beaded cushion a little impatiently. He still looked mortified. When they were alone, he put his head in his hand and said, "Ugh. She's worse than I could have imagined--and I thought I could imagine a lot."

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

Aaron gaped at him. "What's wrong? You just went through that, and you ask what's wrong?"

"I don't mind," Harry laughed. Which was the truth, though more than an afternoon of it would be a different thing. At Aaron's utter shock, Harry tried to explain. "I can take being doted on. Really. I had a dearth of doting as a child." Aaron seemed to accept that, but he still looked strained. Harry, wanting to reassure him more, went on, "My Aunt Petunia used to dote on my cousin Dudley all the time when we were little. Kind of like that," he said, gesturing at the door Aaron's mum had disappeared through. "Made more of a point of it in front of me, in fact. All the while telling me how useless I was, and not feeding me enough, and pretending I didn't exist whenever they could. So really, I don't mind a little make-up doting," he finished with a grin.

Aaron sat back, looking vaguely sympathetic. "I still need a bracer," he said and reached for a crystal decanter full of a dark red liquid that was just one of a veritable forest of fancy containers taking up the fourth place setting at the table. "Want some?"

"No. Thanks though."

"Pour out the Sauternes instead, my dear boy," Mrs. Wickem chided brightly as she swept back into the room followed closely by Plumley carrying plates.

"Mmm," Aaron murmured, as a plate was placed before Harry. "Goose liver paté. My favorite. You've outdone yourself, my man."

The butler opened a bottle of peach-colored wine and poured a splash out for each of them. Before he could turn completely away, Mrs. Wickem said, "Plumley, did you see whom dearest Aaron has brought for luncheon?"

Plumley, looking bored, glanced around the table as though noticing for the first time that people were actually sitting at it. He blinked several times at Harry. Mrs. Wickem prodded, "Surely you recognize Mr. Potter?"

Plumley's face underwent some sort of distorted metamorphosis, or perhaps it simply was too unaccustomed to holding any expression. Stunned, he held out his hand and Harry shook it. "Most . . . thrilled to meet you, sir," Plumley breathed.

He clasped his hands before him formally and stood straight, gazing around the table as though he had just woken up. A bit unsteadily he announced, "Yes. Perhaps, I shall go prepare the next course, then."

When the door had swung itself closed, Aaron said in awed tones, "That's a first. I don't think he's ever been thrilled about anything." He and his mother shared a shocked look before they started eating, and Harry followed suit, immediately thinking that he could put up with lots more doting for food like this. Winky cooked well but this was something else. There were soft warm onions draped over the cold paté and a streak of something fruity and red beside it for dipping and the wine, while almost sickly sweet, went down very well between bites. He must have been making unconscious noises of appreciation because Aaron broke out laughing. "Enjoying it?" he asked.

"It's really good," Harry insisted, wishing the plate were a little fuller. He ate slowly to savor it.

Harry soon learned why the first plate had seemed sparse. Uncountable courses followed that first one and he fast filled up. During a pause, Mrs. Wickem asked with great feeling, "Harry, I am curious about something and perhaps you will be able to answer this for me."

Harry adjusted the napkin in his lap and gave her his attention. Sunlight was now slicing in through the top of the window and sending shattered beams of itself off the crystal on the table. "Of course," he replied, expecting some difficult question about Voldemort or Ministry politics.

She put a broad hand on Harry's arm and asked, "How is my dear Aaron doing in his apprenticeship?"

Harry smiled and suppressed a laugh. "He's doing fine. Why do you ask?" He looked between them. Aaron had sunk back into mortification with a frown.

She replied, "I can never know what his answers mean. In school, he always said he was doing fine, always seemed happy, but he was not, in fact, doing so well."

"He *is* doing fine," Harry repeated, feeling odd assessing someone five years older than himself. Somehow it seemed Aaron did not agree with his marks and began fiddling with one of the oddly shaped spoons above his plate whose function Harry had no clue about. Aaron was biting his lip awfully hard too.

"Well, that is good to know." She gave her son a soft look before standing with unexpected lightness. "I'll just see to the pastries."

The door swung closed behind her. Aaron was still biting his lip and slouching as though to examine the spoon better. Harry asked, "What's the matter?"

"I'm not doing that well," he pointed out, sounding peevish.

"What makes you say that?" Harry thought over their training. "You do fine on all the spells. You did fine on the review examination."

"I stink on readings. You always know the answers."

"No, I don't. Vineet always does, and then Kerry Ann. You and I are in the bottom half of that."

Aaron huffed and confessed, "It is so hard for me to do the readings. Ten minutes into it and I'm totally bored and going nutters. It's like torture. No, actually, I would take a Crucio most days rather than finish the readings."

"Well, why don't you have someone read them out to you. A girlfriend or something."

Aaron's face twisted in thought. Harry considered that he was like Ron in that his mental impressions went right to his features. "That's a thought," he said, sounding upbeat. He arranged his silver more neatly and said, "How did you get

through everything you've faced being so damn nice, Potter? I would spit spells in every direction I'd have been so angry."

"I had moments like that, believe me."

With a half grin Aaron asked, "Similar to the time you took Rodgers down a few?"

"A bit like that. Not as articulate. I trashed Dumbledore's office, for example." Harry's heart picked up a bit; he had never told anyone that.

"You what?" Aaron was stunned, and impressed, most likely.

"All those little machines and balanced globes and things? Threw 'em everywhere." The memory made Harry hands clammy.

Aaron made a noise of surprise and put his hands on his head. "I so haven't sussed you, Potter. I can't even picture it. What did he do?"

More quietly, Harry said, "Nothing. He just sat there, said he didn't care about any of the things."

"Wow."

"I'd had a very bad day. The worst day of my life, I think. Or close to it."

A long pause ensued where the sound of organizing small plates could be heard just outside the door. Aaron said, "If you're trying to make me feel better, Potter, you're succeeding."

Their hostess returned with the butler, carrying stacks of pastries that made Harry's stomach feel like it might split just from looking at them.

An hour and numerous bear hugs later, Harry was allowed to depart. Aaron walked him back to the station. "Thanks. You really made her day," he said, rocking on his toes with his hands in his pockets, looking oddly shy.

"It was nice. And the food was great. I'll see you tomorrow."

Aaron gave him a wave before walking away.

At home, Harry settled in to read but ended up napping on the library lounge instead. He hadn't eaten so much since the last Halloween feast at Hogwarts. Later, as he settled in with a pot of tea to try his readings, Harry wished his guardian were there, but Snape wouldn't be visiting for at least two weeks, he had said. Harry pulled a sheet of parchment across his book and wrote out a note asking Snape if he thought there were only two revelation spells for charmed animals, like his text said, because it seemed like there ought to be more. It was a silly question, but Harry needed an excuse to write yet again. At the bottom he almost added that he missed him, but didn't.

* * *

Harry brought one of Snape's letters with him to training on Monday. In it, he stated that Sinistra had in the past taught attenuation and was more than willing to assist Vineet. Since her classes were in the evening, she suggested that afternoons were better.

Rodgers perused the note and said, "Ask if you can bring him up sometime this week, then. Tomorrow, if possible."

Harry wrote two letters at lunch, one to Professor Sinistra about Vineet and one to Snape about arranging a visit for dinner at his relatives. Even though he himself had reservations about the plan, he presented it as something foregone. Upon rereading it, he wondered if Snape would see through that, even though his words covered his uneasiness pretty well.

When he arrived home, Harry had two replies waiting in the window box. Sinistra was indeed willing to begin tutoring Vineet tomorrow, making Harry think his description of the Indian's current magic must have alarmed her. The other was from Snape, in it he said, *After dragging you to the coven enough times, it cannot be within my rights to decline.* Harry wrote to Polly right then and even stepped out into the fast-cooling evening with Kali on his shoulder to post it at the train station. He dropped it into the cold steel mouth of the post box and looked around the quiet village. As awkward as he imagined it would be to have Snape and himself at dinner with Pamela, Polly, Patricia and family, he found he really wanted it to happen, ached a little for it even.

Kali sniffed the air when the breeze came up. Harry, with no cloak, found it chilling and quickly walked home. In the garden he paused and listened but no unnatural sounds emanated from amongst the last of the flowers.

* * *

After lunch the next day, Harry took Vineet by Floo into Hogsmeade. "Britain's only all-Wizarding village," Harry announced as they stepped into the street, which unfortunately had a row of thick clouds hanging just above it. Harry pulled his cloak over his shoulders for warmth against a sudden wind.

"Hello, Harry!" Someone said as they passed. Harry recognized the shop clerk from Glad Rags and greeted her back. The next person they passed greeted him as well.

"You have many friends," Vineet observed as they walked out of town.

"I guess," Harry admitted. The castle came into full view almost immediately. "Hogwarts Castle," he announced, hoping he didn't sound the way Mr. Weasley did the other day.

They walked up the lawn, which Harry had remembered as being smaller than it was today, and up the front steps. Since it was during class, the Entrance Hall was deserted. Harry wondered if this place would ever feel unfamiliar. "Professor Sinistra's letter said to come up to her office," Harry explained as he headed for the staircase. "Oh, but you have to see this," he said, diverting to the Great Hall. Just inside the doors he gestured at the ceiling. "Charmed to show the sky outside," Harry explained. Some older students looked up at them curiously from the other end of the long tables.

"Ah, I thought you would be showing me something else."

Harry let the door close. "What do you want to see?" he asked.

"The place where the Unnamed One fell."

"You're standing on it," Harry pointed out and then added a grin.

Unusually startled, Vineet looked down and stepped quickly off the spot he had been on. "Here?" he asked, looking around for some sign. "Not there?" he asked in confusion.

Harry followed where he pointed and saw that a brass plaque had replaced one of the stones. He bent over to read it. "*Here Voldemort perished,*" he read. The date was printed around the edge in flowing longhand. "Hm." Harry backed up and surveyed the scene. "No, definitely where you are standing," he said to Vineet.

"Such few feet hold little meaning," Vineet intoned, also bowing to read the plaque. When his eyes came up they held that reverence that they had lost of late.

"Sinistra's waiting," Harry said to get them moving on.

Professor Sinistra walked them down to the Defense classroom for tutoring. "Professor Snape has taken his class outside today. Wanted to show them a few nasty creatures Hagrid collected from the forest." She pushed a few desks aside with a

wave of her wand and clasped her hands before her. Her complicated earrings caught the light as she looked Vineet over. "Well, Mr. Abhayananda, I have been given some background details. You have been using a mismatched wand, correct?"

"I have been using my family wand," he conceded.

"That is the usual way one ends up requiring such tutoring. Let me see your old and new wands."

Harry sat in one of the front desks and observed. He had been given loose instructions about escorting Vineet here, so he used the lack of clear orders to return as an excuse to stay.

"There are many ways of reducing magic when one is too old to learn by instinct. One is by narrowing." She moved a stout granite monolith away from the wall into the middle of the floor. "But," she held up a finger, "one must do so *without* focusing one's power. Otherwise even harmless spells can become dangerous." She demonstrated a simple torch spell, then a narrow unfocused casting of it that produced a very useless little spot of light on the granite, and then a narrow focused version that left a waft of smoke and a small dark spot on the stone. "Give it a try."

Vineet produced far more than a waft of smoke on his first attempt, and his second. After many attempts and a little progress on reducing his power, he said in frustration, "That is harder than one expects."

Lecturing now, she said firmly, "Everything we are going to work on requires practice."

Vineet nodded and concentrated harder. After another long round of attempts the air had grown hazy with smoke. His shoulders slumped in defeat. Harry was about to get up and offer encouragement but Sinistra stepped in before he had the chance and put her hands on the Indian's upper arms. "Mr. Abhayananda . . . we have many, many, techniques we can try. We are just getting started." Her tone was compassionate, unlike anything Harry had heard from her as a student. It got through to Vineet though and he straightened and returned to himself.

An hour later the door opened and students began to step in. Harry stood and watched for his guardian. Ginny came in and gave him a wave and a smile. Snape entered last, with a student in tow, who was summarily told to *sit* rather forcefully. "And you as well," he said to a nearby Slytherin. "Detention, both of you." He looked up and said calmly, "Hello, Harry. Chapter 18 for next class and a short essay on . . . " He looked to be considering a topic appropriate to bad behavior. " . . . hazardous magical tree dwellers."

The bell rang then and most of the students departed, murmuring to each other about various topics. Nott and the other Slytherin sat sulkily in their desks, eyeing the rest of them darkly. Snape stepped over to Harry after dropping his books on a side table. "How is the tutoring progressing?" he asked.

"We are making headway," Sinistra responded pleasantly. "Folding seems to be the technique of choice in Mr. Abhayananda's case. I should start preparing for the evening classes, if you'll excuse me." To Vineet, she said, "Practice that on your own and come back perhaps on Thursday?" When he nodded gratefully, she departed with a small smile.

"And how are you?" Snape asked Harry, sounding unlike himself in this environment. Vineet wandered over to the windows and peered out with interest.

"Good," Harry assured him.

"Training going well?"

"Training is going fine," Harry said, amused by the outpouring. "You haven't been away from home that long, have you?" he teased.

Snape smiled lightly and touched him on the arm. "True, I'll be joining you this weekend. Come with me to my office a minute while I put my papers away."

"Vineet," Harry said, to pull his companion along.

With a glance at the surly Slytherins, Vineet followed. In Snape's office, Harry asked, "What'd they do to get detention?" The sunlight was just right for the windows on this side of the castle, and everything in the office, from the tall stacks of parchment to the empty cage on top of the shelves, glowed with light.

Snape frowned. "Wandered off during class and then pretended they had been there the whole time. I must wonder that they think I have got that easy to fool." He sat down and tilted his head back, apparently to rest it. "A few students have been exceptionally troublesome lately. But onto this weekend, how do you intend to travel? It is getting a little cold for the bike. I need to know what time we should depart on Saturday."

"Oh," Harry said. He hadn't thought about this. "It *is* a little cold for the bike," he agreed to stall. "I don't suppose there's a Floo node. But I think I can Apparate that far now. Although I haven't tried it." Vineet moved to examine the bookshelves, again giving them space.

Snape scratched his cheek. "That isn't the problem, Harry. Your relatives will expect to see Muggle transport, will they not?"

"Oh, yeah." Harry had been looking forward to the visit that he had let that detail slip by him. "We'll have to work something out. Too bad we don't have a car."

Snidely, Snape said, "I don't think so. Noisy miserable contraptions and if I'm not mistaken it is many hours drive by ground means and would require an entire day there and back."

Harry thought hard. "What if we Apparate nearby and take a cab? Except we should take a cab from a nearby town . . . one with a train station. No one would believe we took a cab all that way, but I've never been to the nearby towns to Apparate into. Hm. Well, my mum's cousin's sister knows we're wizards. She'll cover for us."

"That is good, otherwise it is possibly not workable. Does she have a car?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "I'll ask although Muggle post won't get there and back in time. Guess I'll telephone from the Ministry. I have her number."

Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Do let me know what time I need to be home on Saturday to depart."

Harry adjusted his cloak; he had forgotten how cold the castle could get. "Thanks for agreeing to come along."

Snape gave him a wry smile. "I could do no different. You should probably return to the Ministry."

Harry felt the box in his pocket and withdrew it. "I almost forgot. Can you give these to Suze for me?" he asked, holding out the sunglasses in their nice, hard-sided case. "I think they'll stay on during a match, even the way she flies."

Snape opened the box and carefully unfolded and held the shiny, Muggle, plastic sunglasses to the light. He raised a brow at Harry. "Certainly." His lips twitched slightly as he said it, Harry was certain.

"Thanks. It was good to see you," Harry insisted, generating another wry but different smile. "Ready to go, Vineet?"

On the walk back down the lawn, Harry asked, "Did Professor Sinistra help at all?"

Vineet replied, "I am hopeful now. I could feel some measure of control at the end of the lesson."

Harry hadn't noticed this from what they had been doing, but he was willing to trust the other's judgment and his own anxiety eased. "That's good to hear. Hey, shall we stop for a butterbeer?"

Inside the Three Broomsticks it was relatively quiet. Madam Rosmerta came over as soon as they entered. "Harry, my Harry," she said affectionately. "Oh, who is your friend?" she backed off to ask in a low tone. Harry introduced them and

Rosmerta put an arm around Vineet's shoulder to lead him to the best table. "My but you are a handsome one . . . but handsome ones are always taken, right?"

"I am assuming you are inquiring if I am married," Vineet said, appearing perplexed by this rather outgoing woman. She tweaked him on the chin.

"She likes you," Harry said and pulled out a chair for himself.

"I have a wife already, yes," Vineet stated, making Harry look up in surprise.

"Ach! Of course," Rosmerta sighed theatrically and brushed her forehead with her bar rag. "Your free butterbeer, Harry, I will fetch it," she added in a tragic tone.

Vineet sat down beside Harry and looked at him in consternation. "What?" Harry asked.

"Your free butterbeer. It is going well with the free sundaes."

"I . . . They . . ." Harry tried and failed to come up with words. "People like to give me things," he finally said in exasperation.

"Hm," Vineet muttered but was interrupted by their warm mugs arriving.

"So, a wife?" Harry prompted to change the subject.

"Of course. You do not have one?"

"Well . . . no," Harry replied and then laughed. He couldn't even picture being married, or to whom. "So when do we meet her?"

"If I gain a little more confidence in my attenuation, I will send for her. She is living with my mother in India. She did not want to journey until the stay was certain. It is often this way."

"Oh," Harry said, feeling sympathetic. "But she has your mother for company," he observed.

Vineet shifted his mug on the table without picking it up. "I am thinking that my wife is getting eager to move now." He had stated this flatly, without humor, but Harry smiled into his mug.

"That works."

Vineet finally drank some of his butterbeer. "In a way. It does not generate happiness, however."

* * *

On Saturday, Snape arrived home as Harry stood by the mantel shouldering his cloak. "Sorry, Harry, rather a day, and with more student difficulties. I see you are ready to depart."

Snape sounded slightly frazzled, so Harry said, "Do you want to rest up a bit? We are supposedly coming from Highbury on Wye so we could believably be late."

Snape removed his soot-dusted gloves and rubbed his hands together. "Let me wash up at least."

Harry waited in the dining room, feeling more anticipation than a simple dinner warranted. Snape finally returned, looking better than his average, which Harry felt grateful for. "Ready?"

"You are certain you can take us both?"

Harry nodded. "Yep. I practiced this morning a few trips back and forth."

Snape held out his arm, Harry put his hand firmly around it and forcing himself not to think too hard, scrunched down a large paper ball and imagined the shady area under the willow in Godric's Hollow. Harry opened his eyes when he heard a bird scolding above him. The wind moved the long grass of the graveyard and made Harry tighten his cloak and wish for gloves himself.

Snape stepped out from under the low branches and looked about with his usual sharp gaze. Harry followed, detouring over to his parent's marker. The glass egg didn't have any flowers now and the remaining silvering had corroded from the mirror, leaving it a black square framed by tarnished silver. Snape stood a few rows off at the crux of two aisles, waiting with his head down. Feeling heavy in his chest, as he always did, Harry finally stepped away toward the gate. Snape joined him in silence and they walked that way through the village, down the narrow lane and finally up the grass path to the house. The wind grew stronger as they walked uphill, channeled by the adjoining hills that gave the place its name.

Harry knocked and the door opened almost immediately. "Come in, come in," Polly welcomed, her mittened hand gesturing as she disappeared from view. Harry led the way into the kitchen where many things were cooking on the stove, and the counters which were usually crowded, were packed tight with dishes and more pots. When he reached the stove he received a warm, one-armed hug. "Just a moment," she said and turned off a burner while stirring another pot. She finally put the spoon aside and rubbed her hands on her apron. "Well, this must be . . ." Her face changed a bit as she actually looked at Snape. " . . . your adoptive father." Her eyes went to Harry as though to verify what should have been obvious.

"Yes," Harry confirmed pleasantly, unfazed. "This is Severus Snape."

"Ah. Well . . ." She reached out a hand and shook Snape's. "Welcome to the Evans' place." Snape bowed at that, looking stern. Polly frowned lightly before going on with oddly measured speech, "Harry, would you be a dear and fetch the children? They are out in the neighboring field looking for four-leaf clovers."

"Sure," Harry said and aborted removing his cloak. He stepped back out and looked either way before moving out of view.

Polly turned back to her cooking only after giving Snape a much longer look. Farther inside the house other voices rose in laughter. "I don't know quite what I was expecting, Mr. Snape, but you are not it." She stirred a large pot of mashed potatoes before moving things around and putting another on. The pot she stopped stirring began to bubble violently.

"I assure you that . . ." Snape took out his wand and charmed the wooden spoon in the potatoes to stir on its own. " . . . I am Harry's guardian."

She watched the spoon in surprise for a few turns before going on with other things. She took a pie crust out of the oven and poured filling from a pan on top of the fridge into it. "Your name is actually familiar. Is it possible James Potter would have spoken of you?"

"Not unlikely," Snape replied. In the heat of the kitchen he shucked his cloak off and draped it over his arm.

"You can put that down in the next room," she suggested.

Snape did so and returned to stand in the doorway, arms crossed.

She put the pie back in the oven and set the loudly clicking dial. "Yes, I'm quite certain I've heard that name. An odd sort of name, isn't it?" When Snape merely shrugged, she said, "Yes, Snape. . . I'm quite certain, in fact, that James rather disliked you."

"The feeling was mutual," Snape stated calmly. "Whatever it is you are getting at, you may go to directly. I expect Harry will return momentarily."

She uncovered a roast on the small table and prodded it with a long fork. "Now, give an old woman time to put old memories together." She took out a carving knife, prompting Snape to say, "May I assist?" She shrugged and held out the knife, but Snape had his wand in his hand and with a wave, the roast was reduced to slices on the plate. She looked between the empty pan and the full plate before saying, "You do a lot of cooking, then?"

"I have an elf for that. But I do a great deal of potion brewing and ingredient preparation, which is rather similar."

She set the pan aside on the floor. "You are a dry one, aren't you? Harry does speak of you fondly though. I wonder what his father would think of that?"

"I don't know, nor care, frankly," Snape replied darkly.

She put the long fork aside and looked at him hard. When she didn't speak, Snape said in a low voice, "Yes, the worst you can remember James Potter saying of me is most likely true. Or was. You must have sent Harry on a rather roundabout errand."

"If he knew exactly where to go, it wouldn't have been. The children do like their hiding places."

Snape sighed and said, "I appreciate your concern for Harry. He is in need of relatives who understand him rather than vilify him. It is one of the things I cannot heal on my own." The voices from the other side of the house rose and fell in boisterous conversation. Snape tilted his head and waited for silence before continuing. He had caught her off-guard with that comment and she was now more thoughtful than suspicious.

She asked, "Does Harry know that his father hated you so?"

"Yes. And Harry has despised me just as much although he is not as good at it, since his father's personality is tempered by Lily's disposition as well."

Polly smiled, apparently in memory. "Yes, a lovely woman. Very sad what happened."

Snape watched the door in anticipation but there was no sign of Harry. Polly wasn't finished. "The worst James ever accused you of . . . is rather terrible," she stated while spooning string beans into a bowl.

"Almost certainly."

"And all true?" she asked, sounding amused which may have been a measure of her confusion.

"Probably. The worst he could have accused me of . . . certainly was."

She stopped suddenly and a string bean fell onto the floor from the hovering spoon. "He included you in with those trying to hunt them down." She resumed spooning. "I remember James warning Ed and I to be on the lookout for odd visitors . . . characters in black hooded robes with masks, that sort of thing. Seemed like a bit of a game, really . . . until that night." She sounded unseated.

Silence fell between them. She sprinkled fried onions over the heaping bowl. "And now you have Harry."

"Yes," he replied mildly.

"And you with that wand of yours, not much someone like me could do about that."

"You misunderstand," Snape stated. "I could hardly wish Harry any harm."

Her eyes asked for reassurance of that, but looked doubtful of getting it.

Snape sighed lightly and crossed his arms. "Harry very much needs people around him who understand him. I have no need for you to understand me beyond that." He moved to the door to peer through the window. Harry was at the far side of the long field, approaching with two children, one by the hand. Speaking quickly, Snape said, "The Harry I took in a year ago last summer was not the one approaching now. He was worn down, used up even, by the task a heartless prophecy had set him to, which was to destroy the vilest, most powerful wizard in half a century. He had no family to speak of. He had been Voldemort's puppet. He was disbelieved regarding everything that mattered, and not given help when he most needed it." Snape exhaled, frustrated at trying to explain. "I gave him a home--something he had never had. I drew him out of his past--something only I, who had also been the Dark Lord's puppet, could do."

She covered the string beans with the plate she had been holding for this. "So this is about redemption, then?"

Snape shook his head with a frown and reached for the doorknob. Quietly, he said, "There is no redemption for me," and pulled open the door just as a small boy, running full tilt, ran up the steps, and without pausing, inside and through the kitchen.

Harry was carrying the girl. "Oof, you are heavier than you look," he breathed as he put her down. "Hey, Severus, getting to know Mrs. Evans?"

"Yes, of course," he replied evenly with no hint of the seriousness of the conversation.

"Why don't you head on in and sit down?" she invited, arranging other things quickly in the small available spaces.

Harry noticed the self-stirring spoon and gave Snape a shake of the head before leading the way through the house to where the voices emanated.

"Harry!" Pamela exclaimed, pushing her chair back and coming around to greet him as he entered "And . . . this must be your father, adoptive father. No family resemblance there, is there?" she teased.

"This is Severus," Harry said, and introduced everyone except Patricia's husband who stood to shake Snape's hand.

"Sit down, we've been famished waiting for you," Patricia complained with a wide grin.

Dishes began arriving and Pamela jumped up and helped ferry them to the table. Harry tucked into a huge pile of everything, wrapped in the cheery house and relatives.

"So, Mr. Snape," Pamela asked, "What do you teach?"

Snape, who had been monitoring Mrs. Evans' scrutiny of himself, took a moment to formulate a reply. "A diverse course covering various, what you might call, folklore and European myths." Harry's brow started to knit in confusion, but it faded quickly. Snape went on, "It is a new topic for me, I used to teach chemistry."

"That's a change," Patricia's husband exclaimed, one of his few contributions.

"So what kinds of myths?" Patricia asked curiously.

"Mythical creatures, for example," Snape said. "Basilisks, sirens, things of that nature."

"That's very interesting. Did you like his class?" Pamela teased Harry.

Harry grinned, "Yeah, except that he graded me really hard so no one could think he was being too easy on me."

"Did you really?" Pamela asked and the sisters laughed.

Hours later, when they finally put on their cloaks to depart, Snape pulled Mrs. Evans aside and let the door close to the outside. Everyone was seeing them off, which had necessitated calling an actual cab to pick them up. Snape said quickly,

"I am considering suggesting to Harry that he apply for a dispensation to be allowed to reveal his wizardry to his blood relatives, your two daughters. If you have reservations, however, I won't."

Her eyes widened. "Is that how it works?"

"It is complicated, but given who he is and his lack of blood family, I expect the Ministry will accept it."

She put one hand on her hip and moved a spoon from a bowl to the sink. "You are a puzzle, Mr. Snape."

Dryly, he said, "I have no desire to be easily understood, really."

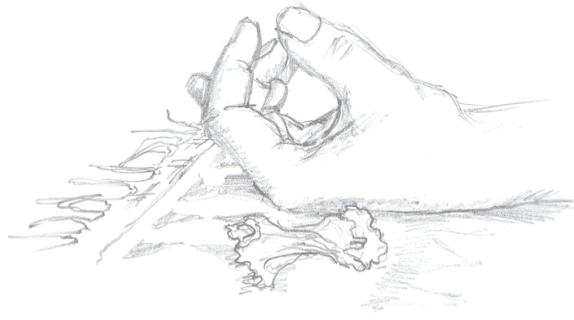
"I think Pammy and Patty would be thrilled to hear that magic is real."

Someone knocked on the door from the outside. "They could not tell anyone."

"They can keep a secret," she assured him. "As can I," she added.

Snape bowed faintly, opened the door and stepped out. Harry asked, "Ready to go?"

At the end of the grass path they had no choice but to get in the cab. They rode in the direction of Highbury on Wye for a few miles before asking the cabby to drop them off at a pub at an unmarked crossroads. They tipped him well and Disappeared when the cab disappeared over the next rise.



Chapter 66 -- Mum Galore, Part II

Harry arrived for Monday training feeling good about everything. He had dropped a thank you letter to Mrs. Evans in the post on the way out the door along with a letter to Elizabeth who sounded in her last letter as though she were having an exciting time at university.

They were still working on combined spells in training, and Vineet, who was rather good at it before Sinistra's tutoring, was even better now at matching his power to another. Harry, who was his usual partner got the main benefit of this, although Rodgers starting shifting partners around by the end to give the others a chance to work with Vineet and hopefully pick up some of his skill. Vineet, who was not accustomed to being the best at spells, gave Harry a rare smile when they finally broke for lunch. Everyone but Vineet was exhausted and shuffled out of the training room with tired sighs.

Harry was feeling rather relieved that the Indian was certain to stay on past the six month review. He still could not risk casting a spell at anyone other than an Auror but he was gradually improving on this. As they settled into the break room, Vineet passed the cold teapot to Harry to heat. Harry obliged and tapped it with a hollow *tink!* He then asked, "So, have you invited your wife to come?"

The others stopped what they were doing; even the older apprentices, Munz and Blackpool, turned to listen in.

"You're married?" Kerry Ann demanded. "You never said."

Vineet shrugged in confusion. "It is normal. I don't understand your surprise." He turned to Harry, who was taking out the sandwich Winky made for him from last night's leftover roast chicken. "And yes, I will do that this week." In a lower voice, he said, "I am having you to thank, Harry."

"I'm glad you can finish your training now, Vineet. Very glad."

Vineet, appearing embarrassed at that, ducked his head over his bowl of curry.

"So, what's her name?" Kerry Ann asked. "Let's hear all about her..."

Harry, who expected Vineet to be reticent, was surprised when he began to give her family history, father's occupation, a description of his mother's house where she now lived. Harry listened to these details as he ate.

"So where'd you meet?" Kerry Ann then asked, just pausing between bites long enough to get another long part of the story.

"Where did we meet?" Vineet echoed. "At her house, I suppose, when I went to meet her parents to finalize the engagement."

"Huh?" Aaron said. "You have an arranged marriage?"

Vineet gave him a lowered brow. "Everyone does. You are very strange here with this hit-or-miss pretending to be in love system you have." He sounded honestly critical.

None of them could come up with a decent response to that for some reason. "But really," Kerry Ann finally insisted. "How can you live with someone you don't love?"

Vineet looked around at all of them. "You are none of you married. You do not know of what you are speaking."

Kerry Ann's face twisted in thought. "Well, you have us there. I'll give you that."

Harry arrived home to find a letter from Snape on the table. He read it as he walked upstairs to drop off his things and stopped dead on the center step upon reading Snape's suggestion about the dispensation. The thought had not occurred to him before. Through all the hassle of arranging a visit, he had assumed they could never know. Standing there, he was certain the Ministry would allow it if he asked and that made his heart feel light.

I asked Mrs. Evans directly--that is why I we were detained leaving the house. She gave her consent to it and assured me that her daughters would be discrete.

Snape's talking to Mrs. Evans before speaking with him, made him a little annoyed, but the thought of visits where his distant cousins knew what he was and what his parents had been, thrilled him enough that he easily put it aside.

The very next day at the Ministry, Harry used his lunch break to visit the Magical Filings office. He waited for his turn at the window a little impatiently; although not outwardly so because a witch had already tried to let him cut in on the queue and he had declined. Behind the desk sat a thin old witch with jeweled cat-eye glasses on a silver chain. "Yes, next," she said in a nasal voice.

"I would like to file a dispensation to . . . " Here he pulled out the note he had written out from one of the Ministry rules booklets he had been given over the last few months--the ones he hadn't really touched otherwise. " . . . allow me to inform a blood relative that I'm a wizard. It is called an Extended and Distant Blood Filing, I think."

She frowned and chewed her gum three times before getting up and going to a cabinet and leafing through a drawer. On the top of the cabinet, paperclips were busy hooking themselves into a chain. By the time she stood straight with a hand on her lower back, the clips were jumping rope with themselves and a seal that had been inanimate until then.

She handed a form over to him. "Fill this out with copies of the appropriate records and bring it back. NEXT."

Harry stepped away and gaped at the hundreds of tiny boxes that covered the form. He jumped literally at the identically packed back of it. "Aye," he breathed as he hurried back to his department.

* * *

Pulling paperwork together became Harry's primary free-time activity over the next weeks. He visited Muggle offices in many different counties. He wrote away for property records. He discovered a dusty Ministry records office he didn't know existed for birth certificates going back three generations, because he had to prove that Pamela and Patricia were actually blood relatives. When the gangly man handed him an unexpectedly thick file of Evanses Harry had stared in dumb surprise before thumbing through for the ones he needed copies of--all under the watchful eye of the clerk.

"What's this tag mean?" Harry asked of the orange dot beside the name on the file label.

"That is color code for, uh, intermittent magical progeny."

"What?"

As though Harry were slow, the man said, "It means magic isn't constant in the family. It shows up only random-like."

Harry was stunned. "Does that mean it's shown up before?"

The man reached over and flipped expertly through the oddly sized papers and decorative certificates in the file. "Here, they're marked in orange too."

Harry accepted the birth certificate the man held out. "Clayton Evans born 1632," he read, then flipped madly through the pile. "Gerabald Evans born 1760. I didn't know there were others."

The man shrugged and, seeming slightly miffed, tapped the remaining pile to make it jump back into order. "Got whatcha need?"

"Yeah, thanks. I need copies of these seven."

Upon his return to his floor, he encountered Mr. Weasley in the corridor. "Hello, Harry. How are you, my boy?" He didn't wait for Harry's reply. "You probably have a ton of invitations, but I thought I'd give you one anyway." He held out a card and Harry accepted it; it was an invitation to a Halloween party at the Burrow.

"Thanks. I'll definitely be there." A pair of witches went by, each hovering a large trunk. They took them into the file room at the end.

Mr. Weasley said, "It'd be nice to see you. Just one set of Weasley twins this time."

"Oh, that's right. I'm really sorry I couldn't make the last picnic--"

Mr. Weasley hit him on the arm. "No problem, dear boy. I know you're busy."

"I had something I really needed to do," Harry said at the same time. "Thanks for the invitation, though." He gestured that he needed to go into the workout room.

Mr. Weasley looked as though he wanted to say more, but he merely gave a little wave and stepped away. Harry thought he seemed a little strained, but he forgot about it as soon as they settled in for reading review.

* * *

The next morning, Harry stood opposite Vineet as they sequenced through their normal blocking drills. Vineet wore his usual furrowed brow that spoke of frustration. "You are pulling your attacks again," he stated.

Harry frowned lightly and lowered his wand. Vineet's blocks were unpredictable, since many of the attenuated ones required fine power control. Excess power usually resulted in an exploded or collapsed block. Harry was very tempted to explain that he really didn't want to hurt him, but decided instead to say, "I'm putting a lot into my attacks, as much as I do with the others."

Vineet also lowered his wand. "I wish to work on my blocking," he stated calmly although with almost a plead in his dark eyes.

"All right," Harry said. When he cast a stronger Blasting Curse, Vineet had to leap back and pour power forward in his Chrysanthemum block. His look of consternation grew deeper but he stepped forward with a determined expression and Harry moved on to a Freezing Curse.

When they changed roles, Harry's blocks held up well against the broad assault of his partner's spells. Deflecting and countering each overpowered attack appropriately required concentration and as the sequences repeated, Harry settled into an intense state that made his blood rush as the flashes and sizzling explosions flowed safely around him.

"Goes to show that Potter is used to being on the defensive," Rodgers drawled as he stepped over from explaining a detailed point about block nodes to Aaron. "Let's try a few combination attacks," he said, "since Potter appears bored. We'll be starting them next week in any event."

Vineet stepped back and Rodgers said, "Oh, no, continue. I'll match you as you sequence."

Vineet stepped through their usual attack sequence, with Harry blocking or countering each one. Rodgers added a contrary attack spell to alternate attacks from Vineet. When he did this Harry found his blocks wavering oddly and felt that he did indeed need practice at this. The fifth one of these attacks made Harry's block fail with a blindingly bright blue flare. Harry went to his knees, his legs suddenly unable to support him. Vineet stepped over and offered him a hand up. Harry, dizzy still, accepted it slowly.

"Problem, Potter?" Rodgers asked.

"Don't know, sir," Harry replied. He had never before felt quite so disoriented from being hit. He forced himself to his feet and blinked at the others. Looking around made him lose his balance and had to step backward to catch it.

"Down to the Healer, Potter," Rodgers ordered dismissively. Harry shook his head in a vain attempt to clear it, and stepped out of the workout room.

In the Ministry Healer's station Harry waited to be consulted by a young witch who seemed overwhelmed. She hurried through healing a nasty cut on the thigh of an older wizard that appeared to have been caused by the claw of something very large. Harry, feeling a little warm in the small closed room, slid his sleeves up off his wrists, and slouched down in the chair. His attention was caught by something on his arms several times before he managed to focus on it properly. Blue jagged streaks resembling an ephemeral net continuously walked up his forearms. Rubbing his skin had not effect on them. Harry stared at it uncomprehendingly while he waited.

Finally, the young Healer took a look at him, cast a few spells at him, and frowned deeply. "I don't know what that is on your arms," she said. "Some kind of spell rebound. I expect it will fade." He was released with the instruction that he should take it easy.

Harry sat out the rest of workout, which was almost over by the time he returned. Rodgers glanced with a frown at the strange electric lines on his arms and waved him to a desk. During the review session Harry could barely keep his eyes open. By the time he returned to Shrewsthorpe he was utterly exhausted, but fortunately Winky had tea and biscuits waiting for him, which helped perk him up.

With his books at his side, he studied for the next day, sleep tugging constantly and unwelcomingly at him as he turned each page of what seemed like endless chapters of mind-numbing information. He replied to Snape's most recent letter with a quick description of what he had learned in the last week. Hedwig took the letter away with her usual energetic flapping.

The next morning Harry wasn't feeling much better although the electric blue effect on his arms was indeed dimmer than the night before. He prodded at the underside of his left arm while he waited for the usual bacon and eggs to appear. The effect was so strange; walking strings of jagged blue glow flickered their way along just under his skin. When one disappeared off his fingers, another emerged from his upper arm.

Breakfast revitalized him as did coffee, but holding on during morning training took every ounce of strength he had. He actually wished, then felt guilty for it, that Vineet's spell power was still weak. Again he forced himself through afternoon review and then home.

The quiet house was a blessing to his raw, worn nerves. Harry ate dinner gratefully, then crawled straight into bed without even cracking a book or opening the afternoon post.

* * *

Professor Snape sent off the student he had kept for detention, a Second Year Hufflepuff with an aggravating penchant for doing the exact reverse of what he was told. Snape imagined the boy's parents were relieved utterly that school had resumed. He sat at his desk and methodically pulled out the rolls of assignment sheets from tomorrow's classes as well as the grade book. As he recorded each grade in an unambiguous hand, his thoughts strayed to Harry, not for the first time

that day. Usually, he found himself half-expecting a visit from him, as Harry had frequently done the previous year. Now he found himself worrying about him, which was ludicrous; he had received an ordinary missive from him just yesterday. He shook himself and focused on the columns of meticulous green numbers before him.

* * *

Friday, Harry didn't have any place he needed to be, which was good, because he yearned to sleep in. Which he did--until a very late ten in the morning and he could do this tomorrow as well, he thought with relief. As he made his way downstairs, he attributed his difficulty with negotiating the steps to excessive sleep. Rubbing his eyes, he waited for breakfast, or whatever Winky decided to prepare so late in the morning. Bacon and eggs and a pot of tea appeared eventually. He had a hard time pouring from the pot as though the porcelain had a shiver charm on it. Using the cozy, he managed to pour with both hands.

The hot tea and heavy food made him feel well enough to do some reading. He did this the library, his stretched his legs out on the lounge as he held one of his books on his lap. During the course of reading one chapter, he fell asleep at least three times. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, wondering why he was so drowsy after such a long night's sleep. Sitting up, he struggled through the remaining chapters for Monday, not certain if he had learned anything memorable from them. Tomorrow he would take some notes, perhaps.

At the end of the day, as he changed into his pyjamas, Harry noticed the blue effect was still there on the underside of his forearms. The strange ripples looked brighter. He wondered with a jolt if maybe they had not faded, but that they showed up better in the dark.

The next morning, Harry could barely force himself out of bed. He wondered if he had caught the flu, although it was hardly the season. He stumbled downstairs and took up his usual spot at the table with his books and parchments. One pot of tea disappeared and then another as he struggled to stay alert enough to read. He would have missed lunch had it not bumped him on the head as it appeared on the table.

Eventually evening came on. Harry looked forward to going back to bed as he sat at the dining room table and slowly, methodically studied. The hearth flaring startled him as he turned the page of a reference book on apprehension charms. Snape stepped out, ducking his tall frame as he did so. Harry greeted him warmly, very glad for the unexpected company.

Snape hesitated at Harry's tone, giving him a faint smile. "Good to see you studying even without my constant presence."

"They haven't given us any less to read," Harry tried to quip, but it came out weakly.

Snape put his satchel down and stepped over to him. He glanced at the open book before Harry and then looked him over with narrowed eyes. He finally said, "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm tired. I've been tired since I got hit during paired spell blocking at training."

Snape's hand brushed his shoulder. "Did you see a Healer?"

"Yes. Right after." Harry rubbed his eyes hard and pushed the book away to fit his elbow on the table so he could lean his cheek on his hand and cease holding his head up. His foggy brain remembered the blue lines. "But this strange effect hasn't gone away like the Healer thought it would," he commented as he tugged his sleeve up.

Snape grabbed up Harry's arm so suddenly that it made him jump. "How did you get this?" Snape demanded.

"At training. On Wednesday," Harry answered groggily, unable even to rise to Snape's alarm.

"Wednesday?" Snape whispered in disbelief. "What happened?" he demanded, sounding almost nasty.

Harry awkwardly explained about the paired spell attacks they had been practicing. About how his block had failed.

"Rodgers was one of the ones spelling you?" Snape asked. Harry could hear suspicion behind it.

"Yes. He didn't know what it was on my arms either."

"I'm surprised," Snape sneered, "since he fancies himself the Death Eater expert." He turned to the hearth, scooped a clump of Floo power and with a jerking motion, threw it onto the grate and requested the Ministry Auror's office. He tossed his cloak back out of the way as he knelt before the hearthstone. "Nymphadora Tonks, please," Snape demanded when a head appeared.

When Tonks' head floated into view, greeting Snape in a friendly way, Snape laid into her about Harry's condition. Harry sat rigid, holding his breath at the tone of extreme anger.

"Wait, wait," Tonks interrupted. "Step back. I'm coming over." She was all seriousness when she appeared, didn't even apologize for knocking the poker rack over. When Snape showed her the rippling blue on Harry's arm, she asked Harry, "You still have that?"

Snape cut in. "Of course he does, it . . . You don't know what it is either?" he demanded. He paced once, rubbing his forehead with his fingertips. His cloak flared behind him as he turned. "You're too young, I suppose," he muttered.

"What is it?" Tonks asked in concern as she held Harry's wrist to examine it better.

"Sponteingero," Snape said. "A regenerating spell that is draining him as it propagates. It forms when two perfectly counter-phased netting spells are used simultaneously on an unprotected person. Voldemort's servants perfected it. Malfoy and Nott were particularly good at causing it to manifest."

"I don't think I've heard of that," Tonks said apologetically. "This happened by accident, I heard."

Snape stood and gazed at Harry in thought. "It was used for blackmail when there wasn't anything else to hold over the victim. It takes two to cause it, and two to eliminate it. The spell drains your magic as it feeds on it. You probably have no magic accessible at this point, given how long it has been."

Harry pulled out his wand, considered testing that, but then stashed it away again when Snape added quietly, "Eventually it will drain your life."

In alarm Tonks asked, "Can I help? What spell do you need to cancel, or should we take him to St. Mungo's?"

"It is not a complicated spell . . . but I would much prefer someone who has experience with this." He frowned in thought. "Moody has . . . do you know where he is?"

Tonks frowned. "He's off this week, but I could have him found . . ."

"Remus Lupin has experience with it as well," Snape added thoughtfully.

"He's at the Wheezes," Tonks offered. "He's been working for them off and on. We should get Harry to London where we can either find someone or take him to Mungo's."

Without hesitating Snape turned back to the hearth and contacted the three Ws on Diagon Alley. This time a password was required to get through. When one of the twins appeared, Snape asked, "Is Remus there right now?"

"He's just out on an errand. Should be back in a mo." His head turned and looked up at Harry and Tonks, "Wotcher!" he said.

"I am coming through with Harry to wait for him," Snape said, pointedly cutting off more small talk.

"Gotcha. Love to see ya." The redhead backed out quickly.

Snape stood and came over to Harry, lifted him to his feet by the arm, and held him steady. Harry, for his part, forced his shoulders back and tried to stand straight and unaffected. He was swimming in weakness so completely it was almost restful.

"The Floo Network is going to be disorienting for you in this state," Snape said, as he led Harry to stand before the empty grate. He took down the canister of Floo Powder and handed it to Tonks. "If you would throw for us," he said to her. At her nod he pulled Harry into the hearth, careful to ensure that Harry ducked under the mantel.

Harry, finding standing to be far more effort than he could expend, leaned against his guardian as they stood up in the chimney. "Tell me when you are ready," Tonks' voice echoed up into the chimney. As Snape's arms enfolded him, Harry rested his forehead on a shoulder and found himself trusting utterly that he would be taken care of. He wasn't used to this kind of faith in someone else, and wondered idly if all parents warranted that feeling.

The green flames distracted him from his musings and they were catapulted through the darkness. Dim hearths and fires roared past them, making Harry believe he was flying into oblivion. Just as he was losing track of himself, they stopped suddenly with Harry's landing softened by being held off the floor.

The dim, candlelit rooms that made up Weasley Wizard Wheezes' assembly and research area were disarrayed and crowded with odd assortments of things. One of the twins greeted them as they ducked out of the hearth. "What's wrong with 'arry?" he asked as he quickly moved to clear a box of candy rats on sticks off the nearest old straight-backed chair. The rats squealed in complaint.

Harry was helped to sit down, gratefully, because he felt sick and dizzy from the Floo as well as somewhat surprised to be whole and breathing. Snape kept a hand on his arm, he assumed to keep him from falling out of the chair. The hearth flared, lighting half the room, and Tonks appeared.

"Oy, so many visitors, Fred. We have to change the password again," George commented in false tones of being overwhelmed. He stepped over from the dim, far side of the long room.

While they waited, Snape explained about the spell. He held Harry's arm out and said, "It drains all the magic from its victim and then the very life force."

"Aye, Harry has no magic right now?" Fred asked. "My one chance to beat Harry in a duel." he said with relish, pulling his wand out and brandishing it. Snape took only one long stride to block him bodily, eyes flashing. Fred stepped back at his menacing move. "Only joking, Professor," he muttered panicky, quickly stuffing his wand back into his robe pocket and slinking aside.

Minutes later, the door opened and Lupin appeared, gingerly carrying a small glass jar. George leapt over and removed it from him and quickly put it aside in a cabinet. "Just a, uh, necessary ingredient for an experiment," he muttered.

"What is this?" Lupin asked upon seeing them all there. When Snape showed him Harry's left arm, he crouched quickly before Harry. "How did that happen?"

"It happened during his training," Snape explained, glancing sideways at Tonks. "Apparently an accident."

Tonks stiffened and frowned but did not respond. Lupin looked Harry up and down. "Looks like it's been a while . . ."

"Since Wednesday," Snape provided.

"Wednesday!" Lupin exclaimed. "You are doing very well in that case, Harry." He stood back up. "Let's get him on the floor," he said, pushing a stack of flattened boxes off the one clear corner of rug. "Take off his robe so we can see the tracings."

Many hands assisted in pulling Harry's robe down, revealing his grey t-shirt underneath. Urged to the floor, Harry rested his head back on the dusty, red rug. A discarded sweet wrapper crinkled in his ear; he reached up clumsily and tossed it away. More things were pushed aside so that Lupin could kneel on one side of him and Snape on the other.

His short sleeves were tugged up and thumbs pressed into the crux of each of his shoulders. "We are right on the nodes," said Snape instructively to Tonks, who appeared very worried as she stood before Harry's feet. "Ready?" Snape then asked Lupin, who replied by nodding grimly. "Harry," Snape said gently. "You are going to black out when we incant the spell. Don't fight it . . . you will wake up again shortly."

Harry nodded. His total faith was holding strong; although he wouldn't mind being allowed to sleep a little.

"On three," Lupin said and counted. "*Mutusborum*," they incanted together at the end of the count. Tonks gasped. Snape lifted Harry's now limp left arm and turned the underside upward. He and Lupin watched as the blue tracings slowed, grew sparse and then only appeared occasionally. A moment passed with no jagged line.

With his wand Snape tapped Harry on the chest and said, "*Locoinitio*," in a hurried way. Harry drew in a sharp breath.

"Too soon," Lupin criticized. Indeed, a few blue traces appeared again, but they remained sparse.

Snape sighed audibly. "Perhaps you should do the reanimation," he said in a tone of self-recrimination.

"*You* should, Severus," Lupin said. "We'll try it again after he catches his breath."

Harry opened his eyes and lifted his head. Snape said, "We didn't quite get it, Harry. We have to do it again."

"All right," Harry said quietly, resting his head back on the floor. He sounded disoriented.

Lupin counted down a second time and they repeated the spell. Harry again fell limp and quite still. "Count a slow ten after the last line appears," Lupin instructed patiently. They watched Harry's arm as the electric lines faded and finally stopped. Lupin counted aloud. At seven another line appeared and the count restarted. Snape fidgeted, repeatedly changing his grip on Harry's limp hand. One tense count after another was interrupted. Finally, they made it all the way to ten. Snape repeated the reanimation spell, with more power this time, enough to make Harry's body jump as he gulped air. "It's all right," Harry murmured as he exhaled.

From Harry's feet Tonks said, "I'm glad there was someone else to do that spell."

Harry's breathing slowed and he opened his eyes. Lupin tugged him to a sitting position as they continued to monitor his arms. "It's all right," Harry repeated dazedly.

No more lines appeared for several minutes. They helped him back into his robe before pulling him to his feet. Fred and George stood in paired, identical, stunned silences beside the hearth. Harry glanced at them and gave them a small smile.

"Feeling better?" Lupin asked.

"Yes," Harry replied, feeling real strength flowing in his limbs for the first time in days.

"Thank you, Remus," Snape said sincerely. He released Harry's arm when it was clear he could stand on his own.

"Anything for Harry," Lupin said in a teasing tone. When Harry looked over at him, Lupin said, "Stop by anytime. We're all usually here working most days."

"I was admiring your ingredient cabinet," Snape intoned.

"It is open for borrowing . . . I think," Lupin said

"Trades," Fred said. "We definitely do trades."

"Ready to go home?" Snape asked his charge. At Harry's nod Snape pulled the tin of Floo powder from his pocket and held it out for him. Harry took a handful and stepped before the hearth.

"Thanks," he said to the room, eyes dwelling on Lupin a little longer.

"I'll see you on Monday, Harry," Tonks said in a tone of concerned affection. "Rest well until then."

Back at the house in Shrewsthorpe, Harry immediately sat down in a chair at the table and breathed deeply. He felt much better although he also felt strangely numb. Snape arrived in a roar of flame. "Would you like dinner?" he asked after setting the Floo powder back on the mantel.

Harry's stomach growled at the thought, so he nodded. Snape stepped out into the main hall and down to the kitchen. Winky looked up from lifting a cauldron off the wall, clearly in the midst of dinner preparation. Snape crossed his arms and eyed the elf. "I was going to ask you to prepare dinner," he said dryly, "but that is apparently unnecessary."

She hung the oversized cauldron on a hook and swung it onto the fire, which was flaring high on recently added wood. "Winky make dinner," she stated reassuringly.

Snape watched her a long moment before turning to leave. Her voice stating, "Master Harry better," brought him up short. He turned his head around to her. "Yes," he confirmed quietly. They considered each other as Winky stood on the hearthstone and wrung her hands around the tea towel clutched between them.

"Winky is bound," she squeaked finally in some distress. "Very limited. Cannot order Master home. Only compel. Something very strange with Master Harry and Winky can only compel."

Snape stared at her, the long debate he had had with himself about checking on the boy cast itself into new light. In the end it was likely the reason he had decided to come home unplanned. "Thank you," he said.

