

Chapter 11 - Fame if not Fortune

The dormitory had started giving Harry that closed-in feeling, so he took one of the parchment spell books down to the Great Hall to read. It was an innocent enough book titled, *Witch Writing*. It was short on theory, but it had a lot of examples and ideas, mostly for dolling up letters to friends.

It was only an hour before lunch, so Harry took up a spot near the far end of the Hufflepuff table. A basket of chocolate frogs sat in the center of the area where the staff usually ate. Gradually, the staff came in and sat and talked over tea beforehand. Harry, feeling peckish, took one of the yellow, five-sided boxes out of the basket and opened it, coming down with an odd sense that everyone was watching him. Looking up, he found faint smiles from around the table, which was a little strange, although it shouldn't have been worrisome.

The dark brown frog hopped over his book and climbed his hand. Harry raised his arm automatically to make it harder for the magical frog to leap away. It froze in a climbing position, clinging to his pinky. Trying to ignore his sense of unease at the teachers' behavior, Harry broke off a leg and went back to reading as he ate it. He could have sworn the table relaxed a little as he did so.

Dumbledore arrived and so did lunch. Harry put his book aside, set the remainder of the frog on the edge of his plate, and made himself a sandwich. Lunch was unusually quiet, adding to Harry's growing edginess. He was getting a lot of glances too, he was sure, although it wasn't something he usually paid much heed to.

He finished his sandwich and his frog. His plate disappeared so he reopened his book. He reached over for the yellow package beside the book and felt a ripple run through the table, not unlike the one he had caused in the Dementors. He glanced around at everyone and received the same faint smiles. If they were trying to make him crazy, they seemed to know exactly how to go about it. Suppressing a sigh, Harry idly pulled out the chocolate frog card and crumpled the package as he tried to find where he had left off in the chapter on cartoon spells.

The first thing Harry thought was, he did not have this card, as the picture was not a portrait and all the ones he had were. He gave it his full attention then and froze. On the card was a color version of the picture from the Ministry of him standing over the crumpled body of Voldemort. As he stared at it, the breeze disturbed the hem of his robe in the picture. The look in his eyes was even stranger with the bright green of them piercing through.

He moved his thumb to see his name printed fancifully on the bottom border. Chagrined, he looked around the table. At least he now knew why everyone had been behaving so strangely. "This isn't a joke, is it?" At Dumbledore's shake of his head, Harry looked at the card again. He flipped it over. On the back it read *Destroyer of Voldemort* at the top, as though it were some kind of honorary title. In the biography was written: *As an infant, survived an attack by Voldemort that killed his parents. Defeated the selfsame dark wizard sixteen years later. Famed as well for the expulsion of over two hundred Dementors from the Hogwarts Quidditch grounds. Won the Tri-Wizard Tournament of 1994.*

"Better not do anything else," Harry quipped. At the questioning looks he explained, "No more room on the card." He put the card into his book as a page marker and stood up.

Dumbledore gestured that he should take the whole basket.

"Those are all the same?" Harry asked.

"The company sent them over," the headmaster replied.

With an odd reluctance, Harry reached over for the basket and took it up by the handle as he departed. When Harry was gone, Dumbledore steeped his fingers before him. "If I could do just one thing this summer holiday it would be to remove that boy's melancholy."

Snape sat back and crossed his arms. "It would undoubtedly help if he ceased to have nightmares."

"He is still?" Dumbledore asked in surprise.

"Yes," McGonagall replied. "Though who knows what they mean."

Snape sat straighter. "Potter believes he is seeing the remaining Death Eaters hunting him, which is not impossible given that he inherited another vision of the nonphysical world from the Dark Lord."

"I am afraid there is more to this than poor sleep," Dumbledore said as he stood up.

* * *

Harry sat on the floor beside his bed, staring out the window at the castle grounds. He had his entire stack of chocolate frog cards on the floor beside him. The Destroyer of Voldemort one had the highest series number and there was no gap between himself and Marigold the Malevolent, so he assumed they had only issued one new card. It was odd to imagine future Hogwarts students trading it on the train to school; they would get entirely the wrong impression from the text on the back.

He gazed out the window again. Harry had sat in this precise spot six years ago the night after he had arrived on the train the first year. His emotions now couldn't have been farther from what they were then. Back then he had been painfully hopeful and so happy to have been rescued from his relatives. It occurred to him that it was easier to be happy when things were simpler.

Dumbledore sat down on the bare bed beside him where Ron usually slept. As usual, Harry hadn't heard him enter. Dumbledore's eyes looked very pale blue in the sunlight. "You deserve the chocolate frog card, Harry." Harry took a deep breath and stared outside again. Dumbledore went on, "It is unproductive, if not harmful, to continually wish for things that are impossible to obtain."

Harry dropped his eyes and looked at his hands, pulled halfway into his sleeves.

"Come here, my boy," Dumbledore invited. Harry stood up and sat on the bed beside the old wizard. Dumbledore put an arm loosely behind Harry and said, "Our pride is not enough for you, apparently."

It wasn't, Harry thought. It only served to remind him of what he was missing.

Dumbledore went on. "We *are* very proud of you," he said, patting him on the arm. "You have a whole year of school ahead of you, as a Seventh-Year, no less. Top of the pack. A whole season of Quidditch. You are looking forward to that, I expect?" He waited for Harry to nod. "And your marks the last term were most impressive. I expect you can earn your way into any program you wish to enter. We are all very aware that you do not intend to influence your way in."

"I don't want anything from Fudge."

"*Minister* Fudge, Harry, and you are not obliged to accept anything from him." After a pause, he said, "You have been writing to your friends?" Another nod. "And working on some project of your own with parchment spells. If you need any help, I, or any teacher, would gladly give it."

Harry pulled away and removed the Map from the drawer beside the bed, marveling in part of his mind that he was going to show this to the headmaster of all people. He grinned a bit at what his father would be thinking if he could see him now. "I want to edit this," he explained, "but I'm having a hard time figuring out how." He sat back down, unfolded the Map, pulled out his wand, and activated the parchment.

"My, my," Dumbledore said as he put on his spectacles and peered at it.

"I don't want to damage it, so I've been trying to make something similar first, but it's really hard. I'm thinking that my dad was much better at magic than I am."

Dumbledore handed the Map back. "That is possible, Harry. He managed the marks you have now without seeming to work at it. But I am certain you are much more clever, especially when things are most dire, if that is any consolation." Dumbledore rubbed his hands together. "Do you have a blank parchment?"

* * *

Harry sat in the Great Hall in what had become his usual spot. Ron had sent him a deck of wizard cards and a book of games to play on his own. At first he had been a little insulted, but boredom drove him to try it out and he was getting more amusement out of it than expected. Most of the games required careful strategy. Some of the cards aged after they were dealt and changed value. Some cards reacted to the presence of other cards and changed predictably or randomly depending upon the game.

The post owls arrived. One dropped a letter in front of Harry. Another three, flying together, dropped a package on the end of the table in the spot for mail when the recipient wasn't around. Harry read his letter from Hermione. She was really good about writing immediately when she got Harry's letters. Harry took out a quill and wrote a reply on the back. He told her about his ongoing shadow-filled dreams and his frustration at still being stuck at school.

The school barn owl, used to this routine from him, waited for him to finish. Harry gave the letter back to it and it took flight, scattering the nut shells from the bowl on the table. Snape stepped in and looked at the package before picking it up. He untied it as he came over and looked over Harry's shoulder. "Red seven-flint on the black obsidian," he said.

"That will turn the nine into a dragon and I'll lose," Harry said. He picked up the seven-flint and held it near; the other card flickered threateningly.

"Haven't you already lost, then?" Snape asked.

"No, I have the deck in novice mode."

Snape tossed the brown paper from his package aside; it disappeared before it hit the floor. "Potter, I can't imagine you doing anything in novice mode," he commented as he flipped through the stack of books in his arms.

Harry, spying the title of one, asked, "What are those?"

"Potential texts for Defense Against the Dark Arts."

Harry half stood by kneeling on the bench seat and looked at the pile more closely. "Can I see one?"

Snape selected one and handed it over. Harry leaned on his elbow and flipped through it. "Which year is this for?" he asked doubtfully.

Snape considered him, "What is wrong?"

Harry frowned lightly. "We've done-" he stopped and flipped to the table of contents. He listed spells under his breath, "Grand flecture, Whistler, Frompten, Polarized blocking. Those four," Harry said, pointing. "We haven't done those."

"Haven't?" Snape took the book back and glanced at it. "Potter, I have Grey's syllabus--you have only covered two of this list."

Harry shrank down a little, half expecting an outburst as he said, "Not in class. In D.A."

Snape raised his chin before he turned on his heel. "Come with me, Potter."

Harry stood up and followed, figuring it was all right to leave his game as it was, although by the time he came back the cards would be different anyway. Snape led the way up the stairs and down the corridor to the Defense classroom.

"In here," Snape pointed.

"Am I in trouble, sir?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"Not if you are telling the truth," Snape replied. He went to the front of the classroom and stepped up onto the platform.

Harry stepped up onto the other end. "Can't you just tell by looking at someone if they are?"

Snape froze at that. He raised a brow and replied softly, "Usually." He pulled out his wand. "First spell is a Titan Block. Let's see it."

Harry took out his wand and thought a moment. "Are you going to spell me with an attack to bring it up against?" he asked, thinking that would make sense. He was used to that from D.A.

"What if I told you you have a persecution complex?" Snape said sharply.

"If I insisted I didn't, wouldn't you think I was overly optimistic?" Harry retorted.

"Point taken."

Harry cleared his throat and tried not to grin. Finally he put up his wand, mostly because Snape looked impatient with him.

"Ready?" At Harry's nod, Snape said, "*Figuresempre!*"

Harry put out both hands, palms outward, his wand hooked under his right thumb. A shimmering orange dome flared, absorbing the incoming curse.

Snape pulled the book out of his pocket. "Next is Grand Flexture; you said you didn't know that one . . ."

"Can you show me?" Harry interrupted.

"Why not, Potter." Snape said in resignation and stepped over to him. He held out the book. "It is a spell to repel anything physical around you. Timed correctly, you can avoid being struck by something, or many things, thrown at you. Or, you can use it to force a path through something moveable, like brush, or even people, should you be in that much of a hurry."

Harry grinned at that and wondered if Snape were really trying to make a joke. He took the book and read through the description quickly. "Can you do it once?"

Snape moved two heavy stone pedestals onto the platform and placed a wooden block on each. He stood between them and, holding his wand straight up, said, "*Hovequanta.*" The blocks flew in opposite directions away from him.

Harry set the book down on the floor, picked up one of the blocks and placed it back on the pedestal. Snape did the other and stepped out of the way. Harry stepped into position and thought a moment. The book said the spell felt like a globe

expanding in sections away from the caster. He took a deep breath and holding up his wand, spoke the incantation. The block on his right moved to hang half off its pedestal; the other didn't move.

Harry put the one block back into position and tried again, thinking harder about a globe sectioned longitudinally like in the picture. Both blocks flew off their perches. "Huh," Harry muttered as he moved to pick them up. This was a heck of a lot easier than making parchment write on its own.

Snape shook his head at him.

"That wasn't right?" Harry asked, concerned since he thought he had succeeded that time.

"It was acceptable," Snape said evenly.

Harry jumped over and scooped up the book. "What's next?" he asked eagerly.

An hour later, when they had gone through all of the spells, Harry jumped down from the platform. The stack of other years' texts lay on a desk in the first row. He picked up one and thumbed through it. "Which is the Sixth-Year?"

"I have a question for you first," Snape said. "How many students know the spells you know? Not counting the four new ones, obviously."

"It varies. Not everyone came to every session of D.A."

"There were nineteen students on the staircase the day of the battle. Safe to say they all do, correct?"

"Yep, that was pretty much the core. Some of the younger ones we made stay behind." Harry picked up another book as he talked. That one looked like first-year, or he hoped it was. He didn't see Snape's thoughtfully surprised expression as he said that. Harry said, "There were probably forty-five who came to most sessions-"

"Forty-five?" Snape echoed in surprise.

"And another fifteen who came depending upon the topic. Easy stuff that is really useful brought in the most students."

"Such as?"

"Basic counter-curses, spell detection, stuff like that. Which one is the Sixth-Year?"

Out of his pocket, Snape handed over another book and watched Harry as he perused the contents.

"If I am out sick, you can simply teach the class," Snape muttered.

"What?" Harry asked, distracted by the book.

"Nothing, Mr. Potter."

"I don't know this one," Harry said brightly, pointing at one halfway down the contents.

"It is also referred to as a Banana Peel."

"Oh, I do know that one, then." Harry snapped the book closed and handed it back.

"Hm. You are making me realize that I need to rethink this. At least for the upper levels."

"Sorry, sir," Harry said sheepishly.

"Do not apologize, Potter," Snape retorted. "You needed those students. Not a single one lost their life. I would not have imagined that possible--not against some of the wizards I know were there. We shall have a more interesting class than expected, that is all. With Dumbledore's permission, perhaps we can do some advanced offensive spells as well."

Harry's head snapped up with acute interest.

Snape set the books on the desk and straightened the chairs. "Remember what I told you," he threatened.

"Yeah, detention for the rest of my life, or something."

"Precisely," Snape stated as he strode past him to the door. As he opened it, he said, "You still have a few hours before dinner. Perhaps you should wander up to McGonagall's office and finish your last year's lessons with her as well."

Harry scoffed. "Her class is hard. I'm not very good at Transfiguration. Hermione is."

"Disgusting having friends like that, isn't it, Potter?" Snape commented.

* * *

One day, as Harry sat in the Great Hall building a card house out of his wizard pack, McGonagall stepped in and said, "Potter, I really do think you need to get out. Come with me."

Harry jumped up and followed her across the Entrance Hall and down the steps to the lawn. "Are you my only escort, Professor? Headmaster said two to leave the castle."

She slipped on her traveling cloak as they walked. "From what Professor Snape tells us, you qualify as your own escort. As well, several Order members are in Hogsmeade today. Come along."

