

# Reconciliation

(a completely unauthorized Harry Potter story)

by Marie Williams

## Chapter 1 Another Bad Night's Sleep

Harry pressed his fingers to his eyes to take the edge off yet another headache. He then rubbed hard and blinked to clear them, trying again to focus on the blank three inches of parchment he needed to fill before playing a quick game of Quidditch on the newly setup pitch. He flipped through his notes on the history of wizard government and wondered if Hermione might loan him hers. After six years at Hogwarts, Harry would have expected to be able to take usable notes but, even though he felt he wrote down every barely interesting fact Binns droned out, when it came time to summarize he couldn't find or remember the details he needed.

He stretched his neck and peered out the window toward the pitch. At least the weather was relatively nice for autumn. He could anticipate how refreshing the cool breeze would be as he soared around on his broom. Pickup games were fun because people cared a little less about winning and the bludgers weren't hit nearly as hard. Harry shook himself and tried in vain to return to his essay. Maybe he should elaborate more on the collapse of the fiefdoms in the mid 900s.

A whistle blew out on the pitch, carried on the breeze like a spell. Harry stuffed his parchment and quills away after carefully sealing the ink bottle. Then he leapt from his bed and grabbed his broom in one smooth motion.

Harry returned later that evening, pleasantly tired from flying. Deciding that he could ask Hermione for a fact or two for his essay at breakfast, he left his assignment untouched. Ron bounded into the room a moment later. "Did you see that block I made right after getting whacked with a bludger? I tell you, Harry, this keeper thing is much easier this year." Ron sat down on his own bed and opened his trunk to take out a quill and parchment. "I'm going to write Mum, make sure she comes to our first match."

Ron did seem to have improved athletically since last year. Over the summer he had transformed into something more like one of the twins and he seemed to know where his limbs were now at all times.

"Did you finish Binn's essay?" Harry asked with a yawn.

"Blimey," Ron muttered. He put the letter to his mother aside and dug out his essay instead. Harry was pleased to see that Ron hadn't gotten as far as he had. It made him feel better about not finishing his own essay. "You?" Ron asked.

"Almost." Harry flopped back down on the bed in exhaustion. "I'll finish it at breakfast."

"Where have I heard that one before?"

"My head hurts," Harry muttered.

"You always say that," Ron retorted. "Any more visions of You-Know-Who?"

"Only when I am, you know, unhappy or really angry," Harry replied. "Or tired. Speaking of

which, I think I'll knock off early." He stood up and pulled out his pyjamas. He changed quickly and flopped back onto the bed. With a flick of his wand, he closed the curtain. "'Night Ron," his muffled voice said from behind the velvet.

"'Night Harry," Ron said with some jealousy as he flicked the feather end of his quill over his nose in thought.

Harry woke up suddenly. With the drapes pulled closed it was pitch black around the bed. Harry found his wand on the bed stand and whispered 'lumos'. He stared at the inside of the dark drapes for a few minutes, trying to decide what had woken him. He was pretty certain it was something inside his head. Seamus's snoring penetrated the thick drapes until the other boy rolled over with a sigh and it fell quiet. If there had been a noise, someone else would be awake.

Harry had gained some control of his emotions, enough to keep unwanted visions out of his skull. After what happened the last time he followed those visions, Harry was pretty certain he didn't want to follow one again.

He extinguished his wand and rolled over with a huff of annoyance. An image of someone writhing on the ground leaked in at his flash of anger. Harry froze and held his breath. It hadn't felt like Voldemort's mind; it felt more simpleminded than that. Harry finally remembered to breathe as he tried to piece together what else was in the scene. Trees. A dense forest with little underbrush. Very little light. Frustrated with the lack of detail in his memory, he let himself get angry again. This time he had a distinct sense of joyous revenge and it definitely wasn't Voldemort.

Harry sat up and scrubbed his face with his hands. His scar didn't hurt really at all, which confirmed that it was someone else's thoughts this time. Damn it, Harry thought, last thing I need is another station to be tuning into in the Death Eater Radio Network. He decided that he should just tell Dumbledore and come back to bed. That was what they were always telling him to do.

He tossed off the covers and pulled aside the drapes. After donning his robe over his pyjamas and pocketing his wand, he left, not bothering with the invisibility cloak as he had a legitimate reason to be out.

He didn't encounter anyone on the way to the turning stairs to Dumbledore's office. The gargoyles at the bottom gave him a look. "Quid pro quo," Harry said to it with confidence. It refused to move. "Fate Accompli. Habius Corpus," he tried with no luck. "Drat," he said to no one as he ran out of latin phrases. Maybe Dumbledore had moved on to some other theme.

"Need something, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall's voice said from the end of the corridor. She came toward him at her usual brisk pace despite the late hour. "It is just a bit past curfew," she pointed out with an edge of sarcasm.

"I need to see Dumble- the headmaster," Harry explained.

"He isn't here. He is away." She said in a tone that indicated she wasn't going to spill anything more.

"He's at Azkaban, right?" Harry asked. McGonagall didn't react. "They need to replace the dementors, I guess, after they let everyone out. . . again."

"Perhaps I can help you," she said stiffly.

"Dumbledore said I should talk to him if I had visions I couldn't block out."

"And are you?"

"Well," he said and rubbed his tired eyes yet again. "I can control them but they are strange this time. I thought I should tell him."

"Why don't you come down to my office. I'll make tea." McGonagall offered and put a hand behind his back to steer him, thinking as she did so that Potter hadn't really grown as much over the summer as one might have expected. At least he had filled in a little. It made him lose that frail look he'd always had before.

Harry sat down in the visitor's chair and watched McGonagall pour hot mint tea from a bright yellow bulging kettle. The kettle pulled in a little as she poured each cup and as it was returned to the side board, it burped faintly.

Harry stuck his nose over the steam and sat that way, wondering if he should risk letting the vision in again, just to be sure.

McGonagall sat down with a toss of her robes behind her. "So, what is strange enough to bring you from your bed, young man?"

Harry forced himself to focus on her businesslike but not unfriendly face. "I'm seeing out of the eyes of someone other than Voldemort. That hasn't happened before."

Her expression didn't change. "Who?"

He shook his head. "I don't know who. Someone not so smart, that's for sure. I wonder, if someone were under the Imperius Curse, if that would make this happen." He took a sip of tea. He didn't really like mint, he thought. "This person is torturing someone," he commented factually.

McGonagall dropped her cup hard into the saucer she held in her other hand. She set the rattling pair down on the desk. "Can you see who?"

"Too dark." He took another sip to avoid her gaze, which had turned oddly sympathetic. It wasn't an expression she wore often, or at all.

McGonagall sat thinking, considering Harry closely for several minutes. "Do you know where they are?"

Harry glanced out of the window, though the inky blackness yielded no scenery right now. "I think I could find it. But I can't really tell you exactly where."

"That close?" She gripped the arms of her chair, hard.

"Not really far, I don't think. Somewhere in the forest." Harry set down his tea and put his head in his hands. "Do you want me to try to see it again?" his muffled voice asked.

"If you think it is safe, go ahead."

Harry relaxed and let annoyance at not being sound asleep penetrate his thoughts. Like some disturbing game of peek-a-boo the scene popped up again. This time the figure on the ground was screaming a primal wail. With a strangled gasp, Harry leapt out of the chair. McGonagall stood as well.

Harry leaned on the closed door to the office, heart racing. "They are using the Cruciatus Curse," Harry said, bending double. The vision wasn't fading out because his runaway fear was keeping it front and center. The scene grew closer and more light came from somewhere all of a sudden. Voices faded in and out. "Deserves it, doesn't he?" A familiar voice to the right stated with relish. The screaming stopped and the figure tried to sit up, to come at him. Harry had a glimpse of shiny black shoulder-length hair and an aquiline nose before a wand raised before him and the figure flew backwards like a doll.

Shock coursed through Harry, sucking his breath away for a distressing moment before he finally regained control. He stood straight. Conflicting emotions raged through him. "Where is Professor Snape?" Harry asked.

"He isn't here either," McGonagall stated. "Perhaps-"

"Is he with the headmaster?" Harry asked, interrupting.

"No," she said flatly.

Harry finally met her gaze. "Then I think the Death Eaters have figured out he's a spy," Harry said with a grimace.

## **Chapter 2 Forests and Trees**

McGonagall stood straight, rising up as though filling with magic. "You can get us there?" She strode over to her wardrobe and opened it. "By broom I should think since we can't apparate."

Harry looked from her to the broom before opening the office door. "I'll get mine and meet you by the doors?" Harry asked. It felt good to be taking action, even though stabs of guilt and pain from losing Sirius were piercing him as a result. For once he wanted to sit still and let someone else deal with things, but he couldn't.

Maybe it wasn't Snape, Harry thought as he raced back to the Gryffindor common room and up the stairs to his dormitory. But it was someone. Anyone the DE would torture is probably someone who would be useful to the Order. With some stealth, he opened his trunk and pulled out his Firebolt. He also pulled out his jacket, remembering the last night ride on broomstick to 12 Grimmauld Place and his frozen hands and arms.

In the front hall, Professor McGonagall stood with Professor Flitwick. They leaned close

together in deep discussion. Harry approached and put his jacket on and pulled the gloves out of the pockets. "I should go with you," Flitwick said.

"I am already violating Dumbledore's strict orders to stay here to keep an eye on things. Both of us cannot go." She pulled on gloves as well and took her broom from Flitwick. "Ready, Harry?"

Flitwick's very concerned gaze was the last thing Harry saw as the great door swung closed behind them. The grounds were still and dark, even Hagrid's cabin. McGonagall was already airborne. Harry joined her and took the lead. He wasn't sure how he knew which direction was correct, but he was as certain as he was of the position of Hogwarts behind them.

They flew twenty minutes to the far western edge of the Forbidden Forest. The moon highlighted the border, leaving an inky, uneven line between it and the next forest. Harry slowed and circled lazily. He pointed downward. A faint glow was visible through the dense treetops. McGonagall gestured back and Harry followed her as she swooped down into the border.



Harry landed silently beside her in the tall grass. He looked up and down along the gap stretching away. He sensed that the trees of each forest were holding a standoff along the firebreak. McGonagall hefted her broom over her shoulder and leaned close to him. "Ready to take on Voldemort's minions again, Harry?" she asked.

"Yes, Ma-am," he replied. He realized now that he was relishing this chance to get even for being left alone yet again.

She patted him on the head. "That's my boy, Harry," she said in a wry tone.

Harry grinned up at her in the darkness even though she probably couldn't see it.

They marched toward the wall of trees, McGonagall in the lead. Harry turned his broom upside down and used it as a walking stick. "*Lumos Homios*," McGonagall said, creating a glow that would all be drawn back to her wand rather than seen at a distance.

Trees creaked and rustled overhead even though the wind was perfectly still. Harry tugged on Professor McGonagall's sleeve and whispered, "Is there anything else dangerous in these woods?"

"Yes, Harry," she said, evoking a charm to silently flatten the underbrush, "Us."

They hurried forward with Harry forced to jog to keep up with McGonagall's long stride. The trees grew larger and farther apart as they progressed. Soon the roots were taller than Harry, requiring the pair to clamor over them or walk around.

Eventually they heard murmuring and saw a blue-green glow at the top of the next rise. They crept closer, always keeping a large tree between themselves and the Death Eaters. Flashes could be seen off to the left as well as jeers and laughter. Ahead, at the peak of the hill, a larger group mingled. It was difficult to count the people as their silhouettes crossed and wove in the odd blue-green light.

"I'll go over here, draw their attention away," Professor McGonagall whispered and pointed with her wand to the right. "You go and get Professor Snape."

Yeah, Harry thought, I'll do that. Tough choice though: fifteen Death Eaters or Snape. He nodded, trying to still seem eager.

"On my signal," she breathed and moved silently away.

Harry crouched down and waited, watching the strange circular procession and glancing over at the pair on the left to check their position. Sooner than expected, a crackling like a large fire could be heard from the far side of the hill as well as the sound of something large crashing through the upper branches of the trees, way, way up.

Without hesitating, Harry moved. He slunk around in a circle and moved inward cautiously. The larger hooded figure swore and headed off in the direction of the noise. The thinner one lowered his wand and reluctantly followed. Harry waited until they had made the rise before stepping all the way over and crouching beside the dark figure on the ground. He chanced a weak *lumos* spell. It was Snape. His robes were stained with something shiny which must have been blood.

"Professor?" Harry whispered, touching Snape fleetingly on the arm.

Dark eyes opened and turned to Harry. "Potter," Snape spat venomously, "I should have

known."

Harry frowned. "Look, we need to get out of here-"

"Isn't it past your bedtime, boy?" Snape whispered tauntingly as he tried to sit up. He had to stifle a moan but he made it up onto his elbows, breathing heavily.

Harry swallowed. His heart was aching badly enough, remembering the last attempted rescue mission, without this vicious git twisting him up more. "Look," Harry snapped, "you think I would be here rescuing your greasy little bum if I had a choice?"

"Why don't you just join this crowd, Harry?" Snape hissed as he gestured toward the flickering light. "You can take over where your father left off tormenting those whose magic was weaker than his own."

"Well, what do we have here?" A smooth, familiar voice interrupted.

Harry whipped around and stood up to face the hooded figure now blocking the light. Lucius Malfoy made a long show of pulling back his hood and mask. His blond hair became an aura of aqua around his head as he did so. Harry could just see his sickly, generous smile in the shadows of his face.

"I. Am. Not. My. Father." Harry stated harshly. Malfoy hesitated, confused by this proclamation. Harry took instant advantage and hit him with a jellyarms curse followed immediately by a confusion charm. Harry fell into the same state of utter clarity he had when he'd spotted the snitch during a Quidditch match. His body and mind moved on automatic, faster than thought. Spells flew at him and he partially blocked or fully blocked them before they could hit. He threw a random array of curses back at Malfoy, anger and hurt powering them into the full force.

Malfoy went down to one knee. "*Impediment*," Harry said. Then, "*Petrificus Totalus*." The taller man toppled over, white wraps covering him from head to toe. Harry stepped over and stood above him. "*Avad*-" Harry began but stopped. He wanted to, he really did. Malfoy's eyes shining out of the bindings appeared to believe he would. Harry dropped his hands to his sides, then bent and took Malfoy's wand before turning back to Snape.

"*Mobilicorpus*," Harry said and flicked his wrist with confidence even though he hadn't practiced this one more than one DA session. Snape curled up in the air and put his hands over his head as though he thought Harry might accidentally or otherwise run him into a tree. Harry directed Snape's floating form behind the next huge tree and pressed back against it. He let Snape glide to the ground where, with a quiet groan, he insisted on sitting up and peering back over the tall tree root.

Someone was approaching, a large figure walking flatfooted over the brush. Harry crouched down lower, right beside Snape in the small alcove formed by the roots. He risked opening his mind. Sure enough, it was the same bloke. "He got away," Harry whispered. In the shadow of the tree, Professor Snape turned suddenly to him.

"Damn it. He got away." A dimwitted voice said as the footsteps ceased approaching.

Harry could feel Snape's gaze drilling into him. "It is all Malfoy's fault." Harry breathed.



Another mutter. "Damn Malfoy." The heavy footsteps headed across behind their tree.

One more time, Harry projected, "Voldemort should kill him for this." Snape breathed in sharply at that as the deep voice of Goyle chuckled.

"Master will kill him for this," Goyle muttered as he hurried off.

Harry pulled his thoughts back into himself but not before catching a glimpse of Snape's stunned fear.

"Who is going to save us from you, Potter?" Snape asked quietly.

"I am," Harry quipped in response and chanced a glance around the tree. The shadows appeared to be moving away.

"I envision nothing but doom," Snape muttered darkly.

Harry laughed suddenly and had to put his hand over his mouth to keep quiet. "You are such a fake," Harry whispered gleefully, feeling like he suddenly understood something important.

Snape declined to comment, just gave him a dark look.

"Can you walk?" Harry asked when his chuckles subsided.

"Not. Easily." Snape returned in a hiss.

With one more glance around the tree, Harry stood up and reinitiated the hover charm to carry Snape away. Lack of sleep and mental fatigue were starting to wear on him as he directed his floating burden quickly away from the lights. As they reached the edge of the forest, Harry realized that he and McGonagall had not made exact plans for how to meet up.

He stood in the clearing between the forests for a long minute, feeling badly exposed and antsy. Snape had fallen completely silent, for which Harry was grateful. The moon angled down at them brightly, exposing them. Making a decision, Harry led the way along the clearing a distance and then into the Forbidden Forest. He felt more at home here since he knew the dangers of this place.

McGonagall would want him to get himself to safety, Harry told himself as they headed deeper into this forest. The added distance made him feel a little better and he started to look for a place to hide until help arrived. Up ahead, Harry thought he saw a shape too straight to be natural. Sure enough, they approached a small stone cabin.

The door padlock yielded to a simple charm and Harry led the way in, hovering his burden behind. The oversized cabin door put Harry in the mind of Hagrid, which made him feel better about breaking in. He settled Snape on the stone floor and realized that the reason his charge had grown quiet was because he was now unconscious. For a panicked moment, Harry wasn't sure he was breathing, which made him realize that he couldn't, at this point, take even losing Snape.

The cabin was empty of furniture and supplies so he took off his coat and laid it over Snape,

then crouched beside him and waited. He played with setting his Lumos Charm to as dim as possible to amuse himself. The silence let him hear his own breathing too loudly as he listened for anyone approaching. He wanted to signal McGonagall somehow but couldn't think of any way to do it that wouldn't also alert the Death Eaters.

Snape caught his breath and opened his eyes. After he looked around without moving otherwise, he said, "Where are we?" in a rough voice that made Harry realize he must be in a lot of pain.

"A cabin in the Forbidden Forest. I don't know how to find Professor McGonagall."

"She is here?"

"Don't go thinking this was my idea," Harry said, though the anger he felt from before had faded almost to nothing. "Does it hurt?" Harry asked, confused by what felt suspiciously like sympathy for his second most hated person in the world.

"What do you know about pain?" Snape asked in a mocking tone.

Harry sat up straight. "The time Madam Pomfrey had to grow my arm back after Gilderoy Lockhart made my bones disappear hurt a lot," Harry said, keeping his voice factual and not rising to the bait. He shifted from a crouch to sit cross-legged on the floor. His voice dropped as he added, "But the Cruciatus Curse Voldemort used on me hurt much worse."

Snape looked away and muttered, "Lockhart was an idiot," as he tried to sit up and finally managed to prop himself up on one elbow. "Can I use your wand?" he asked.

"You can have Malfoy's." Harry pulled the other wand from his pocket and gave it over.

Snape took it and muttered a blood replenishment charm as he tapped the wand on his own chest.

"You've bled a lot, maybe you should do it twice," Harry observed. Snape shot him a look but sighed and repeated the spell. With difficulty, he then shuffled over to the wall to sit upright. He noticed Harry's jacket for the first time as he did so and after a moment's hesitation, adjusted it over himself.

"I could go look for McGonagall or go for help but I don't want to leave you here alone," Harry said.

Snape's right eyebrow went up and he took a long moment deciding how to respond to that. "I have a wand," he stated.

"Yeah, but you had one before, right?" Harry retorted.

Snape's eyes darkened but he didn't reply.

Harry looked around the cabin again. The small fireplace was full of cobwebs. "Too bad that isn't hooked to the Floo network," Harry lamented.

Snape's gaze snapped over to the hearth beside him. He reached into his robes and pulled out a tin from which he took a small pinch of powder. When he tossed it into the hearth, nothing happened. He sighed again.

"I could take you on my broom but I'm not strong enough to keep you from falling off."

Snape's gaze combed over him a moment. "Why are you so small, Harry?" Snape asked.

Insulted, Harry didn't notice Snape had used his first name. "I don't know," he snapped back.

"Don't those muggles you live with feed you?" Snape asked in his usual taunting tone.

Harry looked down and fiddled with his wand. "Not much," he responded quietly. "It got better last summer," he continued more upbeat. "Mad-eye, Lupin, and Tonks threatened them." A surge of angry embarrassment rushed through him and he was grateful for the dim blue light of his wand which wouldn't show it.

"I think I remember Hagrid mentioned they kept you in a closet?" Snape went on, relentless.

"Can we talk about something else?" Harry nearly begged, desperate to avoid this conversation. His face burned with shame so he dimmed his wand down further to hide it.

"Did you put any protective spell on this building?" Snape asked.

It took Harry a moment to change gears. "No." His eyes were suddenly burning as he remembered for the thousandth time that he wasn't ever going to be able to live with Sirius. He swallowed hard. "I only know one," he muttered low to keep his voice even.

"Better than nothing," Snape said in a flat voice, odd for its lacking its usual vitriol.

Harry jumped up and went out. He circled the house, invoking the alarm charm he'd learned at the Weasley's for warning away the gnomes. He put it on the ground and the branches of the trees all around the little cabin. Too soon he finished and reentered. He lowered himself to sit in the middle of the floor again and sat listening for anything moving outside. "Did you call me 'Harry'?" he asked suddenly, accusingly.

"It is your name, is it not?" Snape's dry reply came back.

"Yeah, but. . ." Harry shrugged. "It just seems odd."

They fell into silence again. Harry wondered what time it was. Wondered what was taking so long to find them. "Why did you join them, anyway?" Harry asked, diving in.

"I agreed with them," Snape answered.

"And you accuse me of being cruel," Harry retorted.

"Not about that, about strength and purity. Wizardry has this annoying habit of getting bogged down in the mundane. It gets weak when this happens." Snape spoke with clear conviction. "Wizards are supposed to be powerful and proud of it."

Snape shifted his foot on the floor, trying to find a less painful position. "But you wouldn't understand having pride, would you, Potter?" Snape asked. "Left by Dumbledore to starve for sustenance and affection like a maltreated dog-

Harry jumped up to a kneeling position and raised his wand at his professor. "Shut up! Why are you doing this?" he snarled angrily. Shame and hatred were burning through him again so strongly that he wondered where they had gone just minutes before. He was getting flashes of hooded forms again but his distress made it hard to pay attention to what they were doing.

"I want to see if you can be pushed into the dark," Snape stated simply. His voice had taken on an exhausted edge.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, his wand hand shaking with emotion.

"Do you ever think you might be a dark wizard, Harry?" Snape asked in a deceptively even tone.

Harry lowered his wand. "All the time," he answered in defeat. Snape's gaze came up and his eyes became dark drilling points with glowing blue dots. Harry went on. "Ever since the sorting hat wanted to put me in Slytherin and I had to tell it not to."

"Is that so?" Snape stated, as though internally satisfied by that.

"I didn't kill Malfoy," Harry said defensively. "I could have."

"No, you did the much more strategic Slytherin thing of setting him up for someone else to kill," Snape observed.

And this from the head of Slytherin house, Harry thought despondently. "If he didn't hang out with Death Eaters, he wouldn't be in danger in the first place," Harry pointed out. It made him feel better to realize that. "And Dumbledore apologized," Harry added.

A whooping noise like a bird sounded close outside. "The alarm," Harry breathed and stood up to go to the window on that side. At that moment a furious scratching struck on the dirty panes, making Harry leap back in surprise. He started to raise his wand and then stopped. "Hedwig!" he cried, found the latch, and forced open the window.

Hedwig hopped in onto Harry's arm and gnawed on his robes with furious affection. Harry pushed the window closed and relatched it. "Am I glad to see you. We need to send a note," he said to Snape.

Snape waved his wand and a small piece of parchment fluttered down out of the air into his lap. He handed it up to Harry, who took it and looked at it. It had a diagram of the small fireplace in the cabin and a quick note about their situation.

"Neat. Can you show me that spell?" Harry asked in a voice of young eagerness as he rolled the note and hooked it around the owl's leg.

"Perhaps," Snape replied with an amused voice, making Harry flush at his lapse.

Harry looked over at him slouched against the wall and realized that his anger had again

evaporated. He released Hedwig from the doorway and watched her white form flicker through the trees and disappear in the mist.

Back in the cabin, Harry knelt in the center of the floor and sat on his feet. His wand arm felt unnaturally heavy. "I'm tired," he said, meaning by it more than physically. He was tired of all this, being in the middle of everything all of the time, even when he went out of his way to avoid it.

"It will take them a little while to put two chimneys on the Floo network," Snape stated impatiently.

"Two?" Harry asked, a whine still tainting his voice.

"One at Hogwarts, and one here. After Umbridge had them all removed, Dumbledore decided it was perhaps for the best to leave them off." Snape explained.

Harry's shoulders slumped still further. After long minutes he said, "Sirius' brother was killed trying to get out. How did you do it?"

"I was smarter," Snape said. "And I had Dumbledore's assistance." Snape crossed his arms. "Don't tell me you blame yourself for Regulus' death as well?"

"No. Why would I?" Harry snapped back. Snape gave him a dubious look. "Why would Dumbledore help you?" Harry asked, equally dubious.

Snape leaned his head back against the rough stone. "I am sure he has his reasons. I will confess that my understanding of his reasons is continuously changing. I usually just explain that he thought I would be useful."

"But why didn't the other Death Eaters figure it out?" Harry continued. When Snape didn't respond, Harry answered himself, "You told them you were spying for them. You probably intended to." Professor Snape was silent for several breaths, making Harry think maybe he had gone too far.

"I soon realized that Dumbledore was the far more powerful wizard," Snape stated quietly.

"Why doesn't he just take Voldemort on then and get it over with?" Harry asked with a hint of sarcasm.

"Because he believes wizardry should organize to beat him as a society. That we will become weak if he simply does things for us."

Harry stared at him as the implication of that sunk in. It stung as he considered it. "You really believe that?" Harry asked honestly.

Snape nodded. "So picking an alliance was easy for me, you see," Snape concluded.

Harry stared into the darkness of the fireplace. "He was too busy to bail you out this time."

"I think Dumbledore actually prefers working underground. His responsibilities have multiplied manifold since the Ministry accepted what has happened. He refuses to lead

outright; he thinks it is 'meddling'," Snape said as he slouched yet farther down the wall.

Harry sat up straight. "Did you hear that?" he asked. Snape just looked at him. Harry jumped to his feet. "Drat it," he said and ran to the door. With effort he lowered the thick wooden cross beam to bar the door. "Can you spell the window?" Harry asked. Hoof beats could be heard approaching. Snape cast a few spells at the window as the whooping of the alarm spells began and the hoof beats circled.

"It's the centaurs," Harry whispered.

"They aren't usually dangerous, just prophetic," Professor Snape commented.

"Want to bet?" Harry sneered. "How many times did they try to kill you last year?"

"Everyone wants to do you in, Mr. Potter," Snape pointed out.

Harry faced the door with his wand out. "Tell me about it," he breathed. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Snape try the chimney again with no luck. Harry took a deep breath and tried to relax and get ready. He jumped anyway when the first hoofstrike banged loudly on the door. It banged again and again, making Harry blink with each strike. Finally it stopped and the circling slowed. Harry turned with the sounds, trying to count how many there were.

Snape tried the Floo Powder again. This time it sparkled when it reached the firebox, burning away the dusty strands of cobwebs in a beautiful orange filigree. Harry bent down to help Snape up. The taller wizard leaned alarmingly heavily on him as they rose up clumsily. Another strike on the door startled Harry, almost making them fall. Snape threw a small handful of powder into the fireplace and Harry said, "Hogwarts," just as a splintering strike on the door broke through.

### **Chapter 3 Going It Alone**

Before Harry could look at the door, they were sucked away into the chimney. The spinning threatened to tear them apart and Harry, not certain what would happen if they separated, grabbed onto Snape's robes. An instant later they were airborne. Harry executed a barrel roll like he would in Quidditch to turn them so he would land on the bottom. As they slide out onto the floor, he regretted his charity for the first moments of trying to get his breath back.

Harry opened his eyes and squinted around the unfamiliar room. Furniture and boxes were piled at random. They had been drawn off course to some other place, Harry thought in a panic. And him trapped under Snape's unconscious weight, unable to even get at his wand.

A door opened, sending a triangle of light into the room. Harry turned his head, relieved beyond belief to find Dumbledore's silhouette there. "Headmaster," Harry greeted him, short of breath.

"What is this, Harry?" Dumbledore asked as he walked around a pile of discarded bronze buggies. "Oh dear," he added when he saw Professor Snape. Dumbledore bent down and rolled Snape off of Harry. "What happened?" Dumbledore asked in concern.

"Malfoy had him," Harry said, then realized with some amusement that this would look like he had just popped out and rescued Professor Snape as though it were a trip to the milk store.

Dumbledore, with some stiff movements, crouched low and took out his wand, muttering an incantation under his breath while tapping it on Snape's chest. He then did the same to his forehead. He then laid his hand on the side of Snape's face and ran his thumb over his brow almost like a benediction. Harry watched this in stunned silence.