Winky dropped her gaze and straightened her tea towel upon seeing the state of it. "House-elves get only worst wizards have to give," she said, tugging excessively on the bottom edge of the towel to pull out the wrinkles. "Masters very good wizards," she asserted. "Have nothing bad for Winky." Her oversized eyes finally came up to him, blinking sadly. "Winky not want to lose nice wizard family."

Snape swallowed consciously. "Neither do I," he said. After further thought he considered asking her if she were capable of compelling Harry to grow as well.

Winky pointedly turned back to her cooking. "Winky make dinner now."

"Thank you," Snape breathed again before stepping away. In the main hall he felt a delayed, twisting panic at the realization that it would have been truly ironic if Harry had died from such a thing.

Back in the dining room Harry sat in his usual seat, looking glum. He had had time to build up a list of apologies. "I'm sorry," Harry began when Snape stepped in. "I ought to be able to manage on my own for more than two weeks. I went to the Healer, she didn't know what it was either."

"Harry," Snape interrupted as he pulled out the chair across from him. He sat down and shook his head to indicate the apologetic speech could stop. Harry fell into a brooding silence instead.

When dinner arrived, Harry ate voraciously. He consumed two large servings of roast chicken by the end, followed by chocolates when they appeared.

"That and a good night's sleep should render you quite recovered," Snape stated, sounding relieved. When Harry's eyes tried to fall closed as he pulled one of his textbooks over from the stack beside him, Snape said, "Perhaps you should sleep instead."

Harry stumbled his way upstairs where he changed hurriedly and fell into bed.

An hour later, Snape stepped in to check on him. As he approached the bed, Harry rolled over and looked up at him in the dimness. "Hello," Harry said groggily.

"There is no sneaking up on you," Snape observed.

"Not when I'm asleep."

Snape sat on the edge of the bed. "Let me see your arm," he commanded.

Harry sniffed and pulled an arm out from under the light duvet. In the darkness it would have been easy to see the tracings. A long time passed before Snape said, "It has cleared. It was an unfortunate thing to have happen."

"It's all right," Harry said, pulling his arms back under the warmth. He held his breath as that brought an odd, slippery memory back. "Hm," he muttered.

"What?"

Harry exhaled. "I had the oddest dream when you and Remus hit me with the spell," he said, straining to remember the foggy world where his parents had approached. They had chastised him for being there, he recalled in confusion. Disjointedly they also seemed to expect him, although maybe that had been a second dream where they greeted him welcomingly. He blinked against the darkness, as he thought he remembered Dumbledore as well.

"You could not have dreamt," Snape said. "We used a Mutushorum on you, two of them, directly on the strongest magical nodes of your body. The only way to eliminate a self-propagating spell such as that is to cut it off from all energy."

"What are you saying?" Harry asked, shying away from the inkling he was getting.

"There was no activity in your brain with which to dream. You were effectively dead for sixty seconds the first time and nearly three minutes the second."

A chill ran over Harry's arms and chest. "Is it possible to see beyond the veil in that time?" he asked, fearful of the answer.

"I suppose." Snape shifted, crossing his arms. "What did you see?"

Harry hesitated as he sifted through the memory again and remembered his mother smiling; she hadn't seemed very old he considered, more Harry's own age. "My parents. Dumbledore." Harry remembered another figure moving through the snaking fog, a shy or self-recriminating one. "Maybe Sirius," he said and then had to swallow hard.

"You were speaking when you woke up," Snape said. "I thought it odd that you would have come to awareness that quickly."

Harry let his head fall back on the pillow. "I was talking to my parents," he explained. "They were apologizing for leaving me alone. How did they recognize me, I wonder?" He remembered the half figure of Dumbledore that appeared to be standing in a denser fog beyond his parents. "Dumbledore didn't say anything, just smiled." Harry rubbed his eyes and yawned. "You don't think that was real, do you?" he asked.

"I don't think the concept of reality applies in this case."

"Probably not," Harry murmured in reply. Tired, he rolled over and curled up. Snape took the hint and stood, although he hovered for a minute or more. Harry, realizing he was still there, rolled back and looked up at his faint grey outline in the dark room. "What is it?" Harry asked.

A pause ensued before Snape reluctantly replied, "I cannot help but think I would have deserved to have lost you this way."

"What?" Harry blurted, raising himself onto his elbow.

Snape exhaled before saying in a dark tone, "I certainly have stood by and watched it take others down."

Harry turned the lamp up a bit and sat up farther with a quick motion. "Severus," he started in an admonishing way, but didn't know where to go from there, just couldn't bear to have Snape feel as guilty as he sounded.

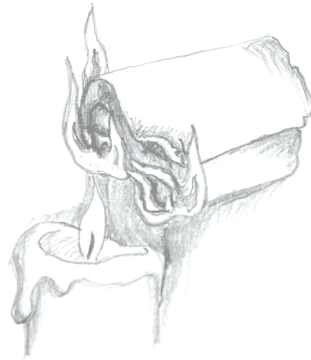
"You should rest," Snape said and turned to leave.

"Severus," Harry called him back as he stepped to the half-open door of his room. "Severus," Harry repeated, when Snape kept going. As his guardian grasped the door handle to open it farther, Harry said with a stab of concern at being ignored, "Dad."

That did bring Snape to a halt, arm immobilized mid-pull. Harry pushed himself out of bed and padded across the floor in bare feet. Snape turned just his head to him, his expression very odd and far away in the sharply shadowed light. "You wouldn't deserve that," Harry insisted. "How could you think that?"

Black eyes flicked over to him, reflecting the single flame of the lamp across the room. "I don't deserve *you*, Harry," Snape stated before again moving to leave.

"Severus," Harry said in exasperation but Snape stepped into the hallway. Harry leaned out the door and watched him walk away, unable to try the word 'dad' again because if Snape ignored him, Harry wasn't sure what it would do to him. Harry stared down the empty hallway after Snape went downstairs. Frowning deeply, he finally returned to bed and the nightstand where he found the last of an old bottle of sleeping potion and drank it down.



Chapter 67 -- Removing the Mask

At breakfast the next morning, Snape's mood did not seem to have improved from the night before. Harry started eating the plate of food that was already at his seat when he arrived. Snape didn't speak and Harry, feeling bitter in his helplessness, finally decided to say, "Thank you for taking care of me." Snape nodded silently, holding his coffee cup before him without drinking from it. His expression was still too distant. Concerned, Harry tried to make conversation, "When do you go back?"

Snape said, "I need to leave for Hogwarts shortly."

Harry scratched his head. "I'll try to take better care of things," he said, sounding too eagerly helpful to his own ears. Snape's guilt must be tangling him up.

Snape set his cup down and pushed his plate away untouched. He stood and said in a quiet, commanding voice, "If you are in doubt about anything, owl me or even contact the Hogwarts Floo. Someone is always monitoring it, and they will think nothing of you contacting me."

"I'll do that," Harry insisted.

With a stony expression, Snape collected his things together and departed through the hearth. Alone, Harry pushed away his half-eaten breakfast and both plates sparkled away. He rubbed his eyes and forehead, trying to think of what to do. Eventually he gave up and fetched his books; he was very far behind for Monday.

* * *

"Figures he would know," was the only response Rodgers had on Monday to Tonks' reciting of what had happened. Harry stonily let the comment pass, not noticing Vineet's alarm as the explanation was given. Harry's close concentration on their practice made everyone leave him be during the morning, for which he was grateful; he was afraid his temper might be short and didn't want to test it.

When they broke for lunch Vineet stepped to Harry's writing desk, looking grim and uncertain--an extension of his quiet demeanor that morning. Harry put his books together slowly to give the others time to move on to the tearoom. When he did stand, he moved confidently, but Vineet was looking down at his clasped hands and might not have noticed this show of recovery.

"It was an accident," Harry tried. "One of those ironies I'm cursed to attract." With this, Harry winced inwardly, because it reminded him of Snape's mood when he had departed for Hogwarts.

Without responding Vineet took out his wand and studiously rubbed the gold pattern with his dark thumb. Harry prompted the Indian with his name and Vineet finally said, "I am regretful of what happened and not certain how to amend."

Harry was regretful too, for other reasons, but he didn't let on to it. "I don't want you to ease up during drills. I was glad you didn't today," he added brightly.

Vineet appeared more chagrined. "I could not ease up any more than I did . . . I *was* trying."

"Ah," Harry uttered. "Maybe we should go to lunch . . ."

Vineet stood his ground. "You are trying to move from the conversation."

"Yes, because I don't want you to feel bad about it. It wasn't your fault. Come on." Harry urged his companion with a toss of his head.

Despite appearing unconvinced, Vineet gave in. Harry gave him a smile which seemed to work better than arguing.

* * *

Harry was grateful for the quiet house that evening. He opened the mail and replied to Penelope's last letter with one that came out sounding happy and friendly when he reread it, making him think that maybe Snape's dark departure wasn't weighing so heavily on him as he had thought. Thinking he may have gotten perspective on things, he took out a quill and longer parchment and started another letter.

Dear Severus, Harry started and then thought for a long while before continuing with, *I've been thinking about what you said and wish you didn't feel so. I'm also worried that you will take your mood out on the students in your house, or worse yet, my house.* He frowned at that; it was too straightforward. He decided that he would rewrite it before sending it. He also decided to try an eyes-only spell so that he could say things more openly knowing only Snape could read it. He dipped the quill in the soot-black ink and continued.

An hour later, Harry had the third version of the letter before him. It read a lot better, for which he was thankful, because he deeply felt he needed to do something. He rolled the parchment and pinched the end to hold it curled and then pulled the white candle closer and, needing grey wax for the spell, dropped India ink into the liquid wax around the flame. Incanting the first part of the spell, he tipped the candle and sealed the parchment with a thin line of dingy wax along the edge and in a ring around the center. The next step was the most crucial one; he took out his wand and tapped the paper while saying, "*Flamen Cypher Severus Snape.*" The paper glowed and the wax darkened. Quickly, while it still glowed, Harry held it over the candle flame. It ignited immediately and began curling away into black ash, which he caught on a white plate.

The last corner of parchment flared orange and went out. Since his breath was disturbing the delicate ash, he held his breath as he mouthed the same incantation again while tapping the center of the ash pile. With a barely audible *whoosh* the ashes reassembled into a scroll shape which flashed white before leaving behind the previous rolled parchment.

Harry fetched Hedwig from his room, giving Kali a pat as he passed her cage. "Straight to Severus," he told his owl. "Don't give it to anyone else." She took off through the window and Harry closed it behind her against the cold evening air.

* * *

A knock preceded Headmistress McGonagall's entrance into the Defense Against the Dark Arts office. "Severus," she said in greeting, though her tone held much more. "Do you have a moment?"

Snape, who had been pacing while reading a textbook, dropped the book on the desk with a slap and crossed his arms.

"Hm," McGonagall uttered thoughtfully. "I just sent a pair of distressed students to the Gryffindor Tower for the night. You were perhaps a *bit* short with them when you kept them after," she suggested.

"They were foolishly attempting spells from the syllabus for the second term," Snape stated. "I will not tolerate that."

"Ah," she uttered and paced casually to the window. The clouds were rippled orange from the low sun and were reflected pristinely in the still lake. "Is everything all right with Harry?" she asked.

"Why do you ask?" Snape returned.

McGonagall frowned and said without turning from the view. "You are behaving . . . well, like yourself, Severus--your old self, that is."

"Something the matter with that?" he asked snidely.

"The students have ceased to expect it," she pointed out calmly.

"Is my performance in question?"

"No," McGonagall answered immediately, finally turning to face him. "I am just concerned. You arrived back on Sunday in this mood and it hasn't eased. It was interesting at first for us all to receive a little lesson in how different you have become, but it has grown old already. What has happened?"

Snape didn't immediately respond. A scratching at the window interrupted his stalling, and when he didn't move, McGonagall opened the sash. Hedwig hopped inside and fluttered over to the desk to drop the scroll with its distinctive wax. She then flapped once to rise to the back of the chair to wait.

"Well, I hope he can talk some sense into you," she said. "Probably knows you better than anyone else." Snape fingered the scroll, turning it to look at the ink-stained wax. "Severus?" she prompted, insisting, it seemed, on some kind of response.

Snape, fixated on the unopened scroll, said, "I arrived home on Saturday and found Harry half-dead from Spontengero."

"Severus! How in Merlin's Realm did he get that?"

"At his training. I am forced to accept that it was an accident. They are all apparently too ignorant to even know what it is," he stated harshly. "But it would have been a fitting end to him," he went on in a dark tone.

"Oh dear," McGonagall grumbled and came closer. With an almost theatrical sigh, she said, "At least I understand where we are here." She took her glasses off, cleaned them and put them in her pocket. "It would not have been fitting, in the least," she argued forcefully. "What is fitting is what everyone says about Harry, how fine he has become, because that was your doing, Severus. That hardly sets one up to deserve what you are suggesting."

She stood straight when he didn't reply. "Well, I'll leave you to the letter. Do try to read it with an open mind." When the door had re-closed, Snape waved a locking charm at it and broke the wax.

Snape's first reaction was pain that Harry had foreseen which students would bear the brunt of his anger. He did not like to imagine himself as that predictable. He read on: *I understand that you feel guilt over the past, and think you are obliged to feel it, but I also know how self-destructive it is--it doesn't lead anywhere. I do hope you can let go of it or at least not let it rule you so. If you can't do it for your own sake, please do it for mine. I assume you realize how much I still need your knowledge and guidance. Where would I be if you hadn't known what was wrong? Moody or one of the Healers at St. Mungo's might have known but what if they didn't? As always, I need you because you know these things, not in spite of it. Even if you feel you cannot make up for the past, most everyone believes you already have. Corner Headmistress McGonagall and try prove me wrong if you doubt it.*

Snape lowered the letter and smiled weakly despite himself. Certainly his colleagues treated him equitably now, which he had come to take for granted. Candida was a sore point still, he tried to disregard her even as she crept into his thoughts at random times throughout the day. In the larger scheme of things, her opinion was minor in comparison to the author of the letter he held, and always had been.

Guilt doesn't pay anyone back or restore anyone to life; it is more of a dark magic spell you shouldn't be doing because it drains your spirit and can become a habit that only hurts those around you. If you still feel you need to make amends, figure out how to do that. I'm willing to help.

It was signed below, *Your loyal adopted son, Harry.*

The room, the very school seemed oppressive to that notion, as though years of enmity had been recorded in its walls. Snape rested his head on his hand and considered the letter until a rap on the door interrupted his musings. He rolled the letter up quickly and slid it into his breast pocket to preserve it from the flames locked inside of it.

McGonagall stepped in quietly after opening the door slowly. "Are you coming down to dinner, Severus?"

Snape stood straight, still far away in thought. "Do you believe I owe anyone anything?" he asked, rather than answer.

"What? Oh." She gave that some consideration. "Albus."

"Conveniently . . . he isn't here," Snape stated in annoyance.

She smiled lightly, though with pained eyes. "My, but you are in a mood."

Snape crossed his arms and huffed. "You know what is ironic?" he asked, then answered himself in a bit of a snarl, "How much I care that I care."

"The curse of having a conscience, Severus," she stated in a lightly philosophical way, so that it didn't carry any damaging weight. She turned to the door and invited easily, "Come down with me to the Great Hall. The elves are waiting to put dinner on."

He turned after a hesitation and followed. It was late into the dinner hour and the corridors were empty. As they walked, McGonagall said, "I think, Severus, that of everyone here, I'd trust you the most to do the right thing in any circumstance." At the top of the staircase, she stopped and turned to him. "I think because you, more than anyone else, know the consequences of not doing so. The unexpected price of things can be very high, and most people do not appreciate that. You have that ingrained in you, something Albus put a lot of trust in, although it's taken me a long time to see." He still looked very far away. She patted him on the arm before starting down. "Forgive me for being so slow."

That night, after he was prepared for the next day's lessons, Snape pulled out a parchment and quill. He hesitated a long while before writing simply: *You and Minerva can be quite persuasive when you put your minds to it. Do try to stay out of trouble.* It was a pride-saving letter, he realized with a frown as he sealed it up, but he expected that Harry would understand.

* * *

By Wednesday Harry fell back into the rhythm of training. Rodgers had stopped treating him as though he were breakable and returned to his normal overly-forceful spells during demonstrations with him. By lunch Harry felt he was going to arrive home bruised and was grateful that they would move to a discussion of investigative questioning techniques for the rest of the day.

"Are you going up to Hogwarts again today?" Aaron asked Vineet. "I'll escort you this time," he offered eagerly.

"I believe I can locate it myself," Vineet replied easily. He sounded more relaxed now, almost teasing. "Perhaps you should teach if you wish to spend more time there."

Aaron's face twisted and untwisted. "Is it that obvious I want to?"

Vineet replied before Harry could. "It has been a repeating topic, yes."

"Ah." Aaron nibbled on a carrot and sulked a bit. "What would I teach though?"

"Skiving," Kerry Ann immediately supplied.

"Thanks," Aaron sarcastically replied.

After training, Harry arrived home and again was disappointed by a lack of a reply to his dispensation application. As he half-read a few other letters he wondered if he had actually been expecting special treatment; he really thought a reply would have arrived by now. Not that he couldn't simply walk into Madam Bones' office and simply ask outright. But that was the sort of thing he hoped he wouldn't ever do.

He rolled up his letters and tapped them edgewise on the sideboard. No, he would be patient, he insisted to himself, even though imagining his relatives knowing about magic, knowing about *him*, made his chest swell. If the application came back denied, he wasn't certain what he would do then. That possibility made it easier to picture himself appealing directly to the Minister, which made him feel slimy.

* * *

Friday arrived and Harry was early for his fieldwork as usual. He was paired with Rogan for the first time and the Auror gave him a wide smile when Harry entered the office. Vineet entered behind Harry, and Tonks tossed a memo airplane in the vague direction of the door and stood up. "Well, Vishnu, it is you and I tonight. Just patrol, we hope . . . I hope anyway." Shrugging on her cloak she collected the quiet Indian and they headed out.

"Do we have an assignment?" Harry asked hopefully.

Rogan chuckled and bent his head down, making his mop of straight hair fall into his eyes. He appeared on the edge of exhaustion for a moment before recovering and sitting straight. "You really want an assignment?" he asked. When Harry shrugged, Rogan pointed at a balsam board in the corner where notes were pinned. Harry went over to it as Rogan explained, "The miscellaneous pile of minor Muggle reports that haven't led anywhere. Suspected to be false, but we or Enforcement aren't certain enough to discard them."

Some were sheets yellowed with age and layers deep behind others. One newer looking one had printed on it, *Mysteriously aggressive ivy* with a cartoon doodled beside it of a plant-like snake with long teeth. "How about this one?"

Rogan laughed and stepped up behind him. He plucked the note down and unfolded it. "Dead end, I think, but we can take a look if you like. The report came in on a Friday three weeks ago . . ."

As he read the note in silence, Harry asked, "So what happened with the murdered witch?" He really wished he were more involved and chaffed at that still not being true.

"We haven't arrested anyone."

"No?" Harry prompted.

Rogan sighed. "Some odd facts turned up, such as: she hadn't bought her godchild a birthday present, she hadn't sent in a grocery order for the next week . . ."

"So she did kill herself?" Harry asked.

Rogan looked up sharply. "Figures you'd be good at this. Yes, it looks that way. As bad as it is to admit, it is much neater for us if it is true." He pocketed the note from the board. "Well, Mr. Potter, why don't we try our luck with phantasmic plants this afternoon. Patrol does sound dreadfully boring. And if it sounds boring to me, it most certainly must sound boring to you."

They Apparated into a long narrow alley. "This is as close as I can get us. We'll have to walk the rest. One reason for frequent patrols is to learn every last good Apparition spot possible." When Harry didn't respond, Rogan turned to look curiously at him as they walked. "You aren't always this quiet, are you?" he asked, sounding surprised.

After long blocks of fast walking they turned down a narrow street with no outlet. A quiet consultancy was in the building at the end. Rogan glanced around them and stood on tiptoe to peer in the large window. "Looks empty. I want to use it to look out onto the next street." He grasped Harry's arm and they reappeared inside. Rogan tilted his head and listened for a long minute before he moved farther into the building beyond a disorganized storeroom and to a back entrance.

"No window," Harry said, pacing in and out of a tearoom that shared the back wall.

"No difficulties," Rogan said and tapped in the shape of a box in the center of the door. A small window appeared there, framed in wood. Someone passed by on the street, walking a small dog.

"Won't anyone notice?" Harry asked.

Rogan shook his head. "If they do, they'll assume it's always been here. Muggles ignore pretty much everything. You'd think their eyes were closed most of the time, even though they look open." He crossed his arms and looked out at a bit of a distance. "The report was for this block, south side, which is across the street. We'll see if anything happens."

They stood there for a long while, almost an hour. Every time Harry heard something from the street at the other end of the office, he expected the owner to be returning. Rogan paid no mind to this, so Harry made himself relax. Rogan broke the long silence with, "So, Potter . . ." but then stopped.

"Yes?" Harry finally prompted.

"Enjoying your training?"

It seemed like Rogan was going to ask something else, originally. "Yeah. Loads. And every time I go out I see all these spells we haven't learned." He gestured at the window.

"This is an easy one."

"At least we are finally doing barriers," Harry said. "I've been wanting to learn those."

A long silence ensued before Rogan said, "I'm surprised you like the detailed work. Oh, what's this?" he asked, putting his nose closer to the magical glass.

Harry looked in the same direction and saw a woman picking up her bags. With a deep look of consternation, she looked behind herself at the ground, then at the bottom of her shoe. She finally stepped away.

Rogan said, "Could have been those heels of hers, rather than something else." He was squinting now. "Do you see that?"

Harry leaned close in and looked as well. Something seemed to be moving along the pavement trailing out of a grate. It looked a bit like ivy that had gained a rather independent disposition.

"Here's the deal," Rogan said. "I'll give you fifteen minutes to cross around behind that building, the *next* street over. Got that? Yeah, of course you do. I'm going to come at that from the front and I expect if someone is there, they will flush your way so I expect you to get them when they do."

Harry pulled out his wand and stashed it in his sleeve. Glad to be given a real role, he strode eagerly through the unlit office and out the door onto the empty street. Fifteen minutes had sounded like a long time, but the blocks were long. Harry jogged part of the way around the corner and only slowed when he was crossing the street they had been observing, careful to not look at the grate in question and give anything away. A man at the corner was retying his shoes and muttering angrily under his breath when Harry passed. As he made the next corner, he thought that he should have checked his watch at the start.

Harry had counted the number of buildings between the grate and the corner and now stood before the same number in on this side. The block had been short, the buildings stretching fully across from one street to the next. A cluster of schoolgirls went by him, making Harry finger his wand and consider various illusion charms he may need if things got serious. He stepped up to the door and waited. Anxious, he looked around, and down below he spotted another entrance, below ground. It was ajar. Moving quickly, Harry looked around and, seeing no one on the street now, leapt over the rail with a quick pillow charm to the hard concrete below.

He landed silently, cloak billowing, just as the door was jerked inward. Someone gasped and twisted away from the opening, but ran into someone else who hadn't the sense to move. Harry let his wand slide out of his sleeve into his hand. Two boys, one sandy haired, one redheaded, tangled each other up in their panic to get aside and fell inward.

This worked well, because high-heeled footsteps were approaching along the street. Harry stepped inside and knocked them both down with a light Jellylegs since they were trying to run farther inside. The room he had entered was a workshop of sorts with old bicycles in various states of repair and the strong scent of oil. The sandy-haired boy made a noise of alarm but finally gave up and stopped struggling. The redhead glanced fearfully at Harry but upon seeing his companion sitting still, did so as well. Their eyes looked very big in the dim light.

"So," Harry said, crossing his arms, but keeping his wand out. "Up to no good, I see."

"It was his idea," the sandy-haired one whined.

"It was from *your* aunt's garden!" the other countered.

Harry rolled his eyes. They must be ten, just a year from starting at Hogwarts. Rogan stepped in from the far corridor and leaned on the doorframe. Neither boy reacted, making Harry assume they couldn't see him. "Names?" Harry asked.

They both shrunk down. Harry gave them a look he remembered Snape doling out many times and they actually quivered slightly before quickly answering. "Nothing better to be doing?" Harry asked facetiously. They both frowned.

"It was kinda funny," the redhead offered.

"Yes. Getting Muggles suspicious about magic is very funny." Harry was surprised at his own annoyed tone.

"We'll remove it," the sandy-haired one insisted.

"I already did," Rogan stated and the boys both jerked stiff and scrambled away from the Auror. Rogan held out a mesh evidence bag inside of which green leaves and stem snaked as though to escape. He stepped over to the redheaded one and ungraciously hauled him to his feet. "Address?" he demanded. To Harry he said, "You take the other home."

Harry nodded before Rogan Disapparated. "Come on, Tilman," Harry said, "Let's go." Wide-eyed and looking most unhappy, the boy got to his feet. Some part of Harry tried to temper his attitude under the logic that this had been himself many, many times. "Where do you live?" Harry asked. The boy started to answer haltingly that it was only two streets over and Harry immediately said, "I can tell you're lying. Not your grandmum's place. *Your* house."

The boy fell into a stillness during which he looked Harry over as though assessing him for potential danger. "I can haul you to the Ministry to look it up," Harry suggested, and the boy gave his address up. Trouble was, Harry had no idea where it was or how to Apparate close by. Thinking now that he should have simply returned to the Ministry in the first place to look the address up on a map, Harry thought fast to save face.

"Your mum or dad home during the day?" Harry asked to stall for time.

"My dad. Works nights for Wizard Rail. That's why I was at my grandmum's. My dad's asleep all day," the boy added, sounding glum at the prospect of waking him. The boy looked up at the delay in departure and Harry saw a man in his light brown eyes--a rough, bulky man with a two-day beard and the look of one not happy about being disturbed.

"You live in a flat, right?" Harry asked. "What floor?"

"Third." In that instant Harry saw an image of the place in Tilman's eyes, clear as his own imagining of his house in Shrewsthorpe. Before it could fade, Harry took the boy's wrist and scrunched them both down in his mind. An eating area appeared around them. The boy shook his hand free and slouched in worry. Harry felt his blood rush at how well that had worked and how easy it had been. The dishes were quietly washing themselves in the sink and a tea towel was fanning the ones in the rack beside.

The noise of them arriving had indeed roused dad and a side door swung open as though propelled by someone with a strong arm. A man resembling Harry's preview, right down to the t-shirt with a hole in the belly of it, stepped in and stopped stock still. He stared at Harry in complete befuddlement, not even glancing at his son. "What's this, then?" he asked with a stunned quiet that didn't match the rest of him.

Reducing the seriousness with his tone, Harry said, "Your son was playing with magical plant life down in Freebury. Causing a bit of a stir among the Muggles."

The man swelled at that, stalked over in one long stride, and scooped up the back of the boy's shirt which lifted him to his toes. "*You*," he demanded into his son's ear, "were making such trouble as to have Harry Potter himself bring you to bear?"

Harry, who was forcing down memories of Vernon Dursley, said, "Really, I'm just an apprentice. It isn't so serious as all that."

The man didn't appear to hear this. "Sorry, sorry," the boy said, futilely twisting away. "It was only a joke." He was dropped onto his feet where he pulled his shirt straight.

Harry couldn't help his own shoulders falling when the boy was released. He wanted to point out that it wasn't even going to get reported, but then censored that.

The man, waving his finger in his son's face said, "You'll be lucky if Hogwarts sends you a blasted letter. You think they want miscreants of your sort at that fine old place?" Harry again forced himself to refrain from contributing anything. Mr. Tilman went on, "And now look what we've got here, Harry Po-" He stopped then and straightened as though just realizing something. "Mr. Potter," he said, in an voice trying for politeness. "Most ple- uh, welcome to our, humble little flat here. Sorry for the inconvenience."

Harry resisted grinning at the sudden affectation. "It's all right, sir, really. Just . . . doing our job."

"You're, an uh, Auror, then?"

"Apprentice," Harry clarified.

The man returned his attention to his son by regrabbing him by the shoulder of his oversized shirt. "YOU, had to be hauled home by a bleedin' Auror! You know what Aurors does, right? Dark wizard hunters, they are. Shape up or that's where you're headed, boy." He released his son again and again Harry felt himself relaxing when he did so. The man stepped closer to Harry. "Terribly sorry 'bout this. Gettin' harder to keep an eye on him what with the double shifts and all." He sniffed and fidgeted a bit. "Anything we have ter fill out or a hearing or something we need to attend?"

"Oh, no, I don't . . ." Harry dug through his law readings quickly in his head. "No Oblivation was required and no injuries reported, so I don't expect so."

The man's great shoulders fell slack. "Well, that's fortunate for us. So . . . I suppose Hogwarts might not find out then?"

Harry hesitated before replying, "I have to honestly admit that I don't know how Hogwarts finds out most things."

The man snorted and grinned for the first time, which gave him an almost childlike appearance rather than the previous tired workman one. "True. I do remember my days there." This seemed to trigger more thoughtfulness and he turned to his slouching son with a more accepting, though wry, look. "Well, Mr. Potter, sorry again for troubling you."

Harry nodded and gave the now cocky poised boy a sharp look before stepping back to Disapparate. The man saying, "Oh, uh, you wouldn't be willing to give us an autograph, now would you? It would make explaining to the missus a bit easier."

Harry returned to the Ministry because he hadn't been told to return to the scene and since Rogan had the ivy, it didn't seem necessary. If Rogan weren't in the Auror's office, he would just have to Apparate back to the bicycle shop. He had a feeling he should just *know* what to do next.

Rogan was at his desk writing something out. "Are you filing a real report?" Harry asked.

"Just a quick one. I wasn't going to bother filing it under their names. We haven't had trouble with those two before." He scratched away with the quill for a time before asking, "So, how did it go?"

"It was fine."

"Did you talk to his mum?"

"Dad, and he was properly incensed with his offspring."

More scratching with the quill. "It occurred to me after I returned that you may have been forced to take him home via the underground if it was any distance. I find myself mistakenly considering you a full Auror, even though you are far from it." He said all this without pausing in writing or looking up.

"I Apparated him home. I knew the area," Harry lied.

"Good, I was assuming I'd have to apologize for abandoning you."

Harry, who had no trouble with being given more duties, said easily, "No, it went fine."

* * *

Sunday, Harry wondered if he shouldn't have some kind of costume for the Halloween party at the Burrow. He hadn't thought about it until that morning and now he stood before his cupboard, lightly scratching his head in thought. He considered and then dismissed the idea of going as a magical animal, same with pretending to be a Death Eater, although that sounded easy enough, just a hooded cloak and a mask. For a long moment, he was sorely tempted by that idea, as it would certainly get attention, and his friends would find it highly amusing. But the thought of possible headlines in the *Prophet* made him sigh, so he dismissed it. It didn't help imagining Snape's reaction either.

Additional ideas were dismissed as he tapped the door of the cupboard lightly with his fingertips. Kali rustled about in her cage, and he went over to let her out while he thought. She climbed out onto his sleeve and sniffed his hand. Harry watched her climb about, a sly smile forming at his lips.

Harry still could not Apparate all the way to the Burrow, or he thought there was perhaps a chance if he really tried, but he didn't want to get Splinched any more than he wanted a photo of himself in the *Prophet* that would make Snape cringe and wonder that he had lost his senses. So instead, he waited half of an hour after the party's start time and Flooed directly into the Weasley's hearth. A lot of people usually came to the Burrow parties and there was nothing worse than a Floo traffic jam where one could get stuck in a stalled spin for five or ten minutes only to get redirected to an entirely different node and have to start again and hope that one could find more Floo powder to continue on with.

Harry bent very low and replaced his hat when he was clear of the mantelpiece. The sitting room was quiet, but Mrs. Weasley was mixing punch in the adjacent kitchen. Outside the windows orange fires glowed and many voices could be heard. Molly Weasley turned as Harry approached, looked taken aback, and then grinned broadly while shaking her head. "Harry dear, that is something," she said with a laugh in her voice.

Harry looked down at his sky-blue flowing robe and smoothed his long white beard. "Do you think it's all right?"

She was still laughing as she worked. "I think it's adorable." She put the ladle down and wiped her hands on her apron. "Oh, and look at your pet. Oh dear, she doesn't mind being that color?"

"She's usually bright violet, so no, doesn't seem to." Harry adjusted his now-peach colored Chimrian to better sit on his shoulder. He also again adjusted his hat.

This prompted Mrs. Weasley to say, "Did you actually borrow one of Albus' hats? That one looks familiar."

"No, I changed a plain one from memory using an Illusion Charm."

She gave him a hug and said, "It's good that you remember him that well." She released him and smiled even more broadly. "Well, go on out, then."

Harry stepped out and approached the long, crowded tables. Glowing pumpkins hovered above them in crowded rows to provide light. A bonfire crackled and spat a few yards away. Someone turned to watch him approach and did an amusing double-take. The table quieted as he arrived and some even appeared alarmed, making Harry wonder what effect the fire-light was having on his illusions.

"Harry?" a frog-costumed Neville cautiously asked.

"Yep," Harry replied. "It's only me."

This broke the spell that had held the table in a stunned stillness. Everyone laughed which attracted others to come over. Fred and George scampered over wearing just their usual dragon-covered jackets, although the dragons appeared to fly between one and the other, which was disconcerting.

"Harry?" one of them cautiously confirmed. "Wow, a little taller and . . ." He tugged on Harry's beard and Harry had to bat his hand away. "Nicely done." He sounded truly impressed.

"I've been slow at the Metamorphia they've been teaching us, and this is my best one yet. I don't know how long it's going to last though . . ."

"Aye, might be permanent," the other twin suggested with a laugh.

"Then you'd have to retire, join the Wizengamot . . ."

"Not anytime soon, I hope," Harry countered. Kali had climbed down his arm and onto the table, and was investigating a pushed-aside plate. "Come here you. I'll get you something."

Harry returned from the food table and found a seat across from Ron at the far table. "That's a really scary costume, Harry," Ron said.

"We think it's bloody brilliant," one of the twins countered. "Especially with that leather-winged Fawkes of yours."

Harry gave the peach-colored creature a strip of chicken meat, which she seemed less interested in eating than mauling. Fred fetched them all fresh mugs of mead. Other friends came over and laughed over his costume as he ate. Those from the Ministry seemed less amused and more disturbed by his costume than his friends.

"Where's Hermione?" Harry asked, realizing that he had not yet seen her.

"She said she'd be late," Ron replied.

"Office party with the solicitors to attend," Fred supplied with a glance at Ron. While Harry was puzzling out the subtleties of the moment, George hit him on the arm and said, "I don't feel like making any trouble all of a sudden. That's your fault."

Harry, remembering how he had spent his Friday, said, "Good."

"Ah," Fred uttered. "Forget the costume, Harry. You are scary enough on your own."

"No date?" the other twin prompted as a hoard of bats fluttered by overhead. Kali ducked low on Harry's shoulder and watched them, wired and alert.

"Couldn't think of anyone to invite," Harry explained easily. He was certain that Ron's jaw stiffened. Wondering at that, Harry added, "I might have tried Tara if I'd planned ahead a bit." Ron was avoiding his gaze. Frowning, Harry kicked him under the table and asked, "What's up?"

Ron shrugged, eyes still evasive and Fred and George were frowning lightly as well. Mr. Weasley stood up on a far bench and announced that the games were beginning. Ron was the first one up and over beside his father. The first contest would be broom races, their host announced and then explained a racecourse around the property that sounded more like a flying obstacle course. Fred and George stood up eagerly. "You racing? That beard might slow you down," George teased.

"I didn't bring my broom."

"It's pairs, you can borrow mine. I have a 3030--brand new," he graciously offered.

Harry was watching Ron negotiating with his dad to be in the first race. "What's up with Ron?" he asked, rather than answer.

"Uh, nothing sensible," George replied.

"What does that mean?" Harry returned, but the twins waved that they wanted to draw for a spot in the races and headed away. Harry moved down to where the non-racers like Neville, Justin, and some of the older friends of the Weasley family were sitting. The races began with Ron competing against Fred. The two of them took off on broomstick into the darkness to follow a long, hazardous course lit only vaguely by floating jack-o-lanterns. Much shouting of encouragement ensued.

Harry looked up as someone sat down beside him. "Tonks!" he said, very pleased to see his colleague.

"Just stopping by for short visit--technically on duty." She patted his shoulder. "How are you doing, Albus?"

"Good," Harry replied. "Did I tell you you have detention?" he carried on.

"Do I now?" Tonks returned. "What did I do?" she asked with no little insinuation.

"Skiving from your Auror duties, I hear, to attend a Halloween party."

She leaned closer. "Many of the people I'd like to keep an eye on tonight *are* here, so I count it as being on duty." She looked Kali over. "Poor thing. I think her color is fading." She tapped the creature with her wand and her color returned to bright peach from mottled.

"How is my beard?" Harry asked and submitted to inspection.

"Not bad." She gave it a tug, making Harry wince. "You did a good job with that," she praised. "How long has it lasted so far?" They carried on with a discussion of illusion and Metamorph spells as the races went on and the table cleared as people departed to watch.

"Dumbledore, my aligning stars," a middle-aged witch exclaimed as she took a newly empty spot along with some other newcomers. Everyone shifted down to make more room for people and plates. "You're a sight," she said to Harry. "Didn't want to come as someone too famous, eh? Who were you last year?"

"Harry Potter," Tonks and Neville replied together, and Neville continued with, "It was getting repetitive, though, that old costume. About time you got a new one." He winked at Harry.

"Thanks," Harry sarcastically replied.

The newly arrived wizard beside her, who apparently had sampled a great deal of mead before arriving at this party, said, "So, Dumbledore, I've always wanted to know . . . why didn't you ever go up for Minister of Magic like everyone wanted?"

Harry thought a bit, using the shouting from the races as cover for hesitating. Affecting a sage tone, he replied, "It was no longer my time. Others needed to learn that their moment to lead had arrived."

The questioner held his mug before him and glared at Harry with his bloodshot eyes. "You even . . . sound like Dumbledore. Blasted."

"You did ask," Harry returned, still trying for airy. He knitted his fingers before him and sat up a bit straighter. Kali reacted to this by quitting her grooming and sitting up pretty on his shoulder.

The man leaned over to the middle-aged witch and whispered, "Who is that really?" She shrugged. Neville giggled and Tonks ducked her head.

"Something amusing, Mr. Longbottom?" Harry asked in a teacher voice.

Neville held up his hands as though to ward Harry off. "No, no. I can't take it. You *are* too much."

Harry glanced at the openly curious couple across from him. With his eyes changed to blue, the hat over his scar, and the beard hiding his face, he considered that he may not be too recognizable. Strange sort of anonymity, this.

"Do you work at the Ministry?" the woman asked. "You do look familiar."

"I'm there most days," Harry said easily and sipped from his mug, which was nearly impossible without getting his mustache foamy with mead.

"So how's the afterlife?" the man asked, sounding mocking.

Harry thought over his vision of Dumbledore's serene figure from his near death experience. "It's pretty quiet in the veil," he replied. "But I get to see all my old friends and, at my age, that is quite a few people." He had spoken this with such authority that even his old schoolmates gave him surprised and uneasy looks.

"You didn't take that hat out of Dumbledore's cupboard, did you?" Neville asked in concern.

Harry gave him a wink. The spectators grew louder as the finalists were selected for the last race. Ron stalked grumpily back over. "Fred and George, it's always Fred and George. Wish I had a brand new broom to race with." He took a seat and looked around for his mug.

"Who *is* that?" the stranger asked Ron while pointing at Harry.

"Who?" Ron asked, as though confused about the question. "That's Harry Potter, who do you think?" he answered with a sharp edge.

The man let his mug hit the table a little hard. "You don't have to say, then. Blather."

Neville giggled again.

Harry stood up and said, "Ron . . ." while signaling with his head that they should step away.

"What?" his friend asked, not moving.

"I want to talk," Harry explained.

"Going to give me detention if I don't?" Ron asked sulkily.

If you don't stop behaving as though you're ten, I might, Harry thought grimly. "Is this costume peeving you?" he asked, unable to come up with a better guess. "I can ditch it. It is just a Metamorph spell."

"Yeah, no showing off there," Ron grumbled low.

Kali hissed--though it wasn't at Ron--it was at something behind Harry, in the unoccupied blackness beyond the aura of the party. Chilled with the notion of what she might be sensing, Harry clamped down hard on his hot anger. Kali calmed and climbed around to his other shoulder. The whole half of the long table was staring at him with mixed expressions. Tonks stood up and went around to Ron where she hefted him to his feet and dragged him away as though it were her duty to help. Harry followed, far more concerned about keeping his temper in line than what his oldest friend's problem might be and grateful for Tonks' quick action.

Tonks didn't give Harry a chance to speak. As soon as they were out of earshot, she asked the redhead, "What's wrong. Why are you being so peevish around Harry?"

"Nothing's wrong," Ron returned.

"Yeah, and I'm a prima ballerina. *What's wrong?*"

Ron finally held Harry's gaze. "Hermione said you stayed at her place the other night."

"So?" Harry said, not understanding the significance of that.

"She didn't want to do anything with *me* that night."

Harry stared at his friend. "I was only there to sleep," he argued, but then thought maybe that wasn't the best thing to have said given Ron's anger. "I was too tired to go home."

"Can't take the Floo?" Ron asked in disbelief.

"I had my bike with me. I'd been out on my bike all day. I'd've had to come back for it."

"What were you doing?" Ron asked as though to test his story. When Harry hesitated, Ron more sharply asked, "Well?"

Tonks appeared interested in the answer as well. Darkly, Harry finally replied, "I was hunting Avery."

"You were, were you?" Tonks asked sharply.

"I was riding around Devon. Having a look," Harry defended himself.

"Find any clues?" she asked smartly, propping her hands on her hips in a disapproving pose.

"No." They stared each other down until Harry said, "It isn't like you've found him. It isn't like all along the Auror's office has done a stellar job of hunting Death Eaters."

"That isn't quite fair, Harry, and you know it. We were hobbled by previous Ministerial edicts."

"You aren't anymore."

She sighed. "No, now we're just expected to take care of bloody everything. Every hexed garden strimmer and rogue hag on a flying carpet."

Harry didn't relax his fierce look, although he kept the emotion superficial. A long silence passed, which was broken by Ron saying, "He thinks you're letting him down." Harry dropped his eyes, reminded starkly of how well Ron knew him.

"The department doesn't revolve around you, Harry," Tonks pointed out.

"I know that," Harry replied. "I'd just feel better--I'd feel like everything was complete--if he were in Azkaban where he belongs."

"We'll discuss it later," Tonks threatened. "Right now I have to get on with patrol." With one last glance around the proceedings, she Disapparated.

Harry said, "I'm sorry, Ron. I didn't know you'd think anything of my crashing at Hermione's flat. I really was too exhausted for the Floo and I needed to talk to someone who understood, because as you just saw, I can't talk to most people I know."

Ron looked more unhappy but no longer angry. He sighed and said, "Hermione's been difficult to get along with lately. I don't know what's wrong with her. She's always upset with me about something."

"I'm sorry for that, Ron," Harry said sympathetically.

Ron gestured at the spot Tonks had occupied a moment before. "Did I get you in trouble?"

"Don't worry about it. I'm head of the Wizengamot, remember?"

Ron laughed lightly. "I got the feeling from Dad's Ministry friends over there that they're afraid you'll believe that."

Harry grinned. "They do seem unseated, don't they? Maybe I should go back and tease them some more. How's my beard doing? I keep expecting it to fade."

Ron gave him a once-over. "Looks convincing to me." They started back to their seats and Ron added, "Sorry I accused you of showing off."

"I wasn't trying to."

"I know," Ron mumbled reluctantly.

Fred and George, now sporting yellow trophy-shaped hats and sweaty hair, shifted to make room for them. As he and Ron took their seats, the drunk stranger said, "Okay, I have more questions for you, Dumbledore."

The others were all grinning, so Harry said, "Why certainly," as amiably as he could manage.

"Why, when you had the chance, didn't you stop Tom Riddle when he was a student? Huh?"

Harry took a deep breath and considered that. Everyone, including his friends, waited for the answer. "I thought there was still hope for him." When the man opened his mouth to ask, Harry interrupted with, "Why? Because I believe that about everyone."

"Oy," George exclaimed, "Fred, get us some more mead if we're sitting at this table."

Fred stood while saying, "I'll just get Dad to run the costume judging so he can go back to being himself."

"What if he doesn't want to change back?" George asked fearfully.

Fred returned presently. "No, Dad's running the William Tell contest first. Hey, Hermione!" he greeted someone approaching from the house.

"Wow, Headmaster," she said, greeting Harry after giving Ron a casual hug.

"You haven't seen anything," Fred insisted. "Ask him a question."

"Oh . . . can I? Hm . . ." She fell thoughtful. "Gosh, it's odd to look at you like that." She looked away and rubbed her cheek as she thought. "Well, I think I'd ask the real Dumbledore how everyone is behind the veil, but . . ."

"Already asked," someone interjected.

"Really? What was the answer?" She sounded honestly disappointed.

"Everyone's fine," Harry replied, but then rethought his answer, "Although, Sirius . . ."

"Sirius what?" she prompted, curious.

Harry realized he had said too much, but didn't see how to back out. He went with his persona instead. "He doesn't seem very happy, but I can't do anything for him."

Hermione stared at him a moment before saying, "All right, this is really creepy."

He leaned over and whispered to her, "I'll explain later."

"That should be interesting. Do I still get a question?" At Harry's nod, she asked, "Are there any other prophecies we need to worry about?"

"Merlin, I hope not," Harry uttered, making the table chuckle.

"That wasn't much of a Dumbledore answer," Hermione criticized.

Harry sighed and cobbled together a sage-toned response. "The future is something best not known ahead of time, lest that knowledge do irreparable harm." He hesitated, unable to stomach the idea of another prophecy that referred to him or any of his friends. "There aren't any prophecies that I know of." Harry truly hoped that Dumbledore's serenity was a sign of Harry's own freedom; he discovered within himself that he counted on believing it.

"That's better," Hermione said. "So how good of a job do you think McGonagall is doing?"

"What about Madam Bones?" Justin interjected.

"Are you asking me?" Harry hesitated. "Or Dumbledore."

They both laughed. "Either," Hermione admitted. "You've been back to Hogwarts a few times."

"Minerva's doing well. She's working Severus really hard, though."

"Severus? Severus Snape?" the stranger interjected. "So, Dumbledore, why did you trust *him*?"

Their end of the table fell still again. "Because he was worthy of it," Harry replied with a flat, deceptive lack of concern. No one relaxed at this. The man wore a smirk making Harry ask, "You believe that you know better than I?"

"Despite that long beard, I've been around a lot longer than you," the stranger countered.

Harry did not at all recognize the man with his small nose and salt and pepper hair, and now wondered who he was. "What department at the Ministry are you in?"

"Can't say."

"And that doesn't narrow it down at all," Harry stated with a touch of snide, assuming the man was in the Department of Mysteries.

"We've been to the Department of Mysteries," Neville, apparently following Harry's train of thought, stated cockily and swigged from his mug.

"No, you haven't," the man returned.

Ron laughed. "We all have. Broke in when Voldemort was trying to get Harry's prophecy."

"Oh, yes. Bloody little punishment all of you got for that." No one responded to that, but Harry could feel them all closing ranks with their postures. The man went on, "So, you *are* Harry Potter. Only you'd have the gall to wear that costume. Joining the Wizengamot soon?"

Mr. Weasley came by before Harry, or anyone else, could come up with a proper response. "Harry, my boy, I see why you are expecting to win the costume competition. Oggie," Mr. Weasley turned to the man across from Harry. "I see you've been getting to know my son's friends. Quite a little crew they all are. Especially this one." Here he clapped Harry on the back. "Come on up--we'll have the judging--and you too, Longbottom."

Harry escaped the table and waited in a row with an amphibian Neville, a rather crude dragon, a far too tall elf, a pair of black cats, and a brightly glowing rainbow. Their friends all cheered loudly when Mr. Weasley held his sparkling wand over Neville's head and just a tad louder when he held it over Harry's. "Harry takes the day with his stunning interpretation of Albus Dumbledore." He presented Harry with a trophy-shaped gold hat. "Any words of wisdom for us?" Mr. Weasley teased. The resulting negative shouting from Harry's table startled the party host.

"I've dolled out too many words already," Harry informed him.

"Ah, I see." The Weasley father grinned, understanding. He leaned in and said, "You fit his shoes better than I would have expected, Harry."

Unsure of how he felt about that, Harry merely shrugged, garnering a pat on the back and a push toward his seat.

"Your beard is fading," Ron informed him as Harry approached.

Before sitting, Harry pulled out his wand, removed the charms, and changed hats for his trophy one, putting the old, now-dull one under the bench. He met the eyes of the man across from him, feeling more at an advantage facing him down as himself. "I didn't catch your name," Harry said.

"Ogden, Tertius Ogden. This is my wife, Olive." The woman held her small hand out to be shaken.

"Your father is on the Wizengamot, correct?" Harry asked.

"Forty-three years this December, in fact. Before your parents were even born," Ogden snidely went on.

"But long after Tom Riddle was," Harry added conversationally while handing his empty mug to George for refilling.

"The Ministry certainly had many chances at him."

Ogden frowned into his own mug. "Disgusting how thrilled the Ministry was to get you," he muttered.

Feeling no threat from this man, Harry just shrugged. Around the table his friends glowered at Ogden as though weighing possible hexes in their minds. Harry merely pondered the odd fact that he felt more confident and certain of his power *out* of his Dumbledore disguise.



Chapter 68 -- Magic to Muggles

"Invited your wife to come yet?" Harry asked Vineet during a quiet lunch in the department tearoom. Vineet had been quiet that morning, ever since Rodgers had expressed disappointment in the Indian's progress on strengthening his blocks, and Harry hoped to draw him to other topics.

Everyone took their usual keen interest in the answer. "I have. She is planning the details now."

"When does she arrive?" Harry asked.

"She must complete the packing first."

"Uh, oh," Kerry Ann uttered. "How big is your flat?"

Vineet appeared vaguely disturbed. "I have been measuring, yes . . ."

They all shared grins at their friend's dilemma. "Bring her in when she comes," Harry said and swallowed the last of his sandwich. "We'd all like to meet her." At Vineet's solemn nod, Harry excused himself to use the extra time to work on his languished petition to have Sirius' case reopened.

Tonks was at her desk, writing a response on the bottom of an unfolded airplane memo. Without looking up she handed over the file Harry kept stashed with hers. With a quiet thanks Harry took it to the next open desk. Tonks had yet to take him to task about hunting Avery and he continued to expect her to at any time, but apparently at the moment she was too busy. Harry put concerns about trouble out of his mind and perused the to-do list he had spellotaped inside the folder. *Compile witness list* was the main item left on it, with a penned in list of potential names below. Harry had seen the rare Alastor Moody, who was the first on the list, just that morning. He got up and wandered around the corridors peaking in any open doors. He found Moody in the file room, peering closely at a file with his one real eye.

"Potter," he grunted without looking up.

"Can I ask you a favor, sir?"

Moody scratched his grizzled cheek and closed the file before him. "Depends."

Harry explained, "I have a petition for the Wizengamot to have Sirius' name cleared. I need to submit a potential witness list with it and since you were involved in the original investigation, I was wondering if you'd be willing to be called . . . if they decide to call anyone."

Harry couldn't read Moody at all. "Sure, Potter," he grunted before stashing the case file under his arm and walking toward the door.

"Thanks," Harry said as the wide man passed with his limping shuffle.

"Aye. I'm supposed to be retired . . . talking to that moldy old bunch always makes me feel young."

Harry grinned and followed him out. Now he needed to owl Hagrid, whom Harry expected would say yes, but he didn't want to presume. He wished that Dumbledore could have been on the list but pushed that aside.

Back in the offices, Tonks was absent, so Harry took her desk instead. Rogan stepped in and peered over Harry's shoulder. "Getting that finished?" he asked.

"Almost," Harry replied.

"Would you like it looked over?"

Harry gratefully handed the bulk of the file to the Auror and waited with impatiently grasped fingers for him to read through it. A paper airplane sailed in and landed in the excessive pile already on Tonk's desk, causing them all to shift around as though they all wanted to be on top.

Mid-flip of a page, Rogan asked, "Why are you doing this?"

"Because it isn't right that Sirius is still believed to have helped Voldemort," replied Harry, trying not to sound annoyed at such a question.

"So, you are doing this for the dead?"

"Well . . . he was important to me. It's not right."

Rogan closed up the file and pushed it back to Harry. "So, you are doing this for yourself . . ."

Harry could not read his intent. "You don't believe I should be doing—"

"I didn't say that. Are you doing this for yourself?" Rogan reiterated.

"No, for Sirius' memory."