They walked down the lawn. Harry was grateful that only a few figures loitered at the gate. He and McGonagall approached and the figures started to take interest in them. As they drew closer, they started calling out his name excitedly. Harry's steps faltered. McGonagall slipped an arm through his and pulled him along. "There are only four of them," she admonished.

An old wizard shook Harry's hand vigorously as soon as they passed through. A woman with her two small children bent down and said. "Look, dears, it is the famous Harry Potter." The tow-headed children clung to their mother's skirt and stared at him with wide-eyed, unblinking gazes.

McGonagall steered Harry through. "Just out for a butterbeer. Excuse us, please."

On the high street, people turned and gaped at him. Quietly, Harry said, "You are reminding me of all that is good about the castle."

"Relax, Harry. Everyone else is *now*." She tugged open the door of the Three Broomsticks and gestured for him to enter.

"Blimey, it's 'arry Potter!" someone exclaimed, and the room broke from quiet murmurs to shouting and chaos. Everyone got up from their seats and came over. Madam Rosmerta came out from behind the bar and seated them at the best table near the bar.

"Two butterbeers, please," McGonagall said, completely unshaken by the goings on around her.

Harry shook everyone's hand and a few people's twice. Eventually, after much back pounding and expressions of worship, the crowd settled back at their own tables, although the conversations were much more raucous than before.

"You survived," McGonagall said as she poured her bottle out into a mug.

Harry made a noise that indicated it had been a close call.

His teacher leaned forward and asked, "How are you doing, Harry?"

"I'm doing all right, Professor. A little bored."

"You're spending a lot of time in the dungeon," she observed.

"Sna- Professor Snape gives me things to do."

"It's a little surprising, is all. You two haven't got along well in the past and during meals it seems as if that is still true."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Does it?"

She took a gulp of her mug. "Well, if you aren't noticing maybe it is my imagination."

Halfway through their butterbeers--which Madam Rosmerta insisted were on the house, forever--murmuring behind them started to raise alarms with Harry. He settled back in his seat and tried to listen in. Moments later, in badly tuned voices, an old drinking song started, although the lines had been changed. Harry listened with growing bemusement as the lyrics roared out with much shouting.

*I'll sing thee one, ho
green glow the wizard, ho!
what is your one, ho?
one is gone destroyed and gone and ever more shall it be so
I'll sing thee two, ho
green blow dark wizard, ho!
what is your two ho?
two and twenty wanders boys spelt on his head, oh
one is gone destroyed and gone and ever more shall it be so.*

Harry sank down in his seat with his mug. "At least they made it into a group effort," he offered.

"Well, this must be my lucky day," a familiar voice said from behind them. Rita Skeeter stepped over and started to pull out a chair at their table.

"Ms. Skeeter," Harry said a little less than welcoming.

"Please, have a seat," McGonagall said, getting a sharp look from Harry.

Skeeter took out a pad and a normal quill this time. "Anything to say, Mr. Potter? You have been quite the recluse."

"He is being protected from the remaining Death Eaters," McGonagall pointed out factually. Skeeter made a note of that.

"No more attempts on your life, Mr. Potter, since the Dementor incident?"

"No," Harry replied. "Not that I've been informed of, but I'm not informed of much; you must realize." He sipped his butterbeer and watched her write that down. He didn't look over at his teacher.

"Plans for the future?" Skeeter asked without looking up from her writing.

"Still deciding. I have a whole year to figure that out." Working with Fudge, if he were an Auror, was starting to seem unsavory, even if working with Tonks still sounded like fun.

"Glad to have Voldemort gone?"

"Thank you for using his real name," Harry stated. "And yes, very much so."

"But you aren't free to move about as you please because the seven are still loose, correct? You're still a prisoner?" Skeeter asked this in a tone that sounded mild, but really wasn't. Harry wondered in concern what she was really trying to ask, at the same time as he was glad that someone else recognized his situation.

"No, I can't go out without an escort, but Hogwarts isn't a prison--it's my home, as it has been for six years."

Skeeter glanced at McGonagall before she asked Harry, "What do you think your parents would say if they could see you now?"

Harry was very grateful that Skeeter didn't have her Quickquotes quill because this time his eyes did feel a little warm. "I don't know," he replied flatly. She had cut right to the heart of what was bothering him.

"Mr. Potter, you may make up whatever you like. What would you want them to say?" Skeeter waved to Madam Rosmerta for a pot of tea.

"I didn't know them," he insisted, staring into his butterbeer as he grappled with himself.

"Move on to the next question, Ms. Skeeter," McGonagall interjected.

"You knew them," Skeeter pointed out to her. "What do you think they would say?"

Harry looked up at his teacher as she sat back and thought that over. He tended to forget that many of them had known James and Lily Potter at least as students if not from the Order. McGonagall had, as well as Dumbledore, Flitwick, Hagrid, Lupin, and even Snape. It gave him a flash of anger to think that he was the only one who *didn't* know them.

McGonagall sighed. "It is a long way to think back." She glanced at Harry with a sympathetic expression. "They were very intent on defeating Voldemort and didn't hesitate to get into fierce, dangerous battles with him and his followers whenever they tried to extend their power. It was not the best of circumstances in which to try to raise a child. But like the Longbottoms, I think they felt that they needed something to pin their hopes on. We are all very grateful now that they did." As she said the last, she stared evenly into Harry's eyes.

"Do you still miss them?" Skeeter asked Harry.

"I miss not having parents," Harry replied flatly. He finished his butterbeer and set the mug down. He easily imagined all the other students practicing Quidditch in their yards, taking holiday, waking up late to breakfast with their families.

"Must be difficult," Skeeter commented as she looked over her notes. "No particular future to look forward to and a dark past to keep you company."

Harry hoped the article didn't read like that. "I have plans, I just don't feel like sharing them."

"How about off the record?"

"Is there such a thing with you?" Harry asked.

She put her quill down. "There is now."

"What's with you, anyway?" Harry asked, curious about her good behavior.

Skeeter hedged by topping up her tea cup. "I'm on a very short leash. Finding you here is my big chance to move up again. Plus, I'm still under a cloud of blackmail, am I not?"

"I suppose you are," Harry said. "The deal didn't include Voldemort."

"What is this?" McGonagall asked sharply.

"It wasn't me," Harry insisted.

"It wasn't him," Skeeter confirmed. "Another of your students is presently blackmailing me to not write anything unfavorable about dear Mr. Potter, although that isn't hard to follow as he is all the rage at the moment and anything negative would get the *Prophet* flooded with angry howlers. It is blasted hard to work when that is going on," she complained as an aside. "Well, I do appreciate your time." She stood and put away her pad and quill. "Nice to see you again, Ms. McGonagall."

When the door closed after her, McGonagall leaned in and said, "Am I to understand that one of your friends is blackmailing a *Prophet* reporter? To your benefit?"

"Don't you remember all of those awful things she wrote about me during the Tri-Wizard Tournament?" Harry asked.

"No," she said firmly. "Who is this student?"

"You have to ask? Who is smart enough to pull that off?" Harry said.

"Hm," McGonagall growled.

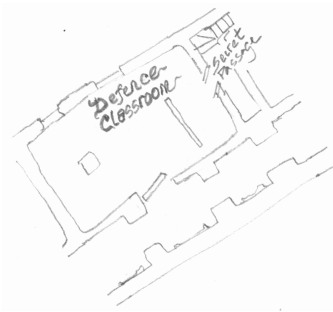
"Skeeter wouldn't have got into trouble if she hadn't been breaking serious wizard law. That is what we have her on, and that's why she's behaving."

"What law is she breaking?"

"As long as she's holding up her end, I can't tell you," Harry pointed out and felt a bit of justice in it.

"Are you in deep anywhere else that we should know about?" She asked a little smartly. "We are only charged with your continued safety, young man."

"Are you finished with your butterbeer, Professor?" Harry asked, very ready to leave.



Chapter 12 - The Offer

Days past. Harry ignored the *Prophet*--he had no desire to read the other side of the interview with Skeeter. He learned how to charm parchment to do some interesting things, but he didn't know how the Map knew where everyone was. He managed to make a copy of the physical part of the Map with his additions and even gave it modes where it showed just a normal map of the school with the current classrooms labelled or with an additional charm, it showed the secret passages, including the one to the Chamber of Secrets that Harry also realized the old Map lacked.

He made two more copies and sent them off to Ron and Hermione, feeling anxious about their replies after he did so.

His friends didn't reply by the next day, making Harry realize that he needed something else to occupy himself. There weren't any potions to work on. Bored, Harry wandered the castle and the bailey. He wondered if he should start up a new hobby, like sketching, or violin, or anything. The bailey was too small for much flying which was a shame as the weather was beautiful, but then again the sun was shining like this the day Voldemort showed up. If the Ministry would just catch the remaining Death Eaters, he could go flying again around the much larger outer grounds.

Feeling frustrated and caged, Harry sat beside the fountain and rolled up his sleeves to get some sun. He tried to imagine what Voldemort's remaining followers were doing right now. They didn't seem particularly close in his dreams. He hoped that meant they didn't have any good plans after the Dementor one failed so brilliantly.

* * *

That night, Harry woke jarringly, shaking with chills. He jerked the drapes aside and turned up the lamp. His own breathing sounded harsh and urgent in his ears. The sight of the curved walls of the dormitory calmed him somewhat. He pulled his legs against his chest and hugged them while he waited for the remainder of his distress to fade.

Remembering Pettigrew's falsetto words of reassurance from the dream, he started shaking again. Wormtail had been leaning over him, stroking his forehead about where his scar was. Harry felt a bit as though vomiting might improve his stomach. He grabbed his robe and shrugged into it as he stumbled down the steps. The Fat Lady slammed closed as he stepped out into the corridor.

By the time he made it to the boy's toilet, his stomach had calmed even though his shivering hadn't. He ran the water hot and held his hands under it a while before washing his face. Feeling better, he walked back to the common room and sat on the couch. The clock read three-thirty. The room was utterly silent. Harry really wished he had someone to talk to, as he wondered tiredly what had brought on this new dream. He toyed with the notion of going to Dumbledore, but the thought of him coming to his office door with an expression like McGonagall's dissuaded him.

When his eyes tried to fall closed, he went back up to his dormitory room, took a large sip of potion, and crawled back into bed.

Harry woke when the light came through the window since his drapes had not been re-closed. He rose, fuzzy-headed, thinking that a bath sounded like a treat, and that he would have to do it before the day heated up, or it wouldn't be as pleasant.

Harry's bath made him late for breakfast. As a result, everyone finished before him. Sprout and Hagrid hovered a bit over coffee before moving on and leaving him alone. The Hall became as quiet as the common room had the night before.

Harry wished in vain for some kind of distraction, but the day oozed by slowly, mind-numbingly.

That night, Harry took the potion before lying down at ten. Early, but then a good long rest was what he wanted most in the world. Exhaustion pulled him easily into sleep as he snuggled down between the covers.

* * *

Harry was cold--so cold he could barely move. He looked around himself groggily. The air was foul and dank. He was looking at the edge of something woven, like a basket or a coarse sack. Eventually, a figure approached and reached out to him. It was Pettigrew again. Harry tried to jerk away and managed to turn his head. It made him dizzy to do so. A hand stroked his forehead as Pettigrew chanted vague phrases of comfort. Harry jerked away from the hand again and caught sight of thick snake coils surrounding him.

With a cry of surprise, Harry tumbled out of bed. He crawled, gasping, to the center of the floor on clumsy limbs that felt alien to him. He huddled there and waited for the panic to ease. His stomach rebelled. He swallowed hard several times since he didn't feel capable of making it down to the toilet.

When he finally came to himself, he looked at the clock which read fifteen minutes before five. Almost morning. In fact, the sky looked to already be brightening. The thought of imminent daylight and company at breakfast soothed his rattled nerves enough to give him strength to get off the floor.

Harry sat through breakfast in near silence, giving one syllable replies to Hagrid's attempts at conversation. As badly as Harry longed for company, he didn't actually want to participate in it. He also wasn't very hungry, although he drank a lot of orange juice and coffee. Harry was still pushing his scramble around on his plate when everyone else got up to leave. He peered into his empty coffee cup, only vaguely aware of the movement around him.

At the door to the Great Hall, Dumbledore paused to look back at Harry, who sat with unusually bad posture on the far end of the long table. The headmaster stepped out and let the door close. "Severus," he said to the retreating backs of his teachers. When Snape looked back, Dumbledore gestured with a tilt of his head that he should return.

Snape came back down the steps and over to the old wizard. Dumbledore said quietly, "Talk to the boy; something is bothering him unusually so." When Snape raised a brow in surprise, Dumbledore added, "I am not unaware where Harry has been spending most of his time."

Snape huffed. "Why do *you* not speak to him?"

The old wizard sighed as his gaze focused beyond the wall. "Because he will not have me to rely on forever." He tossed his head at the door to the Great Hall to urge Snape back in.

Snape shook his head, pushed his hair back and opened the door. Potter still sat near the far end of the Hufflepuff table, looking more forlorn than usual. He didn't stir as Snape approached. Frowning at his own discomfort, Snape sat on the bench beside Harry, facing outward.

It required nearly a minute to conjure up words and an appropriate tone of voice. "Did something happen?" he asked factually.

Harry jumped lightly as though, as unlikely as it seemed, he didn't realize Snape was there. Harry cleared his throat and replied, "Potion stopped working."

"It does not completely eliminate dreaming, that is why it is safe to take regularly," Snape explained. "Are the shadows moving in?" he asked, suddenly concerned.

Harry shook his head. "Different dream." He didn't elaborate.

Snape watched the boy's hands rubbing over each other as though to warm them, even though the Hall temperature was quite comfortable. "Does this other dream lead you to believe that you are in danger?" he asked, being as specific as possible.

Harry considered that before he shook his head.

"If it does, you will inform someone immediately?" Snape half asked, half ordered.

"Yes," Harry replied faintly. He hadn't looked up from his barely touched plate of breakfast.

"The dream has removed your appetite?"

Harry nodded and swallowed hard as though to demonstrate his nausea.