Snape's eyes half opened. "Headmaster," he muttered.

"Madam Pomfrey will be here in a moment," Dumbledore assured him. And indeed, no sooner had he spoken then the light from the door filled with Hogwart's hospital witch. She brought up the lights as she entered and immediately crouched beside Professor Snape as well and pulled his robes open to assess his injuries. A surge of nausea made Harry swallow hard as he winced at the bruising and blood revealed.

"Can you take care of him here, Madam Pomfrey? Or shall I send for the Thestrals to have him carted to St. Mungo's?"

"No," Professor Snape breathed. "Not there." He tried to sit up.

Pomfrey shushed him and stood up, hovering Snape with ease as she took him out.

As they stood to follow, Dumbledore's kind gaze fell on Harry. "You are unharmed?" At Harry's nod Dumbledore put an arm around him, pulling him beside himself. "You did a fine job, I believe, Harry," he said. Harry let his head rest for a moment against the tall wizard's side before they started walking out. "Indeed, my boy, you never cease to amaze me. You are very good once you recognize the danger. We need to get you better at spotting it in the first place."

"Where is Professor McGonagall?" Harry suddenly asked.

"She is downstairs. It was her idea to send your owl to find you. She expected to find you here when she arrived. I believe she underestimated Professor Snape's injuries." They entered the main hall, still silent in the waning hours of the night. "Minerva," Dumbledore addressed McGonagall.

She spun around and strode over to them. "Harry, thank goodness you are all right." She bent down to gaze at him from his level. "Oh my, you are covered in blood!" She glanced in alarm at the headmaster.

"Not any of his own, I think. Minerva, would you take Harry to get cleaned up and see that he gets to bed for a little sleep yet tonight?" He released Harry and pushed him by the shoulder toward McGonagall.

"Of course." She took his hand, which made him feel sheepish. "Come along, Mr. Potter." She led him up toward the Gryffindor rooms. "Let's use the Prefect's bathroom. It is a little nicer." She opened the door with the password and pushed him in.

With neat efficiency she stripped off his robe to reveal his pyjamas underneath. "We did leave

in a hurry, didn't we? Take those off, they are filthy as well." She handed him a soapy cloth, bundled up his clothes and put them down the chute as he washed up.

"Now let's see. You really aren't hurt?" she asked, turning him around for inspection. He tried hard not to blush. "Okay then," she said and released him. Satisfied, she went over to the wardrobe in the corner. "There are a few spare robes in here. Well this one will do for now." She came back with a well-worn robe that wasn't really black anymore. Harry slipped it on gratefully anyway.

To his chagrin, Professor McGonagall took him by the hand again and led him out, all the way to the stairs to his room. His only consolation was that no one else was awake to witness it.

"Good night, Mr. Potter," she said. "Or maybe, good morning."

Harry waved good night and crept up the steps to his bed. Dawn was starting to lighten the sky outside the window. Harry shook off the borrowed robe and stuffed it under his bed with his foot and fell onto the covers. He had just enough energy to pull the drapes closed against the spreading light.

"Harry, Harry, time for breakfast," Ron's voice said, it seemed, just moments later.

"I'm sleeping through it. Wake me before class," Harry groaned.

"You sure?"

"Yes," Harry said.

Ron peeked through the drapes and gave a wolf whistle at the sight of Harry's bare bum.

"Go 'way," Harry mumbled.

"'kay mate. I'll be back after brekkies."

Finally the room fell silent again and Harry dropped off immediately.

"Boy, the house elves really like you," Ron's comment woke him later. "Look, your robe all clean and folded and a tin of pepper-ups."

Harry rubbed his eyes hard and managed to dress and pull on his robe. He pocketed the tin with silent thanks to Professor McGonagall.

"Snape wasn't at breakfast," Ron said conversationally as he guided the way down to History of Magic. Harry seemed likely to run into a wall if not watched closely.

"Hmmm," Harry replied.

They took their seats. Harry did his best to pay attention. He had to shoo off Hermione's concerned prodding several times during the hour.

After that and Divination was lunch. Food helped perk Harry up and his appetite had returned so he ate ravenously.



"Still no Snape," Ron leaned in conspiratorially to point out.

"He wasn't in Potions this morning, either." Hermione said. "Flitwick wouldn't say where he was. He filled in at the last minute."

Well, he did lose a lot of blood, Harry imagined himself saying. Half of it was smeared all over me--you should have seen it. He shook his head and decided it was too complicated to explain.

"Harry, maybe you should go see Madam Pomfrey about your sleeping problem," Hermione said as they stood up from lunch.

"Good idea," Harry replied. "I'll do that now." Harry was curious about Snape's condition in a morbid kind of way.

At the door to the hall, Hermione said, "Do you want me to take you?"

Harry looked at her closely for the first time that day. She looked really worried. "No, Hermione. I can make it. Don't worry about me." He was annoyed to see that this appeared to make her worry more, not less. She turned away and swung her books to her back. "See you in class then," she said brusquely.

Harry frowned at his continued lack of understanding girls and headed for the hospital wing.

The ward was quiet, with one set of white screens set up in the far corner. Harry stood in the middle of the room for a long minute before stepping over and peering cautiously around at the bed. Professor Snape lay asleep. He looked better than he had the night before, though bruises still glared purple from under the edge of the bandages around his chest.

"Can I help you, Harry?" Dumbledore's voice interrupted.

Harry spun around. He hadn't heard anyone approach. "I just wanted to see how Professor Snape was doing," Harry said, trying to make that sound plausible. Well, it was the truth, but somehow it didn't seem like a sufficient explanation.

"Madame Pomfrey says he will be fine in a day or so." Dumbledore, with a penetrating gaze, gestured for Harry to step away. Harry obeyed.

"It's just that . . ." Harry began. "Well, after what happened last time--"

"You don't have to explain, Harry," Dumbledore said kindly. "You have class, I believe?"

Harry nodded and left the ward without a glance back.

"Even you do not trust him," Professor Snape's voice emanated from behind the white curtains. Dumbledore stepped over into Snape's line of sight. "You have created something I do not think you will be able to control for long," Snape commented. Dumbledore's gaze followed where Harry had just departed. "If you were trying to create a dark wizard, you went about it the rig--"

"I was not and you know it," Dumbledore cut him off stiffly.

"Why did you leave him there then?" Snape asked. "Look at the boy, Albus. He is suffering failure to thrive. How much anger have those muggles buried under there just waiting for enough power to set it loose?"

"Had I known how powerful he would be, I might have chosen differently," Dumbledore said thoughtfully.

"Tsk, ts. Infallibility," Snape commented and sat up with a grimace.

"I have never claimed to be infallible, Severus. That is why I keep you around, to point that out."

"Ah, is that why? Potter wanted to know why and I actually couldn't give him a good answer."

"He asked that?" Dumbledore said in surprise.

"He asked many things. Seemed to just need a good opportunity." Snape rubbed his bandaged chest a moment. "He is smarter than he has let on." He looked Dumbledore in the eyes. "Did you know the sorting hat wanted to put him in Slytherin?" At the headmaster's look he said. "Ah, I see he did. I would have expected you to have told me."

"Perhaps your new favorite student then, Severus," Dumbledore teased and got a snarl in return. Smiling, the headmaster turned to leave and said airily, "Good to see you feeling better, Professor."

"Feeling better?" Hermione asked as Harry sat down in Herbology.

Harry nodded, which seemed to satisfy her. However, he had to concentrate extremely hard on the instructions for plucking nightlighting flower stamen. Lack of sleep made his usual attention span extremely short. All he could think about through class and the rest of the day was returning to his soft bed and the total darkness of the drapes. It called to him like a siren from everywhere in the castle.

## **Chapter 4 Shifting Allegiances**

Two days later, Ron's proclamation changed. "Snape's back. It was too good to last, I knew it."

"Lay off, Ron," Harry said quietly, which made it sound like a threat.

The table around them quieted. "What?" Ron asked.

"I'm tired of this," Harry explained while he buttered a roll. "Remember what Dumbledore said about hanging together."

"Yeah, but we are talking about Professor Git himself!" Ron went on.

"I said, lay off," Harry repeated.

"What is with you? Are you channeling Voldemort or something?" Ron asked in shock causing several nearby to hiss under their breath. Ron spun on them. "Voldemort. Voldemort. Voldemort." Ron chanted at them a little too loudly. Harry stared at him in amused surprise. Hermione shrank back from the table as the whole side of the room quieted and turned to them. "Using his name is not going to hurt you," Ron hissed, trying to hide by ducking low over his plate.

Dumbledore arrived at the head table at that moment. His voice instantly quieted the room. "Well, Mr. Weasley has a point. Don't give something more power than it deserves by mysticizing it." He started to sit down. "Oh and Madam Pomfrey asks that whoever borrowed the nasal vacuum pump, please return it. It may be needed at any time. That is all." He sat down as a plate of food appeared before him.

"There's no such thing," Hermione whispered scathingly.

"He's saving Ron by distracting everyone," Harry commented as he took a bite of bacon.

"You think so?" Ron asked in flattered surprise through a mouthful of toast.

"Yes," Harry insisted. He scanned the table with a practiced eye. Hagrid caught his look and winked at him. Harry waved back. Snape didn't look up even though Harry stared at him hard for almost thirty seconds.

"Scar burning?" Ron asked.

"No," Harry replied. But a few minutes later the Gryffindor table fell silent. Harry and his friends looked up to see Snape striding over their way, a disagreeable look on his face.

"Your new best friend, Harry," Ron whispered as he elbowed Harry in the ribs.

Snape's eyes locked onto the back of Ron's head, making Harry bite his lip. "Mr. Potter, come with me," Snape commanded and started for the door.

"You can't give him detention, he isn't even in your class anymore," Ron protested.

Snape spun back around with a dramatic swing of his robe. "Did I say I was giving him detention, Mr. Weasley?" Ron shrank down and clamped his mouth shut. Harry stood and, with a frown at his friends, followed Snape.

Snape led the way across the hall and down the stairs toward the dungeons. It was strange to Harry to only feel curiosity rather than dread as he padded down the stones and the air became strange with noxious compounds. Snape stopped at the bottom landing and turned around. The stairwell and corridor were deserted. The Potions master reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a wand. "I believe this is yours," he said as he presented it to Harry.

Harry reached out automatically but stopped when he saw what it was. "I don't want it."

"It is the rightful spoils of a true duel, Mr. Potter. I certainly don't wish to keep it." Harry relented and took it. He turned it over in his fingers.

"Okay." Harry said and started to turn away.

"You could start a collection," Snape suggested in an odd tone.

Harry turned back. "I think I'll pass on that." Rather than start to leave again, Harry met Snape's eyes until the other was satisfied that was his real answer. He pocketed the wand. "Anything else, Professor?"

"No, Mr. Potter."

The wand in Harry's pocket felt like a warm secret except, unlike most secrets, he didn't really feel like sharing it. He had bested Lucius Malfoy easily in a duel to the death. Or it would have been death for Harry and almost was for Malfoy. Harry considered taking the wand up to put it in his trunk but decided he liked having it in his pocket better.

During Binn's class just ten minutes later, Harry had other things on his mind.

"The radical leadership of 741 wanted to incorporate the rights of manifestation documents of a century earlier. . ." Binns droned.

Harry was startled by Hermione poking him to write down that date. Harry gave her a look of disgust but did so, just to give himself something to do. He had almost caught up on his sleep, so he really had no excuse for the malaise he seemed to be suffering.

A searing burn from his scar stopped his quill on the number '4'. He exhaled suddenly at the same time as he saw a flash of green in his mind and felt something fall away into oblivion with a cosmic 'pop.' Anger from two sources had flared strongly just before and Harry struggled to find the remnants of them to figure out what just happened.

"Harry?" Hermione whispered.

Harry opened his eyes and looked over at her. "Scar?" she mouthed and pointed. He nodded and whispered, "Weird one." Then it dawned on him like the memory of a dream moments after waking. "Voldemort just killed Goyle," Harry whispered to her. Ron looked up at him, mouth agape. Aberforth and Seamus glanced back at them in question.

"Your scar is glowing," Seamus commented, as though it might be catching. The back half of the room turned around at that.

"It is?" Harry asked him. "It shows?" He heard his voice come out stupidly, as though they were discussing a zit. He rubbed it hard. Binns droned on unaware of the shifting heads.

"Harry, you should go tell Dumbledore," Hermione suggested.

"Like it is going to change anything," Harry shot back at her. "Everyone is killing everyone else. Death Eaters feel like doing each other in, who am I to stop them?" Harry said.

"Harry," she tried again. Harry turned to her, slapping his hands on his desk in annoyance. "Dumbledore should tell Goyle. . ." she said.

Harry exhaled hard. He suddenly felt utterly exhausted all over again. "Okay. You win."

"It's the right thing to do," she pleaded.

Harry looked at her closely again. He really needed to do that more often. He was getting the same look from a lot of people. That probably meant something. He stood up. "Yes, you are right. Especially since Goyle was under the Imperius Curse and probably didn't know what he was doing anyway," Harry mumbled and realized that the entire class had turned around to look at him with stunned expressions.

"Professor," Harry said loudly. Binns stopped his monologue and peered at him.

"Yes, lad?"

Harry took a deep breath and tried to prepare a lie. To heck with it, he thought. "I have to go, sir."

"In the middle of lecture?" Binns asked. This was a lot from him, realizing that and all.

"Yes, Professor. You see the headmaster told me if I had any more interesting visions of Death Eaters, that I should come tell him right away." Harry ignored Hermione's gasp. "And, well, since I just saw the Dark Lord murder one of them, I think I should go tell him." Harry waited. The class's eyes were locked onto Harry as one.

"You young people these days," Binns said, causing at least two people to have to choke down a laugh. Even Harry felt his frantic mood lift a little. "Well, if the headmaster told you, then go on."

Harry left. He could hear the room break into chaos as the door latch clicked closed.

It felt good just to be out of there. Harry headed down to the Entrance Hall. Filch stood in the center, mopping the same spot over and over and eyeing passersby with suspicion.

"I have a message for the headmaster," Harry stated with false authority. This was what he thought the Weasley twins would have done. "Do you know where he is?"

Filch squinted at him nastily. "In the staff room," he finally said and tossed his head at the correct door. Harry opened the door indicated and was daunted to find not just Dumbledore, but Snape, Flitwick, Hagrid, McGonagall, and Grey in there as well.

"What can we do for you, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, leaning over parchments spread in front of McGonagall, clearly interrupted from something.

"I, I need to speak with you, Headmaster," Harry stammered.

Dumbledore took a seat at the table surrounded by entirely mismatched chairs. "Whatever you need to say can be said here, Harry," Dumbledore said factually, steeped his fingers, and looked up at him expectantly.

With a slouched pose, Harry looked around the room at each face. He took a breath. "Uh,

Hermione thought I should come down right away," he explained.

"Ms. Granger is a young lady of uncommon wisdom; she is most likely correct," Dumbledore urged.

"Well-" Harry struggled. Every face in the room was waiting for him. "I saw, uh, Voldemort murdering Goyle with an Avada Kedavra curse and, well, Hermione thought that you would want to tell Goyle. . ." Harry faded out. The table had been quiet before, but it took on a kind of deep, sound-absorbing silence at his words.

"Harry, sit down," Dumbledore said. Harry winced visibly at this but obeyed, dropping into an old straight-backed wicker monstrosity beside him. "Start at the beginning."

"The beginning?" Harry asked.

"You have Professor Binns right now. . ." Dumbledore began. Harry sensed that his patience was not quite as limitless as it usually was. He stole another glance around the room, wishing again that he and Dumbledore were alone. Strangely, it was Snape's expression that seemed accepting and understanding or at least not like he believed Harry to be some kind of sideshow freak. That alone distressed Harry more.

Realizing that he could leave as soon as he finished, he dove in. "I was taking a note about," he paused, forgetting in the confusion, "something-"

"Something, Mr. Potter?" Snape sneered. "It is gratifying to know that nothing we are teaching you has the slightest chance of sinking in."

Harry stopped and stared at Snape with his brow furrowed. He could feel everyone watching him, especially Dumbledore. He's testing me again, the obnoxious git, Harry thought. He let the insult blow over him and felt suddenly light, uncaring. Memory just flowed back effortlessly. "It was the Articles of Manifestation." He waved his hand around like it was completely unimportant. "741. Proposal of the Frederick's Administration." He theatrically waited for Snape's approval to go on.

Professor Snape nodded as though accepting of this. For just an instant, Harry was willing to believe that Snape had set him up to give Harry a chance to prove himself to Dumbledore.

Harry took another deep breath and couldn't find anyone's eyes that he felt comfortable resting his own on, so he stared at the table in front of himself. "My scar burned, but it does that a lot now, but there was also these incredible feelings of anger and betrayal and a flash of green. Then there was. . ." he paused, trying to recapture that queer moment. He clenched and unclenched his hand a few times, palm up, as though letting something go free from it.

"Harry?" Hagrid spoke from the end of the table.

"Like a soap bubble bursting or something," Harry finally finished. He shook his head. "I can't explain it," he finished lamely.

"I expect not," McGonagall commented sharply.

"You are certain of the identities?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes. Can I go?" he asked, hopefully.

"In a moment," Dumbledore replied. "Hagrid, pour Harry some tea."

"Not the mint one," Harry said quickly. Hagrid shrugged and picked out a kettle from the window bench. Harry's tea was passed down the table to him. He sipped it carefully, the cinnamon filling his face.

"So what do you think caused this?" Dumbledore asked the room. His eyes were on Harry, who froze as he remembered what he had done that night.

Snape spoke, pulling everyone's attention to him. "I believe that he lost a power struggle with Mr. Malfoy."

Harry stared at him, at his casual crossed arms and the intense expression he had locked on Dumbledore. He's bailing me out, Harry thought in shock. Snape, of all people, is bailing me out with Dumbledore. He took another sip of tea to hide his expression. Dumbledore nodded as though that made sense and turned back to Harry, who now had control of his face.

"Well, Harry. You will come and tell-" He gestured around the room. "Any one of us if you sense anything else. All right?"

Harry nodded, then pushed his teacup back and stood up.

"G'day Harry," Hagrid said as Harry reached the door. Harry gave him a smile and shut the door behind him.

"It is getting worse," Professor McGonagall commented as the door closed.

"What is?" Hagrid challenged her.

"Harry's ability to see what is going on around He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," she said. "That may be why Goyle was killed. He was a liability because Harry could see through him so easily." Hagrid stared at her in pained surprise. "That is how he knew the DE had Severus," McGonagall pointed out.

Hagrid looked from her to Snape. "I think y' whole lot should just leave the poor boy 'lone," he commented.

"We have been trying to do that all along, Hagrid," Dumbledore said gently. "It has never worked out, as you just saw. And I am beginning to believe it is worse for Harry to not know what is happening to him." The table fell silent.

"Do *we* know what is happening to him?" McGonagall asked.

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. "At the moment I am more curious to know what is happening to Voldemort himself. He took part of Harry to recreate himself as human and I am rather curious which part of Harry he got."

Harry returned to Binn's class. The whole room turned to watch him come in. Harry scowled at them and half turned back to their notes.

"Did you tell him?" Ron asked.

"Yes," Harry said casually and everyone else turned back to the lecture.

Hermione gave him a relieved look. Even Harry had to admit that handing off responsibility felt good.

## **Chapter 5 Evening Things Up**

Later that day, the three of them were rushing to get out to the pitch to watch Quidditch tryouts. Hermione was teasing Ron about Ginny's chances of unseating Harry as Gryffindor Seeker.

"Come-on, Ron, she's your sister, you have to root for her," Hermione insisted, with a wink at Harry, who rolled his eyes.

"Harry, are you listening to this?" Ron asked, incredulous.

"Yeah, how can I not, I'm right here." He shrugged. "If Ginny can beat me, she can have the position," he said, knowing the unlikelihood of that. "We are about the same height now, it will be an interesting match-up." Indeed, Ginny had grown a lot over the last half a year, Harry thought jealously. "She said last year she was interested in Chaser, she can try out for that too."

They turned the corner from the west wing stairwell and Hermione was just saying again, "But Ron, your sister!" when she ran headlong into Snape coming the other way.

"Oh!" she said and caught her balance from getting knocked backward, then looked up at him.

"Ms. Granger, since I know you are capable of reading a blackboard, I fail to see how you can be so incapable of paying attention to where you are going," Snape said to her in his disgusted tone.

"Sorry, Professor," Hermione said in a small voice as she scowled at him in a shy way.

"Indeed as you should be," he snapped back at her. She turned away and continued walking. Snape gave them each a quick glare and continued on as well.

Harry stayed put. "Professor Snape, sir?" Harry said in his best boy voice, the one he would use with McGonagall if she were here.

Snape spun back around threateningly, though the gesture didn't make it to his eyes. "Yes, Mr. Potter," he said in a voice of incredibly shallow patience.

Harry formulated for just an instant. "I know you don't like me, sir. But can you please not



take it out on my friends?" They are all I have, he wanted to say, and I don't want you scaring them away. He bit down on even possibly projecting that. Hermione had turned back and was tugging gently on Harry's sleeve. He could almost hear her chanting in her mind, *Don't get in trouble. Don't get in trouble.*

Snape considered him. "That is all you want, Mr. Potter?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

Snape gave him a look of loathing and rolled his eyes. "You can ask anything you want of me," he said as though talking to a young child. "You don't want, say, a potion for love . . . or height even? Or a custom spell to make you invincible on the Quidditch pitch?"

Harry stared at him, understanding dawning.

"What's he on about?" Ron whispered in Harry's ear.

"No, I don't want those," Harry said firmly.

Snape sighed. "Good thing you talked the sorting hat out of it--you'd be a sorry excuse for a Slytherin," Snape commented.

"Wha?" Ron started. Hermione finished, "The sorting hat wanted to put you in Slytherin?" she asked in shock.

"He didn't tell you that?" Snape asked in mock surprise.

"I don't tell everyone everything," Harry said in a dangerous tone through clenched teeth.

Snape's chin came up at that and he evaluated Harry once again with a long look. "No, I guess you don't."

"I don't want anything from you except common courtesy for my friends," Harry said in a calmer tone.

Snape sighed loudly. "Oh, very well." He looked back and forth at the two students beside Harry. "Mr. Weasley," Snape began then faltered a moment. "Have a nice day. I know I will since I don't have to look forward to having you in my class."

"Hullo?" Harry exclaimed.

Snape frowned and crossed his arms and drew himself up. "I am somewhat out of practice at this, you know."

"Clearly," Harry snorted and found himself laughing, so he put a hand over his mouth to keep from offending Ron.

"Ms. Granger." Snape turned to her. "Since you are one of the rare bright spots in my sixth year Potions, I will say honestly that I look forward to seeing you tomorrow." He looked at Harry, waiting for a verdict.

Harry was finding it harder not to laugh out loud with Snape's expectant gaze added to the mix. For some crazed reason he was now seeing Snape as comical rather than evil and obnoxious and the shift in itself was staggeringly odd. "Thank you," Harry managed to gulp.

Snape rolled his eyes and strode off again while shaking his head. When Snape had turned the corner and his footsteps faded from the staircase. Ron exploded, "What the heck was that?"

Harry was still trying to suppress his laughter. "Sorry, Ron." He wiped his eyes. It felt good to laugh.

"Harry, what is going on?" Hermione asked. "Why did Snape say you could ask anything of him."

"Ugh." Harry breathed and started down the corridor. "I don't want to get into it," he said tiredly.

"Harry!" Ron and Hermione both shouted at him in unison. Harry put up his hands in self defense and ducked down as he walked. "He owed me a favor, okay. I don't want to talk about favors I do for Snape, really," Harry pleaded. At their disbelieving faces he added, "Maybe later. Right now we have to get to tryouts."

Barely mollified, they let him lead them out.

As she landed on the pitch after the Seeker tryout, Ginny looked like she had really expected to unseat Harry. She stood with her shoulders slumped and dragged her broom off the pitch. From the stands, Hermione elbowed Ron to go after her. Harry stood up and gestured for Ron to stay put. "I'll talk to her," he said.

Harry had flown first and hadn't taken off his Quidditch robes. Ginny also wore the Gryffindor colors, as she had been on the team from the second half of the season last year. Harry jogged over to her. She glanced over at him and immediately away. Harry had learned in the last year that you never ask a girl if she wanted to talk. It only made them mad and it was a stupid question anyway, since they always want to talk. He just walked beside her silently.

"I guess I kinda sucked," she said as they walked into the shade of the stands. The banners were down so it was just a skeleton rather than the colorful stadium it was on game day.

"No, Ginny." Harry said. "You were really good. You are much better than Hufflepuff's seeker and, well, I guess I'm not the right person to be comparing you to Cho."

Ginny grinned at him through her sadness. "Guess not." She kept walking around under the stands. Harry kept beside her. "You really think I would be good enough if I were in Hufflepuff?"

"Yes," Harry said with certainty. The hair on his neck was standing up and, as he spoke, he reached into his robes for his wand. Without turning around he fired a wall charm back over his shoulder. He heard a stifled 'oof' from behind.

"What was that?" Ginny asked as she spun around.

"Just Malfoy, I think. Ignore him," Harry said with confidence. "Let's go back out to the pitch. They will be running tryouts for Chaser next."

## Chapter 6 Creating Trouble

The next day at breakfast, Harry felt the extra wand poking him for the tenth time that morning. That was why he never used that inside wand pocket usually. He pulled out the ebony wand and fingered it.

"What's that?" Ginny asked rudely. She was a little gloomy since she had only made backup Chaser the day before.

Everyone nearby looked at him. "A wand I found," Harry said. He glanced at the head table to see that only half the staff had arrived and Professor Snape had not.

"You should turn it in. Someone will be missing it," Ginny said through a drink of juice.

"Oh, I know whose it is," Harry said evenly as he looked out across to the Slytherin table and found Draco Malfoy's eyes on him. Harry gave the wand a little formal wave, holding onto the pointed end so as to not get into trouble if any staff should see him.

Draco's gaze shifted into something odd and deep, as though he were falling into himself. Harry gave him a questioning look and Draco's gaze grew darker.

"Who's wand is it?" Hermione's voice asked.

"Lucius Malfoy's," Harry responded, carefully enunciating each syllable so that Draco could read his lips.

"Where did you get THAT?" Ron sputtered his juice.

Harry's lips cocked into a little smile that made Ron shirk away from him. Harry was truly enjoying himself. It was a thrill watching Draco's personal torment, even at this distance. Maybe especially at this distance. Harry's limbs had filled with this lovely vibrating magic as he turned the wand around, weighing it on his fingertips.

Ron and Hermione realized who he was looking at. "You really are a Slytherin, Harry," Hermione chided him sharply.

"Harry a Slytherin?" Ginny laughed.

"He has Lucius Malfoy's wand," Hermione whispered to her frantically. The rest of the table was beginning to murmur as well. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Snape step over to the head table. He slipped the wand up his sleeve in a smooth motion. Hermione didn't miss that. "What is going on with you, Harry?"

"Shhhh," Ron said, willing the table to shut up. Amazingly they sensed the danger of

discovery, and did.

"Don't you like seeing Draco freaked so?" Harry asked.

"Yes, but there is a limit, Harry," she said, sounding suspiciously like Harry's mother in the pensieve.

Harry backed down, somewhat chastened. "Yeah, maybe."

"Give it back," Malfoy's voice caught Harry up short as he walked down the corridor from breakfast.

"Get lost, Malfoy," Ron sneered.

"Ron." Harry grabbed him by the robes and pulled him back behind him. To Draco he said, "I don't want it anymore anyway. But I think you should say the magic word."

Draco's eyebrows came together in confusion. "Magic word?" he asked incredulously.

"He means 'please', Draco. It is a muggle expression." Hermione said, rolling her eyes at Harry.

"How would I know something like that?" He sneered and stared at Harry, clearly disturbed to be in this position. He stood alone. Goyle had been absent since the day of Harry's vision and Crabbe must be elsewhere. "If I say this stupid word, you'll give it back?" Draco asked.

Harry nodded. He pulled out the wand and held it up vertically. It's polished black surface flashed in the light. Draco's face went through a rapid set of transformations, from distress to glee to hate and back to distress. Finally he spat, "Please?" as though he were cursing.

Harry straightened his arm and held the wand out. Draco was stunned for a moment, but quickly recovered, snatched it up and ran off.

When they made it to Binn's class, Hermione said, "So I am going to assume that these two things are related, because it makes my head hurt to imagine they aren't." Harry and Ron both looked at her as they sat down and took out their quills and ink. "You had Lucius Malfoy's wand and Professor Snape owed you a favor," she stated. At Harry's nod, she said, "Okay, I just want to know that someone else knows about this and I'll leave you alone."