"For the dead then . . ."

"I guess," Harry admitted.

Rogan shook his robes out, crossed his arms, and said, "It looks good, but before you step before the Wizengamot, figure out the answer to that question and stick with it. Controversy is not kind to those who waver," he added helpfully.

Harry sighed his annoyance away, grateful for the advice; he wasn't looking forward to the actual hearing with much relish.

* * *

The week passed with no response to Harry's dispensation application, which would allow him to tell his cousins that was a wizard, would in fact, make them real family. Fidgeting his impatience, he read the Friday morning mail with little interest. He had owled Ron the day before, asking what his plans were. This had been a nearly arbitrary decision—whether to owl him or Hermione, since it no longer seemed safe to assume that their plans were the same. Harry was in dire enough need for a real break that he wished he had planned a party for this weekend. He should plan one for next weekend, perhaps, after the Hogwarts Quidditch match. A little desultory, he dropped the unopened mail on the sideboard. If he simply showed up at the Ministry early for his shadowing, he wondered if they would let him do something useful while he waited.

Sighing, Harry pulled out his books and did a little reading instead. Before he left for the Ministry, Pig arrived with a quick note saying to meet Ron in their usual pub at 7:00. No hint of whether anyone else would be there. If shadowing

ran long, Harry might not be on time and he wouldn't want his friend sitting there alone. He sent a reply back reminding his friend about his duties sometimes running late.

When he arrived at the Ministry, Rogan took Harry up to the street by the hidden staircase where the alley entrance was disguised as a loading dock for a lingerie shop. At first Harry followed the Auror in silence, until he remembered that Rogan didn't expect him to be quiet all the time. "What are we doing today?" Harry asked.

"Hm . . . just looking around," Rogan airily replied.

That sounded vaguely misleading, but Harry didn't ask more. They walked along a crowded shopping street for well over a mile, turned and walked another. Rogan did appear to be looking for something in particular. Harry, rather than prying, kept a watchful eye out around them. The neighborhoods they passed began to decline in appearance and the number of pedestrians dropped significantly. Rogan stopped then, right in the middle of the pavement before the taped-over window of a closed hat shop. He made a thoughtful noise.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

Speaking low while adjusting his sleeve where his wand was hidden, the Auror replied, "Just a few too many strange reports from this area. Thought it worth a look around."

"Something more than animate ivy?"

"Definitely. But not so clearly described." He looked at Harry finally, as though trying to decide something. "Tonks said you sometimes sense things. Do you feel anything right now?"

Harry closed his eyes and tried to find the green world or the Dark Plane without luck; he was far too wakeful and in too good a mood. He shook his head. Rogan stepped away and Harry caught up. "Sorry," he said, not wanting to disappoint.

Rogan chuckled. "Why are you apologizing?"

When they were back in a more lively area, Harry asked, "What's been reported?"

Rogan stopped again, even more suddenly. "I need a cuppa," he announced, stepping into a little gyros place. Harry followed him in. The young man behind the counter put a tea bag and hot water into a plastic foam cup and handed it over. In the corner away from the one table of customers, Rogan replied, "Nothing significant and that's what bothers me." Harry gave him a confused look as the Auror sipped stained water.

Rogan explained, "Meaningless things don't filter down to the Aurors office. So when a run of seemingly harmless things come up, like a wizard's dog disappearing here and a minor memory charm there, I start to wonder. We are too busy to investigate something with no serious magical crime attached to it." He frowned and drank from his very Muggle cup. "It feels the way things did when Voldemort was around. Reports came through, but those involved and what had happened were only vaguely or incorrectly described, uselessly so. These reports are useless too."

The young man behind the counter was moving a meat-covered pole from one machine to another. No one else remained in the shop. "Voldemort is definitely not back," Harry stated.

"I didn't mean to imply he was. But something doesn't feel right to me and there is a geographic link to that area for the reports. I didn't want to Apparate in, hence our long walk. Taking you out is a good chance to investigate because if my instincts were right and something very bad were going on, I'd expect you could take care of your end. But on the surface it looks like I took you out on low risk patrol."

He put down his tea suddenly and reached with alarm into his pocket. He stared at the wooden-framed square an instant before pulling out his wand and sending a confusion charm at the young man who was now topping up the paper cups in the dispenser beside the cola machine. The tower of cups toppled onto the counter as his hands became clumsy. Rogan then grabbed Harry's arm and the shop disappeared.

They Apparated into the hazy upper room of a pub furnished only with an old couch and burnished brass lamp. "Wait here," Rogan ordered and promptly Disapparated again. Another *pop!* and Tonks and Vineet appeared just an instant before Tonks departed again.

"Some kind of emergency," Vineet opined as he wandered over to an old leaded window through which the world was too distorted to see.

Harry joined him there where he could just make out that people were walking outside on the street below. "I wonder why they didn't just tell us to return to the Ministry?"

"The rules state that we are to return to the closest safe place."

Harry circled the several empty connected rooms which composed the floor, feeling imprisoned and unuseful. A carved wooden railing surrounded the staircase down. He leaned down to try to see to the level below. Vague noises of a pub filtered up. "I wonder if we can get an order of fish and chips. I didn't have lunch."

"You are concerned with food?" Vineet asked in shock.

"They don't very well let us be concerned with anything else, do they?" Harry snapped. He circled the whole floor this time, eyeing the poor view out each window, before returning to the old red velvet couch, dropping into it and resting his head back. "I suppose I would get kicked out of the program if I tried to find them if we're still here in an hour."

Vineet sat down as well. "I do not recommend doing that," he stated dryly.

Silence ruled for many minutes before Harry asked, "So how do you like shadowing Tonks?"

"She is the same as Mr. Rogan."

"You think?" Harry returned in surprise. "You didn't find Rogan a little more . . . loose?" Vineet shook his head, making Harry utter, "Huh." Harry bounced his crossed ankles impatiently a while before asking, "So do you think they'd notice if we just slipped down to the Ministry? We could walk even . . ."

Vineet, who was sitting calm and still, replied, "I believe the instructions were quite clear."

"Hmf." Harry crossed his arms and again rested his head back. "So, tell me again . . . how did you get the name Vishnu?"

"It was my *ḍachnam*. My child name, which is supposed to be temporary and is usually less serious. When one knows a child's real name, it is then given."

"But your mum didn't give it up," Harry suggested.

"Correct. But among family, this is quite common."

Harry blinked at still not following completely. He gave up on it. "So when did you first know you were a wizard?"

In his usual level voice, Vineet replied, "My mother said she always knew. Everyone else, meaning my whole family, discovered during my rice ceremony."

"What's that?" Harry asked, glad to have conversation as a distraction.

"It is an important passage for an infant where I come from. The whole family is there. As part of it, the child is presented with three plates, one with earth upon it, one with money, and one with tools. It is to determine the lifepath of the child. The story is that my uncle was urging me, when I refused all options, to take the money, and I did so only after transforming it into chocolate."

Harry laughed. "So you like chocolate, then?"

"Yes."

"Wish we had some now. Transform us a box of Honeydukes, will you? Or nip out for some? If they come back while you're gone, I'll tell them you're practicing invisibility charms."

"I believe the Hero of Wizardry is much less likely to be removed from his apprenticeship if he is caught fetching chocolate when he is supposed to be staying put."

"Yeah, but they'll be more disappointed in me. You can always say I talked you into it."

Vineet tilted his head. "True." He too rested his head back on the bolster. "Perhaps if an entire hour does pass . . ."

Harry frowned and after a long pause asked in annoyance, "What are they doing? Did you get any clue?"

"No, I did not get a glimpse at Ms. Tonks' wooden tablet."

Harry rubbed his hair back and forth. "Hope they aren't in trouble."

"It is my understanding that they are considered competent to face trouble."

Silence descended again. Pigeons alighted outside the window, casting flickering shadows across the room. Harry finally broke the silence with, "Looking forward to having your wife here . . . Nandi, right?"

"Yes. She is supposed to be with me."

Harry gave him a doubtful look. "That's the only reason?"

"She is my wife," Vineet explained patiently.

"Yeah, but . . . never mind," Harry gave up on that too.

"The British do not understand this, I realize. It is a better way, though," he stated.

Harry didn't feel like arguing, so he remained silent and tried not to imagine Tonks defending herself against a spell onslaught from some violent hooded figures.

Vineet continued though. "Love is a poor way to choose a life mate. It is not a good predictor of compatibility."

Harry resisted pacing the room again by calling forth that waiting patience he had built up during his abduction. This relaxed him as well since it reminded him that he wasn't truly imprisoned at the moment, only inconvenienced. He finally said, "I think you'd try harder with someone you love."

"That may be true, but it is not offset by additional complications it causes."

Harry began to feel a tiny bit sorry for this unknown Nandi person. "I can't see it."

A long while later, Harry pulled out his watch. Seventy minutes had passed. "Tell me again why we can't just go to the Ministry?"

"The rule is straightforward and is applied, I am quite certain, whether we are in County Cork or Central London," Vineet explained.

"That's kind of dumb, don't you think?" Harry began to pace the perimeter of the floor yet again, and this time leaned over the rail to peer down the stairs more keenly. He didn't know if this was a Muggle establishment or not.

"I think it eliminates all uncertainty. There is a barrier on the stairs, you realize."

"There is?" Harry had been very close to stepping down just then. "How can you tell from all the way over there?" he challenged.

"It is in the floor." Vineet tapped his foot on the wood. "And it extends across the opening downward, keeping everything and everyone out, presumably."

Harry looked around at the old, slightly warped, wood floor. "You're good at that. I can't sense barriers without casting something at them."

"I have always found barriers easy to detect." After a moment, he added, "And to disable."

Harry gave him a thoughtful look. "So, you can get us downstairs?"

"You may go when you like. You will not be able to return," the Indian intoned casually. Harry crouched and frowned at the landing below, which was all he could see. His mind pondered his options one after another. Vineet's voice caught his attention fully, "How do you know that this is not a test?"

Harry stood and stared at him. "Ah," he uttered, feeling foolish. "I don't." He returned to the couch and relaxed, wishing now for a chess set.

Much later, when a *pop!* sounded, Harry turned from the window, wand at ready, which he had not planned on doing.

"My," Shacklebolt said, looking between them. Vineet also had his wand out and aimed. "Remind me not to sneak up on either of you. Back to the Ministry with you both. Come along."

In the Auror's office it was quiet, but Harry had learned that meant everyone was out and things were actually at their busiest. Shacklebolt checked them both in and said, "Your shadowing is done for the day, head on home."

"But where is Tonks . . . and Rogan?"

"Out on a call, go on home," he repeated, sounding more commanding this time.

Harry, feeling difficult, said, "I'm actually supposed to meet some friends at a pub in London, can I do that?"

"Of course. You know what I mean. I don't want you out looking for the other Aurors."

Harry slung his bag over his shoulder and pointed out, "I don't even know where they are."

Shacklebolt propped his hands on his hips, which, with his long cloak, gave him real presence. "Somehow, Potter, I don't think that would stop you."

On the way across the atrium, Harry said to Vineet, "They don't trust me."

"I was noticing this," Vineet said.

Harry frowned, put-off by that notion. "What do I have to do, I wonder?"

"Obey, I would think," Vineet offered levelly.

Harry really looked forward to meeting with Ron to whom he could complain about all this, and he would actually be early. "I'll see you on Monday."

* * *

Sunday, Harry received a Ministry owl, which at first he thought was a reply from Tonks to his message asking if everything had gone all right on Friday. It wasn't. It was a letter from Rodgers telling him to wear his dress robes to training the next day. Harry preferred his dress Auror robes to the fuzzy workout suits they normally wore, so he had no difficulty with that. It also occurred to him that he could use the opportunity to file his petition for Sirius with the Minister's office if he pulled it all together in time. Doing so wearing his dress robes seemed like a good idea.

The next morning Harry rose an hour early, dressed, and in the pale morning light, checked himself in the mirror on the cupboard door. As much as he was rushing, this brought him to a halt. The image that reflected back at him was yet again a leap beyond what he had expected. He filled out the carefully measured fabric of the tunic in a way that implied physical as well as magical power and the high collar made him look older and competent. In the robe pocket, he found his medal bar, which he pinned on straight the first try. A wrist flick brought the cloak over one shoulder, showing off the red edge of it. He would trust himself, he thought; he looked like he could do anything.

Still feeling this confidence, Harry arrived at the Ministry just as the elves finished mopping. Tonks' desk was a disaster of parchments, maps, and a broken quill or two, but he found his work file in the stand where it always was. He used the tearoom to finish organizing things and a copy spell to make a duplicate. His copy spell was still a little poor and the ink on the copy turned out faded and bluish, but it was readable, so he stuffed the original set in a large envelope and tied it closed. There was space on the tie for a wax seal, but he didn't think he need bother.

The offices were getting busier as he made his way to the lift, where he checked his watch. He just had time to drop off the documents before training. In the Minister's office, the receptionist looked up sharply and then her expression relaxed, as though she had expected someone else.

Harry said, "I have something I want the Wizengamot to consider," as he held out the packet.

The woman at the desk, whom Harry recognized as being in the Weasley Twin's year at Hogwarts although she had changed rather a lot, stood and accepted it with a formal air. Through her formality, her eyes flickered over him less so. "I'll see that the Minister gets it."

"Thanks," Harry said. He was noticing the shine on her auburn hair that covered the right quarter of her rather smooth face when she looked down.

"Unless you'd like to present it personally?" she asked and gestured toward the office door behind her. She almost looked to be blushing and it didn't look bad on her.

"No, that's all right," Harry reassured her. He hesitated, thinking he could add something along the lines of a personal question, perhaps. Looking at her, he got the distinct impression she wouldn't mind that at all. He was just stealing himself for something in the theme of *Don't I remember you from . . .* when voices entered from the corridor.

Harry turned and found the doorway filled with figures that stood out from the usual Ministry denizens, and not just because of their very fancy Muggle suits. Two of them wore rather alarmed expressions and the one in the lead was very familiar. Harry and this man stared at each other a few long seconds before the man said, "My, and you must be Harry Potter, correct?"

Harry recovered his poise and couldn't have been more grateful to not be in his usual silly workout suit. The man stepped forward, leaving his companions frozen in the open door, and put his hand out. Harry said, "Prime Minister," as he shook it. The man's eyes twinkled almost unnaturally when he smiled.

Madam Bones had been called from her office and swooped in at that moment. "Tobius," she said in familiar greeting. "I see you have met our most famous Ministry employee."

"Yes," Mr. Daire confirmed, "I just did." To Harry he said congenially, "We hope you can be counted on to prevent the next spillover out of the Wizarding world should you have another powerful rogue wizard causing difficulties."

Harry took that in and composed a safe response. "I intend to." In his head he was thinking, *spillover*? "As soon as my apprenticeship is complete. Speaking of which, I'm going to be late . . ."

Daire smiled that smile again. "By all means, we don't mean to get you in trouble . . ." He gestured at the door gallantly. Harry nodded at Bones, took one very quick glance back at the receptionist and escaped the room, parting Daire's slow moving assistants still rooted in the doorway.

"Nice of you to join us, Potter," Rodgers stated grimly when Harry rushed into the workout room.

"Sorry, sir." Harry took his seat, not bothering to explain.

Rodgers returned to writing a list of accidental magical reversal procedures on the rarely used chalkboard. Aaron asked, "Why are we in uniform today?" and Rodgers didn't respond until he had finished the second board. He stepped back and eyed the long list. "How does that look?"

"Like it will impress the Prime Minister," Harry quipped. When his fellows turned in surprise, Harry said, "He's with Madam Bones right now."

"Really?" Kerry Ann spoke with eagerness. Her eyes brightened as she asked with relish. "Is he coming up here?"

Aaron gave her a disgusted look. "Don't tell me you like that bloke?"

Kerry Ann geared up for a reply but Rodgers interrupted. "I thought it unnecessary to point out that we should be behaving in a dignified and organized manner." He gave Harry an odd look and put the chalk away.

Aaron turned backward to Harry. "So, he isn't talking . . . why's Daire here?"

Harry replied, "He wants to be assured that we aren't going to allow rogue magic to spillover into the Muggle world again."

"Ah. Is he right?" Aaron asked their trainer.

Sounding vaguely annoyed, Rodgers replied, "Of course Potter is correct. Must have gotten the memo even before the department did."

Harry, not wanting a return to their previous animosity, banked his all-knowing attitude and said with a shrug and a laugh, "I didn't get a memo, sir. I just happened to stop by the Minister's office this morning." The rest of the room had stiffened and they now all turned to see their trainer's response.

"You do that every Monday morning?" Rodgers asked with the slightest sneer.

Harry considered explaining about Sirius' petition, which he had not been keeping secret, but given the political waves it might cause, it was easier to respond with, "It was a good chance to talk to Belinda, Bones' receptionist."

Kerry Ann made a noise of amusement. "Oooh, Harry has his eye on someone."

Harry frowned but could not, despite his efforts, keep his face from heating up.

Rodgers rolled his eyes and muttered, "Flirt on your own time, Potter." Munz and Blackpool entered then, and with a glance at the clock, Rodger's whole demeanor changed. "Push the desks aside and line up here. We are supposed to be the second stop on the tour."

They stood waiting, which Harry thought a little silly. They should be doing drills instead, especially since Kerry Ann was quietly interrogating Harry about Belinda, as well as dropping gossip she knew, which Harry was ignoring for the most part. On his other side Vineet leaned over and, sounding as though he truly wished to be helpful, said, "Imagine how much easier to simply have your parents meet with hers and decide."

"I'll ask Severus if he's willing to do that then," Harry returned.

Vineet straightened and muttered, "Ah, yes. I was letting my mind slip on that fact." He sounded vaguely alarmed, which made Harry grin.

A troupe of footsteps came down the corridor, ending all conversation. Falsely toned introductions could be heard from the Auror's office across the way. Rodgers muttered, "Merlin, I hope Mad-Eye is out today." He didn't sound as though he were trying to be humorous, more truly worn down and Harry felt a little bad for having set him off earlier.

Madam Bones came into view, Daire right beside, followed by a pack of his and Bones' assistants. "And here is the future of our Magical Law Enforcement efforts," Bones asserted brightly. "This is our largest ever class of Auror apprentices, all of them the highest achievers on our rigorous admissions examinations." The Muggle assistants to the Minister did not appear to have relaxed at all and still maintained antsy postures as they stood just behind their boss, who took no notice of their alarm. Harry considered that they may have been informed just that morning that magic truly existed.

Daire passed along the line of apprentice Aurors and with that smile still fixed asked, "So, how does one enforce magical law against someone practicing black magic?"

"Can we have a little demonstration, Reggie?" Bones asked.

Rodgers walked along behind his charges and put his hands down on Harry's and Vineet's shoulders. In their ears he whispered, "Give them a bit of a show--lots of light and noise." More loudly, he said, "Certainly. We'll run through some of our drills for you, starting with two of our first year apprentices."

While Harry slowly took his place in the open end of the room he considered what spells made a lot of show without straining a block; the last thing he wanted was to actually knock Vineet off his feet during a demo before the Prime Minister. The visitors arranged themselves beside the other apprentices and Harry noticed that Belinda, standing on the end beside Daire's assistants, appeared keenly interested in the demonstration, in contrast to the Muggles in suits who appeared only additionally alarmed.

Harry lifted his wand and after a decent pause, sent a simple Freezing Charm at Vineet. It had a nice blue spell trail and some sizzle, which drew a gasp from someone. Vineet countered and spelled him with a rather broad Blasting Curse in return. Harry blocked it sufficiently, but he had not been expecting so much power in return. The boards in the floor shook. They exchanged another set of spells and again Harry went easy and bright and Vineet didn't curb his power. Harry bit his lip and considered what to use next.

During the pause, Daire said, "Bit of a mismatch here, Madam Bones. I thought young Potter was your star."

This bothered Harry far more than he would have liked.

"Oh, he can be counted on when it matters," Madam Bones returned casually, but beneath it Harry thought he heard a challenge.

Harry sent a chain-binding spell at his opponent, which he knew required timing and exactness on the block. Vineet was forced to use his agility to jump out of the way of it as his counter failed and the heavy chain floundered loudly on the floor before vaporizing. The Muggle assistants, who had been backing up with each exchange, were now up against the wall.

Vineet found his feet and his former spot and sent a blue torrent of Freezing at Harry, who found enough concentration for a block with an ease that made his heart race. Ice crystals clattered to the floor around him in a circle. Harry, deep in the zone of competitive concentration, cast back a whiplike disarming curse they had learned just the previous week. Vineet's wand clattered as it skid across the floor and stopped at Kerry Ann's feet.

"Ah," Daire stated with strange happiness. "Wizards are helpless without their wands, now aren't they?"

Harry had not been able to read Vineet's eyes until that moment, but he saw then that he longed to have a try at Harry with his martial arts. Harry didn't lower his wand. Madam Bones was beginning a complicated explanation of different magicks when Vineet demonstrated unexpectedly. One moment he looked to be stepping rapidly forward and the next a white tiger was loping straight at Harry, who took a few quick steps backward, partly from startlement and partly to gain time. Vocal expressions of surprise were coming from more than the Muggles. Harry raised his wand, dismissed spells as fast as they came to mind, and then dropped it to the floor instead, in favor of his own Animagus transformation.

Harry had no attention for the sudden movement of the audience to get farther from the pair of them. His attention was fixed on the tiger, which in its last bound before reaching him, was desperately trying to avert its approach. Claws scabbled at the wood floor to no avail. Harry, only in the interest of avoiding having his feet taken out from under him, put forward one of his large scarlet feet, knocking the snowy, delicately striped tiger over with ease. For a breath, nobody moved. Harry had spread his wings for balance without thinking, and now pulled them consciously in as he stepped back off of the prone big cat. Vineet flipped to his four feet and then just as smoothly stood and transformed back into himself as he returned to upright. He gazed up at Harry with eyes vacant in surprise. Harry quickly released the spell and flushing, picked up his wand while attempting an attitude of normalcy. Unfortunately, even the other apprentices were gape mouthed.

"Well," Daire exclaimed, clapping his hands once. "That was illuminating. Madam Bones, good to see you have someone to keep your star wizard properly challenged. What's next?"

"Sports and games, I believe," Bones said, failing to recover quite as quickly as her counterpart. She gestured to the door and Daire followed but had to turn when his assistants failed to move from where they leaned heavily on the wall in a tableau of horror.

"Come along then," Daire cajoled them. "Much more to see."

Only their eyes moved at this and Kerry Ann had to turn to hide a laugh at the comic disbelief they held. Only after further urging they did finally slink away in an attitude which implied that any sudden noises would be unwelcome.

Rodgers immediately spun on his apprentices. "What was that?" he demanded.

Harry didn't have a good answer. Kerry Ann provided one after a long pause. "Harry was colorful," she offered.

This put Rodgers on a different tack. "What was that, anyway, and you had better be registered."

"I am," Harry responded, careful not to sound anything but cooperative, even though he longed to snap at his trainer.

"It wasn't on your application," Rodgers breathed in annoyance.

"I hadn't managed the spell in time for my application," Harry offered calmly. "And my form is a mountain gryffylis."

Rodgers rubbed his eyes and then his face. "Well, you certainly made an impression. I guess that was the object of this exercise," he added with a groan before commanding, "Pair up, let's get some real drills in before lunch. Not you two," he added, gesturing at Harry and Vineet. "Vishnu, pair with Aaron."

When they finally broke for lunch after remarkably sober drills, Harry approached and said to Vineet. "I couldn't come up with a spell that would stop a four hundred pound tiger without hurting it."

Vineet appeared pained as he quietly said, "I allowed my frustration to rule me, for which I am apologizing."

Aaron and Kerry Ann stood by the door and waited for them. Harry said, "In a real fight you wouldn't give someone so much time, so you wouldn't necessarily need your blocks. After the first spell I think you'd be all set."

"It is more than that. I cannot even heat my tea without destroying the teapot. I have destroyed several and I do wish to have one when Nandi arrives. She will wonder."

"Maybe you could get a metal one or use a cauldron, they're tough," Harry offered helpfully.

Vineet brightened only a little as he replied. "I didn't consider a cauldron, I will do that."

* * *

The envelope didn't look very impressive but Harry's heart started to race even as he tore the seal of what he was certain was the response to his dispensation request. The roundabout wording required a heart-stopping minute to sort out, but it confirmed what he had assumed: that the Ministry would allow him to inform his two cousins of his magical background, with the caveat that they not tell anyone else and that their doing so would be grounds for reevaluation of the dispensation and make them subject to action by the Magical Reversal Squad.

Harry raced to the drawing room for a pen and paper to write to Mrs. Evans with the news. When he got there, he stuffed them back away and instead fetched his cloak and Apparated to Godric's Hollow, to his usual spot, the deep shade below the Willow tree, which wasn't so shady now as it had lost its leaves. A cold wind blew through the small valley, making Harry wrap his cloak around himself and wish for gloves. He paused only a moment at his parent's grave before walking swiftly to the Evan's house where he interrupted Mrs. Evans reading a magazine with her tea.

"Harry dear, what a surprise." Her short grey hair was pulled back in a scarf today and the house was warmer than Harry was accustomed to.

Harry gave her a broad smile in return and pulled out the dispensation which he had stuffed into his pocket. It had crinkled it rather badly, so he quickly smoothed it with a charm and handed it over.

Polly Evans adjusted her glasses and asked, "That work for shirts as well?"

"Sort of. There are better spells for laundry."

"I haven't felt jealous of anyone in years but I have to say waving a wand to do the ironing has rather a strong appeal." She handed the letter back with a smile of her own. "Would you like a spot of tea or are you going to rush over to Patty's this instant?"

"Is she home?" Harry asked.

"She may be in the square with the children, even in the cold they prefer to be outside." She smiled at Harry's indecision. "Perhaps you should fetch her here for tea and we can share the news. Pamela will be home in an hour or so."

Harry's chest tightened for the tenth time at the very thought. He said he would return quickly and headed back out into the brisk breeze.

Patricia didn't answer her door, so he walked over to the small village square. The wind was much lower here, blocked by the buildings and a row of pines. His cousin sat on one of the two benches in the middle of the weedy cobblestones; her two children ran in fearsome circles nearby, chasing a bright pink football. The boy was too small to kick it and resorted to picking it up and dropping it instead. His sister tried in vain to explain better.

Harry approached from the side and said, "Hello."

"Harry! This is a surprise. You came all this way just to call?"

"Um, yeah. It's not all that far really," he said as he sat beside her, bundling his cloak around himself better. He watched the youngsters at play a minute and finally asked, "Anything strange ever happen around them?"

"What?" Patricia asked, sounding alarmed. Sounding amused instead, she added, "Why do you ask?"

Harry shrugged and found himself hoping one of the children would turn out to be magical. The prospect of little magical relatives was dizzying. The ball rolled to Harry's foot and he picked it up and tossed it back into the game, such as it was. Neither child had on mittens. "They don't mind the cold, eh?" Harry asked.

"No, not at all. If I tried to keep them inside all day I'd go nutters."

They'd make good Quidditch players, Harry thought to himself, still wishful. His friends' various stories about how their relatives tried to determine if they were magical flitted through his mind. The next time the ball rolled his way, Harry held it out of reach to see what would happen. The girl just stood on tiptoe and bounced until the ball was given up.

"Did you stop and see Mum?"

"Yep," Harry replied and shook himself. "She said to bring you round for tea."

Patricia stood immediately. "Sounds good. Come on Basie," she called to the boy when he didn't follow immediately. His sister picked up the ball, which forced him to follow with a cry of displeasure. As they walked, Patricia asked doubtfully, "So you stopped by just to say hello?"

"No, I have something I want to explain."

"About what?" she asked, sounding curious.

"Um, partly about the night my parents were killed."

"Hm," she murmured eagerly and accepted the ball from her daughter to carry. "Mum knows something and she would never tell. It was always so mysterious what with dad always making up crazy explanations to tease us with. So what really happened?"

Harry took a deep breath. "An evil wizard came and killed my parents."

She tossed the football at him, hard. Only his Quidditch reflexes let him catch it although he jammed a finger doing it. "Ow," he muttered. "What was that for?"

"You sound like Dad," she complained.

"Ah," Harry said in understanding. They were on an empty street so he pulled his wand out and tapped the ball, turning it bright blue. He gallantly handed it back. She turned it around and looked it over, then looked at what he held, the wand. To her credit she kept walking.

"Ball!" Briar, the daughter demanded.

"Just a second, dear," Patricia insisted. "Neat trick."

"I don't actually know many tricks," Harry admitted. "That's an illusion. He took the football back and tapped it with an incantation to turn it into a blue golf ball."

"You're a magician?" she asked, sounding hopeful.

They had reached the field leading to the Evan's property. "Not exactly," Harry admitted. "A wizard."

"There's no such thing," she countered with a laugh.

Harry removed the illusions and tossed the ball ahead of them on the freshly mown field. Giggling children gave chase. The children remained outside as they went into the house.

"Hello, dear," Polly greeted her daughter. "Met our magical relative?"

Patricia froze at that. "Sort of," she hedged.

At Harry's questioning look, Polly explained, "I knew you couldn't wait to say." She fetched the teapot and biscuits and took a seat and cajoled her daughter to join her.

"He's telling one of those crazy stories like Dad used to," she said. "About magicians, no . . . wizards." She shook her head with a frown.

Harry took a seat across from her. "Give us a little show, Harry dear, since you have your wand out. Get us the sugar, perhaps."

Harry hovered the sugar bowl from the shelf above the stove. Patricia closed her eyes and muttered, "Gracious. You aren't kidding."

"You should wait for Pammy or you'll have to tell it all twice," Polly said helpfully, sipping her tea with a smile. "I do so remember your mother with fondness."

"Lily was a . . .?"

"Witch," Harry and Polly replied together.

A bit reluctantly, Patricia queried, "Ah, and the question you had about anything strange happening with the children . . . ?"

"I haven't seen a sign of anything," Polly went on. "But I don't really know what to look for."

Harry calmly explained to his rattled cousin, "Magic shows up occasionally in this family. But only every hundred years or so." He shrugged. "But either of them could be magical. You'll know for certain when they turn eleven if not before."

"Why when they turn eleven?"

"Because Hogwarts school keeps track and sends every single magical child in Britain a letter saying they can go to school there. Not all of them do though. It isn't the most normal education."

"Your dad seems to teach normal things, chemistry, well, mythology is a little different."

Harry shook his head. "He used to teach Potions. Now he teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Oh," Patricia quipped. "Potions . . . as in Love Potion?"

"I can brew one of those . . . they're easy."

"Pammy could use one," she stated authoritatively between bites of biscuit. "Hover something else," she then insisted.

With a bright smile Harry obliged.

When Pamela arrived, drawn by multiple mysterious messages left on her telephone answering machine by her sister, Patricia dove right in with. "Guess what? Dad wasn't joking, it really was an evil wizard."

It grew dark outside the window as Harry and Polly explained. Much dismay was expressed about the prophecy, which made Harry feel unexpectedly good.

"So, wait, your dad, Mr. Snape, he's a wizard as well, then?" Pamela asked when Hogwarts was explained.

"Yes," Harry replied.

"I have to admit to finding him a little creepy before," Pamela confessed. "That doesn't help."

"He has his moments, I'll admit," Harry said. "He's good at intimidating students."

"Even you?"

"Well, for a while," Harry hedged. "I see through it now."

"So one of the children could be magical?" Pamela asked. "That would be fun. Maybe I should have a few," she uttered thoughtfully. She didn't notice the gleeful expressions on either her sister or mother's face. Harry ducked his head to hide his laugh.

"I should show you my album. Let me fetch it." Harry said, and promptly Disapparated. He arrived in his room directly, picked up the album out of the nightstand and returned. Three sets of stunned eyes fixed on him as he held the album out. "I didn't explain about that, did I?" he asked and swallowed hard. "That's called Apparation. It's how we get around."

Silence reined until Patricia glanced at the album and said, "You went all the way to your house? Isn't it just miles and miles away?"

"Yes," Harry admitted and tried to distract them with the album which, of course, was full of animated pictures, which didn't help the general sense of alarm.

"And this is me playing Quidditch for my house team. My dad played too when he was in school. And that's the end." Except for the chocolate frog card that Harry had had forgotten was in there between the last page and the back cover.

"What's that?" Pamela asked, grabbing it up and reading it off. "It looks like a football card. Are you famous?"

"Sort of," Harry admitted. "Everyone's very happy to have Voldemort gone."

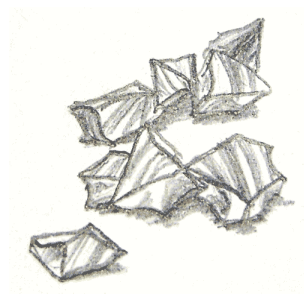
Patricia took the card next, watching the picture on the front closely. "You look small in this picture."

"I was. I've grown a lot since then."

"Looks it." She continued to peer into the card intently until she noticed the time suddenly and insisted she had to get the children home to bed and get some dinner together. She gave Harry a hug, and the card, and departed.

"I need to get to my studies as well," Harry said, remaining standing. He said his goodbyes and insisted he would visit again soon. Polly had less than dry eyes as she gave him a hug as well.

At home the house seemed extraordinarily quiet and his light heart made it hard to finish his readings. Before getting into bed, he wrote a quick note to Snape explaining about his evening, which refreshed the memory rather happily. He fell into sleep with a smile still quirking his lips.



Chapter 69 -- Circling in the Dark

Harry decided to depart early for the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw Quidditch match so that he could visit at Hogwarts beforehand. For the match he planned to meet up with Ron and some other former schoolmates as well as Aaron. As he moved around his room getting ready, he wished that he could just Apparate into Hogsmeade, since that distance was easy for him now. After he finished feeding Hedwig and Kali, he found himself half tempted to try. Closing his eyes he imagined High Street and scrunched himself down hard, only to be popped back so fast he had to take a step back to stay on his feet. Harry sighed to himself; he really couldn't have expected that to work. Both of his pets were peering at him with identical tilted head expressions of curiosity.

"Yeah, I know--*Hogwarts, A History*," he grumbled at them.

As expected, he became stalled in the Floo for long minutes before getting dumped a bit unceremoniously on his knees on the hearthstone of the crowded Three Broomsticks. Pretending nothing was amiss, he got to his feet and brushed himself off.

"Harry!" a familiar voice rang out and Seamus came over to greet him. When his old schoolmate started discussing the match-up in great detail, Harry had to beg off. Other than the occasional letter where Ginny discussed a new play, Harry had no sense of the two teams and wondered that he had lost touch so quickly.

A cold wind blew steadily sideways along the path to the castle. Harry tightened his cloak against it and walked most of the way with his arms wrapped around himself. Few others were on the lawn this early, preferring instead the warmth of the pubs until game time. Only a pair of well-bundled students were moving quickly in the other direction, so quickly that they took no notice of Harry. In contrast to the empty lawn, many students were milling about in the Entrance Hall. He didn't expect to see Ginny or any of the other players since they would be down in the changing rooms already, but many students waved hello as he passed through and only a few stared in surprise.

Snape was in his office grading a thick roll of essays. "You are early," he said in a way of greeting.

Harry dropped into the visitor's chair and relaxed into the familiar feel of the surrounding stone walls. Snape continued to work uninterrupted. Harry peered around the office, eyes alighting on a few things that had not been there before, like a brand new manual of forbidden potions that sat alone upon the top shelf beside the dusty pensieve. Below that Harry spotted the tin from the Himalayan tea alongside some other ingredient jars and realized with a jolt that Snape's birthday was fast approaching and questions about potion books fled his mind as he fiercely considered what he might get his guardian this year . . . quickly.

"Are you coming home next weekend?" Harry asked, rapidly plotting ahead.

Snape's eyes lifted from his task. "I was not considering it."

Harry, who regretted not thinking of plans sooner, but figured he could safely assume Snape did not have a date with Candide scheduled for his birthday, suggested, "Shall we meet in Hogsmeade on Friday?"

"You have nothing better to do?" Snape asked lightly. When Harry shook his head, he prodded, "Wouldn't rather be out with your friends?"

"They're all coming over this evening."

"Ah, do try to keep things sedate, if possible." Snape rubbed his hair back out of his eyes and held it there as he searched through a pile of books. "We can meet in Hogsmeade if you wish," he said.

He sounded just a bit down to Harry, but of course this time last year he had a date. Harry figured that was probably what was bothering him. With a glance at his watch he stood. "I'm going to meet my friends. I'll see you after the match?"

Snape nodded and started to wave him out, but then closed the book he had started to search through with a *snap*! "Everything going all right, Harry?" he asked soberly.

Harry gave him a smile. "Well enough. Very well, I think." Snape seemed to expect more elaboration, so Harry leaned a hand against the doorframe and said, "My visit to my relatives went very well, but I owled you about that. They are expecting us for Christmas at some point, just to warn you." Here Harry smiled even more, but bit his lip as he added, "And I didn't tell you that I submitted a petition to the Wizengamot to have Sirius' case reconsidered. I haven't heard anything about that yet." Snape's passive gaze didn't waver, so Harry went on, "Um . . . I met the Prime Minister, but I didn't tell you about that because the demonstration of Defensive magic got a little out of hand and Daire's two assistants needed calming draughts by the end of the day, and I was a little embarrassed about the whole thing." Harry felt his cheeks flushing at the vaguely disturbed expression that had overtaken Snape's face. "We'll keep the party tonight small and quiet . . . I promise."

Snape raised a brow and rubbed his chin. "I was going to suggest that perhaps life had gotten calm and ordinary for you, but I realize not." He turned back to his papers. "There was some strange rumor about a griffin fighting a tiger at the Ministry and my paranoid thoughts immediately leapt to you." He raised just his pitch dark eyes to peer at Harry with a vague challenge.

Harry smiled sheepishly. "The press wasn't there. Thank Merlin."

"I would say," Snape intoned. "Perhaps you should join your friends. I had hoped to finish grading these essays before the match."

"I see you later then, although I'm not staying for dinner. Is Minerva expecting me to?"

"You should probably find her or leave her a note in that case."

As he exited Snape's office, Harry checked his watch and found it was still well before match time. He headed farther on, around to the gargoyles, but didn't know the password. He was turning to go ask Snape and came face to face with Professor Greer. "Good morning, Professor," Harry said in a rather friendly way, he thought. It was easy to let go his dislike of her since he was feeling even farther removed from this place than last visit.

"Mr. Potter," she said with a sour shape to her mouth. She grinned then. "Don't know the password?" she asked the way Dudley might have, as though to taunt.

Harry calmly refused to rise to it. "No, ma'am," he admitted.

She swung her full robes around, "Lemon Verbena," she commanded haughtily and the gargoyle jumped aside.

Harry followed her up the office where McGonagall appeared to be having a meeting with Professor Cawley, who looked a bit more worn down than Harry remembered. "Do try to be firm with them . . . it does no good to give them a chance to rule the situation . . ." McGonagall was advising when the turning staircase reached the top. Her door was open as usual.

"That might cut down on the Slytherin skiving as well," Cawley responded.

"Ah, Gertrude . . . and *Harry*," McGonagall said, pleasantly surprised. "Please come in. I'm sorry, you've caught us in the middle of an impromptu staff meeting." She came around her desk and gave his hand a light shake. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"No, sorry, Professor. I'm having a party tonight." Harry noticed that she looked greyer than ever.

"Ah, well. It was nice enough of you last time. Know that you are always welcome to stay after the match." She glided back around her desk. "But I'm afraid at *this* moment we have issues we must discuss."

"Of course," Harry said amiably and started back to the staircase. A frosted glass dodecahedron mounted on a spindle shifted to follow him as he passed by it.

"Ah, but . . ." McGonagall said, pulling him back around. "There was something I wanted to ask you." She had an odd smile on her face, as though reluctantly amused. "I heard a very strange story about the Prime Minister, a scarlet griffin and a rare white tiger, or some such." Harry's shoulders fell, which he feared gave him away. McGonagall went on pleasantly on the surface but underneath she sounded as though she might be getting even for something. "The story was too many tellers removed to be wholly accurate . . . I thought you would . . . perhaps have heard what actually happened."

Greer and Cawley both turned back to hear the answer as well. "No one got hurt," Harry pointed out instead of replying. "And Daire seemed to enjoy himself. It's a long story," he breathed, not willing to explain.

"Ah," McGonagall uttered, eyes twinkling. "Is Daire as good looking in person?"

Harry shrugged, unable to gauge that. "My fellow apprentice Kerry Ann can't shut up about him now, so I guess he is."

She smiled and waved him out with a generous goodbye. Harry fleetingly suspected that she enjoyed knowing that his penchant for trouble was someone else's problem now.

To overcome that thought, Harry walked the other way around the castle to find Hagrid in his garden, harvesting the last of his peas. Only they weren't ordinary ones. Even browned by the frost, these kept trying to reach out and tangle Hagrid's hand while he plucked the nobbly pods off into a massive basket.

"Good to see ya', Harry," Hagrid said with feeling. They had a pleasant long chat that didn't include any discussion of any kind of trouble Harry might or might not have gotten in at the Ministry.

When Harry found his friends in the visitor's section of the Quidditch stadium, he gratefully tucked into a bag of wriggling caramel caterpillars and a butterbeer that Ron had purchased for him. He and Hermione had formed a small section of former students along with Neville, Seamus, and even Lavender, whom Harry had not seen in a long time. When Aaron arrived, Harry made them all shift down to make room.

"As long as you aren't a Slytherin," Ron commented around a mouthful of cinnamon popcorn.

Aaron beat Harry to a reply, by sitting straight and saying haughtily, "And what would you do if I were?"

"Ah," Ron uttered. "Nothing, I guess," he admitted sullenly. He swallowed and leaned over to whisper to Harry, "You've picked up some strange friends."

"This from someone who works with Trolls and Goblins," Harry retorted teasingly.

Ron sighed and slumped in his seat. "True."

The match was long--three and a half hours long. Harry thought that they should have used the old Snitch given that both Seekers were new. He also wondered if anyone else knew of the switch in equipment. By the end all of the players were utterly exhausted. Ginny's hair had fallen completely out of its tie and she was doing much more shouting at her players than Harry would have expected, probably out of frustration due to their trailing by two goals most all the game.

The Gryffindor Seeker, Louisa Llwelan, finally caught the Snitch almost by defense when it veered suddenly as though imitating a Bludger and came right at her. The Ravenclaw Seeker hung his head and shook it, tossing his long curls side to side as he did so. Ginny had mentioned in one of her letters that even though he was a Third Year many of the girls had a crush on him. He had poise in losing though, and flew over to shake hands with Louisa before landing where his team had gathered on the pitch. The Ravenclaws slouched off the field as the Gryffindors slapped each other on the back, although they didn't do this with the usual enthusiasm; perhaps they were too tired even to celebrate.

The crowd lacked energy too and filed slowly out of the stands. "Good thing we have a party to look forward to," Ron said, slapping Harry on the back rather hard.

* * *

The doorknocker sounded, just audible over the voices in the crowded main hall of the house. Harry, while maneuvering his way across to answer it, had not realized that he had invited so many people. He opened the door to reveal Aaron with a fashionably pretty girl on his arm from whom he seemed to be getting more than moral support. Harry wondered at that, he had only two hours with which to pick up his date after the match.

"Harry!" he greeted and then gesturing with a wine bottle that sported a crinkled red ribbon at the neck, he introduced, "Rachel . . . Harry Potter . . . how're ya' doin', Harry? This is for you." With this he held out the bottle.

"Come on in," Harry invited, stepping back and gesturing with his arm. Rachel passed with wide, surprised eyes as though trying to see him better in the darkness of the entryway. Aaron drove ahead without noticing his date's amazement.

As they made the hall, Rachel said to Aaron in a confused and heavily French-accented voice, "Zo, you really are an Auror?"

This seemed to get through to Aaron's alcohol-fogged brain. "Yeah," he replied in a hurt tone. "I wouldn't make that up. What if someone expected Auror things from me if I did make that up?" He sounded honestly alarmed.

"Have some punch," Harry offered from the tray Winky carried past at that moment.

Rachel accepted the glass of glowing blue liquid, still fixated on Harry. "Zis is your house?" she managed to ask.

"Yes."

Aaron looked around with a keen eye. "That's right, this is Professor Snape's place, isn't it?" He swallowed hard and looked more wary.

"Nothing hazardous here," Harry assured him. "Unless you start drinking things from the medicine cupboard without mixing or diluting first. Speaking of which, before you leave I can mix you something you are almost certainly going to want."

Rachel stared at Harry over her untouched glass which was making her hand and chin glow. "You are really ZE Harry Potter?"

Harry neutrally replied, "Yes. Aaron and I are in the Ministry Auror's program together."

She appeared to be reevaluating Aaron, including looking him up and down. "Huh."

"Let me introduce you to some of my friends. . . "

The party only seemed to get more crowded as the evening wore on. Perhaps this was due to the excessive amounts of food Winky kept bringing out. Harry looked around at the laden tables covered in trays of little snacks in alarming variety. Someone had brought a Wizard Wireless set and strains of eerie music were battling with the conversations.

"Harry," Ron said, stepping over. "Quite a spread of food. I really need to get an elf. Maybe when I get a pay rise."

"How *is* Gringott's?" Harry asked.

Ron shrugged. "Good. I got to see the ninth level this week, which is the second most secure and full of all kinds of nasty stuff. The Goblins are good at cursing iron, I'm hoping to learn how they do it." Ron fell into explaining with relish. "They have this double door leading to the lowest levels . . . it looks like two ordinary reinforced doors, but if you aren't supposed to be there, these triangular spikes pop out and the two doors snap together like an iron maiden."

"That's nice," Harry replied, feeling more queasiness from thoughts of physical harm than from magical.

Fred and George slinked over, their usual broad grins visible even in the low candlelight. "Great party, Harry. You do have an awful lot of friends."

"Everyone wants to be Harry's friend," the other twin teased as they both leaned in close.

"How goes your training, O Auror? You haven't come by for a visit in a long while."

"Yes, we need to ply you with treats now, so you don't arrest us later."

Harry wondered what they were getting up to. "You haven't been expanding to other neighborhoods, have you?"

The twins appeared curious. "No, why?"

"Just wondering. Have anything new and interesting that would help an Auror?" Harry asked as a distraction.

"Hm, George have we?" Fred asked thoughtfully.

George rubbed his chin in a pose of careful consideration. "We'll have to think about that." He tugged on his brother's arm as though to keep him from speaking.

"What *are* they working on?" Harry asked Ron when the Twins had moved off, wearing identical sly grins.

Ron finished chewing before answering, "Well, they spent a lot of time trying to make an invisibility cloak. I don't think they quite managed it, or how about, I think they actually wanted to make an invisibility lemon drop. They get bored with that and moved on. I actually don't know what they're working on now. Ginny might . . . she keeps up with that better."

Tonks wandered over, her expansive pink Mohawk bobbing above the crowd. "Have to go, Harry. Thanks for the invite."

"You just arrived . . . didn't you?"

She laughed brightly, which plucked at something inside Harry's chest. "Two hours ago, Harry."

"Really?" Harry asked in shock and fished out his watch; it was nearly midnight. "Well, glad you could come," he stated with some formality. She gave a little nod before she disappeared with a *bang*! Harry, looked around the crowd to avoid Ron's gaze. He watched Aaron dancing with his date across the floor, agile in the crowd and rhythmic, despite dancing while the Wizard Wireless announcer was giving Quidditch scores. They tangoed near to them and stopped, with Aaron dipping his date almost into the punch.

"Hello, Harry," Aaron said graciously, sounding a bit like his mother might. "We should have parties every night," he said dreamily. "Rather than readings, for certain."

"Readings?" Rachel asked, straightening up.

Aaron sighed, "Yes. Aurors, we're all nearsighted from living inside a book, you know . . ." Here he tweaked Harry's glasses.

Harry pushed his glasses back up his nose. "I've had these a long time," he pointed out.

Aaron took his date's arm through his own, and she draped herself against him and gazed at Harry with a strange look of wonder. Harry cleared his throat. "So, where did you two meet?"

"On the train," Aaron said, patting Rachel's hand. "She is visiting from Lyon and I offered to show her the sites, you know, Tower of London, Dungeon of London . . . Harry Potter."

Rachel giggled with an elegant hand over her mouth. "I sought he waz joking."

"Ah," Harry uttered. "You pick up women by telling them you know me?" he asked in dismay.

Aaron leaned over as though to confide something. "Harry, you should be picking them up by *being* you. Why don't you have a date?"

Harry had owled Tara, just as a casual invitation, but she already had an engagement. During the week, he had tried to think of a reason for stopping in at the Minister's office, but didn't want to actually run into the Minister until he was certain she had forgiven him for the demonstration, so he hadn't. He shrugged.

"Aye," Aaron breathed and pulled his date over so he could put an arm around Harry. "We still have so far to go with him," he murmured sadly.

"Good luck," Ron quipped while eating his twentieth sausage roll of the evening.

The party finally began to thin out, although the food hadn't, Harry noticed. He didn't see Winky in the hall and, fearing that she was making yet more snacks, headed to the kitchen.

It was blissfully quiet even on the steps leading down and at the bottom only the crackle of the kitchen hearth fire was audible. Winky was busy cleaning cauldrons. "Hey, Winky," Harry greeted her.

"Master need something?" she asked in concern.

"No, no, I was just coming to make sure you didn't bring anything else out." It was warm and cozy down here and Harry's ears were ringing from the noise, he discovered in the quiet. He took a seat on a low, elf-height stool. "Thank you for doing so much for the party," Harry said, making Winky bow.

A foot scraped on the stone steps. "I thought I saw you duck down here," Hermione said, coming into the red firelight, the only light in the kitchen. "Big party."

"I didn't mean it to be," Harry said, rolling his sleeves up in the warmth.

"Did you make all that food, Winky?" Hermione asked.

"Winky make food, yes," Winky replied, while pulling at the edges of her teatowel.

"That's a lot of work," Hermione said, pulling over a crate of potatoes to sit on between Harry and the low table that dominated one wall.

"Oh, no Mistress, little work for Winky." Apparently seeing Hermione's doubtful face, the elf went on, "Winky not given much work--Winky like work."

Hermione slapped the back of her hand lightly on Harry's arm. "Harry, you're not much work. Loan me Winky, will you?"

"You?" Harry blurted in disbelief. "*You* want to borrow an elf?"

"No, I guess not." Then thinking further, added, "I'd eat a lot better if I had one, though."

"How are things at the solicitor's?" Harry asked.

"Interesting enough," she said, sounding vaguely insincere. "Really, it is challenging and all, but I spend *too* much of my day going through books."

Harry gave her an even stronger look of disbelief and lightly pinched her arm. "Is that really Hermione in there?"

She slapped him weakly in return. "Yes," she replied in exasperation. "It's just that . . . I don't really use my magic at all. And I'm *good* at magic. I heat the office tea with my magic. You and Ron get to use magic all the time and you get to learn lots of new magic." She rested her chin on her palms and stared into the fire. "It's hard to mix magic and serious work. But I'm not sure what else to do. I get to do all kinds of important things now, but not what I had set out to."

They both considered the hearth in silence until Hermione said, "I need a change."

"Considered being an Auror?" Harry teased.

"Yes, and the conclusion was, 'No'," she stated emphatically. "Maybe I *should* try to find something at the Ministry. . . ." She sighed and rested her chin down on her hand again.

A dark, cloaked figure silently descended the five steps leading to the kitchen. Harry looked up and said, "Hey, Vineet."

"I should be departing," the Indian intoned.

Harry stood and shook his friend's hand. "Thank you for coming. Sorry, we didn't get a chance to talk."

"Your invitation was most welcome . . ."

Aaron barreled down the steps at that moment and grabbed Vineet up from behind, apparently for support. "Harry! great party. You should have more of these. Hello, we didn't get introduced, did we?" he said, squinting at Hermione.

"We met at the match. Hermione Granger," she said, holding out her hand.

"Harmony, nice name," Aaron greeted, shaking her hand. "Aaron's the name. Harry and I are at the Ministry together . . . I mean, we are training at the . . . well anyway. See ya' Monday, Vishnu. I should get the lady home . . . she wants to . . . I have to go." With a sharp pat on Vineet's back he departed with an unsteady step.

"*He's* an Auror Apprentice?" Hermione asked in concern.

"He's all right normally," Harry assured her with a laugh. Aaron was not leaving much of a positive impression and he left without any pink stuff, although he might get more care out of his date as a result.

"I will be seeing you Monday as well," Vineet said and gave a little bow in Hermione's direction. "Harmony," he stated formally before turning and departing.

Harry expected his friend to express annoyance at the mishearing of her name. She didn't say anything however, just sat in silence while Winky hung cauldrons up to dry along the wall. "Who was that?" she asked finally. "Another of your fellow apprentices?"

