

Title: Resonance

Author: Salamander/GreenGecko (AKA Marie Williams)

Site: Darkirony.com

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

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

Author's Notes:

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

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

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

Two sequels have been written: Revolution and Resolution.



Chapter 1 - Year Six, Easter

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

--Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

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

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

"More tea?" Ron asked him.

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Harry!" Hermione whispered sharply, chastising him.

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hagrid!" Ron pounded on the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," Ron said, his voice breaking.

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

"Where is he?"

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

"Hagrid?" Ron insisted, pained.

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

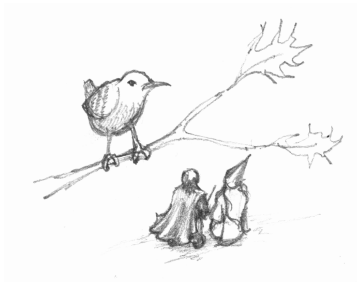
"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't think . . ." He frowned miserably.

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

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

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

Face scrunched up, Ron stomped after Hagrid.



Chapter 2 - A Long Bitter Night

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

"Unless there were more than two of them."

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Severus, give me a hand with him."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry grinned lightly at his headmaster through his many aches.

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

"Most impressive, Albus," Snape said.

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

"Harry," Dumbledore chastised him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Potter? What spells were used on you?"

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

"Crucio?" Snape asked.

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

"Perhaps some of the potion?" Dumbledore suggested.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The curse?" Snape asked in surprise.

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

"What did you shout?" Snape asked carefully.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not precisely," Snape admitted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry couldn't bring himself to argue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Chapter 3 - St. Mungo's

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What was used on him?" Shankwell asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Snape shook his head.

"Can I leave?" Harry then asked.

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

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

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

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

"Shankwell," Harry replied.

"Do you have his release form?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Apparently not," Snape said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where is Ron?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

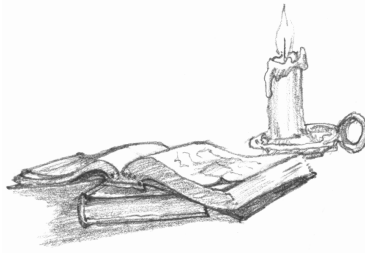
Dumbledore called Harry over as they all stood up when the meal was over. The old wizard put a hand on his shoulder and leaned down to say, "Madame Pomfrey wants to be certain you return to the hospital wing for the night."

"Yes, sir."

"And how are you doing?"

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

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



Chapter 4 - Restless and Sleepless

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Leave him alone," Ron said stiffly.

"I was only kidding him," Cho said.

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

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

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

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

"Like what kinds of transfigurations?" Dean asked.

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

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

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

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

"You can work on that," Harry said.

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't think so."

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

"They tortured me for hours," Harry said.

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

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

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

"No."

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

Harry scoffed at that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He is capturing a wizard who knows."

"Does Dumbledore know this?" Harry demanded.

"Yes, Master."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry related the whole thing for him.

"Blimey. The Dark Lord-"

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

"It just sounds better than-"

"His name is Voldemort," Harry said harshly.

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

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

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

"Thanks, Ron," Harry retorted sarcastically.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Go," Snape ordered him.

Ron ran off to catch up to his friend.

* * *

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

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

"Good job, Harry," Neville said.

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

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

* * *

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

"Mr. Potter!"

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

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

"Harry?" Hermione asked in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course."

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

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

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

"Hermione said Snape gave you a potion."

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

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

* * *

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Chapter 5 - Meeting Destiny

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Voldemort is downstairs."

"Shit!" Someone exclaimed as everyone gasped.

"Harry, you were dreaming," Hermione insisted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

"No," Harry quipped, recovering himself.

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

"Yes," Harry replied.

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

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

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

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

"Did you do this?" Tonks asked Harry.

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

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

"What?" Harry blurted, stunned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir," Harry acknowledged quietly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"From what point?"

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

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

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

"A nap?" Percy asked in disbelief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry nodded, hiding his relief with great effort.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell that to Professor Snape," Harry said.

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

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

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

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

"No," Harry replied.

"Not at all? Not a scratch?"

Harry shook his head.

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

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

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

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

"Haf you used it before?"

"No."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ginny had turned bright red and stared at the ceiling.

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

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

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

"There has to be one," she insisted.

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



Chapter 6 - Aftermath

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

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

"Professor," Harry said a little sleepily.

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

"What time is it?"

"Six-thirty."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ma'am?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry took this cue and started devouring his plate.

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry blinked at him in surprise. "Victor?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Please, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A minister is," Dumbledore pointed out mildly.

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

"Yes," Harry replied dryly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, definitely."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

Much conversation followed this announcement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You are," Ron said in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ron is Gryffindor captain," Harry pointed out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell everyone else that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

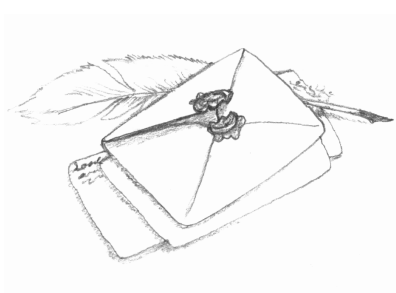
"One is . . . similar," she said. "The other just exceptionally well written."

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

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

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

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



Chapter 7 - Unexpected Offers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

"Hermione," Harry said, chastising her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reluctantly, Harry admitted, "Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

Harry shrugged. "Your House, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Potter," Snape threatened to make him continue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry laughed. "I hadn't noticed."

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

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

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

Harry sighed. "I'll try."

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

"Yes."

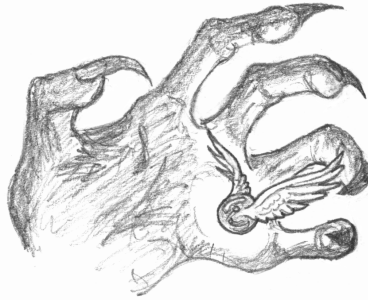
"If it happens again, Professor McGonagall wants you banned from the Quidditch match."

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

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

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

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



Chapter 8 - The Big Match

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

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

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

"Yeah."

"Nightmare?"

"Yep."

"Have any more potion?" Ron suggested.

"No," Harry said.

"Too late to get more?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And?" she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Snape's entire demeanor changed. He straightened and gave Harry a long look before gliding back into his office. Harry and Neville stepped just inside the door to wait. Snape closed a low cabinet and examined a small bottle in his fingers. Harry could see a large grimoire open on Snape's desk. Two lamps were lit to read by. Snape stepped back over with the bottle held out, then retracted it at the last moment as if reconsidering.

"Mr. Longbottom, leave us alone for a minute," Snape said, putting his hand on the door.

Neville glanced at Harry to verify that this was all right, then stepped out. Snape shut the door and kept his hand on it. "What is in your nightmare?" he asked.

Rambling in a tired way, Harry replied, "I'm being chased through a world a lot like the vision, which I haven't had again, by the way. But it isn't the same, really. I think I am just dreaming something like the vision. But I won't fall back to sleep, and I sorta want to be awake for the only Quidditch match of the year." He waited as Snape studied him with his dark eyes. Harry wondered idly why McGonagall hadn't asked what his nightmare was about or worried what his strange vision meant.

Snape held out the bottle.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said honestly as he pocketed it. "It isn't going to be much fun anyway--McGonagall insisted on adding a sticking spell to my broom." Harry immediately thought better of that. "Please don't tell any of the students in your house, sir. I'd never hear the end of it," he added tiredly.

Snape shook his head once. "No one has probably told you this, Potter. But there are those who are certain the remaining Death Eaters are determined to take revenge upon you."

"That wouldn't be too surprising. What else do they have?" Harry thought for a moment. "But we are still having the match. Why?"

Snape raised a brow at him. "Because Dumbledore is determined to cheer you up. That and forty Ministry wizards will be there on guard. I think they are actually hoping the event will draw out the remaining seven, although personally I would consider it a very unwise way of going about it."

Harry tried to imagine Pettigrew showing up at the match, his metal arm glinting in the sunlight. It didn't seem very likely.

Snape went on. "The insistence on the sticking charm probably has less to do with your propensity to phase out than the inherent risk of getting hit with a spell at a great height."

Harry thought that over. "You are being nicer to me," he commented. At Snape's doubtful look, he added sadly, "All I've ever wanted was to know what was going on."

Snape crossed his arms and straightened his shoulders. "I am not one to bury truths simply because they are unsavory or negative."

Harry started to reply then thought better of it. Instead, he reached for the door handle to leave.

"Yes, Potter?" Snape challenged him, quickly putting his hand on the door to hold it closed.