Harry narrowed his eyes at her. "You don't trust me?"

"I don't think I trust Snape."

Harry frowned at her and Binns started to drone, so they quieted and started taking notes.

On the way to lunch in the crowded main hallway, someone grabbed Harry hard under his arm and pulled him aside behind the staircase. Harry started to struggle until Snape's voice close to his ear said, "Do not underestimate Draco Malfoy."

"I-" Harry started to deny.

"I overheard a secondhand story of your casual treatment of his attacking you and the Weasley girl."

"He didn't get a shot in," Harry said.

Snape's grip tightened, making Harry wince. "Be. More. Careful." Snape's voice fired out in a harsh whisper and he released him.

As Harry made it back into the main flow of students, Hermione came up to him. "Was that Professor Snape?" she asked, concerned. "What did he want?"

"I'll tell you later; Ron's waiting inside."

Hermione stood her ground. "You'll tell me right now, Harry Potter." She took him by the arm and led him outside around the side of the castle. Cloud shadows chased each other over the lawn as they walked the worn path beside the rough stone at the base of the outside wall.

"What did he say?" she asked firmly when they had stopped.

"Just now?"

"Yes."

"He warned me to watch out for Draco. Draco tried to come after Ginny and me over by the pitch during tryouts."

Hermione relaxed a little. "Back to my earlier question, who else knows about this 'favor'?"

Harry held himself in check. "So you'd be okay if someone like McGonagall or Hagrid or Flitwick. . ." He waved his hand around like he was pulling names out of the air. "Or Dumbledore, even, knew about it?"

"Yes, Harry, I would, and with good reason."

"They all know, Hermione," Harry stated.

"Oh." She looked out over the lawn. "I just don't like this sudden. . . appreciation. . . you have for Snape."

"He understands, Hermione. No one else does," Harry said honestly.

"Understands what?" she asked a little shrill.

Harry frowned and turned his head away.

"Harry, Harry. Did he do something to you?" She grabbed a piece of the sleeve of his robe.

Harry turned to her with an expression of complete disbelief. "Like what?"

"I don't know," she replied in distress. "He is nasty, can't you see that? He was a . . ." She dropped her voice. "Death Eater. You know that."

"He's a fake," Harry commented with a scoff. "It's an act."

"Not all of it is an act," Hermione retorted in a low voice.

"No, not all of it. I agree. But a lot of it. You saw him in the hallway."

"I didn't see the same thing you did, Harry," she said. "Are you sure he didn't do anything to you?" she persisted quietly. "Slip you some kind of potion or something?"

Harry rolled his eyes. His stomach was growling. "Unless you think his blood has some kind of magical properties, no."

"His blood?" Hermione echoed with a wide-eyed thoughtful look.

"Yes. Because the other night I was covered in it." Hermione looked aghast. "Lucius Malfoy had spent hours torturing Snape and he was bleeding everywhere by the time McGonagall and I got to him."

"Professor McGonagall?"

"There wasn't anyone else around. Dumbledore was gone to Azkaban. . ." Harry watched understanding dawn on his friend's face. "Please don't tell anyone. He expected I was going to brag about it and I really don't mean to."

"You saved his life," she said. She chuckled in embarrassment. "Oh, Harry, I thought. . ."

"Thought what?"

"I don't know, like he was trying to take control of you. No wonder he thought he owed you."

Harry rolled his eyes again. "Can we go into lunch? I'm empty."

"Of course." At the steps leading in, she hit him hard on the arm, hard enough that Harry grabbed ahold of it in protection. "And you gave the wand back to Draco?!" she asked in sudden horror.

"I didn't want it."

"I don't believe you," she breathed in exasperation, then added, "No wonder Draco looked like a whipped dog."

"Oh, so I'm not going far enough now?"

"I don't know. I have to think about it." She scowled thoughtfully.

"Where were you?" Ron asked when they arrived at the table, halfway through his plate.

"Discussing Harry not finding us understanding enough." Hermione commented, apparently

still stinging from that.

Harry gave her a hurt look.

"Are you guys going to embarrass us again today?" Ginny asked shyly.

"No," they all responded together, then laughed.

Harry took a few bites of his turkey sandwich. "Hermione," he said quietly. "That is exactly what I am talking about with you not understanding. You get angry when I even tell you that."

She put down her fork and put her palms down on the table in a pose of self control. "You're right, you ought to be able to tell me that at least."

"You two don't have the right range of experiences to understand," Harry tried and then seeing their faces, cut himself off.

"For example?" Ron asked.

"You've never read a Death Eater's mind." Harry pointed his fork at them.

"And Snape has?" Hermione asked.

"I would assume. He can read anyone's I think."

"What?" Ron gasped.

"You never noticed that?" Ginny interrupted. "Geesh!" She went back to her conversation with other fourth years.

Ron put his head in his hands. "Oh, oh, oh. I am soooooo glad I don't have Potions anymore. I couldn't take it."

Harry smiled at Ron's antics. "Get off it, Ron. He doesn't care what you think," he pointed out.

Ron held his protective position. "Ooooooh, I hope that's true."

Hermione said quietly, "Just be careful how far you trust him. Please?"

Harry nodded with a wry smile.

"This is going to haunt my dreams. . ." Ron moaned.

## **Chapter 7 Deadly Curiosity**

Things calmed down around Hogwarts. Quidditch practice started, leaving Harry with little time to finish his homework. Even so, he found himself eyeing the stairwell down to the

dungeons with strange interest. One day when he was alone after practice, he padded down the stone steps with no particular purpose in mind.

The low-ceilinged corridors were quiet, making his footsteps echo loudly. Even though it was obvious someone was there, he peered carefully around the door to the Potions classroom, holding his broom behind him.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked without looking up from whatever he was brewing in the front of the room. A smoking sequence of burners was filling the air with a dizzying mixture of odors.

Harry stepped inside and stopped halfway along the empty student tables. "I just wanted to, uh, thank you for being nice to Hermione," Harry said, thinking up an excuse for being there. Hermione had commented on it just this morning. Harry thought it might have been some kind of peace offering regarding the Potions master.

Snape looked at him doubtfully. "It is far less painful than expected to do so. Fortunately for me, I do not see Mr. Weasley very often."

Harry grinned at that. Snape stared at him a moment before going back to his work.

"They haven't recaptured anyone," Harry commented quietly. This had been weighing on his mind ever since it was clear the Death Eaters and dementors had left Azkaban for a final time.

"Apparently not," Snape commented. He poured a bright green liquid with large globs in it into a dark blue one. The whole thing went inky black as it mixed.

"Do you think I should have-" Harry stopped. He had been obsessing over what now seemed like incompetence on his part, letting Malfoy get away that night. "Never mind," he amended. He had wandered closer to the large table at the front of the room and now peered into each bubbling cauldron in turn from his side.

Snape watched him as he stirred. "Mr. Potter, you truly are not spending free time here, are you?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't mean to bother you."

"I simply would find it irrational for you to voluntarily spend time in this room," Snape commented with a suspicious expression.

"I would too. Especially since you were so gleeful about setting Sirius up for the Dementor's kiss." Harry realized that this was really what he had come down to say. Their eyes met. "But since I was the one who really did kill him, I can't really fault you for that."

"You did not kill Sirius, Potter. Circumstances did." Snape dampened the flame on the burner with a tap of his wand and set the intermediate concoction aside. Harry frowned and didn't comment. "You didn't really know him that well," Snape commented carefully.

Harry leaned hard on his broom handle, gripping it tightly. "I know. But he was all I had." He was my only ticket away from the Dursleys, he thought to himself with a selfish sting. "Well," Harry said after a pause, "I have about ten hours of schoolwork tonight."



"Try not to become too fatigued, Potter. It makes one sloppy," Snape warned.

"Oh yeah, that excuse would go over well with Professor McGonagall," Harry joked. He turned back to the door and found Draco blocking it.

"What are you doing here?" Draco asked in a low voice.

Harry started to reply when Snape's voice floated over to them. "Unless you are a better dueler than your father, I would step out of his way, Mr. Malfoy."

Harry worked hard not to grin at the look on Draco's face. The blond boy did step aside though, with a look of pure loathing for Harry.

Days later, Harry finished composing a note to Mrs. Weasley. He had taken to writing her more often this year. It simultaneously made him feel good and bad to do so, but her messages back were always so full of pleasure at his having written that he couldn't restrain himself for long. She was open to short notes too, which made it very easy.

Harry let Hedwig go from the owlery window and looked out. Someone was sneaking across the lawn in a invisibility cloak that didn't completely cover them. Harry himself was the only student at Hogwarts that he knew of who had one. Curiosity got the better of him and he raced down from the tower and out a side door onto the lawn of the keep.

As a heavy user of such a cloak, Harry knew the telltale signs. He scanned the lawn and at the far corner of the inner yard, saw the grass being compressed in a pattern of footprints moving away. Harry pretended to be walking back to the main building; when the footprints disappeared around an alcove, he took off at a stealthy run and peeked around slowly.

Of course he couldn't see anything. The stone pavement gave no indication. Harry wished he had some flour with him to spill on the floor so he could watch for tracks. He waited a moment, then followed around the curved stone staircase downward, reaching out with his hands in both directions to cover the whole space of the stairwell. He felt disoriented when he reached the landing below ground level. He tried to take a deep breath to clear his head and darkness snatched him away.

Harry came to with a blinding headache.

He cracked his eyes open and stared at the bound hands in front of his face for a very long time, trying to decide whose they were. Eventually he decided that, since he couldn't seem to find or move his own hands, these must be his.

Light showed through a series of long vertical slits in the rough stone wall. Large, still objects loomed around Harry, but he couldn't move his head to study them closely. Also, his eyes were clouded with a strange greenish haze that made everything blurry and either too dark or too bright. He was glad that he couldn't move--it meant someone else must be taking care of things. That was a comforting thought and he dwelled on it for a very long time, until he noticed the dust motes swirling in the sunlight cutting through the air nearby. They seemed alive, like they were trying to communicate. Harry was sorry he couldn't understand them, because they were very busy writing messages to him and it seemed a waste to not read

them.

His eyes drifted back to his hands again. They were okay hands overall. They weren't obeying him right now, but since that wasn't the norm he could forgive that for now. They were a little small. He'd had to work on hand strength for flying, but that was okay too. Hermione had once told him that the limitations you can see are the easy ones and to not let them slow him down. The ones inside your head that you couldn't see were the ones that would inhibit your success the most. This limitation of not moving was getting to be a bugger though.

The sun grew dimmer and it no longer angled into the room. Harry was sad to see it go, as the dust motes had left as well. He felt abandoned by them. That stark emotion ran rampant through him until the door slammed open at the far end of the room.

Someone was walking toward him, tossing the tall objects aside without regard. A wand moved in front of Harry's face and the ties around his wrists fell away like dead snakes. He was lifted off the shelf he had rested on so long that his legs and back had apparently gone numb. Good, he thought, it was getting boring here. He was adjusted in this person's arms until he was held fast, his cheek pressing into the warm fabric of the robe. A mixture of sharp scents came off the fabric. Good, Harry thought again, Professor Snape is taking care of things this time. I don't have to do anything at all.

"Stay with me, Harry," Snape's sharp voice commanded. He was being carried out of the darkness and into the dim light of the corridor. "Do not allow yourself to float," Snape continued.

"Fl-?" Harry tried to ask in confusion. He realized now that he couldn't talk because he couldn't willingly force any air out of his lungs.

"Focus on breathing, Potter," Snape said. The light became brighter, more cheery. People mingled here, a rising and falling murmur of human voices. The mass voice began shifting into a higher pitch of excitement. Fear pummeled Harry's helpless mind. He could feel people staring at him. He groaned and struggled, trying to get away from them, from the stares.

"Harry? Harry! Harry!" Hermione was screaming from somewhere. Harry wished he were there too so he could tell her everything was all right.

Hermione fought her way through the crowd of students milling in the hall. Snape was carrying Harry's limp, pale form in his arms. Harry didn't appear to be alive. Snape glanced at her horrified face and disregarded her. McGonagall rushed toward them all.

"Your office, Minerva," Professor Snape said urgently. She led the way. Snape carried Potter's ridiculously light form behind McGonagall. She cleared her desk completely with a wave of her wand and shut the door on the scared faces in the corridor. Snape laid Harry down, taking care to lower his head to the wood.

"What happened?" McGonagall snapped angrily.

Snape was looking Harry over in the light. He pressed his wand into Harry's palm and sent a spark down it. Harry's arm twitched slightly.

"I'll call Pomfrey," McGonagall breathed.

"She is rather busy at the moment," Snape stated factually.

"With what?"

"With Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Crabbe, and Ms. Parkinson," Snape stated dryly. "I seriously doubt that she can help, even if she were not otherwise engaged."

McGonagall gripped the back of her chair and stared at her colleague, trying to control her horror.

He met her gaze evenly. "They are alive, I assure you. They perhaps do not wish they were." Snape leaned over and spoke to Harry. "Harry, can you hear me?" Harry gave an impression of a nod. "Can you see me?"

"Y- You're all hazy, green," Harry managed with great effort in a series of exhalations.

Professor Snape straightened with a grim expression.

"Oh, my," McGonagall said. She rubbed her forehead with her fingertips.

"He has survived it once before," Snape commented.

"We have to send for Dumbledore," McGonagall said, shakily.

"I was hoping you would do that," Snape said. "In the meantime I have a few ideas for a potion."

The door to McGonagall's office swung open, causing the crowd around it to leap back and bump into each other.

"Professor Snape?" Hermione said in a distressed voice from the front of the group. Tears streaked her face. Snape grabbed her by the arm and dragged her away from the crowd. "Come with me, Ms. Granger."

"Harry?" she asked in a small hopeful voice. As they reached the stairs he regripped to lighten the pressure on her arm, even though she hadn't complained. "In a moment," was all Snape said. They walked down a corridor and then down into the dungeons. Once inside the Potions classroom he said, "Sit," and indicated the chair at the first desk near the far end. Hermione obeyed. Snape rummaged around hurriedly and began setting things on her table. Silent tears continued to flow down her face.

"You do know how to create an amorphous rejuvenation potion, correct?" he asked. She nodded and bit her lip. "I want you to only add three squid eggs before it goes on the heat the second time, as well only stir it for forty seconds. . ." He put his hands on the table and leaned down close. ". . .before getting it to a fast boil. Got it?"

She nodded and began opening jars, hurrying as much as she could and still have it exactly right. Snape worked in the back. He cleared several tables of brewing potions with a wave of his wand and started setting many bottles out.



Hermione looked up only when another figure entered. Dumbledore had walked in silently and his grim expression did nothing to cheer her at all. She finished the boil and produced a cooling charm with her wand to bring the temperature down at just the right rate for the last step.

"Severus," Dumbledore said. Snape looked up and Hermione was shocked to see the Potions master's shoulders sag in defeat. It was a pose she had never seen on him. He shook his head in reply to some unspoken question. Hermione added honeysuckle nectar drop by drop and stirred in a kind of trance.

"What are you trying?" Dumbledore asked finally.

"A variant on the Sandmaster's Elixir."

Hermione couldn't contain her sob. There was only one reason they would try that potion. She put her hand over her mouth and stared at the two of them. "Who?" she tried to ask.

"Is that finished, Ms. Granger?" Professor Snape asked.

She nodded. He stepped over and picked up the cauldron by the handle then took it over to the other table.

Dumbledore stepped over to stand on the other side of her table. "Who put an Avada Kedavra on Harry, are you wondering?" he asked. "I am told it was Mr. Malfoy," Dumbledore answered his own question. He turned around. "A charge of your house I believe, Professor Snape," he said in an ominous tone. A breeze swirled out of nowhere around the room, filling the headmaster's robe. The air filled with a crackling energy.

Hermione grabbed the edge of the table. Dumbledore angry was scarier than expected. She could starkly see for the first time ever, the difference between the shell of a human form and a raging magic underneath.

Snape seemed to ignore Dumbledore's fury and continued looking through a series of small old bottles, sniffing and holding them to the light. "I cannot watch every single Slytherin simultaneously, Headmaster," Snape said. From the bottle in his hand, he added two drops to Hermione's cauldron.

"This situation is very bad, Severus," Dumbledore stated. The bottles on the far wall rattled. "And putting three students from your house in the Hospital Wing is not really an atonement."

Hermione's sense of fear ratcheted up at that. She had to bite her lip to stay quiet.

"I did warn Mr. Potter," Snape commented as he watched closely the foam bubbling up in the cauldron.

"He did," Hermione squeaked. Dumbledore did what she most feared at that moment: he turned back around to face her. His blue eyes were glowing and sparkling and he seemed to have grown a foot in height. "Harry told me," she managed to say somehow.

Dumbledore blinked at her and his eyes faded back to normal and he relaxed into his normal posture. Hermione wanted to be relieved but couldn't quite manage it. In an ordinary tone, he said, "Ms. Granger, I think you and I should go make ourselves useful." He gestured for her to lead the way out the room.

As they reached the uneasy crowd in the hall, Dumbledore put a hand on Hermione's

slumped shoulder and steered her through. Ron fought his way over to them. "Hermione! They're saying-" He caught sight of her tearstained face, then his eyes jumped to Dumbledore's grim expression. "Oh, no!" he moaned.

"Mr. Weasley, come with me as well," Dumbledore said and led the way toward the door to McGonagall's office.

## Chapter 8 Hanging by a Thread

"It was the Slytherins," someone's voice sneered viciously and ominous murmuring followed. The crowd shifted. Hermione tore her gaze from Cho's damp, streaked face to the far end of the hall where students from the other houses had clustered. Another odd breeze blew around them and she tried to shirk away from the Headmaster, but he had a firm hand on her shoulder.

"No one will do anything!" Dumbledore's voice rang out. The whole hall froze. "It would be a grave error to take revenge on a group for the actions of an individual." He paused a moment, seeming to evaluate the mood. He frowned. "House Prefects, take your students back to their rooms and keep them there," he ordered. The crowd shifted again and began turning away.

Dumbledore opened Professor McGonagall's office and urged Ron and Hermione inside. The door closed behind them on its own. McGonagall perched on the end of the desk looking down at Harry. "Ms. Granger, Mr. Weasley, I want you to talk to Harry." Dumbledore's hand urged Hermione around the other side of the desk.

"Talk?" Ron asked in a strangled voice.

"Remind him of all the things he is going to be doing this year," Dumbledore suggested.

Ron swallowed and looked over Harry's pale yellow face. "He's not-?" He stopped at Hermione's sharp hiss.

Hermione took Harry's hand. "Harry?"

"Hm?" Harry responded.

She glanced softly at Ron, who looked as though the world was spinning too fast for him, and cast about for something. "It's nice being Seeker again, isn't it?"

"Mmm."

Hermione gave Ron an impatient look. He fingered the loose material of Harry's sleeve a moment and leaned close. "You have to show me the Wronski Feint. You promised last year you would."

Dumbledore's quiet voice imposed on them as he spoke to McGonagall. "I am going to make certain this goes no further," he said and departed.

"What happened?" Ron mouthed to Hermione.

"Malfoy," Hermione mouthed back. "The weather is so nice right now," she said to Harry, "we can go study under the big tree."

"Hmmm," Harry responded in a sadder tone.

"Avada Kedavra," she mouthed again at Ron, whose expression shifted to terrorized. McGonagall's hand fell on Ron's shoulder. She gave him a supporting look and nodded at Harry.

"Next Hogsmeade, Harry. It is coming up this weekend. Honeydukes gets their next year's previews in this week," Ron managed, although his tone was desperate. His eyes were going shiny.

Oh no, Ron, don't, Hermione pleaded silently. I won't be able to hold back either.

The door opened and Professor Snape strode in. He moved Ron bodily aside and leaned over Harry. "Still with us, Mr. Potter?" he asked conversationally. He reached around Harry and lifted him into the crook of his arm. In his other hand he had a small bottle which he popped open with his thumb. "Wake up a moment, Potter," Snape said sharply. "I need you to swallow this." He put the bottle to Harry's lips and tipped some in. Hermione reached over to take the bottle as Snape rubbed Harry's throat to get him to swallow.

"Ych," Harry commented weakly.

Snape took the bottle back and repeated the process. "One more sip, Potter," Snape said when they reached the end of the liquid. As Harry swallowed the last bit, he tried to say something. Snape held still and said, "What is it?"

Pacing his speech for each exhalation, Harry said softly, "If you are going to . . . poison me, at least . . . make it taste good."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione whispered, grinning through her sadness.

Snape stared at the boy, the most famous wizard in the world, three quarters dead . . . and teasing him. He was certain it was a tease--he could feel the shape of it in Harry's mind. Something alarming shifted inside of Snape at that. Some kind of irrational belief in real absolution tried to bud in his mind. In a daze he lowered Harry back down, remembering as well the irrational absolute trust the boy had felt as he had carried him from the storage room. This couldn't all be some strange side effect of the Curse.

When he came back to the present, Professor Snape said, "The potion will put him into a deep sleep . . . If it is going to work at all," he added in his usual tone, but it sounded off now even to him.

Harry did appear to drop smoothly into sleep. "Lumos," Snape said and lifted each of Harry's eyelids and waved his glowing wand in front of each unfocused eye.

"How does it look?" McGonagall finally spoke up.

Snape straightened. "As good as can be expected. It am curious to know if Malfoy botched the Curse or if Mr. Potter has some inherent immunity to it. But I don't think we are going to find out." He continued to look down at Harry. "We are in completely unknown territory at this point."

"We should take him to Pomfrey now," McGonagall said and took out her wand.

Snape held up his hand to stop her. "No spells on him, Minerva." He bent down and picked Harry back up again. It seemed a weak gesture, but something. Ron's exclamation of surprise actually strengthened it in some twisted way.

The corridors were empty on the way to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey met them at the door. She gave Professor Snape a look that could have peeled the scales off a dragon and led the way to a bed. She stripped Harry's robe off, forcing Hermione to look away with a flush, and settled him in under a sheet and blanket. When she pulled out her wand, Snape and McGonagall protested.

Snape explained, "If there is any remnant of the Curse in him, it may add force to it." Pomfrey gave him a hard look. "I gave him an extended Sandmaster's Elixir," he added.

Pomfrey rubbed the back of her neck in thought. "Well, we are going to have to do a little something to keep him alive while it works." She got up and went to the supplies room. She came back with a small worn stone and a funnel on a stand.

"Ugh, I hate those things," Ron commented.

"What is it?" Hermione asked.

"It's a stomach stone. When I was five, my mum got it in her head that I had swallowed the pixie powder and took me into St. Mungo's. They used one of those." He shuddered. "It can take stuff out of your stomach or put it in."

Pomfrey opened Harry's mouth and dropped the stone into his throat. "I'll keep the charm very local," she commented. She used the wand to draw the stone down into Harry's stomach. Satisfied, she turned to the funnel and poured a gloppy grey mixture into it. Even though there was nothing under it, the mixture disappeared.

"Oh," Hermione remarked.

"It is pure nutrition and he is going to need a lot of it, since his body is going to try to replace every last bit of itself with a fresh copy."

"What?!" Ron exclaimed.

"That is what a Sandmaster's Elixir does." Pomfrey explained. "Though it sounds like Professor Snape tried to slow down its action." She watched Harry for a long moment. "We'll see," she stated frankly and stood up. To Snape she said, "Your other charges were sent to St. Mungo's, just let you know."

"What?" Ron said again.



Quietly, Hermione explained. "Malfoy and the others, uh, got a little more than they expected when they were found out."

Ron stared at her queerly then went wide-eyed. He looked up at Snape with a kind of adoration. "You put them in Hospital?" he asked, incredulous. "All right!"

"Ron!" Hermione scolded him.

"But they deserved it," Ron insisted, not backing down a bit.

"I only lost control for a moment," Snape said to no one in particular. He sounded a little disappointed in himself.

Ron looked back up at Snape. "Harry's right, you're not as bad as you seem."

"We shall see, Mr. Weasley," Snape said darkly.

"Maybe someone should tell Dumbledore that the potion is working," Hermione said quietly. She, McGonagall, Snape and Ron had been sitting around Harry's bed for some time. Hermione was sure the yellow tint had faded just a little from Harry's skin, that it wasn't just a trick of the light.

"He will undoubtedly stop by," Snape stated with a hint of displeasure. He slouched in his chair a little more and crossed his arms.

"I have never seen him so angry before," Hermione commented with a tone of fear. "I'm glad he is usually very patient and nice."

"He is usually nice because otherwise it would always be the way you saw it," Snape commented.

"Severus," McGonagall chastised.

"You disagree?" Snape asked her.

She sighed. "I disagree with you telling them. You and I can debate the headmaster's merits in private some other time."

They fell silent again. Hermione held Harry's hand in her own. She ran her fingers over the scar still visible on the back. "I must . . ." Snape read from beside her. She moved her thumb out of the way, pulling the skin tight to make the words visible. "I must not tell lies," Snape read. "What is that?" he asked.

Hermione bowed her head. "Umbridge."

"Indeed?"

"She was evil," Ron commented. He sat hunched over with his chin on the heels of his hands, rocking his elbows on his knees. "That was her idea of lines." Snape looked at him closely. "Didn't know she was your type, did you?" Ron grouched moodily.

Snape's whole brow went up. "Have I ever harmed you, Mr. Weasley?"

"No," Ron grudgingly admitted.

Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I would certainly not force my students to use a blood quill to do lines."

"Is that what this is about?" McGonagall said, deciding the conversation deserved attention. "I found that nasty thing in her office when I boxed it up for Dumbledore. I wondered who she wrote to with it. Or what spells she needed it for."

Hermione held the back of Harry's hand up for her to peer at. McGonagall took off her glasses and squinted, then sat back and shook her head. "She was a piece of work," McGonagall commented, also crossing her arms.

The door to the wing opened a few minutes later. Everyone sat up a little as Dumbledore approached, except Snape. Dumbledore stopped at the foot of the bed and sighed faintly as he looked Harry over. "The potion seems to have taken hold," he observed. "That implies it had enough to work with."

"That would be the optimistic interpretation," Snape commented. He looked very tired now.

Dumbledore shifted his penetrating gaze to him. "Professor Snape, get some sleep in case your expertise is needed again." Snape stood. Dumbledore looked from Ron to Hermione. "You two as well." At their protests, he said, "Your Prefect duties are currently unfilled."

That got them going.

The door to the wing closed. Dumbledore took a seat beside the bed and shook his head. "If we get out of this one, Minerva, I think we will have to consider ourselves very lucky." He shook his head again. "The danger in our midst is always the least expected," he commented philosophically.

Hermione stepped through the portrait hole first and the commons room erupted. "Hey, hey!" the seventh year prefects shouted to calm everyone down.

"Why is everyone still up?" Ron asked as the portrait hole closed behind him.

"What is going on? Did Malfoy really kill Harry?" Dean asked sharply. "Because if he did, we're going over there."

"And do what?" Hermione shrieked at him, causing him to step back from her. "Killing a few Slytherins in return, that's going to help?" she asked sarcastically. "Then what? They come back over here?" She was raging now. Ron stared at her with his mouth open. "Dumbledore is right: It stops here."

"So we just take it, is that it?" Seamus said.

Hermione took a deep breath and calmed considerably. "No. We don't just take it. But we

don't take revenge either." The room glared at her. "What? You think Slytherin parents would be any less distraught to get a letter saying their son or daughter is dead? You think you are different than that somehow?" Her voice was quieter now, more dangerous.

"Harry isn't dead, anyway," Ron murmured.

"Not for lack of trying, we hear," Neville commented and Seamus jumped in with a taunting "Yeah!"

"How is Harry?" a voice from the back asked.

"They've given him a potion. He's asleep. We won't know for a few days." Her eyes started to burn again. She took out her wand and sat on the step to the portrait hole. "Anyone wants to get out, they can come through me," she said tiredly. Ron moved quickly to sit beside her, pulling out his wand as an afterthought. The other Prefects stepped closer as well.

The commons room crowd shifted and murmured. "And I suppose Malfoy and Crabbe are lounging in the dungeons enjoying themselves," Seamus sneered with a twisted face.

"No. They are at St. Mungo's, if that makes you feel any better. It shouldn't," Hermione said.

"Harry got a few shots of his own in then?" Someone said.

Ron and Hermione exchanged glances. "Not exactly," Ron commented.

"You were so happy about it Ron, you should tell them," Hermione looked away from him, and he sensed she was profoundly disappointed in him.