Snape stood, having run out of issues to discuss. He watched Harry push his plate back to make room for his elbows on the table. The boy put his head on his hands, looking rather defeated. Snape departed, unwilling to probe further.

Dumbledore visited Snape's office about an hour later. "You spoke with Harry?" he prompted.

Snape put down the crate of marble blocks he was sorting through for student spell practice. Many were cracked or had serious burn marks. "He is suffering from a new nightmare."

"Did he tell you what was in it?"

"No, and I didn't pry. Unless it is critical to, it seems unnecessary," Snape went on, although he felt a bit like he was post-justifying.

Dumbledore stepped over to the desk. "I am concerned the dream represents some real danger to him."

Snape replied, "I asked that specifically. He says it does not."

"Hm," Dumbledore muttered as he picked up one of the cracked blocks of pure white marble and examined it.

Snape commented, "I think if we are willing to trust his retelling, we should be willing to trust his interpretation."

Dumbledore set the block back down. "I want you to keep an eye on him for the next few days."

Snape studied the headmaster a little suspiciously. "Meaning?"

"Speak to him if this continues. Check on him, make certain he is sleeping, because clearly he is not doing so regularly."

Snape blinked in surprise and gave Dumbledore a dismayed look.

"Severus," Dumbledore said congenially, "it is very little to ask, especially compared to what has been asked of you in the past. I have worked hard to keep him unattached to me. Now, when my immediate future is even less certain, I do not wish to tether him to me more than he has managed on his own."

With a frown Snape turned away to pick up another crate of blocks to sort. Dumbledore hovered a moment before he departed, as though to verify Snape wasn't going to protest further.

* * *

The dream woke Harry just after midnight, which wasn't surprising considering he had crawled into bed at nine. He stumbled from the room again, unable to resist the need to satisfy his urge to flee if only from one room to another. The common room was its usual silent self as he dropped onto the couch. He stared at the bookshelves and wondered what he was going to do.

* * *

It was two when Professor Snape headed up to the Gryffindor Tower. As he approached the end of the dark corridor where the portrait guarded the entrance, he huffed his annoyance at this task. The house passwords were all set identically for the summer and the Fat Lady opened to *Periwinkle*. As he stepped into the common room and eyed the staircases to the dormitories, it occurred to him that he didn't even know which floor the boy slept on. There were only seven floors to search, he thought in further annoyance.

It wasn't until he stepped across the room that he noticed the figure in striped pyjamas curled on the couch before the empty hearth. He turned one of the lamps up slightly and considered the still form. At least Potter was asleep--that simplified his task, but it was a tense sleep, not normal and probably not restful. The boy even appeared to be shivering although the room felt pleasantly warm from the sun-baked stones of the tower. As well, the crocheted throw pillow his head rested on would have only seemed comfortable to a monk from an exceptionally strict order.

Snape surveyed the room. The houses all had spare bedding accessible somewhere. He tried one of the wardrobes--it contained games and sundries random. The next one had games as well but the top shelves had pillows and blankets. He pulled down one of each.

Using a transpose spell to avoid disturbing Potter's sleep, he swapped the pillows before covering him. Potter still shivered. Snape was beginning to be somewhat curious what this dream was. He went to the hearth and opened the flue before lighting the logs that were stacked decoratively on the grate. The room didn't need the heat, but the fire would provide more than one kind of warmth.

* * *

Harry woke up early the next morning. His first thought was that his memory of leaving his bed again must be mistaken as his head was on a very soft pillow. That was, until he opened his eyes and saw the common room. He fingered the blanket and noticed the black remains of a pile of logs glowing in the hearth. Sitting up and scratching his head, he wondered at that. If Dumbledore or McGonagall had come in, though they would simply have woken him and sent him back to his bed, he was certain. Maybe Dobby had done it, he considered, or one of the other house-elves. He stretched and, feeling better than he had the morning before, went down to wash up.

At breakfast no one paid him any more attention than usual, leading him to assume the house-elves had bedded him down. He relaxed at that notion and forced himself to eat enough to cover the burn in his queasy stomach.

Harry wandered the castle most of the day, because if he sat still he felt chilled and sick again. His friends' replies arrived and out in the sunshine, on a bench beside the keep, he read them. They were impressed with the maps. Hermione offered a few possible ways the Marauder's Map knew where everyone was although she had to admit they were unlikely to really work. Ron was visiting his brother in London and his letter had a return address there. He described a little of what he had seen in the city in a way that made it clear he was holding back to not make Harry feel bad.

A chill overtook Harry at that moment. He folded the letters haphazardly and stuffed them into his pocket as he stood up to walk around the bailey perimeter yet again.

That evening, exhaustion drove Harry to his bed. Nothing short of nodding off in the library three times in a row could have done it. He took a sip of potion before pulling the covers up with painful reluctance.

His unease was more than justified. His dream this time was a confused blur of bloody white fur, animal panic, and an odd gulping swallowing of something still struggling ever so slightly, although part of him seemed to find that quite satisfying.

Harry fell down the steps to the common room and immediately vomited the little dinner he had eaten. He rubbed his mouth on his pyjama sleeve and suppressed the sob that tried to follow.

"Potter?" a voice asked as someone stepped in through the portrait hole. Harry looked up in surprise as Snape turned up one of the table lamps before coming over to him. "You are unwell. Let us get you to the dispensary."

Harry managed with some assistance to get to his knees. "No, it's the dream," he explained as another bout of shivering overcame him. Snape pulled out his wand and Scourgified the mess before stepping away. Harry watched him step straight to the corner wardrobe and pull down a blanket. Surprise at the implication of that erased Harry's fear. Dazed, he let himself be wrapped up and pulled to his feet.

Harry stepped toward the portrait hole and out, with Snape keeping a grip on his arm for support. Harry insisted on stopping at the toilet.

As he leaned on the sink to wash up, Snape said, "You are certain you are not ill?"

"It's just the dream," Harry insisted. He bent down, washed his face, and rinsed his mouth before washing the edge of his left sleeve. As usual, the warm water was a blessed relief to his panic. Finished, he finally had to turn it off. He glanced at his dripping face in the mirror and shivered again, despite the warmth of the room and the steam still rising from the basin. He tugged the blanket tighter around himself and held it with his left hand. He felt dizzy so he leaned heavily on his right, propped on the sink edge.

"She's cold," Harry explained. "He doesn't know to keep her warm."

Beside him, Snape straightened and said in a very serious tone, "To whom are you referring?"

Harry closed his eyes with a wince and replied, "Nagini."

Snape grabbed Harry's arms and steered him to the bench along the wall where he sat him down. Crouched before him, Snape said, "Occlude your mind, Potter. Now."

In a tired voice, Harry said, "I've been trying--I can't."

"Look at me," Snape ordered.

Harry raised his eyes to his teacher's unnaturally dark ones.

Snape said, "Put your emotion aside, Potter. You know how to do this. Force her out."

Harry shook his head. "I don't know if it's me or her."

"It does not matter," Snape said in a sharp tone. "The result is the same."

Harry forced himself above the sickening fear. He organized his thoughts with no little effort, concentrating on the discomfort the tight grip Snape caused his left wrist. Like a switch being pulled, the second existence went away. Harry blinked in surprise, fearful it was just going to jump back again in the next moment. After a minute of relief, his shoulders fell as he relaxed.

"Better?" Snape asked snidely.

Harry nodded and accepted the towel that was handed to him. He dried off his face and patted down his damp sleeve. With a hint of impatience, Snape held Harry's arm out and used a drying spell on his sleeve.

"Thanks," Harry muttered. He had left his wand beside his bed and he wasn't very good at that spell anyway.

"You should return to your dormitory," Snape commented.

Feeling almost himself, Harry stood up, hugging the blanket around him for moral support.

As he escorted Harry back to the Gryffindor common room, Snape said, "Do not fall asleep without Occluding your mind first."

Harry nodded and stopped at the base of the stairs to the boy's dormitory. "Thank you, sir," he said honestly.

Snape didn't reply beyond tilting his head to the side.

* * *

Harry's previous uneasiness around Snape returned with a vengeance. He delayed going down to breakfast so that he would have to sit on the close end which was usually where Hagrid, Sprout, and Filch sat. Through breakfast he occupied himself with steering a reluctant Hagrid toward the topic of wombats, and avoided looking over at the occupants on the end of the table.

Feeling better than he had in days, Harry went back to his reading about parchment spells. Several times he thought of taking a break and checking if Snape needed help with anything; each time he vetoed the idea immediately.

Occluding his mind before falling asleep worked well to keep his mind from wandering, and after a few days, he didn't even have to think about it consciously. Safely separated from the horror of it, he thought back to the dreams to try to remember if there were any clues to Pettigrew's location. Other than being in a cellar, he could not recall any.

Harry fell back to his previous routine, fearing that he was going to spend the entire summer at Hogwarts. Pettigrew didn't seem to think he was in any danger, which didn't give Harry much hope. His notions of visiting Ron in London or the Burrow were now seeming to be only so much fantasy.

* * *

At dinner one evening the next week, Dumbledore observed, "It is almost your birthday, Harry."

Harry glanced up at that and thought about it. It was July eighteenth. A month of the summer was gone already.

"I think perhaps a small party is in order," Dumbledore continued. "Why don't you invite a few close friends--not as many as I invited last time if you please. You can have the Great Hall for that evening."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, feeling a bit honored by the offer. "I'll do that."

* * *

Harry used one of his new parchment spells to make up invitations. At first he was going to make them very elaborate, then decided all that showed was he had way too much time on his hands. He went instead with a simple animated flour-
ish at the bottom.

Hermione wrote back the next day, accepting his invitation and asking if she could bring her parents as Ron was bringing his whole family and she wanted them to meet again. She also made some suggestions about his new Map and thought it was coming along nicely.

Harry wrote again to Neville, telling him to bring his grandmum. Neville replied the next day, sounding surprised to be invited, which made Harry think he needed to try harder with his shy friend.

* * *

The day before Harry's seventeenth birthday party arrived. He got up early and asked McGonagall if she would take him to Hogsmeade to get favors. She seemed to have much less to do now that they had all been there for so long.

As they entered Honeyduke's, someone gasped and everyone turned to stare. Harry put his head down and looked around the shelves, determined to not be affected. He was uninspired though. Up at the counter he said to the clerk, "Anything new and interesting? I need party favors."

The lady in a pink striped apron said, "We have you on a chocolate frog card."

"Newer than that," Harry said, trying to sound easy-going. "A little tacky to hand those out at your own party."

"There isn't anything newer than that. And I'd hand them out at my party, especially if they had me on them. Oh, except these." She pulled out a box of red, shiny-wrapped sweets. "The wrapper is grain and sugar, so you can eat that. And inside each is different. All of them are fruit flavored and they turn your eyes the color of that fruit. Low-key, but tasteful."

She rang him up for those and as he reached for his package, she said, "Can you sign this for me?" as she held up his chocolate frog card. "Headmaster Dumbledore signed his," she pointed at the card pinned behind a sheet of glass on the wall behind her. Harry had never noticed it there and it looked like it had been there a while, given the amount of dust on the glass.

Harry shrugged and she happily slid the card over to him as well as handed him a never-out quill. When he gave it back, she stared at it a long moment before smiling at him and turning to slip it behind the glass next to Dumbledore's.

* * *

Late that evening, Harry stepped into the Great Hall in search of a snack, and stopped just inside the doorway. A massive pile of presents had been stacked on a table near the fire. Since it was his birthday coming up, he feared they were all for him.

"A bit startling, isn't it?" Snape's voice came from behind him.

"Those aren't for me, are they?"

Snape ignored the question and stepped over to the table. "Professor Sprout has been intercepting the owls bringing these over the last week. The piles are sorted into people you might know . . ." He picked up a long narrow box. "Such as Victor Krum. And complete strangers." He gestured at the larger pile on the end.

Harry gaped at the varied and colorful packages. Some of the wrapping had wizard pictures on it with little moving scenes. "Well," Harry said quietly, "this makes up for a lot of birthdays with absolutely no presents." He reached out and picked up a strangely shaped box with maroon and gold wrapping. Curious, he shook it and then glanced at the tag. Alarmed, he set it back down gingerly at full arm's length.

"What is it?" Snape asked.

"Fred and George," Harry said and breathed out in relief when nothing untoward sprang out of it.

"I would imagine that nearly everything a seventeen-year-old wizard could want is somewhere in this assortment."

"Yep," Harry agreed, trying to keep the restlessness from his voice as he eyes roamed the pile. Some of the larger boxes from total strangers worried him. Fortunately, none of them appeared to have air holes. He stepped around to the other side, stopping beside Snape. "Do I have to write thank you notes for all of these?" Harry wondered aloud.

In his driest voice Snape replied, "Having never faced this dilemma, I do not know. Perhaps if Mr. Lockhart were here, he could tell you."

"Having spent detentions helping him answer his post, I think I know what his answer would be." Harry sighed. The presents felt like a burden now, like a pale substitute for something more meaningful.

"There is perhaps one thing you still wish for that is not here," Snape stated as he picked up a silver-wrapped box, looked it over casually, and set it down again. Harry looked up at him in question as he went on, "A home besides this castle, perhaps?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, thinking that he *would* like to leave at some point.

Snape put his hands behind his back and appeared to bolster himself with a small frown. "It is not too late to be adopted, for example."

Harry laughed lightly. "Oh, you mean those twenty-seven offers of adoption McGonagall sorted through?"

"There were that many?" Snape asked sharply, surprised.

With a shrug Harry replied, "More than last time, according to her. She thinks it's because I'm less hazardous now. I'd like to think that's not true," he added, a little put upon. He looked over the piles again and sighed faintly.

"Don't want to take any of them up on their offer?" Snape asked.

Harry shot him a look of humored disbelief. "Not really."

Snape advanced a half step closer. "Any particular reason?"

"I don't know any of them . . ." Harry stopped. His brow furrowed as he tried to find words to explain. He couldn't deny that, in a fanciful moment or two, he had entertained the notion of being adopted by Lord Frelander, if only because it would mean hanging out on a nice estate instead of here at the castle for the rest of the summer. In reality the idea was awkward and strange, and he sensed that it wouldn't really address that deeply buried longing. With his hands Harry gestured that he couldn't explain.