"I was going to say that you look for the unsavory and negative, but I wasn't sure if that was a fair thing to say, so I wasn't going to say it," Harry explained. "Sir."

Snape removed his hand and re-crossed his arms. "You would best go if you are going to get much sleep."

As Harry opened the door, he muttered, "Thank you, sir."

Neville stood, leaning against the far dungeon wall. He pushed away from it as the door opened. "Professor," he said quietly.

Snape gave him a curt nod and closed the door. At the end of the corridor, Neville asked, "What did he want?"

"He wanted to know what my nightmare was about," Harry explained, feeling hurt again by McGonagall's reaction to his asking her for help.

"Did he know what it meant?"

"Not that he said. I don't think it means anything except that I'm keyed up for the match." Harry fingered the bottle in his pocket as they walked, reassured by the distinctive shape of the warm glass.

* * *

The crowd cheered as they flew out onto the pitch. They especially cheered when Harry's name was announced, making him think that more visitors were in the stands than normal. The seats did look rather full. Harry paced Malfoy around in a wide circle as Madam Hooch gave them all the usual warnings. For once, Malfoy remained silent as he looked over the players on both teams, his mouth grim.

The whistle blew and the players flew into position. Huffindor, as they had called it during practice, went on offense first. Ginny and Zac looked like they would reach the goal posts easily until a Bludger, hit by Parkinson, struck the front of Ginny's broom, spinning her around several times. Zac's pass to her, just before, flew wide to be picked up by a Ravenclaw chaser.

Harry took his eyes off the game to check Malfoy's location. The other boy circled lazily, eyes alert. Harry took up the same stance, a half turn around the pitch. The crowd rose to their feet as the opposition scored. Minutes later, Zac put one through as well, tying the score. Harry glanced up at the lake as a breeze ruffled his hair. He really hoped the game went on a good long time. If he saw the Snitch and Malfoy didn't, maybe he would just pretend he hadn't.

Harry passed behind the goal posts as Ron made a save on the center, which unfortunately went right back into the hands of a Slytherin, who tossed it behind his back and through the left hoop. Harry returned to looking for the Snitch.

Malfoy made a dive. Harry changed course but not severely, refusing to be fooled. Apparently it was nothing or a dodge, because the blonde boy returned to his earlier altitude. Harry watched Malfoy as he climbed; he was too big to be a seeker, really. He probably would not be next year. Maybe he wouldn't be on the Slytherin team at all. That thought cheered Harry quite a lot.

The game went on. It was sixty to thirty against. The crowd had quieted, chants gathering steam only occasionally. Malfoy seemed to be getting anxious: he circled faster, looking around himself with more turns of his head. Harry, though he wasn't impatient yet, could not just let Malfoy win. He cut Malfoy off and took up a position just ahead of him. Malfoy zipped past him with a nasty look, brushing Harry's shoulder with the tail of his broom. The bristles were sharp and tore at his sleeve and rasped his skin. Annoyed, Harry considered ducking under Malfoy to pass again. He didn't get the chance; a green haze filled his eyes, making it hard to see. Harry curved away sharply, making the opposing Seeker turn to see why.

Harry circled in the opposite direction, occluding his mind to shake the vision, grateful now that he didn't have to worry about falling from his broom if he lost himself to it completely. A cold wind lifted his scarlet cloak, making him shiver. It felt like a breeze from deep in the forest. He turned again at random, crossing the pitch the short way to pace beside Malfoy as he circled. Dimly, he heard the crowd cheer another goal. Another breeze chilled him, and this time it didn't feel so much from the forest as from a crypt.

Heart pounding fiercely, Harry looked out across the lawn toward the forest, green haze coming and going from his vision. Malfoy cut him off. Harry dodged instinctively to avoid him. In his mind, the black spiked ball was very close, reaching hungrily with its limbs as though to enclose him. With great effort, Harry drew in a breath and shook his head.

The crowd was shouting. Harry saw Malfoy turn suddenly to cut him off again. The Snitch hovered just on Harry's right, its gold fluttering wings penetrating the veil over his vision. He started toward it, his limbs felt numb and cold as he stretched out his hand. The Snitch dodged farther right, increasing Harry's advantage. Malfoy ducked down to get around Harry, betting the Snitch, already high, would dart lower.

Fear gripped Harry in that moment as he realized his green vision corresponded to the real world and that the spiked shadow was behind him, for real. He turned his broom sharply the other way and stared out over the lawn leading to the forest. It was closer yet, approaching from that side.

"Oh, no," McGonagall said, putting her hand over her forehead. "We shouldn't have let him play."

Dumbledore murmured a spell and stared intently at Harry.

The crowd roared and groaned. In the back of his mind, Harry assumed that Malfoy had captured the Snitch. It felt to Harry like the world was ending, but not because of the match. Shaking now, Harry raced to the top box. "Something is coming," Harry shouted and pointed toward the forest.

Dumbledore moved to the front of the box. "Harry, what is it?"

"I don't know. Get everyone inside, sir. Hurry." His hands visibly trembled as they clutched the broom handle.

Dumbledore didn't hesitate. With a *Sonus* charm, he announced that everyone was to evacuate to the castle immediately. The ministry wizards gathered below the box. Tonks yelled up to Harry, "What is it?"

Harry gasped and glanced fearfully over his shoulder again.

"Harry, get inside, now," Dumbledore ordered him.

Shaking his head to clear his vision, Harry recognized the grip on his heart. The teachers were at the edge of the box now, cajoling him to move. "I feel it," Harry said. "Do you?"

The teachers shook their heads. "Harry!" Dumbledore shouted at him, angry now.

In his vision the ball now appeared as hundreds of separate things, each moving forward, forming a streaming pack. Glowing points of light appeared here and there. He wondered what they were. Ron and Ginny came alongside him then, hovering easily. Harry pulled out his wand. "Dementors," Harry said.

Everyone looked to the empty lawn where Harry pointed. "How many?" Ron asked.

"All of them," he replied darkly.

The stands were half empty. Harry watched the line of people moving toward the castle doors. The black figures separated, spreading that way. "They aren't going to make it," Harry said. He felt freed up now, less numb. "They are supposed to be after me, but they are getting distracted."

Ron and Ginny zipped off, collecting a D.A. member each off the stands and flying to the line now running to the castle. Tonks and the ministry wizards saw this as well and instructions went out to protect the path to safety.

"Harry," Dumbledore said in a stern tone as he leaned over the edge of the nearby railing.

Harry looked Dumbledore in the eye and shook his head. He flew the other way, trying to draw the Dementors off. He could see them in his mind, and apparently now others could feel them because some were starting to panic. Ron, Ginny, and ten other D.A. members had lined up over near the steps. Patroni circled them. Harry could see dark figures shifted to avoid them, but there were far too many Dementors, more than Harry imagined existed. Ministry wizards joined the students. They appeared to be arguing.

Some of the Dementors had fallen for his ruse, but most hadn't. Harry swooped down and landed near the lake, as far from the castle doors as he could get. The black swarm in the green world shifted toward him nearly as a whole. Harry's limbs went numb again immediately. He readied the Patronus charm in his mind, but held off; he wanted to attract them, not repel them.

The teachers were coming across the lawn after him. Snape caught up with him first. He started to chastise Harry, then paused and looked around himself in concern.

"Feel them?" Harry asked. "There are hundreds of them."

"Your vision?"

"Guess so," Harry answered. "You should be helping with the crowd. I can get away on my broom," Harry said as McGonagall, Sprout, and Dumbledore joined them. He may have been lying; he couldn't feel his fingers holding the broom handle. "Now we're all surrounded," he argued.

The teachers had their wands out; they turned slowly, checking for any targets.

"They're waiting for something," Harry said. The crowd was almost all inside the castle now. "Do you have a really good Dementor spell, sir?" he asked the headmaster. Dumbledore didn't reply, just moved his head as though listening for something.

Deciding it was almost too late, since he could no longer feel his hand clutching his wand, Harry cast a Patronus. The stag immediately faltered, kicking up on its hind legs. McGonagall followed suit--a tiger joined the stag, stalking hunch-shouldered in a tight circle around them. Snape held his wand before him, but did not cast anything. Harry wondered if maybe he was not capable of it.

"Harry, I need to see them," Dumbledore said. He lifted Harry's chin with his finger and stared into his eyes. After a breath, he said, "My dear boy, I cannot believe you placed yourself here, given what you see."

"I was trying to draw them off," Harry explained, pointing at the crowd now trickling in the door, some being carried.

"Yes, but Harry, you should have some desire for self-preservation." Cold swept through them all at that moment. "My friends," Dumbledore said to the teachers, "we are in serious trouble here."

The teachers looked very alarmed at that.