"Yeah, that was Vineet."

A long pause ensued. "How's he doing?"

"He was using a mismatched wand until recently, so now he has no power control." Harry smiled, "It really annoys him too." Seeing her odd expression, Harry added, "He's getting better. He can counter, but he can't put up a block worth much. Otherwise he'd be the top of the class."

"Where's he from?"

Harry cast back in his memory. "Oh, he said, once. Uh, Bhube-something."

"Bhubaneswar?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied. "You've heard of it?"

"They are famous for their white tigers," she explained, locking her hands around her bare knees below her skirt and rocking back on her crate.

"Ah. I can imagine," Harry stated cryptically.

"So, how is Auror training going. Seems like you have interesting fellow trainees."

"I like the training a lot, except that drills get a little tiresome and things are going on and no one tells us anything. That annoys me."

"You don't get to go to staff meetings?" she teased.

"No. And I found out the other day that they don't trust me."

"They don't trust you?" Hermione echoed in disbelief. "What are they thinking?"

"They think if I know where trouble is I'll disobey and try to get involved."

"Oh," Hermione uttered, sounding too understanding of that.

Harry huffed into the still air. "You think I would too."

Hermione rocked back, still holding her knees tightly. Her bright white socks glowed in the firelight. "I think it would depend on what was going through your head. Like if Tonks were in trouble . . ."

Harry stood suddenly and paced the very short distance to where stray broken biscuits lined the edge of the table. He munched on one as a distraction.

"Harry . . . you like her, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Harry replied, trying for an ordinary tone.

"No, I mean, *really* like her."

"I'm not allowed to," he answered quietly.

Hermione sighed and stood up beside him. "My advice, if you are willing to hear it: don't wrap yourself up in her, it will only make it worse. Go out with someone else."

"I've been doing that. Well, I've been trying anyway," Harry answered defensively. "I avoid thinking about her, but when I suspect she's in danger . . ."

"She got by just fine without you looking out for her, you know," Hermione pointed out gently. "When things were much worse."

"Something's going on," Harry whispered, needing to tell her that.

"What?" she asked, alarm quick to her voice she stood up and came beside him.

"I don't know exactly. You haven't heard anything, have you?"

With a sharp laugh she replied, "You're asking me?" A paused ensued before she asked, "Are you sleeping well?"

Harry faced that question. "Not always," he admitted.

"You haven't been hunting Avery again, have you?"

"No, but maybe I should be," he replied flatly.

She patted his back. "Be careful, Harry, all right? Whatever you do."

* * *

That night, Harry awoke in the coldest hour just before dawn, a headache grinding at his temples and an odd dream disturbing his calm. The fire in the grate flickered weakly and it wasn't enough heat for this late in the year. Harry slid out of bed, the duvet wrapped around him. Halfway across the floor, he considered that he could have used his wand to hover more wood onto the fire instead. With a huff he dragged the covers the rest of the way across the room and rearranged the coals with the poker before adding new wood. He pulled over the velvet-covered stool from before the rolltop and sat close to the hearth for warmth as the fire rose up. Rubbing his eyes hard did not make the cotton in his head go away, in fact it made his head pound a little more.

As he sat hunched close to the rising flames, the dream flickered though his memory; in it he had been fighting a panther in the Forbidden Forest. The sleek, pitch-black cat moved unnaturally, as though not entirely solid. Harry had been fighting it in his Animagus form and only his ability to fly was giving him any advantage at all over the sharp toothed, slippery-bodied beast. Every time it turned and lunged, he pumped his wings hard downward and lifted himself out of reach, but he could not manage to bring the creature down. His claws repeatedly passed through the thing as though it were only a shadow.

Harry rubbed his eyes again. Perhaps he had drunk too much mead and eaten too many spicy sausage rolls.

* * *

Harry, tired of waiting for Tonks to open the subject, did so himself the next chance he had, which was Monday, when their training broke for lunch. She was reading through a thick stack of files at her desk. People were going in and out, but they looked otherwise occupied. Harry pulled a chair over and sat down, which brought her attention up to him.

"You were supposed to yell at me about Avery . . . I just thought I'd remind you."

She closed the file before her and put her hand on it. The thickest file emitted a sigh and the pile settled. "Yes, I was, wasn't I?" she asked rhetorically while staring beyond the note-laden cubicle wall at the back of the desk.

Whitley stepped by with his usual stooped shoulders and handed her another file, which she stacked with the rest, this time eliciting a groan from one of the folders. Tonks rubbed her cheek thoughtfully. "Someone would help you, Harry . . . you hardly are in this alone." Voice harder, she added, "You never were, you know."

Harry pressed down unwelcome memories and focused on the present. "I haven't sensed him in a while. And I haven't been looking, not since Halloween."

"He was a dunderhead, Harry," Tonks stated. "Unlike many of the others we need to deal with right now."

"Why is he still out there then?" Harry asked, upset at being put off.

"A lucky and extra paranoid dunderhead."

Harry paused until Rogan finished fetching a small crystal ball from his desk and departed again, tossing it in the air and catching it again as though uncaring of the value. When he was gone, Harry said, "But he must think it is safe for him now, eh?"

"We've not had any sightings, Harry. Only you have any news of him, and you haven't exactly been sharing it," she pointed out, anger underlying her words. "Just because you aren't allowed to be involved at all levels, doesn't mean you aren't part of this team. Where did you sense him last?"

"Near London."

She tilted her head as though this was news. "He must have gotten better at disguise." She bit her lip. "Or he has help. There are still people out there, although not many, who would sympathize with him." She stared off in the distance thoughtfully. "We can issue another round of posters. No one would complain if we did." She pulled out a mostly blank scrap parchment and scratched a note on it. "London, eh?" She stuck a pin through the note and added it to the layers upon layers of notes already pinned to the cubicle divider. "Any other news, Harry, please consider sharing it," she stated this in such a cold tone that Harry felt it as well as heard it.

Harry stood, fighting the tangle under his ribs. "So what happened the other day when Vineet and I got left at the safe-house?" He asked this because he figured he had little to lose and only information to gain.

"Nothing," she replied.

She sounded honest, so Harry echoed, "Nothing?" in disbelief.

"Turned out it was a complicated mistake."

Harry thought of Rogan's comments about vague and inaccurate reports and felt uneasy. "That's strange."

Without looking up from the file she had reopened, she replied, "It was. We spent a lot of time determining that it was truly the case . . . that nothing was going on." She sounded dismissive, so Harry moved off, feeling heavyhearted.

When Harry opened the post that afternoon his spirits lifted when he found a letter from Patricia. Inside was a photograph of her, her husband, and the two children. He stared at it for several seconds before realizing that it was unlikely to start moving. It occurred to him that he had no good picture to send back, unless he wanted to send a page of the *Prophet*. He placed the photograph inside the edge of the frame of a picture of him and his friends from third year. He could really use a new one of the group of him and his friends as well, they looked much too young in this one--naïve even. And sometimes when he looked at it, he felt the cursed grip of the events to follow, as though they were still in the future. But they weren't. Voldemort was gone. The Ministry was run more competently. Things had changed a lot from that moment captured at the Leaving Feast that year, but the otherwise innocent photo still unwelcomingly evoked that past.

The unmoving photo of his smiling relatives covered too much of the one underneath; he would have to get a new frame. He would also have to get a picture with his guardian, as he didn't have a good one to send or even to keep.

Harry wrote out a nice reply addressed to Patricia, and just in case her husband might see, put it in care of Mrs. Evans and gave it to Hedwig to deliver. His owl's white form soared away over the trees, making Harry smile at the expected

scene of her arrival. He had mentioned how wizards send post . . . hadn't he? In any event, they would welcome an owl delivery he was certain, unlike the Dursleys.

* * *

"Don't put your things down and change yet," Rodgers said when they arrived on Wednesday. "We are going to do some work outside, practice some larger barriers. Magical Games and Sports is storing a herd of racing thestrals in our usual spot, but fortunately our assistant department head has offered the use of his property in Ottery-St. Catchpole for our spell practice."

Harry's spirits rose at the prospect of visiting the Burrow. They Apparated in just behind the house and Mrs. Weasley came out, drying her hands on a bright yellow polka dot apron, a dingy grey parka pulled over her shoulders. "Harry dear," she said, giving him a big hug. She then released him and straightened her apron while flushing under Rodgers' dismayed scrutiny.

"Mrs. Weasley," he said soberly shaking her hand as though to make a point about decorum. "We promise not to be any trouble, please let us know if we disturb you at all."

Harry was very grateful he had left his rabbit-lined gloves in the pocket of his cloak, as they followed Rodgers of the uneven ground to the area usually used for Quidditch. In fact one of the poles still held a bent bicycle rim. Rodgers turned to Harry. "This is technically not far enough away from a Muggle settlement," he breathed as though wanting to hold that over him.

"In the summer the trees block the view from the nearest road," Harry pointed out, then hoped that it wasn't obvious that the trees had grown magically fast. Right now they looked like ordinary leafless trees.

Rodgers frowned at the tall line of trees and then let it drop in favor of explaining the barriers he wanted to practice. "The first is an object repelling barrier, traditionally called the cannonball catcher because it was widely used to protect castle walls. The second is a Muggle repelling charm such as a Quidditch stadium would have . . ."

They worked for hours. The spells began with them holding their wands in the air near each other and incanting a spell in unison repeatedly until a hazy glow encompassed all of their wands. Usually the glow would only be around two of the wands and almost always around Vineet's and Rodgers'. Harry did as poorly as the others and he struggled with the advice to *feel the spell* and *channel the nearby magic* as well as his own through his wand. Vineet patiently followed along, although it was clear he didn't need the practice.

Lunchtime came and went and still they worked at it, Rodgers apparently not pleased with their progress. Mrs. Weasley interrupted around 1:30, for which Harry and his rumbling stomach were very grateful. She brought them all cups of chicken soup and Rodgers accepted one rather than complain about the interruption as Harry expected he would.

When their wonderfully warm mugs were empty, he said, "All right, back to it. You are the slowest bunch I've ever seen at this." Harry, Kerry Ann, and Aaron shared a frown as they raised their wands yet again. Harry restrained himself from pointing out to their trainer that the Ministry had never tried to teach barriers to this many apprentices at once, so how did he know?

Despite his aching arm and frustration from training, Harry dearly needed to shop for Snape's birthday present for that Friday. They departed the Burrow after Mr. Weasley arrived home, so twilight hovered over Diagon Alley when Harry stepped out onto it. Few shoppers were out this late in the cold and some of the shops, such as the Apothecary, were already shuttered for the night.

Harry wandered down the street, still having no good ideas of what to buy. He had been saving his allowance and had a good amount to spend, but without any ideas, Galleons themselves weren't helpful. Harry peered into the Eeylops window and dismissed any owl accessories as too boring. Fortescue was doing a brisk business in hot cider and small cakes. Harry ordered a cider and was desperate enough he almost asked Florean for gift ideas.

"Hello, Harry," came a voice beside him as he gingerly sipped from a steaming, chipped mug. It was Belinda, Bones' receptionist.

"Oh, hi," Harry replied, pleased to run into her, but given his dilemma, not showing it.

"Your stop on the Prime Minister tour went memorably," she said with a bright smile.

Harry had previously thought that if anyone else had mentioned that, he would have reacted very differently than he actually did. Instead of snapping, he grinned mischievously and said, "We got their attention."

She smiled more. "So what are you doing out on such a nice evening?"

Harry thought that her sarcasm needed a little more work . . . she sounded serious. But Harry realized she might be able to help. "I need to buy a present for my guardian--my adoptive father. I have no good ideas. Do you?"

"Hm, I don't think I realized that you had been adopted."

"You keep up with these things?" Harry asked evenly between sips of clove-scented cider.

"I have to for my job. I read a lot of personnel files, believe me." She bit her lip then and Harry wondered if she had pulled his just recently. She went on, "But . . . gift ideas. I think I can help with that. I do a lot of that as well for visiting dignitaries."

Harry set his empty mug back up on the window ledge. "I'd really appreciate any help. Last year I got him an exotic tea, which he really liked, but now he orders that kind for himself. That idea was someone else's too." They began walking slowly down the street together. Harry strangely found her very easy to talk to. Maybe it was the way she managed to look interested in what he was saying without looking overly interested.

"Well, let's see. What does he do in his spare time?"

"Hm, works on spells, I guess. He doesn't have a lot of spare time, really."

"Well, so I assume you considered a spell book?"

They were in front of Flourish and Blotts, and stopped as a result. "Yeah. But he has a lot of books and an entire library at his disposal, so it would have to be something rarer than I can get in two days."

"Two days?" She laughed. "You didn't leave yourself much time," she chastised gently.

"I've been thinking about it for, well, a few weeks at least."

"I think you're taking it too seriously. You just need to have *something* to wrap up and hand over. With dads that's all that matters, I think." She stopped to retie her boots which Harry now noticed stretched all the way up beyond her knees. They had high heels on them too, which explained why she was his own height. "So," she uttered thoughtfully while straightening, which she did with a certain charm, especially the way she tossed her thick hair back at the end. "What does your adoptive dad do?" she sounded quite curious.

"Strange my file doesn't have it in it," Harry commented casually.

"It is," she immediately rejoined and then sucked her lips in at giving herself away.

Harry laughed. "It's filed with the WFC."

"The paperwork at the Ministry rarely seems to find its way where it belongs. I once ordered a file from the records office for Jacob Jackson, this plaque maker the Ministry hired to redo the office labels and it wasn't until I finished summariz-

ing the file that I realized the birth date was 1225 and the two was written like a nine. That Jackson had been dead for seven hundred years." She shook her head. "You know though, much of the stuff the WFC deals with isn't supposed to get into the personnel records. Your boss isn't supposed to find out if your kid is disowning you right after your wife ran off with a circus magician. But . . . back to your present."

"You know my dad. You had him at Hogwarts--Professor Snape."

She gave him a long look. "You are perfectly serious of course," she stated strangely as though accustomed to suppressing her reactions to things. She started walking again. "I distinctly remember Potions," she said in a neutral tone. She clasped her gloved hands together before her. "Well, a present for Professor Snape," she intoned slowly as though getting used to the idea.

"Never imagined thinking about that?" Harry supplied, amused.

She shook her head slowly. "Nope. Doesn't do much in his spare time," she repeated thoughtfully.

"Except make up ways to torment first-years," Harry quipped easily.

"Stop speaking my thoughts. You don't know Legilimency, do you?" she asked, teasing.

"I do, but haven't been using it. That is in my personnel record I expect, if my application is in there."

"Yes, it was," she admitted. "I only read your essays."

"Ugh. I wrote them under duress," Harry insisted with a groan, which made her laugh. She had a nice laugh, the realization of which made Harry step back emotionally. He knew nothing about her availability beyond Kerry Ann's rumors that she had given up dating Ministry people in some kind of huff.

"What would he like if he could have anything?"

Candide, was the very first thing to leap into Harry's mind. He looked up at the first floor windows across from them and traced down to the darkened ones of the accounting office. A few windows further down, the lamps of Tri-W *were* lit. "Hm," Harry uttered, getting an inkling of something. "I have an idea, but you should wait here."

"Why?" she asked curiously.

"Well, because if this works I'll be breaking several Ministry regulations and I don't want any witnesses about whom I don't have anything to hold over their heads. And I know almost nothing about you . . . "

Before Harry could turn away, she tugged his sleeve and quickly said, "My full name is Belinda Beatrix Beluna, but everyone always called me Bell when I was young. My parents are both magical and I didn't have any sign of magic even after my Hogwarts letter so my first year was really very difficult, even with everyone insisting that the school never made a mistake, but I since found out that they actually did once graduate a Muggle in 1421 after not having the heart to kick him out." She finally took a breath. "I've been working for Bones for a month, even though I always wanted to be a broom charmer growing up but that never worked out, and working for Madam Bones is a lot of pressure but I really like meeting all the interesting people who come through the office and I get to know everything that is going on . . . " She bit her lip and fell silent.

Harry laughed lightly. "Okay, so I do know something about you. But . . . oh, well, come along then. I'm going down to the Wheezes."

"Fred and George's place? Those two are completely bonkers." She bit her lip yet again and straightened attractively. "All right then," she said more gamely.

Harry liked the way she could do that, sort of pull a diplomatic face down. If Kerry Ann was correct that the Minister was very pleased with Belinda, then Harry could imagine that might be one reason.

On the rickety dark staircase leading up, Harry took Belinda's hand, to help her along, of course. At the top Harry lowered his luminescent wand and knocked on the door. Much scrambling about could be heard from the other side and then nothing. Harry was about to knock again when something slithered out from under the door and stretched up before them. Belinda stepped back suddenly at the sight of the eyeball on a long pink thread that hovered before them, a detached eyelid blinking over it bizarrely.

"Harry!" the door popped open and one of the twins stepped out and quickly bundled up the eyeball and stuffed it away. His eyelid was still inside out however, and he deftly flipped it over.

"Extendable eyes?" Harry asked, pointing to his bulging pocket. The Weasley rooms smelled even more pungent than Harry remembered and he had to put an effort into not wrinkling up his nose.

"Still experimental. Not selling them yet. Come on in. And who is . . . ah, Belinda. How are you . . . haven't seen you in yonks. George, come see what time has wrought on little Belinda."

"Hey there," she complained.

As George shook hands, Fred asked, "To what do we owe this little visit?"

"I need a favor," Harry said. "I need a present for Severus and some of the few things he might like that he doesn't already have, you do have."

"Ah," the two of them uttered in joint understanding.

Harry asked in a slightly pleading tone, "Is there anything you didn't end up needing that you think he might like, or something I can replace later, because his birthday is on Friday and don't have much time."

Fred pulled his hat around so that it pointed forward and rubbed his unshaven chin thoughtfully. "Replace I don't think is possible for you, but we may have something or two somethings." He and his brother stared at each other. "The K.T? We haven't used those and they are taking up space in the volatile storage trunk."

Equally cryptic, George said, "The A.S. as well. It's been in there a year."

"All right, then!" Fred said, suddenly excited. He and his brother went to the corner of the long narrow room and after much shuffling of things around, including hovering two trunks to the corridor because there was no space elsewhere to put them down, they gingerly unlatched a large steel-sided trunk. Fred, tongue sticking out with the effort, reached oh, so slowly into the trunk and removed two packages. "Oh, and this too," he whispered, sounding very nervous. Finally the trunk was closed again and extensively latched back up.

Fred handed over the three packages one at a time after he was certain Harry had each of them. "I can't believe we are getting presents together for Snape. Harry, you do make life interesting for us all, you know."

"But, what are they?" Harry asked.

"This . . ." Fred held up a silver ball with a hinged top a third of the way up. ". . . is Asteroid Salt. Have to confess we never got it to react with anything although it is considered sought after. These are Kraken teeth," he explained, pointing at a thick leather sack in Harry's hand. "Very active if mixed properly. *Don't* get them near a flame. And . . . the jewel that has proved too hot to handle . . ." Here he took back the sandalwood box and after de-enchanting the lid with a wave of his wand, opened it. Inside were tiny bits of black broken glass and lots of glass dust. "Two of the top five most powerful Japanese potions require it for proper brewing but it is highly regulated even there. Our first two experiments with it went so badly that we haven't tried again. Frankly, we just need to dispose of it now."

Harry was staring at the sparkling stuff that filled the box. His heart felt oddly emptied as he peered at it.

"Harry," George prompted, sounding concerned.

"What? Oh, what is it?" He closed the lid himself and felt better immediately.

"It is crushed glass of a Kuromakyo--a demon mirror."

"Why do you have that? It sounds darkly magical on its own."

George shrugged. "It is used in magical paints in Japan to get an iridescent glow. That's what we were going to use it for, that coloration, but if the potion isn't perfect, the power isn't trapped right and . . . "

Fred shuddered. Belinda leaned over and opened the box to peer into it. She looked interested rather than alarmed as Harry might have expected.

"But, when the power is trapped by the right mixture, it is just beautiful. We saw the effect on an antique in a shop in York and talked the proprietor into selling us the glass powder. He had no use for it anyway, just kept it around to tell the story."

"I tried to bring it back to him but he'd retired and moved to Majorca and I didn't trust the couple running the shop now," Fred explained.

Harry slowly accepted the box. "So . . . it is from a mirror into the demon world?" Harry asked, very curious and just a little hopeful that perhaps the Japanese knew something more about the Dark Plane.

"No," George replied, surprised by that guess, "It is from a mirror *used* by a demon."

"Ah," Harry said, still uncertain.

"Harry," Fred admonished. "If you are looking for a present for a master potion brewer, it doesn't get any better than that one."

"True," George said. "Having invaded his personal stocks on, well . . . shall we say, having *glanced* at his personal stocks on several occasions, I've never known Snape to shirk from a powerful potion ingredient."

As Harry and Belinda were leaving, Fred ran down the steps to catch them at the door. "Oh, I almost forgot . . . don't take those in the Floo. Or, how about, *I* wouldn't take them in the Floo, even if I were married to a hag and dying of a terminal ingrown toenail. Just a bit too much Floo powder and you could vaporize a dozen Floo nodes if you were carrying those, not to mention your own insides. Oh, and nice to see you again Belinda." He gave a gallant bow to her and zipped back up the steps.

Harry stood in the street and stared down at the packages while he figured out what to do.

"Shrewsthorpe is way in the north, isn't it?" She glanced at her watch. "The overnight leaves in half of an hour..."

"Good idea," Harry said. "I can probably Apparate all right to the station." He hefted the packages as though checking the weight. "I should probably go. . . "

"Maybe we should . . . " Harry started to say just as Belinda said, "Do you think . . . ?" Harry waited for her to continue, which she did after a gay laugh. "No, you please," she insisted.

In the silence of thinking harder, Harry found himself having to force the words out of his mouth. "Should we plan to get together sometime?" he asked, trying not to look strictly down at the packages in his hands rather than her bright brown eyes.

"I'd love to. How about next weekend sometime?"

"Excellent, I'll send you an owl," Harry assured her and then, stepping back with a nice goodbye, Disapparated while very carefully cradling his burden in his arms.

He reappeared at the far end of the platform, beyond a drinks machine. It was a little risky but since it was night, Harry figured it would be quiet. He only needed to walk back along the platform and through the barrier. Platform 9 and 3/4 was deserted this early. Harry took a seat and rather than risk setting his packages down, continued to hold them until the train arrived.

* * *

Friday, Harry rushed home from training, changed into his nicest robes, snatched up the small trunk he had packed with a feather pillow and an old towel, grabbed up his broom, bundled himself in his winter cloak and gloves and took off from the back garden. It would be nearly an hour flight to Hogsmeade in good weather, heavily laden. Harry straightened the compass on the broom handle, gripped the trunk tightly under his arm, and leaned into the fastest speed the broom could sustain.

By the time Harry landed, his arms were numb from the wind. Repeated heating charms had quickly been negated by the misty cold air buffeting him. Outside the Middle Inn, he swung his arms to loosen them before he straightened his hair in the reflection from the window set into the door. He ascended the rickety stairs and, as he waited to be seated, tried to look normal while holding a broom in one hand and a trunk under the other arm. The dour waiter directed Harry's cloak and broom off to a side room with a flick of his wand before leading him to an empty table.

Snape arrived ten minutes later, enough time that Harry had himself fully composed and warmed up. "Happy Birthday," Harry offered as a greeting.

A small smile took over Snape's lips as he sat down. "Thank you for coming," he said a little stiffly.

"Wouldn't miss it," Harry chastised him.

The meal passed quickly in quiet conversation. Harry had the sense that Snape needed a break more than entertainment so he kept his training stories few and far between, although now that he was here with his guardian, he found himself wanting to share all kinds of things he had forgotten until then.

By dessert, the formal restaurant had filled with Wizarding's more fashion-sensed members. Bright conversation poured around them and everyone seemed to be smiling, making Harry wonder if this was normalcy or not. It didn't feel too bad. Remembering, Harry reached under the table and gently took out the trunk, which Snape certainly would recognize as one of his own. "I got a present for you," Harry said, setting it down on Snape's side of the table. "But don't open it here," he quickly added. Snape's hand moved away from the latch and his hawk-like visage shifted to curious.

Speaking quietly, Harry explained, "It's some rare, and probably regulated if not banned, potion ingredients."

With a teasing snide Snape asked, "The Ministry didn't teach you how to look up regulations yet?"

"Oh, they did. I just thought . . ." Harry shrugged. ". . . that I was better off not knowing."

Snape placed the trunk on the third empty chair at the table. "Well, thank you. You somehow always know what to get me."

Before they finished their slices of chocolate cake, Snape put down his fork and said, "I find myself much too curious . . ." He had Harry's attention because Harry didn't know the topic. "What is in the box?" Snape asked.

"Oh," Harry laughed and then more quietly, said, "Get ready for this: Kraken teeth-"

"Indeed?" Snape asked, sounding very pleased, making Harry think he should have just stuck with that.

Harry went on, "Asteroid salts."

Snape's brow left brow rose higher and he almost reached for the trunk but restrained himself. He looked as much like a first-year in a sweet shop as he ever had.

"And the real zinger," Harry went on, "Demon mirror glass."

Snape didn't respond immediately, when he did, he soberly said, "You are, of course, joking."

"Mm, nope," Harry insisted. "Most of it is in a pretty fine powder," he added for good measure, assuming that broke down the magic more.

Snape blinked down at the small battered trunk beside him. He actually looked vaguely uncertain. "I think . . . I will need to respell my potions cabinet. Most definitely. Or perhaps get a new potions cabinet." He patted the box very lightly. "A most pleasant surprise, Harry."

Harry grinned happily. "I was going to get a tie, but then I thought, he never wears ties."

"Your gift comes just when I was thinking it was time to show Greer up a bit in the brewing department."

"Oh, please embarrass her for me," Harry pleaded as his empty cake plate was removed.

"I will do my best." Snape stood when the waiter asked if they wanted coffee. "It is getting late, I'm afraid. I have to check a student doing detention with Filch this evening." While Harry placed sufficient Galleons on the table, Snape picked up the trunk, hefting it experimentally. As they departed, he asked in sudden alarm, "You didn't take this in the Floo, did you?"

"No, I came by broomstick." At that moment Harry received his broom and cloak back from the waiter.

Snape turned at that. "That was a long ride in the cold."

"I didn't mind," Harry insisted, forgetting his numb arms in the wake of Snape's pleasure at his gift.

"Be careful with them," Harry teased when they parted in the middle of the street.

Snape gave him an acquiescing bow and a snap of his cloak and stepped away.

* * *

All the next week they were dragged out into the cold field at the Burrow to practice barriers. By midweek, Harry was even more impressed with Vineet's patience, especially since it seemed to be setting an example for Rodgers to follow. Rodgers at least called for breaks now when he was frustrated with them, rather than getting angry.

During one such break, Harry and Aaron stepped away in the direction of the makeshift Quidditch goal.

"You aren't just pretending to stink at this, are you?" Aaron asked.

Harry laughed which felt good after two straight hours of negligible progress. First thing that morning they had finally all managed a basic object repelling barrier and everyone had cheered, even Rodgers. But since then their Muggle repelling barrier and their illusional steep incline barrier had little success.

Mrs. Weasley, bundled in two Gryffindor scarves, came out with hot cocoa. Everyone gathered around and thanked her effusively.

Kerry Ann broke the resulting sipping session with, "So, Vishnu of the Great Barriers, when does your wife arrive?"

"She is coming in two weeks time."

"Ah, bring her into the Ministry," Kerry Ann urged.

"I do not wish to overwhelm her so soon."

"Oh, come on," she teased, putting a thickly jumpered arm around Harry's shoulders. "Harry will behave himself."

* * *

Harry spent a restless evening trying in vain to finish his readings for Thursday, the day Rodgers seemed to actually question them closely on their assignments. He found, however, that he could not sit still. He paced to his room to change out of his street clothes and into jeans and a housecoat, thinking that he might relax if wearing something more comfortable. It didn't work; his left foot continued to bounce on its own as he sat at the dining room table with a thick book entitled *Mahemic Mastery Manual* open before him to a daunting page four.

Harry slapped the book closed and paced the hall once. Perhaps a walk, he considered, to lose some of this energy. Or, perhaps a flight. That idea lifted his spirits considerably. He stepped to the back entry and out to the dark, wild garden behind the house. Stars winked overhead out of a clear dark sky and the cold air froze his lungs. Without hesitation Harry transformed into Gryffylis and stood tall, breathing in the now comfortable air. The stiff wind felt refreshing and freeing as it ruffled his furred legs and feathered chest.

Harry raised his wings upward and with a powerful leap, launched himself over the garden wall. Many powerful flaps later, he reached a comfortable speed and relaxed into flight just above the treetops, which loomed dark as they passed below him. This was the first time he had started from standing and, despite the effort at getting going, he thought it had gone pretty well. Two hard, quick flaps gained him enough height for a sweeping turn and a sheep field slid by below him, the street lights casting the telephone poles as long bars across it. Then their street went by, and Elizabeth's neighborhood, and then fields again.

Harry gained more height and played with his speed a little to see what took the least effort to maintain. He found that if he shifted the long feathers at his wing tips--sort of like spreading his fingers--the air that would pass through his wings at the angle his wings normally slowed him down. He experimented with this along with relaxing into a long glide to see how far he could go without flapping. It wasn't as far as he would like and he had to touch down in a field with one back and one front foot to get airborne again. He supposed that he was rather more ungainly than your average eagle. But he was pleased to find that his wings had a natural position for gliding that required almost no muscle to maintain and small foldings in and out of his wing tips was sufficient for steering and leveling. The air still felt wonderfully refreshing even though on a broom he would have been quite frigid. Perhaps the hot rush of freedom was helping keep him warm.

Harry continued on, content with simply following north along the river valley. He knew he could always Apparate home, although he was planning on testing if he could find his way back on the wing. Passing over the motorway resulted in an unexpected lift, so Harry ducked his head to dip lower again. The river turned eastward and Harry rose to clear the hills on the left to continue north.

A village, all alight with shops and a petrol station, passed by below him on the other side of the hill. Muggles were moving around their cars and walking on the pavements, bundled against the chill. Harry felt sorry for them there on the ground. He grinned as well as he could with his catlike mouth and flapped higher to avoid being seen.

A dark, wooded area passed beneath Harry now, a large one that stretched to the distant hills, although the sky was lit ahead as though by a big city. Harry swerved side to side to practice his steering some. It was on one of the broader turns to the left that he espied a bonfire through the trees. He veered back and flapped harder to speed up and get a look.

Three fires came into view, burning in a clearing. The positioning, an equilateral triangle, was typically the way witches would have them during a coven gathering.

Curious, Harry flew closer, peering in detail with his odd gryffylis vision. The fires flared green and the next instant Harry was upside down with the star-packed sky below his feet. Frozen with surprise he held his wings straight and still. The dark trees loomed above him and gravity was pulling him in confusing ways but mostly toward the trees it felt like. Harry forcefully put himself past the panicked disorientation and considered that he had *not* turned over; he was certain of that. Methodically Harry flapped his wings hard and balanced on the stars as downward. Repeatedly he flapped, stubbornly ignoring the approaching crash with the craggy dark forest. Suddenly, he was upright again, flying high above the ground and the three fires which now appeared small and close together. Harry rose higher still and rotated quickly away to gain some distance before circling lower and gathering his thoughts.

Figures moved around one of the fires. Harry used his keen animal eyesight to get a good look at the space between that fire and the wall of trees beyond it. Then, taking a very deep breath and steadying himself, he flapped and raised his head to come to a dead halt in the air. One last flap gave him a straight up lift and just as he reached the top of it, he released his Animagus form, and Disapparated.

With a *bang!* that Harry heard echoing when he arrived and dearly wished he did not have to make, he appeared behind the five robed figures. His wand was in hand from his housecoat pocket before they turned around. They were witches--the kind that fit the Muggle understanding of that term much too well.

"Who are you?" one exceptionally stooped one asked. When Harry didn't reply, she used her staff to stomp in his direction.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked in his best Auror voice.

Behind the approaching witch the others were feeding the fire and muttering about something getting away. Wood was hovered onto the other fires, making them spit tall towers of sparks into the dark air.

"If you must know," the witch answered snidely, "we were brought in by the neighboring village to rid them of a vampire. I don't know what business it is of yours . . ."

"Why don't they have the Ministry take care of it?" Harry asked.

"Ha!," she scoffed. "We are a very long way from the Ministry, my *boy*. Up here, *we* are the assistance most wizarding folk get."

Harry didn't think he had flown *that* far, but he didn't know enough about hedge wizardry to argue. She was eyeing his wand, so he lowered it and stepped over to the others at the fire, from which the heat radiated too much to get really close, although the witches seemed to be able to.

"Yvonne," one of the others complained. "Something was definitely in the trap but it has vanished."

"That was me," Harry said.

They turned and looked him up and down, eyes dwelling on his orange and green plaid housecoat and maroon knitted slippers a little longer than on his face. "You don't dress like a vampire," one of them commented dryly, as though trying for an insult.

"I'm not." Harry put his wand away and looked up at the sky, stars barely visible over the bright fire. He didn't know how to catch a vampire, only repel them, and thought perhaps he would like to wait around in case one showed up so he could see.

Yvonne shuffled over to him. "So . . . what are you then?" she asked challengingly. "You don't have a broomstick."

"My Animagus form can fly," he explained. "I was out stretching my wings and saw your fires and got curious." After she had examined his eyes to assess the truth of that, he added, "I really think the Ministry would send someone to help if there was a problem with a vampire."

She scoffed again and stepped back to her cohorts. Harry stepped back from the fire to better see the sky, but not so far as to get cold from his poor late-autumn dress. The witches were leaning close together and whispering; one of them turned and glanced back at him with a throaty giggle before breaking away and approaching. She was the shortest of the group and her robes the most worn. Her long crooked nose even sported the expected wart. She gave him a half-toothed grin that set Harry's neck hairs on end.

"Yes?" Harry asked. "I just thought I'd wait around . . ."

"Oh, no matter, no matter," she cackled and continued to approach. Harry stepped back, farther from the fire, thinking perhaps he should go rather than wait. The approaching witch looked different now. Harry blinked and watched as she grew taller and younger and long auburn hair spilled out of her hat, which was no longer worn and bent but shiny and straight. Her clothes too changed into a fancy black dress with a fur cloak and long black gloves. Harry stepped back again. The spell progressed differently from a Metamorphmagus one, making Harry curious what spell it was.

"Do you like Alberta now?" she asked provocatively.

"Um," Harry hemmed and took another half step back as she continued to approach. Perfume even wafted around her. "It's not bad," he opined. Her eyes were now bright green and she flickered long eyelashes coyly before smiling in a most pleasant way. Harry was still slowly backing away. "But I think I should be going now . . ."

"Oh," she said playfully, "just when things were getting interesting."

"Uh, yeah. Really. Sorry to have bothered you all." Harry scrunched himself down to Apparate away . . . or tried to. Instead he found himself on his knees, in the center of the triangle of fires, Alberta right before him. Harry growled at himself; he had fallen this time for the same trick as before where he was fooled about direction. Instead of stepping back into the trees, he had stepped right into the center of their power.

Harry pulled out his wand and stood straight, eyes fierce. Alberta just laughed and the other witches approached, all grinning with amusement and anticipation. "And what are you going to do with that?" Alberta asked airily.

Harry's wand began to shake queerly. He lifted it and found himself holding the rattle of a long-fanged snake that twisted and coiled as it tried to strike him. "*Stop it!*" Harry hissed at the snake and it relaxed and uncoiled slowly, sniffing the air with its tongue unconcernedly. The witches were no longer smiling and Alberta, who had returned to her normal self, looked alarmed. "Remove the illusion from my wand," Harry ordered. The snake disappeared. Harry rubbed his fingers over the wood before holding it upward, not aimed, but ready.

An impasse seemed to have taken over. One of the witches huddled in the pack quipped, "Not often you see a dark wizard about in a housecoat. More the high-collared cloak type."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm an Auror, not a dark wizard," he insisted.

"You don't see them about in housecoats much either," someone else commented.

"We don't seem them about around here much at all," Alberta said.

Yvonne, the oldest one, stepped forward. "Most Aurors introduce themselves as such," she stated.

"Do they?" Harry asked. "Well, I'm still learning protocol. I'm new." He considered lowering his wand again but wasn't keen on letting down his guard at all. "Don't you know who I am?" he asked rhetorically. They all stared blankly at him. "You haven't seen my picture?"

"We don't have many pitchures here. Only pitchures we've got's on chocolate frog cards," the stoutest of the bunch retorted. The others chuckled.

"I'm on one of those," Harry pointed out. "Although, I've grown a bit since that photograph was taken."

The witches gave him puzzled expressions now. "He can't be . . ." one of them began to say when she was interrupted by the fires flaring green and nearly exploded with sparks. The witches scattered to tend the fires and Harry ran to the side to get out of the way. His hair and clothing had begun blowing around as though he had become the eye of a whirlwind. For many minutes a battle raged between the fires and something distant. The witches held up their hands and incanted spells into the fires and Yvonne stomped between them hurriedly shouting instructions.

Eventually, something dark fell into the center of the clearing. It fluttered there desperately before giving up and transforming into a man-shape. The man who straightened up, set Harry's teeth on edge, let alone the hair on his neck. He straightened slowly and crossed his arms as he considered the witches surrounding him. His grey and black streaked hair fell back when he shook it that way with eerie sensual confidence and his clothes were exquisite, although far out of date.

That awful chittering sounded just at the edge of hearing, making Harry realize that this man, this creature really, brought with him a gateway to the Dark Plane. Harry stood, transfixed, as the witches continued their spells as they moved in, their hands up, palms outward, the green glow from the fires forming a dome over events. He hoped they knew what they were doing. The Vampire's eyes went from cocky to wary. He dropped his arms and gave his cloak a toss backward and disappeared. But he hadn't actually, he had transformed into a mist which unfurled itself, trying to get around the circle of witches. A chant in old english rose up from the five and the smoke drew into itself until it was in the shape of a bat and then solidified into a black bat that flapped madly an instant before a silver net was tossed over it and cinched down very tight.

Much shouting of glee went up from the witches who quickly collected their things. One bent and petted the bat like a child might. Harry had approached to get a closer look and, after some effort at getting her attention, asked the witch holding the net what they were going to do with the vampire.

"We're going to have a bit of fun," she said gleefully and then she Disapparated, as did the others, leaving Harry alone in the clearing, the bonfires still burning hot in the cold night air.

Harry Apparated home. His house felt blissfully peaceful as he walked through it up to his room and then back down to the toilet for a much desired hot bath. With a sigh as he settled into the warm water, he considered that he still had much too much to learn.

* * *

The next morning, Harry arrived early at the Ministry with the intent of behaving like a real Auror, despite the distraction of an owl from Belinda agreeing to a movie in London on Saturday night.

"I need to file a report," he informed Tonks, who appeared to have been up the entire night.

She perked up at that, however. "Do you now? Anyone we know in this report?"

Harry didn't rise to the bait. "Some witches who hold a coven near Hadrian's wall. I only have two names, Yvonne and Alberta."

"Hm, what are they up to?"

"They were capturing a vampire," Harry explained, accepting the long parchment form she handed him along with a never-out quill. The form was dauntingly long, but Harry settled in at Rogan's desk and methodically filled in all the details he knew.

Harry was working on the report section itself, for which he was having trouble coming up with the right terms for things as he had seen in other reports, when Tonks tapped him on the shoulder. "You have to get to training." She took the form from him and started reading it even before he departed. She was sober and serious around him now, which he continually found himself stinging from, despite efforts to dismiss it.

Training today was curse neutralization, because Rodgers insisted that they all needed a break, especially him. Fortunately they were all pretty good at this, so it became a bit of a game between them and Rodgers, with the trainer increasing the morbidity of the curses with each round and all of them avidly working together to break it.

Harry was glad the week ended on a high note; it left him in a good mood looking ahead to that weekend and his first date with Madam Bones' receptionist.



Chapter 70 -- Time and Tide

Harry met Belinda in the Leaky Cauldron. She was leaning gracefully on the bar, chatting amiably with Tom who was wiping mugs with a cloth and lining them up on. "Hey, Harry!" Tom greeted him as he pushed open the door from Charing Cross Road, the windows of which hadn't had a cleaning in a century.

Belinda gave him a nice smile that implied that they shared some secret, and indeed they were the only two present dressed in Muggle clothes. She swigged the last of her mead and leaned away from the bar. Tonight she was wearing very high-heeled boots and was actually taller than Harry. He graciously held out an arm as she hooked her heavy cloak and they headed out. Behind them Tom loudly wished them a nice evening. Many heads in the room turned at that, although no one Harry recognized.

They walked to the Odeon, briskly because of the cold evening. Harry, in fact, had to keep up with his date, despite her loud and heavy boots. At first he considered offering to use a Silencing Charm on them, but then decided not to risk offending her. They arrived in plenty of time for the film so they settled into the small bar and had a beer while they waited.

"How was your week?" Belinda asked conversationally.

"It was not the best week of training I've had. We are working on barriers and most of us are turning out to be slow learners at it." Harry shrugged. He then felt the need to justify a bit. "Barriers are supposed to be hard to do, but for some reason Rodgers expects us to pick up a barrier spell the first time he shows it to us. But you have to tune your magic to all the others building the barrier and we apparently don't work well together when we're actually sharing magic. I think we are all too different from each other or something."

More people were crowding around, ordering drinks. Belinda said, "The Ministry is thrilled with your class' progress otherwise."

"Are they?" Harry asked.

"I'm pretty certain," she said with a sly smile.

The movie Belinda had picked out was about a time traveler who gets sent back to 1999 and must spend the movie fruitlessly trying to convince everyone that an army of robots was shortly going to take over the world. Halfway through, about the time the main character was plotting an escape from a mental institution, Harry slipped an arm around his date's shoulder. He didn't have to wait long for a reaction; Belinda immediately leaned into him, and Harry relaxed into the warmth and the fruity scent of her hair.

On the screen, the man was frantically tying dental floss he had hoarded into a trip wire for the guard. Belinda asked, "Do you believe time travel is possible?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "I've done it before."

The woman beside Belinda scoffed in amusement and rolled her eyes. "I believe him," Belinda retorted playfully. Into Harry's ear she said, "You'll have to tell me about it over drinks after the movie."

"You really want to hear that story?"

"It must be better than the one we're watching . . . this guy fails at the end. I think he goes completely insane and they lock him up for good."

"He'll probably be dead before the robots arrive, so that's okay," Harry opined.

The movie finally let out and the unsatisfying ending was negated by Belinda leading Harry out by the hand. An older lady waiting to file out gave them a wink as they exited in front of her. At a pub down the street from the Odeon, they settled into glasses of ale just before last call. "So time-travel. Tell me all about it," Belinda urged.

"Well, it was my third year of school and my friend Hermione had been given a time-turner by the headmaster so that she could take classes that were occurring simultaneously." Harry paused at Belinda's amazed look. Harry cast his mind back to that day, the desperate race to save Sirius . . . the desperate, and in the end, futile race to save Sirius.

His face must have reflected too much of his feelings because Belinda said, "Looks like it did fail."

"Yes and no," Harry admitted, hesitating to piece the story together because he wasn't certain how much old pain would rise with it and wondering if he could still damage time by explaining this long after. The passage of time made it *feel* safe.

"Drink up your ale first, then try telling it," Belinda urged.

"Sorry," Harry said. "In the end I couldn't save the one person who passed for family to me. At the time, that is. We were successful with the time-turner, all right, and my godfather escaped the Dementor's kiss by flying away on a hippogriff."

"Wait a minute . . . is this the hippogriff that was supposed to be executed? The one that slipped its leash?"

"Buckbeak, yes, the very one. My friend Hermione and I freed it just in time and flew it up to the tower where they were holding Sirius. They were just fetching the Dementors . . . "

She put her mug down with a load *thud*. "Ugh, that's awful. Fudge was completely inhumane." Harry didn't comment, he was seeped in the memory of Snape's anger at Sirius' escape. Belinda said gently, "I didn't mean to bring up bad memories . . . "

Harry conjured a smile for her. "It's all right. I haven't thought about some things in a while. And I have a family now . . . " He shrugged lightly, although unease still clawed at him. They finished their ales with harmless small talk and departed when the pub closed, moving with the bleary-eyed Muggles making their way out the door in a clump.

Harry walked Belinda in the direction she indicated led to home. "I live just here," she said eventually and stopped before an apartment building on a small side street. As Harry looked around, she said, "A wizard from Sports and Games lives on the second floor there, a witch lives on the end there. It is nice to have someone to fall back on if something magical comes up. Like once I left an ironing charm uncanceled, and fortunately Mrs. Florence went over and stopped it from ironing all of my books, which it had started on after it did the drapes and the bed sheets. My cat was cowering under the bed when I got home, so maybe it had got ironed as well."

Harry chuckled.

Belinda stood in silence looking up at him with bright eyes. "Are you coming up for another drink?"

"I think I should head home. I had field work late yesterday."

This took her completely by surprise. "Oh. All right. Well, I had a very nice evening . . . "

Harry gave her a quick kiss and friendly hug before holding her at arms' length and thinking that she just needed to lose that vaguely worshipful look and then she would be perfect. Harry said good night and with a glance up and down the quiet street, Disapparated to the Leaky Cauldron to use their Floo node.

At home he stepped through the house, humming faintly. He checked the post and actually ran up the stairs in a burst of unneeded energy. He paced his room, far too wired to sleep or even get ready to sleep. He wrote a letter to Hermione instead, explaining about the very nice date he had just had. As he read it over he considered that Belinda must have some flaws. Presumably he would find out what they were, eventually. Still humming, Harry tried to do a little reading, but even this was tough in his overactive state. He forced himself to not wish he had accepted her invitation to come up to her flat. The evening would have ended predictably, and he needed to get to know her a bit better, but just a bit.

* * *

Severus Snape opened his eyes and raised his head from the cold ground. He squinted perplexedly into the blue late-afternoon light radiating off the dusting of snow before pushing himself achily to his feet. He stood beside the peeling back wall of the Three Broomsticks and at his feet a patch of green grass had been revealed where the snow had melted. That was odd; the grass should be dead by now. Shaking out his cold, wet cloak before wrapping it and his arms around himself, he stumbled between the buildings to the road and looked around. Orange light poured onto the snow from the shop windows and the low sunlight made the ruts in the road look treacherous. Nothing unusual seemed to be happening, nor did he see anyone he did not trust. He turned in the direction of the castle and managed to put one half-numb foot before the other.

At the edge of the village, a small voice said, "Are you all right, Professor?"

Snape turned jerkily. Tracy Trillium, a first-year, barely recognizable through the thick cloak and knitted scarf bundled around her, was walking alongside, wide eyes looking concerned. "Of course," he snapped at her. "Why wouldn't I be?"

She shrugged, which barely translated through her thick outerwear, but continued to walk just behind as he cut across the street to take the path to the gate. "Are you following me?" he asked her, truly amazed by the notion. "And are you allowed out of the castle at all?"

She looked pained and explained haltingly in her muffled voice, "I, uh, was making sure you made it to the castle, sir."

Snape actually stopped hard and stared at her. "You what?"

Her arms waved awkwardly as she gestured in both directions. "You didn't look like you would make it for certain, sir," she explained.

"Off with you," Snape huffed at her in annoyance, too befuddled to manage anything more pointed.

"Yes, sir," Tracy replied. He stared at her as she headed back to the village, small back hunched over against the cold.

The castle torches flaming beside the doors were a welcome sight. Snape stepped inside, passing Filch, who was checking students in on his list. He headed down the stairs and strode to the dungeon classroom with purpose, intending in his chilled state to collect his thicker fur-lined cloak from the cupboard. He yanked open the door and got snagged on the threshold when a voice said, "Yes?" rather forcefully.

Snape stared at the chubby, curly-haired woman who was obviously mid-brew of something complicated at the front bench. A bit more rudely, she said, "Something you want, Severus?"

Snape looked around the subtly altered room from the primitive painting of the London skyline on the wall beside the supplies room door, to the short curtains on the small upper windows, something even he wouldn't have thought useful in a dungeon. "No," he replied, thinking fiercely. Clearly he was the one out of place, though that didn't seem possible. He started to close the door, only to look in and around again in quick verification.

Grimly shaking his head, he strode with purpose up to the second floor and around the long corridors to the gargoyles. "Lemon drops," Snape said. They didn't move. He tried a few other common passwords to no avail. A student wandered by, one of the Prefects, Snape didn't turn to him, wished simply that he would go away.

"Need the password, sir?" the boy asked. It was Mumfred, one of the Hufflepuffs. Snape gave a noncommittal sideways nod. The boy said, "Lemon Zinger is the password."

The gargoyle jumped aside. "Is that a kind of sweet?" Snape huffed.

"Tea, sir," the boy patiently explained.

Stalking forward, feeling even more dread, Snape muttered angrily, "Right."

The moving staircase carried him to the top landing where the door stood open, something he rarely encountered. McGonagall paced behind the desk with a long parchment in her hand. The office was significantly changed and most of the mechanical contraptions were gone. "What can I do for you, Severus?" she asked, not removing her eyes from her reading.

Uncertainly, Snape said, "I suppose you would think me daft if I asked where Albus was?"

The parchment fluttered violently as her hand dropped to her side. It required a moment for her to say, "Yes, I suppose. Though not daft, perhaps befuddled." She looked him over very closely. "Have a seat, Severus. Tell me what is going on with you."

He accepted the chair and sat heavily in it. Mud was drying in spots on his cloak; he should have removed it before sitting. "I just now found myself, rather unexpectedly, on the ground behind the Three Broomsticks," he reluctantly explained. "I . . . seem to be in the wrong place now."

"Or the wrong time," McGonagall suggested easily. She came around and studied him still. "What do you believe the date to be?"

Snape started to answer, then hesitated. "February. I don't remember exactly," he added, disturbed by the lack of detailed memories for just the day before.

"That would indicate a Memory Charm. Especially since it is November."

"November?" Snape echoed. He sat straighter. "What has happened. Where is Albus?"

"Albus is dead, Severus."

"Not retired to beekeeping, then?" he asked, sounding alarmed as well as snide.

She smiled faintly. "No." She went over to the hearth and took down her canister of Floo powder. "I'm going to call the Auror's office, get someone to investigate."

"You think it worth their time? Aren't they a bit busy with important matters?" Snape asked, not liking the idea very much.

"I expect it worth their time. You don't appear injured so I doubt you had an accident. I'm assuming someone had ill intent, making you lose so very much time."

"What happened to Albus?" Snape asked after she spoke with a floating head at the Ministry and was told to wait ten minutes or so. "What kind of trouble are we in now?" he asked a little frantically.

"Relax, Severus," she soothed. "Perhaps I should call Madam Pomfrey after all? You are bit haggard, even for you."

Snape combed his hair back with his fingers, plucking out a dead leaf, and leaned back in the chair. "I am not myself, apparently." He then muttered, "Thought in this state I would not have any luck avoiding those meddlesome Gryffindors: Potter and his little friends."

Her face crooked into a small smile. "You needn't have worried about that, Severus. They are gone."

Snape fell still an instant before he asked, "They are dead as well?"

"No. They finished. It is November of ninety-eight. You are missing a bit more time than you realize."

Snape's hand fell from the back of his neck as he went slack in shock. "Ninety eight?" he breathed. He glanced around the office and brushed his hand over his left forearm. "What of the . . . Dark Lord?" he asked carefully.

"Gone."

"Dead?" Snape asked in surprise.

"Very much so," McGonagall replied kindly.

He found it very hard to believe her. "You are certain? For good?"

She nodded and said, "You are very far behind, Severus. Very far. But you need not worry about Voldemort."

He flinched but moved on. "And my classroom? Some strange woman was in it."

"What do you think you are teaching?" she asked with a sparkle in her eye.

Snape pushed his shoulders back. "I am finally teaching Defense?" he asked, sounding almost hopeful. When she grinned in reply, he asked, "You did that?"

She shook her head. "Albus. Although I didn't disagree with his assigning you that position."

Snape relaxed just a bit, but his hands kept clasping and re-clasping. "What happened to the Dark Lord?"

"You really should use his name, especially now that it doesn't matter," McGonagall pointed out in a matter-of-fact tone. She heated the teapot with her wand and held it up to ask if he wanted any. Snape nodded and accepted the cup when she had poured it out. "Need something stronger in that?" He nodded again, while hiding his surprise at her solicitous offer. She pulled a silver flask of brandy out of a desk drawer and gave him a splash of it.

He sipped the doctored tea carefully, hand not completely steady. "I cannot use his name. Even if he *is* gone."

"You do all the time," she observed.

"Do I?" he muttered in disbelief.

The hearth flared green, interrupting them, and Tonks stepped out and shook herself off.