"What if someone you knew very well wished to?" Snape asked evenly. "Someone who understands what has happened to you over the last six years."

Harry hesitated answering. Thinking about it meant opening up those buried memories again and since his life didn't depend on it, he really didn't want to; it threatened only to breathe new life into that tangle inside him. They both stood in silence for a long minute. Finally, Snape stepped closer still, making Harry look way up at him.

Quietly, Snape said, "Myself, for instance."

Harry blinked at him. "What?" he asked loudly. The question echoed in the vast hall.

"I think we know each other rather well," Snape said.

After a long stare of disbelief, Harry said, "You aren't joking--are you, sir?"

"Have you ever known me to joke?"

"Not about something like this." Harry thought about it more. "Maybe not at all. No, that's not true," Harry corrected himself. He was scrambling for time to think. "I thought you hated me," he said.

Snape straightened at that. "Have I given you that impression at all in the last three months?"

"Uh, no. I guess not." He swallowed hard. "I don't . . . You . . ."

Snape backed up a step and put up his hand to halt Harry's speech. "You certainly don't have to answer now. And there is no time limit on your answer."

"I'm seventeen tomorrow; isn't that a little old to be adopted?" Harry pointed out.

"By wizard law, one can be adopted up to the age of financial independence, considered to be the average age to finish an apprenticeship, which is twenty."

"You've, uh, researched this," Harry observed. Snape returned a look that said, *of course*. Harry stared at his hard angular face again, trying to slow his fast circling thoughts. "You are seriously offering this?"

"I have been thinking it over since the end of last term."

Harry frowned and stated darkly, "This is Dumbledore's idea."

Snape held up one finger. "His idea, but not his instruction. He made himself very clear on that point. And I admit, the idea was . . . quite startling at first."

"But he talked you into it," Harry suggested quietly.

Snape suddenly stepped forward again. "*You* talked me into it, Mr. Potter," he said sharply, stunning Harry. "Every time I, rather surprisingly, looked forward to your company in the dungeon. Every time I showed you a spell and, no matter how complicated it was, you required only at most three or four tries to produce a reasonable replication of it, and I would think to myself how proud any wizard parent would be of you."

Harry dropped his eyes to the stone floor as the gap inside himself twisted around like a snake.

Snape went on, "I do not offer this simply out of gratitude, in case you think that true." Harry continued to stare at the floor and didn't respond. Softly, Snape said, "Consider it, Harry. You certainly know where to find me." With that, he turned and stepped away.

Harry felt a bit like he did staring down at Voldemort's body, as though someone had taken his heart out and haphazardly stuffed it back in upside down. He stood in the vacant Great Hall for a long time, watching the flames make his shadow flicker across the uneven floor.



Chapter 13 - Acquiescing

Harry remained in his dormitory through breakfast. He had woken with an overwhelming desire to reorganize his possessions. There was a box in the far corner of the common room of things people wanted to give away. Harry dumped a few things in there and threw some others out. Around eleven, too hungry to avoid it, he went downstairs. The party was scheduled to start at three; that gave him plenty of time to see to any last-minute preparations.

When Harry returned from the kitchens to the hall with a plate of food, he found the teachers seated in their usual place. Unable to avoid sitting with them, he walked the length of the room. He set his plate down on the end, across from Dumbledore.

"Good morning, Harry," the old wizard greeted him warmly.

"Morning, sir."

"Sleep well?"

He shrugged. "Mostly." He had had very strange dreams about the Dursleys and his parents, though the details were escaping him now.

As Harry poured himself some pumpkin juice, Dumbledore said, "I hope you don't mind, Harry, if I give you my gift now. I'm not certain how long I can join the party for later." He pulled a long slender box out of his pocket.

Harry put down his fork and accepted it. "I don't mind, Professor."

"Harry, you of all people have earned the right to call me 'Albus.'"

"Uh," he hesitated. "I'd have to work on that, sir."

McGonagall, beside Dumbledore, put her hand over her mouth to hide her grin.

"Only if you wish to, of course," Dumbledore said amiably.

Harry lifted the box top to reveal a dark peach feather quill with a gold tip. "Wow," he said, "thank you, sir." It was clearly a feather from Fawkes. The tip didn't have a well. On a hunch, Harry wrote on the inside of the box with it. The never-out charm wrote in continuously sparkling gold and peach ink. "Thanks. It's wonderful." He carefully boxed it back up and set it well out of range of his plate and juice.

Hagrid reached into one of his great pockets and brought out a smashed box and handed it over. "Can' compete with the las' one, but here yer are."

"Hagrid, you are talking to someone who used to get old socks for Christmas and no birthday presents at all, so I am pretty easy to please." As he said this he realized that maybe he shouldn't have with Dumbledore right across from him.

He concentrated on the difficult unwrapping job, made worse by much knotted string, and tried not to flush. Inside were a pair of rabbit-lined gloves.

"Maybe a lil' more of a Christmas present, but they're the bes' I could think of. Made 'em myself."

"They're great Hagrid. They'll be useful for practice in the autumn."

McGonagall and Sprout had fetched their gifts from the pile across the room and presented them. Harry's plate grew cold while he opened them and they joined his small pile. McGonagall gave him colored sheets of reusable parchment and Sprout an ever blooming flower in a glass bulb to put in the window of the dormitory. The rose scent of it hovered around him, even after he had re-closed the box.

"Severus," McGonagall said airily, "didn't you get Harry anything?"

Harry paused in pulling his plate back, an unexpected defensiveness rising in him. "He gave me his present last night, Professor," Harry said, pleased with how even his voice sounded, given how much his heart broke from its usual rhythm.

Dumbledore looked closely at Harry before he leaned forward to look down the table at Snape. The headmaster then gave Harry a knowing look, and Harry twitched his lips in confirmation.

"Do we get to see it?" McGonagall asked eagerly. "In all the time I have known him, I don't think Severus has ever given anyone a present. No matter what the occasion."

"Uh," Harry started. He glanced at Dumbledore for support. In measured speech Harry finally explained, "I haven't accepted it yet . . . so there isn't anything to show."

McGonagall's brow furrowed deeply as she tried to figure that out. Harry expected her to ask more, but she didn't. He wondered if Dumbledore had nudged her under the table. Harry kept his attention on his plate the rest of the meal; he wanted his thoughts kept private while they churned.

* * *

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley gave Harry a hug when she arrived at the door. Ron, Ginny, and the twins tramped in behind her, each patting Harry on the arm as they passed, presents in hand.

"Thank you for coming," Harry said. "And I said, no gifts. You'll see why inside." He led them into the Great Hall. Hermione jumped up and greeted Ron and the Weasley parents warmly. Harry offered butterbeers all around. "We are still waiting on Neville and his grandmother."

"Small party," Neville commented from the doorway.

"Hi, Neville." Harry stepped over to him and took the large wrapped box from him with a shake of his head. "I was ordered to keep it small after the last one."

"Oh, yeah. I can imagine."

Fred held up his bottle of butterbeer. "Congratulations Harry. Never would've believed you'd make it to seventeen."

"Here here," Mr. Weasley, echoed. "To Harry."

Harry rolled his eyes as they all raised their bottles. "We had enough toasts at the last party," Harry insisted as he straddled the bench. The others joined him around the Gryffindor table and soon, loud conversation filled their side of the hall.

"How are you making out here?" Hermione asked.

"Bugger to be stuck here," Ron commented. "When is the Ministry going to catch those blokes so you can come visit us?"

"It could be more interesting, but it isn't so bad. It isn't the Dursley's," Harry stated emphatically as he cut himself another piece of cake.

"There is that," Ron agreed. He glanced over all of the gifts again. "I can't believe all of these presents," he said for the third time. "Wonder what is in 'em all?"

Harry put his plate and fresh piece of cake down. "Let's find out!" he said and jumped up from his seat.

He and Ron tore into the boxes, revealing a mostly ordinary assortment of wizard gear along with a few Mugglish cross-over things like t-shirts with magical pictures on them. Every time Ron expressed a liking for something, Harry gave it to him. Ginny, catching on to this, helped out as well. By the time they were finished, the table was a disaster of torn wrapping, open boxes and teetering gifts.

"So you ended up with Krum's autograph anyway," he said, looking over a heavily marked Quidditch bat.

"So, he and I are even, then," Harry said. He stood up to get another butterbeer. Ron gathered up his goodies and brought them over to mess with them. Hermione was discussing Muggle relations with Mr. Weasley. Mrs. Weasley and Neville's grandmother seemed to be plotting Neville's future together. Harry looked at his friend in concern, but Neville seemed more interested in the flowerless chocolate plant Harry had received.

"You are definitely the right lady for the job," Arthur was saying to Hermione.

"I think I need Muggle expertise though to have a private practice, like law or policy." Her eyes glowed eagerly as she spoke. "I'm going to apply to some Muggle programs this autumn. I have piles of brochures but I don't have them with me. I'd be interested in your opinion."

"Have you looked at Waxman's Medicinals?" Molly was saying. "They have a farm and greenhouse not far from the Burrow. One of several, I hear."

Neville looked up in interest at that. "Do you think they have internships?" he asked.

"Certainly worth checking," Molly said.

Harry felt cold as he listened. Other than his sometime notion of becoming an Auror, he didn't have any real plans. Thinking he would find some commiseration, he said to his best friend, "What are your plans, Ron?"

Ron began putting away the advanced wizard chess pieces that were refusing to battle outside of a real game. He said, "Bill says he'd have me on as an assistant at Gringotts to see how I liked it. He said just getting around that place is an adventure." He shrugged. "I think I'll give it a try. Sounds interesting at least. Even get to train security Trolls every now and then," he added with an odd smile.

Harry pushed his third piece of cake around with his fork and frowned to himself. He couldn't imagine what else he would do other than become an Auror, and whatever it was, it sounded like he was going to be doing it alone. He sighed and finished off his luke-warm butterbeer.

"I'm going to take my parents on a quick tour," Hermione said brightly many hours later as the gathering broke up and moved to the doors. "I'll come back down and say goodbye, Harry," she added as they disappeared around the corner.

"We had a nice time, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said kindly, patting Harry on the shoulder. "Hopefully you can come and stay with us soon."

"Happy birthday, Harry," Fred or George said as they departed. The other Weasleys echoed this as they shuffled out into the Entrance Hall. Harry hung back and, as their footsteps faded, returned to the table. The large front door to the castle boomed closed. Harry stood before the mound of open boxes and random gifts.

Halfheartedly, he pulled a larger box free and began digging around for items to load into it for easier transport to the dormitory. The sudden silence of the room pressed in on him and, when the next item, the official Bulgarian Quidditch bat signed by the team, wouldn't fit in the box, he set it down on the floor beside it and dropped down on the bench, facing the fire. The crackle of the flames was the only sound in the large dark space around him.

Harry wondered at the oppressive feeling in his chest. Discussions about the future had left him feeling uneasy rather than excited as it clearly had his friends. He deeply wished he felt the way they did but didn't know how to find his way there.

A shadow shifting in from the left brought Harry's attention up from the dwindling fire. "Sir," Harry said when he recognized the tall figure.

Professor Snape lifted a stray lid on the pile. "I do believe that you have not even managed to open them all," he stated dryly.

"No," Harry agreed then wondered if Snape were hinting at something.

"You gave most of them away," his teacher went on, as he held an empty velvet-lined box from Flourish & Blotts.

"Tried to," Harry said. "Hermione took that one."

"Ah," Snape said.

"Did you want it?" Harry asked, a little surprised.

"Hm." Snape put the box back down.

Grinning faintly now, Harry turned back to the pile. "There was another box like it with the same store wrapping." He dug around to the bottom and pulled out a weighty, silver parchment wrapped box. With well-practiced movements, he pulled away the wrapping and opened the lid to reveal another dark gray desk journal with gold edging to the pages. After flipping it over, Harry observed, "You are in luck, this one isn't embossed with my initials. Hermione didn't seem to care that the other one was." He held it out to Snape.

"You are certain you do not want it?" Snape asked as he accepted it and flipped through the pages once.

"Carry that in my backpack all next year? I don't think so."

Snape closed the journal and set it on its edge. "Thank you," he stated levelly.

Hermione's voice issued from the Entrance Hall, still giving statistics and history at a rapid clip. Her parents followed her in and back over to the party table. "Well, Harry, we should go."

Harry stood up and gave her a casual hug. "Thanks for coming. Thanks for the books."

She started to turn away. "Hopefully I'll get to see you at Ron's before school starts." As she stepped between her parents to leave, she hesitated and looked back at her father when he did not immediately move to follow.

Mr. Granger looked from Snape to Harry. "You all right left alone here, son?"

"Yes," Harry replied automatically. His brow furrowed as he tried to figure the man out.

Hermione stepped back over. "This is one of our teachers, Dad, Professor Snape."

"Oh," he said and looked Snape up and down another time.

Understanding now, Harry glanced up at his teacher. In his long cloak with high collar and the dim firelight coming from floor level, he did look rather menacing, and, as usual, he wasn't trying not to. Harry felt that surge of defensiveness again, stronger this time.

Hermione's mother patted Mr. Granger's sleeve. "Come on, Hon. I'm sure they wouldn't hire anyone, uh, dangerous."

"Hire anyone who would try to kill Harry?" Harry suggested with such sarcasm that Hermione had to cover her giggle. "Can't imagine that," he finished a little bitterly.

"Poor, Harry," Hermione said in overdone sympathy and giggled again.

"Why are you laughing, dear?" Hermione's mum asked, alarmed and chastising.

"Ehem, uh, nearly every Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we've had has tried to kill Harry," she explained making her mother look more alarmed.

"You know," Harry said, turning his head to look back at Snape, "as much as you didn't like Dumbledore hiring Lupin, at least he didn't have it in for me."

Snape crossed his arms. "You don't recall running across the lawn away from a werewolf, Mr. Potter?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, he didn't spend months plotting my death. That was an accident."