He opened his mouth then shut it again. He saw it differently now. Crabbe and Parkinson were just hangers on, they probably didn't quite deserve it. And Snape was their Head of House; it was a kind of betrayal really when you thought about it. If McGonagall had done something similar . . .

"Ron?" Someone prompted over the talking and suppositioning. "What happened to Malfoy and friends?"

Ron swallowed. "Snape happened to them."

Mouths fell open. Exclamations went around. "Professor Snape?"

"He said he only lost control for a moment," Ron added, trying somehow to explain. He was feeling a little sick now.

"Brrr," Dean shuddered. "A moment from Snape would seem like a lifetime. I imagine he would be pretty creative in that moment, too."

Ron looked down at his wand sadly. Hermione took his hand and squeezed it hard before letting it go. Ron stood up. "Everyone, get to bed," he said, waving them away. "We just have to wait and see." Amazingly, most students obeyed him. A few sat down in the chairs by the fire and glared at the Prefects.

A few minutes later, the portrait hole opened and McGonagall stepped in. "Well. Looks like you have things under control. I wasn't sure that would be the case."

Redding, a stocky girl and one of the seventh year Prefects, said, "Hermione and Ron had a little talk with everyone." She swallowed hard.

"I would expect, if anything were going to calm things down, it would be that." She looked at the two of them sitting on the bottom step. "After all, you two have more to lose than anyone else." She turned to the room. "No one needs to keep vigil. Off with you." The remaining students obeyed her with unhappy expressions.

When she turned back to them, Ron said, "We'll stay here."

She stood still, considering them until the last footstep on the stairs faded. "That bad?" Ron nodded emphatically. McGonagall stepped over and sat in a well-worn chair by the fire. "Might as well not take any chances then," she said conversationally as she crossed her legs and settled back.

The next morning, Hermione, more tired than she remembered being in a long time, stopped by the hospital wing before breakfast. Harry's bed was in the middle on the right. The morning sun blazed through the windows casting squares of warm yellow on the floor. She walked over to stand at the foot of Harry's bed. Harry's skin looked normal now but he seemed to have sunken into himself. Also he didn't look like he was resting completely; he had a vague, straining expression.

"Anything I can do for you, Ms. Granger?" Pomfrey asked.

Hermione shook her head. After long minutes of contemplation, she hoisted her heavy book bag and headed to breakfast.

Through breakfast, Hermione dreaded Double Potions with the Slytherins so much she could barely eat. Ron kept bouncing between pointing out how dumb she was for taking it again and how badly he felt for her.

In the dungeons, the students from Gryffindor and Slytherin glared at each other from opposite sides of the corridor as they filed in. They kept their segregation as they paired up at the tables. Hermione ignored everyone and thought of Harry. She would have to go back up there, maybe take her lunch up . . . do her homework there tonight with Ron.

Professor Snape swooped in just on the hour. He stalked to the front of the room and with hands on hips, glared from one side of the room to the other. "Despite the . . . excitement . . . yesterday, I expect everyone to successfully produce a gnarl-killing potion, which will be tested at the end of the period. I also expect there will be no accidents or otherwise involving the two rather toxic ingredients you will be using today." He flicked his wand backward and the instructions appeared behind him on the blackboard.

Parvarti, Hermione's partner, groaned at the board. "Looks like an annoying one."

Hermione read it as well. "Doesn't look bad."

"Nothing's bad in this class for you. Professor likes *you*."

With a wrinkled expression, Hermione said quietly, "Snape doesn't like anyone." She studied the orange blobs floating in brine on the supply table. "Stripping the pufferfish glands will be a little gross. You do that and I'll do the rest of the prep, if you want."

"Uh . . ."

McAlly's voice at the next table floated over. "I don't know why they even still have Slytherin house at Hogwarts. They're all nothing but trouble, both at school and afterward."

Hermione sighed but ignored it. However, she shifted her position to better watch McAlly and Aberforth at the next table. Her care was rewarded: as Hermione brought the spring water to a simmer, she noticed that McAlly had her wand out behind a sheet of parchment in an odd way. A glance across the room revealed the stopper coming out of a bottle of Screech venom. Hermione moved faster than even she thought possible. In one smooth leap she had grabbed the front of McAlly's robes and jerked her around.

Both were surprised to find Hermione's wand pointed threateningly at McAlly's cheek. "Don't even try it," Hermione hissed.

"And what if I do?"

"You get to try me then," Hermione heard herself saying with an unusual force of ego. Anger flared in her eyes and she grabbed the other girl's robes even tighter in her fist.

McAlly set her wand down with a click. "What is your problem?" McAlly shot back in a whisper. "Why are you getting me in trouble?"

"Why am I?"

"Eh hem," A voice interrupted. The room had gone totally silent. They both turned to find Professor Snape standing in the aisle between the tables, his arms stiff at his sides, wand held firmly in his hand. "Threatening another student with a wand is against the code, I believe, Ms. Granger. Twenty points from Gryffindor." Hermione released McAlly with a dark expression. "And three evenings detention are also in order, I believe."

Hermione's eyes came up at that and she stood fixed with a look of utterly devastated surprise. At that look, Snape hesitated. "Which you can serve inventorying potions . . . for Madame Pomfrey," he finished. Hermione closed her eyes in relief.

"Yes, Professor. I'm sorry, Professor," she said flatly and went to her table. When Snape turned his back, she sent a black look at McAlly. The other girl chewed her lip and tried to look inconspicuous.

At the end of what turned out to be an exceptionally long three hours, Hermione loaded her books into her bag while the classroom emptied. At least their potion had gotten full marks, she reminded herself. Last night felt like it had happened last month. She forced her eyes open fully and rolled up her parchments to shove them in beside the books.

"Ms. Granger," Snape's voice carried across the room. "Remain behind a moment."

Her shoulders fell at that, but she nodded her head. She hefted her bag up onto the table and waited for the room to empty. Resisting the urge to set her head down on the table and close her eyes, she took out her wand and tried to rub out a stain that had apparently gotten on it today. The door thudded closed. "Rather unusual behavior from you today, Ms. Granger," Snape observed as he filed potions on a shelf.

"You should tighten the cork on the Screech venom," Hermione said tiredly.

"I already did." Snape replied.

Hermione looked down at her feet. After a long silence, she said, "I feel so angry." As she said it, she wondered why she had.

Professor Snape stood straight and leaned against the table at the front with his arms crossed. "No one to blame, Ms. Granger?"

She frowned, trying to understand the question. "Why does everyone have to behave like this?" she asked instead.

"Including yourself?" Snape asked.

She sighed. "If Harry is always this angry, it's amazing he doesn't lose control more often." She shook her head. "I think I'm filling in for him. I can always count on him to jump in without thinking. Then I can take a moment to consider the situation and tell him where he went wrong. But he isn't here to do that first part."

Hermione straightened her book bag and tightened the flap before meeting Snape's unchanged gaze. "What time is my detention?"

"Seven," he answered, his unreadable scrutiny not withdrawing. Hermione chafed under it a long moment. Snape continued, "You would undoubtedly have been there anyway."

"Yes. Thanks for that."

"You are not contesting your punishment?" Snape asked. "If you are filling in for Mr. Potter, you almost certainly should."

Hermione laughed lightly for the first time that day, then shook her head. "I shouldn't have lost it. I didn't even mean to have my wand up like that." She pulled her hair back a moment and held it there. "It is just that I spent the night sitting up with it in my hand in front of the portrait hole . . ."

Snape's brow went up at that. Hermione dropped her hair and looked down at her fingernails, at the stains under them. "Too many students were raging when we sent them to bed. It just didn't seem like a good idea to trust that they'd stay put." She fell silent, picking at her nails. Eventually, she added quietly, "You don't really know people until they get that mad and you see what they try to do." Hermione shook her head with a disbelieving look. "I yelled at Harry for this just the other day, but he was right." She looked up at Snape's questioning expression and started to explain, then hesitated. "I never thought I would say this, Professor,

but you are really easy to talk to." She looked disturbed and thoughtful a long moment. "I yelled at Harry for trusting you, and here I am . . ." She frowned and rubbed her eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm too tired to censor myself."

His gaze didn't change.

"Am I excused, sir?"

Snape nodded. She slid her bag off the table onto her shoulder and departed.

Hermione skipped lunch and went straight to the hospital wing. Ron was already there. They shared his pork pie.

"What were you doing, Hermione?" he asked finally, after they had contemplated Harry's unconsciousness for a sufficient time.

"I got detention from Snape."

"That bugger," Ron snapped.

"I threatened McAlly with my wand."

"Why in the world would you do that?"

Hermione explained what had happened, to Ron's building disgust. "Hermione, just let them have it out and get it over with. That's what Mom eventually let us all do."

"You are all related, Ron. It's not quite the same." She looked at her watch. "We have to get to class. I'm looking forward to seeing Hagrid. Let's go."

McGonagall stopped them near the outside doors in the Entrance Hall. "Ms. Granger, Professor Snape informed me he gave you detention."

Hermione pushed her hair behind her ear. "Yes, Ma-am."

"For stopping a fellow Gryffindor from attacking a Slytherin?" At Hermione's nod, McGonagall frowned. "Do you want me to get it lifted for you?"

"No, Professor. He let me serve it with Madame Pomfrey." The hall was clearing out as class was about to start.

"Yes, remarkably understanding for Professor Snape. Very well, then." McGonagall patted Hermione's shoulder as she strode past them in a hurry to get to her class.

"'Remarkably understanding'", Ron mimicked as they walked across the lawn. "That would be the day."

"Lay off, Ron," Hermione said, to Ron's disbelief.

Dumbledore stepped across the hospital wing and paused beside the Potions master. Snape sat in a chair facing the end of Harry's bed. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he considered the boy.

"Severus," Dumbledore said in the way of greeting. "I am . . . somewhat surprised to find you here."

Snape sat back with a grim expression. He shook his head faintly. "I do not believe he is going to survive the elixir," Snape said.

Dumbledore stepped over beside the bed and studied the now rather skeletal Harry. "We shall have to try a spell or two in that case." He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. When he opened them, he added, "I do not sense any tailings of the Curse. I believe we are safe on that point." He leaned over and swept his hand over Harry as though clearing invisible cobwebs from above his sleeping form.

"That is not wise, Albus," Snape said sharply. "You risk exposing yourself to the Dark Lord."

Dumbledore straightened and stared down at Harry in thought. "And you question why I keep you around, Severus?" Dumbledore asked.

Snape went on, "Contrary to your apparent belief, you are more important than Mr. Potter."

"Well, we won't debate that now, but we must try something," Dumbledore stated.

"There isn't time for any experimentation. Something straightforward, like a force transfer spell, is needed. And soon."

"Who do you think should attempt it? It is not in Madame Pomfrey's perview, nor Minerva's, nor yours," Dumbledore said. "We can call upon the Ministry of course but I think it should be someone Harry knows, if at all possible." Dumbledore raised his chin. "Of course," he said obliquely. Without a word he strode out of the ward.

Snape hadn't moved from his vigil when Dumbledore returned with McGonagall and Hagrid. As Hagrid stood beside the bed and considered Harry, Snape gave Dumbledore a look of disbelief. Hagrid shrugged one shoulder and said, "I don't know, Headmaster. 've never done this on a human before."

Madame Pomfrey stepped over and crossed her arms.

"But you are well practiced at it, I am sure," the headmaster prompted. Hagrid didn't reply. "Hagrid, I realize you have been using a Lifeforce Spell all along to manage the creatures in your care. If I had had a problem with that, I would have said something."

"Yeah, s'pose."

"For Harry, Hagrid," Dumbledore pointed out.

"I guess ya woudna called me here if there were a better option."

"Now that I have thought about it, I am certain you are the best option."



Hagrid looked around for someplace to sit. Dumbledore pulled over the next bed with a gentle wave of his wand. Hagrid settled down on it; it growled ominously but didn't sag too far. Taking Harry's hand in his enormous one, Hagrid murmured, "Aye, Harry," at the delicate state of the boy's arm.

Hagrid composed himself and, with great care, began stroking the back of Harry's hand with his index finger, which was very nearly the width of Harry's whole hand. "Come on, Harry," Hagrid chanted. Harry shifted in his sleep with a grimace. "'S all right," Hagrid said to his edgy audience. "Always takes a moment or two."

"Don' fight me lad, just give in," Hagrid encouraged Harry with a soft, rumbling voice. Harry fidgeted again. Hagrid bent forward with a pained expression. "'S all right, I've got him," he rasped. Slowly, Hagrid sat upright. "As wounded animals go, Harry, you are almost certainly the worst I've ever seen," he said. The group around the bed all exhaled at once. "'ll just stay here then," Hagrid commented to no one in particular.

"Thank you, Hagrid," Dumbledore said and departed.

Gradually, they all wandered off to their rooms except for Madame Pomfrey, who took a seat on the other side of the bed.

## **Chapter 9 Back from the Edge**

Harry opened his eyes. He ached positively everywhere. Even his bones ached. Even the bone in his little toe. "Hagrid?" Harry said, his voice barely audible. He cleared his throat and tried again with more volume this time.

"Harry, how 'r ya feelin'?" Hagrid asked, all relieved grin.

"Awful." Harry raised a shaky hand to rub his eyes and instead stared dumbfounded at his hand and arm.

"Now then, Harry. Take it easy," Hagrid said. Harry lifted his other arm up for comparison, still caught in a silent horror.

"He's awake?" Madame Pomfrey said. Her clicking shoes stopped beside the bed. "Well, Harry you gave us even more of a scare than normal," she said politely.

Harry just whimpered as he lifted the sheet and peeked under. "Hagrid, I . . . I look like a Halloween decoration."

"No shortage of energy though," Pomfrey commented and gave Hagrid a warm look.

"Should go tell everyone," Hagrid said and stood up with a groan.

"Hagrid?" Harry asked. He managed just barely to sit up to make a grab for him.

"Sit tight, Harry. I'll be right back."

"What happened?" Harry asked, eyes moving between the departing Hagrid and Madame Pomfrey.

Instead of answering, Pomfrey asked, "What do you remember, Dear?" She brought the bed up into a reclining position and handed Harry his glasses.

Harry leaned back to think and sort through jumbled memories. He frowned and hid his arms under the blanket so even he didn't have to see them. "I remember sitting somewhere for a long time. It was all green and hazy. Someone came and got me."

"That was Professor Snape," she said with an ambivalent tone. "Do you remember what happened before that?"

"I was following someone in an invisibility cloak-"

"Harry," Dumbledore's voice rang out warmly. "How very good to see you awake."

Harry crouched down a little more under the blanket and wondered if it would be too rude to just pull it over his head. He wondered this again as more people started coming in. "Now, now," Pomfrey said as McGonagall and Snape stepped in, followed by Hagrid. "Just a few at a time."

Running feet caught everyone's attention. Ron and Hermione skidded around the corner and into the ward. "Harry, Harry," they called out as they charged across the room, making the teachers step back unconsciously.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said, her eyes going glossy.

"Wotcher, Harry," Ron said, all grins.

Harry ducked down a little farther. "I don't want you to see me like this," he explained quietly.

"We've been here most of the time," Hermione pointed out.

"Hey." Ron poked him. "Harry you are now the only person in history to have survived the Avada Kedavra curse *twice*." Harry's eyes went wide and he glanced over at the teachers congregated off to the right of the bed. "Oup," Ron gulped. "Wasn't I supposed to tell him?"

"It is all right, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore said gently. "Someone was going to have to tell him at some point."

Harry continued to look confused. "Malfoy," Ron supplied.

"Uff," Harry groaned and closed his eyes in frustration.

"Do you need anything, Mate?" Ron asked.

"I think I want to be by myself for a while." Harry frowned and fidgeted with the edge of the blanket.

"All right, Harry," Ron said. He and Hermione glanced significantly at the teachers as they walked out. Dumbledore gestured to the rest that they should go as well. As their footsteps departed, Harry pulled the blanket over his head and curled up into a ball.

Harry had just finished his second meal in two hours, scrumptious feast-day meals that Dobby brought up from the kitchen himself. The elf had cut down on the number of hats he wore, but from somewhere he had obtained a real chef's jacket. The sleeves were rolled up into thick donuts at Dobby's shoulders and the waist dragged on the floor.

"Someone wishes to see you," Pomfrey said to him as she waved his demolished tray over to the rack by the door.

"Who?"

"Who do you think, young man?" At Harry's hesitation, Pomfrey added, "They don't care what you look like."

"I care. I look like a ghou. Tell them to come back in a year when I fill in a little." Harry turned on his side away from the door and closed his eyes.

"I'll let you get away with it for today, Mr. Potter. But not after that." She walked off to explain to Hermione and Ron.

A sound nearby woke him from a nap. Harry turned an irritated gaze at the source of the noise and discovered Snape beside the bed. "What do you want?" Harry grumbled.

"Such gratitude, Potter," Snape commented, but without rancor.

Harry frowned inwardly at that and sat up as Pomfrey told him to do as often as possible. He was careful to keep the blanket pulled up around him. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Snape pulled up a chair and took two small bottles out of his pocket as well as a leather wrap. "I have muscle building potions," Snape began and noted Harry's very interested expression. "But they can cause a rather undesirable reaction in some people. So I want to test them and, if you do not react by tomorrow, we can try one." Snape looked at Harry's defensive position. "I need your arm, Potter."

Harry hesitated, but instead of the snide, impatient comment he expected, Snape just waited. Finally, Harry sighed and stuck his disturbingly boney arm out. Snape glanced at the scar on the back of his hand, now glaring against Harry's thin skin. Harry pulled his arm back to hide it. "Don't bother. Ms. Granger explained already," Snape said and unrolled the leather wrap onto the bed. Harry put his arm back out with a frown. Snape took Harry's hand and rolled his arm over so the underside was up.

"Potter, if a teacher at this school ever harms you, you should tell someone. Anyone." Snape commented, then shook his head at Pomfrey's sarcastic snort from behind him.

"It was between me and her," Harry explained.

Snape picked up a tool that had a tiny sharp fork on the end. "Well, that at least I can understand," Snape commented ironically. "This is going to hurt just a little. If you could take using a blood quill for the number of hours that scar required, I expect you can handle it." He made a row of scratches in Harry's skin.

"Oh, an allergy test. You should have just said so," Harry said with a yawn.

"Is that what Muggles call it?" Snape asked.

"Dudley, my cousin, had one once after a visit to Mrs. Figg made him break out into hives. He had about a hundred little ones of these on his back. It was awful." At Snape's look, Harry continued, "... for us. Dudley whined nonstop for days."

Snape dabbed a little of each potion onto several cuts and then packed everything up. He stood to leave, stopping in front of Pomfrey. "Would you mind terribly, putting a breathable dressing on that?" he asked. Harry watched as Pomfrey seemed to use great will to reply civilly. She finally managed a simple "yes," at which Snape left.

Harry was grateful for the plaster; his arm was itching fiercely already.

Hermione walked down into the dungeon. Snape looked up at her in question as she stepped in. "Madame Pomfrey sent me down to do detention here," she explained.

"Very well," the Potions master replied. He put down his book and stared at the shelves of potions in thought. "I am trying to think of something for you to do that makes at least fleeting use of your not incompetent skills."

"Careful, Professor," Hermione said as she set her book bag down on a bench stool. "That almost sounded like a compliment."

Snape only spared her a glance for that before pulling the potions log out of a cabinet and flipping through the last few pages.

"How is Harry, by the way? Have you seen him?" Hermione asked.

"I am surprised you did not force your way in, Ms. Granger."

Hermione took a seat and folded her hands in her lap. "Pomfrey is giving him a day," she grumbled.

"That boy is positively coddled," Snape commented. He carried the heavy log book over to the table and set it so they both could read it. He pointed one long finger at a row of entries whose expiration dates were just past. "Have you ever done an efficacy test, Ms. Granger?"

"Once," she answered carefully, "but it was for Fred and George, so I don't want to tell you what it was."

"Nevertheless. Not all of these will have lost their potency. The test descriptions are in the other book in the cabinet." He pointed behind him.

Hermione nodded and pulled the book over.

Hermione was blurry-eyed by the time detention came to an end, and she still had an essay to finish for McGonagall. She was distracted as she put the potion materials back away and closed the log book. She had made startlingly little progress on the long list of stored potions that were due to be tested. "Professor," she said, to catch Snape's attention. "It's ten o'clock."

He looked up from the tome he was studying, and his eyes shifted to something on Hermione's left. Hermione turned and found Pansy Parkinson standing silently in the middle of the room. "What are you doing here?" Parkinson asked her.

A heady swirl of conflicting emotions held Hermione captive for a moment. Finally she managed to say, "I had detention."

Parkinson just grunted in response and returned her gaze to Snape. "Headmaster told me to report to you, Professor," Pansy said flatly.

Hermione's first thought was how could Dumbledore be so cruel, her second was that Pansy deserved it. All she knew was, if she were Pansy, she sure wouldn't have the guts to be standing where she was.

"What 'r you looking at?" Pansy asked her sharply.

"Nothing, I was about to leave," Hermione explained, glancing back at Snape and his unreadable expression. Horror and conflicting emotions held Hermione in place for another uncomfortable moment before she could pick up her book bag and walk out.

"Ron!" Hermione gasped as she reached the Gryffindor common room. She dropped into a well-worn chair beside his and leaned close. "Guess who I just saw down in the dungeons?" Ron shook his head. "Pansy Parkinson." Hermione pronounced each syllable separately.

"What!" Ron exclaimed, drawing the attention of the common room.

Hermione rolled her eyes and dragged Ron away to a deserted corner. "She came in as I was finishing detention, said Dumbledore had told her to report to Snape."

"What is she doing here? She should be in Azkaban," Ron muttered.

"I can't imagine it," Hermione said.

"Neither can I. What is wrong with the Ministry?"

"No, I mean having the guts to go back down there after what Snape did."

Ron looked at her. "You were down there and you know what he did."

Hermione stared back at him, lips pursed in thought.

"Kissy, kissy." Dean suddenly leered at them, leaning close.

"What?" Both of them said in unison.

"You are in the kissing corner and I saw that, Hermione."

"We are not!" Hermione insisted, face turning pink. "I mean, we might be in the kissing corner, but we . . . oh, never mind." She stalked off.

The next morning the pair of them, determined to force their way into the hospital wing, were welcomed by Madame Pomfrey at the door. "Right on time, children," she said. Breakfast was laid out for three at trays beside Harry's bed. They beamed at him as they sat down.

"Hope you don't mind if I started without you." Harry said between bites of fried bread.

"Absolutely not," Hermione said as she uncovered her tray. Underneath was a huge basket of muffins and three different juices: pumpkin, pomegranate, and something mysteriously bright purple. "Wow."

"Oh, yeah. Dobby made those up. I think he believes we are all on the same calorie plan."

"Whoa," Ron said to the half of fried chicken and heap of mashed potatoes on his plate. "How did he know that was my favorite?"

"I told him," Harry said. "Sorry 'bout yesterday," he added quietly.

"Oh, Harry, we understand," Hermione said. "I remember having that furry face and how I didn't want anyone to see me." She bit into a apple cinnamon muffin.

"You think this is that bad?" Harry asked in shock.

"Uh, well, I just meant that I understood the feeling," she said, flustered. "Actually I refused to look in a mirror, so I can't make a comparison." She didn't look up; she knew the sight of Harry's sunken, skull-like face would give her away. Instead, she buried herself in her breakfast.

Ron leaned back and watched Harry spoon fried eggs into his mouth a half at a time between swallows. Ron covered his own half-eaten plate with a groan. "I can't believe Pansy Parkinson is back again," Ron said. Harry looked at him, uncomprehending. "No one told you what happened?" Ron asked. Harry shook his head. "They never tell you anything, do they?"

"Tell me about it," Harry said around a mouthful of whole roasted tomato.

"Uh, Parkinson helped Malfoy do you in," Ron stated. "Her and Crabbe, though we haven't seen him."

"In all fairness," Hermione broke in, "we don't know what they did to help, exactly." She gave Ron a meaningful look to tread carefully. "What happened to your arm?" Hermione said to change to subject.

Harry glanced at the plaster under his wrist. "Snape-" he started to say.

"You let that bloke touch you? Brrr." Ron shook dramatically.

Harry frowned at him. "He has a muscle building potion, but he had to check for an allergic reaction before he could give it to me."

"Strenusolus or Supfibriola?" Hermione asked with curiosity.

"Uh, he had two, so probably both."

Harry finally covered his plate and swung the tray away. "So, on this theme of no one tells Harry anything, where is Malfoy now? Or don't you know either?" Ron and Hermione hesitated and Harry sighed. "I asked Pomfrey and she snarled at me." He shook his head in remembered amazement.

"She has been kind of upset about that," Hermione said. "When I was filing potions for her she kept banging things around and cursing under her breath."

"Is he in Azkaban?" Harry asked.

"Uh, St. Mungo's, Mate," Ron said.

"I certainly didn't do that. I passed out for the whole thing."

"It was Snape, Harry," Hermione said.

Harry stared at her. "And I missed it. Figures."

Hermione filled him in. "Someone in Slytherin told Snape something was going on and Malfoy was involved. This was after you went missing for a few hours, so Snape confronted him and he told him he had used the Killing Curse on you. Snape flaked, I guess. All three of them were sent to St. Mungo's."

"And Dumbledore didn't fire Snape for attacking three students?" Harry asked. "That's weird."

"I wonder what he did to them?" Hermione asked. They sat in silence, contemplating that, until Ron realized they were going to be late for class.

That afternoon, during Harry's lull while his friends were in class, Professor Snape strode in. Harry glanced around to make sure Pomfrey was absent.

"Let's take a look, Potter." He peeled off the plaster and eyed the neatly healing abrasions. "It looks fine."

"Yea," Harry cheered lightly.

Snape gave him a disgusted look and took one of the bottles out of his pocket. "I assume I can trust you with this." At Harry's nod, he continued, "Two drops per meal. That is it. Too much will have rather alarming side effects." Harry took the small, dark brown bottle and studied it a moment before setting it on the bedside table.

Before Snape could get up, Harry asked, "What did you do to Malfoy?"

Snape clasped his hands together and studied Harry a moment before saying, "Nothing I am particularly proud of, Mr. Potter."

"Is it all right if I am secretly happy about it?" Harry asked.

"Only if you wish to be a Slytherin. As well, it isn't a secret if you tell me," he said with more of his usual sneer. He prepared to stand up. "Any other questions?" he asked sarcastically.

"Why didn't Dumbledore grind you into a little pulp when he found out?"

"Because he needed me . . . to have a chance of keeping you. As well, the spell I cast on them was not . . . straightforward." Snape paused. "Do you know what an Autoluminare Spell is?" Harry shook his head. "It causes the victim to imagine their most feared situation. In certain people, people with a middling or better magical ability, it also causes the effects of that situation."

"So if your greatest fear were, say . . ." Harry paused.

"Being eaten by a snake?" Snape suggested.

Harry gave him a nasty look for that. "For example. Then you could end up like Mr. Weasley just from the spell?"

"Minus the venom, yes." Snape's eyes hardened a little and he asked, "And if we cast the spell on you, Harry?"

Harry didn't miss the dark tone in Snape's voice, but he considered the question seriously anyway. "I don't know. Dementors don't bother me so much anymore. Due to overexposure," he added in a comical voice. "I guess just facing Voldemort again." He shrugged. "I'm sure I'll find out; I always seem to."

The Gryffindor common room was quiet except for the scratching of quills on parchment and the crackle of the fire. Katie stepped in from the portrait hole and stopped beside Ginny and her friends. Ginny's friend Marta elbowed her and pointed at Katie.

"Wha. . .?" Ginny asked.

Katie sighed. "I think we need a Seeker," she said.

Hermione and Ron looked up from their chairs nearby. "Whassa?" Ron started.

Hermione put her hand on his arm. "Ron, I don't think Harry's going to be playing much Quidditch in the near future."

Ginny looked at the two of them and then at Katie. "I want to be Seeker," she said. "But, when Harry's back . . ."

Katie shifted her weight between her feet. "I don't think he's going to be back soon. I expect



you'll get to play at least a game or two. But after that . . . I have to hold the spot for him, Ginny; it's his spot," Katie said.

Ginny sighed. "Okay, I'll take second. I'd be stupid not to, right?" She directed this at Ron, who nodded.

Ron and Hermione shared a group dinner with Harry. They weren't sure it was a good idea to tell Harry about the new Seeker so they agreed to avoid the subject. This meant that other topics of conversation were suddenly very hard to think up.

"Uh," Hermione began after another long break in the conversation. "Has anyone told you how long you'll be stuck here?" she asked, then realized that wasn't as far from the topic of Quidditch as she'd really wanted.

"At least another few days. Depends on how well Snape's potion works."