"They want me. Just go," Harry said, stepping back away from them. His back prickled with cold as he did this; hope drained from him. Sprout and Snape grabbed hold of him and pulled him back into the middle of their small circle. They did not let go. Harry had thought his arms were numb, but pain shot through his wrists from their tight grip.

The Ministry wizards were splitting up now. Some stayed to guard the doors and many started in their direction, but hesitated. "I don't want anyone to get hurt," Harry muttered, watching Tonks in the group fighting in their direction as though invisibly repelled.

"What are they waiting for?" Snape snarled. "If there are so many of them . . . "

The air wavered in grey wisps as though the Dementors considered becoming corporal. Harry froze. "They're confused," he whispered. He closed his eyes, trying to find the figures in his mind.

"Harry, be careful," Dumbledore warned him.

The wind in his mind sounded this time like harsh breathing. The teachers around him gasped and he felt them shuffling in closer. Harry did not dare open his eyes--he had a hold of something in his mind, something very hungry. He felt betrayal as well from the mass presence. "They were promised a feeding," Harry said. "They don't understand their instructions anymore."

Hands fell on Harry's shoulders and held them. "Keep your eyes closed, Harry," Dumbledore ordered. Harry heard shouting in the distance and spells being cast. The press of bodies around him grew tighter, which blocked the cryptic breeze from reaching him, although he could smell it. "Can you make them leave?" Dumbledore asked. Harry could hear in his voice a straining to make that question sound reasonable.

Harry grinned painfully, "How would I go about that, sir?" The combined sound of hundreds of Dementors all pressing in close, lungs rattling, bones clunking, made Harry squeeze his eyes shut harder. He didn't need to see it, he could imagine it well enough.

"Renegotiate," Snape stated.

"I already offered them me in exchange for you, but you wouldn't leave," Harry quipped. His fear had grown old and no longer gripped him so tightly, leaving him reckless.

"Not acceptable, Harry," Dumbledore said in a hard tone. The sound of the ministry wizards battling toward them grew louder.

"I've had to say we aren't with them," Harry pointed out.

"Good plan," Sprout offered shakily. Harry had never heard her frightened before.

Harry delved into the vision again, using his anger growing up with the Dursleys to enter it. He sensed an offer to consume these Muggles in revenge and denied it, reflexively afraid to even dwell on the possibility, even fancifully. The web, active and surging during the offer, fell quiescent, waiting. Harry realized they had more patience in them than he would have imagined. Not today, Harry thought at them, trying to seem authoritative. He had a feeling they had stopped to negotiate because they sensed Dumbledore may have the power to give them something more, or that he did.

Harry relaxed a little more and tried to feel his way through the vision. The Dementors found his access to their web interesting. Only the Dark One had spoken to them thusly in a very long time.

"What are Dementors?" Harry asked.

"What do you mean?" McGonagall asked.

"Are they real, I mean natural?"

"They are a very old wizard creation, Harry. Magical guards spawned to protect treasure in ancient times." Dumbledore provided this. Harry could hear fatigue in his voice. The ministry wizards sounded farther away.

"I'm going to try something, in that case," Harry said.

"Be very very careful, my boy." Dumbledore's hands tightened on his shoulders.

Harry reached out in his mind and reconnected one of the broken strands before him. The web shuddered and glitter flashed around it. Something shifted in the real air around him as well.

"What did you do, Harry?" Dumbledore asked carefully.

"I'm negotiating," Harry said slowly. "Can you call off the Ministry?"

* * *

"Harry?" Hermione's voice roused him and he opened his eyes to the darkness of the hospital wing.

"You are insane, Harry," Ron said earnestly. "Completely effing insane."

Harry laughed at him as memory flooded through him. "I couldn't think of anything else to do," he said in a hoarse voice.

"What *did* you do?" Hermione asked. "The Dementors just left. *Poof!* And the teachers had to carry you up here."

Pomfrey stepped over, glanced over him, and walked out. She stepped down the corridor, down the stairs and into the staff lounge. "He's awake," she stated to those assembled.

"Lucid?" Dumbledore asked.

"Rather," she replied.

Dumbledore shook his head in amazement and rose to his feet. The staff followed him out and up to the dispensary.

Harry looked up as they entered and came over. Most of them hesitated too get close, or seemed to. Dumbledore stepped up beside the bed next to Hermione. He sighed when he saw Harry's bright eyes. "So, Harry . . . what happened?"

"I gave them something so they would leave," he replied factually, then cleared his rough throat.

"What did you give them?" Dumbledore asked in his usual calm curiosity.

Harry glanced around at the other faces; they looked more perplexed by him now than they had after he had killed Voldemort. "Um, I'm not sure how to explain it. And . . . I'm not sure it was a good idea . . ."

Dumbledore shot him a very intense look, then calmed. "We were afraid, Harry, that you had still given them yourself."

"I didn't need to. And I've cut myself off from them, so I can't see them anymore. That's the last thing I remember." He wrapped his arms around his middle as he remembered the moment they sensed his intent. Their icy minds had tried to grab hold of him; he had severed the web attaching him just in the nick of time.

Dumbledore studied him. "Everyone," he said, "please leave Harry and me alone."

With a few backward head turns, the staff departed. Dumbledore gestured at Hermione and Ron to follow. "He already told us," Ron protested.

Gently, the headmaster said, "Out with you anyway." When the room was clear, he moved to sit on the edge of the bed. "We continue to underestimate you, my dear boy." He shook his head slowly. "I never imagined so many Dementors in one place, especially never imagined surviving being surrounded by them. They truly wished to leave nothing to chance when they sent them after you during the Quidditch match."

"It was some kind of bonus deal for them--all of those victims," Harry said. "The deal was, me first, then they could take what they wanted." He waited for Dumbledore's response and went on when none was forthcoming. "Voldemort had be-

come one of them in a way by tapping into their joined minds. That is what I was seeing. He punished them until they did what he wanted. Tore the web of their minds apart, which made them crazier I think, or at least more desperate." He paused again. Dumbledore sat patiently without comment.

"I fixed the web that I could reach. That was the deal," Harry said quietly.

Dumbledore raised his chin in surprise. "You were screaming at the end, Harry. Did you know that? Right before you passed out and the Dementors disappeared."

Harry flushed and cleared his throat again. "No, I didn't know. I barely got away from them. They grabbed me as I cut the strands connecting me. It was horrible, like having my soul turned to ice crystals."

"You seem all right, now."

"I feel the same as I did." He shrugged. "At least those visions will stop."

Dumbledore straightened his robes and sat back. He patted Harry's arm and sighed. "We should discuss the summer, Harry. Despite your continued cleverness, we are concerned about your safety. We want you to stay here at Hogwarts until the Ministry has apprehended the remaining Death Eaters."

"I don't have to go to the Dursleys?" Harry asked excitedly.

"In the past, we have not been here to keep watch. But with Voldemort gone, we can be more flexible. As well, the spell's effectiveness is in question with regard to your aunt's house since it was a binding upon Voldemort himself and, by proxy, his followers."

Harry felt very relieved. With a sly look, he asked, "Can I write them the letter that says I'm not coming back?"

The headmaster pulled his robes together and stood. "If you can behave yourself while doing so . . . of course."



Chapter 9 - The End of Year Six

Harry was released from Pomfrey's clutches at breakfast time, and before heading down, he had to rush back to his dormitory for a clean set of robes. By the time he had changed, the corridors were nearly empty. He came up behind Dennis, hoisting open the door to the Great Hall with some effort. Harry helped from behind and gave the younger Creevey brother a smile. Dennis nearly fell over when he saw who was behind him. He stepped aside with his mouth open and watched Harry pass. "Dennis?" Harry asked the boy. The whole large room quieted and everyone, it seemed, turned to watch him come in. Harry only now realized his mistake; by being late, he had made an entrance.

The expressions of his fellow students had shifted to quiet awe or even fear from the ecstatically impressed they had been before. Shaking his head, Harry stepped along the table to where his friends were and sat down.

"Good to see you, Harry," Ginny said when Harry greeted them all.

Plates of food appeared. The hall was a long time returning to a normal level of conversation.

After breakfast Harry took himself away from his friends to write his letter. He had originally planned on mailing it, but owl post would make more of an impression and it would arrive in time, since the train left tomorrow morning and they presumably would be expecting him. He pulled out parchment and quill and began.

*Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia,
I am writing to inform you that I won't be returning for summer holiday. I have destroyed Voldemort so I am no longer required to seek refuge with you for protection.*

He grinned at that opening. It was succinct, just the way his uncle liked it.

I don't expect to be needing anything from you in the future. I probably should thank you for the shelter and meals, although I find it hard to do that. Mum would have been disappointed, I'm sure, if she knew how low you managed to keep a bare minimum of care.