"No partner today?" McGonagall asked conversationally.

"No. Only Fridays. And I wasn't certain what was going on, so I didn't pick him up." She stepped briskly over to Snape and pulled out her wand. "Hold still," she commanded. Snape looked very dubious, especially when she tapped the end of his nose with her wand, but he held still. A spark jumped from the end of it and stung him. "Looks like a Memory Charm, all right."

"From February ninety-seven," McGonagall supplied.

"What?" Tonks blurted. She spun back to Snape. "That long! I don't think I've ever heard of such a charm. You have . . . ninety-seven? You have no idea what has happened?"

"No, I do not," he replied nastily, tired of this.

"Oh, dear. Well." She rubbed her head. "That eliminates someone just trying to erase evidence of something recent. Let's take you back to where you became aware again and see what we find."

Accompanied by the headmistress, she led him out and down into the village. The three of them looked around the buildings, talked to people inside and to some of the other shopkeepers. No one had anything helpful to say. By the time they were walking back toward the Three Broomsticks, having canvassed the village, Snape was lagging behind.

Tonks waited for him to catch up. "Disoriented?"

"Fatigued," he snapped back.

"We should take you home to rest. A charm like that can be wearing. I've never heard of one covering so much time--it can't be holding tightly to any part of your memories . . . it has to be spread too thin. There's a chance you'll recover on your own as it weakens, but I'll have St. Mungo's send a specialist." She looked Snape up and down in concern. "Hopefully we'll have luck with you. I'd really like to find who did this."

* * *

Harry heard the flare of the hearth from the library and, curious who was coming in, headed that way, but Tonks was standing in the doorway to the dining room, holding up her hand to forestall him. Mystified, but accustomed to obeying her, he waited. The hearth flared again and voices sounded beyond. Tonks was speaking to someone who sounded like McGonagall. Harry inched forward and saw the headmistress helping Snape into a chair at the table. Concerned, he touched Tonks' shoulder.

"Just a sec," she said quietly.

Harry didn't feel like waiting a second. He couldn't understand why he was being kept out when something clearly had happened to Snape.

"You said you would call someone from St. Mungo's?" Snape was saying when Harry pushed by Tonks. Snape looked up at him, eyes narrowing severely. McGonagall, who looked about to reply, fell silent. "What are you doing here?" Snape demanded of Harry.

Harry blinked at him, then looked between the two women. Tonks explained, "He's had a Memory Charm."

"Yeah? One that took out how much?" Harry asked a little vehemently. The implication rattled him.

Snape pushed himself to his feet and stepped toward Harry. "You didn't answer me," Snape pointed out, voice holding nothing but cold, rocky cliffs.

Harry actually took a step backward, bumping the mantel, before he gathered his wits. Snape's looking him up and down as though surprised by his height gave Harry an extra moment to level himself.

"I live here," Harry stated frankly, feeling unseated to be arguing about such a thing.

Snape's eyes narrowed farther, lids vibrating a little. He turned to McGonagall, who shrugged broadly. "Was a surprise to everyone, believe me."

"*What* was a surprise?" Snape asked dangerously.

McGonagall looked as though she were trying hard not to grin. "When you adopted him."

Snape seemed to swell at that. His head tilted to the side and he looked back at Harry who took another small step back in concern at the sheer fury he was seeing. "This is an elaborate hoax, isn't it?" he asked in a very low voice. "They gave you a height spell and Ms. Tonks an anti-clumsiness charm." Menacingly, he headed at Harry, who backed up again, almost to the wall beside the hearth, but Snape ended up nose to nose with him anyway, radiating anger.

The sound of teacups rattling distracted everyone. Snape turned, and aborted what he was going to shout at the elf bringing in the tea tray. "Who is this?"

The house-elf curtsied. "Winky, Master."

"Where's Tidgy?" Snape demanded.

After a silence Harry replied, "She was killed by Nagini." Snape's hard gaze came back around to him. "You know I'm telling the truth," Harry said levelly as he matched the intense black stare.

Snape snarled and stepped back to the table, which he leaned on heavily while gazing around the room, apparently to get his bearings. He spied the photograph of Harry with his friends on the sideboard and growled at it, turned away from it, then stepped around to slap it flat, out of sight. McGonagall, who had been amused, now looked concerned. She gave Harry a very sympathetic expression.

"What?" Snape began loudly. ". . . on earth . . . would possess *me* to adopt *you*?" Snape asked, waving a hand at Harry.

Harry, who knew several reasons, some Snape's stated ones, some his own guesses, nonetheless didn't feel like going over them before an audience. He remained silent instead, hoping like a thunderstorm, Snape would run out of energy.

"What?" Snape mocked. "No answer to that?"

"I don't have an answer you'll understand, Severus" said Harry, sounding unhopeful to his own ears.

"DON'T call me that!"

McGonagall came around to face Snape down. "Sit down." When he glared at her challengingly, she said, "I inherited Albus' mantle, I'll have you know. Sit down." Snape grudgingly obeyed after hesitating, apparently for show. "Now, listen closely. You have lost almost two years. That is a very long time. Blustering about like this isn't helping anyone, including yourself." She stood straight and sighed. "What you need is a good night's rest and a good looking over by a Healer." She sent Tonks a forceful look before stepping over beside Harry and placing a hand on his shoulder. "I need to return for dinner and two meetings, as well as to arrange for a replacement for him for the next week."

"I can teach," Snape insisted forcefully. "Defense, certainly. My memories of Defense are quite clear in my mind, thank you."

She spun on him while gripping Harry's shoulder harder. "Oh really? Tomorrow's lesson for the seventh-years is the Patronus. Ready to teach that?" She sounded downright cruel. "Your modern counterpart has it down rather well." She straightened and propped a hand on her hip as she surveyed the effects of that. Snape did look knocked back a bit.

Tonks uncrossed her arms and shrugged her cloak straight on her shoulders. "I have to get going as well. Stop by St. Mungo's, then the Ministry to file a report." To Harry she said, "You going to be all right here? I'll come back if you want."

"I'm fine," Harry replied flatly.

As they moved toward the hearth, Snape scrutinized Harry darkly, making Harry scoff, which only darkened Snape's expression. McGonagall hesitated on the hearthstone until Harry waved her on. "Owl if you need anything, Harry. I could borrow a variety of useful things from Mr. Filch . . ." she added with a crooked grin.

Harry waved her off again, but almost smiled at her offer. Tonks left with a, "See you tomorrow." When they were gone, Harry started to march out of the room, until Snape's, "Where are you going?" pulled him short.

"I'm going to continue my studies for tomorrow."

"Aren't you finished with school?" Snape prodded insultingly.

"I'm an Auror's apprentice, so I guess the answer is 'no'." Snape's lips pursed but he let Harry leave.

Harry glanced back to see Snape sitting slouched, eyes hinting at distress. Harry didn't see any path but to wait this out even though he longed to force Snape to understand. He returned to his reading but found it extremely difficult to concentrate. An hour later, after banging around in the drawing room, Snape stepped into the library. Without preamble he lifted the cover of Harry's book to read the title. His eyes narrowed in surprise at *Spell Predestination and Propagation: a Primer*. He wandered the perimeter of the room like a caged animal, pausing a half minute at the shelves added for Harry's books before heading over to the overstuffed black leather chair in the corner by the large wall lamp. He looked like he really wanted to say something but was holding back. Harry turned back to his reading, head pounding.

Time ticked by. Harry, when he looked at the clock, was surprised how much time, given that he was forced to study with dark eyes inscrutably upon him. It began to occur to Harry that Winky had not asked if they wanted dinner, which should have been hours ago. He sighed and closed his book.

"Giving in already?" Snape sneered.

"I've been reading since noon. I wouldn't say, already." He stood to return the book to the shelf, which normally he wouldn't have done; he would have left it on the small table beside the lounge.

"So, an Auror. How sweet," Snape said in falsely touched tones.

Harry met his gaze. "Ironically," Harry began, level and conversational. "You don't know me well enough to hurt me. The current you could do it like that." Harry snapped his fingers. "But wouldn't."

"Someone must have addled him utterly," Snape said, sounding disgusted.

Harry shrugged. "I am surprised this you isn't at least grateful."

"For what?" he almost laughed.

Harry studied him instead of replying right away. "You haven't been told anything, have you?"

Snape violently swung himself to his feet and growled, "NO. I'm dragged back to my house only to find it isn't mine anymore. I've a new house-elf. My dungeon has some strange, rude woman in it."

"Greer," Harry supplied. "Gertrude."

"I've heard of her at least," Snape muttered, barely concessionary.

"She was rude to you because she despises me. And surprising as you'll find this, that doesn't make you and her allies."

"Goodness, were you as stellar in her Potions class as in mine?" Snape asked, voice dripping in sarcasm.

"For your information, I received an O on my Potions N.E.W.T. and my Defense one. On all of them except Transfiguration, Divination, and History, on which I received Es."

Through a twisted mouth, Snape said, "Well, good for you."

"I've already thanked you for your help in preparing for them, so I hope you don't mind if I skip thanking you this time around."

Snape stalked around the room again. "I won't miss the thanks, believe me."

Harry considered Snape as he stopped and pulled one of the fatter law books from Harry's shelf and flipped it open with a scowl. His head was bent tiredly over it, making Harry feel a little sorry for him. He was mean because he had never known much else, Harry had already decided, but had to remind himself. Harry's stomach reminded him about dinner. "I'm going to ask Winky for something to eat."

Snape paused before looking up. "And?" he asked rudely.

"Nothing," Harry said, and departed for the kitchen.

Harry ate alone, avoided having a glass of the smoky liquid which had replaced the used up sherry, and tried not to imagine that Snape's memory would stay like this because he couldn't bear it. After eating, he returned to the library, where Snape sat in the corner, going over a stack of parchments in a file. He peered in mystification at some of them. Glancing upside-down at the label on the file, Harry said, "You're the deputy headmaster, if you are wondering why you have that stuff."

Snape froze as he took that in. Without responding he stacked it all neatly beside the chair and began instead to stare beyond the wall beside him, fingertips rubbing his forehead in a fidgety way. Harry rubbed his own forehead as he dropped onto his seat, feeling beaten down in a way he couldn't fight. He closed his eyes as he rubbed them and then gasped hard and reached for his wand. Two shadows hovered close-by. Up in an instant, Harry reinforced the property boundary spell with the best barrier spell he could manage in a hurry, hoping to trap the invader in. Red light flared outside the window as the spell fought something. Harry evacuated the window and casement, leaving a neat, square hole in the stone wall, and then sent a barrage of incarcerating spells out into the darkness. With a two-step start he leapt out onto the side wall a yard from the window, teetering there after a moment's Animagus transformation and wing flapping to balance.

"Damn," he swore when he didn't see anyone. The fresh night air felt good, even as the stones and sharp broken mortar cut into his shin where he perched. Snape was at the window, looking astounded. Harry, as he had leapt out, thought he had heard a loud *pop!* of Disapparation, which meant he was too late and his spells insufficient. Harry jumped back to the missing window and climbed in. "Damn," he repeated forcefully, the stress of the evening fueling his frustration. He waved the window back into place and paced the room. "Must have been Avery, but I can't imagine him getting away."

Snape looked from the window to Harry and back, twice. "Why would it be him?" Snape asked doubtfully and as though he were attempting to be derisive but could not manage it. He sounded undone.

Harry stalled in his pacing and feeling his patience running low, said in a difficult tone, "He's the only one not in Azkaban."

Snape re-stashed his own wand finally. "Could have been someone else, could it not?"

Harry sighed. "No." He then laughed mirthlessly. "Is there anything you *do* understand?" he asked, going for derisive himself, then wishing he hadn't. When Snape didn't respond, Harry added, "It was Avery, or someone else has escaped, but I expect we'd have got a message right away because the Ministry knows they'll come here looking to off either you or me, I honestly don't think they'd care which."

"I am surprised you didn't catch whoever it was," Snape said, managing to not sound like he was complimenting Harry, though he sounded honest. "But how do you know?" he insisted. "There was no hint, none of the protective spells gave a warning until you boosted them."

Harry's lips quirked into a smile. "I saw him in my mind. *Voldemort*," Harry accented with clear enunciation, "left a little of himself behind, which I inherited" When Snape unconsciously rubbed his left arm, Harry said, "Not that ability, as far as I know."

"Is that why I took you in?" Snape asked honestly, looking wary. "To pacify you."

Harry dropped onto the lounge. "I doubt it. I've never had that sense. Do you want to know what you told me was the reason?" Harry asked as he fetched a parchment and Never-out quill from the desk in the drawing room and began a note to Rogan, who would be on duty tonight, regarding what had happened.

"I don't know. Do I?" Snape asked, facetious sounding.

"You said," Harry went on, feeling relentless and like he had gained the upper hand with his Voldemort revelation, "that you enjoyed my company and were tired of living alone." Harry signed the note and whistled for Hedwig to come down. She fluttered into the room and Harry handed her the letter and let her out the window of the library after checking that no one was around outside. Then, finally, he met Snape's strange gaze and went on into the silence, "Other theories have been expounded: You are looking for protection from the Ministry, which you have needed, by the way because Dumbledore isn't here to vouch for you. You are looking for redemption, which is also possible given the story you told me about Nott recruiting you and yes, you told me that story."

Snape looked startled but didn't speak further. Harry's eyes ached. He tried to piece together the Memory Charm on Snape with Avery coming to the window. The connections didn't form. "I'm going to bed," Harry informed the room. "We can catch up more tomorrow late afternoon if you want, when I get home from the Ministry. I keep expecting you to ask about what happened to Voldemort, since it seems like Minerva didn't tell you."

"I asked, she . . . did not get around to answering the question." Snape turned away with a jerking motion and pointedly returned to his pile of parchments. Harry left for his room, feeling strung out and dangerously in a mood to punish this version of this man.

The next morning, Snape was at the table when Harry arrived for breakfast. He had already eaten, but Harry had not expected that Snape would wait. He had also already finished the *Prophet*, which indicated he had been awake for a while.

Before leaving for training, Harry stood beside the hearthstone, hand clenched around a ball of gritty Floo power. "Try to keep an eye out," he said. "Someone obviously wants to get at you."

With derision Snape growled, "You think I don't know how to watch out for myself?" He had his wand in his hand in less than an eye blink. "The weak, simpering me that you apparently know too well was the one taken advantage of, not *this* me. I have survived far more than you can imagine, O Auror apprentice."

Harry listened to this diatribe without looking up. When it wound down, he tossed down the powder without responding. At the Ministry, Tonks noticed that Harry had arrived early.

"A patrol is going through Shrewsthorpe in about ten minutes . . . I thought you'd still be home when they arrived. Things okay?" she asked. When Harry restricted his response to a shrug she frowned. "Shacklebolt and Moody will be reinforcing the spells around your place when they come through the first time. And I found the best Memory Healer I could, asked him to visit your house this evening. I thought you should be there while he is."

Harry shrugged that he agreed to all of this.

At lunchtime, Harry, dearly needing company, headed to the Minister's office. He carefully peeked in the open door to assess the situation. Bones' office door was open and she was loudly giving instructions to three staff members who were scurrying about between the reception area and her office. Belinda looked a little frantic as well, as she flipped through a file. Harry made a low hiss and she glanced up, looked surprised and then gave him a nice smile followed by an apologetic shrug. The other staff headed into Bones' office at that moment and Belinda slipped away and joined Harry in the corridor.

"Good to see you. Hope you weren't expecting me to go to lunch," she said.

"Guess not. I just wanted to see you."

"All right. Here I am," she teased.

Harry glanced into the offices to make sure no one was paying attention. "I may not be able to do dinner this week. Something's come up."

"Oh," she said, disappointed. She appeared to want him to tell her what but as usual her expression neutralized neatly.

"It's too complicated to explain. Maybe later," Harry said, hearing a touch of strain or sadness in his own voice. "I'll let you get back to work. Good to see you."

At home, after a day that went much too fast, Harry found Snape in the drawing room, going through his files in a rather destructive manner. He strongly expected that Snape would later regret having thrown things around so haphazardly. When he spied Harry in the doorway, he dropped into the desk chair, looking exhausted and tense. Harry felt a twinge for him, even as nasty as he was behaving. Snape appeared to remember something and dug through the piles on the desk and pulled out a note. "Explain this to me," he commanded. Beside the stacks sat a rolled up copy of the adoption papers. Harry eyed them as he approached, but they looked unruffled. To get to the desk, he had to step wide over tipped piles of parchments and file folders.

Harry took the note card and opened it. "I've never seen this." He mulled over the date and Dumbledore's signature with a bit of a chill. "This is months after he died." Harry read the note, feeling very awkward as though he were eavesdropping. He folded the note and handed it back. "What do you want explained?"

"What is this anniversary to which he is referring?"

"Don't ask. I don't want to talk about it," Harry replied.

Snape appeared keenly interested in this response. Winky stepped into the doorway and announced dinner, something she had never done before. Harry followed her out and after he sat down and began, Snape arrived as well. They ate in silence, Harry rereading his letters from his friends, thinking he should write back but not sure he would have anything happy to discuss. Snape was reading *Witch Weekly*, which he never did. It was unfortunately the *Most Eligible Bachelor* issue, the only one they owned.

Snape noticed Harry watching him. "You must be insufferable to live with," he commented disgustedly, indicating the magazine.

"I try," Harry returned.

The door knocker sounded. Harry got up and let in the Healer, an older wizard with poor eyesight. He looked Harry over critically before Harry convinced him that it wasn't he who needed attention. In the dining room Snape was convinced to sit still for an examination of the charm.

After several tests, the Healer put his wand and magic crystals away. "I've never seen such a charm, and I've seen quite a few. Any dreams last night you think may be missing memories?"

"I did not sleep last night."

"Well, you most likely will tonight, then," the wizard said brightly. "If your memories are going to break loose on their own it will start with your dreams. Short of the charm weakening, I would want to have the wand that did it in hand before attempting a reversal." He gave both of them a nod and departed, leaving Harry feeling unsatisfied and anxious.

After a long silence Snape asked, "When did I cease to hate you?" Harry shrugged because he didn't really know. Snape then asked, "When did you cease to hate me?"

Harry thought that over. "Some time around the end of my sixth year. You were being nicer to me." He ignored Snape's snort. "And I wanted a home badly enough to overlook a few things."

"Albus had something to do with this according to his missive from the grave."

"Of course."

The door knocker sounded again. Harry went to the door and accepted the book Elizabeth held out. "How are you?" she asked brightly.

"Surviving," Harry quipped. "I really can't visit right now. I'm having a personal crisis."

"Oh. All right." She stepped back from the door. "Good luck with it. If you need anything else, just owl again. I'll accept any distractions after the term I had."

"Thanks and I hope your revising is going well," Harry said sincerely. He closed the door, turned and handed the book to Snape, who was hovering behind him. "Since your pride won't let you ask for some stupid reason, you should read it."

Snape took the book and slowly turned it over in the dim hallway light. Harry turned up the wick in the lamp beside the coat cupboard, spilling surging light and smoke around them. The book was the *Wizard Annual 1997*, a slim volume to fit neatly beside the multi-volume *Wizard Encyclopedia Albion*. Snape opened it where he stood and paged forward roughly.

"Let's see, H for Hero, or I for Insufferable."

"V for Very effing messed up," Harry suggested, feeling more anger. "P for Prophecy, perhaps."

Snape froze an instant but flipped to the back as he slid down the wall to settle in across from the cupboard. Harry slid down across from him, bumping the cupboard door closed. The floor was cold. Snape swallowed hard and began reading in the poor, shifting light, "*Voldemort, AKA The Dark Lord, AKA Tom Marvolo Riddle. Voldemort's dreaded reign ended this year when the prophecy that set the precepts for his downfall was concluded. Harry Potter; The Boy Who Lived, so marked by Voldemort himself to be the One with the Power to Vanquish the evil wizard, brought Voldemort down with a single spell, a Killing Curse.*"

Snape paused and considered Harry across the small space. Harry stared at his fingers as he clenched them together. It seemed too recent as well as too long ago. It made it hard to get a hold of the emotion of it.

"*The Dark Lord, after tricking the witches and wizards guarding Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry away from said school with a ruse of having located a Celtic power Sceptre which they just had to free from a mound to make use of, attacked the school with twenty-two of his Death Eaters, intending to kill young Potter and terminate the prophecy.*" Snape swallowed hard again, looking vaguely alarmed. "Albus must have been getting doddered." He went on reading. "*Harry Potter and nineteen of his schoolmates . . . not twenty two?*" Snape halted to ask snidely.

Harry cleared his throat. "There were three more, which was a coincidence really, but they were First- and Second-Years, so I made them stay back."

"It wouldn't have mattered," Snape sneered. "If you had lost, they would have all died."

Harry didn't respond, so Snape went back to reading. ". . . *went down to meet the Dark Lord in the school's Entrance Hall. The battle lasted only minutes and at the end three Death Eaters were dead as well as Voldemort. Nine students were taken to St. Mungo's for treatment.* This is what you meant by grateful?" he asked.

Harry couldn't read his tone. It was less nasty, but he refused to feel hopeful. He shrugged. The lamp sputtered, sending more orange sparks along the wall. Snape shut the book with a snap of its thin stiff covers. "Or shall I read *your* entry?" Contrary to his threat, he set the book aside. "I cannot understand this person you expect me to be."

"My expectations aren't much, really," Harry said, feeling on better footing, even though he didn't like the defeated tone Snape used. "Just the things Dumbledore mentioned in the letter. Even you at your worst are an improvement over my aunt and uncle."

"This is insane," Snape huffed as he shoved himself to his feet and stalked off, leaving the book behind. Harry felt despairing suddenly, as though the situation were taking control of him. He picked up the book and thumbed idly through it. His bum hurt from the uneven stone floor so he stood and went to his room.

* * *

Severus Snape awoke the next morning, a dream chasing his conscious mind. He was still fatigued and it was early, but he rose anyway and put on a dressing gown. He should be teaching . . . something; this forced idleness in the middle of the year made him antsy. As he headed downstairs, the dream caught up with him. In it he and Potter were at the zoo, a surreal scene in itself, but while Harry was enjoying the animals, Snape was studying the boy, looking for cracks in his demeanor, any sign of old wounds. It didn't make any sense, this dream, especially the stark memory of Harry smiling at him between bites of an ice cream.

After his toilet he settled at the dining room table with the day's newspaper. The coffee service sparkled into existence, something Tidgy had not been able to do. Snape folded and put aside the *Prophet* before sipping the scalding coffee, considering in dismay and confusion his thoughts and intentions from the dream.

An hour later Harry came down, looking poorly slept. Snape's gut reaction to him came to the fore, holding him from returning Harry's automatic greeting, which shifted to a small frown as he poured himself coffee. Snape considered that in exchange for eliminating the Dark Lord, he probably did owe the boy something, but not his house and life; that didn't seem acceptable, and why would Potter want those anyway?

In silence Harry ate and departed, earlier than he said he needed to leave. Snape returned to the drawing room and began the arduous task of reassembling the files he had tossed around in his frantic hunt for understanding.

* * *

Harry returned from the Ministry after running his errands in Diagon Alley and loitering alone in a coffee shop Belinda frequented. He had stood in the corner of the crowded place as long as his hot chocolate held out. This was a change, this not wanting to go home. Usually he wanted to share the day's learning, and for the most part Snape wasn't there, except the random weekend. It was well into evening, dinnertime, and Snape was at the table. He half-turned his head as Harry ducked under the mantel to enter. Harry considered putting his shopping bags down, but then changed his mind and carried them to his room, wanting to avoid a possible transgression. He wondered how Snape had spent the day, but didn't want to ask, since silence, as sharp as it was, at least didn't cut in unexpected ways.

Snape seemed more subdued as they ate, which was an improvement over the vitriol Harry was expecting. Halfway through, Snape said, "You never explained the letter. What does it mean?"

Harry put down his fork and swallowed some mead. "It means he thinks you had redeemed yourself, even though you didn't think so. What do you think it means?"

Snape took that in with a confused expression. "Why did he send it *then*? What happened a year before? There is nothing in my notes or my files. The Dark Lord wasn't defeated until a month later."

Harry sighed and firmly replied, "I don't want to tell you. Telling you is handing you a weapon you can take me down with, which I expect you will do. This is hard enough already with you not understanding enough to be dangerous."

After a long pause Snape said ploddingly, "I had an odd dream last night: we were at the zoo together."

"That was just before school started," Harry said brightly, then forced his elation down.

The hearth flared before Snape could respond and McGonagall stepped out of it. "Sorry to interrupt dinner," she apologized after taking in the scene. "How are you doing?"

"Not well," Snape said, crossing his arms.

"I wasn't asking you," McGonagall returned. "But here is your post, in any event." She placed a small bundle on the table. Snape didn't deign to look at it, just glared at her. To Harry, she affectionately said, "Surviving, Harry?"

"I'm fine," he replied quickly. He would have crossed his arms too if it wouldn't have mimicked Snape.

She pulled a chair around to the table end where she could sit between them. "So," she addressed Snape, "decided yet that this trade is acceptable?"

"What trade?"

"Your freedom for this responsibility," she explained, indicating Harry.

Snape rubbed his left arm inside his sleeve. "I am not accustomed yet to believing he is truly gone. And no sane version of me would ever take this on as a proxy son. No matter how thoroughly and utterly I believed it would appall his father." He ended with quirked lips.

McGonagall sighed. "You strode into my office one day and asked me to witness some papers. His adoption papers," she gestured at Harry. "You seemed sane that day, even though I was too shocked to make any masterful observations."

"I know nothing of parenting," Snape returned harshly.

"But you do know something about being too closely affiliated with Voldemort," she returned. "And separate from that, I have seen you caring for him with surprising ease, in fact." When Snape huffed and turned his head away, she turned to Harry. "Any news?"

"The investigation hit a dead end," Harry said. "Unless someone comes forward who saw something or he remembers . . ." He shrugged, trying not to appear too strained.

She patted his arm and stood up. "Don't take what he says personally," she said.

"DO take it personally," Snape countered vehemently.

McGonagall straightened her cloak. "Well, I am glad he is here and not Hogwarts. Thank you for that, Harry." Snape growled. "Do behave yourself, Severus. Goodness, I normally say that to Harry. Goodnight, both of you. Do try to not kill each other," she said pleasantly and then she was gone.

Snape rubbed his forehead as though he had a headache and pulled his post over closer to his plate. He untied the bundle one-handed and flipped through the envelopes, pausing at the third one and opening it slowly. "Who is this?" he demanded of Harry, pushing the envelope over.

Harry glanced at the purple ink. "Your lady-friend, Candy." Snape mouthed the word, *candy*, in sickened dismay. Harry leaned forward and Snape jerked the letter toward himself. "I wasn't reading the letter, I was noticing that there was more than one in the pile. She might be worrying about you. I didn't owl her because I didn't know you were corresponding. Things are a little shaky between you as it is. Frankly I thought it was off."

"Oh, thank you for your confidence," Snape returned sarcastically.

"To fill you in," Harry said. "Her officemate was just a few years behind you and remembers the old you very well. It has things on the rocks as it is. If she met this you, I think it *would* be the end, even considering that she was half-expecting you to ask her to marry her at one point."

"What?" Snape demanded, startled.

"This situation is far too complicated to explain . . . to this you." Harry crossed his arms. "To any you, actually," he added wryly.

Snape turned to the letter again before refolding it and opening the other one. "She is asking for some board game back and trying to justify something," he uttered in confusion. "I am not this man. This is madness," he then huffed as he pushed all the letters aside. "Me as a husband. Me as *your father*. Do you go around calling me 'dad'?" he asked nastily.

"Only rarely," Harry admitted. "Don't you want a family, though? Did you really like living alone?"

Snape sneered, "Your father would disown you if he saw this," and then straightened as he appeared to consider that a positive. "You must be truly desperate. The wizarding world abandoned you again, then?"

"No, not at all. I wanted to live with you."

Snape appeared more annoyed. He pushed his plate aside, starting when it disappeared, before standing up. "It cannot work. It is madness. I see the hopefulness in your eyes," he accused, then leaned in close. "Give. It. Up," he snarled, then grabbed up the letters, spun and stalked away. Harry frowned and pushed the rest of his dinner away uneaten.

* * *

The next morning at breakfast, Harry, feeling a bold desperation, poured coffee for himself and asked, "Any dreams last night?"

Snape shook his head, looking fierce. "Just a nightmare." They waited for plates to arrive in silence punctuated by the rustle of the newspaper.

"I was hoping you'd remember something more," Harry said in a normal tone before tossing the *Prophet* aside after scanning the headlines.

Snape eventually said, "It was rather a fatally horrendous nightmare--it cannot have been a memory."

"What was it?" Harry asked quietly.

Snape put his cup down with a loud *bonk* that Harry thought might have easily shattered it, but didn't. "I was surrounded by Dementors. Literally hundreds of them," Snape explained, voice far away.

"Two hundred and sixty-three of them," Harry supplied. At Snape's narrow-eyed look, he explained, "That wasn't a dream . . . that really happened. They were sent by Malfoy and his cohorts to take revenge on me for killing Voldemort."

"I don't believe you," Snape returned flatly.

Harry pulled his head back. "You think I'd make that up?" He stood and stalked to the library and, after hunting around, found a book marked with a chocolate frog card, which he brought back and tossed on the table. "Or read it in the Annual, which is in my room."

"Of course. More incipient fame," Snape growled as he lifted the card. His expression shifted as he studied the photograph to one less hard and more far away. Finally, he flipped it over and read, "*Famed also for the expulsion of over two hundred Dementors from the Hogwarts Quidditch grounds*. Lovely. How did you manage that, O Supreme Mage Wizard Potter."

"Malfoy apparently didn't realize that Voldemort had made himself one of them."

"One of the Dementors?" Snape asked, all curiosity suddenly.

Warming to that, Harry replied eagerly, "Yes. So that meant I was after he was gone."

Snape aborted lifting his coffee to his mouth and put it back down. "Really?"

"I cut them a deal and they went away."

Snape considered that. "You worry me, Potter."

"You always say that."

"At least I am not completely addled."

Harry grinned, almost made himself stop, then let himself grin more. Snape grumbled in a warning tone. "I am not this person you think I am."

"You are and you aren't," Harry countered. "In the months after Voldemort's defeat you were the only one who seemed to care that I was getting sucked into these green visions full of shadows and webs." Snape's eyes narrowed at that in thought. Harry went on, "See, like that. You don't shirk . . . you wonder about it. Everyone else was well-meaning but they were exhausted and too happy to have Voldemort gone to pay any mind . . . thought everything would just work out on its own."

Harry looked at the clock; he needed to go. He stood up and drank the rest of his coffee down before collecting his bag from his room. Before he tossed in the Floo powder, he said, "It made a difference to you before, so maybe it will again. There was a reason it only took one spell to take Voldemort down, and you were the reason. You don't owe me or anyone else anything." He tossed the powder in and ducked into the roaring green flame, thinking that at least Snape's expression had been thoughtful upon hearing that, if not still grim.

When Harry returned that evening, he couldn't find Snape in the house. Panicked with concern he checked the front, noting in passing that Snape's winter cloak was on a hook, so he shouldn't have gone far. The street contained only an old car turning at the next corner. "Winky!" Harry called out when he stepped back inside.

Winky came up from the kitchen and pointed shyly out the back. Harry strode quickly to the back entryway and outside. Snape sat on the frozen ground, leaning against the wall of the house, looking over the rampant dormant vines curtaining the walls of the back garden. It was cold and Harry worried how long he had been outside.

In an accusing tone, Snape said, "That is Black's bike," referring to the tarp-covered hulk against the high stone wall to the right.

Harry crouched beside his guardian and noticed that Snape's loose dressing gown was frozen stiff as though he had been out here a long while. Harry explained, "He left it for my eighteenth birthday. You could have not let me have it." When Snape shook his head, Harry added, "You flew it to visit your mum."

Snape's brow twitched. "I did?"

Harry smiled slightly, feeling he had an entry point to pry at. "Yes. She was appalled."

"How do you know?"

"We went together."

Snape's eyes fell half closed. "I don't understand this," he said, sounding utterly defeated--so much so that Harry wished he were angry instead.

Harry tugged on Snape's upper arm. "Come on inside, Severus," he urged kindly.

Snape scoffed. "Listen to you." But he tried to stand, and with Harry's arm around his back, managed just barely.

Harry led him inside, which now felt overly warm in comparison. He put his burden down on the lounge in the library and pulled out his wand to use a warming charm on him. Snape sat silently through it until Harry put his wand away.

"Same wand you killed him with?" Snape asked flatly.

"Only one I have," Harry answered.

"He is truly gone?" Snape asked quietly, rubbing his arm unconsciously, a habit Harry was glad he no longer had.

"He is truly gone. You are truly free," Harry assured him. He pulled over a chair to sit across from his guardian and leaned forward. "Look," he began. "I know you hate me right now, but you don't know me very well."

"Don't I?" Snape sneered. "You are an attention-seeking, sorry excuse for a student," he snarled tiredly.

"Well, no."

"And that article in *Witch Weekly*?"

Harry ducked his head, feeling no anger, only a eagerness to explain. "You think I knew about that? That was Skeeter's way of punishing me for not granting her an interview." When Snape glared at him doubtfully, Harry cajoled, "Come on, you know I'm not lying." Snape looked quickly away. Harry touched his arm. "Look at me," Harry said. "What do you see?"

Snape exhaled and turned halfway back to stare at the far window. "Someone taller than expected," he replied, sounding difficult and as though he were reserving the right to become uncooperative.

"And?" Harry prompted. When Snape remained silent, Harry filled in, "Someone who has been pulled carefully back together after sacrificing every ounce of himself to take Voldemort down." Snape didn't respond, although his head moved marginally. Harry said, "Do you know who everyone, from Dumbledore to McGonagall to Remus, even, credits for that?" He paused, and receiving no response, asked again, "Do you know?"

Snape shook his head.

"You," Harry said firmly.

Snape scoffed quietly, but his eyes had lost their edge. "I would have no idea where to start," he commented quietly before rubbing his forehead hard.

"You did. And I'm very grateful you did."

With a bit more snarl, Snape snipped, "I don't owe you anything."

"No," Harry agreed. "I owe *you* a lot. Almost everything."

Snape jerked his hand up to rub his forehead again. "Start acting like it then, and leave me alone," he hissed. He stood shakily and shook off Harry's offer of help. In silence he headed up to his room, leaning heavily on the handrail. Harry watched the door snap closed and went back to the lounge, pulled out his reading and forced himself to get lost in it, although his thoughts kept worrying terribly if Snape would ever be completely all right.

Harry tired early and headed upstairs as well. When he topped the stairs, he saw the light on under the first door and knocked. When there was no response, he pushed the door open. "Severus?" Harry queried. Snape sat on the edge of his

bed, still in his clothes and dressing gown, one hand on his head, one holding a teacup from the tray on the night stand. The sharp scent of valerian root wafted in the room.

Harry stepped forward in concern. Snape half-raised his head and said, "So many . . . odd memories."

"I should get the Healer," Harry said. He started to leave, but Snape's voice pulled him back.

"Wait," Snape said. "Was . . . was I there when you killed the Dark Lord?"

"Yes. You were coming up from the kitchens."

"You lied," he snarled in pure anger. "I almost made you fail. You looked at me and the Dark Lord almost overtook you."

"No," Harry countered forcefully. "It was a stalemate and Voldemort thought he had me, but I turned it into a trap. One I wouldn't have thought to lay in the beginning, I admit, because I didn't like remembering."

"Remembering what?" Snape asked suspiciously, still looking predatory.

Harry rubbed his hair backwards and forwards; it still bothered him to remember. "The night that the letter from Dumbledore was an anniversary to." When Snape didn't respond, Harry went on, "I don't want to explain. Let's just say you and Dumbledore had to rescue me that night after Malfoy's old friends took revenge on me for him ending up in Azkaban." Harry, drawn into the memory, said, "I was a mess." He kept his gaze down instead of Occluding his mind. "Let me get the Healer," he said, and left the room.

Ten minutes later, the old wizard from before arrived with a *pop!* in the front garden. Harry led him upstairs and stood aside as he examined Snape.

"It is a good sign, these memories. Are they clarifying things for you?" he asked Snape.

"No," Snape replied darkly.

The Healer, who was putting away the strange crystal instrument he had used, paused at that. "You must want to remember if you are to do so completely." He looked to Harry. "Is there some problem?" When Harry nodded sadly, the wizard said, "You must remove this problem." He lifted his bag and stood before Harry. "Contact me if there is any more change and give him this before he sleeps."

Harry accepted the bottle and nodded. When they were alone, Harry placed the bottle on the night stand, surprised when Snape didn't immediately scrutinize and criticize its contents. Instead, his dark eyes stared straight ahead at the empty wall. "I cannot be this man you expect," he insisted tiredly, doggedly.

Harry crouched before Snape and looked up at him. "I'm willing to start again," he said, though something tore loose inside his chest as he did. He kept his voice level and plowed on, "It could work. You and I understand each other."

Snape gave him a dubious look, then put his fingers to his forehead with a groan. "I hear myself saying that." More condescending, he added, "To Minister Obolensky of all people." Harry grinned, prompting Snape to say, "Why are you so insistent? I can't make you go away."

"You are the only father I've ever known."

Snape snorted and mocked, "Most unfortunate for you."

Harry shrugged, untouched. When Snape rubbed his forehead for the tenth time, Harry asked, "More memories?"

"Yes, but not understanding." He sighed. "I do think I enjoy teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts . . . I keep remembering that."

"You do enjoy it," Harry confirmed.

"The students don't seem as completely inept at it as they always are at Potions. Minerva said that Albus gave me that position."

"Yep. As soon as Voldemort was gone."

"He always held back. I assumed to punish me. Perhaps he did finally believe I had atoned. Or that if he pretended he believed it, I would change, thus making it so. He *so* liked to work that way."

Harry laughed lightly, drawing Snape's attention and a disgusted shake of his guardian's head. Harry stood straight on knees that had stiffened too much. Reaching for the bottle, he said. "Take some of this and get some rest. It's late. I'll be here tomorrow all day and we need to not kill each other."

Snape accepted the bottle, opened it and sniffed it before pouring out a splash into his empty teacup and handing it back. He stared down at the muddy brown liquid and asked, "Did I do all this just to avoid owing you?"

Harry set the bottle back on the night stand. "I don't know," he replied honestly. "I guess it wouldn't surprise me if that were part of it. One thing I am certain of . . . the original reasons don't mean anything anymore."

Snape downed the potion in one swig, then held the cup out before him, turning it around in his fingers. His eyes narrowed as they traced a tea-stained crack in the side of the porcelain. A memory was leeching into him, matching the dim room, the cup, the hearth . . . and Harry. Snape had a vision of huddling close to a dusty hearth that gave off only paltry heat, a badly injured Harry unhappily resting too close, but too weak to move away. Snape himself forced by his loyalty to Dumbledore to care for the boy as best as possible under the limited circumstances.

And Snape was doing this duty, reluctantly, and with restrained complaint, but he had done something wrong. Something he didn't understand. After the years of withering insults and outright threats, he had accidentally broken the boy down, utterly.

Snape squinted at the hearth beyond his raised cup, trying to capture more of the memory and any true comprehension of it. It must be the events Harry refused to discuss, for which Snape could not blame him. Fear had motivated Snape as well in that memory. Fear that this annoying, aggravating, bad-memory inducing boy was far too important to them all. And indeed that fear had been borne out, it seemed.

Snape looked up at the far different Harry standing patiently before him. This one was tall and broad shouldered and looked slightly less like his father than he used to. He was also looking hopeful again, as well as concerned, and half a dozen other completely incomprehensible emotions. Snape rubbed his forehead. That event was the key to all of this, according to the foremost wizard of the last century; not an opinion Snape could entirely ignore. Rubbing his head, he considered reluctantly that some kind of understanding could have resulted from what had happened. He wondered what had set Harry off so. What possible vulnerability had he touched?

Harry finally asked, "Are you all right?"

It hurt to hear Harry speaking so; it meant Snape had no power to make him understand how ludicrous he was being. It also, more frightfully, meant that much too much was expected of him. But apparently he *had* risen to it. Maybe the biggest change that fateful night had been in himself. Snape ignored Harry's question and settled back on the bed, still clothed, to stare at the ceiling, at the arch of light from the lamp beside the bed.

Harry turned down the lamp with a sigh, apparently giving up on getting an answer. "Good night, Severus. If you need anything . . . "

"Leave me alone, Potter," Snape murmured, unable to find the heart to snap at him.

Harry departed for his own room and found sleep easier than expected.

The next morning, Harry quietly passed by Snape's room and peered in. Snape was still asleep, as he had left him the night before, so he went quietly down to the dining room. At half past eight he grew concerned and went back up to check on him. Snape was sitting up, rubbing his temple.

"Do you want the Healer?" Harry asked.

"Healer?" Snape muttered. "Oh, no, it is all right." He squinted at Harry after glancing around the room in dismay. "I am not entirely clear on what is happening, or why I am home."

"Are you remembering?"

"Remembering what?" Snape asked, sounding much more himself.

Harry, heart speeding up, went over to him. "You do remember--enough that you are confused. Do you remember who gave you the Memory Charm?" Snape's gaze focused beyond the walls. Harry prompted, "Behind the Three Broomsticks. You woke up there, anyway."

After an extremely long pause during which Snape's eyes roved the walls, he said, "They were wearing a hood, a Death Eater mask. It wasn't Avery, but there was something familiar . . ."

Harry grabbed his shoulders. "You remember!" he said, overwhelmed by elation.

"Harry," Snape chastised him, plucking Harry's hand off his arm. He stood suddenly and paced the room, looking caged again.

Harry watched him, forcing himself to be patient for a minute before asking, "What do you remember about the spell?"

"I remember what he said, but it was a strange voice I did not recognize."

"Which was?" Harry asked in painful eagerness.

Quoting, Snape said, "As much as you deserve to die, death is too easy. Instead, am going to take away everything you've gained cheating your Lord and Master, everything that matters to you." He looked at Harry. "I don't know who it was . . . The eyes were familiar, but not the voice." After a sigh, he said, "You were remarkably tolerant of me. You should have just left."

"I couldn't do that," Harry insisted. "It was Avery that night here though, I sensed him. What happened exactly . . . do you remember?"

"It wasn't Avery in Hogsmeade." Snape leaned on the wall and rubbed his face. "I remember someone calling out. I was in the road and I walked between the buildings . . ."

"Didn't you have your wand out?" Harry asked sharply.

"Of course I did. I believe I got hit from behind," he sighed and appeared even more weary.

"I should summon the Healer," Harry insisted.

"I don't need a doddering old wizard; I need coffee," he muttered, crossing in front of Harry a little unsteadily. Harry took his arm and led him downstairs.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," Harry insisted vehemently, pulling out Snape's chair for him. His voice was not steady and he was glad that Snape did not seem to notice.

Coffee appeared immediately. "What? Don't want more abuse?" Snape asked snidely.

"I understood the old you better than I used to," Harry explained, taking the coffeepot up as Snape set it down. "McGonagall will be pleased, I'm sure."

"Owl her to stop by today, but do not inform her I have recovered," Snape said, taking a large gulp of coffee with unsteady hands. "I've a few things to say to her."

Harry nearly spit out his mouthful of coffee. After barely managing to swallow, he laughed into his hand.

Snape considered him from hooded eyes. "I don't deserve you, Harry."

"Don't be silly," Harry returned. "It's good to have you back. It's been a long week." Seeing Snape carefully set his mug down with shaking hands, Harry stood. "Healer," he breathed, angry at himself for forgetting in his excitement.

The old wizard set up a few complicated charms around Snape, which he barely sat through, though at the end Snape's back was less bent and he looked much more alert.

"You'll get my bill," the Healer said as Harry showed him out afterward.

"Thank you for everything," Harry said to the wizard as they stood in the doorway.

"He was lucky. Whoever did this tried to do more than they were capable of. If the spell had not been overextended, I think they'd've have succeeded permanently. Quite a charm, in any event."

Harry bit his lip and nodded that he understood, thinking also that there was only one wizard he knew of with that kind of exceptional skill at Memory Charms. Back in the dining room, he said, "We have to figure out who did this. Avery came to the window here, I'm certain. But it wasn't him behind the Three Broomsticks, what if it was Lockhart?"

Snape held his coffee cup before him and pondered that. "I'm not certain. I have to admit to ignoring him most of the time he was at Hogwarts . . . it was the only way to keep down a meal."

Harry went on, "I'll have Tonks check with the Ministry that everyone is still in Azkaban, no Doppelgangers, Aging potions, Polyjuice or otherwise." Breakfast appeared. Harry was getting angry now and it felt good. He looked up at his guardian. "Be more careful, all right?" he commanded.

"I have relaxed of late, it is true," he agreed.

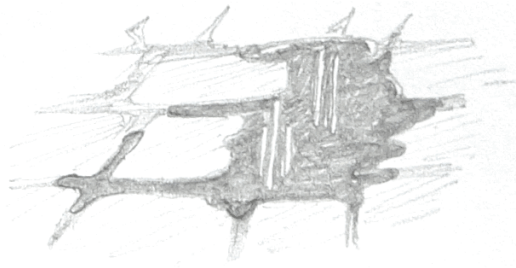
Still angry, Harry said, "I don't want to lose you."

Snape, with a small smile, tilted his head to the side in a kind of nod.

Part way through eating, Snape said, "I apologize for the way I treated you."

Harry shrugged. "You really didn't know how to hurt me."

Snape straightened his napkin a little fussily. "I am glad for that," he admitted quietly.



Chapter 71 -- Arms of the Angels

Friday, very late in the evening, about the time Harry was getting ready to go to his room, Franklin appeared at the window and scratched at the pane. Harry let the owl in and it dropped a letter on the table where he had seconds before cleared away his studies for the night. Franklin flapped up to a chair back and stepped, as though nervous, from one post of it to the other. When he finally paused, Harry picked up the letter, making the bird shift from one foot to the other and cock an eye at him as though to gauge him.

Only Harry's name was on the envelope. He opened it and read: *Dearest Harry*, and swallowed hard. *I find that I need to convey some things more strongly to you than I did before my hurried departure for Hogwarts.* The next sentence had been written after a pause; Harry could tell this because the angle and shape of the writing changed at that point. *I am sorry for the manner in which I treated you over the last week, and before. I am finding it most strange to be reminded of wishing to hurt you, and I wish I did not. You deserve far better and I believe the balance between us was already too tilted toward my vitriol, leaving me even farther behind in evening things out.*

Harry paused to argue aloud, "We're even." He sat down with the letter and rubbed his hair back and forth as he continued.

I do truly hope you were honest and correct in your assessment of my inability to strike anything vulnerable in you. It was very wise of you not to reveal anything that could be turned against you. You did not always do this and I am heartened to see that you have learned to. What pains me most to remember is your offer to start again. Had you tried, I flinch at how much you would have been put through on my stubborn-minded account. It was consideration I did not deserve.

I promise to be more careful. I do remember a time when it was necessary to scrutinize every shadow and every sideways look for enemies. I will do so again. Yours, Severus.

Harry put the letter aside, wishing Snape had not felt the need to send it. Somehow, it revealed less understanding between them and more uncertainty than Harry felt there was. He penned a quick letter back and gave it to Franklin, who had finally settled down. In it he said, *I cannot have given up on you. Rest assured that beyond my concern that the charm might be long term, I wasn't under any real threat.* Harry stared at the letter; it sounded too cold and isolated, but he imagined Snape might scoff at anything more intimate--his Snape, the one who could hurt him very easily. Harry added, *You are my family, Severus. There is nothing I wouldn't do to preserve that.*

* * *

By hand, Snape adjusted the position of the stout, hickory cabinet in the corner of his office. He had found it in one of the castle's attics and although it was small and a bit ugly, its construction was solid. Its former owner must have used it to hold his or her pipe smoking paraphernalia because the top surface showed flares of black burn marks. That was all right; a dangerous ingredient cabinet invariably got stained if not worse.

Snape checked it for existing spells but any spells it held in the past had weakened too much to do more than sparkle. He carefully layered on a new set and checked that the lock functioned before moving anything into it. It wouldn't hold many containers, but at least it would hold the ones most in need of protection from prying student hands.

He had just finished stocking and securing the cabinet and had stepped back from it when a shout and a high-pitched scream sounded from the corridor. Snape was out of the door in an instant, wand in hand, pausing only to get a sense of

direction as another squeal sounded. At the second bend just at the staircase, three first-year students were huddling in an alcove as Peeves pelted them with balloons full of something thick and sticky.

"Peeves! Stop it!" a voice shouted. It was Ginny Weasley, brandishing her wand and her voice with authority. Peeves gave her a raspberry and then mooned her, which made her wand waver in surprise.

"Peeves," Snape commanded, catching the Poltergeist's attention away. Ginny looked relieved to have help. "Off with you. NOW." Peeves turned in fast circles, chanting a twisted nursery rhyme. The first-years were removing their robes. Whatever it was had soaked through to their white shirts. "What is it?" Snape asked.

One of the boys sniffed at it. "Honey, I think," he replied in surprise while trying to rub it off, which only made his robe stick to his hand.

"Peeves, my next stop will be the dungeon to fetch the Baron," Snape threatened.

Peeves stopped circling wildly and slinked away with one last raspberry over his shoulder.

Ginny approached. "Why doesn't the school just get rid of him, Professor?"

"He isn't a thing to be rid of. He is a manifestation of the stresses and mental disturbances of the students. We could get rid of the students," he suggested snidely with a raised brow.

"Oh. I suppose that wouldn't work then," Ginny admitted before moving to help the first-years down to the Prefects bathroom to clean up.

One of the girls was complaining. "Why did Peeves do that? We weren't bothering him."

Snape returned to his office and his task of organizing his old ingredient cabinet. As he reached for the jar of essence of feather star, he paused, almost certain he had not left it so close to the edge of the shelf, even given that he had set it down in a hurry. Turning suddenly, he considered checking the corridor, but then remembered it was empty when he arrived. Peeves behavior now seemed more like a distraction than an accident. He quickly finished arranging the cabinet, grateful that the most dangerous ingredients had already been put aside.

Down in the dungeon, Snape found the Bloody Baron playing a game of chess with a nervous-looking second-year. The boy looked up hopefully at Snape who assumed the boy had gotten himself into the match and could get out of it on his own. Usually the Baron kept playing until you beat him; hopefully the boy was halfway decent at chess.

"Baron, I need you to do something for me," said Snape. When the ghost swooped up to attention, showing his silver stained front to full advantage, Snape commanded, "Come with me." In an empty dungeon classroom, Snape closed the door and said to the hovering figure. "I want you to question Peeves about what prompted him to create a disturbance just now. It may be nothing more than my own renewed paranoia, but I wish to know if he was urged on by a student . . . or even one of the staff," he added, thinking of Greer.

The Baron saluted and sailed off through the ceiling. Snape returned to his office and straightened up his grading, checking that the grade books were still stored as they had been. The Slytherin ghost returned and bowed as he emerged through the floor. Soberly, he reported, "Peeves insists he simply found the balloons sitting in a box by the staircase."

"That's all, Baron. Good day to you," Snape dismissed the ghoulish figure.

The ghost bowed again and simultaneously floated backward through the closed door. Snape was reminded of annoyingly meddlesome students past, one of whom he had adopted. He shook his head and carefully put everything away to leave for dinner.

* * *

Harry received notice on a Monday morning that on the following Wednesday the Wizengamot would consider his petition. The scheduled time was during his morning training, but he assumed Rodgers would let him leave for it. The department was getting busy now with holiday plans and others were skipping out to take care of important errands or to greet out-of-town visitors at the station, so his absence might not be noticed.

In the lift, a wanted poster for Avery was wired to the inside of the gate door. During the long trip to the second level, Harry watched the Death Eater's nervous-eyed face glancing side to side. The photograph looked to have been taken at a garden party, since people kept entering the frame holding drinks with ice in them and wearing white, wide-brimmed, pointed hats.

Harry noticed that the lift had stopped quite a while ago and the lift door had long since unlatched. He slid it aside and stepped out and down the corridor to the training room. Tonks was in the corridor speaking with Kerry Ann and Vineet. She handed Harry a notice. "We received this memo regarding your hearing," he said in her now usual flat tone. Kerry Ann frowned but immediately spoke brightly to Vineet saying, "We'll stop by this evening if that's all right. Have a little welcome party. Harry, can you make it this evening?"

Harry had tentative plans to have Belinda over for dinner some night that week, but her work often kept her late so she did not want to make a firm date. Harry, despite finding himself doing so a few times, did not want to sit at home and wait for her to have time to do something. "Sure," he answered easily. "Did Nandi arrive?" Vineet nodded solemnly, prompting Harry to congratulate him.