"Hm," Snape muttered noncommittally.

"Harry," Hermione said, "if you define it as danger to Harry--you have to count five of the Defense teachers."

"So, Professor, do I have to start worrying about you as well now?" Harry turned his head over his shoulder to ask Snape.

"You're teaching Defense next year?" Hermione asked sharply, sounding very concerned. "Who's teaching Potions?"

Snape replied, "A woman by the name of Gertrude Greer has accepted the position. I know her only by reputation. She is expected to arrive tomorrow, in fact." He gave Hermione a challenging look.

"I was looking forward to seventh-year Potions," she explained with a hint of a whinge.

"I don't mean to disappoint, Ms. Granger," Snape said airily.

"That's all right, sir. You should teach what you want to teach. It's just that we need Potions more than Defense now . . ." she trailed off. After a pause where her mother pointed out the time, she added, "We really should go." This time her parents followed her out of the hall. At the door she paused. "Bye, Harry," she said as her mother put a hand on her shoulder to keep her moving. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," Harry replied.

The sinking feeling started again as the outer door closed, reverberating through the vastness. Harry distracted himself by picking up another larger box from the floor and putting gifts into it, tossing the smaller empty boxes into the hearth.

"Do you want help?" Snape asked.

Harry hesitated before replying, "Sure."

They managed to pack everything into three large boxes. Snape handed Harry each of the last few unopened packages revealed at the bottom. Harry sighed and ripped them open, adding a ninth hat, a third broom compass, and a very soft scarf in Gryffindor colors to the last box.

"And this one," Snape stated softly as he pulled a small, slender box from his pocket and held it out. "In case you cannot accept the other one."

Harry stared, unmoving, at the box in Snape's hand. He had been merely sinking before--now he was plummeting.

"Harry?" Snape prompted him.

"You don't have to do that," Harry said, voice a little thick. Walls that he hadn't known were surrounding him seemed to have crashed in on him. "You don't have to do any of this." The flare of the hearth faded out at that moment, leaving the boxes and wrapping as glowing filigrees of ash.

Still holding the box out, Snape thought a long moment. "I find myself wanting to," he said quietly; too quietly to give away his tone.

Harry took the box and held it, unable to open it. He was certain he would lose his tenuous control if he did. The scene of minutes ago, of Hermione leaving with her parents, replayed again in his mind. He had never lost that ache of jealousy, of hopeless bitter longing, could conjure it now if he thought it useful.

"Are you sure about the other one?" Harry heard himself ask.

"I never do anything without due deliberation."

Harry still held the box lightly in his fingers. It was a little heavier than he thought it would be from the size. "No, I don't suppose you do," he commented, stalling for time to try to pin down the emotion churning in him. It felt like fear, but that didn't make any sense.

His internal struggle must have reflected in his face because Snape said, "I don't mean to distress you. My offer has apparently rendered you too vulnerable."

A measure of control returned to him as Snape said that, making Harry wonder if half the fear hadn't been of Snape recognizing what was happening to him. "You already did that," he commented and finally raised his eyes. "That is how I finally defeated Voldemort, you know." At Snape's intense expression, Harry went on. "You thought you'd made a mistake, breaking my concentration. I thought you had too," Harry explained, his heart racing as though it were happening all over again. "But he'd Occluded his mind too much--I couldn't get at him anymore."

"The Death Eaters were regrouping and I looked around and saw you. All of these confused emotions came out and Voldemort latched onto the hate. He came straight at me with it, so certain he knew you, so certain he had me." Harry paused and shook his head. He was breathing faster now as well. "I didn't have any choice--I had to pull out everything I'd felt at the abandoned manor. I had to relive all the memories I'd been avoiding because I couldn't stand to realize I'd been needing something that badly that I couldn't have." Harry's voice cracked at that. He paused to catch his breath and calm the burn in his eyes.

Snape gave him a moment and then observed quietly, "That most certainly would have done in the Dark Lord."

"He'd staked everything on that surge--hadn't left himself any way to back out of it. The memories did startle him rather a lot," he commented, attempting a lighter tone.

"I had been rather curious, but you'd avoided filling in the details to the Ministry, and I had no right to pry if did you not wish to discuss it."

"You deserved to know," Harry said tiredly. He didn't know where to go from here; numbness had seeped in where everything had churned injuriously before.

"Harry . . . you can have it, you know."

Harry closed his eyes and floated a moment. When he opened them again he could feel that his expression was unduly pained so he closed them again and held them that way. Snape stepped close, his robes swishing over the sound of the fire. After a long pause he put his left hand lightly on Harry's shoulder blade. Clenching his eyes tighter, Harry leaned forward and rested his forehead on Snape's chest. They stood that way for a long time, until Harry's breathing slowed to normal.

"What do you think?" Snape asked as he stroked Harry's back once, very lightly, fingers uncertain. After a long pause, Harry nodded. Snape caught his breath. "Are you saying 'yes?'" he asked, a little startled. Harry nodded faintly again.

Taking a half-step back and drawing himself up, Snape said in an unsettled voice, "Happy birthday, Mr. Potter."

* * *

The next morning, the teachers sat in a staff meeting. "I must say," Dumbledore began, "that having more time over the summer with this many of you here does make preparations for the coming year go easier. Although I am certain you would like to go home at some point."

"Harry did apologize for keeping us here," McGonagall said. She sat back in her chair with her datebook open in front of her.

"I do hope you dissuaded him from his concern?" Dumbledore asked.

"Oh yes. I pointed out how much busier we would be if he hadn't disposed of Voldemort. He seemed to accept that."

"Thank you, Minerva. He doesn't seem willing to voice his concerns to me."

A silence fell. Snape sat hunched, flipping his quill over in his fingers repeatedly.

"Yer antzier than a sack of fire beetles, Severus," Hagrid said from the end of the table.

Snape started at his comment, dropped the quill on the table, and sat back with crossed arms. Dumbledore looked him over once. "Everything all right, Severus?"

"Yes. Why shouldn't it be?" he retorted stiffly.

"You are behaving oddly," Dumbledore said gently.

"More so than usual," McGonagall added teasingly.

Snape glared at both of them but refrained from comment. Dumbledore shifted smoothly onto school business.

At the end of the short meeting, all but Snape stood up. "There is something I should discuss with you," Snape said to Dumbledore. The rest of the teachers paused and looked at him before continuing out of the room.

"Everything is not all right, I take it?" Dumbledore asked when the door closed.

Snape again flipped his black quill feather across his fingers nervously. "He said 'yes'."

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "Already?" At Snape's nod he added, "I would not have imagined that." The headmaster stepped to the window and looked out for a long minute. "It concerns me."

Snape rubbed his chin in thought. "I think it need not. Bringing the Dark Lord down forced him to admit things to himself that he would not have otherwise. I believe he had less to think over as a result."

"Well then, congratulations are in order," Dumbledore said. At Snape's dubious expression, he shook his head. "You do seem unsettled . . ."

Snape collected up his parchments, rolling them tightly. "I may have thought the likelihood to be lower than it actually was when I was deliberating."



Chapter 14 -- Forms and Filings

Harry walked through the day in a daze. He didn't have any place he had to be or anything he had to do, which was unfortunate since he really could have used something to occupy his mind. His mind vacillated between stunned and hopeful. He was in a hopeful mood when he encountered Snape in the corridor that afternoon. His eyes must have given him away because Snape straightened sharply when their gazes met.

Recovering quickly, Snape said, "There are some arrangements to be made. If you are going to be available on Wednesday--"

"You think I have someplace else to go?" Harry asked.

"There is that. I have asked a solicitor to come . . . are you ready for this, Harry?" Snape asked.

Harry swallowed hard. "Yes, sir. Just a little fast."

"Do you want more time?" he asked levelly.

Harry thought a long moment. "I don't think that will make any difference." He looked down at his hands folded around themselves. "I'm still getting used to the idea."

"You may certainly have more time to do so, should you wish."

With a shake of his head, Harry said, "I don't need it. I'm not going to change my mind." Indeed, he had latched onto the notion more fiercely than he had believed possible, imagining giving it up gave him a sick feeling.

"Wednesday then. In the morning after breakfast, in my new office."

"All right."

They both stood still without any inclination to move on. "Would you care to help me test the efficacy of some old potions from the stocks?"

Brightening instantly, Harry said, "Yes."

* * *

Later in the afternoon, Harry sat alone in the Great Hall reading a Muggle paperback book Hermione had sent by owl that morning. It wasn't holding his attention as well as he had hoped; so, when the front doors of the castle opened and closed and hesitant footsteps sounded across the Entrance Hall, Harry looked up at the doors with some interest. A

woman with short brown hair and maroon robe came in the first set of doors, stopped, and glanced at the ceiling in surprise.

Eager for a distraction, Harry put down his book and stepped over to her. "Are you Gertrude Greer?"

She pawed through a large purse slung over her shoulder. "Are you the welcoming committee?" she asked without looking up. She apparently found the parchment she wanted; it had the school seal on it. She read it over quickly, her lips moving faintly.

"I guess I am now," Harry responded. "Do you want me to show you to your office and classroom?"

She put the parchment back away, stuffing it in at random. She turned back to the Entrance Hall without answering his question. "I came on an earlier train in case they didn't have room for my trunks on the fuller afternoon run," she explained in a tone that assumed he would care. In the outer hall stood five very large vertical trunks looking like menacing wardrobes.

"Maybe I should let you move those," Harry said, imagining them filled with dangerous ingredients and delicate instruments.

She muttered a hover charm of sorts and the trunks lifted in unison like a platoon and followed them across the hall.

Down in the dungeon, Harry was glad Snape wasn't around. A few cauldrons still bubbled on the benches against the wall. Greer slipped her gloves off and circled the room, glancing into the cauldrons as she passed.

"So what do you teach?" she asked as she opened a trunk and pulled out her desk set.

Grinning, Harry said. "I don't. I'm a student."

Still self-absorbed, Greer opened the drawers of the desk and began arranging her things in them. The scene bothered Harry somehow and he tried to shake it as silly.

"I read the school rules; students aren't allowed to stay for the summer," she stated in a nearly Umbridge-like voice.

"I think the headmaster made an exception," Harry said easily. He turned from her and walked over to the cauldrons. The Draught of Isis was turning a nice fuchsia color which meant it would be finished before tomorrow. He stirred it a few times, bringing a cloud of debris from the bottom.

"I wouldn't touch those if I were you," she snapped at him.

"Your dungeon, ma'am," Harry said, again feeling uneasy about that notion, as though he had something unfinished here that now never could be.

She shut one of the drawers loudly and opened the cabinet behind her, usually locked because it held restricted ingredients. Snape must have left it unspelled for her. "If the headmaster lets the rules be broken so easily, that doesn't bode well for my getting along with him, I must say." She seemed to be thinking aloud to herself, but it still made Harry narrow his eyes at her.

"Then I am glad you are not the headmistress, ma'am," Harry said. "I don't fancy being hunted down and killed in revenge by Lucius Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew. Although I admit, being here restricts me from doing the same."

She froze, her hands wrapped around a stack of files. "You're Harry Potter," she said with a momentary grimace. Her eyes finally sought out his scar. She shook her head and put the files in a box on the floor. "I suppose if exceptions are going to be made. . . ."

Harry stepped toward the door. "They do tend to happen for me," Harry admitted, thinking ahead to the next one he could annoy her with. "I'll leave you to your unpacking, Professor," he said.

* * *

At dinner, Greer stepped in just as everyone took a seat. Harry sat down across from Snape, realizing too late that there was an empty spot to his left, across from Dumbledore. With so few people, it was difficult to box himself in. Greer stepped over to that seat and shook Dumbledore's hand before sitting.

"Gertie, if you had owled that you were early I could have made certain you were met at the station."

"It is no matter, I am accustomed to handling my own trunks."

Dumbledore went through introductions. Greer turned from the last one, Hagrid beside her, and rubbed her hands together as though overexcited by the food on the table. At least she didn't wear flowered things the way Umbridge did, Harry thought. "Mr. Potter was kind enough to show me to my office when I arrived," she said in a saccharine sweet voice.

Harry gave Snape a flash of dismay. "The Isis is almost finished, by the way," Harry remembered to mention to him.

"It is about time," Snape replied, as though the potion had it in for him. Greer looked between them calculatingly. "Mr. Potter has been assisting me in preparing the long-brew potions I took the liberty of starting before your arrival. During the school year, it is much more difficult to brew them successfully."

"You should use the second floor girls toilet, it's worked well for us in the past," Harry commented in a tantalizingly innocent tone. No other conversations seemed to have started as everyone served themselves.

"And what may I ask were you brewing?" Snape said.

Harry drank his pumpkin juice to stall. "Ask me in a year when Hermione has passed her exams."

"Something dangerous?" Snape went on.

"Was for her." Harry poured himself more juice. "She accidentally turned herself into a cat." The memory was far enough removed that he found it quite funny now. When he stopped laughing, he pulled the plate of chicken legs closer and selected two.

"What is wrong with this toilet?" Greer asked, slightly concerned.

Harry sensed that she really disliked anything that might not be orderly and predictable. "Moaning Myrtle is the reason no one goes into it," Harry commented. "She's a ghost. . . . You didn't go to school here?"

"I attended Durmstrang," she said in a tone that closed that topic.

More annoyed with the woman, Harry said, "Myrtle is harmless. Other things in there aren't so." He caught Dumbledore's gaze, which held equal parts disapproval and mischief.

"Why are such things left for the students to stumble upon?" Greer asked bluntly.

"Oh, well, this one was left by one of the school's founders, so it is a little hard to remove." In as ordinary of a conversational tone as Harry could muster, he added, "Although the Basilisk is dead now; someone put a sword through its head."

Snape broke in. "It does not pose a threat to you, Ms. Greer. Or to anyone who does not speak parseltongue." He gave Harry a dark look.

"Well, I certainly do not!" she said, insulted.

Harry jumped a bit at her reaction. As he settled down and adjusted his napkin, he muttered quietly, "Nothing wrong with that."