Hermione brightened at that. "Can I see it?" She took it from Harry's hand and opened it for a sniff then put a dab on her napkin to look at the color. "Hm, that must be something else. I don't recognize it."

"You put it on your food at the start. You still feeling all right?" Ron asked.

"Yes, Ron. I feel fine." He paused. "I look like a ghoul, but I feel fine."

"Harry," Hermione chastised him.

"Tell me I'm wrong, and look me in the eye when you do it."

Hermione looked up at him. "You look like you've had a rough time, Harry. But there's nothing you can do about it now except get better and go on with things."

"Yeah, you're right."

They put away their trays and pulled out their homework. "Have they given you any of the assignments, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"They haven't even fetched my books," Harry pointed out.

"Do you want to read the sections you missed in something? Transfiguration, maybe?" Harry relented, thinking of how much catch-up there would be when the teachers stopped feeling sorry for him, or guilty, or whatever it was that was holding them back from bringing him his schoolwork.

## **Chapter 10 Back into the Fray**

It was night. Harry woke up suddenly. Lying face down on the hospital bed as spread out as he could manage on the narrow surface, Harry wondered what had woken him. No dreams

presented themselves from moments before. No visions invaded. He scowled into the darkness of the hospital wing. Dumbledore's voice reprised in his head, *Harry, you are very good once you recognize the danger, but you are very poor at spotting it.*

A light thump sounded on the castle wall outside. It could have been anything: a bat, an off-course owl, but Harry's heart started racing. He began staring very hard at the floating lights that always splashed across his vision in the dark. Actually, he realized, Pomfrey's office light wasn't on. That in itself was strange; she usually left it on all night. Okay, Potter. Decide there is danger, he thought to himself.

Hurrying now, Harry took his wand and glasses off the side table. His glasses he slipped on and he used the wand to *silencio* the bed and floor before he scooted out. The charm appeared to work without him actually speaking it; just moving his lips worked fine, for which he was grateful.

His knees didn't hold when he landed on the floor, but he kept moving in a hobbled crouch along the wall to the last bed. He waited there, holding perfectly still and straining to hear anything. Part of him thought that, at any moment, the lights would come up and Pomfrey would say, "What are you doing down there, you strange boy?"

A soft sound, kind of like a whooshing rustle of fabric, came from farther down the room. Harry stopped breathing to listen better. For a second there was total silence, then a loud *crack!* like a giant whip snapping and a flash of light from near Harry's assigned bed blinded him. On instinct now, he crept farther away, using the silencing charm at random before him because he was nearly blind from the red spots in his vision.

The open door to Pomfrey's office appeared in front of him and he shuffled behind it, straining on his weak muscles to stand up and move toward the hinges. This trick often worked with Dudley, since his cousin couldn't imagine someone skinny enough to fit behind an almost totally open door.

Blazing white light suddenly filled the large room. It appeared without the normal *chuff* the room's globe lamps made. Also, this light seemed to cast no shadows so he was brightly lit even though he should have been in the shadow of the door. If it were me, looking for me, I'd *accio* myself, he thought. Harry raised his wand and put an impediment charm on his feet and on his back. The ghostly rustle sounded again. Harry held his wand up, ready. He could feel his breath bouncing off the surface of the wood door, heating his face.

A strangled, raspy voice said, "*Homo accio Potter!*"

Harry's hair flew forward and he had to struggle to hold his arms across his chest, but he stayed put and, after a moment the spell drained off. His heart was really racing now; he thought it might leap from his chest any moment. Footfalls sounded from the far corridor. Harry almost sobbed in relief. The rustling moved faster now, away from him.

I should look, I need to know who it is. No, another instinct said, play it safe--you are almost home free. Curiosity overrode common sense. Harry leaned ever so slightly and peaked around the door. A large, dark figure, crouching apparently on the way out the far window, jerked its head and its yellow-orange coal-like eyes zeroed in on him. The creature shot its strange arm out toward him from all the way at the other end of the ward. Harry raised his wand and conjured a wall charm just as the solid wooden door smashed backward into him

with incredible force.

Harry opened his eyes. Stunned voices were speaking in the room. He looked up in disbelief at the shattered door leaning over him. Every fiber of the wood had spilt; pieces stuck out at all angles. He grunted and tried to lift it away from the wall, off of himself. Footfalls came closer, and the door was tossed aside by a spell. Harry noticed the lights were back to normal.

"Harry!" McGonagall breathed. She pulled him to his feet by his wand hand and hugged him.

"Professor?" Harry blurted, incredulous.

She released him and dusted herself. "Sorry, Potter."

"S all right, Professor."

She put a hand behind his back and pushed him toward the center of the room. Harry had a glimpse of the bed, a blackened gouge nearly sliced it in two, before his eyes found Pomfrey. His scar stabbed him fiercely. Shaking now from one thing too many, Harry threw himself behind McGonagall, putting his teacher between Pomfrey and himself.

"Imperius. Imperius. Imperius," Harry chanted at her in a whisper as he clutched his forehead.

McGonagall grabbed him by the shoulders and looked at him. Then she backed him into the empty office and shoved him behind the shelter of the inside wall. She turned around. Dumbledore was looking at her with stark curiosity. She turned to Pomfrey, holding her wand at the ready. Pomfrey had hers out too. "Madame Pomfrey," McGonagall said in a polite voice. "Put down your wand, I need to talk to you." She ignored Snape's running entrance and his positively stunned expression upon seeing the state of the room.

"Don't be silly, dear," Pomfrey said in a saccharin voice. "I need my wand."

"Put it down," McGonagall said more forcefully.

"Minerva?" Dumbledore prompted.

Pomfrey turned her head toward him and McGonagall threw three knockout spells at her while her attention was turned. Pomfrey crumpled. McGonagall stepped over and stood above her, still pointing her wand. "Harry? You are sure about this?"

Harry stepped around the doorframe, still clutching his scar. "Yes," he winced. He looked from Dumbledore to Snape. Snape's gaze seemed to go right through him, as though he were looking at something beyond him, on the horizon maybe. More teachers arrived and Harry flinched as each of them fell into a state of shock as they took in the room.

"Harry says she's under an Imperius Curse," McGonagall explained to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore stepped over to the unconscious witch. "Flitwick, Grey, take Madame Pomfrey to the dungeon and put a few strong spell guards on her, then come back." He walked over to Harry. "Did she do this?" he asked.

Harry shook his head and pointed at the missing window. "It went out that way."

"What was it?" The headmaster asked. Harry shook his head again. "What happened, Harry?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"I woke up. Something came in the window. I crawled along over there, behind the beds, then hid behind the door there." He indicated the wall and the door. "I would have been okay, but I wanted to see who it was. It saw me. I got a wall charm up just in time." He was shaking now with post-adrenelin and fatigue.

"McGonagall, take Harry out of here."

"To the Gryffindor Tower?" She came up and put an arm around him to steer him from the room.

"To my office."

McGonagall led Harry out, slowly.

"How can we be so completely unable to protect this one boy?" Dumbledore asked Snape as he walked over to the broken office door. "And a breach here, at Hogwarts." He frowned deeply. "We will need to respell and reseal the castle."

The heavy wooden door had a definite dome shape, as if it had been forcefully wrapped around something very hard and spherical. "I also would like to know what kind of wall charm could have held up against that." He shook his head. "Go with them," he said to Snape, sharply.

Snape ran out of the room. They weren't walking very fast because of Harry and he caught up with them in the next corridor. He took up a pace beside them, watching on all sides and behind, wand out.

They were discussing what had happened. "It tried to *accio* me. It had the queerest voice. That was when I got really scared, because I knew it wasn't just one of the Death Eaters."

"Harry," Snape said dryly. "You are the only wizard in the world who would ever say that."

As they made it to the gargoyle, Harry said, "A lot of walking."

"Sorry, Harry." McGonagall said. "Didn't think you'd want to be hovered." She gave the password and the gargoyle opened.

"Not really." They boarded the escalator. "I'd rather have Draco again," Harry mumbled and rested his head against the center pole of the turning steps.

"Here we go," McGonagall announced at the top. Fawkes flapped once in the corner then settled down again. She pushed Harry toward the large armchair. He climbed gratefully in and curled up. He was still in just his pyjamas and the sweat on him was making him chilled. McGonagall crouched on the floor before him. "Harry, tell me again what this thing looked like."

Harry forced himself to pay attention. "It was dark."

"The room was dark?"

"No, no, the room was blazing bright." He spoke so tiredly he almost sounded drunken. "It had made it bright somehow to look for me. Strange light with no shadows." He looked closer at McGonagall as she grew thoughtful. Snape stood on the other side of the room, listening with a closed expression. Harry couldn't tell what he thought of any of this.

"Go on," she prompted.

"I only saw it for an instant. It had eyes like coals, orangy. Its fingers were pointed. I think its feet were too. It had horns, sort of."

"How tall was it?"

"It walked hunched over, but as it was going out, it looked like about the height of the window."

"Furry? Clothed?" She asked, clearly confused.

"Um. It was dark," he repeated then sighed heavily. "It didn't have any skin at all. It wasn't really there."

Snape jumped, yanked the door open and ran down the escalator. His footfalls faded out. "I think I scared him," Harry commented through his fatigue. He tried to close his eyes.

"You need to stay alert," McGonagall said, glancing at the only entrance to the tower.

Harry gripped his wand and forced his eyes open.

Snape's charging footsteps brought Dumbledore to the entryway to the hospital wing. "Do you need-?" he started to ask.

"It was a Baylron," Snape said, cutting the headmaster off.

Dumbledore's expression shifted to one far away and then came back again. "You are certain?"

"Potter's description was of a creature about the height of the window with coal orange eyes and pointed limbs. . . and no surface, just darkness." Snape followed Dumbledore as he paced back into the ward. "It matches what happened as well. A Baylron cannot see well, so it struck Potter's bed without realizing he had left it. It also had to fill the room with very bright, unshadowed light to look for him."

Snape frowned still thoughtful. "But it is not capable of casting an Accio spell let alone an Imperius Curse." He took a deep breath and held it as his eyes flicked over the room. "I suspect what happened, Headmaster, is that Pomfrey uttered the Accio spell and that someone inside the castle put her under an Imperius curse to prepare for the Baylron's arrival."

"Which means we have either an intruder or a traitor." Dumbledore stroked his long beard a

moment. "Find the Head Boy and Girl and have them tell the Prefects to hold the students in their rooms until we tell them otherwise. Then go back up and guard Mr. Potter. I don't want to give anyone or anything another chance. After we have searched the castle and respelled it, we will reconsider how much protection we can manage around him. I will call in for help from the Ministry."

Snape nodded, dismayed, but obeyed.

Snape collected the Head Boy and Girl, Perfickus and Grailing, from Ravenclaw. After a blunt explanation to the Ravenclaw Prefects, they went together from house to house.

Hermione was fast asleep when someone tapped the back of their hand against her shoulder and whispered, "Granger. Common room. Now."

She raised her head, confused by sleep. She could hear Head Girl Perfickus through the open door whispering to Redding. Kicking off the bedcovers, she grabbed her robe, padded out of the room she shared with the other sixth year girls, and pulled the door shut on their first murmurings of disturbed sleep.

Down in the common room, Ron, hair askew, sidled over to her and whispered, "Merlin's bloody beard! Woken by Snape." He shuddered. "Stuff my nightmares are made of. Almost makes me wish I weren't a Prefect."

The Head Boy and Girl stood with their arms crossed as Professor Snape addressed them. "There has been an incident." Hermione opened her mouth and Snape cut her off with a look. "The headmaster has ordered you to keep the students in the tower until further notice."

"No classes?" Redding asked.

Snape's look was odd, "Not today, I don't think."

"What happened?" Ron burst out as their Professor started to turn away toward the portrait hole. He turned back toward them. He had that vulture-like look about him, accented by the dim light. Ron backed off but Hermione asked softly, "Professor, is Harry all right?"

Still keeping his harsh tone, Snape said, "Mr. Potter is . . . safe."

"But what happened?" Ron said, stepping forward now. Hermione grabbed him from behind to restrain him.

"Mr. Weasley, your job as Prefect is to obey the staff and assist them with managing the students of your house. That means . . ." Snape gave the impression that he was drawing on the last of his patience. ". . . remaining quiet when you do not have a chance of receiving any more information."

Ron gave him a look of loathing but he shut up. Snape turned again and stalked off. Hermione followed them to the portrait hole and leaned out a little as they stepped into the hallway and to the side. Snape held the portrait open. "I am spelling you in, Ms. Granger."

After a hesitation full of a series of pained expressions, she nodded sadly and slowly backed out of the way. Snape closed his eyes for a moment of self-control. He turned to Perfickus and

Grailing. "Wait at the end of the corridor," he told them. "Ms. Granger, out here," he snapped.

She stepped back over and leapt out into the corridor. Snape closed the portrait and leaned on the frame. For a moment Hermione thought she was going to get a royal chewing out like Ron had.

"I am only telling you this because there is a chance, even though a remote one, that you can assist with this." She tried to keep her face neutral rather than victorious. Snape frowned. "You should teach Potter that self-control, Ms. Granger."

"Don't think I don't try, Professor."

Speaking quickly and lowly, he went on, "First, let me reinforce that Potter is quite unharmed. He is in the safest part of the castle." Her expression made it clear she knew where that was. "He was attacked . . . by a Baylron."

Her eyes which, had looked concerned at the first part of the news, turned to panic at this. She took a breath to ask something, and Snape simply cut her off, "We don't know," he said.

"But how did Harry?"

"Ah, well. Sheer instinct would be the shortest summary I can give you. And since I need to return to assist in guarding him. . ."

Hermione turned back to the portrait, prying at the edge of the frame even though Snape was still leaning on it. "Go, go," she said insistently.

The fat lady said, "Dearie, I don't care who you are meeting; I still need the password."

Snape rolled his eyes and said the password. After Hermione disappeared inside, he closed it and took out his wand.

The door to the escalator slid open and Snape stepped out. McGonagall lowered her wand. She sat on the arm of the overstuffed chair upon which Harry lay curled. The boy clearly was having difficulty staying awake and only managed it because McGonagall was brushing his hair back off his forehead with her fingers in an offhanded manner. It was the most maternal gesture Snape had ever seen from her. If he hadn't known them he would have believed Harry to be hers. He and McGonagall lived in a world with an endless parade of students coming from nowhere and, as soon as they grew up, going back to nowhere. It occurred to him that she was as good as he was at avoiding any attachment to their charges; she just managed to do it in a completely different manner.

"Can I sleep now?" Harry asked in an utterly exhausted voice.

McGonagall stood up. "Yes." She spelled the armchair to grow as wide as space would allow so Harry could stretch out. She then conjured a blanket and laid that over him. Harry dropped off instantly into deep slumber. After a long hesitation, she reached down and carefully pulled Harry's glasses off and set them aside.

McGonagall turned to Snape. "What is happening?" she asked in a whisper.

"The headmaster and I have determined that an intruder or someone inside Hogwarts put the *Imperius* curse on Pomfrey. A Baylron cannot cast spells."

"A Ba-" she started to exclaim, then dropped her voice to a whisper. "A Baylron?" She dropped hard into Dumbledore's chair. "What is happening here, Severus? We are under siege from within and without."

"Wizards from the ministry are being called in to help seal the castle. We are on guard duty for the time being," Snape said in frustration as he sat in another armchair McGonagall conjured for him.

McGonagall rested her head on the back of the chair. "Let the Ministry Aurors take care of it. I don't have the energy to spell an entire castle right now anyway."

Night passed slowly. As morning light poured in from the one window, Harry woke and opened his eyes. The tumble of bad memories from last night seemed like a dream, but the sight of Dumbledore's office told otherwise. He blinked at Snape and McGonagall sitting across from him. It made him feel odd; he didn't know how to behave under these circumstances. He also needed to find a restroom.

"One floor down, Harry," McGonagall said, as though reading his mind. She rubbed her neck hard. "Take the escalator and, when you see the platypus carving, touch it and it will stop at that floor."

Harry hadn't realized the tower had other rooms. He kept the blanket wrapped around him as he stood up and padded weakly over to the escalator. It worked exactly the way she said; a stone door slid open on a seascape-styled tile bath and toilet. Harry took his time washing up, as he was feeling very uncomfortable with the idea of going back up and sitting around with his teachers some more. He wondered whether other students who had parents would feel this way or if this was just something he wasn't used to.

"Clearly you need to see a healer!" The mirror said to him. He had avoided the gaudy, shell-framed thing when he first entered, then forgot as he explored the room.

"Sod off," Harry said to it.

"There is plenty of soap; perhaps you should wash your mouth with it," the mirror retorted.

Driven from his refuge, Harry headed back up.

He settled back in his chair and closed his eyes since pulling the blanket over his head would have been too obviously unsocial. He didn't have to suffer long. The door to the escalator slid open and revealed a spiky, pink-haired witch.

"Tonks!" Harry said, happily.

"Wotcher, Harry." She set her burden of robes and breakfast trays down and hugged him. "Harry, you are simply unbelievable at finding trouble!" she breathed in an impressed voice. The feel of his alarmingly thin frame unsettled her, though, and she held him out at arms' length and looked him up and down. "You've looked better, I have to admit."



Angry suddenly, Harry retorted, "Better than you would look after an Avada Kedavra curse."

"Harry, sorry . . . I'll grant you that ten times over. I brought breakfast and a change of robes for you, Harry. I have to get back down. The spell to protect the ground from deep digging keeps collapsing. Hey," she said to the teachers, "how about I stay with Harry and you go down?"

"As attractive as that notion is," Snape said, "I think the headmaster would feel otherwise."

"Well, gotta run. See ya' later, Harry."

"Bye," Harry said dejectedly, then hung his head. He felt bad making McGonagall and Snape sit here all day and night, and he would have preferred Tonks' company.

"Would you like breakfast, Harry?" McGonagall stood and separated the trays.

He nodded and wondered suddenly when McGonagall had started using his first name. He thought this wasn't the first time, but he couldn't remember which time was. Snape had done that too. Wondering about it made Harry's heart race for no good reason.

McGonagall gestured for Harry to sit at the desk to eat as she produced a straight-backed chair for him to sit in. Harry uncovered the tray and studied the feast arrayed there: three kinds of sausages, two large eggs, a stack of fried dark toast. He was just reaching for a small piece of parchment curled between the plate and his juice when Snape grabbed it up. "Hey!" Harry exclaimed.

"What is this?" Snape asked and uncurled it in his fingers to read it.

"It is probably from Dobby," Harry commented.

Snape finished scanning it and released the small paper to flutter back down to Harry's tray. Harry snatched it up and looked at it. "Dobby hears that Harry is feeling better. He hopes Harry likes breakfast today." The note read.

"Harry Potter, friend to house elves," Snape commented snidely.

"He is my friend," Harry insisted.

"Isn't everyone?" Snape added, sarcastically.

Harry, surprised by his nasty tone, hesitated in replying. The scene from the pensieve played through his mind again. James Potter surrounded by friends and Snape alone and unsupported. "Hardly," Harry muttered.

"It certainly seems that way," Snape commented coldly as he looked under the next tray in the stack; it had plain cooked porridge.

"Well, I don't count the quarter of the students who are trying to kill me. That would be *your* house, sir," Harry retorted.

"Potter," McGonagall warned him and changed the subject. "'Dobby?' Isn't that the Malfoy's former house elf? The one that made trouble for you a few years ago?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I freed him. Dumbledore hired him for pay."

Snape studied him. "You freed him. How?"

Harry swallowed his mouthful of sausage before replying. "I gave Mr. Malfoy Tom Riddle's diary back with an old sock hidden in it." Snape's eyes narrowed at that. Harry continued, "He didn't want it, of course so he handed it to Dobby."

"I expect he was pleased with that."

"Oh, livid," Harry said, smiling slyly.

Snape started to turn away, then he stopped and said, "You said 'gave back?'"

Harry paused in sopping up egg yolk with his toast. "I realized that Mr. Malfoy had slipped the diary into Ginny's cauldron during the confusion at the bookstore before term. Lockhart was having a signing and it was packed. But Dumbledore knew too, just couldn't prove it."

"You have been in deep from the start, haven't you, Harry?" McGonagall sighed as she sat back with the porridge.

## **Chapter 11 Prisoner**

Midmorning, Dumbledore returned to his office. "I will relieve you both for a short while." He arranged his robes and sat at his desk. "I strongly suggest you use this time to sleep. . ." Harry looked confused at that and at his teachers' expressions of dismay.

As McGonagall entered the escalator, Dumbledore said, "Severus, a moment please." Snape stopped and stood beside the door, arms crossed. Dumbledore turned to Harry. "How are you feeling today, Harry? Sleep well?" Harry nodded. He was glad Tonks had brought him a clean robe. "Harry, I want you to show me the spell you used against the Baylron. Do you feel up to it?"

Harry took his wand out and got up on his knees on the seat. When he last used this spell, he was in a fearful panic; now he wasn't. He brought the wand up in a sweep over his head.

"Certainly it had a bit more power last night," the headmaster commented. He took a wand out of his desk and stood up. Harry swallowed hard. "I am going to throw a spell at you and I want you to block it for me," Dumbledore instructed.

Harry nodded. Dumbledore thought for a moment as he aimed his wand. An unbalance curse flew from his wand and Harry threw up his wall charm to meet it. It expanded outward until it met Dumbledore's wand and the old wizard canceled the curse by letting his wand jerk to the side in the wake of Harry's spell. Harry canceled the wall charm at that moment, since Dumbledore was then defenseless.

"And you kept me here for this demonstration, why?" Snape asked.

"So someone else knows," Dumbledore stated. Harry looked between them, not understanding. "Harry, you sensed my spell before it left my wand. In fact, I think before it even entered my wand. Did you realize that?"

Harry shook his head.

"How early in its generation can you detect a spell, I wonder?" Dumbledore said out loud to himself. "Harry, what is this spell?" Dumbledore asked, then waited. Harry's wand jerked but he didn't cast anything.

"I don't recognize it," Harry said.

"How about this one?" Dumbledore again didn't move.

"Jellylegs," Harry said, pleased to have gotten one.

"You must be a rather fiercesome dueler, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said, then studied the boy. "I wonder. . . is it possible for you to detect the spell when it is all in the Ur, Harry?"

"What is that?" Harry asked.

"It is the source of magical energy in a person. Only a few spells spring fully formed from the Ur, and only one of them I think you will recognize," Dumbledore commented.

Snape stiffened at that and scowled at Dumbledore. Harry waited for the next spell, then screeched and tried to clamor over the back of the chair. His weak legs gave way and he slid back down to the seat, breathing heavily and staring fearfully at Dumbledore. He still gripped the top of the chair, as if he believed he may need to leap over it again.

"Headmaster?" Snape prompted with a hard tone. Dumbledore was staring at Harry with an odd expression.

"I am truly sorry, Harry. I really did not believe you were going to detect that." Dumbledore put his wand down and sat down at his desk again.

Harry's breathing slowed a little and he looked down at himself and the floor. Snape shifted a moment near the door in indecision. Finally dragging his eyes from the headmaster he stepped over to Harry and leaned over him, placing a hand on each armrest. "Potter, it is all right if I leave you with the headmaster?" Harry nodded and didn't look up at Snape, he instead raised his gaze to Dumbledore's even one.

With a last scrutiny of the Hogwart's headmaster, Snape left.

Harry finally relaxed and sank back down into his chair. He slid his wand into his pocket and looked up at Dumbledore, who was arranging a small stack of parchments.

"All right, Harry?" Dumbledore asked. Harry nodded. "I must say, I am impressed with your continued ability to succeed against great odds. Butterbeer?" he then asked, picking up his

wand just long enough to make a pair of frosty bottles appear on his desk.

Harry picked one up and took a gulp, then dabbed his sleeve against his mouth. "I remembered what you said about recognizing danger. Otherwise I don't think I would have hidden so fast."

"Well, I am gratified to have been instrumental in your escape," Dumbledore said with smiling eyes. He held his own bottle up in a small toast and drank half of it down.

Harry managed a small smile as well, followed by another satisfying gulp of butterbeer.

Hermione *huffed* and shoved yet another book back onto the shelf in the Gryffindor common room. "I need to get to the library," she complained.

Ron looked up from polishing his broomstick and said, "We don't have class, Hermione."

She ignored him. "Maybe McGonagall will bring me a few books," she said thoughtfully and Ron rolled his eyes.

Hermione had only found one small reference to Baylrans in the old ruffled encyclopedia, but it didn't say anything she didn't know. Only sorcerers in ancient times knew how to create them. They formed them by cutting a hole in the fabric of space. They had only rudimentary intelligence but they could travel anywhere, through anything, unless a spell blocked them. They could also change shape up to a point and did damage by smashing the atoms around them. If one wanted a Baylron, one had to find one and train it, however that was managed.

How did one fight something like that? Hermione wondered, and worried about Harry.

McGonagall and Snape returned to their guard duty the next day in the late afternoon. Harry was really starting to feel bad about that. McGonagall took some parchments out and began grading them. After a while she looked over at Harry thoughtfully.

"Harry, you have really fallen behind," she said.

Uh, oh, Harry thought, here it comes. "No one brought me my books," Harry pointed out.

McGonagall stood up and opened one of the wall panels near the floor. Inside was a brand new copy of every book in use in the school. She brought over her textbook. "Chapter 8, I think," McGonagall said and opened the book there.

"I read that one," Harry said.

The book snapped closed. "Why is it easier to change a mouse into a teacup than a chocolate truffle?" she asked.

Harry's brows came together. "Are you talking about Moritz's theory of spacial mood?" he asked. "The mouse and the cup are both shy but the truffle is seductive," he responded, to her impressed expression. "But that sounded like bunk to me," he added.

"Well, you will still be tested on it," she said curtly.

Harry accepted the book from her. "I figured that," Harry commented and leaned back with the book open. "Hermione had it triple underlined in her notes."

An hour later, McGonagall rolled up her parchments and put them in her bag. "Would you like to practice some, Harry?"

Harry thought, if this was what having a private tutor was like, he would stick with public school, thanks. He shrugged. McGonagall waved Harry's chair closer to the desk. She took out some objects from her bag: stones in various sizes, some random buttons, some knots. She mixed them up and spread them out on the desk. "Harry, I want you to change all of the objects into one of the kinds here. But I want you to maintain the same variability of the collection. So, for example, the knots: some are shiny and some quite grunged."

Harry stared at the objects and nodded that he understood.

"This is from Chapter 5, which you did not get a chance to practice," she added.

"Minerva," Snape said from the other chair. "I do not think the headmaster wants Harry to strain himself."

She looked over at him. He had a warning look in his eye. "Nonsense, this is an easy exercise once you get the knack. Harry, you will tell me if you get too tired."

He nodded. "I'm too bored, so this is okay." He looked over the little things more carefully a second time. "Okay, which one first?"

McGonagall was still trying to figure out Snape's expression of dismay and said offhandedly, "The knots."

A *bang* sounded and nearly every object in the room became a knot. Large objects became strangely shaped piles of knots; small ones, including some large dust particles, tinkled onto the floor as little slices of knot.

"Whoa, I didn't mean to do that," Harry said, glad the desk and the chair had at least stayed the same. He looked up at McGonagall and shrank back at her expression.

With forced calm, she said, "Harry, can you change them back? Do you remember the end of the chapter?"

Harry took on a look of concentration and waved his wand, "*Diffendora*." The objects obediently changed back.

McGonagall met Snape's raised brow. "Maybe we should save this for the classroom. The headmaster would probably like his office preserved in some semblance of its original form."

Harry frowned and picked up the textbook again, paging to find his place. "I don't know what I did wrong on the spell," Harry commented.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Harry. It worked rather too well in fact." She pulled out her

parchments again. "The headmaster's office is just not the right place for this."

After two days of cancellations, classes renewed at Hogwarts. Ministry wizards still roamed the halls, reinforcing spells and generally guarding things. Ron and Hermione expressed wonder to each other about the changes to the school. Old bogarts and whifflesnelps had been cleared out completely. Even the ghosts were given the once over, to their insulted chagrin.

It was late after dinner. Ron and Hermione had visited Hagrid after failing to be allowed to visit Harry. Twilight filled the sky as they made their way back toward the castle.

"I don't feel like going back in yet," Ron said. "We've been cooped up too much; let's go sit in the rose garden."

"Ron!" Hermione admonished him. "If you want people to talk, that is a great idea." She rolled her eyes.

"I don't care if they do. Come on." He headed off around the castle. It wasn't curfew yet, so the watchwizard patrolling along the forest observed them without comment.

"We have to go in soon," Hermione pointed out. Ron grabbed her hand and pulled her down below the balcony into a little alcove. The marble was still warm through their robes as they leaned back and looked out through the climbing roses overhead.