Rodgers came over then and the conversation ceased and they moved inside and took their seats.

"We're going to do some . . . yes, Potter?" He stopped because Harry had his hand up, school style.

"Any word on Avery?" Harry asked factually.

"No. I'll be sure to have you owled . . . I know you have a special interest," he stated, not quite sarcastically, and then went on with an overview of illicit objects and why they were regulated. He had a few examples in a box, but for many he drew on the chalkboard. "Now this is an interesting one." He drew a long round spike on the board. "Freezing Stick. Cursed object used semi-legally in Australia during a hunt to bring down and automatically refrigerate game. A few of these turn up every year, it seems. Mostly dangerous because people bring them back and they fall into the hands of someone who doesn't know what it does. Adds a few cases to Mungo's casualty lists every year. Fortunately, most Freezing Sticks work so well, Mungo's simply has to thaw you out." Holding up an ordinary bed pillow, he said, "This is a Lethipillow, not because it contains a Lethifold, but simply because it kills you in your sleep. No good way to identify these, but if you find someone dead in their bed, good thing to check for. Next, we have . . ."

Harry took notes on each object along with his fellows. The fact that they were doing lecture first thing usually meant Rodgers would be out, leaving them to drill on their own. And indeed this turned out to be the case.

Just before 4:00, Kerry Ann urged them all to head over to Vineet's. Harry urged the opposite and suggested running through their least favorite incarceration drills. "I'm not partnering with you then," Aaron complained to Harry.

"Come on," Harry urged, "Avery is out there right now, don't you want to be ready if you come upon him?"

"He's only after you, Harry," Kerry Ann teased.

"I *wish* he was only after me," Harry breathed. "I'd be fine with that."

They agreed to run a few drills and once they got going went on almost an hour more. Harry was better at most of these spells than the others, so after Kerry Ann complained about the tightness of his Mummifying Jinx, Harry stood off to the side and offered suggestions. Vineet as usual was having difficulty with consistency; one spell would be far too much, such as a chain-binding curse with one-foot long links that clattered to the floor under its own weight and the next a perfectly acceptable version. He had taken to biting his lips a lot as he drilled. Kerry Ann and Aaron got into a serious competition to see who could produce the deepest Treacle Track Curse on the other and by the time they stopped, the floor

was shoe-deep in sticky goo which it was nearly unanimously decided Harry should scourgify since the drills had been his idea.

Vineet's flat was in Greenwich. "Ever been?" Kerry Ann asked Harry. When Harry shook his head, she took charge, saying, "Well, we can all take the Floo to a shop that I know there. We'll meet you at your flat, Vineet."

Vineet nodded and Disapparated on the spot. The rest of them had to go down to the atrium where Bones seemed to be holding a press conference. At the sight of Skeeter and company, Harry slipped along the wall from the lifts and took the long way around to the hearths, skirting around behind the small crowd. He caught a glimpse of Belinda standing to the side in a nice line with Bones' other staff, but there didn't seem to be any way to wave to her that would not risk catching anyone else's attention, especially the Minister's. Harry's fellows were waiting for him before the first hearth, hands on hips, gazing at him oddly. Harry didn't try to explain as they took turns in the Floo.

During the longish walk from the flower shop, Kerry Ann said apologetically, "I think I goofed up, Harry." When Harry asked her why she thought that, she explained, "I let slip to Tonks that you had a date with Belinda. Normally I don't gossip about my friends, *really*, but the topic of keeping the Minister's office happy came up and it just slipped out. I didn't think anything wrong with it, but Tonks didn't look happy to hear it and I see she's still snappish with you." After a half of a block, she added, "I didn't know anything was going on between you two. Usually I notice things like that."

Aaron suddenly became unusually interested in their conversation. "Nothing *is* going on between us. Not that I know of." Harry stated this firmly, hoping to squash her line of thinking.

At the door to the flat, Kerry Ann held the bottle of port wine she had insisted on stopping for on the way over. She handed it over to a slightly befuddled Vineet when he opened the door.

"Nice place," Kerry Ann said, as she stepped into the airy second-floor flat. A small dark-skinned woman, with shoulder-length hair so black it glistened blue, stood in the sitting room they had entered, looking pensive. "You must be Nandi," Kerry Ann said brightly while Aaron and Harry trailed behind.

Vineet stepped in. "Yes, my wife," he stated. "These are my fellow trainees at the Ministry," going through introducing each of them. When he got to Harry, she made an exclamation and said, "My Vishnu has such impressive friends."

"Please, sit down," Vineet insisted, gesturing at a white chesterfield behind them. He then insisted on fetching tea while Nandi took a seat. She sat very primly, hands folded in her lap, but her eyes kept straying to Harry.

Kerry Ann made small talk about Nandi's trip until Vineet brought the tray. The teapot he set before Nandi, so that she could use a spell to heat it. Nandi did so with a tap of her wand, and with a sigh said, "I am surprised my Vishnu's magic has not gotten any stronger during his training."

Uh oh, Harry thought. Vineet's lips had drawn thin as he poured for everyone, but he didn't speak. Everyone on the chesterfield shuffled their arms around and tried to appear nonchalant. The visit ended some time later with Kerry Ann insisting upon taking Nandi to her favorite shops that weekend and Harry and Aaron shooting looks of uncertainty at their fellow apprentice.

* * *

Rather than sleeping, Harry lay in his bed staring at the ceiling. He felt cold even though the hearth was burning high. Closing his eyes, he tried to drift and find the green world and its shadows, but it was illusive, perhaps because he was trying too hard. It was difficult not to. Snape's attacker had not been found and lying there late at night with the cold darkness enveloping most of the room, that felt painfully unacceptable. Frustrated, Harry rose from his bed and began to dress with purpose. He put on his thickest woolen Molly Weasley jumper and wool pants as though expecting to be out in the cold for quite some time. When he finished dressing, however, his spirits dampened, and downstairs, while standing before the Floo when he could have announced any destination, he asked for the Ministry of Magic.

"What are you doing here, Potter?" Rodgers asked when he stepped into the office and found Harry sitting at Tonks' desk, his head resting on his arm.

Harry sat straight, feeling anxious for no good reason. "I couldn't sleep," he tiredly explained, tried to explain more, then gave up.

Rodgers put down the file he had been carrying and with a sigh pulled over the nearby chair. "Something gnawing at you?"

"Avery," Harry replied with an aching wish that the Death Eater were before him now so he could simply take him down and be rid of him off to Azkaban.

Rodgers rubbed his hands together before asking, "You can see him somehow, right?" When Harry nodded, Rodgers went on, "Can you see him now?"

Harry closed his tired eyes, thought of his soft pillow waiting at home, and found the green world easily this time. A shadow hovered, but it wasn't particularly close. "Yes," Harry answered. "But he feels distant."

Rodgers stood suddenly and gestured for Harry to follow. "Put on your cloak . . . I want to try something."

Harry obeyed with clumsy motions. Despite his aching, undefined anxiety, he now wished he were back home in bed. Rodgers waited for him to shrug his cloak around himself before grabbing his arm and Disapparating both of them.

They were suddenly in an alleyway. Their arrival had startled something which now scurried frantically over the spilled rubbish piled against the wall beside them. "How about now?" Rodgers keenly asked.

Harry closed his eyes and tried to relax enough to find that green world again. It took him a long time, and he was surprised at his trainer's patience while he worked at it. When the forest with its towering trees appeared in his mind, the shadow was skulking in the distance, still just at the edge of Harry's vision. "No difference," Harry informed his trainer.

Rodgers grabbed his arm again and this time they reappeared somewhere where city lights didn't encroach in the least. The stars glared through gaps in the clouds and highlighted the edges in silver. Hulking pitch-black piles loomed around them. "Where are we?" Harry whispered, his voice sucked into the darkness.

"An abandoned pit. Try again," Rodgers instructed.

Harry did so. If there was any change in the shadow, it wasn't enough to be certain about. "No. Still a long way off."

They repeated the process four more times, until Harry's ears hurt from the *pop!* of air that hit each time they arrived somewhere new. The next time they Disapparated they reappeared back at the Ministry.

"Not the most useful skill," Rodgers commented dryly, although not impatiently.

"It saved my life when Malfoy came to take revenge at our house," Harry explained defensively. He was frustrated and his underlying worry was starting to wear him thin. Forcing himself calm, Harry went on, "Trouble is, distance isn't always just miles. It can also be if one of them is thinking about me, or they are performing dark magic, or fighting each other." With a grunt he lowered himself back into Tonks' chair. "I want to find him. He's up to something. He's involved with Lockhart somehow."

"Lockhart?" Rodgers echoed doubtfully.

His frustration clear again, Harry said, "He was the best at Memory Charms. I'm sure he must have spelled Severus. Do you know anyone else who would even attempt to take away two whole years from someone?"

Rodgers paced once. A door opened and closed somewhere else on the floor, creaking loudly. "I have to admit, I don't. Snape didn't say it was Lockhart though, according to the report."

"You read it?" Harry asked.

Rodgers spun around. "I would like to catch Avery as well, Potter. If for no other reason than that his freedom mocks us." Frowning, he picked up a Remembrall from Shackbolt's desk. It was flashing lightly. "Think that's for me?" Rodgers asked facetiously. With a *bonk!* he put the ball down again on its wooden stand. "I suppose we could issue wanted posters for Lockhart. Certainly have enough pictures of him to choose from."

Giddily tired, Harry quipped, "Have you seen this disgusting smile? After you get your autograph, please call the Ministry."

Rodger's lips curled slightly upward. "We'll put out something. He could be dangerous, I suppose, in the right hands. I expected him to simply show up in some Muggle hospital after being picked up wandering the streets." He sniffed and stood in thought. "Go home and get some sleep. Go on," he commanded firmly, when Harry stalled

* * *

Harry again stood before the Wizengamot, and despite not having nearly as much on the line, found himself equally nervous as the last time. He forced his shoulders down and flipped through the notes resting before him on the podium that stood before and off to the left side of the half-full tiered seats.

"Mr. Potter," Minister Bones said after getting through the preliminaries. She had a copy of his petition and was paging through it. "I must say this is well assembled."

"Thank you, Minister," Harry acknowledged quietly. He was staring at his own disorganized notes without really reading them. While he waited, he glanced around the assemblage again to gauge their faces. McGonagall was not present, unfortunately; Harry thought he could have used a guaranteed ally.

Bones was continuing. "If I may say, despite your thorough documentation of the case, there is little here but secondhand information. To overturn a conviction, even one posthumously, requires a preponderance of evidence."

Harry's first scribbled out potential witness list was open on the podium before him. *Moody, Hagrid, Severus?* Feeling as though he had been dipped in ice water, Harry suddenly realized why he really was doing this: He was still, after all this time, trying to rescue Sirius.

Bones was still talking. Hurriedly, Harry caught up with what she was saying while at the same time trying hard to latch onto the more sensible reason he had settled upon after Rogan challenged him on just this point: It wasn't fair. It set a bad precedent. None of them sounded all that reasonable while standing before the assembled governing body of British Wizardry.

"... upon what basis do you wish us to make this decision?" Bones was asking in a formal tone.

Harry quickly answered awkwardly, "Uh, upon the confession Pettigrew gave that I witnessed. The others who witnessed it are on the witness list as well."

Bones was relentless. She held the list up to better peer at it and said, "Your best friends and a werewolf, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes, madam," Harry admitted.

Bones removed her glasses and held them between her clasped hands before her. "Let's hear your version of events then, and we will go from there."

Harry put aside his uneasiness at losing track of his purpose and launched into a detailed reminiscence of the events in the Shrieking Shack. He related as closely as he could remember how Pettigrew had broken down in the end and admitted that he had been scared of Voldemort and had given into him. "And lastly," Harry said, "Pettigrew's very existence after his supposed murder, an existence which the Ministry readily admits to, means that the original conclusions about the crime Sirius Black was convicted of were mistaken."

"True," Bones admitted. "Well, we shall deliberate and hand down a decision. I am curious though why you have brought this up now of all times, Mr. Potter?"

Harry had closed his note file and now placed his hand down on it. "It seemed to be a matter that needed to be righted, Minister." He hesitated and then added, "I admit that I have a personal interest in this. My godfather was severely wronged and lost his freedom and his life to it. This is the only thing we can do to right any of it at this point."

"Hm," Bones muttered. "Well, we will take that into consideration. You are released."

Relieved, Harry stepped out and barely noticed the walk up the steps to the busy atrium. He made his way slowly to the lifts, wanting time to think before returning to his training. All he could change now were the history books, nothing else. But that was worth it, wasn't it?

Fortunately, Harry had his mind taken off of the hearing by Belinda showing up in his hearth that evening. "Hope it isn't too late . . ." she said apologetically. Harry had already eaten but he went and asked Winky for another dinner for two.

Back in the dining room, Belinda was sitting with her head resting tiredly in her palm. Harry, truly moved, suggested, "Maybe you should have gone home and gone to sleep early."

She shrugged and sat straighter. "I wanted to see you."

This statement made Harry's insides ooze around happily. "It's good to have you over finally," he admitted.

"Sorry, I'm always so late at work. We never can tell what notion the Minister will get in her head in the afternoons. She gets so many invitations that she can't accept them all, but she'll decide to go to some dinner, or dedication, or memorial, or reception, and expect some or all of us to go along. Behaves like it some kind of treat even."

"But you like working for her?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I like being involved . . . meeting people," she smiled coyly at him then, which made a dimple stand out on her right cheek. She pushed her hair back behind her ear, where it refused to stay, and took on a shy posture, making Harry suspect that she still didn't relax and behave like her true self around him.

"Dinner will be in just a few minutes."

"I was hopeful for something to eat, but not expecting it. Thanks." She looked around the dining room with interest, especially at the decorative potion bottles on a high shelf on the far wall. Harry went and fetched the smoky liqueur that was in one of them. It was his favorite bottle with leaded colored glass fixed to it with fine chains and a matching colored glass stopper. As he carried it back to the table he considered that something like it would make a good present next time he was stuck for ideas. "Would you like some?" Harry asked.

"What is it?"

Harry held it to the light. "It tastes like burnt oak and sage and too much of it at once will make you feel like you've been hit in the gut with a Bludger."

She smiled and said, "Sounds good," so Harry poured some for her and a little less for himself. She seemed to think deeply as she sipped it. With another glance around the room she asked, "So this is . . . Professor Snape's house?"

"And his booze," Harry quipped.

"Ah, never imagined I'd find myself at Snape's house, drinking his booze. Nope, never imagined that. With *you* no less."

Winky brought dinner then and Belinda ate voraciously at first before slowing down. "I didn't get lunch either," she apologized. She saw that Harry barely touch his roast and potatoes. "And you've already eaten . . ."

Harry insisted that it was all right. When she had cleared her plate, she became interested in the house again and leaned over to peer into the main hall. "Do you want a tour?" Harry asked, only half serious. But she expressed eagerness, so he showed her around the ground floor and then up to the first.

"What's on that side?" she asked, pointing across to the other balcony.

Harry, thinking of pentagrams on the floor and skull candleholders said, "Just storage. There isn't an attic."

In his room she looked around keenly. Harry was very grateful that Winky usually straightened things during the day while he was out. "What's this?" she asked of Kali.

"Oh, that's a Chimrian." Harry opened the cage door and put his hand in so his pet could crawl up his arm to his shoulder. Belinda leaned close to get a look and Kali hissed at her before turning in a circle and crouching. "She's much better behaved than she used to be. I think she's matured, even though she hasn't grown much. Or maybe she's lost some of her color."

Belinda, who had backed off at the hiss, said, "*Lost* some color? Wow. What does she do? Does she deliver post?"

Kali hissed again, making Harry laugh. "No. She's empathetic and very protective. That's about it." Harry gave her a pat. "She would eat any post you gave her."

Belinda rounded the bed and said, "You haven't really personalized your room."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, glancing around. It sure felt like his room.

"Well, you don't have any posters on the walls or anything."

"I used to, at school. But there there was someone to see them. Most of them were too beaten up to rehang here." She looked around again, more critically. He sensed that she was trying to learn something about him from his space. Giving up on this, she plunked down on the bed. "Pretty normal looking place."

Harry approached slowly. "What were you expecting, wanted posters?"

"There is a new one out for Avery," she pointed out.

Crossing his arms, Harry stated grimly, "I know what he looks like." Kali growled low in her tiny throat.

After a pause Belinda tossed her hair back and asked curiously, "What would you do if you came upon him?"

Harry chewed his lip. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "I'd like to see him put away in Azkaban. I don't suppose I would feel too much regret if something bad happened to him on the way there. I'd like to be able to relax though, and I can't seem to with him running loose."

Speaking the way Hermione might if she thought you were missing an important and obvious point, she said, "Harry, if you are going to be an Auror, I don't think you can ever relax."

He finally relented and sat down beside her on the bed. He spied the album under under his nightstand and pulled it out. "I have some pictures if you want to see them."

"I'd love to."

Harry flipped the album open to the first page, ignoring the chocolate frog card that had gotten stashed there. Belinda plucked it out and looked it over. "I have to get you to autograph one of these for me." When Harry made a small noise of dismay, she froze, holding the card up between them. "You don't like your fame, do you?" she asked in surprise.

"Not really," Harry answered, still looking down at the photograph of him and his parents. His mother waved at the camera.

"I didn't realize that," she breathed. "I'll keep that in mind. The other day in the atrium, I thought you were just being polite to the Minister, skulking around like you did to keep out of view of the reporters." She moved over closer and looked at the album with interest. "Your parents?"

Harry nodded and paged silently and slowly forward. One was of himself in a kind of baby backpack carried by his dad. The next was his parents and some other members of the Order photographed while sitting around a table strewn with maps. The next he now recognized as having been taken in Godric's Hollow. He would have to try to find that spot next visit. His father was posing before a plaque with a Snitch on it, but Harry had never seen a plaque there in the village square where the photograph appeared to have been taken. His father was saying something slowly to the camera, Harry tried to read his lips but beyond "My . . ." he couldn't make it out. He was pointing at the plaque though with some amusement and pride even.

"So," Belinda asked, "What would your dad think of you getting a new dad?"

Harry exhaled. "He'd be appalled."

"Really?" Belinda blurted, sounding amused and alarmed.

"Absolutely. He'd go berserk, I think. I don't know what my mum would think. She was considered the levelheaded one. Maybe she'd be okay with it." He flipped past more pages of bright picnics. "Next time I get stuck beyond the veil I'll ask," he quipped grimly.

Belinda had a mixed response to this, apparently uncertain if he were being humorous. "That happen a lot?"

"Sometimes," Harry said, and then mentally nudged himself. He was being mean doing that and knew it, but let it happen anyway.

"Huh," she uttered, taking that in. "That's Hagrid," she said brightly to a younger version of the Hogwart's groundskeeper, smiling sheepishly from the next photograph. He was holding a pumpkin the size of trunk under his arm as though it weighed nothing; Lily stood beside him holding a much smaller pumpkin, carved with a broad grimace.

"Yeah," Harry said with a smile. "I don't get 'round to see him as often as I should."

"Friend of yours."

"My oldest friend."

"Huh," she uttered again as though forced to readjust her thinking. Harry had suspected that she understood him wrong; maybe after a half-dozen evenings like this, she might be straightened out. Meanwhile, she had shifted closer still so their legs touched and he couldn't miss that fruit scent of her hair. "You playing Quidditch. You were good at that."

"Yeah. We lost that last year's cup though. But it doesn't matter, really. I thought I would remember that loss for a long time but I don't even think about it. The next challenge is always more important than the last, win or lose." She had put a hand on his arm and was moving it slowly up to his elbow. Harry almost commented that *she* wasn't a challenge at all

but then decided that that would be a very unwise thing to say. He flipped through the remaining pages with photographs and closed it. There were quite a number of blank pages remaining.

"There isn't one of you and Professor Snape," she observed.

"No. I'll have to get one." He leaned forward to put the album away, pulling free of her grasp in the process. Then he stood up smoothly. "I have training in the morning . . . I think I have to get some sleep."

She appeared amused, but as though she were attempting to cover it. "All right. Stop by at lunch if you have a chance this week."

"I'll try," Harry replied before leading her down to the hearth and seeing her off, garnering a peck on the cheek as she departed. As the flames flickered down to normal yellow, part of him wished she could have stayed longer, but her infatuation was in the way, a kind of barrier to understanding that had to be pulled down before he wished to risk anything intimate. He sighed into the empty air, feeling a bit lonely.

The next morning, a Ministry post owl arrived. Harry wondered that they didn't just send him a memo at the Ministry. He then reconsidered that he really didn't have a desk for it to arrive at. The language was roundabout but upon a second reading he decided that it promised to add an addendum to Sirius' file casting grave doubt on his guilt but there would be no official announcement. Harry refolded the letter, feeling unsatisfied, and wondering how Bones and this assemblage of the Wizengamot would cope with real problems if they were this careful about dodging controversy when no one who mattered remained alive.

Over the next few days Harry did not manage to stop by the Minister's office at lunch; he felt a deep, simmering frustration with Madam Bones and had no interest in testing his control. Wednesday evening, Belinda's owl arrived as he was doing his post-dinner readings. The letter read bright and cheery and hoped for them to make a date for the weekend, perhaps for Harry to have dinner at her parent's house. "Aye," Harry muttered aloud, bringing Kali's head up from his lap with a curious look. "Think I'm being shown off?" he asked his pet. "Maybe that's unfair," he then answered himself, folding the letter aside to answer later.

Harry didn't make it to the weekend to find out; that night he jerked awake in his bed, feeling badly disoriented. His room was black, except for the orange glow in the hearth, and totally still. The curse detection above the hearth flared pure blue when Harry waved his wand at it, so he flopped back, closed his eyes again, and tried to relax. As he lay there, floating half-conscious, a tangled vision filled his mind; in it, overlapping shadows jostled in a green haze.

In a surge of acid panic Harry leapt from his bed, tossing the duvet halfway across the floor, the breeze of it sending sparks showering out of the hearth. He grabbed up his wand and robe, which he shrugged on as he took the stairs in a rush, three steps at a time. He scrawled a five-pointed star followed by a two-word message on his Auror's tablet and tossed it heedlessly back on the dining room table. Inside the hearth he shouted, "Hogwarts" as he threw down a very large handful of powder. The resulting acceleration through the quiet Floo Network nearly knocked him out. Blurry moments later, he landed in an ashy heap in the largest hearth of the Great Hall.

Wand still in hand, he clambered to his feet and pounded his way out to the Entrance Hall and up the Grand Staircase, amazed and relieved at the fluidity and speed of his own movement. He didn't slow on the staircases and sped to flying speed when he reached the dim second floor corridor.

Snape's office door was locked and an strange foggy glass globe was resting just at the bottom edge of it. Harry pounded on the door, then stepped back, wand aimed. He uttered a Blasting Curse and the jagged bolt from his wand burned the air red and split the heavy wooden door in two with a deafening crack. The unhinged half fell aside and the other swung open, revealing Avery clutching a thick cloth over his nose and mouth, crouched over another figure. Blood splattered the walls and pooled around their black robes. Blue mist floated out into the corridor around Harry's feet.

For Harry, all existence reduced to the man staring at him in surprise quickly turning to fear. All sound faded beyond Harry's own breath and pounding heart. He blasted the man without conscious thought. Like a rag doll, Avery was tossed against the couch from which he flopped to the floor. The Death Eater, eyes bright with pain, brought his wand

around and tried to aim it but an *Expelliarmus* disarmed him easily as though he had the magic of a mere child. Harry stalked forward into the room, his mind over-bright with a white hot wrath. Avery knelt in a pleading pose after giving up on reaching his wand in the far corner beyond the shelves.

Snape lay completely still in the mist clinging to the floor. Harry didn't remove his eyes from Avery, but he could sense no life in the shattered form on the floor before the desk. He had to force himself to breathe, shrinking away from the oily air. Every fiber of his being yearned to utter a Killing Curse at the wizard groveling before him. He took a breath, and his lips incanted a chain binding curse instead. It felt like emptiness, like a bitter winter wind blowing through a leafless tree. Giving vent to more anger he cast a Prison Box charm, a excessively forceful one that shrunk Avery down to less than a foot square. The box shifted and rattled before stilling. The foggy air had drifted on, clearing his view of the shattered form beside his feet.

Harry dropped to his knees then, spent, but with his heart still rushing deafeningly in his ears. Death-heavy air wafted around him and his ash-dusted robe licked at the blood spreading across the stone floor. Any remaining emotion he may have harbored slipped from him as he pushed Snape's shoulder away to turn his face upward and to pull his tangled hair aside. With a hollow heart he considered the familiar visage, the aquiline nose and thick brow, now unnaturally pale and still.

Minerva McGonagall had been woken by the old Order alarm: a half dome of glass resembling a paperweight that she now used strictly as one. She stumbled into her office and read the message inside it, squinting hard without her glasses. It was from Shackbolt and it was short. She threw on her robe and rushed down the far too slowly turning staircase.

When she made it to Snape's office, the door was split and light poured forth between the remains of it. Harry knelt inside over the fallen form of whom she could only assume was her colleague. "Potter?" she questioned sharply as she stepped inside. A rather cramped prison box sat on the floor, but she spared it no attention. Behind her, running feet approached.

"Harry?" she tried again. Only when she was right behind him, did she notice he was rocking forward and back slightly, keening faintly. The sound froze her hand as she reached for his shoulder. In her view over Harry's shoulder, Snape's future did not look promising.

Others entered the office. Tonks moved in, stepping around Harry as though he were furniture. She did not hesitate or ask anything, simply spelled Snape's body with a rapid series of charms. Shackbolt followed into the room as well as another. They were all moving, talking rapidly in abbreviated observations and commands. McGonagall pulled Harry backward out of the way. He didn't resist, although he gave one louder keen.

"Run ahead to Pomfrey," Tonks said to Shackbolt. "It's the only chance." She hovered Snape with a spell and for someone reputed to be clumsy, steered him speedily and unerringly out of the room. The pool of blood glistened in their wake, its surface disturbed.

The remaining Auror took charge of the prison box and the strange glass orb resting on the threshold. He hefted the box with a grunt and carried it to the door where he hesitated and looked back. His disturbed eyes looked over Harry, lying catatonic over McGonagall's folded legs. "What's wrong with him?" he asked, sounding unyieldingly hard.

McGonagall adjusted Harry so he was lying more comfortably and less like a discarded puppet. "If you knew how many parent figures this boy has lost, you would not need to ask that," she stated coldly. He appeared to consider that a half second before departing. McGonagall leaned back against the couch; despair wormed its way in as silence descended.

Another figure, wearing a Prefect badge, materialized from the darkness of the corridor, looking wide-eyed curious and distressed. "Ms. Weasley," McGonagall greeted Ginny. The young woman's face looked as despairing as Harry's should have. "Please, close the door," she said, only after realizing that was not a reasonable request. Ginny did not hesitate, though, just set the heavy broken plank near the half still on the hinges and repeatedly incanted a *Reparo* spell. When it held, she pulled it as closed as it would go.

Alone then with Harry, McGonagall looked down at him. He had not moved at all. It was a mistake, she thought, to have referred to him as 'boy'. He had grown startlingly since leaving school. With broadened shoulders and additional height, he finally actually resembled someone who could believably defeat Voldemort. His face had changed as well, it had stretched into one more like Lily's in the jaw and brow. She brushed his fringe back. His scar had lightened too, as though he were outgrowing it.

She reached around him in a loose hug. "Hang on, Harry," she said. "I have no intention of failing Albus now. Or you." She huffed in frustration, but did not want to bring Harry to the dispensary without word, as it most certainly would not do him any good. This left nothing to do but await news and decide how to proceed from there. She could not bear to chart either path forward without knowing absolutely. She imagined Pomfrey at work with her spells and potions, glad she was here imagining instead of there witnessing, and then wondered how improper it was that she was worried for Snape almost strictly because of Harry.

Footsteps approached the door and McGonagall heard urgent whispering. At the end she distinctly heard Ginny urging the messenger away. "Ten points to Gryffindor," McGonagall whispered.

The door creaked open and Ginny peered around it. "Headmistress? Pomfrey says Professor Snape's going to make it."

McGonagall nearly collapsed before she found the strength to sit forward and hover Harry aside so that she could stand. She shook her head at how much simpler things were if Severus was there to take care of them, which was a first. Ginny's eyes were taking in the alarming streaks of blood on the face of the desk and even the wall.

"To your tower, young lady," McGonagall ordered.

Ginny reluctantly obeyed. McGonagall followed her to the staircases before heading down with her silent burden.

In the hospital wing she settled her silent charge on the bed beside Snape's where Pomfrey was still working with the help of Shacklebolt and Tonks. She watched them sealing a few last minor wounds. When they finished and covered him, McGonagall looked down at Harry, who seemed to have fallen into a disturbed sleep.

Tonks came over to the other side of the bed. Her hands were bloodstained as she rested them on the white sheets to lean over Harry. She studied him a long time and sighed. "I'd keep him under until Severus is up."

"That could be a while. At least after the blood replenisher kicks in," Pomfrey pointed out, glancing doubtfully at Harry's sleeping face.

"I agree that is probably wise," McGonagall said, remembering with a twinge the state she found him in. She pulled a chair over from another bed and sat in it with her wand held at the ready. A Quiescent Charm could be repeated many times without risk, she considered, focusing on that simple fact and rehearsing the spell in her mind even though it was a trivial one.

* * *

Severus Snape moved in a grey fog, one that swirled unnaturally around him as he stepped through it. He felt feather light, as though his mind moved him rather than his legs.

A figure appeared. Snape hesitated at the sight before him, half obscured by tendrils of white and grey.

"Severus," Dumbledore greeted him kindly. Snape looked around in concern and the old wizard said, "Yes, you are in the veil." Dumbledore came closer and put his hands on Snape's upper arms as though greeting him. "But you are still tied to life." He nodded his white head broadly to indicate something behind Snape.

Snape turned and found a glowing cord tethering him to something hidden beyond the fog, in a smudged greyness. Dumbledore didn't release him when Snape turned back to study his old colleague. He looked a little younger than Snape remembered but his light blue eyes still twinkled with an aged wisdom. Dumbledore turned and looked over his shoulder,

appearing to wait for something. Snape followed his gaze and another figure became visible, this one moved through the fog, not disturbing it at all. Snape stiffened when he recognized the dark haired man with a sharp chin. "Black," he whispered. The other man didn't reply, just looked away and stood silent.

Confused, Snape turned back to Dumbledore, who sharply said, "Think of life."

"Life?" Snape echoed, more confused.

"You are at Hogwarts, undoubtedly in the hospital wing. Remain there, rather than here," the old wizard commanded. More figures shifted behind Dumbledore, flickering in and out as the fog cleared and thickened. "If you pass, there is no going back," he explained gently.

Snape struggled for comprehension. He could not have moved had he wanted to, Dumbledore had too tight of a hold. The figures beyond flickered and moved across one another. Sirius continued to stand beside Dumbledore, arms at his sides, gaze averted.

Snape looked down at himself, his hands were fading; he squinted at them, trying to understand. Realization came with a wave of cold. "I'm going to be a wraith," he murmured in fear. If he did not cross over before it was too late, he would be trapped. "I don't relish living out eternity with the Bloody Baron," he said and laughed mirthlessly.

"Life, Severus," Dumbledore commanded sharply. "Remember that. You need to return to it and holding onto it is the only way."

"You're helping him return?" a voice sneered beside them.

Jolted from his fearful musings, Snape turned to find James Potter appearing from an appendage of fog. It released James rapidly as he stepped up beside them. "Why?" he demanded of Dumbledore in hot anger. Behind his old nemesis a shyer figure appeared, although the fog still clung to Lily. Snape was startled to realize that Harry looked much less like his father than he had always assumed.

"You *want* Severus to return," Dumbledore insisted gently to James. "He is caring for Harry now."

"He's what?" James blurted in sharp surprise and tried to reach out to grab Dumbledore's arm. A flash of white surrounded it, throwing his hand back.

"James," Dumbledore admonished calmly, clearly disappointed. "You have seen Harry and what a beautiful young man he has become. You have Severus to thank for that."

Snape tried to appreciate James' rather distressed reaction to that, but his arms were fading alarmingly; although, somehow, Dumbledore still held them firmly. Snape couldn't remember what his body felt like, maybe he had never had one. "Harry needs you," Dumbledore stated firmly to him. "Grab hold one more time. There is still a path back."

Snape tried to do as he was told, deciding that life as ghost would be worse than not trying. He turned and studied James' angry eyes before Lily's more hopeful one's captured his gaze. He was falling somehow, without actually moving. Dumbledore gathered him up. This time, Snape could feel his mind rationalizing that into an embrace, rationalizing something that was not the least bit physical.

Suddenly, as though he had grown skin that instant, he could feel more, imagined he was breathing blessed air. Everything in his field of view was skewing distressingly. "A moment more," Dumbledore said in a reassuringly victorious tone.

"What are you doing with my son?" James demanded, leaning in without touching in order to get Snape's attention.

Snape turned to him and smiled then--his darkest smile ever. "He is my son now," he stated and took in James' odd distorted expression of horror for just an instant before everything skewed menacingly.

"Sirius," Dumbledore said with urgency. "Now." Snape felt himself being manipulated in ways that made no sense. Pain was slashing and hammering at him, but he decided it was best to not will himself to avoid it--it was a part of living after all.

He was pushed to Sirius, who looked sad more than anything else. Their gazes locked before he embraced Snape, crushing him. Dumbledore's voice sounded in his ear, "Do not resist him."

Snape had no fight left in him to resist with. Passively he felt himself being bunched up like a ball of paper by Sirius' arms and eventually just his hands. His last glimpse was from inside his old enemy's hands as massive fingers of darkness closed around him.

Snape's next impression, some time later, was of Pepper-up potion tainting his lips. His body rebelled severely at the notion of conscious activity. The potion flowed into him, nonetheless, as a swallowing spell made him take it down.

He cracked his eyes open and tried to push the cup away. Pomfrey was leaning over him, studying him intently. If he had not just experienced death, he would have thought this pain and total lethargy of will to be comparable.

"You are needed," Pomfrey explained, nodding to indicate the next bed over.

Snape breathed a few times, forced his head to turn, and found McGonagall sitting on the far side of the next bed, upon which rested Harry. Snape blinked in confusion and raised his head a monumental inch. Pomfrey held the cup out and this time he drank several gulps before heaving himself to a sitting position. His hand plucked at the unexpected hospital shirt he wore and confusion about what had happened made him dizzy. Disassociated recollections flickered before him: waking with Avery glaring victoriously over him, taunting him for being overcome by a vaporous potion of all things, pain and furious helplessness, Dumbledore. He pushed it all aside and focussed only on Harry as he slid out and over to the next bed.

"What happened to him?" he asked. His eyes found others nearby; Tonks and Rodgers stood off the end of Harry's bed, looking pensive.

McGonagall responded, "He came for you," she said sadly, "came in from the Floo in the Great Hall." Snape ran his hand through his badly matted hair and looked Harry over. McGonagall continued to explain, "We've been using a Quiescent Charm on him for the last hour. It should wear off any moment." Their eyes met as Snape strained to understand the situation.

To stall Snape said, "Get him out of here." When no one moved, he looked over at Rodgers, who returned him a very dark look before Tonks urged him out of the wing. Snape waited until they were gone to return to evaluating Harry.

"What was that about?" McGonagall asked.

"Nothing worth discussing right now. Mostly, I didn't want an audience," he replied as he lifted Harry's wrist to feel his pulse.

McGonagall sighed and brushed Harry's shoulder with her fingertips. "He broke down," she explained in a dark tone. "Completely."

Snape dropped his head and laid Harry's hand back over his abdomen. He did not believe he had the strength for this. The scene beyond the veil was playing out in his mind in un-sequential pieces, disorienting him further.

"It was a distressing scene," McGonagall went on, "given everything he's been through."

Harry's eyes were cracked open now. Snape put his hands on Harry's arms and called his name without effect. "Give me the Pepper-up," he requested. Pomfrey handed it over and he forced a few sips into Harry, who turned his head away from the cup but Snape followed him with it, forcing it on him. After a few shaking breaths, Harry twitched on the bed and made a low keening sound.

"That's the noise he was making when I found him," McGonagall supplied quietly.

Snape frowned and put the cup aside to shake Harry by the upper arms. "Harry," he prompted a few times. Harry turned his head back, but his eyes stared beyond the ceiling. Snape forcibly turned his head farther to meet his gaze, and held it there. "Come on, Harry. Everything's all right," he coaxed to no response.

Snape took a deep breath and pried into Harry's mind. Pain assaulted him, pain like his heart was being torn out. Snape quickly clenched his eyes closed and blocked it out, thinking as he did that Voldemort had less of a chance than he had previously imagined if that was what he had met with in the Entrance Hall on that long-ago day.

"Severus?" McGonagall's concerned voice prompted Snape back to the present.

Drawing on his fast-dwindling strength, Snape leaned farther over Harry and pushed his hair back from his forehead, intentionally touching his scar, which should have produced a jolt but only made Harry's eyes come into focus.

Harry's eyes blinked rapidly. Reality closed in with awareness and he swallowed a gasp. Damp eyes looked frantically around, finally glaring disbelievingly at Snape. Harry sat up suddenly and grabbed the front of Snape's shrift as though to verify he was solid.

"It's all right, Harry," Snape reassured him yet again.

Harry's mouth worked silently before he quietly said, "I thought you'd left me alone."

"No," Snape said and pulled Harry against himself. Harry closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "Never," Snape insisted. McGonagall gave him a surprised brow at that assurance. Snape considered that she didn't realize Dumbledore was blocking his path through the veil; otherwise he would never express such certainty. Feeling that he had committed to something with more certainty than signing a piece of paper, he ran a hand over Harry's back. His vision was wavering and narrowing though, and Pomfrey gestured for him to return to his bed.

"Are you all right now?" Snape asked, forcing his voice strong. When Harry nodded into his shoulder, he explained, "I have to go."

Harry reluctantly leaned away from him before Snape pushed himself carefully to his feet. Pomfrey helped him back to the other bed where he immediately fell unconscious again. Harry swallowed his distress and reassured himself by watching his guardian's chest rise and fall.

"Lie back, Harry," McGonagall urged. "Get some rest. Madam Pomfrey will keep an eye on Severus."

Harry nodded, still pulling himself together with great effort. He settled under the covers and tried to stem the panic that kept rising to clench at his heart. McGonagall stood to leave, her hand brushing his shoulder.

Harry must have fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew, the room was full of morning light and Dobby stood beside the bed with a breakfast tray. "Harry Potter must be hungry," the elf squeaked and placed the tray on the side table. Clothes had been laid out for him too, he wondered whose they were, as they weren't his own. They were worn and faded to grey by many washings. Maybe they were just discarded spares.

Harry slipped on his glasses and looked quickly over at the next bed. Snape still slept deeply, but his color was much better, though not normal. Harry turned back to the elf. "Thanks Dobby." Dobby bowed, ears bobbing, and backed away. Harry ignored the tray--he wasn't very hungry--and slid out of bed. He pulled a chair over from between the next two beds and sat close to Snape's side, hands clamped tensely between his knees. Pomfrey stepped over from her office and checked Snape over quickly.

"How long before he wakes up?" Harry asked her.

"A while yet . . . perhaps this evening. The Pepper-up did not do him any favors on top of the Kayo vapor." She stated this brusquely and departed back to her office.

Harry frowned and closed his eyes, feeling guilt reducing him.

In the Great Hall as breakfast was winding down, Headmistress McGonagall stepped away from the head table and down the Slytherin one, which had been exceptionally quiet during the meal. She tapped Suze Zepher on the shoulder and indicated that she should follow. McGonagall led the girl to the other side of the hall where Ginny sat, picking at her breakfast in an unenthusiastic manner.

"Ms. Weasley, please come with me."

Ginny glanced between the two of them and stood immediately. When they reached the Entrance Hall, McGonagall said, "I am giving you both an excused absence from the first class of the day, but I want you to spend it keeping Mr. Potter company; I think he could use a little. I'll relieve you for your second class." She nodded at them both and headed back inside.

Suze moved quickly to catch up to Ginny, who was marching off up the stairs. "I don't get it," Suze said when she came aside the red-haired girl.

"Didn't you hear what happened last night?" Ginny asked.

"Only that Professor Snape was attacked and isn't going to be teaching for a while."

Ginny stopped in the empty corridor, empty except for the paintings, which turned and watched them curiously, whispering to each other. "I had the misfortune, because I was trying to track down the Creevey brother's latest prank before it got the house in trouble, to see the end of what happened," Ginny explained with a waver in her voice. She swallowed hard and went on quietly, "Professor Snape was dead by the time help arrived last night. Harry wasn't . . . coping well with that." She fell silent as the scene replayed before her.

"Dead? What happened? Why was Harry here?"

Ginny shook herself and started walking again. "I think he probably saw the attack in his mind. He told us he saw the Death Eaters fighting in Azkaban last year in his head."

"He saw what?" Suze asked in awed tones. They had reached the staircase to the second floor and both waited for two other students to pass by before continuing.

Very quietly, Ginny explained, "Harry sometimes can see Death Eaters in his mind. If they are close by, thinking about him, or fighting each other."

Suze looked very uncertain as they continued, and at the corridor that led to the hospital wing, she grabbed Ginny and said, "Death Eaters fighting each other?" She trailed off and let go.

"Come on," Ginny urged, heading off down the well-lit corridor.

Suze caught up at a run and grabbed Ginny's sleeve. "But . . ." she whispered.

"Come on," Ginny repeated and opened the door.

Harry looked up as the door to the wing swung open. He straightened upon seeing his friends enter; glad he had pulled himself together enough to get dressed.

"Watcher, Harry," Ginny said with a weak smile when she came up beside him. Her eyes glanced over their unconscious teacher before she moved to fetch chairs from farther down the row of empty beds. Suze stood at the foot of the bed looking anxious. She dropped her gaze rather than stare at Snape.

"How are you, Suze?" Harry asked.

Suze shrugged in reply. Ginny returned with two chairs and placed them both near Harry, took the closer one, and urged Suze to take the other, which she did after some hesitation. She looked very uncomfortable with being there. Ginny sat straight and said with mustered brightness, "He's going to be all right, right?" Harry nodded, rubbing his hair back. Ginny went on, "So, he'll wake up soon?"

"Later this evening," Harry said, feeling pained about that and hearing it in his voice.

"Great Goblins, Harry, you aren't feeling guilty are you?" Ginny demanded.

Harry rubbed his head with both hands. He really had to pull himself together. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Professor McGonagall said you saved his life last night. Why are you feeling guilty? You are some kind of guilt-freak."

Harry narrowed his eyes at her but couldn't find anger to go with it. "He'd be up sooner. . . never mind."

Ginny turned to Suze, who struggled a moment before saying, "Thank you for saving his life, Harry. We wouldn't want to lose our Head of House . . ."

Harry nodded.

After a long silence Ginny said, "Is your training still going well?" Harry nodded again. Ginny went on, "You are doing field work now, right? Is that more exciting?"

Harry finally pushed himself upright and replied quietly, "Yes. I usually get to follow Tonks or Rogan, both of whom I like. Tonks lets me do more now when we're out, like ask questions. She says people answer me more than they do her."

Ginny laughed a bit and said in a falsetto while clasping her hands to her chest, "Oh, the great Harry Potter is talking to me!"

Harry put a hand under his glasses and laughed lightly despite himself. "It's some of that," he admitted.

Harry leaned forward and asked Suze how Quidditch was going and whether they were going to beat Ravenclaw. Suze assured him they would, then glanced at Snape and fell silent again. Harry looked him over again as well. He was sleeping very soundly and it was a little odd to be sitting here chatting like this, but he didn't feel like moving farther away.

"Tell me about your new plays," Harry said to Suze.

"Not in front of the captain of the Gryffindor team," Suze complained.

Ginny folded her arms and stated smugly, "We watch you practice most days you're at the pitch. I think I know them already."

Quidditch filled the next hour until the door to the wing opened to reveal the headmistress. She looked relieved and a little pleased although she still managed a stiff tone as she ordered them off to their second class.

When they were gone, Harry asked, "You let them off from class?"

She ignored his question and sat down with a graceful lifting of her robes. "You seem in a little better spirits."

"Yep. Thanks."

McGonagall didn't remain long, and while she was there she seemed meditative. Eventually she stood and put a hand on Harry's shoulder without speaking. She had an amused expression, which prompted Harry to ask why. She replied, "You continue to prove me wrong, young man." With a wink she departed.

She was not gone long however. She returned looking more official and leaned down close to Harry to say, "There is a woman in the Entrance Hall who wishes to see how Severus is doing."

"Candide?" Harry asked.

"Yes. Shall I send her up?"

"All right," replied Harry, glad that Snape was out of it for this.

McGonagall straightened. "Hm," she muttered thoughtfully.

Reading her, Harry commented, "It's too complicated to explain."

"I am trying to picture Severus with a lady-friend. Though now that I think of it, I remember seeing them having tea in Hogsmeade a few times." At Harry's shrug she turned. "I'll send her up," she said over her shoulder.

Harry waited with mixed emotion. Eventually the door cracked open and Candide leaned in. Her eyes found Harry there and she slipped in, apparently loath to open the door too wide. When she stood at the end of the bed her eyes looked quite concerned, making Harry feel a bit hopeful. "What happened?" she whispered. When Harry didn't immediately reply, she said, "The rumors are flying thick in Hogsmeade. The reporters are scrambling around but no one from the school will talk to them. The Ministry will only say that the last Death Eater has been captured." She stopped suddenly on that point.

"Avery," Harry supplied. "Wanted revenge. He should have come after me, but he's been after Severus instead."

"Why?"

"Because Avery considered him a traitor," Harry said, anger rising. Something gnawed at Harry's mind, some connection he had yet to recognize, and when Candide asked how Avery had gotten into the castle, it blossomed into full suspicion.

"I don't know," Harry said, possible schemes flickering through his mind. Most of them involved inside help. "He filled Severus' office with Kayo Vapor and broke in and overcame him."

Candide unfolded her arms and put one hand on the bed near Snape's feet. "What did Avery do to him?"

"He killed him." The words were like a spell that hollowed out Harry's chest. He clamped his mouth shut and blinked hard.

After a minute Candide said, "He doesn't look dead now."

"The Aurors put a freezing spell on him and Pomfrey managed to save him." Harry spoke this all grudgingly; he really didn't feel like relating it.

"It was a good thing the Aurors came when they did."

"I signaled them when I saw the two of them fighting in my dream. And Shacklebolt, one of the Aurors, initiated the old Order of the Phoenix alarm." Harry fell silent before saying, perhaps not intentionally out loud, "I should have killed Avery. Voldemort certainly was tempted to enough times." After further thought he added, "Maybe we'll find out who helped him, though. The Aurors should be interrogating him now."

All of this alarmed Candide and she stared at him warily, hands at her sides. Harry's own ill ease twisted into anger at her. In a deceptively soft tone he said, "This is who we are. We are survivors of Voldemort. Accept that, or go away."

She stood staring, amazed by his tone. Their gazes remained locked and Harry could see her surprise was borne partly of sudden understanding. She looked Snape's supine self over again with a different expression, as though she were weighing things. Eventually she asked, "Do you need anything?"

Harry shook his head. He did wish that the ground did not feel like it might pull out from under him any moment, but he doubted even Dumbledore could have helped with that. Though she lingered a while longer, Candide didn't speak except to say goodbye. Dobby brought a lunch tray just after and Harry managed to eat a little chicken pot pie before his appetite fled.

Harry's friends came in the afternoon. Hermione and Ron appeared about as shocked as they ever had when Harry explained what had happened. At the end Ron said, "Boy, dad doesn't even know half that and he's talked to the Aurors." He leaned over Snape to peer at him curiously. "He'll be all right, what?"

"Yeah."

Hermione pointedly asked, "Are *you* going to be all right?"

To his two oldest friends, he found himself saying, "I feel really unwell, as though something awful could happen again any minute." He watched them share a look.

Hermione patted his back. "That will get better. Everything worked out all right."

"It's true," Harry agreed. It was true that he wasn't sitting here wishing dearly to undo things; they somehow, for once, they got undone on their own.

His friends stayed until the dinner hour when Pomfrey hinted for the third time that there had been enough visitors for one day. Hermione gave him a hug and Ron seemed to consider doing so too, but patted him heartily on the back instead. They promised to come by again the next day. In the silence of their absence, Harry wished he had something with which to occupy himself. Dobby brought dinner, roast mutton with a thick gravy. Harry lied and told Dobby he would eat it when the elf insisted that he should do so. "Harry Potter is getting stretched too thin!" the house-elf insisted in concern.

Around 8:00 Harry was trying to eat a bit of cold meat because he didn't feel like facing Dobby's accusatory expression when he came to fetch the tray. He was sitting up on the bed with his legs crossed, having tired of the hard chair. With a jolt he realized there were eyes upon him.

"Harry," Snape greeted him, and sat up partly against the pillows. Harry was finding the breath that had abandoned him and Snape went on. "It is still . . . Thursday, correct?"

"Yes." Harry quickly set the tray on the nightstand and slid off the bed to stand beside the next. "How are you?"

"I have been better," Snape answered slowly in his usual dry way. "But this is, nevertheless, a welcome improvement." He took a deep breath as though experimenting with breathing.

Pomfrey stepped over and brusquely checked him over before sniffing in a satisfied manner and bustling away. Snape sat up a bit farther, leaning on an elbow in a way that didn't look entirely comfortable.

"I'm glad you're all right," Harry said sincerely.

"Not as glad as I am that you came in time," Snape lightly retorted. "I didn't smell the vapor, only saw it too late. I am getting too old for this game."

They fell silent then, bad alternatives hanging between them.

"I didn't kill him," Harry stated, his heart twisting again as he relived that instant of tenuous self-control. "I wanted to. I could feel the curse--the real one this time." The stinking power of it still vibrated through him, unused; he hoped it would fade.

Snape's black gaze focused more tightly and he seemed to be trying to see into him. Eventually, he said, "You redeemed me with that, Harry."

Harry, still caught in the raw memory of that moment, said, "He deserved to die."

"That is not your place to decide," Snape stated. With a wince he sat up a bit farther and sighed. "Go ask the madam, will you, if I am allowed a dinner tray. Your mutton is making me ravenous."

Harry smiled for the first time that day. "Sure."

Harry sat reading a book Ginny had brought for him from the library when Pomfrey circled to extinguish the lamps. It was nearly 11:00; Harry had lost all track of time. Snape slept soundly, but not as comatose as before. His chest rose and fell regularly, reassuringly. Marking the page, Harry put the book aside and sat back to stare at the tall darkened windows across from him. McGonagall's approach actually startled him his thoughts had wandered so far from the hospital wing.

"Madam Pomfrey tells me Severus awoke." At Harry's nod she looked across at the other bed a moment before saying, "I wonder, Harry, if you wouldn't do me a favor?" At his shrug she said, "Would you cover Severus' classes tomorrow?"

"Me?"

"Yes. It is the fifth-, seventh- and first-years. I do not think you will have any difficulty, but it is up to you. We managed to cover today, somewhat, but the older students preparing for their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s cannot lose even a day of preparation."

"All right," Harry heard himself saying. He had a feeling it was his boredom talking more than anything else.

McGonagall touched Harry's shoulder. "Thank you, Harry," she said in deep affection. She started to turn away, but then stopped, "You know where Severus keeps his class notes in his office?" When Harry nodded she added, "Everything has been cleaned up." She softened that with an understanding smile and a squeeze of her hand before departing.



Chapter 72 -- The Substitute

The next morning, Harry woke with the sun and went to freshen up in the boys' bathroom. The sinks were much lower than he had remembered, requiring him to bend uncomfortably low to wash his face. His reflection reminded him that he needed to fetch some clean clothes, or use a really powerful spell on the grey jumper and trousers he had been wearing for two days. He pulled out his wand, remembering unbidden the scene in Snape's office. It required several moments as a result to remember a Freshening Charm and a Pressing Spell. He didn't look very professorly though. Scratching the back of his head, he considered that one of Snape's sleeveless robes might help.

He returned to the dispensary, thinking that Snape might have woken by now, and indeed he was sitting up with a tray before him, a pile of letters beside his plate. Harry sat on the next bed and eyed the simple toast and poached egg on the tray hungrily.

"You are not going to sit here all day, are you?" Snape asked snidely. "You *must* have training to attend."

"Probably," Harry tossed out dismissively, rocking his feet back and forth under the bed. With a devious look in his eye, he went on. "But instead I'm teaching your classes."

It required a moment for Snape to stare down the truth of this, but then he leaned back and said easily, "In which case you should be eating breakfast in the Great Hall"

"Should I?"