"Nothing wrong with it, Mr. Potter?" she asked him in sharp sarcasm as though he had done something wrong during class and she desired to make an example of him. "Only the darkest wizards are Parselmouths, Potter, or didn't you learn that in this school of bright windows? Perhaps you still have a few things to learn, eh?"

Harry stared at her. In a soft voice, he said, "I have lots. I have to take N.E.W.T.s." This comment brought forth wide grins from McGonagall and Sprout. Harry took a bite of mashed potatoes, which were staying warm on his plate somehow. He wondered who was doing that for him. "And I have heard that about Parselmouths, ma'am. In school. Second year."

Sprout and Hagrid looked at the ceiling at that moment. Harry mulled over whether to pop it on her now or save it for later.

"Well, that *is* good to hear," she calmed down considerably as she said this.

"All dark wizards, ma'am?" Harry asked when the table remained silent as though to give him an opening. "Or, all Parselmouths are dark wizards? I just want to make sure I have this straight."

Flustered by his sudden stupidity, she frowned and said, "I'm certain there have been dark wizards who weren't, many in fact. But there has never been a Parselmouth who wasn't." She waved her fork at him as she spoke with strong emotion.

"Do they have to register somewhere? You know, like Animagi?" Harry asked her with an honestly curious tone. He glanced again at Dumbledore, who continued to eat calmly. Harry kept expecting a small shake of the head from him, telling him to stop it.

"They should have to," she blurted out. "Fortunately for all of us, they are incredibly rare."

"Ah," Harry said as though this cleared the topic up completely and it could be dropped.

As Harry ate then in silence, McGonagall caught his eye and gave him a disappointed look. Harry shrugged lightly at her. He had to take an entire year of Potions with this woman, after all.

"I hope you settle in easily here, Gertie," Dumbledore said as he waved his plate away. "If there is any way any of us can assist you, please don't hesitate to ask."

"I'm certain I'll be fine," she said primly, now sounding like Aunt Petunia.

As Harry finished his lunch, all he could think of was he hoped Hermione didn't take a liking to this woman; otherwise he might not make it through his three last terms of Advanced Potions.

* * *

"I am curious, Mr. Potter," said Greer as she encountered Harry in the corridor. Harry had unfortunately chosen that moment to check inside the suit of armor that always seemed to be humming to itself. "Didn't they give you any kind of a job to do around the castle for the summer? I have only been here two days but you seem to have no profitable activity to occupy yourself."

"Um," Harry began. "I'm only guessing, Professor, but I think the other teachers feel that offing Voldemort was worth a summer of unprofitable activity."

"Hmf," she breathed and strode away.

Harry wondered if he went down to breakfast now he could avoid her for the rest of the day or at least for the morning. Willing to eat alone in exchange for not seeing her for a while, he headed straight down to the Great Hall.

As it turned out, he didn't need to eat alone. Snape paced in vague agitation along in front of the head table. Concerned, Harry asked, "Everything all right, sir?"

"Yes," Snape muttered. As Harry took a seat at the end of the Hufflepuff table, his teacher ceased pacing and sat across from him. "You are up early," Snape observed.

"I went to sleep early. I think I'm bored. That and I was hoping to avoid eating with the Dragon Lady."

Breakfast plates appeared on the table. "You are not enamored of Ms. Greer?" At Harry's doubtful face, he said, "Perhaps you would be willing to leave with me after the hearing."

"You think Dumbledore would let me go?"

"I expect, Potter, that no one, Death Eater or otherwise, would expect to find you at my house."

Harry grinned at him, "Probably true."

"Excuse me, Mr. Potter, *our* house," Snape corrected.

Harry's eyes glazed as though he stared at something well beyond the side wall of the hall. A home to go to that wasn't the Dursley's. That thought was going to take some getting used to.

"Potter?" Snape prompted.

Harry looked at his plate as he pushed his scramble around with his fork. "I was just thinking how nice it is to not be at the Dursleys. I like regular meals and not being beaten up by my cousin." He fell silent, flushed in embarrassment.

"That bad?" Snape asked with a touch of his usual snideness.

"I think if you'd asked me to come home with you for a previous summer--I would have, just to avoid them."

"Quite bad, then," Snape stated dryly, making Harry smile.

After breakfast, Snape left to meet the solicitor in Hogsmeade. Harry wandered slowly up to the Defense office. His hands were cold and his heart raced. He stared with much more attention at the portraits on the wall as he went, as a way of stalling. They all paid him more attention in return.

"Prithee!" a knight in one of them said. "Have you seen my horse?"

Harry shook his head. "No, sorry." As he turned the corner, the knight was yelling, "She's a bay. Sixteen hands. Let me know if you see her!"

At the door to Snape's office, Harry stopped for nearly a minute before managing to reach for the door handle. The office was bright inside at this time of day. Books lined the walls now, half of them potion-related. He stared at the pensieve up on the shelf and tried to assemble in his mind how he had arrived at this strange point. Voldemort seemed in the distant past compared to the seesawing of his emotions right at this moment.

Sooner than Harry had hoped, the door opened. As he turned to it, Snape stepped in. He looked pleased to find Harry there, drawing a sheepish smile from Harry.

The solicitor was a woman with short, stiff, auburn hair. "Mr. Potter," she said sincerely, "very pleased to make your acquaintance." Her auburn eyebrows bounced as she talked. "May I take this chair?"

"Of course, Ms. Kranden," Snape replied and sat behind his desk.

She pulled the chair up close to the front of the desk, opened her briefcase and pulled forth a thick assortment of parchments. "Now, since you are of age but under twenty, we can perform a custodial adoption or a successory one." She waited for Snape to reply.

"Successory adoptions are still allowed?" Snape asked.

"Anything you can get the council to approve is allowed." She finally found the sheet she was looking for. "One was authorized just two hundred years ago or so. The Nigellus family, I believe."

Snape leaned back in his chair, "Custodial, I should think."

Kranden pulled out a quill and dipped in the inkwell on the desk before filling in the date at the top of a long parchment form. "Given your age, Mr. Potter, and that no one would question your ability to attend to your own interests, you can in theory break from Mr. Snape at any time, just as one could from natural parents once one is of age."

"I understand that," Harry said.

She looked between the two of them. "Purely symbolic adoption, really," she commented as she filled in the names in the blanks buried in the middle of the first paragraph of highly stylized script. Her writing stood out as cold and factual.

Snape stared at his fingernails and stated quietly, "Symbols are important."

"Of course. I don't disagree," she replied automatically. She shifted the parchment up and scanned the intervening text quickly. "Now, Mr. Potter, you have no living immediate family?"

"No."

"Relatives? Godparents? Anyone who might contest this?"

"I have an aunt and uncle--"

"Ever co-habitate with them?" she interrupted.

"My whole life."

She looked up and considered him. She pulled out another form and made a note on it. "We'll have to get signatures from them. They never officially adopted you, I assume?"

"Not that I know of. I doubt it."

She frowned at the parchment in her hand. "The council is not going to like that. Can you bring them in to witness that they are willing to release you? It'd be very time consuming to go through a separation before the adoption. You might be twenty by then."

"They hate wizards," Harry said. "You'd have to trick them into it somehow. They hate *me*, for that matter."

Kranden tapped her finger on the desk as she thought. She frowned as she reread the second parchment again.

"They starved me. They made me live in a broom cupboard. They put bars on my windows to keep me from leaving for school," Harry explained, exasperated by the thought that Vernon and Petunia could still interfere with his life.

"We'll make a case for abused and neglected then," she said softly as she wrote out a note on the margin of the parchment.

Harry kept his attention firmly on her writing; he couldn't bring himself to meet Snape's gaze. "They'd sign anything you gave them if it meant they never had to see me again," he added.

"We'll start with that route then. If we can convince them that your relatives are wizard-averse Muggles, they may forgo the witness requirement. If not, we'll take the neglect route."

She made her way down the parchment, filling in each of the blank lines with her small, precise writing. She used a complicated spell to duplicate the parchment into five copies. Finally, she said, "Sign here," to Snape as she turned the identical stack around to him.

Snape pulled out his usual raven quill and signed the top copy. Harry leaned back in his chair as he watched, feeling dizzy. As Snape flipped up the bottom edge of the parchment, he gave Harry a glance, then lowered his brow at Harry's expression of distress. Harry forced himself to breathe deeply and felt a little better. After a long pause of consideration, Snape returned to his task.

The completed stack was turned toward the solicitor and she carefully straightened them before turning to Harry. "Mr. Potter, you do understand the ramifications of what you are entering into?"

"Yes ma'am."

"All right, then." She dipped her own quill again and signed each of the copies with practiced speed. She set the quill aside and straightened the sheets yet again. "We need two more witnesses to Mr. Potter's willingness. The witnesses need to have long-term familiarity with him."

Snape stood and gestured for them to move to the door. "The headmaster will most certainly be willing."

They stood in the headmaster's office as Dumbledore glanced over the long parchment with his head angled back to see through his half-moon spectacles. With deliberate motions, he arranged the stack before him and turned to Harry, who stood back from the group. "Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"Sir?"

"All right, Harry?"

Harry shrugged and then forced his demeanor to brighten against an unusual panic that tried to grip him. It receded as he looked into the old wizard's gentle, knowing eyes. "Yes, sir," he answered with confidence.

Dumbledore pulled out a peach-colored quill and signed each of the copies before handing them back to Kranden.

The three of them departed and Harry glanced up as he closed the office door behind them. Dumbledore's expression as he sat with his hands folded before him on the desk was more at peace than Harry had ever seen. He gave Harry a satisfied smile and a nod.

As he followed the others down the escalator, Harry felt that he might have done this just for Dumbledore, had he known what it meant to him. At the bottom, as the gargoyles leapt back into place, Snape stood in thought. "Professor McGonagall?" he suggested.

Harry shrugged and said to the solicitor, "If she thinks we are playing a practical joke on her, will that reflect badly on us?"

Kranden cleared her throat. "I'm not the council; I'm just here to help with the paperwork."

"McGonagall then," Harry said. As they walked toward the staircases, Harry started to grin as he imagined his Head of House's reaction.

At her door, Snape knocked and stepped in. "I am in need of a favor, Minerva, if you have a few minutes."

"Certainly, come in." She marked her page in the large book in front of her and closed it. Harry stepped in behind Snape with the solicitor trailing behind.

"Do you want to explain first?" Harry asked as he stopped just inside the office.

"No, Mr. Potter, it is all right." He took the parchments from Kranden and held them out to McGonagall. "I need you to witness these, if you would, after the solicitor asks you a few questions."

McGonagall accepted the parchments and adjusted her glasses. Her face fell into shock as she read the first paragraph. She looked at the solicitor, then Snape, then finally at Harry, who sighed at her expression of stunned dismay. She dropped the stack down on her desk and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Just a moment. I want to talk to one of you," she pointed between Snape and Harry, "alone first."

Snape and Harry considered each other, unable to determine who should stay.

"Potter, you stay," she said impatiently. The others stepped out and closed the door quietly. She started to speak and then stopped. After another glance at the parchments she shook her head. "This had to have been Albus' idea," she said in dismay.

Harry stiffened at that. A little coldly, he said, "He suggested it originally, but that's all."

She frowned and rubbed her eyes tiredly after setting her glasses aside.

"All you have to do, Professor, is witness that you believe I am doing this willingly," Harry explained in a hard tone.

"Well, Harry, I can tell you are serious about this," she said. "Are you doing this willingly, or to please Dumbledore?"

"I honestly didn't realize how much this pleased him until five minutes ago."

She considered that and sighed as she again perused the top parchment. "Some things cannot be recaptured, Harry," she said wistfully.

Angry and hurt now, Harry replied stiffly, "And some things can."

"Harry," she said gently. "I will sign these for you--I don't mean to imply that I won't. And I do wish for you to find what you clearly feel you are missing." She clasped her hands together, leaned back in her chair, and considered him with a sad expression. Quietly, she said, "The night Albus dropped you at your aunt and uncle's house, I begged him not to leave you there. I am certain he did not realize how poorly treated you would be. But he insisted you grow up in isolation from your fame. Turns out he had other reasons as well that he didn't share at that time."

"I know them now."

"Any of us would have taken you then. Any of us would take you now."

Harry fidgeted a little. "I don't think you understand me as well as Severus does."

She sat forward and put on her glasses. In a lilting tone, she said, "Perhaps not. But had I known you were in the market for a replacement parent, I would have liked a chance to apply." When Harry smiled at that, she went on, "When I ask you if there is anything you need, I do mean it." She considered him. "Clearly what you need is permanence. Call them back in." She waved at the door.

"Are you certain bringing Mr. Snape along is a good idea?" Kranden asked Harry as they waited on the castle lawn. Snape was stepping down from the main doors, still out of range of hearing. "If they dislike wizards . . ."

"Are you kidding? All the better. They'll think I'm going to be miserable. They'll sign in an instant."

Snape wore a Muggle outfit of starched white shirt and dark trousers. The cuffs and collar of the shirt were far too wide for current fashion. Kranden had done a better job, wearing a straightforward, conservative wool jacket and skirt. "Shall we?" she said as they congregated.

They Floo into the nearest wizard enclave and then walked to Little Whinging. The sun was shining brightly and the wind was gentle. "You owled them, correct?" Kranden asked as they approached the drive.

"I used Muggle post, but yes. I didn't tell them the time; otherwise, they wouldn't be there when we arrived," Harry said.

The neighbor lady looked up from her weeding at Snape and gaped. Snape gave her a narrow-eyed look in return. Harry waved at her and said hello in his most friendly manner. Her pinched face looked more confused by this, mincing over to inspect her hedges in order to follow their progress up the pavement.

The door opened as they approached the step. Vernon held open the door and scowled, "Figures the neighbors'd see you. I don't know what you want, but you better make it quick."

"You didn't inform him of the purpose of this visit?" Kranden asked Harry.

"All I told him is that he'd be rid of me for good after this," he explained, as they followed Vernon Dursley into the house.