He reread the last sentence. It was as tactful as he could be while still saying what he absolutely had to; it would kill him to not say anything. He burned with an undeniable desire to put them in his past and that required getting beyond these statements.

Remember me to everyone, especially Aunt Marge.

Harry grinned maliciously at that and signed it.

* * *

The leaving feast was a loud affair. Harry declined sitting at the head table when Dumbledore offered it. He much preferred to sit with his friends before they departed on the morning train without him. His fellow students still seemed annoyingly reverent around him. Harry didn't believe Dementors were worse than Voldemort, but everyone else definitely thought so.

Dumbledore stood up and clinked his glass for attention. "Good evening to everyone. It is time to wrap up another school year. I don't think we've had a more interesting one since our Founders passed on. First off, after much complaining by the students, we have decided to award the cup based on merit points alone, so we are celebrating Ravenclaw's first house cup in over fifteen years." He waved his wand and blue banners bearing an eagle unfurled from the ceiling across the Hall. The Ravenclaw table erupted into cheers and much back beating.

Ron leaned over and said in a cheated voice, "What, he didn't give Gryffindor a thousand points for destroying Voldemort?"

"Everyone helped with that, Ron," Harry said offhandedly.

"We also have . . ." Dumbledore went on as he picked up a looped ribbon with a medal attached and glanced at it briefly. "Not one . . ." He lifted another identical medal and draped both over his gnarled hand. ". . . but two awards for special service to the school for . . ." He pretended to read the name off the medal. ". . . one Harry Potter."

Even louder cheering broke out, startling Harry. Ron and Hermione pushed him out of his seat and gave him a shove toward the front of the hall. Students reached out to slap his arms as he walked up. He mounted the platform beside the headmaster and stared at the edging on the old wizard's bright blue robes as the cheering continued. Out of the side of his eye, he could see the teachers behind the table all standing and clapping as well.

Dumbledore draped each medal over him. They felt heavy as they bumped his breastbone. Harry held one up to look closer. It had his name inscribed in a flourishing script. "Thank you, sir," Harry said as he finally met the headmaster's gaze and accepted the offered handshake.

"You deserve much more, Harry," Dumbledore said. He patted Harry on the shoulder and gave him a nudge in the direction of his seat. "Unless you have something to say?"

"No, sir," he replied quickly. As he walked back to his seat, the Gryffindor table remained standing until Harry sat down. "All right. That will get annoying if it continues," he commented loudly.

"One for the Dementors, I take it," Ron said with his mouth full, as he eyed Harry's medals.

Harry slipped them off. Hands reached out to look at them. He handed them away without care and served himself mashed potatoes. Had he been looking at the staff table at that moment, he might have seen Professor McGonagall elbow Professor Snape.

* * *

The next morning, Harry waved the train away from Hogsmeade station. It felt very strange to do so. As the train rounded the bend and disappeared, except for the plume of steam blooming over the trees, Harry headed back up to the castle with Hagrid.

As they rounded the lake with Hagrid taking extremely slow steps in deference to Harry, the half-giant said, "I have teh go inter Diagon Alley for some things. I asked Dumbledore if'n I can take you along. But he said 'no.'"

"Thanks for asking, though," Harry said.

Hagrid put a hand on Harry's shoulder as they walked. "You amazed everyone this time, Harry. You really did."

"Why? Voldemort was much worse. Why is everyone so impressed by the Dementors? I don't get it."

"I think it was a matter o' being tha' on top o' He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named tha' is getting teh people. They don' know what teh expect nex'. Everyone knew you could do in the other bloke--you'd done i' before. No one saw this one coming."

Harry hung around with Hagrid for a while as he re-sewed his massive boot, watered the pumpkin patch, and mixed meat scraps with chicken blood for the Thestrals then set the buckets of it in the sun to ripen and congeal.

Hagrid wiped his bloody hands on his thick leather apron before pulling it off. "Well, Harry, gotta run. I's lunchtime anyway--yeh best be getting up to the castle."

Harry studiously avoided glancing at the dark buckets again as he departed since he was hoping to enjoy lunch. The lawn was teeming with crickets as he walked and the sun was even warmer today than it had been all school year. That seemed promising.

The Great Hall was alight inside from the tall windows. A few owls were just flying back out the upper open panes as Harry made his way to the end of the Hufflepuff table where the staff were seated. A place seemed to have been saved for him at the end, beside Dumbledore and across from McGonagall. With casual hellos all around, Harry slid onto the bench. Everyone was already eating, so he served himself a small chicken pie and ignored the salad and pea soup. The filling of the pie was hot, so he nibbled along the crust before dropping it back onto his plate to cool.

"Are you going to find things to occupy yourself without your friends here?" McGonagall asked.

"I expect so, Professor," Harry replied flatly. He wasn't feeling too congenial about her still. A subtle shifting happened around the table as though everyone sensed his mood. Harry realized that, while the subtle went completely unregarded by his friends, the teachers were acutely aware of it.

McGonagall eyed him, then went back to eating her soup. Snape leaned forward from two seats down and asked airily, "Nightmares all over, Potter?"

Harry paused in cutting into the hard crust of his pie with the edge of his fork. Last night hadn't been dream-free by any means. The same hazy world with a few slithering shadows had woken him twice despite whatever potion Pomfrey had forced on him, but no web and no wind. "Not exactly," he said thoughtfully.

Groans, sighs and one dropped fork accompanied this revelation. "Should I simply have said 'yes'?" Harry asked the headmaster.

"Not if isn't true," Dumbledore replied as he gave his staff a disapproving once-over.

"You have something else for us, Potter?" McGonagall asked with more than a hint of chastisement.

"I don't know, ma'am," Harry replied quietly. He took a bite of his pie despite not feeling very hungry anymore. After finishing half, he really wasn't hungry. He stood up. "May I go, sir?" Harry asked the headmaster.

"Of course, Harry."

He walked quickly out of the hall even though he had no place to be. His footsteps echoed much more than usual. On automatic, he started up the Grand Staircase and headed for the Gryffindor tower. In the middle of the corridor, he changed his mind. He had an inkling that McGonagall was going to come looking for him, at least part of him hoped she would, even though he didn't feel like talking to her. He ran through the list of likely places she would look next, like the library and courtyard. Turning around, he headed for the staircase to the dungeon.

The dungeon corridors were studiously quiet and cool, even on such a warm day. Harry wandered all the way to the end, past the classroom and the entrance to the Slytherin common room. He had never come down this far. Around the corner were more doors that had no labels so he assumed they were storage. A tall, dusty, glass trophy case sat at the turn in the corridor. On the top shelf was a large mahogany plaque with small gold fixtures for every year Slytherin had won the house cup. This was a Slytherin-only duplicate of one in the trophy room that Harry himself had been forced to polish during various detentions.

Harry bent over to peer at the other awards on the lower shelves. There was a medal from 1423 to one Mathias Prior from a town in Hungary for removal of a plague of fire locusts. Harry thought the Slytherins were stretching it a bit if that was the best they could scrounge up. Beside that was a row of trophies for best in show at a biannual 1600s Quid-ditch festival. Harry wondered if they still held it; that sounded like fun. On the end, partially behind the base of the last trophy, was a medal for special services to the school. The name, inscribed in staid block lettering, was Tom Riddle.

"Goes to show," Harry muttered to himself. As he crouched to study the very bottom shelf, footsteps sounded in the preceding corridor. Harry held still as he heard a door open and the footsteps fade. The door didn't close. He assumed it was Snape going into his office. If he didn't close his door, Harry might have to sneak past with a Disillusionment spell when he wanted to leave.

The bottom shelf held two short silver staffs with large gems on top. They didn't appear to have any labels. More footsteps approached and stopped.

"Have you seen Potter?" Harry heard McGonagall say. He held his breath to listen better.

"No," was the reply just audible from inside Snape's office.

"If you see him—"

"In the extremely unlikely event of him showing up in my office, I will certainly do so," Snape interrupted blandly. He sounded unhappy at being disturbed. Harry's lips quirked at the thought of showing up right after McGonagall left.

"Apparently, he has a bee in his bonnet about something," McGonagall commented in an annoyed tone.

"That is . . . phenomenally caustic," Snape said, making Harry's brow furrow until he heard the dull thunk of a bottle being put back down. He grinned a bit more at hearing McGonagall getting the same treatment from the Potions master as any student.

"I've looked everywhere likely," McGonagall said, half to herself.

"I doubt he has left the castle. He seems to have learned something akin to obedience in the last few months."

Harry growled at that and tried to think of ways to prove that wrong in the coming days.

"Albus seems to think it critical that I speak with him," she sighed, sounding like she had other things to do. Harry frowned, feeling stung yet again.