"Yes," Snape confirmed sternly. Harry reluctantly pushed himself to his feet. Snape asked, "And you have found the lesson plans for today?"

"No," Harry tossed over his shoulder. At Snape's look of consternation, he added confidently, "I'll work something out." To which Snape appeared rather doubtful. At the door Harry turned and said he would return at lunchtime.

There was only ten minutes remaining before breakfast would be served. Harry hurried down to the Defense office, which already had a new door--actually an old door, probably older than the previous door given the near black of the thick finish. By the time he found, and dropped the correct syllabi and corresponding notes and textbooks in the classroom, as well as grabbed an sleeveless robe, breakfast had already started.

In the empty Entrance Hall, Harry intentionally walked in the far left doors and strode purposefully between the wall and the Slytherin table. He had made it halfway before the bright swell of morning conversation died down and heads turned to watch him, most eyes a bit wide. He easily found Suze's welcoming smile and gave her a wink.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall intoned in greeting when Harry pulled out the empty seat beside hers--the only empty seat at the long head table.

"Good morning, Headmistress," Harry returned formally. The room, with its bright ceiling and faces, boosted him enough to bring out a smile as he returned the other teachers' greetings. Cawley came down from the other end to shake Harry's hand vigorously and to welcome him to breakfast as though Harry were again a newcomer. Harry found he still had that instinctive suspicion for the man. He smiled through his ill ease and with a kind of impromptu bow, the man departed.

When Harry turned back to his place a full plate was there. He ate with hungry vigor.

"You have time for seconds," McGonagall stated beside him when he ate the last heel of his toast.

"No, that's-" he started to say but a new plate of eggs, toast, and sausage had already appeared.

"Thanks," he said and rubbed his hair back as a wave of uneasiness swept through him.

She leaned in and softly said, "It will get easier."

Harry didn't respond, just picked up his fork again, wondering if some of the empty feeling he was trying to assuage was from somewhere other than his stomach.

Standing in the Defense classroom, Harry felt more nervous than expected as the fifth-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs filed in. Unlike the advanced classes, these were just two houses, and Harry was happy that it was an easy two. He also knew many of the students personally, so this was really just an expanded session of D.A., he told himself. Everyone looked eager, if not a little surprised. He took roll to learn the few names he didn't already know.

Holding the class notes a bit tightly, Harry glanced at the attentive faces and said, "Today you are supposed to begin covering powerful dark magic creatures, let's see--giant spiders, Lethifolds, great black poison toads, and, uh, Dementors." Out loud he mulled, "I wonder if I should have brought the Lethifold from the office."

A hand went up. Harry looked up at Sanders, a Ravenclaw girl, and she asked, "There isn't really a Lethifold in Professor Snape's office, is there?"

"There was last year. Unless it got out again," Harry replied with deceptive casualness. This led to some widened eyes. "I can go fetch it if you want to see it . . ."

"No," she replied quickly. "That's all right, we . . . can read about them," she insisted.

Harry thought he understood why the sorting hat had such an easy time with most students. Feeling mischievous, he muttered, "That will leave more time for calling in a few Dementors, anyway." He really should be more careful, he considered, as he took in their alarm, but he was too busy trying not to grin too broadly. "You really can't tell when I'm joking, can you?"

A Hufflepuff boy by the name of Mumfred, who wore a prefect badge, and whose long hair was tied back in a frizzy puff said, "Professor Snape doesn't joke much. Can you really summon a Dementor?"

Harry thought about that, replaying in his mind the sounds from the dark plane to reconsider if he had heard the Dementors there. "I'm not sure," he finally replied when the students began to shuffle nervously. "Interesting question."

"Maybe not try it here, sir?" Mumfred suggested.

Harry smiled in amusement. "Do you know how much trouble I'd be in if I did that?" he asked rhetorically, leading a few to laugh in relief.

"The Ministry probably wouldn't like that," someone agreed.

Harry lifted the notes to read from again, now feeling confident and relaxed. "Forget the Ministry; I was thinking of Headmistress McGonagall." This led them all into a relaxing laugh.

At the end of class Harry dismissed them all just as the bell rang. They hadn't even grumbled much about the essay assignment, which Harry himself thought a bit extensive. That, he supposed, was why they were in those two houses, either smart enough to make it easy, or hardworking enough not to care. Harry barely had time to go to the office and change over materials before the seventh-years began arriving.

Ginny gave him a very big smile as she sat ahead of Colin Creevey, in the front row, where he truly doubted she usually sat. Colin himself and the other old D.A. members all looked very pleased to see him and said hello as though they were old friends.

Harry did a quick count, noticing that the Slytherins sitting in the back left corner looked much less welcoming. "Everyone is here, so we will skip roll." He picked up the notes for the next few classes. Today's schedule indicated they should finish up bog and moor creatures, but next week they were starting counter-curses. "So does anyone mind if we jump ahead?" Many heads shook.

A voice in the back sullenly said, "Professor Snape might mind."

Harry grinned lightly. "I'll worry about that." He flipped ahead a few sheets. "Counter-curses," he announced to much happy *ooing*. The list looked very easy and almost useless, most of the spells not powerful enough for any serious attacks. "We'll start with the counter for the tremor class of curses, such as Jelly Legs." Harry called Colin up to demonstrate. He backed up and asked the boy to spell him, which he did, very lightly.

"You can put a little more behind it than that, Mr. Creevey," Harry chastised.

With a mischievous spark in his eye Colin gave him rather a hard Jelly Legs curse, powerful enough to show the spell trail, which it normally didn't. Harry countered this one as well, although he had to step back to catch his balance. "Your turn, Mr. Creevey. Ready?"

Colin swallowed hard and raised his wand, but Harry sent only an weak curse his way. Harry then went through the rows making each of them come up and try the counter. Their attitude was almost universally one of having fun, and he was not certain if it was his presence that was causing that. He tried to sound more serious as he gave instructions. He called the first of the Slytherins up. A tall, lean, redheaded girl named Sylvia Askunk who was wearing a Prefect badge. She didn't raise her wand when Harry asked her to give the spell a try.

In a voice of trouble, she said, "No one will say how our Head of House is doing."

"Oh." Harry put his wand hand behind his back. "I'm sorry, I should have said. I assumed the headmistress said something before breakfast."

Sylvia said, "She said he was going to be out a few days. Someone said you attacked him."

Someone snorted, presumably Ginny. Harry resisted glancing over the other Slytherins, looking for who might have suggested that. "No," Harry responded calmly. "I would hardly do that. Avaricious Avery, the last free Death Eater attacked Professor Snape . . . out of revenge." Still calm and sounding odd to himself, he added, "He's going to be all right though." Harry did glance over the room then and found Ginny's very sympathetic gaze. She was chewing hard on her lower lip and looked to want to speak. Harry did look over to the Slytherins then and found various expressions there, mostly hopeful.

Turning back to Sylvia, he said, "Shall I show you the spell again?"

The last Slytherin was called up and approached reluctantly. Nott, shoulders hunched, looking older than his fellows in more ways than his height, stepped up onto the platform and ground his teeth impatiently. Harry considered him and wondered who had taught him how to Occlude his mind. "Can you show me the block again, Teacher?" he asked flatly.

Harry stepped back and wand at careful ready, gestured for the boy to curse him. Nott raised his wand and shouted a spell that wasn't even related to a Jelly Legs. Instinctively and feeling that he foresaw this, Harry put up a Diamona block. Not his best one, but it chimed like crystal when Nott's Dissecting curse hit it.

The room fell hushed. Harry held his wand at ready and said, "That was very stupid thing to do." Nott was gnashing his teeth. "I didn't know it was you until you did that."

"What?" Nott mocked. "You wouldn't assume it was the son of a Death Eater? Are you stupid?"

"I believe everyone deserves a chance to prove their own worth." Harry relaxed his wand hand just slightly, perhaps trying to draw another attack, perhaps trying to move beyond the exchange of spells. "Shall I tell your housemates what you did?" This, of all things, disarmed Nott. "Yes," Harry went on pleasantly, "You threw away everything. And for what?"

"Avery said his lord was rising again."

"He isn't," Harry snapped.

"His mark was darkening. I saw it," Nott countered triumphantly.

"He was lying. I would know long before that. There is a spell that will reveal a mark, which is after all just a Proteon Charm." Harry banked his anger when Nott's looked shifted to frightened. With a flick Harry disarmed the boy and caught his wand out of the air.

Nott looked sullen now rather than full of fury. "He deserved it. For being a traitor," he growled, fists clenched around nothing. A few students whispered to each other, the first noise anyone had made.

"Severus wasn't a traitor; he was loyal to Albus Dumbledore," Harry said. "And I hope that revenge was worth throwing your life away for. Come," he said, stepping down from the platform. When Nott hesitated, Harry held out his wand and threatened, "You can walk or I can stuff you in a box as small as the one they took Avery away in. Your choice." At the door Harry turned and said, "Ginny, describe the rest of the counter-curses from the notes on the desk until I get back."

She went from befuddled to bright like a switch. "Sure," she said and stood up eagerly.

Harry dragged Nott, who was only an inch shorter than himself, down the corridor by the back of his robes. Anger built in him as they walked and all he wanted to do was scream at the boy if not pummel him. Nott was looking crafty as they approached the gargoyles. "Please try something," Harry whispered softly, avidly. This brought the boy to bear with a fearful gape.

"What are you going to do?" Nott asked.

Harry held off on the password. "I'm going to inform the headmistress and have the Aurors' office come get you." Harry paused, mind chewing on things. "Funny that Avery didn't give you away. They interrogated him already almost certainly."

Nott's lip twitched. "I don't know how Aurors remember to breathe they are so stupid."

Harry still held off on the password. "You know, Avery couldn't have come up with this. Brewed the odorless Kayo vapor, gotten into the castle. You expected him to get caught and gave him a Memory Charm. No, you had Lockhart give him one," Harry restated. When Nott's look darkened, Harry said mockingly, "Aurors don't need to be very smart if you keep giving things away." Hot anger was trying to fill Harry and he was listening for any sound from the Dark Plane, but there didn't seem to be any. "So, where is Lockhart?" Harry demanded.

Nott pressed his lips together before smiling faintly. "I don't know, actually."

Harry thought fiercely. "You used an Imperious Curse on him, didn't you?"

Nott put a hand on one hip. "Can we get on with this? Your playing at the Great Auror is really a drag. In fact, watching the Slytherin Head of House fawn over you nauseated me. Professor Snape doesn't deserve that honorable title, he deserved to be hurt . . . *removed* from his position."

Harry had Nott lifted up by the shirt and flat against the wall in the next instant and was pleased that the boy's eyes flickered with fear. "You tried to take away something I care deeply for," Harry hissed as Nott twisted in an attempt to get away. "I already have major moments of regret at not killing Avery. You think anyone would question for even a second if I took you out right now?" Actually, part of Harry's mind interrupted, Snape would. Harry released the front of Nott's robes, very surprised that they hadn't been overrun by dark creatures then and there given the fury pumping through him. But the corridor was silent, and the gargoyles unfazed. Harry spat the password then before his own will weakened, and dragged a resisting Nott up the turning steps.

The office still reminded Harry forcefully of Dumbledore. "Sit down," he ordered the boy, who obeyed in silence.

McGonagall came down from the upper level. "What is this?" she asked in her official voice.

"Avery's inside help," Harry explained, and now that he had backup, he pulled out Floo powder and notified the Aurors.

When he stood again to await their arrival, McGonagall was circling Nott's chair like a cat waiting for a mouse to twitch. One of the few unsleeping paintings *took* chastisingly. "You failed your second chance, Mr. Nott," McGonagall said in a low voice. "I now have to apologize to Mr. Potter for having given you one in the first place." She looked up at Harry and her eyes said how sorry she was. "You had too much to live down, I suppose," she said, returning to Nott.

Nott, arms crossed and head tilted far to the side, said, "Avery said Voldemort was coming back. He lied."

"Ah yes," McGonagall said. "So as usual, you are the victim. That makes everything all right."

The hearth flared and Rogan and Shacklebolt stepped out of it, wands out. Shacklebolt turned to Harry, "What do we have?"

"The person who helped Avery into the castle. In fact, I expect he planned the whole thing." More of the paintings around them woke up and blinked in surprise.

"Well, Theo," Shacklebolt said, and then in one smooth movement, hauled the boy to his feet, put a binding curse around his arms and pushed him to the hearth. "I'm sure your father's old friends will be blasted happy to see you." Two flashes and they were gone.

Harry shook himself to return to the present. "I have class I think."

"Harry," McGonagall's regretful tone pulled his attention back from a room full of bored and highly creative seventh-years.

Harry cut her off, putting a lot of effort into a level tone, "Don't apologize for trying to uphold Dumbledore's virtues . . . Minerva."

She smiled faintly. Then a breath later chuckled lightly. "Merlin, Harry, don't make me apologize to Severus yet again."

"For what?"

"I don't even wish to tell you. Go back to your class now," she brushed him away with her hand as though he were a student.

Harry, as he rode down the stairs, wondered about the headmistress' tone at the last and considered that everyone around him seemed to be holding onto their pride a bit too fiercely.

Ginny was still at the front of the room and everything was surprisingly calm. When he stepped in, she asked bluntly, "Did the Aurors take him?"

"Yes." She returned to her seat, handing the pile of notes to him as they passed. Harry thanked her and stepped to the front. Only ten minutes remained in the session. "Well, who wants to demonstrate a Hydra Counter?" Askunk shot her hand into the air and Harry gestured for her to come up. With a nod of warning he sent a bucket of water her way. The spell was capable of producing something resembling a fire hose, but Harry wasn't doing crowd control as he had been taught the spell was good for. She didn't use the counter from the lesson but a heat one, which was a little dangerous since it generated a flash of steam and if incanted too late it would burn. Harry explained this patiently.

She stood with her arms stiffly at her sides, looking angrier than before. "I want to duel you," she snipped fiercely when Harry broke off the spell instruction.

"You're sure about that?" Harry asked, not unkindly. Even here he apparently was something to measure up to. Her gaze didn't waver nor did her lips unpurse. Calmly, ignoring the students who were avidly leaning forward in their desks, Harry said, "Trouble is, you have a huge advantage over me."

Her brow shifted to confused. "Why?"

"Because if I put you in the dispensary for so much as a pin prick, I'm in very serious trouble. Whereas you don't appear to care if I end up in Mungo's through Christmas. May I ask why you want to duel? Are you the school champion looking for a bigger challenge?"

"I'm the House champion," she said, raising her wand. Harry matched her on instinct; although he didn't want it to be an invitation.

"I'm quite certain Professor Snape doesn't run dueling competitions."

"He doesn't," she replied, grinning without happiness. She threw a blasting curse at him then, which he blocked. At his sharp look, she said, "You had your wand up." She sent another one, harder.

"Goodness, Slytherin Prefects are selected on some unexpected criteria." Harry teased, "You do realize that if you hurt me, Professor Snape will be most displeased."

"Yeah, right." She tossed something stringy and sizzling at him that he ducked, but it came back after bouncing off the wall. Harry tossed a Titan behind him to block it.

"Sheew," he breathed in honest surprise at the unknown attack. The class were definitely enjoying themselves, but the bell was due to ring any minute.

"Why don't you send something back?" she asked sharply, sounding spoiled.

"I really can't," he insisted. "I'd rather you get in trouble than me."

Ginny said, "Professor Snape would be very upset if he knew you were doing this, Harry."

Harry laughed and countered a Freezing Charm, ice battered the floor. "That's Professor Harry, to you. All right then, go back to Blasting Curses and I'll demonstrate," he instructed Askunk. "Go on then. Hard as you want." When she raised her wand, he called out "Chrysanthemum," and used that block. The windows rattled and someone's book flew off their desk in the resulting shattering force. "Again," he prompted.

They worked their way up the list, her spells only increasing in force and focus. "Ever consider being an Auror?" Harry teased.

Her wand hand fell to her side. "They won't take me," she snapped as though he were being stupid.

"Why not?" Harry returned in disbelief.

The bell rang then. "Assignments," Harry said, suddenly remembering. Fortunately everyone paused in putting their things away. Quickly looking through the notes, he found a list for the next session. "Chapters 11 and 12 and a pop quiz. Oops, not much of one if you know about it."

"Cheers, Harry," Ginny said, laughing. Colin beside her winked.

"That was an accident, really," Harry insisted, but they turned away still grinning.

Harry quickly collected up the lecture notes and caught the Slytherin Prefect as she arranged things in her bookbag. She shot him a dark look that converted to a frown. As the room cleared, he asked, "Why wouldn't they accept you?"

"They don't take Slytherins. Everyone knows that."

"Who said that? They don't ask it on the application."

Her teeth ground together. Gesturing at the door she demanded, clearly upset, "So why are you arresting us all?"

In a very serious tone Harry explained, "I took Nott in because he set Avery up to kill Professor Snape."

"And how do you know that?" she sneered.

Harry looked over her angry features and said, "I hope you aren't too attached to Nott . . . he's going to be in Azkaban for rather a long time."

"No one ever gave him a break," she said, voice wavering. She tossed the last book into her bag hard. It clunked loudly against the chair seat. When she moved to lift the bag over her shoulder, Harry put a hand on her arm. He had a bad suspicion she had been helping Nott, but perhaps without really knowing what he was planning.

"Look," Harry said gently. "His biggest chance was getting to come back to school after arguably fighting on the wrong side in the final battle. He was given the benefit of the doubt for defending his father, who abandoned him in the end. It would take a lot to get over that and his injuries, and Nott didn't have it in him, apparently."

"Yeah, and what would you know about overcoming something like that?"

"A bit," Harry returned, sounding snide to his own ears. He forced everything down again and managed a soft tone. "But I can't overlook anyone attacking my family. Or anyone helping attack my family." He let that hang out there intentionally, but she didn't react more than to appear thoughtful. "If you knew Nott, the Aurors are going to want to talk to you." Her eyes rolled. "If you want your parents or Professor Snape, or even me there, that can be arranged."

"I don't want Professor Snape there," she said quietly.

Harry took out a scrap of parchment and jotted down Aaron's name and the Ministry address. "And take this. Aaron Wickem, a fellow apprentice would be happy to owl you, I believe. He was most definitely a Slytherin, so whoever told you they weren't accepted was lying." Harry strongly suspected Nott.

She looked painfully at the scrap and with a frown muttered a grudging, "Thanks."

"I have to run. I want to visit Severus before lunch. Good luck," he added before hitching up the now disorganized stack of lecture notes and heading out the door.

In the dispensary, Harry found Snape sitting up but resting his forehead heavily on his hand. He raised it immediately when the door swung open and sat a bit straighter as Harry approached. "How are you feeling?" Harry asked in concern.

"Improved. How was your morning?"

"Hectic. You do this all week. How do you manage it?"

Snape smiled faintly. "Practice."

"I have to confess that while I followed your notes with the fifth-years, I didn't for the seventh-years." At Snape's questioning brow Harry sat on the next bed and explained casually, "I, uh, jumped ahead and started on counter-curses because I'm better at those than the creatures you were covering. And, I had to arrest Nott because he let Avery into the castle, and-

"What?"

"Afraid so."

Snape sat back and stared thoughtfully at the high ceiling. "Not too surprising, frankly."

"And I'm going to suggest the Aurors talk to Askunk as well."

"You are a quick study, Harry; they have been friendly of late. How much Legilimency did that require?"

"None." Harry returned a bit cockily, before glancing at the clock. "I have to go down to lunch. I'll see you this evening. Only the first-years yet."

"Hah," Snape snorted. "You think they are the easiest."

Harry turned. "They aren't?"

"Mindbogglingly frustrating, they are."

"And you have to watch that you don't step on them," Harry added, sounding sober.

"Yes. Please do avoid that."

They shared a grin before Harry turned again and departed in a swish of Snape's faded robe.

After a quick lunch Harry had to search the office, which had grown almost alarmingly disorganized just since that morning, for the right notes. He was about to simply wing it, when he found the correct folder. It was one minute after the hour when Harry stepped briskly into the room. The conversations dropped off to absolute silence as he walked down the middle row. Still rushing, he spun at the front and faced all twenty two of them, the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors. Out of them all, Harry only recognized tiny Erasmus, whose large eyes and hair were about all there was of him.

No Dementor jokes this class, Harry thought, scanning the wide-eyed, nearly alarmed faces all turned up at him. The ones in the front row almost appeared to be ducking a bit. Putting on a friendly smile, Harry picked up the class roll. "Looks like you are all here, but let's go through the list so I can learn some names."

They each responded to their names in varying impersonations of a house-elf. Harry honestly could not imagine being one of them; he could not have been. He put down the roll and scanned the notes, but all he could think of was Snape's comment that he had shown up smaller than Erasmus the Mouse, there. "Well, looks like you did hex deflection last week. Is that right?" Someone nodded, a girl with about six little pigtails arranged around her head. She then swallowed hard, apparently at having attracted Harry's attention. In that instant Harry wished for a few Slytherins to liven things up. "And this week you have been covering the forty-one restricted potions . . ." Harry didn't know there were that many.

"Hm," he said as he quickly glanced through the notes mostly in curiosity. "Not my best topic, apparently," he confessed. "Sounds a little boring too. What could we do instead?" He glanced at Pigtails, whose brow was furrowed. "Yeah," Harry said, "I know, Professor Snape likes to stick to the syllabus."

Oops, Harry thought. Have to watch that. Pigtails was leaning back in shock at having her thoughts spoken aloud. They were open books; it was almost impossible *not* to read their eyes. Plowing on, Harry stepped up onto the platform. "I'm partial to counter-curses myself. I wonder what we could get through in an hour and a half? Titan maybe?" The students were glancing at each other.

"Pixley," Harry said to a boy with very short jet black hair, whose name he had remembered. "Come on up. And who knows some good hexes?" All heads turned to a blonde girl in the back. "Shrumm, right?" Harry dredged up her name. "Come up too. Stand there." He indicated the far end of the platform. Looking very nervous, they both moved to stand where he had asked them to. Harry leaned down to talk to the boy. "Now, the Titan goes like this." Harry held his wand hooked under his thumb with his fingers spread, the boy copied that, looking interested rather than doubtful. Harry turned him around; it was like moving a metal spring Pixley was so tense. Harry dearly hoped it wasn't fear because there was only one thing on the platform to fear and it wasn't the champion hexer of the First-Years who stood waiting fifteen feet away.

Continuing on as though everything was fine, Harry lifted the boy's hands into position. "This is a dome block, so all you have to do is push outwards from your hands."

"What's the incantation?" Pixley asked.

"There isn't one." Harry crouched behind the boy copying what they had done sometimes in D.A. when members had difficulty learning a spell. "Here, let me show you." He pressed his hands behind the small shaking ones, steadying them. "You simply push away with your mind the way you'd push something physical away. But you use the ball of magic inside you instead of muscles. I'll throw up a block, ready?"

"Yeah," came the small reply, actually more of a 'no' in intent.

Harry pushed out the weakest Titan block he could, the orange dome didn't even hover, but Pixley caught his breath. "Okay, let me try," he insisted impatiently. Harry backed off and the boy tried for a minute, even squeezing his eyes shut.

"You're trying too hard. Let me show you again." Pixley willing submitted to a second demonstration and Harry said, "You know, it is easier to bring it up under threat, I think. Shrumm, give us a small hex this way."

Harry noticed her shifting her wand. She apparently had been trying the Titan while she waited. Twisting her face in concentration she tossed a hex at them and Harry pushed a block through Pixley's hands. "A little much to counter a hair-growing hex, but it works."

"Let me try it alone," Pixley insisted.

Harry gratefully stood straight. "Nothing stronger than that, Ms. Shrumm," he warned sternly.

She blinked at him and said, "That's the worst one I know."

"Oh. It's true, you're not a Slytherin, are you," he thought aloud. Many giggled.

Shrumm sent another hair growing hex and Pixley invented his own incantation, something along the lines of "Yah!" But there was the smallest of orange flares and when he patted his head in a panic, no extra hair was present. "Did I do it?"

"I think so. Try it again, and let's get some more pairs working on it."

In the end Harry ended up teaching more hexes, because they were needed for practicing the block. He ignored the inner voice that chanted how unhappy certain quarters might be about that. But eight students produced some form of the

block within an hour, although Harry cheated with Erasmus with just a little Legilimency to get the feel of the spell across. The boy was so thrilled to have gotten it, Harry didn't feel guilty at all.

"All right now, take your seats again." The students piled down from the platform and, with far more relaxed postures, took up their quills again, though their eyes were still awfully wide when they took him in. He sat down on the edge of the platform, thinking that might help. "We have some time for questions, or if you want to start talking about restricted potions. . ."

A hand went up. Harry called on a chubby boy with blonde hair growing straight up from a clump on the top of his head. The boy's name was Donovan, but Harry couldn't help internally referring to him as Dudley, even though the boy seemed perfectly normal.

"I have a question," Donovan announced and then remembered that he could take down his hand. "Who took the photograph on your chocolate frog card?"

"I meant questions about the lesson," Harry clarified, but a glance around the room revealed many interested expressions. Hoping that they didn't intend to take notes on his answer, Harry rubbed his brow and replied, "I have to honestly say that I was a bit distracted at the moment it was taken." Some grins appeared. "So I didn't notice. Someone told me later it was one of the Ministry recorders. Normally such photographs don't get released. Normally."

Pigtails piped in, "Everyone wanted to see he was really dead."

"Yes, they did," Harry agreed.

"Why did he come to the school?" Donovan asked, sounding confused. "Do all dark wizards come to the school?"

Harry chuckled. "No. Not as far as I know. Only when they are trying to kill me."

"Good thing he did," Donovan said with feeling. At Harry's disturbed and questioning look, the flustered boy quickly explained, "Because he needed to be gotten rid of and if he'd kept hiding, or whatever, he would have lived a lot longer. Sir."

Harry tried not to balk. "I suppose you could look at it that way."

"You killed him so easily," Erasmus pointed out.

"Uh. It didn't take long, but I wouldn't have said it was easy. Let's talk about something else."

"Aw . . ." Many voices said in disappointment.

Pigtails raised her hand. "Are you going to be teaching us next week?"

"I don't think so. I have training and Professor Snape should be back in . . . not too long." More noises of disappointment. "Don't you like him?" Harry teased.

"He's all right," Pigtails admitted, "But you're more fun. Snape's really tough."

"*Professor* Snape," Harry corrected stiffly, then winced inwardly at the irony. "And he's tough because wants to save your life. If you really need a spell to protect yourself and you didn't learn it here that would make him feel he'd failed, I think."

Pigtails frowned thoughtfully. "He can be mean though," she complained.

"Ignore it," Harry said with a wink. "That's what I do."

They had endless questions, it seemed, or they really didn't want to start the other lecture. Yet another student with copious freckles put her hand up and said, "So why are *you* teaching instead? Aren't you too famous?"

"I didn't have anything else to do today," Harry explained pleasantly.

A previously quiet girl with long black hair asked, "Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Sort of," Harry hedged.

"What does that mean?"

Donavan leaned over and whispered loudly, "It means he has too many."

Harry pushed his hand over his hair; he was losing control of the situation somehow. "Next topic."

Freckles repeated, "But don't you have better things to do? Like, dark wizards to catch or something?"

"I'm only an Auror apprentice. I'm not supposed to be doing anything. But I caught a dark wizard this morning if that makes you feel better. And one the other night."

Pigtails asked carefully, "The one that came after Professor Snape?"

"Yes," Harry admitted. The class fell silent then and their alarmed expressions began to reappear. Harry shook himself out the dark reverie that they may be picking up on. "So I don't get in trouble with Professor Snape, I'd better give you your assignment." He read the chapter readings off the syllabus.

Erasmus had his hand raised again. "Do you ever get grounded?"

Freckles scoffed. "And who would ground him?"

"Professor Snape," Erasmus returned as though the girl was slow. "He's Harry's dad."

Freckles looked shocked and disbelieving. "Don't be stu-"

"Ah-" Harry uttered sharply to shut them up.

Erasmus protested, "But he is. It said so in the American newspaper my mum gets."

Confused and possibly dismayed faces turned Harry's way. "Mr. Van Eschelon is correct. He's my adoptive father."

"Professor Snape!" Pigtails blurted. "Really?"

"Yes," Harry replied in a stern tone.

"Oh," she muttered, just as the bell rang.

Erasmus stepped up to the front as the others departed, happily realizing that they were finished and had the weekend ahead of them. "Thank you, sir," Erasmus said, holding his small hand out.

Harry shook it, amused. "You're welcome." Behind him two of the girls were whispering. When he looked up, they blushed, said goodbye, and departed quickly, heads ducked.

"Girls," Erasmus scoffed.

"You should get your Friday underway, Mr. Van Eschelon," Harry prompted, then wondered who he was turning into to say that.

In the office Harry felt obligated to try to reorganize all the files he had pulled out, mixed up, and simply spilled on the floor in his rush to find everything. It took him half of an hour just to figure out how the files were supposed to be organized. Luckily, Snape had a strict scheme that was possible to pick up on. As he sorted, a rap sounded on the door and Belinda poked her head in.

"Hello," Harry greeted her warmly and put down the file he held open. "Didn't expect to see you here."

She smiled sweetly and said, "I convinced Minister Bones to let me come scope out what was actually going on." She closed the door with a click and approached the desk.

"Ah," Harry said. "I'm teaching. Severus is recovering. I sent Theodore Nott off with the Aurors."

"We heard about that, of course," she pointed out and leaned upon the desk, facing him. "And you are doing?" she asked concernedly.

Harry sighed lightly. "Is this for you or for your report to Bones?" he asked, honestly needing to know.

Her eyes darkened. "That's not fair, Harry. It's me asking. Trust me a bit," she added, sounding stung. After a pause, during which she studied his eyes closely, she said, "Is that why you are so standoffish with me? Do you think I go back to the Minister and report on everything we do?"

"No, of course not," Harry replied, feeling he didn't have enough spare emotion for this conversation and wishing it weren't happening. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to accuse you of that."

She leaned farther over, and he could smell her hair and ash from the Floo. "I was worried about you when I heard you were still at Hogwarts and I needed a good excuse to leave the office. Trust me to summarize anything personal out of what I tell her when I get back."

"All right. Of course you would." Harry rubbed his head and gathered his wits, which seemed more tattered than he wished they were.

"You're teaching?" she asked, glancing around the desk.

He picked up the file he had been working on. "At the moment I'm refiling. I was in a hurry."

"Want help?"

"No, that's all right. *I* messed it up. Have a seat though unless you have to get back."

She gave him that heart-rate increasing smile again. "I have a few minutes. Tell me a bit more I can 'report' on, if you will."

Harry put a file of pop quizzes back away. "What does the Minister think of Severus?" he asked, wondering if she still considered him a free Death Eater, a former associate of Dumbledore, or didn't consider him anything at all.

"That's a question, not a fact I can pass on," she complained lightly. "I don't know the answer to that anyway. Why do you ask?"

Harry shrugged, not wanting to explain. "Just curious."

After a pause she said, "You are so mysterious; you know that?"

Harry looked up in surprise. "I don't try to be," he returned.

She clasped her hands together over her crossed knees and said frankly, "I've read everything there is written about you, but I don't know you at all." When Harry didn't respond, she went on with a touch of sadness, "I feel like . . . you hold that against me . . ." she frowned with pursed lips and looked hopeful for a response.

She seemed honestly hurt, which Harry didn't intend, so he said, "Some things . . . are just too hard to explain. I don't mean to . . ." He frowned as well, not finding words. He picked up another file and put it back down on another pile, aimlessly.

Belinda stood suddenly and straightened her robes. "I'm sorry. You have a lot going on and I'm here adding to it. I'm glad Professor Snape is all right and that you captured the last Death Eater. I'll tell the Minister everything is calm here and I'll see you at the ministry next week."

Harry called her to a halt when she reached the door, stood up, and came around the desk. He said, "Look. I like you a lot. It just takes time for me to want to share some things. It's actually harder with you because I don't . . . well, I don't want you think badly of me, or wonder . . ." Harry trailed off. She turned with such an aching expression that he gave in and finished the thought. " . . . wonder that I'm actually a dark wizard or something." Harry turned his gaze away as he spoke and tossed his arm to the side in frustration.

She gave him a nearly comically disbelieving glare. "Harry, how in the Wizarding world would I ever think that?" She sounded bizarrely like Ron as she said this. Her neutral face reasserted itself a moment later, as though she didn't want to behave so forcefully. She fell silent before suggesting, "You still have Dementors in your head or something?"

"No, but . . . I have other things in my head," Harry admitted and then immediately wished he had not.

She took that in during a longer thoughtful pause. Eventually, she said, "How could you not? After all that's happened. Merlin," she then muttered, "we're still discussing this." She came closer and gave him a firm hug. While holding him by the shoulders after releasing him, she said, "Harry, I refuse to believe that you are only pretending to be the nicest guy I've ever met. The nicest guy who also kicks serious arse when necessary." Harry let his eyes drift away from her very sincere hazel ones. She went on. "The Aurors said you managed single-handedly two nights ago. That's amazing. On the other hand they dodged the question of how you knew Avery was here."

Harry gave in again and stated, "I saw it in my dreams. I often see Voldemort's servants in my dreams, especially if they are performing dark magic."

She took that in while Harry waited for her reaction. "That must make it difficult to get a good night's sleep," she commented.

"Sometimes," Harry admitted, not entirely certain if she were simply putting forth that calm of hers and was actually alarmed behind it. He wished that she didn't make him feel so needful of her acceptance. Maybe he was doing that on his own. She tweaked him on the chin and he met her gaze.

"I won't pass that on to the Minister," she said.

"Maybe not," Harry agreed with a wry twitch of his lips.

"No wonder you and Professor Snape get on so well."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"He always seemed like a dark magic fan. You must fascinate him," she suggested, half-teasing.

Harry exhaled. "I fascinated him when no one else wanted to deal with me because I think I alarmed them too much." This time it felt like a release to explain things and Harry thought maybe he could make a better try at doing so.

"That explains things a bit." She glanced at the clock and gave him a quick kiss. "I have to get back. Take care, all right. Stop by at lunch when you can."

Harry now felt a bit sad to see her depart. "I'll do that."

Harry returned to the desk, diligently keeping his thoughts from the feel of her kiss that still lingered minutes later, and continued to go through every folder to make sure everything was straight and in a reasonable order before filing it away. As he was re-filing the midterm notes that had somehow been mixed in with N.E.W.T. preparation quizzes, an exceptionally light tap sounded on the door. Harry called out that it was open. He was expecting McGonagall, although it didn't seem like her kind of knock.

The door swung partly open and a small face peered around it, followed by another, the second face was Freckles from the previous class. "What can I do for you?" Harry asked.

"Um," the first one, a plain looking girl with glasses, uttered in hesitation before getting pushed into the room by Freckles. A third and fourth followed with no little trepidation. They resembled turtles to some degree; their heads were tucked down so far between their shoulders.

Freckles, clutching a large book as though it were a shield, said, "We, uh, wondered if you'd give an autograph?"

Harry slowly looked over the four sets of large, disturbingly fawning eyes. He believed he now knew what a freshly unwrapped ice cream treat felt like. "Hm," he said, mostly to stall. "How about this?" He pulled out the class notes he had just filed and found the lecture notes he was supposed to have gone over. "Got a quill?"

All of them moved, so quickly that two bookbags spilled onto the floor to much blushing and perhaps even one tear. Harry casually went on, "Write these down." He read out the five potions from the list that he didn't recognize. They hadn't covered potion regulations yet in his training, but it bothered him not to know what all of these were, when Snape was teaching them to first-years. He wondered if the former Potions master wasn't trying to show up the current one a bit. "Take out your books and write out what each of those is for me, will you? I'll trade that for a few autographs." If he could buy things on Diagon Alley that way, he considered, he wouldn't need an allowance.

Brightly, the girls got to it, all managing to somehow share the one small desk and extra chair. Harry went back to filing, ignoring the occasional long glance he received. He shook himself for thinking like Lockhart, which reminded him that he needed to find Lockhart, or that someone needed to find Lockhart. Without a keeper he should turn up pretty quickly, probably wandering in Piccadilly Circus through Muggle Lorry traffic. That image heartened Harry rather a lot. Lockhart would be better off if someone other than Harry found him.

"Mr. Potter, sir?" Freckles, the apparent group leader, prompted Harry out of his far away thoughts.

He put on a smile. "I'm not teaching as of an hour ago, call me Harry."

She blushed better than Ron. "Okay," she replied in a very tiny voice.

Harry accepted the sheet and looked it over with a critical eye, which wasn't easy given the variations on the admittedly highly neat writing. Something about the hearts, smileys, and even flowers and birds used in place of various punctuation made the content hard to get to. But it read like something straight out of a book.

"Thanks." He set it aside. "What would you like autographed?" She held out the book she had been carrying. He flipped it open to the marked page. "What is this?" he asked.

"The *Witch Weekly Yearbook*, sir, uh, Harry." A bright smile followed.

"I've never seen this."

"You're in it a lot," she stated helpfully, clearly happy about that. She leaned over the desk and pointed at a picture of him from a Quidditch match, the one the Dementors interrupted. But it was a good picture of him, in the close foreground, cutting in the opposite direction from Malfoy, who did not look to be having fun and whose figure kept trying to get out from behind Harry. "Can you sign that one, please?"

Harry did so, and handed the book back. The next girl, the one with gold-rimmed glasses, shyly came forward. Harry tried a reassuring smile and wondered if he looked like Lockhart used to. With a jolt he also wondered if what that man had been hadn't been less himself and more what the world turned him into. Glasses had a Gryffindor flag to be autographed. When signed, she gingerly took it back as though it had turned to glass, and backed up a step before saying, "You're much cuter in person."

"Am I?" Harry asked, for lack of anything else to say. There was general agreement about this. "Better than being uglier, I suppose."

Autographs finished, they packed up their things and thanked him repeatedly. One of them whispered to the other. "I'm going to owl my mum!"

Before they left, Harry said, "Don't show those around 'til I'm gone this evening."

Freckles smiled conspiratorially, "Sure, Harry."

They departed with much whispering and giggling, and McGonagall stepped inside in their wake. "Ah, the Harry Potter Fan Club did manage a personal appearance."

"Yep," Harry sighed.

"I do hope you are coming down to dinner?"

Startled, Harry asked the time while he found his watch. "Yes," he replied, "are you going down now?" He quickly filed the last two folders, hoping he had put them to right.

"Take your time, Harry," she said gently. She paced slowly around while Harry put a few stray things away and straightened up. McGonagall stopped in the middle of the office and stared at the stone floor with a faraway expression. Harry followed her gaze and felt that terrible shifting of reality as if those two drastically diverging paths of recent past could be accidentally swapped, leaving him again facing that agonizing grief.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said. "I didn't come here to take you back."

Harry stood and slipped Snape's robe back on. "It's all right," he said, but the floor felt unstable and his chest tight.

"Also I hope you will do me a favor?" At his nod she went on, "Take Severus home for the weekend if you will. Make certain he rests and, if on Monday morning--no make that Sunday night--if he is not one hundred percent, owl me and we will cover his classes, as long as necessary. I don't want him straining himself. Remus said he is available. All right?"

"Sure."

She held out her arm, crooked at the elbow and Harry, with a smile, accepted it. She escorted him this way, patting his hand with her other, as they walked around to the staircase. "It is good when everything works out all right."

"It's shocking when everything works out all right," Harry commented vehemently.

"Oh, my poor Harry," she said sympathetically.

Harry was in the mood for sympathy and accepted it in silence.

The Grand Staircase and Entrance Hall were full of loudly chatting students. Many turned and greeted them deferentially as they passed. In the aisle on the way to the front of the Great Hall, McGonagall said, "Are you coming to our Christmas Ball?"

"I don't think I can find a date in time," Harry pulled out as an excuse.

"I thought perhaps you would be mine," she returned with a wink. A few strides later, they were on the platform beside her chair. She gave his arm a surprisingly hard squeeze before turning to speak with Flitwick. Harry took the seat beside hers and made small talk with Sinistra on his right.

The hall gradually filled with boisterous students. Ginny gave Harry a wave and came up to stand before the head table. "How was your first day of teaching?" she asked.

"Too eventful," Harry returned over the general noise.

McGonagall said, "Ask him how the first meeting of the unofficial Harry Potter Fan Club went."

Harry shot the headmistress a dismayed look. Ginny said, "Oh dear. Who is that?"

"The four muskatellas," McGonagall said.

"Oh. Them. Poor Harry," she said in sympathy.

"I survived," Harry countered.

"Take your seat, Ms. Weasley, and we will start." Ginny turned with a last wave at Harry. McGonagall clapped her hands twice and platters appeared. Harry had just reached to serve himself when he noticed the center doors opening and a familiar figure enter. He released the long spoon and watched as Snape, heavily relying on a cane, made his way down the center aisle. Many of the students stopped and turned as well. Harry had to grip the table edge with both hands to resist jumping up to help his guardian.

Eventually, Snape made it around the long table to where they sat in the middle. He put a hand on Harry's shoulder and leaned on it hard. McGonagall stood and with her wand, waved another place setting between them. Snape didn't move to it; he gestured for Harry to. "Go ahead, Harry. I'm sure Minerva would like to sit beside you, as she has more than enough of my company."

Harry looked up at him, marveling at his very strange smile. Snape gestured again and Harry shifted over one. Their place settings magically switched as he settled in. Snape, gingerly it appeared, lowered himself into the chair Harry had vacated. Harry wanted to ask if he were really recovered enough to be here, but held back; it wasn't as if Snape were going to turn around and return to the dispensary this minute. Instead, Harry pushed the potatoes over to him, and then swapped that bowl for the chicken stew.

As they all started eating, McGonagall leaned close and whispered, "You are hovering, Harry. He hasn't chastised you for that?"

"Am I? No, he hasn't," Harry muttered back. He tried harder to relax then but panic seemed to surge through him for no good reason.

"How were the First-Years?" Snape asked.

Harry took a deep breath. "Mostly all right. You didn't warn me about the mooners."

"Ah. Didn't think to. Did you make it through all the potions?"

"No, sorry. I stuck with what I'm good at--defensive spells."

"Really? What did you teach them?"

Harry served himself more mead to stall. This moment had not been on his mind when he had arbitrarily changed topics in class. "Um, a counter-curse."

Sounding dubious, Snape asked, "And how did that go?"

"Um . . ." Harry considered that less than half of the class got anything out of it. "Well . . ."

Snape leaned past him. "Minerva," he spoke across Harry. "You hired Harry Potter to teach Defense today and no matter what the syllabus said, he taught only counter-curses. All day."

"No. The first session I covered . . . Dementors and Lethifolds."

"Sorry, I take it back," Snape said with more of his old snide. "He can cover other topics with which he is personally familiar."

Harry laughed. McGonagall leaned forward and said, "Judging by the jealousy I have heard expressed this afternoon from the students not so honored as to have Mr. Potter's tuition today, I believe we can allow him some leeway. For one day, at least."

"Hm," Snape muttered doubtfully, but he was still smiling vaguely.

The Great Hall emptied out after the plates and platters vanished. Harry felt much more relaxed with a warm full stomach and Snape beside him, the color more than returned to his complexion. The teachers, unusually, were the last to depart, aside from a few Seventh-Year Gryffindors, who were waiting for Harry. When the three of them stood, McGonagall leaned close to Snape, "I have instructed Harry to take you home to recuperate, Severus. No arguments."

Harry, who was considering going and speaking with his friends, remained in place instead and tried to appear stern. "Hm," was all Snape said before he hobbled along the back of the head table, the rest of them in tow. "I should perhaps go pack, in that case," Snape conceded. Harry started to follow him to the doors of the hall, but Snape stopped and said dismissively, "I believe your friends wish to visit with you."

Harry stopped. "Oh . . . yeah." Snape gave him an extra visual nudge, so he turned and walked over to Ginny, the Creevey brothers and a few others who were still gathered at the end of the house table, talking animatedly. They greeted him warmly and made space on the end of the bench for him.

* * *

McGonagall followed the slow moving Snape to his office where he stopped to run his hand over the worn, age-blackened decorative flower carving on the replacement door. They stood in silence as a large cluster of third-years passed, after which McGonagall asked, "Are you all right?"

Frankly, Snape replied, "Very much so."

McGonagall hesitated before following as she worked out that reply. "That didn't sound the least bit sarcastic, Severus." She closed the door behind her, blocking out the youthful voices from the corridor.

Almost pleasantly, Snape replied, "It wasn't." He pulled out a small trunk and began filing a few things into it.

"Severus, don't work. Don't concern yourself with anything."

"I will go mad with nothing to occupy myself."

"Catch up with Harry. He clearly misses you." Dropping her voice, she added, "He clearly needs a rest as well."

Snape stared through the far wall, lost in recent memory. He laughed lightly as he tried to take it all in.

"Perhaps . . . you also need a slightly different kind of Healer . . ." she gently insinuated.

"No, I am quite all right," he countered, still sounding queerly pleasant. The small trunk was returned to the cupboard, empty. Lifting it even empty had been a strain, but Snape didn't let on to this. He met her worried gaze and held it steadily. That light feeling from the veil had not completely escaped him, or perhaps it was lack of blood making him faint and euphoric. "I've won," he stated and then laughed in a huff.

McGonagall didn't speak, although she did rub her hands together before dropping them at her sides. Snape discovered in himself an unusual desire to be understood by his longtime colleague. He tugged his long sleeves down over his hands to cover a chill from the cool room on his arms. "I could not pass through the veil. Albus prevented me from doing so."

Her expression shifted to amazement. "Truly? You saw Albus?"

Smiling wryly, he replied, "Yes. My assurances to Harry were not misguided." She started to speak but then stopped. Snape filled the silence with an even more wry observation. "He insisted I return to care for Harry--as opposed to for my own benefit."

McGonagall smiled lightly with him. "Albus always assumed those around him wished to be as selfless as he was."

Snape considered that he understood the old wizard better now; previously, similar situations had aggravated him. He put a few textbooks into a shoulder bag and placed it on the desk just as a rap sounded on the heavy door. The door opened and Harry put his head inside. "When are we leaving?"

"Soon," Snape replied.

Harry waved his friends on and started to step in, but McGonagall said, "I need a moment more with Severus, if you wouldn't mind, Harry dear."

"Oh. All right." He backed out and pulled the door closed behind him.

McGonagall paced before the desk while Snape waited for her to continue. Quietly now, she said, "I've underestimated you in the past, but I am concerned that you are not skilled enough to fully help him." She gestured at the door.

Without rancor Snape replied, "I believe I can manage."

She persisted, "He is injured--"

"He is scarred. He wears in it plain sight." Snape hoisted the books over his shoulder and replayed his own assertion to James Potter in his mind. "I appreciate your concern, Minerva. But trust that I do understand his difficulty--as well as my responsibilities." He fell into silent thought before observing, "The risk Harry took in accepting me as a guardian has only become clear to me now, and I am compelled to honor that--as well as other oaths I seem to have taken in the interests of getting even."

She studied him closely, trying to eek out some understanding of that.

Snape went on. "I am not averse to your assistance, however. I can certainly bring Harry to you more often for visits."

She scoffed. "You force me to confess my utter gratitude at your survival to care for him. He was in my hands, and I was completely unable to help him."

Snape picked up his cane and used it to step by her to the door. "Harry desires your praise--of that I am certain. You could perhaps be freer with it." He opened the door to cut off any reply she may have to that.

Harry and a cluster of older students were waiting in the corridor. Harry immediately came over and took Snape's bag off of his shoulder.

"You may use the Floo in my office," McGonagall invited.

Harry made his goodbyes and followed along farther into the castle. In the headmistress' tower as they organized before the hearth, McGonagall said, "Anything you need, please owl. Anything at all."

"Thanks," Harry said sincerely and gave a little wave goodbye. McGonagall waved back as Harry stepped into the blackened hearth.



Chapter 73 -- Revenge and Redemption

At home, Harry put Snape's books down in the library and quickly returned in case his guardian needed assistance on the stairs; although, he looked to be managing. Harry hesitated helping without Snape signaling that he would accept it, so Harry followed a step behind, straining to remain patiently inactive.

"Feeling all right?" Harry asked when they made the balcony.

In a reassuring tone, Snape replied, "Yes, Harry, I'm fine--just being careful." He patted Harry's arm before turning to the doorway to his room.

"Minerva said I was hovering. I don't . . . sorry."

"Your apology is unnecessary," Snape stated without turning from his slow journey into his room. "My father owed to say he and Gretta would stop by this evening. Show them to the drawing room and come fetch me if you would."

"Are you certain?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Snape firmly replied. "I put them off visiting Hogwarts, but could not put them off longer."

Harry wondered that Snape would put so much effort into not appearing weak before his father but nodded that he would do as instructed. He returned downstairs to check the post and straighten things up before the guests arrived. The *Prophets* he stacked neatly and the post he sorted and took to the drawing room where he put it in the desk. Snape's previous desk diary was in the drawer and Harry drew a finger over its soft leather. The desk and the room resonated with Snape's presence and Harry again felt fiercely grateful that he still had his guardian's living presence and not just the hollow memory and physical shell of his things.

Harry wandered the ground floor, unable to settle down to any calm task. He organized his books, pulling them all down to stacks on the floor and reordering them, flipping through several of them to remind himself of dimly-remembered spells from the first month of his training. When the Floo sounded, he shoved the remaining books quickly back away and went to the dining room. Shazor looked exactly as Harry has last seen him, but Gretta seemed older and her smile strained. Harry welcomed them and led them to the drawing room. He had been vaguely dreading their appearance but was now glad for the distraction.

When he went to fetch Snape, however, he found him dozing and disliked disturbing him. Snape woke on his own when the hinge creaked and refused to let Harry do more than hand him his cane. Outside the drawing room, Severus straightened his stance more than Harry thought possible, and entered. Shazor stood quickly to greet him and looked him up and down, shedding his concerned gaze for an annoyed one. "The *Prophet* seems to have exaggerated your injuries."

Severus took a seat with some care, saying snidely, "I doubt that, given that I spent a rather lengthy ten minutes beyond the veil."

Harry gaped at him, but hid it immediately. Shazor was too startled to notice Harry's own surprise. Gretta *wked* in pained sympathy before saying, "You are very lucky to have returned, in that case."

Severus gave a pained, flickering smile before saying to Harry, "Have a seat."

Harry, gripped by bad memories and equally bad possibilities, had to force himself to obey. Shazor and Gretta seemed more like a television program he could not switch off than real people there in the same room. Severus shot him a concerned look before saying to his father, "I was foolish. I knew my ingredient cabinet had been raided by a student, but I was fooled into believing their diversion. They left the Feather Star shifted on the shelf when they must have actually taken some of the extract of Ocimumum."

A heated tendril of anger snaked through Harry at that. "You knew someone was brewing a restricted potion?"

"I suspected," Severus corrected. Sounding more defensive, he said, "The door to my office was well-spelled with an Imperturbable Charm, but Nott must have known how to remove it. Your friend Ms. Granger was the only student I've ever previously known to have mastered that cancellation."

Shazor sounded vaguely chastising as he said, "Unfortunate to have been overcome by one of your own students."

Severus explained, "I woke and heard someone in my office but did not realize that the vapor had already started to affect my judgment and my magic." He fell silent then, looking grim, but it faded quickly and he gave Harry another concerned studying.

Winky appeared during the pause, bearing chocolate biscuits, which Harry gratefully accepted.

Small talk consumed the rest of the visit and eventually Shazor and Gretta departed with Harry getting the usual hug from Gretta. Snape slumped slightly when the hearth flared a second time and they were alone. "You should rest," Harry insisted. Snape merely nodded in silence and made his slow way back to his room. Harry followed, wondering what an ordinary family would be doing right about now.

Harry watched Snape settle into his room before he went to his own and stopped beside the corner bedpost for a time, just staring at the floor and the edge of the trunk by the window. He was simultaneously tired and overexcited, but he moved to change into pyjamas and dressing gown, remembering with a jolt that he was wearing some stranger's discarded clothes. After removing the faded black pullover, he held it up and studied it; the knit had stretched and sagged with time, but he tossed it into the hamper for Winky to clean, thinking that he could wear it while gardening in the spring.

With everything put away Harry tried to read for Monday, but instead wrote a few letters to his close friends, explaining that Snape was home now and recovering gradually. The hollow alternatives resisted his writing down these simple things, as though some rational part of him knew differently and didn't want him sinking so far into delusion.

Still uneasy, Harry gave all the letters to Hedwig to deliver around London in one trip. She cocked her head at him at first, but flew off after adjusting her grip, claws spearing the stack to hold them all firmly. Her ghostly form flitted away down the road and over the streetlight. Harry closed the window and sighed at the sight of his lamp-lit, neatly made bed. Complete exhaustion drew him to it, otherwise he might have organized his cupboard first.