Petunia stood in the kitchen doorway with her arms folded and a sour look on her face that faded to fearful as Snape stepped past her with a dark glance. In the living room, Vernon took a seat in his regular chair without inviting others to sit. Snape followed into the center of the room and turned in a circle to look over the place; Vernon gave him a distrustful huff through his mustache.

"Thought I heard somethin'." Dudley, now as tall as Vernon, sauntered into the room. He walked menacingly over to Harry, who stood his ground and stared up at his older cousin. "Didn' think you were ever comin' back, Pottier."

"Just couldn't stay away," Harry retorted dryly.

Dudley gave Kranden a lewd appraisal then turned to Snape and froze. Snape, even in his approximation of Muggle clothes, looked like a wizard and, with his current fierce expression, not a very nice one. His black eyes and hooked profile stood out starkly in the frilly decor of Petunia Dursley's home. Dudley took an unconscious step backward and swallowed hard. "Who's that?" he asked the room uncertainly.

"My teacher," Harry replied casually.

"You let a wizard in here?" Dudley demanded of his father.

"I told them to make it quick," Vernon insisted.

"What do you want?" Petunia asked from the entry to the hallway. Her eyes darted fitfully between each of the guests in her house. Her prim voice contained barely controlled fury.

Kranden set her briefcase on the low table and pulled out a parchment. "We are here to ask you to sign a document stating that you are willing to relinquish your status as Harry's guardians." She held the parchment out toward Vernon.

Vernon accepted it with a snort through his mustache. He didn't look at it, just stared at Kranden. "Why?"

"It is mostly a formality, but it simplifies our other filings." She sized up Vernon before explaining, "Professor Snape, here. . ." She gestured at the man behind her. ". . . is making an application to the Wizard Family Council to adopt Mr. Potter."

"What?" Dudley sputtered, attracting Snape's quiet, intent gaze. He shut up immediately and backed up another step. "He can't spell me without taking out his wand, can he?"

"Yes, he can," Harry supplied confidently.

Dudley, sweating now under the piercing black look, backed up beside Petunia, stanced to make a run for it. "You're not going to let Harry do this?" he asked his mum.

Petunia's eyes narrowed. "We certainly don't want him back, ever."

Kranden stepped up to her instead with another copy of the parchment, pulling a Muggle pen from her inside breast pocket. "Sign here, then," she invited.

Petunia held the parchment and pen, one in each hand and considered Snape. "What do you know about this man?" she asked.

"I have a copy of his vitae," the solicitor offered, gesturing at her case. "He has taught at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for the last--"

"Don't mention that wretched place to my wife," Vernon interrupted angrily. He hefted himself out of his chair and stepped up to Snape. With narrowed eyes he said in a low voice, "I've heard there are good wizards and dark ones. You look like a dark one to me."

Snape didn't react, just studied Vernon closely. "And that would matter, how?" he calmly retorted.

"Seems a little strange, Potter losing everything to dark wizards, and all." He looked suspicious now.

Snape's eyes narrowed as he crossed his arms and drew himself up straight. "I do not know, or care, frankly, how you might choose to classify me." He stared through Dursley in silence before stating, "What I can tell you that I am a strict disciplinarian; any misbehavior in my presence is punished most severely. Harry's summer has been spent in long hours of extra readings, lessons, and menial tasks that I set him to; I do not tolerate wasted time."

Vernon grunted approvingly and turned to take the parchment from Petunia. Harry backed up against the wall to get out of his way. "So why did *you* agree to this, boy?" Vernon mockingly asked him.

Harry hesitated before replying, "He asked me."

"That's all it took?" Dudley asked in disbelief.

Harry shot him a dark look, pained to find too much truth in his response. "It's nice to be wanted."

On the way back down the front walk, the solicitor switched her case to her other hand after shaking Vernon's. After the door closed hard behind them, she said, "You lived here your whole life, Mr. Potter?"

"They were behaving better today to keep up appearances," Harry assured her.

"I cannot imagine," she said.

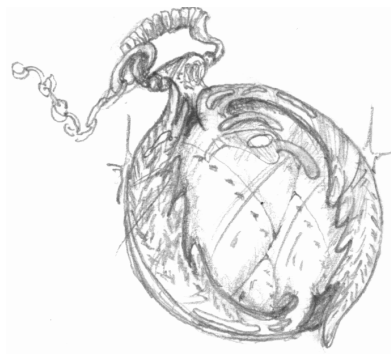
Harry leaned forward to look across at Snape. "You didn't mean what you said, did you, sir?" he asked, worried.

"Potter, as far as I am concerned, you have earned the right to a frivolous existence living off of others' pathetic gratitude. I would not recommend it, nor encourage it, however."

Harry let go of a deep breath in relief. "I suspected that you were just saying what he wanted to hear." He shook himself theatrically. "Legilimency with Vernon Dursley, brrrrr."

"The lengths I am willing to go to, Potter," Snape commented in a airy, suffering voice.

"I am not hearing any of this," Kranden said as they turned off Privet Drive.



Chapter 15 - A Home

The door to the Wizard Family Council room opened and an old witch with a small girl in hand stepped out. She bent and spoke reassuringly to the child. Harry stood patiently waiting for their turn. At the moment he was just grateful to have made it through the Ministry Atrium in one piece. The receptionist who registered his wand stared at him in silent shock for over a minute before he handed it back. By that time the entire Ministry, it seemed, had gathered 'round to shake his hand and thank him. When they had finally escaped, Snape had commented, "You have not been very visible; it is true." Harry had been relieved by that, since he had not been certain how Snape would react to such a scene.

Fortunately, the hearing room was in an out-of-the-way corner on the second floor below ground. Harry'd been worried about running into Mr. Weasley. Since he hadn't owed Ron with the news, he wasn't keen on making up a story on the spur of the moment, especially not in front of Snape.

Kranden gestured that they should enter. As they stepped inside, a witch seated at a small desk off to the side said, "Next we have the application hearing for Severus Snape. He is applying to adopt one . . . Harry Potter." The witch scowled at the paper and looked up at them in surprise. The members of the council sitting in elevated rows at the far end, murmured among themselves and perked up considerably.

As the three of them approached the podium facing the council, the murmuring stopped and all the council gazed at Harry with amazement. Kranden ignored this and took out the sheaf of parchments. She unwrapped them, kept one copy of the long form for herself and handed the others over to the council secretary. "Good morning, members of the council, I am Felicity Kranden. I am assisting Mr. Snape in this application." She went on to explain their application in legalese. Harry stood beside her with his hands clasped extra casually in front of himself. That panicky feeling was trying to build again and he did not want it to show.

Finished with her statements, Kranden stepped back and waited patiently as the secretary handed the forms over to the council chair after registering each document. "Any of them can ask questions now," the solicitor whispered.

After looking over each sheet, at least momentarily, the chairwitch leaned forward. "Mr. Potter," she began with a quizzical expression, "this is a bit unexpected." She cleared her throat and sipped from a teacup before continuing. "The first question that pops into my head is, why now? Why not while you were truly underage and in need of a permanent guardian?"

Harry moved to the podium and glanced at Snape in question.

The chairwitch said stridently, "Do not look to him; I want to hear *your* answer."

"Sorry, ma'am," Harry said. "It is just that there are some things Albus Dumbledore didn't want anyone to know and it is hard to remember that they don't matter anymore." The gazes of the council grew even more interested. "You see, Dumbledore put a spell on my mother's sister's house to make me safe from Voldemort while I was there. I had to consider it my home for the spell to keep working. None of that matters now." He started to step back and then added, "That is why now, rather than earlier."

More murmuring ensued. It quieted as the chair said, "And your mother's sister has provided a signature I see, as well as your uncle. Is there a reason they are not here in person?"

"They hate wizardry, ma'am," Harry supplied.

Kranden stepped up beside him. "I know my comment isn't necessarily relevant, but for what it is worth, I will strongly attest to that."

An old wizard in the back row said, "You have survived well enough, it looks to me. Seems like sticking with blood is the best thing."

Kranden stepped up again. "If I may." She pulled out another parchment and handed it over to the secretary. "This is just a partial chronicle of Mr. Potter's treatment by the Dursleys."

The parchment was subjected to the same procedure and eventually passed to the senior member, who frowned at it. "Locked in a cupboard, Mr. Potter?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry admitted with difficulty.

"Manhandled? Were you every seriously injured?"

"No, ma'am. Repelling magic usually kicked in before then." The council peered down at him now in dismay and sympathy. Harry deeply regretted being there.

"Starved?" she went on, reading the list. "For how long a time?" she asked in an annoyingly factual voice.

Harry sighed painfully then jumped lightly as fingertips brushed the back of his arm. He angled his head and determined that it had to have been Snape. Bolstered by that gesture, Harry replied, "Not usually more than two or three days. My friends were sending me food packages by owl, but one summer my uncle bolted the window closed. And another summer the Malfoy's house-elf charmed my uncle's neighborhood to prevent any owls from approaching."

"Why?" she asked honestly.

"It is a long story, ma'am, and not really relevant," Harry commented.

The chairwitch continued to read the list. "Let's see, basically the rest is a long list of general neglect incidents." She stared at Harry. "You are telling me that Albus Dumbledore, whom I know very well to be a kind and compassionate man, left you in this household for years, knowing this?"

Harry said slowly, "It turned out that there wasn't any choice, but I also didn't explain to him very well why I didn't want to go back."

"Well, that is something we are very familiar with here, I'm afraid." She put the parchment aside. "Anyone opposed to dispensing with the witness requirement?" The secretary looked over the council and made a notation when no one raised their hand. The chairwitch then pulled the long application out again. "Ms. Kranden, this is a standard form, I take it. Right of board, abode, inheritance, all that? Nothing untoward buried in here?"

"No, ma'am. It is standard." Kranden stepped back and waggled her eyebrows once at Harry and Snape.

The witch on the left of the chairwitch leaned over and whispered something that made the chairwitch's brow furrow deeply. "You are certain?" she asked her fellow member and received an emphatic nod in reply.

"Mr. Snape, if I may?" she said. Snape stepped forward beside the podium and took on a pose of attentiveness.

"Is it true you were a Death Eater, Mr. Snape?" she asked in a very serious tone. Gasps sounded around the room.

"Yes, that is true," Snape replied evenly. Harry saw Kranden blanch before her professional face reasserted itself.

The chairwitch seemed to be at a loss for words. She finally managed to say, "Why in Merlin's Realm would we allow a former Death Eater to adopt anyone, let alone Harry Potter?"

Snape opened his mouth and Harry put up his hand to stop him. He felt a renewing anger pumping through him. "There are seven Death Eaters on the official Ministry wanted list. I can name them for you if you wish. You know as well as I that Professor Snape's name is not on it. Otherwise, I would assume we wouldn't have been able to waltz through the Atrium as we did."

"It speaks to his character," a younger wizard on the council said.

"That he put himself at risk spying for Dumbledore?" Harry asked the man. The wizard's face puckered at that.

"Is that what you were doing, Mr. Snape?" the chairwitch asked.

"Yes."

The chairwitch's eyes locked onto Snape's. "That is why you joined He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named?"

"Yes," Snape replied again. Harry forced himself to remain casual at what he knew was a lie. Snape spent years fooling Voldemort, certainly he could handle one Family Council Chairwitch.

"Can't penalize him for that," the old wizard in the back stated. "Someone had to take a stand."

The chairwitch frowned deeply. "Mr. Potter, do you trust this wizard?"

Taken aback, Harry replied. "Of course, ma'am. I wouldn't have said yes to his offer if I didn't. He's saved my life several times."

"How many?" she asked.

"Um, I don't have a count. Well, let me see . . . the broom incident was probably the first time."

"I doubt you would have been killed. Just maimed," Snape commented blandly.

At the expressions on the council's faces, Harry elaborated. "Another teacher, Quirrell, was trying to get my broom to throw me in the middle of a Quidditch match. Professor Snape used a counter-curse to stop him."

"What happened to this Quirrell?" the chairwitch asked.

"Oh, he disintegrated when he touched me while he was trying to get the Philosopher's Stone." Harry shrugged. "Having Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head turned out to be a bit of a disadvantage." He waited for their expressions of shock to neutralize. He hated to say the next part, but he did it anyway. "There was the time he stepped between a werewolf and me and my friends. And then four months ago when he and Dumbledore rescued me after two Death Eaters tried to get even for my helping get Lucius Malfoy arrested." The litany was draining him. With a sigh he added, "And again during the final battle when Bellatrix Lestrange came at me after Voldemort had fallen."

The old wizard in the back grunted. "Wanda, I think we should just give this boy whatever he wants. He wants to be adopted by an ex-Death Eater, I 'spect he can handle it."

The chairwitch, appraised Harry. "You want this Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said with assurance.

She glanced over the application again. "Does anyone have any objections?" No one did. She held the parchments out for the secretary to pick up. "Register these, please."

The secretary embossed each copy and brought all but one back to the solicitor. "You are all set, dear. Have a good day."

In the corridor, Kranden leaned over to Harry. "Nicely done."

"Thank you, ma'am. It wasn't as easy . . . as it should have been," he commented tiredly. His usual lack of sleep was wearing on him now. He needed lunch and tea.

"You need a break from things, I believe," Snape stated as they waited for the lift.

"When can we leave for your house?" Harry asked as they stepped into a mercifully empty lift. "Our house," he corrected himself. "Merlin," Harry breathed, still adjusting to that idea.

* * *

Harry spent the evening packing his trunk in a kind of daze. He had a hard time closing it and had to sit on the lid and bounce a few times to latch it. After he finally managed to, he noticed the bedspread and some other things that he would like. He'd have to borrow a second trunk.

Not sure where to find one, Harry headed down to McGonagall's office to ask. She looked up from her own packing when he knocked on the open door. "Do you know where there's a spare trunk I can borrow, Professor?" he asked.

She stood straight and thought a moment. "In the north wing attic, I believe, are some old unclaimed trunks." Before he could head off, she said, "Excited to be leaving for Severus' house?"

Harry smiled. "Yes, ma'am."

She shook her head. "I wouldn't be," she commented quietly in a tone of disbelief, although she smiled as she said it. McGonagall moved her hands to her hips as she considered him. "Good luck, Harry," she said sincerely.