"It is unusual for you to have a problem with Mr. Potter," Snape observed.

Her feet paced the length of the room and her voice was harder to hear. "I think he is angry that I turned him away the night before the match. Wanted me to come down here to get a potion from you." She said this as though it were very difficult to believe.

"He did come down," Snape commented. "He didn't tell you why he needed it?"

"Said he was having a nightmare," she said dismissively.

"Yes," Snape said in an oddly mild tone. "I believe that was the one where he dreamed he was trapped in a web of the Dementors' minds."

In a defensive tone, she said, "How was I to know he was dreaming about that? Goodness . . . he told you?"

"I asked. And I feel compelled to point out that his dreams are usually significant. I was reading Diogenes' *Treatise on Visions and Other Disturbances of the Conscious* when Potter knocked. I was trying to find a reference to web-like visions." Harry blinked at that, remembering the large grimoire.

McGonagall countered, "What was I supposed to do? Usher him into my office and give him a cup of cocoa? Pat him on the head and insist it will be all right?"

Harry, tired of crouching, stood up and stared unseeing at the house cup plaque. McGonagall ranted on. It sounded as though she was pacing in shorter laps. "Just as well the boy doesn't have parents--the things that happen to him . . . the worry alone would kill anyone. He faced down Voldemort for Merlin's sake. He doesn't need to be coddled. I assumed if I asked him his dream, he wouldn't tell me anyhow."

Snape spoke then. "His dream would not have been significant to you, since I am quite certain he didn't tell anyone but myself about his vision. I was rather surprised to find that no one had spoken to him at all, not even his Head of House." There was silence for a long moment before Snape continued in a slightly harder tone. "Minerva, he attacked the Dark Lord, *with his mind*. I cannot conceive of it. That is akin to bathing in maggot-infested rotting flesh."

Harry straightened in surprise then thought, *It wasn't that bad*.

Snape was still going. "After this, the boy mopes around the castle, clearly hurting, and when I pull him into my office because he is having a vision in the middle of my class, I find that no one has spoken to him about the battle, let alone his visions." Harry held his breath again, his emotions confused.

With a hint of accusation McGonagall asked, "Did you?"

"It isn't my place. As well, it isn't even slightly within the realm of my abilities."

McGonagall sighed. "I guess Albus should have done it. He mistakenly believes Harry needs extensive space to work things out on his own, and I don't think that's true. Maybe it was never true. He persists in his belief that, if the boy has a problem, he will come to him."

Yeah, if I knew the password, Harry thought.

McGonagall sighed. "I just thought it ridiculous he couldn't come down and retrieve his own potion." She paused. Footsteps scuffed across the floor. Harry envisioned her confronting Snape. "You are one to talk about how he should be treated. You are the one who has made certain the boy cannot stand the sight of you."

Harry strained to hear Snape's response, but nothing was forthcoming. His shoulders drooped in disappointment.

"Well, if you do see him," McGonagall repeated in frustration as footsteps sounded in the hallway now.

Harry waited what seemed like a long time, but was probably only ten minutes, before he ventured back around the corner and peered in Snape's doorway. His teacher sat at his desk, one finger pressed against his forehead as he sorted through a stack of parchments. He showed no reaction as he glanced up at the doorway. "Potter," he said flatly in a sort of greeting.

"Sir," Harry said, thinking quickly of a topic. "You shouldn't have exams to mark," he said in reference to the parchments.

"No. One advantage of the headmaster's rather generous edict." He picked up the top sheet and squinted at the heading. "I have been sent the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. Potions essays from Durmstrang. Seems they lost the three wizards qualified to grade them in a battle with some of the Dark Lord's supporters."

"Oh," Harry said. He had already started to forget about that for hours or even a day at a time.

"Professor McGonagall is looking for you, by the way."

"Oh?" Harry said again, this time in forced surprise. He glanced around the room. "Guess I should go see her," he said a little reluctantly.

Snape was leaning over the parchments, which made his hair fall over his eyes. He looked up at Harry through it. "Still having nightmares?"

Harry shrugged.

"Meaningful?"

"Don't know, sir."

Snape dipped his quill and made a notation on the top parchment. "Let me know if you need more potion."

"I will, sir," Harry said, his emotions confusing him more. He stepped to the doorway. "I'm dismissed, sir?"

"You came in voluntarily, as I recall," Snape pointed out evenly.

"Right. See you at dinner, Professor."

Harry wandered slowly up to McGonagall's office. Her door was open as well. He wondered if that were always true when the students weren't around. Maybe it was just to get a better breeze from the window. Knocking on the doorframe brought her head up from the filing drawer she had been bent over.

"Mr. Potter, come in."

"I was told you wanted to see me." Harry hoped she had told more teachers than Snape.

"Yes." She put the folder she had pulled on top of the cabinet. "Close the door and have a seat." As Harry obeyed, she sat at her desk and clasped her hands before her. She looked more tired than he had noticed at lunch, making him feel kind of bad. He should have just answered her in an ordinary tone, and none of this would have happened. She said, "I apologize for my comment at lunch. You certainly would prefer, I know, to be free of disturbing dreams. And should you need us, we will most certainly be here for you."

Harry looked down at his hands. He felt a strange tug of war between wanting to not need them at all and wishing they would pay him a little more heed.

She went on. "The other night, had I known you were dreaming of real Dementors, I would have . . . well, I don't know what we would have done for you. But something . . . we always seem to come up with something. I certainly wouldn't have sent you off so harshly." Her shoulders fell as she finished. When he didn't respond, she prompted, "Harry?"

"Ma'am?"

She waited, then said, "And you are still having nightmares?"

"Yes," Harry replied softly.

"Do you want to tell me what is in them?"

Harry deciding that she might as well know, plunged in and said, "I'm wandering through this green haze and these shadows are--I don't know if following me is quite right--hunting me, maybe. They were there before when I was seeing the Dementors' web, but that is gone now and this isn't." She didn't have a response. Harry added, "With Professor Snape's potion, the dreams don't wake me as much, so they don't really matter."

"I suspect they still matter," she said, then added in a strained voice, "But I don't know *how* they matter."

Harry realized at that moment that much of his teachers' attitude toward him was borne of helplessness. They didn't want to deal with him because they didn't know what to do, not because he was an annoyance they would rather be free of. That made him feel a little better. He leaned forward in his chair and propped his hands on the armrests. "I'll let you know if they change or if they start to make some kind of sense," he said, hoping it would get him away.

"You do that, Harry," she said gently. She looked around herself and then reached for the file on the cabinet and opened it up. "You may go," she said when she realized he was waiting for a dismissal. She too didn't seem to think he needed to stick to protocol.

Now that he didn't need to avoid McGonagall, he headed to the tower. The common room was quiet, the grate dark. It was going to get very boring and lonely here, he realized. At least at the Dursleys he had tormentors for company. He went up to his dormitory. All of the beds but his own had been stripped of bedding and only one trunk sat at the foot of one bed, his bed. The sight was a little daunting. Over holiday break when he was here, his roommates' things still remained.

Deciding to write his friends, he pulled out a quill and a stack of parchments. Writing careful letters to every one of his friends required nearly all of the time until dinner.

He headed to the owlery, where the school owls were settled in large numbers since they were unneeded. Harry gave Hedwig Hermione's letter and coaxed eight other school owls down for the others. As the birds flew off, Harry hoped his friends didn't think it pathetic that he had nothing better to do than write them the same day they had left school. His next thought was, he hoped they all weren't so busy with summer family things that they didn't have time to write back. Harry sighed as he stared at the shafts of evening light coming into the dusty air of the owlery. He wished he had summer family things to be doing. Wished it a lot.

As he walked slowly back to the tower, he regretted not keeping Hedwig for company. He could have put her cage in his dormitory without bothering anyone.

Harry lay on his bed, staring at the inside of the canopy until the clock read six for dinner. He didn't really feel like sitting with the teachers again, but he was hungry and there wasn't anything else to do. If he didn't show up, he worried what they would think. Maybe they wouldn't notice since it wasn't subtle enough.

Rubbing grit from his eyes, he stood up. After stopping in the boy's toilet to wash up and comb his hair down, he headed for the Great Hall. The teachers were arranged almost identically as they had been before, except Tonks occupied the seat he had had earlier. He greeted the Auror warmly and received a tight hug in return. "So good to see you, Harry." She returned to her seat and her conversation with Dumbledore. Harry wandered down to the end across from Hagrid and Filch and beside Trelawney.

Harry ate quickly, stopping only to answer Hagrid's attempts at conversation. As he stood to leave, Dumbledore said, "There is pudding, Harry."

Harry took this as a strong request to stay, since there always pudding. He sat back down, flushing under the attention he had attracted with his attempted early departure.