Harry woke to the dimness of the short wick on his bedside lamp. For a moment he couldn't figure out why he wasn't in the dispensary and then wondered why he thought he should be. The last few days came crashing in upon him. He groaned and rolled over, punched his pillow, hugged it a bit, and tried to fall back to sleep.

He must have managed because he found himself jarringly awake, the same confusion playing out again, adding to the wearing on his spirit. He felt around in his nightstand drawer for a potion bottle before giving up on looking with the cold fear that he might not wake up if he were needed. Eventually, because his body demanded it, he plummeted again into sleep.

The next time Harry awoke he stared through the orange dimness at the stone floor between the bed and the door, and, with a nauseating quiver in his limbs, realized what was wrong. The eerie emptiness of the quiet around him felt suffocating suddenly rather than calming. Stumbling from his bed, he tugged his housecoat down from the bedpost and took up

his wand from the night stand. His rational mind told him that if he were correct, then he was much too late. His frayed nerves ached at the renewed urgency and he stumbled from his room.

On the balcony, light spilled from Snape's room. Harry stepped unsteadily that way and pushed the door open the remainder of the way. Snape sat in bed, propped up by many large pillows, reading a book. He looked over at Harry in curiosity. Harry let his wand hand fall to the side, feeling very little beyond the throbbing of his overwrought nerves.

"Harry?" Snape prompted.

Harry cleared his throat after unsuccessfully trying to speak. "You're supposed to be resting." It was all he could think of to say. He forced himself to breath normally.

Snape closed his book with a *clap*. "I have been resting for two days straight," he complained lightly. When he glanced at the wand in Harry's hand, his face fell slightly. "Come in," he invited gently. "What is wrong?"

Harry stepped forward halfway to the bed. He thought about his repeated empty wakings and breathed, "I've lost you."

Snape's expression grew alarmed. "Harry . . . come here," he said more sternly. "I am right here."

Harry shook his head. "That's not what I mean," he insisted. He stepped over beside the bed, however, and after two attempts found the pocket for his wand and put it away. "I keep waking up and . . . you're not there."

Snape's confused expression narrowed to a very intense one. "You . . ." He swallowed hard. "You do not see me in your mind anymore?" At Harry's half nod, Snape asked, "Are you certain?"

Harry gestured sloppily in the direction of his own room. "I've woken up three times and . . . I'm alone." He pushed his hair back. "I thought something had happened to you. I was too tired to figure it out. To realize."

Snape rubbed his forehead. "Are you certain?" he whispered again.

"Yes. Three times. I usually see you all the time when you're home."

Snape was clearly stunned. "You sound . . . disappointed," he said in disbelief.

"I like knowing when you're around," Harry argued. "When you come check on me." More quietly he insisted, "No one had ever done that before."

"Yes, but . . ." Snape started and then laughed oddly. "Is that possible? To be unmade from such a thing--from being the Dark Lord's servant?" He rubbed his left forearm through his coarse sleeve.

"You weren't anyway. Voldemort is gone," Harry pointed out firmly.

Still gripping his forearm, Snape said, "I did not see it that way." He looked up at Harry, gaze far away, then he laughed lightly again. "I would not have imagined," he whispered. After a half minute more he shook himself. "You are having trouble sleeping?" At Harry's nod, he asked, "Do you want potion?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm afraid I won't wake up . . . if something happens."

"Harry, you must sleep sometime," Snape swung his feet off the bed and reached for his dressing gown. "But it is half past five. We can have breakfast instead. I am quite hungry."

Harry helped him to his feet, which Snape did not resist, and held him steady while he reached for his cane. Putting an arm around Harry's shoulders, Snape gave him a half-hug. "Merlin, I wouldn't have imagined." He ran a hand over the back of Harry's head. "Thank you, Harry."

"You're welcome . . . although I don't know what I did," he said a little smartly.

Snape started for the door, leaning on Harry more than the cane. "You gave me something to return for. Come, let's get you some breakfast." He ran his hand again over his charge's head. "And see what else we can do for you."

Harry ducked his head in embarrassment. He was overreacting to everything but, even with effort, couldn't find a rational instinct for things.

In the dining room Snape asked yet again, "Are you certain?"

"What?" Harry's thoughts had drifted into a bad circle of memories. He roused himself and stirred the coals in the hearth to warm the room. "Yes, I'm certain your shadow is gone."

Snape lowered himself into a chair. Harry gave up on the fire and sat across the table from his guardian. Snape simply stared at him. "Merlin," he muttered again. "You will forgive me while I am occupied with being stunned, won't you?"

Harry relaxed an inch and smiled. "Sure." He certainly hadn't ever seen Snape with quite this expression; it was an almost amusingly befuddled one.

Winky stepped in, hands clasped before her. "Masters wish for breakfast?"

Distractedly, Snape replied, "Yes, please. Thank you, Winky."

Harry laughed as Winky departed after a bow. "Oh sure," Harry taunted. "One never thanks the house-elf."

Snape appeared startled. He quickly turned to the door and then back. "I must be slipping," he breathed, with a tinge of dismay.

Coffee appeared. When Snape reached for it, Harry grabbed it first. "Pomfrey said you weren't to have any." At Snape's utterly appalled expression, Harry relented and poured him a quarter cup and pushed it over to him. Snape stared into it before taking a very small sip as though to make the scant amount last.

Harry put his cup down and stoked up the fire more and added another chunk of wood. The tongues of flame quickly rose to blacken it. He put the poker aside and returned to his seat and watched the fire build. Usually he found the fire relaxing, now it reminded him of his mad run to Hogwarts.

"Harry," Snape's voice cut through his thoughts. "Do not dwell on it . . . it only feeds it."

"I'm not trying to remember," Harry countered, annoyed. Part of him wondered what he had been thinking to put so much at risk and accept someone as a father yet again. Hadn't he learned from the past?

"Harry," Snape repeated. "I will be here for you."

Angry suddenly, Harry argued, "How can you promise that?"

Snape actually smiled lightly. "Albus is blocking my way through the veil. Otherwise, I would *not* promise such a thing."

It was Harry's turn to gape. "Dumbledore! You saw Dumbledore?"

Calmly, Snape poured himself another quarter cup of coffee. Morning light was just beginning to infuse the room, brightening the walls. "I did, and I agree, he looked much younger than he did when he died." Thoughtfully, Snape sipped his renewed cup. "I wonder if he reverted to the age he was when he began using the Philosopher's Stone to make elixir."

"When was that?"

"I do not know for absolute certain, but I got the sense it was just after Grindelwald's defeat." Snape was quiet for a long time, eyes focused far beyond Harry. "Albus would never discuss some things and that was one of them. My suspicion was that he knew Riddle would rise to power in Grindelwald's wake, and he wanted to be there to guide whoever was destined to defeat him. That happened to be you."

"So he didn't just defeat Riddle himself," Harry complained, even though he knew this.

Snape didn't reply right way. When he did speak, he sounded as though he were composing his response very carefully. "I suspect he believed that whoever did defeat him had other things that they must do after."

Harry's jaw clenched. "Oh. Great," he muttered. "Here I am going along thinking my life is my own."

"No one's life is their own. Not yours . . ." Snape's voice dropped low as he added, ". . . and certainly not mine, now." With a light smile he teased, "Chin up Harry, by the time the next dark witch or wizard makes an appearance, you will be very powerful indeed."

Breakfast materialized while they both thought that over. Harry hadn't believed he was hungry but the heaping plate looked very inviting and his stomach rumbled even before he could pick up his fork. In short order, his plate was empty again and it disappeared.

Snape laughed lightly.

"You're sure you're all right?" Harry asked. "All this chuckling worries me."

The smile didn't fade from Snape's lips. "I've won."

"You're no longer a shadow to me, you mean?"

"There is that as well," Snape stated pleasantly. "I was thinking, actually, of cheating death . . . among other things."

Harry stood up to collect the *Prophet* from the owl that was dropping it off rather than let it sit outside on the sill. The cold air woke him up sharply before he re-closed the sash. "What other things?" he asked, putting the paper down beside Snape and returning to his chair.

Snape hesitated rather a long while. "Well," he finally began, "I no longer hold any ill will toward your godfather, who sent me back here, to the land of the living."

Harry froze. "Sirius did that?"

"Yes. He apparently has additional powers beyond the veil, perhaps because he arrived whole rather than the usual way."

Harry feared the memory that drew forth, but it didn't cut nearly so deep as it used to. He put his hands down on the table to feel its solidity. "How did he look?"

"Black? A bit melancholy, I must admit."

Harry remembered his own moments beyond the veil. "That's what I thought," he admitted sadly. "Too bad there isn't anyway to . . . to thank him."

"Not that I can think of. I am certain a time will come when you can do so in person, but hopefully that is well in the future." Snape moved to pour himself yet more coffee, but Harry pulled it out of reach.

"That's enough," he chastised his guardian.

"Hm," Snape muttered, but didn't argue. His eyes were abnormally bright, especially given their color.

Harry, needing a distraction from all the emotion churning within him, turned the paper over to glance at the front page. Avery was relegated to the bottom article and a scandal involving someone rigging Quidditch Bludgers had moved into the headline, which read, *Falcons Must Forgo Questionable Wins*. That nagged at Harry but he dropped it on the worn wood and pushed it back over to his guardian. Snape was giving him one of the closer lookings-over he had ever received.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," Snape said, sounding strangely pained. He picked up the large folded parchment news and scanned it.

It was still early when the door knocker sounded. Harry went to answer it and found Candide outside, bundled thickly against the cold.

"Can I come in?" she asked shyly, sounding as though she expected to be turned away.

"Sure," Harry invited, figuring there was nothing for it.

Snape had come into the hall, leaning on his cane. "How are you?" Candide asked him, sounding concerned.

"Improving," Snape answered amiably.

Harry excused himself and went upstairs. When the door to Harry's room closed, Snape said, "Something I can do for you?"

She smiled wryly. "I wanted to see how you were doing. I stopped by the school again and the headmistress said you had gone home." At his questioning look, she explained, "You were out . . . cold when I stopped by the first time." She glanced up at the balcony. "Got a good chewing out from your son." Snape's brow lowered and she quickly added, "It's all right. He explained something I hadn't understood. And he was only protecting you. That alone made me think." She sighed and swung her arms at her sides once. "You know, I miss being around you, but it is really hard to accept some things--no matter how much time has passed. But I keep reminding myself that Harry Potter himself has forgiven you, so who am I to hold things like that over you?"

Snape didn't respond, just stood in calm silence. She huffed into the quiet space around them. "I really want to let it go. I want to be sorry for what I said." She frowned a bit. "I want to spend time with you again," she said with a short laugh, then ducked her head. "Can we try again?"

Snape sighed lightly. "If you wish."

This simple response caught her off guard. "Oh . . . all right."

Snape gathered the sides of his dressing gown together as though he were chilled and leaned a little harder on the cane. "I would invite you for dinner, but I am not the best company at this time, and as well . . ." Here, he too glanced up to the balcony to check Harry's door. "I must devote myself to Harry for a time."

"I understand," she agreed, sounding flustered. "He did seem rather stretched to his limit when I stopped by Hogwarts." After a span of awkward silence, she moved toward the entryway and turned back, head tilted shyly. "Well, owl me then. All right? I can show myself out." Snape nodded.

After the outside door opened and closed, Snape made his way up the stairs and knocked on Harry's door. Inside, Harry was sitting on his bed, immersed in his Auror-assigned readings. "How'd it go?" he asked.

"Fine," Snape assured him. He stepped in and gimped around to the window, stopping at the cages. Hedwig's stood empty but the Chimrian looked up at him and flapped her wings while holding them bent in the confining space. "Shall I let her out?" he asked.

"Sure," Harry replied. "You didn't have any great fondness for the curtains in here anyway, right?"

Snape turned to the window and studied the drapery, which now hung in wide tattered strips. "Hm. No, not particularly." He opened the cage and Kali flapped down to the door edge and then out and over to the bed. Harry perched her on his shoulder where she hunkered down and appeared to read with him.

Snape turned to the window with a wince, attracting Harry's attention. "You all right?" Snape assured him that he was, but Harry went on, "Pomfrey is supposed to check on you, right?"

"This afternoon."

Harry glanced at the clock; it wasn't even 9:00 in the morning yet. "I can fetch her now."

"It is unnecessary. I will go down to the library and take it easy."

"Why don't you just go to bed?"

"I am . . . thrilled . . . to be up and out of bed. I have no intention of returning until it is absolutely necessary. I will rest downstairs."

Harry followed Snape to where he settled onto the lounge in the library. He fetched Snape's books for him and hovered a minute to be certain he was settled and then went and fetched his own things anyway. Kali, who had gripped him painfully hard when he was moving quickly, settled down when he did at the small table.

Harry tried to follow the chapter on spell dissipation that he needed to read for Monday. It was interesting; really, he had always wondered why certain transfigurations lasted longer than others, why some kinds of spells were easy to cancel and others nearly impossible. But his attention wandered constantly and he had to keep repeating paragraphs to remember what he had just gone over. For the first time in a very long while he wished for a television to look at so he didn't have to think.

Owls arriving provided a welcome distraction. "Ron and Hermione want to stop by this evening. Is that all right?" Harry asked.

"Certainly," Snape replied without looking up. "If they are staying for dinner, you should perhaps inform Winky."

Harry reread the letter from Hermione, which was so full of compassion that he skipped over parts of it to keep from unbalancing himself. "Doesn't say. I'll assume they are."

The morning dragged on with Harry savoring the reassuring presence of his guardian, letting it ease the panic that kept trying to rise whenever his mind wandered backward in time three days.

During one of those moments, Snape urged him, "Do try not to dwell, Harry. Perhaps you should set up the chess board and we can play a little."

Harry shook himself and pretended that everything was all right. Just pretending made him feel better and he went to the drawing room for the roughhewn marble chess set. He moved the small desk over beside the lounge and transfigured it to be a little larger before moving the set onto it and arranging the pieces.

As they played, Harry leaned heavily on his elbow and finally just rested his head on his arm while he waited for his opponent's move. Kali had crawled down into his lap and curled up into a warm lump.

"Why don't you go have a nap, Harry?" Snape suggested.

Harry shook his head; he was about to put Snape in check, and when his move arrived, did so. His bishop made a motion as though to test the weight of his mace in anticipation.

"Have you been playing?" Snape asked as he surveyed the board.

"No." He was however, easily seeing the board as a whole, which was not usually the case.

"You have improved at this game," Snape observed as he moved his king one space to the left. Harry moved his other knight closer in, to box in the black king on the next move and waited again for Snape to take a turn. He must have closed his eyes and drifted off because when he opened them a tea set was being placed beside his elbow. The black king was on its side.

"I concede," Snape informed him as he poured out a cup for Harry.

Harry lifted his head and rubbed his neck. "That's the first time I've won playing you," he observed.

Snape settled himself back on the edge of the lounge and blew on his hot cup. "I blame your unorthodox distraction techniques."

"What distraction?" Harry asked, confused.

"Your sleeping beside the board, for one thing. It tends to lower one's expectation for one's opponent to mount a decent strategy."

"Everyone underestimates me," Harry complained while resetting the board.

Snape wrapped his hands around his cup and simply held it. "I think there will come a time when that will no longer be true. I hope you can rise to it when it does happen."

They played two more games which resulted in draws before Harry settled back into his reading, feeling relaxed, although later, the Floo flaring in the other room startled him, until Snape, getting slowly to his feet, said, "That must be Madam Pomfrey."

Harry longed to give her a hand, but held back and instead went to greet the visitor. Lugging a battered, black bag, the Hogwarts Healer took Snape upstairs with her usual efficient manner, with Harry observing their slow progress from the floor of the hall.

Inside his room, Snape made his way to the bed and with his now usual care, lowered himself to sit on the edge. Madam Pomfrey plunked her bag beside him and tapped it open with a finger. Its metal-hinged top yawned wide like a mouth and she plucked her wand out of it. "Looks like you are in a bit more pain than you ought," she observed.

Snape adjusted his dressing gown and nodded his head to the side noncommittally. Using her wand, she tapped him in the center of his chest and huffed quietly. She then extracted a tall, cork-stoppered bottle from her bag, much too large to fit had the bag been the same size on the outside as the in. She used it to fill the bedside glass nearly to the brim and handed it to Snape, who sniffed at it doubtfully.

"Another dose of tissue knitter is in order, Professor." At Snape's frown she retorted, "Better than suffering forever."

He sniffed at the clear liquid again. "Is this a new batch?" he asked.

"Yes," Pomfrey admitted and when Snape continued to examine the liquid doubtfully, she said, "Professor, the Potions Mistress would not poison another member of the staff."

Snape raised his left brow at her with a dubious expression.

Pomfrey went on, conceding, "And in any event, I tested it this morning on myself . . . no harm done." She lifted her hands from her full-skirted sides, as though to show off her normal self.

Snape huffed and drank a gulp before holding the glass to the lamplight. "Tastes a little off."

"Drink it all. Come now," Pomfrey cajoled as though to a child.

Snape swayed slightly and obeyed with a frown. She took the glass back and suggested that he lie down. "The knitting isn't the most pleasant, sleeping through it would be better anyway."

Snape's head was nodding and in a blink he fell over onto the pillow. Pomfrey scooped his slippers onto the bed and covered them with his dressing gown. "There we are," she said happily.

Speech slurring, Snape muttered, "You . . . slipped in . . . sleeping potion."

She propped her hands on her hips. "Serves you right. After the last dose of knitting potion you ran down to dinner. No wonder you needed another."

She adjusted his pillow and had to lean close to hear him say, "Had to . . . reassure Harry."

She sighed. "Well . . . never mind. This should be the last now." She closed up her bag and held it in her hand while resting two fingers on the pulse point of his wrist hanging over the edge of the bed. Humming lightly to herself, she finally turned down the lamp and departed.

Harry met Pomfrey at the bottom of the stairs. "How is he?" he immediately asked.

"He'll be fine," she stated pleasantly. "Although he'll be asleep for a few hours. See that he isn't disturbed." She headed for the hearth in a businesslike manner, but before she tossed in any powder she said, "When he wakes up, see that he gets a good meal . . . he should be quite hungry."

Harry returned to his reading without much ability to concentrate, but it wasn't long before Ron and Hermione arrived. Harry was very grateful to see them as he was in dire need of an understanding ear and something different to occupy his thoughts. They settled into the drawing room and played wizard chess while Hermione perused a few books she found in the library.

"I shoulda brought my set," Ron complained at one point.

"What? Mine aren't as crazed as yours?" Harry asked.

"I like a chess set that always does as I say," Ron went on. He ordered his rook to slide over beside his queen.

Harry didn't usually try very hard at this game, mostly because Ron almost always won anyway, but today, bolstered by his other win, he was in the mood for a challenge. That move looked as though Ron were trying to distract him from some other ploy. Harry studied the board thoughtfully, refusing to be baited. Thinking of making his own distraction, Harry asked, "Would you like a butterbeer?"

"Oy, yes, thanks."

Harry started to stand, but Hermione volunteered to fetch them from the kitchen.

When she got there, Winky was holding three, fully warmed butterbeers and glasses on a tray for her. "Thank you, Winky," Hermione said as she accepted the tray. She lowered it to her waist and stood with it, hesitating. "Are you happy here?" she asked a little quietly.

Winky straightened her sparkling white tea towel. "Oh yes, mistress. Winky very happy. Masters is very nice wizards."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, they are, aren't they. Well, thank you for the refreshments." Winky bowed her out, smiling broadly as well.

"Are you staying for dinner?" Harry asked later when his stomach began to complain.

"We'd like to," Ron stated forcefully.

"Ron, you don't invite yourself for dinner," Hermione complained.

"I wasn't," Ron retorted.

Harry held up his hand. "It's all right. I'd like you to stay. I don't think Severus is going to be awake for a while." He should have just invited them outright, he regretted to himself as each of his friends eyed the other in annoyance.

The meal was quiet, given that his friends were continuing to be a little peeved with each other, although Hermione kept trying to keep a conversation going regarding Harry's attempts at teaching. Harry, who had decided perhaps he hadn't done all that brilliant of a job, wasn't really in the mood to dissect his performance. When the dessert dishes cleared themselves away, the two of them made their goodbyes to Harry, including a long hug from Hermione that made Ron tap her on the shoulder.

"I'm glad everything's all right, Harry," Hermione said with feeling as she released him.

"Thanks."

When they had gone, it felt much too still in the house. Glancing in concern at the late evening hour, Harry made his way quietly upstairs to check on his guardian, wishing that Pomfrey had told him *exactly* how long Snape should sleep.

Inside Snape's room, the low lamp and the flickering coals in the hearth were just enough to see by. Quietly, Harry stepped in, causing only Franklin to turn his head. Snape lay on his side in his dressing gown, one foot slipped, the other bare foot overhanging the edge of the bed. The air felt cool so Harry moved to add fresh wood to the grate. He crouched and prodded the new wood against the radiating embers until it caught and only then let them roll forward on the wrought iron to continue burning. He straightened, brushed off his hands, and approached the bed, where he stood and watched the reassuring lift of Snape's shoulder as he breathed. Two strands of black hair lay across his face. Harry gingerly lifted and brushed them back and considered Snape's angular profile, stern even in sleep. He stood that way, back bent, forcing this scene to overlay the other bad one, to soften its razor-like edge. Afraid suddenly of being caught so close should Snape awaken, Harry backed off and stepped lightly away, latching the door carefully.

In the dimness Snape rolled onto his back and rubbed his brow, and only after doing so did he remember how much pain to expect with that much movement. There was none; apparently the last dose of potion had worked itself to completion. Feeling Harry's distress like a weight on his chest, Snape stood with new ease and went over to the low shelf behind Franklin's cage. On a square of scrap parchment he scrawled out a quick note to Tonks, folded it, and gave it to the owl before letting him out the small window to deliver it. He then pulled an old straight-backed chair before the crackling fire and sat meditatively, long enough to make Harry expect he had woken separately from his visit. A quarter-hour later, overheated from the high fire, Snape took up his cane, straightened his dressing gown, and quitted his room.

Harry looked up from his reading in the library when Snape appeared in the doorway. "How are you feeling?" Harry immediately asked, glancing down at the cane Snape still used, although he wasn't leaning on it nearly as hard as before.

"Much better. I think I will ask Winky for a plate of cold joint and bread. I assume you have eaten?"

"Yes." Harry stood and went over to him. "My friends were here for dinner, but they left half an hour ago."

Turning, Snape commented, "Good, at least you had company."

Of a sort, Harry thought to himself. He went to the dining room to make certain it was straightened before Snape arrived with a heaping plate of cold meat slices and half a loaf of bread. "Hungry?" Harry asked in amazement.

Taking a seat, Snape returned, "The elf apparently believes I am. Why don't you have some as well?"

Harry tore off a chunk of bread and proceeded to press it flat in his fidgety fingers. He looked Snape up and down. "Are you going to be ready to teach on Monday?" When Snape hesitated replying, Harry went on, "You should take another day off. McGonagall said that would be fine."

"Hm," Snape muttered.

"Severus, please don't push yourself," Harry said, hearing a plea in his own voice that undid some of his careful emotional bolstering.

Calmly, reassuringly, Snape said, "I won't Harry. Don't worry. I will take Monday off, then."

Harry relaxed and nibbled on the now-dense bread. Hopefully training would not run late on Monday, he thought.

Snape eventually pushed his plate over to Harry who waved it off. He had only been eating out of nerves and was now over-full. After a glance at the clock, Snape grumbled, "Back to *resting*, I suppose." Using his cane, he gained his feet. Harry put out a hand to steady him. "I'm all right, Harry, really," he said, shrugging him off.

"You should owl McGonagall," Harry insisted. "So she can warn your replacement." A wave of distress hit Harry at that, unsettling him as though he were starting all over again from the worst moments. He ducked his head and waited for an admonishment for his lapse, or something lightly snide even, as he grappled with himself with what he felt was a heroic effort.

Instead of a well-meaning, yet biting, comment, Snape stepped closer with his cane and put his free arm around Harry's back. Harry grimaced with the effort at squashing the renewed surge of memory and emotion. It was as though a gaping wound had opened, revealing a hollow at his core that the cold blew straight into. He let his forehead touch his guardian's sharp shoulder bone. Solid. Warm. Harry calmed as relief flowed in.

Snape's voice distracted him. "At least I did not lie."

"About what?" Harry asked without moving.

Snape chuckled and released him. "I don't think I want to tell you."

Harry stood straight and stretched his shoulders back. "Tell me what?" he echoed.

With a sigh Snape squeezed Harry's shoulder. "Merlin, I must be redeemed . . . I am feeling guilty for what I did."

Harry blinked several times, completely not following this. He waited to see if Snape would explain. Snape paced a little with his cane as though he didn't really need its support. Facing the table, head bowed, Snape admitted, "I got even with your father."

Harry pieced that together with the other things Snape had said. "In the veil?" At Snape's nod Harry uttered, "Oh," with mixed feeling and continued confusion.

Reluctantly, still staring at the table edge, Snape went on, "I regret it now. Ironically, I only now comprehend what I did."

A long silence passed as the hearth burned down and shifted, throwing sparks. "What happened?" Harry asked.

With a faraway expression Snape finally replied, "Albus restrained me from passing through the veil, but time passed before I could return, or be sent, more precisely." A long pause ensued before he continued, "Your parents appeared." Snape

looked up at Harry as he started and gave his charge the smallest of smiles. "Your father was not pleased that Albus was helping me return."

Harry bit his lip, glad that Snape was looking at him now as he spoke.

"Albus explained to your father that he should wish me to return, because I was caring for you."

Harry's eyes widened. "Dumbledore told my father that?" he demanded, stunned silly. He swallowed hard, heart thudding.

Snape nodded and held up his hand to examine the palm of it. "I was fading. It was very strange. I actually forgot what it felt like to be alive, and Albus kept insisting I remember."

"Wh . . . what if you hadn't made it?" Harry asked.

"Just like anyone who refuses to enter the veil. I'd have become a ghost."

"Severus!" Harry exploded, alarmed. "Don't risk that for me. I wouldn't want that to happen--not for anything."

"My," Snape returned, sounding amused.

Harry found a new measure of control at that insistence; one that he sorely needed.

"Albus most likely would have prevented it, but it was my choice to risk it," Snape finished sternly.

"Don't do it again," Harry insisted, stern as well.

Snape's lip curled. "I don't expect there to be a next time."

Harry thought a moment. "What did my dad say to that?" he carefully asked.

Snape appeared uncomfortable, but finally replied, "Well, he was not pleased. He demanded to know what I was doing with you . . . 'doing with his son'. This was as the world began drawing me back; although, it was a world composed entirely of pain--the only time I have ever welcomed it." He hesitated, but finally added, "I told him that you were my son, now."

Stunned by trying to imagine events that he had never considered possible, Harry leaned one hand on the tabletop and rubbed his hair back and forth repeatedly with the other.

Snape added, "I do now regret saying that. I certainly wouldn't want anyone saying it to *me*. And he has no recourse. Absolutely none."

"You hope he doesn't," Harry commented.

Snape huffed, amused still, "True."

Harry breathed deeply, the wind outside had pushed a curl of smoke out of the hearth and its sweet scent reminded him of Hogwarts and here, of home. "I wouldn't have imagined my parents finding out," he said, uneasily laughing his distress. "What did my mum say?"

Snape shook his head. "Nothing. She remained in the background, in the fog." He brushed Harry's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Harry," he said, sounding more like he meant it than Harry thought possible.

Harry took a half step back at his guardian's fervent expression. The expression dulled an instant later. "Huh," Harry uttered, still trying to take it in. "But Dumbledore told him before you did," he pointed out.

"True. But he wasn't quite so . . . cruel about it." Snape turned with a shuffling of his feet to face the dying fire, gaze far beyond it. "If anyone tried to take you from me . . ." he faded out darkly.

Harry felt undone in a whole new way at the same time as he felt more secure. He didn't have a response.

About the time Harry was going to insist that Snape return to bed, even though he was reclined in the library, the door knocker sounded. Harry imagined Candide had returned so when he opened the door he was unprepared to find Anita there instead, insufficiently dressed for the wind in a thin wrap, but apparently not feeling the weather.

"Uh, come in," Harry invited when he caught up with the situation.

"How is Severus?" she asked. "I only just received the news about what happened."

"He's fine," Harry assured her. He led her into the main hall and she followed with apparent reluctance, posture uncertain.

Snape looked up and started in surprise. While they stared at each other, Harry backed up a step, uncertain if he should stay. Anita said to her son, "You look to be doing all right."

Snape sat up easily, almost normally. "I have had rather skilled care," he explained. He then stood and approached the doorway and her. "I am surprised to see you here."

She fidgeted. "I don't like being away from the coven, but the copy of the *Prophet* I saw described your injuries as nearly fatal. I guess if I had known how well you were doing . . ." She trailed off uncomfortably.

Harry expected Snape to react to that, but all he said, in a rather calm voice, was, "I am quite well. Do not concern yourself. I have Harry here to watch over me, if all else fails."

Both Harry and Anita took that in over a few silent seconds. Still awkward, Anita said with a small laugh. "That's good to know. But which of you adopted the other?" she added, trying for a joke.

Snape's lip twitched and he crossed his arms. "It is growing unclear," he stated in that new amiable tone of his that still struck Harry as vaguely worrisome or potion induced. "Trust that we are both all right. Do you require more assurance?" He sounded so confident and calm, that Harry had to bite his lip against the hopefulness that perhaps this woman no longer held any power over his guardian. While she worked out a response to that, Snape continued to levelly meet her gaze without even a flicker.

"Ah, no, I don't *require* more assurance than that. I realized that, unlike previously, I found myself believing that you perhaps no longer deserved such an attack, even from a former fellow Death Eater." Behind her, Harry's jaw hardened. She went on more brightly, "But I see that you are recovering nicely . . ." She paused, seeming to try to comprehend the altered man before her. She shook her cloak as though considering leaving.

"Recovering very well, I assure you," Snape replied. "But I believe you are uncomfortable here; perhaps you should return." It wasn't a dismissal, simply a statement of fact.

"It has been a very long time since I've been out. But . . . I thought since I had apparently almost lost my only offspring . . . that I should see how he was faring. But you are clearly all right." She gazed closely at him again before stepping back, clearly to depart. "If you can come for Christmas, you would be most welcome."

Harry frowned lightly, remembering their last visit. Snape said, "Owl with the details and we shall see."

She departed with a last long curious look back at Snape. Harry saw her out, wondering at the change in his guardian and whether Pomfrey's potions were still working at him.

In the morning, Harry awoke after an uneasy and frequently broken sleep. He had had a vivid dream of speaking with Sirius through the mirror his godfather had given him. It was very strange, Sirius wanted to know if Severus had arrived all right. Harry wished he really could use the mirror to speak to him, to thank him, but if it ever could have been used for that, the silvering was beyond hope now from the weathering it had received.

Harry was finally drawn from his bed when an owl appeared at the window, one from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry rubbed his eyes, took the letter and discovered it was from Tonks.

Harry, Headmistress McGonagall assures me that Severus is recovering but I think you should take a bit more of a holiday, at least until Severus is back at Hogwarts. Harry blinked at that, feeling suspicious even as he felt grateful. *If Reggie begrudges you the extra time, I'll let him have it.* Harry grinned at that but then his face fell and he bit his lower lip. McGonagall, when Harry had insisted on hearing details, had told him that Rodgers himself had taken Avery away. Harry had no recollection of his trainer that night. There was nothing in his memory but a queer, confused greyness between finding Snape in his office and his guardian's subsequent rousing him in the dispensary, as though a time-turner had been used in between or it had all been a hallucination.

Harry folded the letter and ran his nails along the edge to crease it, then folded it a second time, again creasing it hard. Darkly, he wondered what Rodgers thought of him now. Certainly he had to believe Harry too weak to be an Auror. Harry imagined his trainer would return to treating him twice as hard as his fellows. Well, he would just match whatever Rodgers threw his way, he thought with resolution, to the point where he hoped the man did just that.

Snape was reading the last few days' newspapers at the table when Harry came down. Businesslike, Harry poured himself coffee and sipped it, ignoring its scalding heat. The world felt more stable this morning, less like a wishful delusion. Oddly, thinking of his parents made him feel calm, as though their learning the truth had released some binding inside him that he had been unaware of. He felt light, almost euphoric.

"Did you sleep all right?" Snape asked.

Harry shrugged, not wanting his guardian to worry. "Well, enough."

Snape considered him closely as though assessing the truth of that. An owl came to the window with a letter. Snape waved Harry to remain seated and fetched it himself.

"Where's your cane?" Harry asked.

Not looking up from opening the envelope, Snape said, "I don't seem to need it this morning."

"You're recovered?"

"Well enough to not require a piece of bent wood to get about, yes."

Snape's snide tone made Harry grin. "I *could* go to training tomorrow, then."

"I was thinking of something else, perhaps."

"What?" Harry asked, amused by Snape promoting skiving.

"Some Christmas shopping."

"Somewhere Muggle?" Harry asked hopefully.

Snape's lips twitched as he lowered the letter to peer at Harry over it. "If you insist."

Harry spent a quiet morning in the library studying, answering owls from his friends and idly considering what he might get them tomorrow while he was out. After lunch, since he had an extra day to address his reading list, he settled onto the lounge with the purple book, and tried to read some of it. The weight of the dry text--*The atmos of the parallel planes presents a disquieting conclusion to the visitor that reality is indeed a thin, fragile construct.*-- pulled Harry's poorly-slept eyes closed.

Snape, taking a break from a much-needed re-filing of his papers, stepped into the doorway of the library. The bright noon sun played at the window Harry had expertly removed and replaced with a spell when Avery had come snooping. Harry himself lay asleep, half curled, his arm trapping his book from falling, even though it hung half off the black leather surface. Snape drew it free and flattened its crumpled pages before setting it on the floor because the side table already contained a teetering pile of Harry's reading.

Harry did not stir through any of this. Snape straightened slowly and considered his sleeping face, his especially mussed hair, the fine white line of his lightening scar. The Hero of Wizardry fast asleep, Snape considered, and then additionally, his personal hero as well. Tempered by his knowing how dearly Harry needed him, he failed to bristle at that.

The library was the only room in the house with no hearth, making it far cooler than the drawing room. Snape shrugged out of his sleeveless outer robe and draped it slowly over the sleeping Harry, but even then he could not walk away and return to his parchments. With a broad sigh he sat on the edge of the lounge, leaned slowly back, and draped an arm behind Harry, who continued to sleep as one shorted on proper rest for too many stressful days.

Snape allowed his head to fall back and stared up at the ceiling, absorbing the moment, and resisted squeezing the shoulder beneath his hand, lest he wake his charge. His chest tightened as he felt the burden of Harry's strained emotions, even though they had been noticeably improving and at the moment, were nonexistent. Raising his head, he studied the top of Harry's mussed head and felt an utterly alien pity for his former nemesis James Potter--pity that James was not here in his place. This guardianship Snape had accepted, too lightly it seemed in retrospect, had grown into covetous honor and it felt cruel to be here in Potter's stead.

One day, Harry would rival even Dumbledore for power, but at this moment he needed the shelter of this house and Snape's knowledge and understanding. In response to those simple things Harry returned a fierce loyalty that made everything else extremely easy. One day, too soon, Harry would no longer need these things, but for now Snape felt a burning pride that it was himself in this place, carrying this burden.

Harry shifted as he slept and Snape took that opportunity to pull him closer so that his forehead rested against him. Harry appeared to fall even deeper into calm sleep, making Snape wonder if he should not have been trying to give a bit more affection to him all this time. Harry hadn't given any indication one way or the other, but perhaps he wouldn't know to.

Concerned that perhaps he had been badly remiss in this, yet still bristling at the awkwardness, Snape rubbed Harry's back once, causing his eyes to snap open. Harry seemed rather startled to be held so and Snape read in his green eyes his vague dismay and the certainty that he was too old for this. Snape laughed lightly at the irony that he was just a little bit too late.

"You're doing it again," Harry complained, but rested his head on Snape's shoulder with an expression that hinted at recent pain.

One part of Snape marveled at how ordinary this felt. Soberly, he stated, "Everything is all right."

"I know," Harry said, sounding short on patience with hearing that yet again.

After a silence and thinking of his own renewal, Snape murmured, "'The one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord.' I did underestimate you. You go on defeating him."

"I really didn't do anything," Harry argued.

"Except be yourself . . . your ordinary heroic self."

Harry lifted his head. "Don't *you* start that," he said sharply.

"Only for a few moments," Snape promised.

"Well, all right," Harry conceded reluctantly, but appeared annoyed.

Amused, Snape said, "I do love you, Harry." Only after, realizing that viperous word, that incantation which always threatened to turn and maul the incanter, had slipped out so easily. Snape froze a few breaths before sitting straight, but Harry appeared to have returned to sleeping. Uncertain, Snape asked, "You have no reaction to that?" When all he got in reply was a shrug, Snape pointed out, "I've never said that to you before."

Holding his eyes closed as though intent on returning to his nap, Harry said, "I assumed you did. Why else you've adopted me."

Snape sat in stunned silence, working out if that might actually be true, but in the end decided that it did not matter and returned to his filing, leaving Harry to his well-deserved rest.

Harry woke much later to the hard leather surface against his face and lifted his head. He had not intended to sleep quite so very much, just to rest his eyes briefly. Rubbing his hair, he sat up and discovered the faded robe draped over him and smiled gratefully. Chilled, he slipped it on as he rose to his feet. He found Snape in the drawing room, reading from a stack of parchments.

"Sleep well?" Snape asked.

A bit embarrassed, Harry replied, "Yes." With a sigh and a rub at his gritty eyes, he sat in one of the chairs, first turning it to face the desk as though he were still a student. Snape shifted the stack of parchments and put something smaller aside, something that resembled Dumbledore's last message. Harry asked, "So where are we going tomorrow?"

"I was thinking that Edinburgh is much closer and it would be easier to ferry packages back by Apparation. Unless your range reaches London now."

Harry shook his head. "Not quite. Although I actually haven't tried," he added thoughtfully.

"We will go to Edinburgh then," Snape said decisively.

After a pause Harry said, "I'm glad you're nearly better," with far too much emotion.

With a wry smile Snape said, "I have you to thank for that. You and your godfather."

Harry smiled at that. "It helps to know that old animosity is gone."

"It is quite gone and I'll agree, it helps." Snape steepled his fingers and looked to want to add something, hesitated a long moment, but in the end remained silent with a small frown.

* * *

They Apparated into a wooded area where a narrow trail cut and winded across a steep slope. "Where is this?" Harry asked in confusion.

With a knowing, haughty smile, Snape said, "Follow me."

Around a bend in the trail, they emerged into cloud-broken sunlight halfway up a forested escarpment. Soon their trail joined ordinary pavement and steps before leading across an old cemetery to a busy shopping street. The wind whipped along the pavement, making Harry wish he had on two jumpers under his cloak.

"Let me know where you would like to stop," Snape said.

"Somewhere close-by," Harry returned.

"There is a sizable shopping center ahead if you can hold out."

"Where?" All Harry saw was a large open monument. He wondered if he could manage to hit himself with a warming charm under his cloak without attracting attention. Snape's robes, despite his cloak mostly covering them, already were attracting extra gazes from passing pedestrians.

By the time they turned indoors Harry couldn't feel the fronts of his legs. But contrary to external appearances there was a bustling multilevel shopping center hidden in the hillside. "This is more like it," Harry muttered, shaking off his cloak and blinking in the colorful artificial light radiating from the shop signs.

They wandered along a few shop fronts together. Harry needed to find a glassware shop if he were to buy potion bottles. A stationery store came up on the right. "Maybe I can find something in here," Harry suggested, thinking of Hermione and perhaps Belinda.

"Do you wish to split up?" Snape suggested, hovering at the threshold of the store, beside the security post.

"No," Harry replied immediately, then more lightly added, "Not until I figure out what I'm getting for you."

Snape followed behind as Harry navigated the narrow aisles, muttering about how ugly and cheap Muggle paper supplies were. That was, until a display of hand-held computers caught his eye. One was a student edition displaying the periodic table and other science references. Harry backed up and peered over his shoulder. "Find something you like?"

"It would break, most certainly," Snape commented.

"It would certainly stop working," Harry teased, "You have no place to plug it in."

Snape brushed the shiny metal edge of the display model. "Do you miss the Muggle things you had before, Harry?"

"No, not at all," Harry assured him.

Snape dropped his hand. "Good. I do not think I could tolerate them, even for you."

"They remind me of the Dursleys, especially my cousin, so I'm fine without them." Harry picked up a warm brown leather folder that held a legal pad. "This is nice," he opined. "Some things like this are better from a Muggle store. At least they are always made from a named animal."

"You disapprove of dragonhide?"

"It's fine for fireproof gloves. What I dislike is finding that my boots are made of trollhide and my gloves of seaworm skin." He flipped the folder open and closed a few times. "I think I'll get this for Hermione." By the time they reached the front of the store, Harry had collected a small pile of presents. As he waited in a queue to pay, he added them up. "Um, do you have a few extra pounds I can borrow?" Snape pulled out his coin purse and handed over a stack of twice-folded one-pound notes. "Thanks. Sorry," Harry mumbled, thinking that he had more presents he wanted to get. He should have been saving his allowance more adamantly.

The family ahead of them was debating which relatives were going to be the most annoying to have visit and the current sale was held up because of something to do with 'too many transactions this time of year.' Snape intoned, "Do not apologize, Harry." More quietly, if not oddly pained, he said, "I find myself currently unwilling to withhold anything from you."

Harry ducked his head, surprised and touched by his tone. Feeling sly and half teasing, he asked, "Does that mean I can get a new broom? A prototype Flugenblitzen M3 was in the shop in Diagon Alley last week."

Snape raised a brow and replied sternly, "No you may not. You do not need a new broom in any event."

"Ginny does. I was thinking I could give her my old one. They really want to win the house cup and she had Charlie's old one, which was only decent ten years ago." The queue finally advanced and stacks of photo albums were piled onto the counter.

"As little as I wish to assist with improving Gryffindor's chances, may I suggest you just trade brooms."

"That's a thought," Harry muttered. "Trouble is getting Ginny to go for it without hurting her pride. She's supposed to get a new broom when she finishes school, but that will be too late for the cup." Ahead of them the family was debating which plastic card to use for payment. "How are the sunglasses working out for Suze? She sent me a letter, but she hasn't tried them in a match."

"Very well during practice," he assured Harry. "Unwise of you if you wish for Ms. Weasley's team to win the cup."

As Harry put his stack of things on the counter, he said, "I'm sorta torn. I want Suze to do well, but on the other hand, she has more years to show off after Ginny and most of my Gryffindor friends have finished."

As they exited the shop and stood at the edge of the flow of shoppers going past, Snape said in a reluctant tone, "Is there something *reasonable* that you are hoping for for Christmas?"

Thinking of how much he nearly lost, Harry said, "I have everything I need, Severus."

"Rather difficult to wrap that," Snape complained dryly.

"My first present ever was a birthday cake from Hagrid. It wasn't wrapped." More quietly, in the presence of hundreds of hurrying Muggles carrying thousands of presents, Harry said, "Neither was the one you gave me for my birthday. The ones that can't be wrapped are the best ones."

Their gazes locked a long moment until Snape said, "As usual, you display an odious sentimentality for such things, Potter." But his eyes were just a bit too bright as he made this assertion.

* * *

Early, because he had slept long and sound after a day of Apparating back and forth to Chester and Edinburgh for shopping, Harry stepped downstairs and joined Snape already at the table eating breakfast. Snape finished quickly and hooked a cloak around himself as he stood before the flaming hearth.

Harry stood to see him off, wishing he could stay a little longer but holding back on showing any bit of it. As though reading his thoughts Snape said dismissively, "Christmas is fast approaching." His tone shifted immediately, though, and he added in a softer tone, "Owl if you need anything at all. Owl even if you don't."

"All right," Harry promised, working harder on his forcing down his reluctance at seeing Snape go; he clearly was prepared to depart and even eager since he had to prepare to teach that morning.

Rather than reach for the Floo powder, Snape instead rested his light satchel on the floor and stepped up to Harry. Taking Harry's shoulders in his hands he commanded, "Take care . . . when you are at your training, and otherwise."

"I will," Harry promised.

"And I will see you in two short weeks." Snape appeared to wait for Harry's nod before taking down the Floo powder. "Owl should you need *anything*," he repeated firmly, voice reassuringly full of the promise of swift response.

Later that morning, Harry stepped out into the quiet atrium at the Ministry of Magic. The fountain bubbled musically, drawing him that way as he crossed the open expanse. The translucent, abstract sculpture in the center seemed to radiate light as water coursed down its surfaces; although the glow looked natural rather than magical. The pool was too big for the piece and Harry remembered the larger previous sculpture and the battle that had destroyed it. He had not thought about it in a long time and now considered that he had possessed a laughable amount of skill back then. As he fantasized his current self there now, he felt almost confident with his chances, even alone against the vilest of wizards.

He reached into himself, into that pathway that had drawn him here that night. The path was hollow, empty; Voldemort was gone. Harry not only felt his absolute absence, but had begun to feel he had never been a part of him. Considering that Snape had also freed himself only added to Harry's surge of independence. Standing there in the early light with the water in the fountain glistening, Harry, for the first time, felt truly whole and distinct, and in control of the future.

A figure stepped up beside him, light of foot. Vineet looked over the curves and angles of the fountain with a discriminating eye. "Not a very attractive thing," he observed.

"Better than the last one," Harry opined. Gesturing at the space where each had stood he explained, "It had a man and centaur a goblin and an elf all in these affected poses."

"What happened to them?" Vineet asked.

"Well . . ." Harry said, hesitating with a little cringe. "They leaped to life to protect me from Voldemort. Even the man after his head was knocked off."

Vineet gave Harry a very dubious and disappointed expression. "You cannot believe me so foolish," he stated almost annoyed, crossing his arms to peer along his nose at Harry the way Snape used to.

"I'm not making that up," Harry insisted, then laughed, deep down, in a manner that a few days ago he had not imagined ever doing again. He waved his hand around the atrium and tried to explain the scene more clearly before giving up. "Oh, never mind. It's embarrassing anyway."

Vineet appeared to reconsider Harry's honesty but he changed the topic. "The *Daily Prophet* spoke of nothing this weekend except your capture of the Last Servant of the Unnamed One. Like all stories about you, it seemed lacking in large substantial fact."

Harry hadn't read any of the articles, but he knew everyone intended to keep quiet about Avery having a mission of revenge against a traitor, because it led to uncomfortable, renewed questions about Snape. "It's finally over," he said, feeling unexpectedly gratified.

"Another will rise," Vineet stated authoritatively.

"That's a positive way of thinking."

"Another must rise. It is the way of things, this circle."

Harry, who preferred to consider a straight line leading out from where he stood, resisted this point of view. Although, he figured it naïve to consider that another dark wizard would not rise to power, sometime. "We have a little while though, right?"

"Usually." Grimly, as though speaking only because he felt he had to, arms still crossed, Vineet went on, "The newspaper was mistaken in stating that *all* Death Eaters were in Azkaban, even though the Minister announced this herself."

Harry met his dark brown gaze and held it steadily. "No, she wasn't mistaken." Then he smiled, broadly, couldn't help doing so. Vineet stiffened.

Harry turned back to the sculpture, smiling wryly. "Have you ever seen beyond the veil?"

"No." Then a long pause ensued before, "And you?"

"Yes."

"Did you see the Unnamed One?"

"No, actually," Harry replied. "Just my family . . . my friends." It would have been odd to have seen Voldemort, he considered, but he must be there. For the tenth time he imagined what his father's expression must have been when Snape made his assertion to him. Mixed emotion roiled in him at the vision.

"You would seem to be there now," Vineet offered, sounding awed.

Harry pulled himself straight. "No. I'm here."

The atrium had begun to fill with witches and wizards on their way to work. A familiar voice hailed Harry and Arthur Weasley stepped over and patted him on the shoulder. "How are you, my boy?" he asked in concern.

"I'm fine, Mr. Weasley, thank you."

Mr. Weasley leaned close and, while gripping Harry's upper arm, said, "Minerva told us what happened. An awfully close one, there, my boy."

Harry, attempting lightness although it came out wavering, said, "I don't mean to continue to be so hazardous to those around me."

"Ah, Harry," Mr. Weasley said, sounding far too moved. "This wasn't your doing. *Some* things were set in motion long before your time."

"And it's all right now," Harry added. At Mr. Weasley's confusion, Harry said, "It's hard to explain. Maybe over dinner sometime." He fell silent, thoughts pulled back a few days. But calm flowed through his limbs again and he smiled lightly. "Things are better than you know."

"Well, that would be a change." Mr. Weasley redirected his attention and greeted Vineet. "I hope you are helping keep an eye on him," he said, indicating Harry.

"The attempt is being made," the Indian stated dryly.

As Mr. Weasley said good day, turning his balding rear pate their way, Harry halted him with, "Hey, tell Vineet what happened to the old sculpture."

"Oh, it . . ." He paused and to Harry asked disbelievingly, "You really want me to?" At Harry's sharp look he said, "Well, I wasn't here--just Harry and old Albus Dumbledore, oh and of course He-Who-Shall--"

"Mr. Weasley!" Harry snapped.

"Oh, yes, Voldemort. Sorry, Harry. Apparently Dumbledore used the figures as allies in sending the old, evil bird off."

"Really?" Vineet uttered, still sounding stubborn about believing.

"Intent on killing Harry, he was, and mad as hell about not learning the rest of the prophecy as he'd hoped. The figures were all smashed to bits by the end." He glanced down at his watch. "I have to go. Nice seeing you Harry, do call for dinner soon."

Harry studied the abstract statue again. Parts of it seemed bulky and solid, other parts reached up and out, but the whole thing remained balanced from all angles. Unlike the figures, this one allowed him to define it himself. It could be anything, and he found himself appreciating that for the first time.

"You are very introspective today," Vineet said after a long pause. "And I am believing you about the other statues."

Harry realized that there was real luxury in being harmlessly disbelieved. "I don't have to make things up," he teased.

The deep brown of Vineet's eyes looked a little softer. "Are there any places where memories do not resonate so for you?"

"Not around here."

After a cart loaded with boxes of parchment rattled by, Vineet said, "And there are no free Death Eaters of any sort?"

"Absolutely none," Harry replied confidently.

"Hm. We are late, just to be letting you know."

Harry glanced at the time and they both hurried away. In the lift Harry said, "All right, explain this dark wizard circle to me."

"It is not just dark wizards . . . it is all things that cycle," Vineet patiently lectured.

"Day night day night," Harry offered as he pulled open the gate.

"That is a very obvious example"

"And the good wizard cycle coincides with the bad one, right?" Harry said, getting into this notion.

"Hopefully."

Since they were the first to arrive in the workout room, they pulled the desks away from the wall and arranged the four of them. Harry removed his books from his bag and sat down with blank parchment and a quill, still thinking. Kerry Ann came in, looking underslept. She gave Harry a high-five as she passed. "Good going, Harry. Got them all now."

"Thanks." Harry chewed on the end of his quill before turning to Vineet again. "Can someone read these cycles and know when the next dark wizard is going to appear?"

Vineet's gaze went a little hard. "Some believe they can, but this art is very difficult. When there is a gross imbalance the gods may send an avatar to right things."

"A very powerful wizard, you mean?" Harry prompted.

Vineet didn't respond.

"What are you two on about?" Kerry Ann asked curiously. Rodgers stepped in then, seeming brusque as though he had interrupted something important to come. Aaron dashed in behind him, out of breath, and took his seat with an innocent smile. Rodgers hurriedly straightened his notes and didn't chastise the latecomer.

Harry, sly grin on his lips, leaned over and said to Kerry Ann, "I think Vishnu here is disappointed he didn't get his crack at Voldemort." When Vineet turned to him, eyes narrow and surprised, Harry hit him on the arm and said, "You were welcome to him. How 'bout you take the next one?" Rodgers cleared his throat and Harry dipped into the inkwell and bent over his notebook, quill poised with a ball of fresh ink teetering on the point of it. Harry whispered, still grinning, "Let us know if you need any help. We'll be here."

888 THE END 888

Author's Notes: Thanks to everyone for their comments and encouragement in continuing this beast. Couldn't have done it without you all. Also certainly couldn't have done it without the enormous help of all the beta readers past and present: Amy, Audrey, Nana, Cathal, Jane, Whitney, Stephanie, EC, Kate.

The sequel is Revolution, which is posted as well. The third in the series, Resolution, is a work in progress. An additional chapter was written as a standalone short story for a charity auction. That's entitled Resonance Chapter 23.5.

If you want to join the new chapter/story mailing list send a message to darkirony at gmail dot com.