"This isn't a good idea, Ron," Hermione said.

"Shhh," Ron said and gestured behind them.

Hermione heard footsteps as well. They came closer and stopped at the railing above Ron and Hermione.

"What are we going to do with that boy?" McGonagall's voice spoke. There was no reply. Ron and Hermione looked at each other in the growing gloom. "I was foolish to let him see my fear. He probably thinks I don't trust him," she said. "You tried to warn me but I had no idea what the warning implied."

Then surprisingly, Snape's voice. "You missed the headmaster's little demonstration."

"Which consisted of?"

There was a rustle of fabric. "A very short duel with the apparent conclusion that Potter is now more powerful than he is."

Ron and Hermione gaped at each other below.

"Yes, that I most definitely missed. You could have given me a more concrete warning, Severus."

"I was curious to see what happened."

"Thanks," she said sarcastically. "What has happened to him? I've seen something similar with Aurors whose magic focuses more strongly after a few brushes with death, but this. . ."

Snape cut in. "It is a different kind of magic as well. I suspect that the life force transfer from Hagrid has something to do with it. As a half-giant his magic is different from a human's and he flooded our rather diminutive Mr. Potter with it."

"You would think he would eventually run out of it then." McGonagall said exasperated.

"I see no sign of that happening," Snape said.

"Poor time to lose the boy's trust," she commented.

"Especially since Dumbledore has done so as well."

"How did he manage that?" McGonagall snapped.

"I am beginning to agree with his recent observations about his advanced age," Snape said. "He made a most grievous miscalculation: he underestimated the boy." Snape paused. "He noticed that Potter seemed to have preemptive spell read and, in order to determine just how close to the Ur Potter could read a spell. . . he generated the only Ur spell Potter would recognize."

Hermione put her hands over her mouth to control her gasp. Ron's hand fell on her arm in confused comfort.

"Rather terrified the boy," Snape continued. There was another rustle of fabric. "I have to confess, Minerva, even I felt for Potter at that moment," he sounded irritated with himself.

They were silent for a long minute. "I have to prepare for class," McGonagall said and footsteps receded away.

"Oh, poor Harry," Hermione moaned into her hands.

"What did that mean?" Ron asked.

"There are only four Ur spells, and I'm pretty sure the one Dumbledore used was . . . the Avada Kedavra."

"Why would he do that to Harry?"

"Like Snape said, Dumbledore underestimated him." She stared into the spreading blackness for a long minute, then stood up. "We have to sneak back in if that is at all possible."

They crept around to the door and found themselves facing a short wizard with long blue hair.

"Tonks," Hermione said, "you gave me a scare."

"What are you doing out after hours?" Tonks asked in an unusually serious voice.

Hermione blushed and looked at Ron, "Well, I . . . I mean we . . .uh. We were just talking in the garden and lost track of the time."

Tonks' lips curled into a knowing smile. Hermione thought about dissuading her obviously false notion but realized it played well in this case. "Oh, I see. Well go on in but don't let it happen again."

Hermione grabbed Ron's hand and pulled him along. Tonks gave her a sweet wink when she glanced back at the Auror at the turn in the corridor.

When they were almost back to the common room, Ron said suspiciously, "She doesn't think . . .?"

"I expect she does, but it means she doesn't think we were eavesdropping on two teachers talking about Harry."

"Oh, that is embarrassing," Ron said, flushing.

"I thought you said you wouldn't care if people talked?" Hermione pointed out.

Harry looked up from his reading, bored with the History text as usual within ten minutes of picking it up. Snape had several books from the library stacked around him and thumbed through one and read a bit before thumbing through the next. He eventually sensed Harry watching him, and looked up. "Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Uh, I was wondering if you could show me how to do something," Harry said, not sounding very hopeful. McGonagall looked up at them and watched Snape as well.

"Something from your History text?" Snape sneered lightly.

Harry shut the book and came over and stood before Snape's chair. "Hermione said you knew how to hand conjure."

"Did she?" Snape looked as if he was trying to remember what occasion the girl had seen.

"I want to learn that. Can you show me?" Harry asked. "It seems very useful." Snape looked over at McGonagall a moment. Harry looked over his shoulder at her. "Unless you are willing to teach me?"

She shook her head. "I cannot spell well at all without a wand." Harry looked hopefully back at Snape.

"Very well," he said with a bit of a put-upon tone. After setting his books aside, he said, "Come here." Harry stepped closer. "You are right handed? Give me that hand." Harry held up his hand. Snape looked it over a moment, making Harry afraid he might make fun of its small size. "You notice this here?" Snape asked, pinching the soft flesh at the crux of Harry's thumb. "You want to be certain not to try to focus energy through that muscle; it won't work. This can be difficult at first because when you are physically moving something, you often will use this part of your hand. You want to use the bones of your first three fingers as if they are a set of wands."



McGonagall had stopped grading to look at her own hand. Snape glanced at this and continued, "The added complication is that your fingers aren't nearly as good as wands so you must learn to make them focus individually on the task you are trying to perform in such a way as to complement rather than compete."

Harry thoughtfully moved his fingers, trying to get a sense of that.

"Here," Snape set a copy of his textbook on the floor beside them and said, "Let's try something that is not likely to get too far out of control, hmmm?" McGonagall began to look alarmed. Snape ignored her. "Try a hover charm since you know that one reasonably well," he said with an ambivalent tone.

Harry glanced at him, then concentrated on the book. He raised his hand and wished he didn't have an audience for his first attempt. *Fingers as wands, fingers as wands*, Harry thought to himself. The book cover jerked to the side a little but didn't hover or even jump at all. Harry felt himself flushing with frustration as it refused to move again.

"Not bad, Potter," Snape said.

Harry looked at him, expecting a mocking expression, but the Potions master was apparently serious. He stood up and took Harry's hand again. "The book is quite close, so you need to angle your fingers in more. Remember, each one is a wand that must be pointed at the object." He adjusted Harry's fingers and released him. Harry tried to fine-tune his aim and engaged the hover charm again. The book did jump this time. Thinking more power might help, he poured more force into the charm. Snape grabbed his hand and pulled it upward, causing a ripple of disturbance up the book shelf and over the lights.

"More force will not help in this case. You need aim."

McGonagall, who had been watching the lesson with interest, closed her eyes a long moment. They really didn't know how much power the boy had. Leave it to Snape to play with fire this way.

"Okay, let me practice," Harry said impatiently.

Snape let go of Harry's hand and returned to his seat.

"Thanks for the lesson, Professor," Harry said offhandedly. He carried the book over to his chair and set it on the corner of the desk. With great diligence, he tried to work out the exact aim for a variety of distances.

"Harry," Dumbledore said upon entering the office. "I wonder if you feel up to assisting us?" Always willing to give up another attempt at reading his History text, Harry nodded. "You see," the headmaster explained, "the Ministry wizards have examined Madame Pomfrey and cannot detect any *Imperius Curse* upon her, although it is a very difficult thing to detect."

Harry rubbed his eyes and stood up. "You want me to see if it is still there?" Harry asked.

Snape's brow went up at Harry's presumption.

"Yes, Harry," Dumbledore stated with a smile.

"Sure," Harry said and picked up his wand off the edge of the desk.

"This way then." Dumbledore led the way. Snape and McGonagall followed behind. At the entrance to the dungeons, Tonks and another Ministry wizard joined them.

"How'r ya' Harry?" Tonks said in friendly greeting. She put her arm around his shoulder in lieu of a hug. Harry grinned happily at her. In front of the door to the impromptu prison, they waited while Dumbledore removed the protective spells.

"Okay, Harry." Dumbledore led the way in. "Madame Pomfrey, we have a few guests for you," he said to the healer. Harry stepped in and glanced up at her, then flinched back with a gasp. He moved instinctively to duck behind Dumbledore who put an arm around him and pulled him close to his side.

"What is it?" Tonks asked. "Scar burns?"

Harry nodded and rubbed it. He winced as he glanced back at Pomfrey.

"You don't detect anything?" Dumbledore asked the Auror.

She shook her head. "No, but I'll defer to Harry on this even though I usually can detect something." She looked at Harry trying to control his distress, then back at Pomfrey. "Let me try something, though, before we give up." She came over to Harry and turned him away from Pomfrey, looking into his eyes. "Is that better?"

"Yes," Harry said, relaxing some.

"Stay put a moment." Tonks moved to stand behind Harry but off to one side. She whispered a spell and said, "How about now?"

"Same," Harry said.

She moved to stand offset on the other side. "Now?"

"Better."

"Hmmm," Tonks said thoughtfully. "Harry I want you to try something. Close your eyes and see with your mind what is causing you pain, 'kay? Don't try too hard or it won't work."

Harry did as instructed, even though he really just wanted to get away from the pulsating burn. At first there was nothing but the shifting lights behind his eyelids. Then something almost seemed to flash at him from behind. He turned his head sideways and tried to catch it, but it disappeared. He slouched a little and tried again, letting his mind relax more. Again something flickered at him from behind, which was very odd since his real vision didn't extend over there.

He turned around. "There is something," he said. He squinted at Pomfrey as though she emitted a blindingly bright light. "Something," he said again and pointed at Pomfrey's left

front pocket.

Tonks moved in, pulling on a silvery glove. From Madame Pomfrey's pocket, she extracted a little green metal leaf. "What is this?" she asked the healer. Harry had to bow his head and cover his scar as she held it out in the middle of the room.

Pomfrey shrugged. "I don't know where that came from."

"I'll take it out," Tonks said and departed, the dungeon door booming closed behind her.

"Harry, what do you feel now?" Dumbledore asked.

His scar had tingled down to a dull prickle. "Nothing," Harry replied.

Dumbledore addressed Pomfrey. "Well, I would like to make absolutely certain everything is all right, Madame."

"Yes, of course," she said and sat back with a sigh.

Dumbledore steered Harry out of the room and up to the main floor. "Professor McGonagall, please take Harry back up to the tower."

McGonagall nodded and gestured for Harry to lead the way. Harry hadn't been out of the tower in so long that he was reluctant to go back again already. At the gargoyle, he asked quietly, "How much longer do I have to stay up there?" He tried hard not to whine but it wasn't very successful.

"The respelling is almost complete. I assume once that is finished you will be able to return to a more normal routine." She stood with her arms crossed, reminding Harry that he wasn't the only one tired of this.

Dumbledore approached the gathered wizards discussing the little leaf. A spell-proof box had been procured and it lay inside with the lid open.

"I've never heard of an artifact that can impart an Imperius Curse," one said skeptically.

"Ms. Tonks," Dumbledore said, catching her attention. She handed the box over to another, very elderly wizard and followed the headmaster over to the other side of the corridor. "You seem to like Harry rather well," he commented.

"Yeah, he is a charmer," she said.

"Perhaps you can advise him if you have some time on becoming an Auror. I have been informed that is what he wishes."

"Harry become an Auror?" Tonks blurted and laughed a little. "Headmaster, Harry *is* an Auror." She continued after another laugh. "That third eye exercise we did in the dungeon. Took me three months to learn, and I was rather fast at picking it up." She poked him in the arm. "You keep him alive for the next year and a half and I'll apprentice him myself."

## Chapter 12 A New World

Harry was finally allowed out of his protected room for classes and meals. He was so happy, he almost bounded down the escalator in one long leap. It was lunch time, and he could even forgive the presence of the two Ministry wizards assigned to protect him when he was out.

"Hey, Harry!" Ron said. He stood up and literally led Harry by the arm to their table. "Oh," he said, when two grim looking wizards sat down beside and across from Harry. "Well, it is bloody good to see you anyway," Ron said and pounded Harry on the back, garnering a sharp look from the blond watchwizard seated across from them.

Classes followed a little awkwardly. But Harry was so glad to be back to something like normal that he ignored all of the stares and Hermione's somewhat annoying extra efforts at being friendly.

In the common room the watchwizards agreed to stay beside the portrait hole. Harry went to the corner farthest from them to do homework with his friends. He wondered why he had found homework with them ever to be a drudge. After they finished their History essay (Hermione insisted on getting the most boring out of the way first), Harry stood up to stretch. He walked over to the bookcases, letting his eyes drift down the titles at random. *Making the Most of Magic* followed by *Mushroom Mania*. *Gnome Where Else* was misfiled. Harry thought for a second that the Gnome book was glowing. He blinked at it then, remembering what tonks had taught him yesterday, he relaxed and let his mind wander. It wasn't the book; something was behind it.

Harry pulled out *Gnome Where Else* and behind it was Neville's Remembrall. He reached in and pulled out the dusty glass ball. "Hey, Neville," Harry called.

"Neville looked up from the table where he was trading Dragon cards. "Hey! Where did you find that?" He walked over and took it from Harry's outstretched hand, but Harry was now looking past him with a glazed expression.

Neville turned his head around, wondering what had caught Harry's attention. Harry stepped forward as though in a dream. The room twinkled with magical objects. Harry wandered from the painting of a swaybacked pony on one wall with a magical frame full of spinning pinwheels, to a pair of bookends with glowing eyes. Unaware that most of the students had stopped what they were doing and were watching him, Harry walked over to four students sitting before the fireplace.

They looked up at him, vaguely fearful. Ron and Hermione bit their lips and waited to see what their friend was going to do. The thought of running over and shepherding him back to them seemed more embarrassing than just waiting, though waiting was getting difficult. Harry's appearance didn't shock them anymore, in fact he looked much better to them. But to the other students who had not seen him since Malfoy's attack, he was positively eerie. He was deathly thin and his skin had not completely returned to a healthful color.

Harry stopped before Parvati. "Can I see that?" He asked, pointing at something near her hand. At Parvati's confused look, Harry added, "The ring, I think. Do you have on a magic ring?"

Parvati's face looked relieved. "Yes, my great-great-grandmother's." She lifted her hand for Harry's inspection. To Harry the ring blazed bright red.

"What does it do?" Harry asked dreamily, sounding oddly like Luna Lovegood. He was still lost in his own world.

"I . . . I don't know. My mother gave it to me, told me I'd find out when it mattered. Do you know what it does?" she asked Harry.

He shook his head. "It is very pretty though."

Parvati narrowed her eyes and looked at the beaten up old ring with a rather flat dark stone. "What do you see?" she asked carefully.

"It is bright, bright red and it glows . . ." Harry gestured. "I could see it from over there."

"Harry," Hermione called from their study area. "We need to finish Grey's essay."

Harry returned to himself and, with a smile at Parvati for showing him such a fine thing, he walked away and rejoined his friends.

Whispering, Hermione said, "Harry, I didn't know you had third sight."

Not pausing from pulling out his Defense Against Dark Arts text, Harry said, "Tonks showed me yesterday. What's the big deal?"

Ron and Hermione shared a look. Hermione continued even quieter. "Harry, this is just like you being a parselmouth. No one learns third sight in one day!" At Harry's worried look she changed the subject. "Let's get this essay done before dinner."

Snape paced before Dumbledore across his otherwise empty Potions classroom. "I believed we were in the business of teaching, Headmaster, not rearing," Snape said, annoyed.

Dumbledore was unperturbed by his tone. "For some of our students, Severus, the ones who return to un-nurturing homes for two months of the year, we should at least attempt to raise them. Especially in this case."

Snape put down a tin canister of gelpowder with a clack. "It is rather difficult to run a day's classes followed by a night's babysitting."

Dumbledore's voice remained sympathetic. "I understand that. And as unlikely as it is to hear me say it, I believe this is more important."

Snape seethed a moment, but then didn't respond. Dumbledore took that for agreement and departed.

Dinner in the Great Hall seemed almost as grand as the first time Harry had arrived. He breathed in the air of the large room and studied the enchanted ceiling for a long time, missing

the looks of concern Ron and Hermione threw at each other.

"Harry," McGonagall said as she stepped over to them just as the students were all seated. "The headmaster wants a word with you after the meal, so don't run off."

Harry nodded and watched her make her way back up to the head table. Just as she sat back down, the food appeared. Harry picked up a spoon and started in on the bread pudding with cherries first.

As the other students left, Harry hung back with his friends and his two watchwizards. Dumbledore ended his conversation with Grubbly-Plank and strolled over to them. "Harry, I am afraid that I cannot let you stay in the Gryffindor Tower tonight." Ron and Hermione broke out into protest until Dumbledore raised his head. "Come here, Harry." He led a despondent Harry over to the hallway that led from the kitchens to the Great Hall.

"In the spirit of not hiding things from you, I am going to tell you why I cannot let you stay with your fellow students." Dumbledore bent down so he was at eye level with the boy. "After the Baylron attack the Ministry wizards placed a rather elaborate set of alarm spells around the forest. Two nights since then, including last night, something set off the alarm."

Harry looked back sadly at Ron and Hermione.

"I know you would not want to put your friends at risk any more than you want to be unprotected yourself," Dumbledore said gently. At Harry's nod, Dumbledore said, "Good boy, Potter."

Having been set free, Harry felt more annoyed with being re-imprisoned. He also sensed renewed annoyance in his teachers. He finished his essay and looked over the reading for the next day with little enthusiasm before going down to the toilet to change. He had thrown a towel over the mirror, which no one had removed. He felt embarrassed that they all must know he had done it but also relieved to not have to deal with the obnoxious thing.

He came back in his pyjamas and dressing gown and immediately settled in to sleep, even though it was a little early.

"Are you feeling all right, Harry?" McGonagall asked from Dumbledore's chair.

"Yeah, just a little tired from all the walking around." This was actually true, he realized; His legs ached as though he had been running uphill all day rather than walking between classes and meals.

"If you need anything, let me know," she said gently.

Harry nodded, feeling a little better.

The next morning, Harry remembered that he should have discussed the use of confusion spells in his essay for Grey. He woke up suddenly with this thought and pulled out his essay parchment and quill. Snape watched him from across the room with tired eyes, his chin resting on his fist.

McGonagall handed Snape a cup of coffee and drank half of one down herself. "Black, right?" she asked the Potions master with a hint of something in her voice.

Harry looked up from his parchment and watched them. Coffee discussions always reminded him of the Dursleys so he usually tuned them out. This was some kind of inside joke that he hadn't figured out. He turned back to his essay, thinking hard of a way to rephrase a sentence that he was pretty sure wasn't correct. He wished his assignments didn't have so many crossouts, but it was either that or get marked down.

A dull thump brought Harry's head up. "There it is again," he said automatically, not immediately remembering what it reminded him of.

"There is what?" McGonagall asked.

"Didn't you hear that?" he asked. Both teachers were looking at him now, studying him in that way he really didn't like. It made him feel he was an interesting object rather than a student.

Harry's heart started pumping hard. He reached for his wand on the edge of Dumbledore's desk, his mind relaxing into that strange state Tonks had shown him. He could see the dark angular shadow pass over and to the right side of him. "It's the Baylron," Harry stated.

Both teachers jumped to their feet, wands out. "Where?" Snape demanded.

Harry pointed; his finger tracking the path of the shadow as it crawled over the stones of the tower on the outside. He seemed like a blind man who doesn't look where he is indicating. Harry slowly rose to his feet as well.

"Fawkes!" McGonagall shouted. The bird pulled its head out from under its wing and gave her a tilted head of attention. "Get Dumbledore!"

Fawkes disappeared in a flash of flame, leaving a single feather to drift below its perch.

Harry turned in regular circles now, tracking the path of the Baylron as it skirted them. The Baylron slowed and came to a stop, just to the left and above Dumbledore's one window. "It's stopped," Harry said and pointed his wand. "I can hit it."

Snape grabbed Harry's arm. "Don't!" he hissed sharply. "You'll damage the spells protecting us," McGonagall said at the same time.

"But it's . . ." Harry tried to see it better which made it fade out. He stared at the light coming in the window and let his mind roam again. "It's digging or something," Harry frowned. Snape pulled Harry around behind him with his left hand.

In Harry's mind the tower flashed bright a moment and the limb of the Baylron stabbed through the tower. "No!" he shouted and threw himself forward at Snape.

A loud crack and sizzle deafened them. Harry shoved off Snape's back to stand straight and, without thinking, aimed his wand back up the path of the retreating limb and fired a spell with everything he had. In his mind he could see the Baylron flung from the tower and away. He lowered his wand and stood breathing heavily.



McGonagall came at Harry from behind, pulling him back against her. "It's gone," Harry said, trying to shake her off.

Snape stood with a vicious look at Harry, "We are supposed to be protecting you," he said in a low, dangerous tone.

Harry pushed himself completely free from McGonagall's grip and stepped over to his professor, ignoring the trail of smoke still rising from the blackened stone at their feet.



"Getting yourself killed is a good way to protect me all right!" Harry shouted at him.

"You insolent little thing," Snape seethed. "Everyone is going to great lengths for you, putting themselves in danger just to keep you in this school."

"What?" Harry cut him off. "You think I like this?"

"Then stand back and let others take care of things for once in your life, Potter." Snape took a deep breath and calmed somewhat.

Harry, on the other hand, was just getting started. Snape's attitude pushed him too far this time. "What do you want from me?!" Harry raged. "You want me to stand here and let you get blasted?" Harry gestured to the blackened rent in the stone and kept shouting. "You think I want to lose someone else I care about?"

He shut up with a gasp. Snape stared at him with a horrific expression. McGonagall, who was about to step in between them, instead leaned back against the desk, folded her arms, and watched them both. They stared fiercely at each other with remarkably similar expressions of distaste.

The office door opened suddenly and Dumbledore and several ministry wizards piled off of the landing. Dumbledore's gaze moved from the black, cracked stone to each of them. He noticed the way Harry and Snape appeared about to face off in a duel.

"What is going on here?" Dumbledore asked quietly. Somehow his voice had more force that way.

Snape and Harry didn't move. Harry appeared to be grinding his teeth.

"Well," McGonagall said. "Harry noticed the Bayron circling the tower. When it breached the protective spells, he rather unceremoniously pushed Professor Snape out of the way. That, more or less, has led to the current standoff." She waved in their direction as if it were a minor thing

"Potter has third sight?" A youngish looking wizard asked, confused.

"I taught it to him the other day," Tonks offered, a little reluctantly.

"One day? He just had it then, right?" The first wizard said.

"Yes!" Harry shouted, turning to them. He was still raging inside and was happy for someplace else to direct it. "Freakish Harry Potter has third sight. He's also a parselmouth! Any other tricks you would like him to do for you? Stick around, I'm sure something will come up."

"Harry," Dumbledore stepped over to him. So did Tonks. Harry felt like a roman candle of anger and magic; he wondered if they could see it blazing from him.

"Harry, they are just impressed, that's all," Tonks explained.

Harry stepped back from her, not willing to let it go so easily. His eyes narrowed at her. "They aren't impressed. Look at them," Harry said, his gaze passing over the stunned faces in the

room. "They're scared." All except Snape, who was giving him that deep, calculating expression again. Even McGonagall looked wary.

"Damp it down a little, Harry," Dumbledore said. He had taken up a position in front of the Ministry wizards. Harry stared hard at the headmaster, remembering what Snape had said about him letting Voldemort go unchecked to avoid meddling. His anger deepened into something even darker.

"Potter," Snape said calmly, factually. "Your friends are a mere hundred yards away in the Gryffindor Tower. If you let loose you could easily take out half of this castle."

Just like that, the raging magic drained out of Harry. He dropped, empty, into his chair and stared at the blackened gouge in the stone floor. A wide crack ran up the wall from it like a lightening bolt.

Dumbledore breathed a suppressed sigh of relief along with the rest of the room. "Harry, did you see the protective spell fail?"

Harry's brow furrowed. "Like a flash?" he asked a little tiredly.

"Yes," Dumbledore said gently. No one else in the room made any expression of surprise, which was hard for some of them. "What color was it?"

Harry thought back. "White."

"Pure white?" Dumbledore asked.

"No, kind of blue-white."

"Thank you, Harry." He turned to the assembled wizards. "We need to respell the tower, this time with several more layers. Would you work from inside?" Dumbledore asked Tonks. She nodded.

As the others left, Tonks studied each of Snape, McGonagall, and Harry in turn rather closely. Finally she went over and crouched before Harry's chair. "Can I ask you what spell you used on the Baylron?"

Harry came back to the present. He waved his hand at Dumbledore's desk. "Just something I had been practicing here."

"A hover spell?" McGonagall blurted then masked her surprise.

"Yeah," Harry admitted.

Tonks patted him on the leg. "You must have really put a lot behind it."

"I wanted it to go away," Harry pointed out.

"Harry," Tonks said soberly. "You need to be very careful who you want to go away."

He met her gaze and then dropped his. "I have too much magic now," Harry said. "I don't

know why."

Tonks deliberately didn't look up at the Hogwarts teachers. She didn't care whether they wanted Harry to know or not. "You know Hagrid did a life force transfer to keep you alive?" At his nod she continued. "Well, Hagrid has a different kind of magic than us. And we think you now have both kinds, your old one and his as well."

Harry sat back and crossed his arms. "No one ever tells me anything," he said, annoyed. Then he brightened a little. "Why do I need to be guarded then?"

"Because magical power doesn't give you good judgment," Tonks pointed out. "Promise me you'll keep doing what your teachers tell you to, Harry," she said firmly.

Harry nodded. He carefully avoided either of his teachers' gazes.

It took two hours to complete the spelling of the tower. During that time, Harry reread his Defense against Dark Arts lesson then, feeling unusually motivated, he pulled out the NEWT level text Hermione had given him to read on the same subject. The time flew by as he read each spell and imagined executing it. A mental image of Draco Malfoy always seemed to fill in well for a potential target.

"Well, we're finished," Tonks announced. She closed the heavy window, latched it and spelled it several different ways.

Harry looked up, surprised by how much time had passed. He had forgotten he was trying to avoid Snape's eyes, and found himself meeting the Potions master's most calculating gaze for the second time just this morning. Harry's slip earlier still stung. He felt unusually annoyed with himself over it for many complicated reasons.

"Good book?" Snape asked in a conversational tone.

"Not bad," Harry replied. He felt like they were talking in code all of a sudden. "A little overly simplistic," he added, using a Hermioneism that always annoyed Ron and him. Indeed the book sometimes glossed over the curses to be countered, as though the author were trying to protect the reader from the knowledge of the original curse.

"I'm sure there are others in the library," Snape said. "I have a few you may borrow as well," he added, still in that oddly conversational tone. Even more odd because Snape never used it.

Harry narrowed his eyes in thought at that. Tonks patted him on the top of the head, interrupting. "Gotta run, Mate. Have a good day." She bounded to the escalator.

McGonagall rolled her parchments together and said distractedly, "If the headmaster thinks we can still run afternoon classes, I must be going."

"Does that mean I can go?" Harry asked, thrilled with this notion. He was sick of this room and this chair.

Dumbledore reappeared at that moment. "Can I go to class?" Harry asked him without preamble.

"Of course, Harry. Go on down." Dumbledore indicated the still open door behind him.

Harry collected up his things as fast as possible and jumped up. "Do I have to wait for the watchwizards?"

"No, Harry, the castle is spelled. You are on your own." Harry tried to rush past him, gleeful. "But-" Dumbledore said and put out a hand to stop him.

"Yeah, I know: be very careful. Tonks went over that."

Dumbledore leaned down and lifted Harry's chin. "Very, *very* careful."

Harry nodded with a frown and dashed as soon as Dumbledore released him. As the door slid closed with a thud, Dumbledore added, "Besides, Harry, the watchwizards refuse to guard you anymore. They said it was 'silly'." McGonagall and Snape were the only ones to hear that. McGonagall stood up from Dumbledore's chair as he came around, looking for something in his desk.

"That bad?" McGonagall asked.

Dumbledore waved the topic away and pulled out a silvery bar from his top right drawer. He weighed it in his hand a moment before pocketing it.

"Perhaps he is making this school less safe at this point," McGonagall pointed out.

Dumbledore straightened fully and turned to her. "I refuse to give up on Mr. Potter, especially at this point. I am willing to sacrifice all of us rather than force him to leave the only real home he has ever known." He examined the inside of the tower a long moment. "We simply must change the way we are handling him, is all.

"On that note, Severus, I want to have a word with you," Dumbledore rumbled. Snape had been waiting near the closed office door for Dumbledore to dismiss them. He turned attentively to the headmaster. "I understand you have strong animosity for the boy and I know its source, but it ends here. Harry does not need more enemies at this point."

Snape's expression didn't alter at all. McGonagall set her satchel down and gave this exchange her full attention. Snape shifted to cross his arms in a vaguely defiant posture. "And if I refuse?" he asked. "Am I the first to be sacrificed, Headmaster?"

As though at a tennis match, McGonagall turned to Dumbledore to see his reaction. The headmaster locked eyes with Snape in silence before shaking his head. "By no means, Severus. But I assume you will let your better sense prevail if you feel it necessary to provoke the boy. You did very well earlier when no one else could reach him."