"I hear you are having prophetic dreams, my dear boy," Trelawney said quietly. "You certainly haven't shown much promise in class, but the Sight can manifest at any time."

"They haven't been about the future, Professor, just the present."

"Ah," she said, as though that diminished his dreams considerably.

Harry had to stop himself from tapping his fingers on the table. The problem with staying for pudding was that he had to stay through everyone else finishing dinner.

"Hope yer stayin' out o' trouble," Filch said, pointing his knife at Harry--not an ordinary butter one-- but a very sharp, folding, bone-handled one he kept in his pocket and was using to cut his meat.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, feeling a little beaten down by being here.

"Ah, you'll settle in all righ', Harry," Hagrid said. Harry, never one to let Hagrid down, nodded that he agreed, even though he didn't. He couldn't get visions of all the other students--home with their parents, planning trips, playing sports, visiting friends--out of his head. His chest felt tight if he let himself dwell on it for long.

"At least I'm allowed to consider it home now," Harry commented to himself. A few eyes shifted over to him at that; Snape's dwelled on him a little longer than the others.



Chapter 10 - The Request

Harry explored the castle over the next few days. He discovered a large wooden box of blue wombats in an attic, thought of telling someone, maybe Hagrid, then decided that, since they looked pretty happy, Hagrid was probably responsible for them being there. He also discovered a secret passage that wasn't on the Marauder's Map. It led from the sixth floor landing via an old staircase and narrow passage to the Defense Classroom. One of the panels on the back wall turned open in the middle with a simple unlock spell. Harry didn't know what use it might have, but it had potential. He locked the panel with a much better locking spell before leaving the room.

This led to him pulling out the Marauder's Map to try to figure out how to edit it. His dad had helped create it while he was at school; certainly Harry could work out the magic given enough time. And time was what he had. He wrote Hermione and then, thinking more, Fred and George, to ask if they had any ideas on where to start.

While he waited, he went to the library and started reading. He read through dinner apparently, because he got to find out what happened when he did not show up for a meal. The door to the library opened suddenly and Professor Sprout put her head in, started to pull it back, then stepped in. "Mr. Potter, there you are."

Harry looked around as if that didn't make any sense.

"Just wondered where you'd got to since you weren't at dinner."

Harry glanced at the clock in surprise. "Lost track of time, ma'am," he explained.

"Very good," she brightened upon hearing that. "Well, carry on. Oh, you do know how to get to the kitchens if you want something later?"

"Yes, thank you."

She smiled at him and departed. Harry went back to reading a very interesting book on paper intelligence spells. It didn't provide anything about the Map, but he was starting to think that this book was probably the one Tom Riddle started with when he created his diary.

Harry lit a lamp and kept reading. He had had to pull over a few lamps from the other tables; it seemed like the bright days outside made it harder for him to read at night.

"Interesting reading, Harry?" Dumbledore's voice came from the darkness. He had not made a sound coming in.

"Yes, it is." Harry glanced around at the rather significant pile surrounding him. It would be hard to pretend he was reading idly.

Dumbledore stepped over and peered over his shoulder, tilting his head up to look through his half-moon spectacles. "Hm."

"I was curious how Tom Riddle created that diary," Harry said.

"Thinking of creating your own?" Dumbledore asked amiably.

Harry laughed lightly. "No sir. Just curious."

"Well, Harry you are free to keep whatever hours you wish, but given the propensity for boys of your age to keep rather late hours, you might want to at least attempt to sleep at a reasonable hour."

Harry glanced at the clock. It was just after eleven. "Yes, sir."

Dumbledore patted Harry's shoulder and departed. Long after the door to the library closed, he could feel the spot on his shoulder where the old wizard had touched him. Feeling unsettled, Harry stacked the books neatly and put a note on them for Madam Pince, even though she hadn't been at meals.

He slept well that night and woke feeling better than he had in a while. He didn't like using the potion every night: that seemed like a cheat. Reading himself into exhaustion made for a good alternative.

* * *

Harry stalled on figuring out the Map; he was too afraid to damage it to try anything really experimental. He needed to figure out a way to make a new one and that would take a lot more reading, from which he needed a break. Bored again, he wandered down to the dungeon without really thinking about where he was going.

Snape was brewing something in his office. It smelled like lemon balm. Harry knocked on the doorframe when it looked like an opportune moment. He didn't think it a good idea to startle Snape, although it occurred to him that he had never seen that happen.

"Potter," Snape said in a kind of greeting.

Despite his teacher's tone being neither inviting nor dissuading, Harry stepped in and went over to peer in the cauldron. Ground pearl dust was added in a steady stream while the liquid boiled. It turned a swirling pink.

"What is that?" Harry asked.

"Amorphous Solution."

"Oh." That was an ingredient they had used for one potion near the end of the last year.

Harry considered asking Snape if he knew anything about parchment intelligence spells but decided against it. Snape had not only seen the Map, but had been insulted by it. He might realize why Harry was asking. "You're making a lot of it," he observed to make small talk.

"There is a lot of brewing I would like to do over the summer since it looks like I will be here."

"Normally you wouldn't?" Harry asked.

"Of course not. You may enjoy considering the school home, but I do not."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "I don't enjoy it. I don't have any choice."

"One almost always has a choice," Snape stated as he drew out the stirring stick and wiped it with a rag.

Harry thought about that. He could, he supposed, consider the Burrow as his home instead. The Weasleys had certainly urged him to do so in the past. It didn't seem like two weeks in one place over sixteen years would quite qualify. Grim-

mauld Place might qualify if it had not been auctioned to some wizard from Edinburgh who may or may not have managed to remove Mrs. Black by now. He refused to go back to thinking of Privet Drive as home. He would consider any place before that.

"Gave you rather a lot to think about, apparently," Snape commented.

Harry looked up from staring into the burner flame below the cauldron. "Yes, sir," he agreed, feeling empty inside. He headed for the door, still thinking.

"Potter," Snape said, halting his departure. When Harry turned, he asked, "Still having nightmares?"

Harry nodded.

"You are not out of potion?"

"I don't use it every night," Harry explained.

"That is of course, your choice," Snape said.

* * *

Harry had a realization that night as he sat on his bed, running the Map through its paces. He had stared at the introduction so many times that he had ceased to read it. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs it listed. The thought that Pettigrew had touched the Map at some point made Harry feel unclean. But it had also been his dad's, so that overrode his desire to destroy it in a fit of pique. Padfoot and Prongs could not help him anymore but Moony might be willing to.

Heart beating a little fast, Harry pulled out a parchment and quill and wrote a letter to Lupin. He had not seen his former teacher since the Voldemort Demise Party. He had a lot to tell him, so the letter went on a long time before Harry got around to asking for help with adding a secret passage to the Map. Since he kept Hedwig in his room now, he sent the letter off right away. Hedwig gave him a friendly nip as he held her at the window. He supposed it was because she much preferred deliveries at night.

His response arrived at lunch the next day. Seeing the return address, Harry tucked the letter in his pocket rather than risk someone reading about the Map over his shoulder. He cut his lunch short and headed off with a wave at Hagrid, mostly to make sure no one thought he was testy about something.

In his room he opened the letter. Lupin's first paragraph was filled with a long series of grateful statements about Harry's success against Voldemort. He told Harry that he was working with Gringott's part time, but he couldn't say what his work was exactly. Following this he explained in detail what he knew of the Map, seemed eager to do so. He attached a list of book references, apologizing that he knew there were others Harry would need and, if he remembered them, he would pass them along.

Harry reread the letter, then quilled another one, asking specifically how easy it would be to damage the Map while he worked on it, or should he start again. Lupin's insistence that his dad and Sirius would be thrilled to know he was keeping it up to date, as amending it was something they had been diligent about, made Harry's heart twist as he wrote out the reply.

With a heavy heart, Harry sent Hedwig back off. He lay back on his bed and stared at the canopy for a lot of the afternoon.

Eventually, the list of references got him curious enough to return to the library. He had found some of the right books but not the right chapters. He settled in to read, facing the clock, so as to not miss dinner again.

* * *

"Moving?" Harry asked a few days later as he encountered Professor Snape hovering a trunk down the fourth floor corridor. Harry immediately answered his own question. "Ah, Dumbledore finally let you have the Defense teaching job."

Snape gave him a look that dared him to make further comment. Harry just shrugged. "Hermione will be disappointed, I think." He followed along as Snape took the empty trunk back to the dungeon. "Are you going to last more than a year?" Harry asked with extra innocence.

"I do intend to," Snape commented.