Snape bowed his head in acceptance of that. Dumbledore looked displeased but sent them both away.

Harry relished school that afternoon. He smiled at everyone who looked his way and took the best notes he had ever managed, which gave him hand cramps.

During Transfiguration, McGonagall had Kartikeya hand out mice to be turned into lizards. She reviewed the spells, a series of three, that were needed to perform the transformation then came over to Harry, Ron and Hermione. She leaned down between them. "Harry?" He looked at her closely. "Remember," she said.

Harry, who was eager to try the spell, put his wand between his hands under the table and slouched a little. "Go ahead, Hermione," he prodded. Satisfied, McGonagall went to the next table.

"What was that?" Hermione whispered to Harry. Harry shook his head. "Go on," he urged her. "But. . ." she started. "Why doesn't she want you to do the spell?"

They all glanced at the teacher to be sure she was out of range. "What is going on, Harry?" Ron asked.

"You haven't noticed I don't have watchwizards anymore," Harry commented, looking down at his wand.

"I did notice that," Hermione said.

"You don't know why," Harry pointed out.

"You haven't told us," Ron retorted lightly.

Harry looked sad a moment. This whole thing had him terribly knotted up. He was so happy to be on his own, but knowing why was beginning to terrify him. "Please just do the mouse, Hermione," Harry finally said.

## **Chapter 13 The Dungeon**

After Potions the next day, Hermione delayed in leaving. Snape seemed moodier than normal, almost convincing her to get on to lunch, but she was worried about Harry.

"Professor?" she prompted, when he didn't notice she had remained behind.

Snape gave her a distracted look. "Ms. Granger. I can only assume you want something." He turned back to his potion preparation.

She walked up to the front of the room. "I want to know what is wrong with Harry, sir."

Snape gave her a sideways look. "What precise symptom are we discussing?" Snape asked as he added a lot of grey powder to his mixture.

"McGonagall wouldn't let Harry do anything during Transfiguration," she said.

"Ah," Snape said and read his ingredients list. "Harry knows why and failed to tell you?"

"He wouldn't say." She frowned. She hadn't considered that Snape might have some kind of

loyalty to Harry on this.

Snape finally looked up at her, his long index finger marking his place on the page before him. "You are a relatively intelligent girl. What do you think?" he sneered at her.

Hermione, remembering the conversation she and Ron overheard in the rose garden, said, "He is too powerful, isn't he?"

"Given what Voldemort is willing to throw at our Mr. Potter, it is unclear if there is such a thing as 'too powerful.'" Snape pointed out. "But in the context of a Hogwarts classroom, I would say that is the reason for Professor McGonagall's caution.

"What I would recommend to you, Ms. Granger. . ." He paused to make sure he had her full attention, ". . . is that you make it clear to Harry that you realize how much he has changed and also make it clear that it does not matter to you."

"He's afraid he'll frighten us off? He should know better than that," Hermione countered.

Snape sighed. "The reason the boy no longer has watchwizards covering him is that the half he didn't frighten away think he should be guarding them."

"Oh, dear," Hermione muttered. She frowned inwardly. "Thank you, Professor," she said distractedly, deep in her own thoughts as she turned and left.

Herbology was fast becoming Harry's favorite class. The Hufflepuffs didn't make any trouble and Harry wasn't restricted from doing anything since magic was rarely involved.

Today they were trimming the Spitting Rhumiblooms. "I have been growing these since spring and they are almost ready to bud, so try to be extra careful with them. Their venom is useful as a gnome repellent as well as making a nice aperitif when cured in alcohol. Ehem," she cleared her throat.

"Now, it is very important that the plant not realize what you are doing. But trimming is essential or the bloom will be quite small. So we shall play some nice Brahms." She reached for a charmed music box and tapped it to make it play a lullaby. "Now, with a very sharp pair of shears, we need to remove all of the suckers. Those are the little branches that come out at the base of other mature branches."

She demonstrated on the Rhumibloom in front of her. The plant did seem to have drooped as the music box played. Professor Sprout reached in with the shears and snipped off a small sucker on the top branch. The plant twitched a little but then returned gradually to its drooping state. She snipped off another one.

"Each table has its own music box so that you can make the Rhumibloom passive as needed."

Harry stared at his apparently very alert Spitting Rhumibloom with some trepidation. Ron started the music box and impatiently started in with the shears. Both Harry and Hermione lunged at him and just got his face out of the way as sticky, violet venom jetted out of the center of the flower. Some of it got in Ron's hair and some on Hermione's hand. The whole class was watching them, some with barely concealed grins of amusement.

Sprout moved in with antidote, which she wiped liberally over Hermione's hand and Ron's hair before moving away with a huff.

Ron seemed to have put the rest of their table's Rhumiblooms on alert. Even after ten minutes of lullaby, all theirs still stood straight and watchful.

"Well," Sprout said. "You may have to give up on this part of the lesson since we need to move on to the next."

Ron's hair now was streaked with blond where the venom had adhered before getting neutralized. Hermione shot him an annoyed look at his messing up her assignment then laughed at his hair. "You'll have to go as a skunk for Halloween, Ron," she giggled and plucked at his locks.

"Oy!" Ron said and ran his fingers through his damp hair. "That bad?"

"Don't worry about it, Ron." Harry said. "My Aunt Petunia always got her hair done that way, called it 'highlighting.'" And Harry started laughing as well as Ron's face went pink.

"Where is Professor Snape?" Dumbledore asked around as he stood in a cluster of second year Slytherins in the Entrance Hall. Dumbledore had decided the students should decorate for Halloween this year as a way of letting off some of the tension of the last few weeks. The students needed a little help getting their simulated bats launched.

Harry and some other sixth years from Ravenclaw had stopped to watch the free entertainment. The other sixth years shrank back at the question. "I'll go get him, Professor," Harry said. Dumbledore looked rather pleased by this offer, which Harry mulled over on the way down to the dungeons.

He walked past the empty classroom and down the hallway to the Slytherin rooms. Harry knew where the hidden door was already and he stopped in front of it. Two Slytherin third years stood farther along the wall, staring at Harry. "Is Professor Snape inside?" Harry asked.

One of them nodded. Neither of them offered to go fetch Snape. Harry turned back to the stone door. He unfocused his thoughts and immediately saw a tiny silver disk glowing deep inside the rock. He examined it, literally turning it around in his mind. *Diffendylia*, filled his thoughts, a word Harry didn't know. "*Diffendylia*," Harry said aloud, causing a gasp from nearby. The stone door moved aside. Harry walked past it and into the dim commons room. Stunned gazes tracked him across the room but no one moved to challenge him.

"Professor, the headmaster wants you," Harry said when he reached Snape on the far side of the room.

Snape turned slowly around and gave Harry a positively stunned look.

"He's in the Entrance Hall," Harry added.

"May I ask who let you in?" Snape said with a deep challenge in his voice. The students Snape had been talking to swallowed hard at that tone.

Harry glanced back at the stone door, clearly confused. "No one," he said. Harry was beginning to realize that this room was even more alight with magical objects than the Gryffindor room. In fact, he was starting to have a hard time focusing on his professor's questions.

"Where did you get the password?" Snape asked carefully.

"Oh, I asked the guardian," Harry answered distractedly. Something along the side wall was glowing and flickering mysteriously. Harry resisted wandering over there.

"And it told you?" Snape asked in disbelief. A few students snickered, waiting with eager anticipation for their Head of House to lay mercilessly into this errant, cocky Gryffindor. They were certain Snape was warming Harry up for the kill.

Harry cranked his head around as he saw something familiar flicker behind him. "It is written on the little disk inside it," Harry commented, brow furrowed.

"First off, Mr. Potter," Snape began. He could see he didn't have the boy's full attention but he continued anyway. "Just because the headmaster sends you to find me, does not, I'm quite certain, mean that you can come into the Slytherin Dungeons."

"Oh," Harry said, trying to bring his gaze back. Something in the next room rippled green in a distressing way and he noticed that a good half of the students were wearing or carrying something magical on them.

The flicker caught Harry's attention again and he spun around and walked towards it. Snape followed, looking menacing. The Slytherins, so far disappointed by Harry's dressing down, gasped at this disrespect. Harry stopped before a student sitting alone in a chair by the bookcases. "Where did you get that?" Harry asked.

"Get what?" Dungess Fretterly responded rudely.

"The thing in the box," Harry said, feeling a kind of heat rising up through him as though from the very stones of the castle.

"Fretterly?" Snape prompted.

The boy looked scared now. He hesitated then reached into his sack, rummaged down to the bottom, and pulled out a cloth-covered grey box. Harry flinched with a hiss and stepped halfway behind Snape. He was feeling raw already and his scar seared to the tips of his fingers.

Snape's entire demeanor changed. He snatched the box away and grabbed Fretterly by the back of his robes. "Headmaster. Now," Snape ordered and led the boy to the door, which opened ponderously. Harry glanced behind them at the room and the wide-eyed gazes all focused on him. He frowned and followed his teacher out.

"Inside," Snape commanded the two students loitering in the corridor. With a jump they obeyed. Once the door turned closed Snape rounded on Fretterly. "Where did you get this?"

Fretterly looked like he really didn't want to say. He swallowed hard. "My neighbor, Mr.



Finnius," he finally admitted.

Snape took a deep breath to calm himself. "Do you have any notion what this has led to?" He paused a moment. "This is another one of those leaves, right, Mr. Potter?" He looked up, surprised to find Harry leaning hard against the other wall of the corridor, clearly in discomfort from the object in the box. Harry nodded with a wince.

"I didn't think it was so dangerous," Fretterly said defiantly. "It is just a little thing, like a trinket."

Snape grabbed Fretterly by the arm and marched him down the corridor. "You are a stupid child, Fretterly," Snape breathed. "Who was the other leaf for?" Fretterly didn't respond.

Harry jogged to catch up, rubbing his scar.

"Why are you being so nice to him?" Fretterly asked Snape, referring to Harry.

"You think I am being nice?" Snape asked as they turned the corner and approached the classroom.

"You are treating him like he's one of us," Fretterly complained.

"Now that would be truly ironic, wouldn't it, Mr. Potter?" Snape commented. They started up the stairs.

"The other leaf was for you, wasn't it?" Harry asked the boy, who looked up at Harry in surprise. Snape stopped on the first landing and Harry confronted Fretterly directly. "But you were worried so you left it in the box. You did know it was dangerous."

"I . . . I didn't know what it was."

Snape again pulled Fretterly along and tossed back, "I think we shall make you an honorary Slytherin, Harry." When he didn't get a rise out of the boy, Snape turned around. Harry, instead of wearing an insulted expression, had an even, interested one. Their gazes locked for a long moment and then Snape resumed climbing the stairs.

As they walked down the long corridor to the Entrance Hall, Harry said, "He is going to be livid."

"Are you being prophetic now as well, Potter? Or are you just guessing?" Snape asked. He too was dreading the upcoming confrontation with the headmaster.

Harry stopped suddenly before they turned the corner; Snape slowed and stopped as well. "Do you want me to follow, or do you want to claim the kill?" Harry asked.

Snape studied Harry; the boy had hit upon a Death Eater phrase and Snape wasn't sure it was a coincidence. Fretterly looked between the two of them with growing confusion. "My, my, Potter." Snape finally said.

"It's up to you," Harry added. A few Hufflepuffs wandered cautiously past, eyes wide at the scene in the middle of the corridor.

"Come with me, Potter. I am frankly too tired from babysitting you to risk lying to the headmaster."

Harry jogged along again. In the Entrance Hall, everybody turned to them. "Headmaster," Snape said loudly. Dumbledore took in the three of them and handed the second years off to the two Ravenclaws who were still poking fun at them. They looked seriously disappointed to become part of the show.

Dumbledore led the way to the staff meeting room. They all filed in and Dumbledore closed the door. Snape set the box down on the table. "Another leaf," he said.

Dumbledore turned to Fretterly who was now positively terrorized. It turned out the headmaster didn't care how it had been found. "Leave us alone," Dumbledore said in a voice that sounded pleasant but could be interpreted as thoroughly unpleasant. Harry swallowed hard and grabbed the door handle ahead of Snape. "Ten minutes, Professor," Dumbledore said, "then come back. Alone."

Snape nodded and followed Harry out. They walked in silence back toward the rest of the castle. Ron and Hermione intercepted them. "Harry? What is going on, you look. . . worried," Ron observed and glanced at Snape with a threatening expression.

"Spare me, Mr. Weasley," Snape breathed testily.

"Harry?" Ron asked, ignoring Snape's remark.

"Too much is going on, Ron," Harry griped and rubbed his scar hard. "I need to close my eyes; my head is pounding."

"We'll take you up to your room, Harry," Hermione offered solicitously.

As they turned away, Snape's voice brought them back around. "Potter?" Harry sighed and turned. "You have. . . satisfied your curiosity?" Snape asked obliquely.

Harry, assuming Snape was referring to the Slytherin Dungeon, nodded and started off again with his friends beside him. He could feel Snape's gaze on him until the end of the corridor. Hermione and Ron led Harry up to his bed. Harry kicked off his shoes and laid back with a groan. "I miss my bed," Harry commented and closed his eyes.

"Are they letting you stay here tonight?" Ron asked hopefully.

"Probably not," Harry frowned.

"What was up with Snape? He looked even crazier than usual," Ron commented.

Harry took off his glasses and set them aside. "I hate to send you guys away, since we haven't had much time together, but my head is pounding," Harry said.

"You aren't going to tell us anything?" Ron burst out.

"Ron!" Hermione scolded him. "Harry isn't feeling well. Let him rest."

"Just tell me one thing that happened today," Ron pleaded. "Things are so strange around here and no one says anything."

Harry scratched his head, hard, to distract him from his scar. "Snape made me an honorary Slytherin," Harry commented. "That was strange."

Hermione froze. "Harry, are you serious?"

Harry rolled over away from them. "I have no idea."

## **Chapter 14 Conquering Quidditch**

"Mr. Potter, wake up."

Harry put his hand over his eyes and tried to remember where he was. For a moment he thought it was his aunt calling him rather than McGonagall. "Yeah," Harry managed. He sat up and pulled the drapes aside.

She stood beside his bed, hands on hips. "Tower, as usual," she said curtly. Harry's shoulders fell but he knew better than to complain. "You are in the middle of missing dinner, but it will be brought up for you," she said as Harry put on his glasses and reached for his shoes. He hadn't wanted to miss dinner with his friends. It made him hurt and angry that it had happened.

Harry collected up a few more books into his bookbag which McGonagall took from him. As Harry followed her out he shut the door to the room he shared with Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville a little hard. Blue sparks flew off the hinges and rippled along the metal stairs.

Harry gasped. McGonagall turned around and said, "Harry!" sharply.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "I didn't mean to do that." The terror of his own power that had dogged him yesterday came back with a snap. "I'm trying, I really am," Harry explained, his voice quavering. He leaned against the closed door, his legs suddenly feeling much too weak to hold him up. Horror gripped him and McGonagall's stunned expression only made it worse.

Harry shook his head at her, his eyes suddenly aching worse than his scar. "Please," he said, not sure what he was asking for, just desperate for her to understand something. He was sliding slowly down the door.

"Harry, what is it?" McGonagall asked in concern.

"Please," Harry pleaded again. He sounded miserable to his own ears. His voice fell to a faint whisper as the horror coalesced into something rational, "Please don't send me away."

"Harry!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed. She reached behind him and helped him to his feet. "Merlin's Beard, Harry, we wouldn't do that!"

"No?" Harry asked, confused. Once he thought about it, it startled him that they hadn't.

At the bottom of the stairs in the empty commons room, she paused and dropped his bookbag on the floor. "Come here, Harry," she said and pulled him into a hug. "You can't lose us. Remember that." She released him and handed his bookbag over. "At the risk of incurring Dumbledore's wrath-

"You don't want to do that," Harry said, concerned for her.

They headed across to the portrait hole where she paused again. "It was a turn of speech, Potter," she explained. "I will tell you what Dumbledore said when this precise issue came up yesterday." He looked painfully up at her. "He said, 'I will sacrifice all of us rather than force him to leave the only real home he has every known.'"

"He said that?" Harry asked, forcing his voice level.

"Yes, Harry, he did." She prepared to open the portrait.

"But I don't want anyone else sacrificed," Harry said sadly.

"Just accept it, and be calmed by the notion that you can't lose Hogwarts as your home, all right?"

Harry nodded, took a deep breath and released it slowly. Dumbledore's words did make him feel a little better. He slouched along behind McGonagall toward the headmaster's office. None of the students had left dinner yet so they didn't meet anyone along the way, for which Harry was grateful.

Up in the office, Harry sat down in his chair and opened his bookbag. He had tossed in his *Quintessential Quidditch* book without thinking. Now he stared at it and wondered why no one had mentioned what was going on with the team. He set the book aside and took out the others, stacking them neatly on the corner of the Dumbledore's desk.

Snape came in at that moment, followed by Dobby with Harry's tray. Dobby caught on quickly that Harry was feeling unsocial and left with a little bow, the back of his chef's coat dragging like a gown behind him.

As Harry forced himself to eat his dinner, he kept glancing at the Quidditch book on the bottom of the stack on the desk. Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. He covered his tray and calmed his flip-flopping stomach. "Professor?" Harry said. Both Snape and McGonagall looked up at him questioningly, but Harry was looking at McGonagall, so Snape went back to his grading.

"Yes, Harry," she said.

Harry took a deep breath and asked, "What is happening with the house Quidditch team?"

McGonagall didn't react. "Ginny is training as second seeker right now, Harry," she stated evenly.

"Second?" Harry prompted.

"Yes. It is your position. And you may play it as soon as you are fit to return to it."

Harry looked down at his tray to hide his utter relief. He picked it up and set it by the door for pickup since nothing could be banished from the room anymore because of the new spells. He then returned to his books, working his way down to the Quidditch one when he had everything else finished.

Quidditch became an obsession for Harry. He started working on hand strength again when no one was watching, gripping the seat of his chair during class if nothing else. He found himself staring out at the pitch whenever he had a chance.

In the commons room before lunch, Ron excused himself, saying he had detention with Filch. Harry looked up sharply at him. "Ron, I'm not that dumb. If you are going to practice, just say so. I'd love to come and watch."

Ron at first looked alarmed and then ecstatic. "Hey, great. You too Hermione?" They collected up their books. "Uh, Harry, can I try out your broom?" Ron asked.

"Sure," Harry replied, wondering why Ron seemed so afraid to ask.

"I'll get it!" Ron bounded up the spiral stairs and reappeared with Harry's Firebolt. "Thanks, Mate!" he said excitedly and led the way out.

The murmuring of Katie giving instructions to the gathered team died down as they spotted Harry. Harry waved at them and took a seat in the stands with Hermione, intentionally down a section from the Slytherins gathered to jeer the practice.

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand a moment. "I'm so glad you are okay with this. We weren't sure how to break it to you with everything else going on."

Harry nodded, watching the beaters take off and fly a few laps.

Practice went well, Harry thought, as they started to wrap it up. The Slytherins had only chanted a few times and tried out some new songs to torment Ron and Ginny. Harry thought they were a little below the belt when they included references to Mrs. Weasley.

Exhausted, the Gryffindors landed on the pitch and Katie called them over for a post-practice talk. "Catch the snitch, Ginny!" she called to the seeker who still circled doggedly, "so we can pack everything up."

Harry looked around the stadium. Watching the practice had been harder than he'd expected and he'd found it easier to avoid pretending to be the seeker. Now he scanned the lightly clouded sky for the golden snitch.

The rest of the team came up into the stands to see Harry, which made him feel better. "How are you, Harry? You are looking good," Katie said to him. They reviewed the drills and Harry commented a little on them but not too much.

"Ginny?" Katie called over her shoulder. "What is taking so long?"

The Slytherins had started rocking back and forth and singing a rather rude song with lines like *Ginny's in a bottle, just like her mamma*.

Harry frowned at them and stood up. He realized he could feel the snitch. It was behind the tower to the left of the announcer's stand. "Never mind, Ginny, I'll get it," Harry shouted.

"You aren't allowed on a broom, Potter," Katie said.

"I don't need a broom," Harry announced. He spoke *accio snitch* in his mind as he held up his hand, fingers aiming at the tower where the snitch fluttered. It zipped around it in a nice curve and over to him in nearly a straight line. Harry closed his hand easily around it, never actually watching its approach directly.

Everyone stood stunned, especially the Slytherins, who had fallen silent with satisfyingly horrified expressions. Harry tossed the snitch into the air, caught it again, and laughed as he remembered his father doing exactly that in the pensieve.

"Well, that would be considered cheating," Katie took the snitch from him on the next toss, catching it herself.

Ginny had landed at the edge of the pitch and stared at Harry with a kind of sad fear. Harry waved at her. She gulped and waved weakly back.

"Well, the game day one will probably be spelled better against that," Katie commented as she took the snitch down to the pitch and closed it in the box at Ginny's feet. "Otherwise we just lost our first seeker."

"How did he do that?" Ginny asked her in a low voice, glancing up at Harry and the rest still in the stands, then over at the retreating Slytherins.

"I don't know. He scares me at times," she said and looked up at Ginny sharply. "Don't tell him I said that."

"I won't. Don't worry," Ginny insisted. "I used to worship him. Then I just felt sorry for him. Now I don't know. Except I think we all should stay on his good side."

Katie frowned and picked up the box of Quidditch balls and walked off the pitch.

"I hear you are trying to get yourself permanently disqualified from Quidditch, Mr. Potter," Professor Snape said as they all congregated in the tower that evening. Professor McGonagall looked up at Snape sharply, surprised that he would say such a thing, even to Harry.

Harry just looked evenly at his teacher. "How spelled is that snitch?" he asked.

"Not especially well spelled. But I suspect it is not possible to spell one well enough to remove every last doubt from the spectators' minds."

"What are you talking about?" McGonagall asked them.

Snape turned to her. "Mr. Potter saw fit to capture the snitch at the end of the Gryffindor practice today."

"You aren't allowed on a broom-" she started to severely chastise Harry.

"He didn't use a broom," Snape said frankly.

McGonagall turned to Harry. "You *accioed* the snitch?" she asked with a pained expression.

"I knew where it was once I *looked* for it. Then it was easy."

"It isn't supposed to let you do that; you know."

Harry wanted to point out that the magic on the practice snitch wasn't very strong. But it had seemed plenty strong in the past, so he kept it to himself. "I don't want to play Quidditch professionally anyway," Harry commented.

"Good thing," McGonagall quipped.

## Chapter 15 Living in New Allegiances

The next day, Harry sat studying alone on the far side of the rose garden. He had watched Ron and Hermione walk around along the stone path a half hour earlier, and had decided that they didn't look like they really wanted a third person hanging around. Remembering them walking together, Hermione's hand on Ron's wrist, Harry felt a bit left out. He sighed and turned back to his History text.

Other voices interrupted Harry's diligent attempt to read and memorize the Ghost Conventions of 1287. He looked up as Dorfmin and Krandell, two fifth-year Slytherins who had been trying to take over where Malfoy had left off, came around the low stone wall. Four other housemates of theirs followed them, looking cocky and menacing.

"Well little Rotter Potter," Krandell taunted. He was a brawny, brown haired boy with a very short haircut. The way Krandell's face twisted up with cruel glee reminded Harry of Dudley. The other Slytherins laughed a bit.

"What do you want?" Harry asked him flatly. He could feel his wand in his pocket but remembering Tonks' and Dumbledore's warnings, left it there.

"We don't like you coming into our dungeon, Potter," Dorfmin said. He had a weasel-like face with a long, pointed nose.

Harry noticed someone approaching from behind his tormentors and, out of the side of his vision, recognized Professor Snape. Harry shook his head deliberately at Dorfmin, meaning it for his professor. The last thing he wanted was to be bailed out by a teacher. He saw Snape stop, his black-eyed gaze moving over the backs of his students.

"It won't happen again," Harry conceded.

"Yeah, we want to make sure it doesn't," Dorfmin said.

Harry realized that these two were not as dumb as Crabbe and Goyle. He tried to find a posture that said he didn't care what they thought. He closed his book and clasped his hands together on top of it. Snape stepped away, although Harry suspected he hadn't gone far.

"We don't like you nosin' in our house, Potty," Krandell said.

"The experience was its own punishment," Harry commented dryly, wishing they would get bored and go away.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Krandell grabbed the front of Harry's robes.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Nothing."

"We don't like you winning everything all the time, neither," the large boy said, directly in Harry's face. "I think you cheat. I know you cheat at Quidditch. You been cheating all along? Makes me want to make sure you never play again, Potter."

Snape, who had not actually gone very far, listened from behind a stone obelisk beside the fountain. The boy needs diplomacy training, Snape thought, and shook his head as Harry said, "Your housemate, Malfoy, already tried that."

"Yeah, he blew it though, didn't he?" Krandell sneered, his nose nearly bumping Harry's.

Harry's hand ached to reach for his wand, but he really didn't want to have to explain what happened to six students and half the rose garden. Anger pulsed in his temples but he beat back against it. "Look, I told you I'd stay out of your dungeon. What else do you want?"

"Snape should have turned you into a skrewt rather than picking on Fretterly. We don't like you getting so friendly with our Head of House."

Harry reached for Krandell's hand, which was still grasping Harry's robes and twisting hard. He didn't have a chance of pulling the larger boy's fingers free, which made him flush with anger at himself. He laughed lightly. "Believe me, I didn't mean to." Harry dug his nails into Krandell's hand as the boy twisted his robes hard enough now to squeeze Harry's chest.

Snape heard the sounds of a scuffle and leaned away from the obelisk, prepared to move in whether Potter wanted him to or not. He heard a crack and didn't hesitate anymore. As he approached, Krandell said with a threatening tone, "Awfully fragile, aren't you, Potter?"

Harry held his left arm against his stomach awkwardly. The pain had sent stars into his vision for a moment. As he blinked them away, he saw Snape grab the back of Krandell's robe and spin him around. The boy came up short with a fright. Snape looked him over with narrowed eyes. "Stupid, stupid, Krandell," Snape said in a low voice. His gaze moved to Dorfmin. "Both of you. My office, now. It is going to take me a little while to think up a suitably creative punishment." The students shrank at that. "The rest of you," he eyed the others, "should be studying, should you not?"



"All I did was grab his arm." Krandell said. "How am I supposed to know he is like some freakish china doll."

"Potter. Hospital wing. Now," Snape said to Harry in the same hard tone.

Harry scowled at him and, one-handed, put his book back into his knapsack. He stood up from the bench and hoisted the bag, not looking back.

Around the corner out of sight, Harry dropped the bag on the ground and stopped. The substitute healer from St. Mungo's he really didn't like. Harry wondered if Hagrid knew how to fix him up. But Hagrid's cabin sat all the way on the other side of the grounds. Harry walked slowly until he came upon Ron and Hermione working at a bench on the other side of the garden.

"Harry, what's wrong?" Hermione asked.

Harry stepped over to them and dropped his bag again hard on the ground. "Slytherins," Harry said as if that covered it.

"Did you hurt your arm?" Hermione asked at the same time Ron said, "Nasty things, them."

"Did I hurt my arm?" Harry asked rhetorically. He sat down beside her when they moved over to make space. "Krandell broke it, just by grabbing me."

"Harry! Get up to the hospital wing," Hermione said. She stood up and tried to urge him to move as well.

"I don't like that Mungo's guy, Duffy or whatever his name is. He treats me like some kind of experimental project."

Sarcastically, Hermione asked, "And what are you going to do instead?"

"I don't know."

Hermione thought a long moment. "I suppose I could try the bone knitting spell-"

A voice behind them made them all jump. "You try any unauthorized healing spells, Ms. Granger, and it will be a month's detention and 300 points from Gryffindor, so you could forget the cup," Snape said. "Potter, I distinctly remember telling you to report to the hospital wing. And since you are here, and not there, I can only assume you are disobeying me."

Harry scowled and looked away but didn't budge. Hermione took one look at Snape's darkening expression and said. "Harry, come on. I'll go with you." Harry finally relented and stood to follow her. "Ron, watch our stuff, okay?"

"Sure," Ron managed weakly, realizing he was being left alone with one very angry Potions professor. Ron was angry too, though, and as he stared at Snape watching his friends depart, he heard himself say, "Why do you let the Slytherins torment Harry so much, Professor?" Snape's dark eyes flicked down to Ron, who worked hard to hold his ground and not shirk away.

Surprisingly Snape didn't respond immediately. When he did respond, he said, "None of you would learn anything if we intervened constantly."