Harry had to walk fast to keep up once they were down the stairs. "Are you good at teaching Defense?" he asked honestly. "I need to score well on my N.E.W.T.s"

"What do you need those for? Supreme Ruler of the Wizard Universe does not have a N.E.W.T. requirement," Snape commented levelly.

Harry brushed that off. "No, but the Auror's program does."

They had reached the dungeon. Snape stepped into his office and opened the trunk in front of the next full bookcase. Harry wandered over to the low cabinets along the right-hand wall. An entire row of cauldrons bubbled away on the tops of them. "You have been busy, Professor."

"Those are the long-brew potions needed for the school's stocks. While school is in session, it is very difficult to successfully brew them; something or someone," he sneered, "inevitably happens to them." He had packed the remainder of the books away and started in on other items from the shelves. Breakables were wrapped in rags before being placed atop the books.

"Misthria Potion?" Harry asked as he watched a gold-flecked liquid simmer in a brass cauldron.

"Yes," Snape replied, a little surprised. He watched with hooded eyes as Harry walked down the line, peering into each.

Running feet brought both of their heads up to the doorway. Trelawney, trailing a diaphanous shawl, stopped breathlessly in the hallway outside the door. Upon seeing Harry, she smiled sweetly and composed herself. "Severus," she said in a friendly voice as she leaned lightly on the doorframe, "you are needed upstairs." Snape stepped over to her and, after a brief hesitation, stepped around her and away. "How are you, Harry?" she asked as though they were neighbors talking over a fence.

"Fine, Professor," Harry replied carefully.

She caught her breath and looked around the room casually. "I can't wait to meet the new Potions teacher. Can you? Greer I think her name is."

"Is she as nice as Professor Snape?" Harry asked.

"Uh," she said thoughtfully and then giggled almost girlishly. "That's a good one. One would tend to assume maybe a little nicer."

Harry turned back to the cauldrons, hoping she would go away. He was always a little worried she would start prophesying again at any moment. She only ever did that when they were alone together.

"Well, I'm sure I'll see you at lunch. Bye for now."

Harry sighed and shook his head. Beside the next potion a book lay open. Harry perused the instructions and peered into the cauldron. The next step called for linden bark threads. A small basket of them sat on the shelf below. They were to be added as soon as the potion boiled clear. It sure looked clear to Harry, who felt pretty confident he could spot that.

He listened and didn't hear any footsteps. Shrugging at the thought that the potion would be ruined if he *did not* add the ingredient, Harry started dropping threads in, one at a time, as it said.

"Really, it is nothing," Dumbledore was saying as Snape entered the Great Hall. McGonagall was in the middle of helping the headmaster up. "Just a moment of unbalance."

Snape crossed the room in an instant, taking Dumbledore's other arm. "Hospital wing?" Snape asked his colleague.

"Really, I must insist that is too much," Dumbledore said.

"Yes," McGonagall answered Snape in a hard tone.

On the fifteenth thread a deep emerald bloom spread from the thread throughout the liquid. It was a very nice color. Harry dampened the burner like it said and read the next step. The mixture was supposed to be thickened before it cooled. Harry realized that he recognized it now. It was the insect bite ointment Pomfrey gave out in little tins. Harry looked around on the shelf below and didn't see any gelatin, agar, or anything like that. The other stocks were being re-arranged, so if there had been an organization scheme, he was not likely to pick up on it now.

He wandered over to the cabinet that was still left undisturbed. On the top shelf was a dusty jar of tapioca beads. Still hearing no footsteps, he took down a clean mortar and pestle, ground a handful of beads into fine powder, and stirred it slowly into the cooling liquid. He stopped when it was about halfway thickened to what he remembered the ointment to be, figuring that it would set more when it finished cooling.

He moved the cauldron to a worktable, sat on a stool and stared at it with a faint frown. He couldn't very well just leave it like this. Even though he was pretty sure that if it set up in the cauldron it could be reheated and poured out, the incompleteness of it bothered him. He looked around for any empty shallow tins with screw-tops like Pomfrey had. The side door to the supply room stood ajar, which was not normal for Snape. Harry peered inside and saw what he needed between stacks of filter paper and empty one-dose vials.

Using bundled rags to protect his hands from the heat, Harry poured the green glop out evenly into four large tins and set them apart to cool on the work table. He stared at their glistening jewel-like surfaces, and waited.

"What happened?" Pomfrey asked as the trio entered the hospital wing trailed by the Divination teacher.

"My staff is overreacting," Dumbledore stated as he was lowered onto a bed. "A mere moment of disorientation is all."

"He fainted," McGonagall supplied.

Trelawney stepped to the end of the bed, jingling softly as she shifted nervously from foot to foot.

"Well, I think we'll keep you here overnight, Professor," Pomfrey said as she checked his pulse.

Dumbledore graced them all with a chastising look but gave in.

Harry was just deciding that the tins had cooled enough. He wiped out a lid with a clean rag and touched the side of a tin to see how much it jiggled.

"Potter?" Snape said as he stepped in the doorway. His gaze shifted from the empty spot on the side cabinet back to the work table. Brow drawn low, he stepped over and lifted a tin to look across it. "Hm, what did you use to thicken this?"

"Oh," Harry fidgeted once. "I couldn't find anything but the tapioca." He gestured at the tall cabinet. As Snape eyed the ointment again, Harry added quickly, "I thought it was nonreactive in this case."

Snape's dark gaze slid over to him at that. "It is. It seems to set the color better as well." He put the tin down and pushed it over. Harry waited to be yelled at. When nothing but a close look was forthcoming, he put the cleaned lid on that tin and pushed it to the side. As he started to wipe out the next lid, Snape said, "Are you bored, Mr. Potter?"

Harry swallowed in relief. "Yeah, I guess so."

Snape stepped back over to his trunk. "Many of the potions are rather basic, if you truly wish to assist." Harry brightened. "Do try to practice somewhat better technique than you usually manage in class."

"That's easy when you aren't hovering around waiting for me to make a mistake," Harry commented, then held his breath.

Snape looked up from continuing to pack breakables. "Is that how you explain your rather extraordinary O.W.L. performance?"

"Yes."

* * *

"Where's Dumbledore?" Harry asked when they sat down to lunch.

"He is on a small holiday," McGonagall supplied.

"He could use one," Harry said stridently as he assembled a roast beef sandwich for himself.

"Yes," McGonagall commented emphatically, sounding a little put-out herself.

Harry stared at his sandwich for a long moment before reaching for the horseradish.

* * *

"Professor, can I speak with you?" Harry asked after he knocked on the doorframe of McGonagall's office.

She was sorting through a large stack of parchments. "Of course, Mr. Potter. Come in."

Harry sat down in one of the visitor's chairs. Mice ran around in the cage above his head. He waited for the burst of noise to stop before he took a deep breath and asked, "No one is usually here right now, are they?"

She sighed, "No. Not usually."

Harry slouched and said, "I feel bad making everyone stay on my regard."

"Harry," she said sharply. "I'm sorry for the implication I made earlier. It is truly not a problem. We would be ten times busier and under a hundred times more stress if you hadn't finished Voldemort off for us. If we forget that for a moment and imply that you are any kind of a burden, whatsoever, then we are sorely in the wrong."

Harry frowned and stared at his feet.

"Has anyone implied that besides my slip at lunch? Has Professor Snape?" she asked suspiciously.

"No, ma'am. He seems happy to be moving his office."

"Yes, I can imagine he would be." She straightened a stack of papers that threatened to slide off the desk. "For myself I am taking care of things that I would be doing just before the year begins anyway. Getting it done now means having less to do later. I expect the Ministry will have managed to round up the remaining D.E. in short order, and we can all do as we wish then. If not, I will personally hunt them down myself."

"Can I help?" he asked eagerly.

"Harry, you have done far more than your part already. Take a rest now."

Harry sighed and felt the walls of the castle closing in again.

* * *

Harry spent the rest of the day with this notes from the references. He had prepped a piece of lambskin parchment with the spells he had found in the second book. But he could not decide exactly what he wanted the sheet to do. The little word animation at the beginning of the Map's activation amazed him when he broke it down into its components, unless it was a single more complicated spell that took care of the many small details. He sighed. He had found a book that described how the scoreboard at the Quidditch World Cup worked, but most of the complication with that had been the ability to constantly update it from several locations. Harry wanted something that had some smarts without further intervention.

On a separate piece of paper, he made sketches of Hedwig in several poses. He took a deep breath and used a duplicitous spell to copy one to the smart parchment. He then tried to get it to show when he tapped the parchment and said, "Hedwig". The image seemed to have disappeared completely. With a frustrated sigh, he read through his notes again and wished Hermione were there. Maybe he could get Lupin to visit and show him, he thought, as he pulled out a volume from the stack, pushed up his glasses, and sat back to read some more.

When he reread the text after a few spell attempts, much more of it made sense. He supposed he would just have to keep trying and reading until it worked. It must have been easier for his dad, he had three friends to help him. Or maybe his father just had been better at magic.

* * *

Snape stepped into the dispensary carrying a smoking stone cup. He set it on the stand beside Dumbledore's bed, careful to do so quietly.

"Severus," Dumbledore said, not asleep as he first appeared. "Have a seat; I have been thinking and I want to speak with you."

Snape went over to the next bed and picked up a chair. "That is a downside to your incarceration here," he commented.

Dumbledore laughed. "My dear Severus, you can always be counted on to speak the truth--as you see it anyway. I wonder if you'd permit me to do the same?"

Snape sat back with his hands clasped over his abdomen. "If you wish," he replied tediously

"This little setback came upon me unexpectedly. It makes me very concerned that I have somewhat less time than I thought. As well I am even more relieved to have certain critical things taken care of." He reached over to the night stand for his glasses and perched them on his nose. "After a hundred and sixty years I have to remind myself that I cannot possibly take care of everything personally." He steepled his fingers and sat silently for a long minute. "I want you to consider something for me, Severus."

"Consider, meaning it is not an instruction you are giving me outright?"

"I would never make such a request outright." He looked Snape over. "You have come a long way, Severus," he observed.

Snape *hmfed* and exuded vague insult.

"Realize, it is the only reason I am asking this of you."

"It is just for my consideration?" Snape repeated. At Dumbledore's nod, Snape asked tiredly, "What is it?"

Dumbledore's eye twinkled as he said, "I want you to consider adopting Mr. Potter."

Snape's eyes widened in dismayed disbelief. "You must be joking, Albus."

Amiably, Dumbledore replied, "No, Severus, I am not." When Snape shook his head, Dumbledore said kindly, "Think about it longer than that."

"There is nothing to think about!"

"Severus . . ." Dumbledore hesitated. "Here is where you are granting me the right to state things as I see them." He waited for Snape to calm down and sit back again, artificially relaxed. "I saw that boy bring out a side of you I did not imagine existed."

Snape frowned fiercely and looked away down the long side of the wing.

"Yes, I know what you are thinking. But I know you saw him bring down the most powerful wizard in the world with precisely that set of emotions."

Snape scoffed. "What you don't know, and what Mr. Potter skipped telling the Ministry, is that I almost made him fail at it."

"Hm . . . you underestimate Mr. Potter."

"And you underestimate what happened," Snape came back. "Your request is absurd," he said angrily. He did not meet Dumbledore's gaze. "I certainly hope that is the only request you have of me." He stood up and shifted the chair out of the way.

"Yes, Severus, it is," Dumbledore stated kindly.

"You should drink that within the next hour or so," he said, indicating the potion beside the bed.

"Thank you," the headmaster said sincerely.

With a deep furrow to his brow, Snape stalked out of the wing.

* * *

"Do you need any help today?" Harry asked from the doorway. He almost didn't--Snape seemed miffed about something as he sorted through the shelves of potions that surrounded the room. At some point, Harry apparently had learned the subtle difference between everyday Snape orneriness and real anger.

Snape looked up and considered him a long moment with an unreadable expression. "There is not much to be done today." As Harry's face fell, he added, "But the burn plaster will need to be finished tomorrow, if you want to familiarize yourself with the instructions for it at this time."

Harry stepped in and accepted the potion manual. He flipped it open and glanced at the relevant pages before closing it around his finger at that spot. He hesitated, undecided about whether to stay or go. Snape went back to his task, which involved evaluating each bottle of any age at all. He looked intent on it.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said and slipped out the door.

* * *

Harry tossed fitfully in his four poster and with a groan, woke up. Grey light filled the tall windows. The dark shadows from his dream faded only slowly, taking with them his panic to escape them. He got up to use the lavatory and didn't feel like sleeping anymore. He turned up the lamps, sat on the floor, and sorted his chocolate frog cards. The one of Dumbledore winked at him and he picked it up and read the back of it for the hundredth time, remembering the first time he had read it on the train on the way to his first year here. That moment seemed ten lifetimes ago. Flamel's name made him wonder suddenly if Dumbledore hadn't also been using the Philosopher's Stone to make elixir. The thought chilled him.

* * *

Two days later, Dumbledore returned to dinner.

"Did you have a good rest?" Harry asked him.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as he replied, "Yes, my dear boy, I did."

Harry served himself two chicken legs and a jacket potato. McGonagall spooned a serving of peas beside it. Harry frowned at her but didn't say anything. Sprout was back today. She explained to him about the regular care everything needed. Harry felt better that at least she was here by choice. Hagrid beside her also was. That just left McGonagall, Tre-lawney and presumably Dumbledore there only to protect him. He felt better when he realized this.

After dinner, Harry sat in the Great Hall before the fire, reading the potion manual Snape had given him. It had recipes for all the basic medicinal potions the school used. Harry was fascinated by what went into some of the things he took for granted. The fire lulled him with its heat. After a while, eyes heavy, he set the manual aside and put his head down on his arm.

Shadows that shifted from distinct hooded outlines to smokey, snaking wraiths tracked Harry through a looming forest of dead trees. Tired of running, Harry stopped and faced them with his wand held at ready. They faded out, reappearing in the distance, moving from one trunk to the next, out of range, waiting. He let his wand hand rest at his side in frustration and impatience. Suddenly, the leaves stirred right at his feet and a shadow loomed up in front of him.

"Potter?"

Harry jerked awake and stared at Snape, leaning over the table before him. Breathless from the panic in his dream, he took a moment to recover.

"Nightmare?" Snape asked almost accusingly.

Harry rubbed his hair back and forced his breathing to slow. "Yeah," he admitted, amazed at how much his heart raced. He stretched his stiff neck in a bid for normalcy. "What time is it?"

"Nine thirty."

Still unbelievably sleepy as well as jittery, Harry stood up with the aid of the tabletop. "I guess I should go up to the dormitory," he mumbled.

"Do you want this?" Snape held out the potion manual.

"Yep, thanks," Harry said a little more coherently. He took the book and left the Great Hall.

Up in his room, he sat on the bed and tried to shake the fear that gripped him. That was the second time that had happened--that the shadow looming close in his dream was actually Snape in the waking world. He hadn't wanted to believe that the shadows were anything more than the invention of nightmares, not real. He changed and slid into bed and tried to recapture the utter exhaustion he had felt just minutes ago.

When Harry entered the dungeon the next day, Snape immediately reached into his pocket and held out a small bottle. "Here," he said.

Harry stepped over and accepted it. "Thanks," he murmured and put it in his own pocket.

"I'm surprised that you still need it," Snape commented as he flipped page by page through a thick book on his desk.

"I'd like not to," he admitted, reading upside-down as Snape's finger traced a set of potion ingredients on the page before flipping to the next. He wanted to ask Snape if what he suspected was true, but didn't know how.

"Care to cut up ingredients?" Snape asked. "Not the most interesting task."

"Sure," Harry said. He took the long wild carrot roots and knife to the worktable and set to cutting them so the fibers were as close to a quarter inch long as possible.

Snape came over a little later and scooped up a small pile of them. "Have you determined if there is anything significant in these dreams?" he asked. "I only ask because this is often the case with you."

Harry shrugged. He would feel better if he told, he thought. "I'm being chased, hunted more like, by black shadows."

"Hm," Snape replied. He took the roots to the first cauldron and dropped them in.

Heart pounding a little, Harry said quietly, "I can't count them, I don't know if there are seven of them."

"Or eight, or even twenty-six for that matter," Snape commented levelly. He stirred a second cauldron before stepping back over and looking down at Harry. "More than symbolic, Mr. Potter? These shadows?" he asked.

Harry dropped his gaze and went back to peeling and cutting.

"You apparently have reason to believe they are," Snape went on. When Harry didn't respond, he said, "Have you spoken with the headmaster about this?"

Harry shook his head. "Think I should?"

"I think he may have some insight to offer you," Snape said as he sorted through the remaining ingredients, throwing away the dry ones.

Harry didn't feel like bothering Dumbledore with it. He went back to his careful cutting. Moments later, he said, "I wish the Ministry would hurry up and apprehend them, then it wouldn't matter. The way it's going, I'll have to get them myself."

"I even catch you attempting that, Mr. Potter . . ." Snape said harshly as he leaned in close, making Harry lean back. "You will have detention with me every day from now until you complete your N.E.W.T.s."

Harry blinked in shock at the vehemence in his teacher's voice. Snape spun away back to the cauldrons and for a fleeting moment, Harry thought Snape too had surprised himself. "Yes, sir," Harry replied automatically, sounding oddly like he meant it.