"Ugh," Ron moaned and covered his head with his hands. "You sound like my dad!" If Ron hadn't been squeezing his eyes shut at that moment, he would have seen a rather startled expression on the Potions master's face.

The hospital wing was empty of other patients when Hermione pushed the large doors open for Harry to step in. They stopped when Pomfrey bustled out of her office. "Harry, didn't expect to see you back so soon."

Harry's heart had started racing at the sight of the hospital witch, but his scar was quiet so he let Hermione lead him in farther. "You are staying, right?" he asked her quietly.

"If you want me to."

"Yes," Harry insisted.

Pomfrey led him to a bed, fortunately a different one than last time, and took a look at his arm. She tapped her wand against his good arm a moment. "My dear boy, your bones are quite thin." She spelled the broken bones back together and scurried off. "Just a moment, I think we should give you something."

She came back with a familiar large bottle and a glass of water. "I think some dilute skelegro is in order, Potter." She mixed a little into the water and handed it to him.

"Is it going to hurt?" Harry asked. Hermione looked at him as though he was nuts to ask, until Pomfrey responded, "Of course it will. Skelegro always does. But it is better than breaking your bones every time you sneeze."

Harry sat up and swallowed the awful stuff.

Pomfrey put the bottle back away. "I want you back here every afternoon for another dose and check on your progress."

Harry frowned and sighed. "Can I go now?"

"Yes, dear. Go right ahead," she said kindly. As Harry was pulling his sleeve straight again, Pomfrey added. "And I am very sorry for the other night."

Harry waved her off. "It is all right, Madame Pomfrey," he said and frowned again. She had reminded him that the list of people he could absolutely rely on was getting shorter and shorter. Hermione led the way out and in a brooding silence, Harry followed.

Snape looked up from his Potions text as the potion bottles on the far wall rattled lightly. He glanced around the room, looking for any sign of strange magical effect, until the door swung open. At the outline of Dumbledore in the doorway, Snape put down his wand and closed the textbook.

"I am very disappointed, Severus," Dumbledore stated.

Snape stared at him. He realized that he was, one: too tired to battle with the headmaster and, two: starting to not care very much what the outcome of such a battle might be.

"I don't understand why you would abandon the boy to the most violent students in your house," Dumbledore continued, clearly expecting a response. A light breeze fluttered around the room, testament to barely restrained wizard anger.

Snape took a deep breath. "Albus, I just ask one thing. Call the boy down here and talk to him." He said this with little hope in his voice. All biting arguments seemed to have escaped him.

Dumbledore looked him over and stepped out just long enough to tell a passing Slytherin to fetch Harry Potter. A few, very drawn out minutes later a light knock sounded on the classroom door, and Harry and Hermione stepped inside.

"Ms. Granger, you may leave," Dumbledore said.

Hermione's eyes went a little wide as she took in the situation. "I'd like to stay with Harry-"

"Go on, Hermione," Harry said. "It's all right."

She kept her eyes on Dumbledore and touched Harry on the arm. "Harry, uh, you need to be careful," she said with a meaningful glance at the back of the headmaster.

"It's all right, really. Go," Harry insisted.

Hermione gave Harry a pained expression of distress but finally gave in. Snape never imagined he would be grateful for the girl's utter inability to take a hint.

Harry stepped over to them. "What is it?" Harry asked the Headmaster.

"Harry, what happened today?" Dumbledore asked, with something more like his usual kind voice.

"You mean with the Slytherins, Krandell and Dorfmin?" Harry frowned and looked between the two of them yet again, trying to read what was going on. "They were just harassing me," Harry said with a shrug.

"And Professor Snape let them?" Dumbledore asked.

"I told him to go away," Harry explained.

The headmaster's eyes narrowed at him as his chin came up. "Why did you do that?"

Harry looked at him in confusion a moment. "Headmaster, it would only make it worse the next time."

"Worse than a broken limb?"

"Yes. Him being nice to me is one of the things they were unhappy about," Harry insisted. He shifted his stance and waved his arm around. "It only took Pomfrey a minute to fix, and she's giving me something to make my bones stronger now so it won't happen again anyway," Harry explained, trying to sound earnest as though it were no big deal, although his bones ached when he thought about it.

"You would say that Professor Snape has been nicer to you?" Dumbledore asked carefully. "You don't think any punishment is in order?"

Harry froze at that. Dumbledore's eyes were glowing a little, he was sure of it, and Hermione had behaved almost as scared as he had ever seen her when she left. Harry felt like he was seeing the real Dumbledore for the first time.

*Don't blow it now, Boy,* Snape thought, although he was very careful not to project it. He had noticed Dumbledore watching for any such nonverbal communication from the moment Potter had come into the room.

Harry shook his head slowly. "He's been fine," Harry said evenly. "If I'd wanted help with Krandell and Dorfmin, I'd have called Professor Snape over rather than shaking my head at him to make him go away." Harry paused. "Is that what this is really about, Headmaster?" Harry asked, curious.

That clearly caught Dumbledore off-guard, and the old wizard raised his chin at the question. "It is only about keeping you with us, Harry. I don't like my staff working against that."

*Oh, like Quirrell and fake Moody and in the end, Lockhart,* Harry thought snidely, but stuffed those thoughts down instantly. Instead he put on a more innocent, confused expression. "Professor Snape hasn't been, as far as I tell, Headmaster. I don't understand what you think is wrong."

Dumbledore stepped closer to Harry. "You trust him? Completely?" Harry tried to glance over at Snape. "Don't look at him; look at me, Harry."

"Yes," Harry answered with some certainty.

"You know what he has on his arm?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes. But he doesn't make my scar burn." *Anymore.*

Harry, after a pause in the questions, did glance at Snape. The Potions master looked worn out; he stood beside the teaching bench with his arms crossed and his shoulders slumped. Harry felt something more should be added, but the first thing that crossed his mind was, *If you didn't trust him, why is he here?* Instead, Harry said, "I don't want to lose any allies, Headmaster, and I do think of Professor Snape as one."

Dumbledore nodded once, slowly. "All right, Harry. You can go now."

At the door, Harry turned back and looked at each of them. "Headmaster, I think Professor Snape needs a good night's sleep," Harry pointed out. Snape looked up at Harry sharply with a simultaneously annoyed and grateful expression. Harry didn't dwell on it; instead he held Dumbledore's eyes earnestly.

"It is late," Dumbledore said. "Severus, escort Harry to my tower. I will relieve you for the night in an hour or so."

Harry barely managed to keep pace with the Potions master as they headed for the stairs out of the dungeon. Behind them, Dumbledore kept a slower pace. They headed down the corridor to the stairs then up several flights. After the first staircase, Snape slowed so Harry could keep up. At the gargoyle they were alone.

"I suppose I should thank you," Snape said distastefully.

Harry grinned lightly. "I owed you one."

"You believe that?" Snape asked.

Harry gave the password and the gargoyle moved aside. "You didn't tell him what I did to Goyle."

"True."

"Better yet, you distracted him from asking anything more."

Snape didn't move to the slowly turning staircase. He considered Harry closely. "Which of you is the real Harry Potter, I wonder?" Snape asked aloud. "The innocent, earnest one that pacified Dumbledore just now, or this much more devious, strategic one?"

"They both are," Harry said and jumped onto a step as it rose out of the floor. "One I prefer to be and one I think I have to be." When they had turned out of sight of the corridor, Harry asked, "Which one annoys you less, Professor?"

Snape frowned. "If you are attempting to get me to observe that one of them is less like your father than another, you would be mistaken. James Potter was a master at making complicated trouble and then sweetly and innocently talking his way out of it," he said in a disgusted tone.

Harry grinned at that and stepped off onto the landing at the office level.

"Schoolwork finished, Harry?" Dumbledore asked over his spectacles when Harry closed his book with a snap.

Harry nodded and stretched with a sigh. Dumbledore removed his spectacles and folded them methodically before putting them in his pocket. He then folded his hands and considered Harry. "Your magic has become very interesting, Mr. Potter. I wonder if you wouldn't cater to my curiosity for a little while?"

Harry shrugged. *Please, no spell detection tests*, Harry thought.

Dumbledore, as though reading Harry's expression, said, "I promise, no Ur spells."

Harry dropped his gaze. "I should have known you wouldn't actually. . . "

"Your instinctive fear is completely understandable, Harry." Dumbledore put his parchments away in a drawer so that his desk was completely clear. "Have you ever seen a *Culumbula* spell?" Harry shook his head. "Come a little closer, it is one of my favorites."

## Chapter 16 The Substitute

"Do you want to go watch Quidditch practice?" Hermione asked Harry after lunch as they sat in the commons room.

"Sure," Harry said, trying to sound enthusiastic. He collected his stuff and took it up to his room. He came back carrying his broom. "Ron didn't take it. I'll take it down to him," he said.

As they walked out onto the lawn, Harry felt an incredible ache of missing out as he watched the team warming up with some practice loops around the pitch. He stopped and just watched them from a distance. Ron was tossing the quaffle back and forth with Katie in a kind of makeshift keepaway from Ginny. Hermione stopped and looked back at Harry, giving him a sympathetic expression.

"I miss flying," Harry said sadly. "I want to fly."

Hermione stomped back over to him. She pulled his broom effortlessly out of his hands even though Harry tried to hold onto it. "No. Not until you're stronger." She regretted the demonstration immediately as his face fell farther. "Come on, Harry, you'll get there."

Harry looked at her. "Fly with me. No one said I couldn't do that."

"Harry! I'm not really all that good at flying, not for Quidditch."

"Please, Hermione," Harry pleaded. His desperate gaze got to her. Just over a week ago, she would have given anything to see him awake and doing anything, let alone pleading for something so simple.

She gave in. "All right. But nothing fancy. Just a few laps around the pitch," she insisted.

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry said. He took the broom back from her and said, "Up," as he dropped it and it hovered obediently. "Take the back and hold onto me," Harry said, getting on.

Regretting her decision already, Hermione got on behind Harry. She bent forward over him and grabbed the broom with one hand and grabbed Harry around the waist with the other.

"Ready?" Harry asked. With no perceptible action that Hermione noticed, the broom suddenly soared up and away from the ground, leaving Hermione's stomach behind.

"Slow down!" Hermione yelled.

With a delicious grin, Harry steered them over to the pitch. As they arrived, the rest of the

Gryffindors waved and cheered. Harry circled around to Katie and Ron, who followed them around a lap before landing.

"Good to see you up, Harry," Katie said as they circled again, then laughed at Hermione's expression. "You should see it when it gets fast, if you can't handle this."

"I'm glad I don't play this game," Hermione said unsteadily then whooped as they dropped suddenly to chase Ginny around a lap. They sped up, the wind whipping their hair wildly.

"Hey, Harry!" Ron's voice called from the grass. He was standing next to the wooden box that held the Quidditch balls. He reached down for the latch.

"No! No!" Hermione yelled, panicked. "Don't release the snitch!"

With a malicious grin, Ron popped the top of the box and the golden snitch zipped free.

Harry tracked it with his eyes as it left the box and tipped the broom to chase it. Hermione grabbed hold harder with hands that were already tired. "Harry, not so-" She was cut off when they rolled and dodged suddenly, pressing them both hard against the broom. An instant later, Hermione had to lock her ankles tight together to keep them from pulling away from the broom as they ducked downward suddenly.

Everyone on the pitch had stopped and landed to better watch the chase. They called out encouragingly.

For an instant the snitch stood completely still, wings pulsing against the air then, as they almost reached it, it zipped upward suddenly. Again they were thrown against the broom as Harry, focused only on the snitch, followed. Hermione stopped yelling for Harry to slow down and just held on for dear life.

"Hermione," Harry yelled. "Grab the snitch!"

She looked around them as they turned in a very tight spiral dizzyingly towards the ground. The snitch was just off her right shoulder. But she would have to let go with one hand or the other.

"Grab it!" Harry encouraged as they changed course again to continue to track it.

Hermione held her breath, let go of Harry's waist and closed her hand over the snitch just as it started to dart away again. Harry rolled them out into a smooth circle. The Gryffindors were cheering wildly, and Hermione understood with a rush what it must be like to actually play and be cheered by the crowd.

She grinned happily as they landed, still clutching the fluttering thing in her fist. Her legs were shaking so badly they almost didn't hold her up and, when Ron patted her hard on the back, she would have fallen over except that Katie had hugged her right at that moment.



Hermione pushed the team captain away as McGonagall bore down on them. Their professor held out her hand for the snitch and Hermione handed it over, wincing in anticipation of a serious tirade. McGonagall looked from Hermione's wince to Harry, who was still grinning from ear to ear, and said with poorly mustered seriousness, "Don't do it again." Hermione breathed out hard in relief and smiled along with everyone.

The late afternoon arrived and so did their Defense Against Dark Arts class with the Slytherins. Harry, Ron, and Hermione wandered outside into the nearly cloudless day. Professor Grey led the way down the lawn to a flat area across from the lake. "We are going to be practicing advanced blocking spells today and, since it is a nice day, we thought to save a bit on repairs to the classroom." Grey was just about as his name suggested: medium height and build with salt-and-pepper hair.

Some of the students nudged each other and pointed behind them. Harry turned with the rest of the class and watched as Snape approached across the lawn. "Oh no," Ron moaned.



"Since this topic is Professor Snape's specialty, he is going to be teaching this section today." Grey stepped aside as Snape walked around the clustered students.

The Potions master gave them all a careful look as he passed them, then started right up. "I am going to assume you have all read the relevant chapter for today. Who can tell me what the five kinds of blocking spells are?"

Hermione resisted raising her hand since no one else had. Harry nudged her, "Go ahead," he whispered.

"Mr. Potter?" Snape prompted.

"Uh, Amorphos, Direct Counter, Shield," Harry stopped and flinched when he couldn't remember the others.

Snape gave him a dark look. "Tsk, Potter. You of all people. . . Perhaps if you didn't read so far ahead, you would remember the current lesson." Harry fought to keep from flushing. "Yes, Ms. Granger . . ." Snape said sarcastically as Hermione started to raise her hand. ". . . we know you know the answer.

"Neville?" Snape then prompted.

"Pick on the Slytherins, why don't you," Ron grouched beside them.

"Um, Cracklectric and Subterranean are the two others," Neville said.

"Well, will wonders never cease," Snape sneered.

*He's my friend too,* Harry projected at the Potions master to no apparent effect.

"Perhaps a demonstration of each before we break into pairs." Snape's eyes zeroed in on Harry. "Mr. Potter, come up here." The Slytherins murmured and watched Harry with anticipation. Harry shook his head ever so slightly. Grey stepped over and whispered in Snape's ear. "He is only going to be demonstrating blocking, Professor Grey. I am sure the Headmaster would think Harry capable of that.

"Potter, are you deaf as well as lazy?" Snape said dangerously. Harry weaved through the students up to the front with a frown. Snape's jibes rolled off him now as though they were intended for someone else, or all part of a game.

Harry positioned himself about fifteen feet from Snape and fidgeted with his wand. The faces of the Slytherins looked positively gleeful. Harry tried to tune into what Snape was saying and ignore them.

"The Direct Counter is what we have been teaching you all along, but it requires knowing what spell is being cast. The shield is the hardest to generate but the most generally useful. The Amorphos easier but not as strong. You do know the Amorphos, right, Mr. Potter?" At Harry's nod, Snape continued. "The Cracklectric and Subterranean are highly specialized, and we won't be doing those."

Harry realized that was why he hadn't remembered them--they hadn't looked very useful

and he had been combing his text for useful spells. Amorphos they had been doing in the DA, so Harry felt confident about that.

"The most important thing about casting a blocking spell is fine control. A soft block will not stop anything. Do not grip your wand too tightly as one may be wont to do during a duel." Snape held his wand up, showing his light, three-fingered grip on it. Then, in a move too blurred to follow, he pointed it at Harry as he said, "*Camtornus*." Harry jerked in surprise and put up an Amorphos block at the last moment. Several students gasped at the sudden attack. The Slytherins grinned joyously.

"Slow, Potter. Very slow," Snape commented and Harry knew he meant it. Harry calmed his breathing and kept a close eye on his professor now. "That, class, was an Amorphos block, which fortunately for Mr. Potter, can be generated very quickly." A few Slytherins snickered. Snape looked closely at the boy a moment.

Harry thought maybe he was seeing if he was up for more. Harry intentionally didn't give him any indication.

"Have you ever done a shield spell, Potter?" Snape asked, pacing away from Harry and back again.

Since Snape wasn't looking at him, Harry had to answer aloud. "No."

"The motion is like this." Snape demonstrated a wide zig-zag pattern in the air. "You want to draw raw magic around you to absorb whatever comes at you. If you are really good at it, the power of the spell resonates with itself and forms a hard dome for just an instant. So timing is important.

"Give it a try, Potter," Snape said in a low voice.

Harry swallowed and thought about the spell. For all the glee the Slytherins were getting out of this, it felt more like a private lesson. "Can you do one first?" Harry asked.

Snape bowed his head in agreement and threw both arms up in a zig zag. A milky shimmer formed around him in an arc, then disappeared. The Slytherins 'oohed.' Harry tried not to roll his eyes.

Harry relaxed and repeated the motion. In his mind he saw a flash but he didn't feel anything like resonance. He sighed.

"A little paltry," Snape commented. "I don't think that would stop anything," he said in an odd tone.

"I need a little prac-" Harry started to say, then realized Snape was throwing a spell at him, something with a lot more behind it than the last one. Harry put his arms up, wrists crossed as if to ward off a thrown object, and he pressed raw magic out from his fists where he thought the spell would hit. The intersection of the spells flashed orange. Harry pressed outward harder, forcing the shimmering dome of his block back toward his teacher. Snape moved his wand to the side when he saw this, and Harry shut off his own spell.

Harry was breathing very heavily now, and he didn't take his eyes off Professor Snape even

when he turned away from Harry to pace yet again. "What was that, Mr. Potter?"

"I don't know," Harry said. Those were usually deadly words in Snape's class. None of the students made a sound.

"Well it certainly wasn't the shield spell from the text," Snape commented. "Do you know what spell I used?" he asked him.

"No," Harry answered, wishing he had something more to say.

Snape stepped back over to him threateningly. "Then how did you know what block to put up?" Harry started to repeat himself, then decided not to answer. "Don't know that either?" Snape said in a disgusted voice but his eyes combed over Harry hard before he paced away yet again.

"Do you know what the Fourth Curse is, Mr. Potter?"

"The *Tridelntan*. It is called the Fourth Curse because if there were another Unforgivable Curse, it would be that one," Harry answered.

"Do you know what it does to its victim?" Snape asked.

"Something nasty," Harry said. The class laughed a little.

Snape answered for him. "It divides the victim into three conflicting personalities, effectively paralyzing him or her in a kind of madness." Snape stared at Harry. "Now that you know what that spell feels like. . . let's try it again."

Harry froze at that. Had Snape really used the Fourth Curse on him?

"Wait for it, Potter," Snape said, bringing Harry's attention into focus. A long pause ensued in which the students stood in stunned silence and Harry and Snape looked at each other.

Suddenly, before Snape even twitched his wand hand, Harry threw up the same blocking spell again. When nothing was forthcoming, he cancelled it.

"Very good, Potter," Snape said, and Harry flushed a little at the real pride he could hear in his teacher's voice. "Mr. Potter has what is called Spell Prescience; he can detect a spell as it is being generated and before it is cast." Snape turned to the class and Harry relaxed a little. "Anyone stupid enough to duel with Mr. Potter gets what they deserve."

"Now, break into pairs. I want you all to try those two blocking spells and review the the Direct Counters from previous classes."

"Don't I get a turn, Professor?" Harry asked. The class, which had fallen into quiet discussion of partners, stopped and turned back to them.

Snape gave Harry a doubtful look. "Potter, I am not letting you spell anyone in this class, including myself. You can partner Neville, since he will undoubtedly need more practice. And since he is a friend of yours, I am sure you will not mind."

Harry scowled a little but went over to Neville, who did appear to be partnerless.

"I am going to do a jellylegs, Harry," Neville informed him.

"You don't have to warn me, Neville," Harry pointed out.

Harry patiently demonstrated each block for Neville and then made him generate them without actually casting anything at him. Neville did very well until Snape wandered over to watch.

"Let me see the best you can give Mr. Potter, Longbottom," Snape said, standing with arms crossed and looking especially grim.

Neville screwed up his face and yelled, "*Defindios*," as he pointed his wand. Harry saw immediately that the spell was going awry. He threw up a block and extended it to cover the Slytherins paired up to the right of them. Neville's spell flared harmlessly against the oddly shaped blob of the block.

"Thanks, Harry," Neville breathed.

Snape stared at Harry, who said quietly, "He does better when you aren't nearby."

It took Snape a moment to respond. "I should hope," he said simply, and walked away to the next pair.

## **Chapter 17 A Message for Voldemort**

Harry and Hermione sat under the big tree reading their History text and taking notes. They glanced up occasionally to watch Ron as he ran keeper drills. Katie yelled at Ginny to stay out of the beaters' way when they were running a formation.

"Mr. Potter." McGonagall stepped over to them. Her face looked grim, as though she strongly disagreed with something. "The headmaster wishes to see you."

Harry scratched his nose and collected up his book and papers. "Can I come?" Hermione asked, her protective instinct kicking in. McGonagall shrugged in an irritated way. "The more the merrier, Ms. Granger," McGonagall replied in a voice that made it clear she believed the opposite.

They trooped after her over the lawn to the castle and up to Dumbledore's office. The Headmaster was standing behind his desk when they stepped off the escalator. Snape stood beside the desk, hands clasped before himself.

"There is a . . . situation at the Ministry," Dumbledore told them in a quiet tone. "Mr. Malfoy the younger has attempted to escape from his confinement, undoubtedly with some inside assistance." He stopped and took a long breath. "Unfortunately, in his desperation to avoid recapture, he has taken a hostage." At their frightened, uncertain faces he plowed on. "He has Mrs. Weasley at wand-point. She had the misfortune to be visiting her husband while Mr.

Malfoy was loose."

"So we can go over there and help, right?" Harry asked. Dumbledore didn't reply immediately; he just studied Harry over the top of his spectacles. Harry's face went hard at that. "Look, she is the closest thing to a mother I have-" he cut himself off.

Dumbledore's shoulders sagged a little and he reached down into a cupboard and took out his portkey teapot. "Yes, Mr. Potter, we understand that. Also, among Mr. Malfoy's demands of a broom and a portkey was you."

"You can't let Harry fall into Malfoy's trap, sir," Hermione exclaimed to Dumbledore.

"It's all right, Hermione," Harry said gently. As he watched Dumbledore prepare the portkey, he suddenly felt a great release, as though he had just finished his last revision: clear and free.

"I'm going with him!" she insisted and grabbed ahold of Harry's arm.

"Yes," Harry said as though in a dream. He looked up at Dumbledore for confirmation. After a moment, the tall, greyed wizard replied, "Professor Snape will be going as well. As Malfoy's former mentor, I hope he can talk some sense into the boy."

"What about Ron and Ginny?" Hermione asked sharply.

"I have to confess that, at the moment, the two other members of the Weasley family who are present at the Ministry are already more than we can handle. I will gather the Weasleys and bring them when we have some resolution." The teapot whistled and, with a sad expression, he gestured for them to gather around and take hold.

Hermione stared at Harry as Dumbledore counted down. Harry's face looked almost blissful, and she didn't know at all what to think of that. With a jerk on their collective navels, they were dropped into the entry hall at the Ministry.

Mr. Weasley's colleague, Perkins, met them, breathless from running. He grabbed Harry roughly by the wrist and led them to an express elevator. "Thank Merlin you got here so fast!" he gasped. Only two paper airplane memos accompanied them on their ride down.

The doors opened and Perkins leapt out, leading his charges through a gauntlet of wizards and witches lining the corridor, who eyed their little group keenly as they rushed past. At the end of the hallway in the Mishandling of Muggle Artifacts Tea Room, Harry was pushed to the lead. Mr. Weasley's frantic gaze pierced him as he stood behind a broad wizard blocking the door.

It was Fudge who stood blocking the doorway. "They are here, Mr. Malfoy," he said stiffly. He looked back at Harry and stepped away from the door. "He insists on taking you with him as part of his conditions."

"He can take all of us then," Hermione snapped and pushed past Fudge to stay at Harry's side. Draco sat on the table, hunched over with his arm crooked around Mrs. Weasley's neck, his wand against the side of her face. Mrs. Weasley looked as though she had passed through fear into numbness some time ago. She blinked at the new arrivals and dropped her eyes in embarrassment.

"So, Potter. You at least have the decency to look like someone back from the dead," Draco drawled at him. "Where is the portkey, Minister?" Draco then demanded. His hair wasn't slicked back so well and it flopped in his face, making him look as unruly as he sounded.

"Don't do anything stupid, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said in a desperate voice.

"Shut up!" Draco shouted. "I told you not to talk. Give me your wands. Now!"

Harry and Snape handed their wands to Hermione, who added hers and handed them to Malfoy. Draco stashed them inside his robes.

"Now, Mr. Minister."

Fudge stepped forward with a shiny metal dustbin lid and a basic ministry loaner broom. He set them down on the table and stepped back to the doorway.

Harry and Hermione both stepped forward, followed closely by Professor Snape. Draco looked up sharply at his former teacher. "Yeah, you can come too. This should be fun. Pick up the portkey, Per-fesser," he said to Snape in a mocking sing song.

"Hold it over here and count it down." Draco shifted so he could reach out a little with the arm that was around Mrs. Weasley's neck. Snape held the dustbin within his reach and Draco put two fingers on it. The others touched it as well and Snape said, "Three, two, one. . ."

They were dropped into an open field in the late afternoon sun. The contrast between the weather, fresh air, and birdsong and the situation with Draco couldn't have been more stark. Draco released Mrs. Weasley, grabbed the broom and stepped away. He was laughing in a slightly insane way. He pointed his wand at Harry, who was slowly stepping toward him.

"You can't stop me, Potter," Draco laughed and had to catch his breath in his excitement. The blue of his eyes positively glowed with maniacal happiness. "I am going back to them. Where you belong!" he snarled at Snape. "You ugly traitor."

Harry had stopped just in front of Draco. In an incredibly calm, almost happy voice, Harry said, "I want you to get away, Draco."

"Wha. . .? You're a nutter," Draco said in a less outrageous voice. Harry's odd behavior was starting to sink in. When Harry took another step forward, Draco stepped back and said, "You haven't got a wand, Potter."

"So?" Harry said, almost dreamily.

Draco's eyes jumped around the rest of the assemblage, trying to figure this out. He shifted his grip on the broom, clearly thinking it was time to leave.

"I want you to give Voldemort a message for me," Harry said before Draco could move.

Draco brought his gaze back to Harry. "Oh, yeah. And what would that be?"

Harry brought up his hand, fingers spread, and slowly brought them together. Malfoy jerked

and twisted with an expression of surprise and terror on his face. After a few seconds, Harry dropped his hand, sending Malfoy to his hands and knees. "That," Harry said. "*Accio wands*," Harry said and the wands inside Malfoy's pocket zipped to his fingers along with Malfoy's own wand.

While Malfoy was down, Professor Snape stepped over beside Harry. "We should take him back in," he said.

Malfoy, surprised to be released so soon, looked up sharply.

"No. Let him go," Harry said. Snape didn't offer anything further, just frowned at the blonde boy. Draco stared in stunned horror at both of them, at Snape apparently following orders from Harry. He gathered his things from the ground, staggered to his feet, and stared at them hard another long moment and swallowed nervously. Harry gazed calmly back at him, resisting the urge to wave goodbye. Finally, Malfoy took off at a run and mounted his broom.

Hermione, followed by Mrs. Weasley, came over to them. "Oh, Harry," Hermione said. "Don't become like them," she pleaded. She grasped the sleeves of his robe first, then relented and hugged him.

"There isn't any choice, Hermione," Harry said calmly. He patted her shoulder a few times since that seemed like a good idea. She released him and stared at him with a tragic look.

"What did you and that school do to this boy?" Mrs. Weasley asked sharply of Professor Snape. Snape turned away from her. With a huff she said, "Let's get back," and headed toward the dustbin lid. Hermione followed her a few steps, then looked back. She couldn't shake the impression that Snape, who was standing just to the side and behind Harry, was there as a kind a backup.

Snape turned and watched with Harry as Malfoy became an increasingly small black dot in the bright sky.

Harry said quietly to him, "I feel like I could take on Voldemort right now and win. Is that a mistake?"

Without taking his eyes from the spot where Malfoy just faded out, Snape replied. "I think you are powerful enough, but you do not have enough knowledge."

A wren flitted past, diving and swooping almost erratically.

"Teach me," Harry said to him.