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm not going to be gone long, so hopefully I won't need it," Harry pointed out before heading off to the attic.

He did indeed find several dusty trunks, one with a very nice blue satin lining. He hovered it back down to the dormitory and set about repacking. It was going to be nice to set up his things without having to hide everything wizard related. He looked forward to that, and to his own space that didn't feel grudgingly loaned or borrowed. As he and his dormitory mates had aged, their tower room had begun to seem cramped.

The next morning, Dumbledore saw them off personally. Harry shook his hand as they stood on the steps to the castle. The headmaster seemed to be aging faster now, making Harry anxious to look at him. "We'll be back in three weeks, sir. According to Professor Snape."

Dumbledore smiled and touched the top of Harry's head fleetingly. "Have a good rest, Harry."

Harry hovered his two heavy trunks down the lawn behind him while he carried Hedwig's cage. He followed Snape, who had just one satchel. "Need assistance with those, Mr. Potter?" he asked pointedly.

"No, I've . . . It's going to take me some time to get used to calling you 'Severus'," he said.

"Apparently."

They boarded the afternoon local train and found an empty compartment. Harry dragged his trunks inside and sat across from Snape at the window. He thought momentarily about hovering the trunks up to the rack and then decided that their present location in the middle of the floor would dissuade anyone from joining them.

With a hiss, the train started out again. Hogsmeade disappeared around a bend in the tracks and the trees closed in. Harry stared out at the mountains sliding by until the trolley came up the aisle. He jumped up and opened the compartment door. "Want anything?" he asked Snape.

"Tea would be nice, if it is hot."

"Two cauldron cakes, a chocolate frog and a tea," Harry said to the pink-frocked lady.

"Oy!" she exclaimed upon seeing him. Harry put his finger to his lips and she snapped her mouth closed and winked at him. "That will be eight sickles and a knut, Dear." Harry reached into his pocket and handed over the coins. He piled the cakes in his left arm and took the teapot with his right. The lady patted him on the head. Harry managed a false smile before turning and letting the compartment door slide closed.

"Oy," is right," he commented as he handed the teapot over.

"Your public persona is most interesting," Snape said. He unscrewed the metal lid and poured the tea out into it.

"What does that mean?" Harry asked as he unwrapped a cake.

"Do you expect to be treated that way?" Snape asked snidely. "Patted on the head?"

"No," Harry answered vehemently. "I get treated as though I'm thirteen or fourteen or something."

Snape sipped his tea and considered him. "Your small stature is partly to blame for that."

Harry frowned and sat back with his snack. A village came into view. The fields were radiantly green with pale dots of grazing sheep. After the second cake was gone, Harry opened the frog and let it hop onto the narrow shelf below the window. It tried to hop up to the open window, but Harry grabbed it in time. It solidified in that leaping pose as he sat back with it. He nibbled on one leg and worked the card free of the package. It was Dumbledore. The figure considered him with a tilt of the head, then stepped out of the frame. Chest constricted, Harry set the card on the shelf and tossed the box in the rubbish bin beneath the window. Snape lifted the card and glanced at it before replacing it between them.

Comfortably full, Harry turned sideways and put his feet up on the seat. As he curled his arms around himself, he asked, "How much longer?"

"Forty-five minutes."

Harry leaned his head sideways against the back rest and closed his eyes. The movement of the train lulled him into a light doze. The next thing he heard was Snape saying, "We are here."

Harry sat up and stretched his cramped neck. The wooden sign on the station read Shrewsthorpe. Snape had already hovered one of the trunks out. Harry grabbed the other and the cage and followed.

On the platform, Harry looked around. The sun made the village vibrant. Snape had said it was a half-wizard village. Harry couldn't tell it wasn't all Muggle by looking at it, other than that things looked a little old and outdated. He watched Snape hover one of the trunks along to the steps and decided that it was okay to do the same.

They walked down the road. The houses closest to the station were fieldstone with lots of white cement. Beyond that they were a little newer. Snape unhooked the gate in a low stone wall and stepped into the garden of an older house. Harry hovered the trunk through the gate and looked over the place. The mortar and face were rough where the whitewash had

worn, the garden was a bit wild, the dark roof peaked steeply with tall narrow chimneys. It had an air of existing well past its expected era. It was about as far from Little Whinging as Harry could imagine.

Snape didn't seem to be looking for an opinion. He opened the heavy wooden door and led the way along a narrow corridor into a main hall that seemed much larger than the place looked on the outside. The hall opened up to the next floor with a dark wood railing over wrought iron posts around the edge. Harry peered into the drawing room and tried to glance into what looked like a library before they headed up the stairs to the first floor. At the end of the upper hall, Snape opened the door and stepped inside. The wide boards of the balcony led to the stone floor of a bedroom.

"Your room," Snape said as he let the trunk hover to the floor inside the door.

Harry looked around. The walls were plastered bright white with the dark heavy beams of the ceiling exposed. A massive hearth filled a third of the right-hand outer wall. The window was small. Harry stepped over and looked out at the garden and the road. Two children on bicycles rattled past, apparently racing each other. He turned back to the room and ran his hand over the thickly restrained bed post. It was all his.

"It's great, sir," Harry said honestly. It didn't remind him of the Dursleys one little bit.

They stood considering each other for a long silence, which Snape finally broke by saying, "I expect dinner will be in an hour or so."

Harry nodded and, spying the wardrobe, went over to it and opened its doors. As he hovered his trunk over, Snape left him to his unpacking.

He hung his clothes in the wardrobe. There wasn't much of any other storage. He hovered his trunks beside each other on the far wall, one under the window. The room, even in the summer, was chilly. Harry changed robes to a thicker one and opened the other trunk. The night stands had small drawers and shelf space under them. He sorted through his stuff for things he would want out. His Quidditch books he set on the bed to put out, then put them back in favor of two textbooks for next year.

He found one of the quilts he had received for his birthday. With relish, he spread it out on the bed. It was orange and maroon with little lions here and there on the fabric. Not quite the Gryffindor symbol, but close. He dug in the trunk again and found the photo album. He carefully lifted it out and took it to the far side of the bed to put it in the night stand. Instead of putting it away, he couldn't help flipping through it. Knowing it was a mistake didn't stop him either. The photos of his parents holding him and waving made him feel more ambivalent than he had ever felt. He shut the album a little hard and put it away.

A knock sounded on the doorframe. Harry jumped at it and turned. "Dinner?" he asked.

A chill passed over him as he followed Snape out of the room and down the balcony; he felt as though he had woken from a dream to find he was living someone else's life. It reminded him of when he had first arrived on Diagon Alley with Hagrid and discovered that everyone knew him and knew more about him than he himself did.

With impatient movements, Snape sat at the dining room table. His hair fell before his face as he did so. Harry sat across from him, pulling his chair up close to the table. A moment later a house-elf stepped in with a large tray of covered dishes. As his large eyes fell on Harry, he hesitated in setting the tray down.

"Tidgy," Snape said, "this is Master Harry, you will give him the same obedience as myself."

"M . . . Master Harry?" Tidgy recovered and quickly placed the dishes on the table, removed the covers and with a deep bow said, "Anything else, Masters?"

Harry wouldn't have minded some pumpkin juice, but he couldn't bring himself to request it. He shook his head instead. Snape eyed him with a tilted gaze. "Bring Master Harry pumpkin juice."

The elf bowed and quickly departed.

"Are you reading my mind?" Harry accused him.

Snape scoffed. "I do not require Legilimency for that. I have seen you drink it with every meal for the last six years."

"Oh," Harry said and realized he should relax. "Sorry," he added quietly.

Snape served himself potatoes and peas. "Not hungry?"

Harry started. He had been focusing on calming down as the food steamed before him. He stabbed a piece of roast chicken. "Smells good." As soon as his plate was full he started eating. It wasn't quite up to Hogwarts's standards but it wasn't bad and there was a lot of it. Tidgy returned and gingerly placed a glass beside his plate. "Thanks," Harry said automatically.

Snape's fork and knife hit his plate a little hard as he set them down suddenly. "Potter," he scolded in disbelief, "one does not-

"Potter?" Tidgy interrupted in a frightened squeak. "Master is Harry Potter, sir?" The elf backed up a step as he realized his other error of decorum.

Snape gave the elf a disgusted look which made Harry grin. With a dark look Snape said, "Tidgy, you may GO." After Tidgy backed out of the room, gaping at Harry, Snape said in a low voice, "One does not thank a house-elf merely for fulfilling their duties. One does not thank them at all, in fact."

"Hm," Harry uttered, unconvinced.

* * *

Tired from traveling and the oddness of settling into the house, Harry gave up on organizing his things and got ready for bed. He hung his clothes up and slipped into his pyjamas. The stone floor was cold. He tiptoed over to the wardrobe and took out the slippers that Hermione had knitted for all of them last Christmas. They were gold and maroon with pointed toes and leather bottoms. Her knitting had improved, even Ron had been forced to admit. He jumped up onto the bed and reached way down to set the slippers on the floor for morning.

The strangeness of this new place made him uneasy. He frowned as he considered that this was probably going to make his nightmares worse. He sighed as he turned down the lamp and darkness filled the room. He snuggled down under the soft covers and closed his eyes.

Snape, not hearing anything from the boy's room for a while, stepped down the balcony and looked in. The door was open and the chandelier behind him cast warm light across the floor, illuminating a pair of maroon and gold footwear beside the bed. Upon the bed was a matching quilt. Snape wondered in that moment what had possessed him that he had adopted a Gryffindor. Arrogant and unthinking they were, he thought darkly to himself.

He stepped silently into the room. Harry was fast asleep, curled on his side facing the door. His dark thoughts escaped him, as Snape found himself hoping that the change in environment would mean a reduction in the boy's nightmares. Being away from the very place where he had confronted Voldemort for the last time couldn't hurt.

* * *

Harry woke with the grey light of dawn lightening the room. He was stiff with long sleep so he considered that he should get up. Grateful for the slippers, he padded across to the bedpost to pull down his robe. Snape's door was closed as he passed it quietly.

Yawning, Harry wandered around the ground floor. There was a library across from the dining room. He found a book on lamination spells and settled into a lounge. Three pages into it, Tidgy appeared with a tea tray which he placed on the table beside Harry. As the elf bowed low, Harry said, "Thanks."

"You a very great wizard," Tidgy said in a wavering voice, "to be thanking a mere house-elf." After a fidgeting pause, he went on in a whisper, "I don't want you to have trouble with Master, Master Harry. Not for sake of me."

"Don't worry about that," Harry assured him. He took a chocolate covered biscuit, noticing Tidgy noticing which he preferred. Tidgy bowed again and backed out of the room.

A while later another voice came from the doorway. "You are up early." Snape stepped in and poured himself some tea which he drank in one gulp.

"I went to sleep early," Harry commented with a shrug.

"Sleep well?" Snape asked. He had started for the door and stopped to ask this.

"Yes."

"No dark shadows?"

Harry thought a moment. "No. Not that I remember," he said, surprised.

"Good," Snape said. "If you do, let me know."

"Immediately?" Harry asked, half-joking.

"If it seems appropriate to do so. If you ever feel unsafe, certainly. I want you to feel secure here; it is the least that should be provided for you."

Harry considered that, feeling a twinge. "Yes, sir."

"I will have Tidgy start breakfast," Snape said before he stepped back into the main hall.

As Harry joined him in the dining room a few minutes later, Snape looked him up and down sharply. "Such Gryffindor gear," Snape commented at Harry's maroon robe with a crest on the pocket and his Hermione slippers.

Harry paused in sitting down. He hadn't thought about that. This was just his stuff. "Does it really bother you?" he asked in surprise.

Snape huffed. "Gryffindors in general bother me, yes."

"I can get other stuff." Harry shrugged as he replied. "This is just what I have."

Breakfast arrived and Harry took a piece of toast and started buttering it. Tidgy departed with a low bow. Snape hadn't replied to that offer. Feeling a little unsettled, Harry added, "Maybe you'd feel better knowing that the sorting hat wanted to put me in Slytherin." Harry said this as Snape's teacup was halfway to his mouth. He froze that way and gave Harry a very surprised appraisal.

"You turned it down?" Snape asked, truly curious sounding.

Harry thought the explanation to that was obvious, but maybe not so much in this company. "I'd met Malfoy and didn't particularly like him. I'd met Ron on the train and he was the first friend I'd ever met. So I talked the hat out of it."

"That is not supposed to be easy to do."

Harry added jam to his toast as he said in alarm at the memory, "Yeah, it kept insisting how great I'd be if it put me in Slytherin." Harry shuddered and bit into his toast.

Snape sat back and crossed his arms to give Harry a long look. "I have to admit, Potter, it does make me feel better." After thinking further, he mused, "Wonder what it meant by 'great'."

Harry put his toast down and wiped his fingers. He poured himself tea and sipped it cautiously. "Before the final battle when my dreams were getting very . . . strange . . ." Harry fidgeted as he remembered those awful nights. Snape still sat back, considering him. "When it seemed sometimes like . . . Voldemort was trying to bribe me to join him . . . Who knows?" Harry shrugged. "There were minutes in a row where it seemed worth it, just to get it all to stop."

"What was he bribing you with?" Snape asked as he returned to his breakfast.

Harry shook his head. "I don't really want to talk about it," he said. The heart rending memory of his mother calling, wondering where he was, still chilled him as much as the Dementors' last stand did.

Snape didn't press the question.

After breakfast Harry went back to his room to finish unpacking. He was basking in the notion that he could actually leave things here when he departed for school at the end of summer.

In his old trunk he found a few old robes that he simply banished away because they were too small. Underneath on the bottom were a bunch of random things that hadn't been touched in a while, like his Sneakoscope. If it hadn't been a gift, he'd have just been rid of it. His First and Second Year textbooks he shelved in the back of the wardrobe with the later ones in front on the high shelf. They hadn't been given summer assignments this year in yet another celebratory gesture, so Harry hadn't kept his texts in any order. Lining them all up by year like that was satisfying. They felt like trophies that way.

He banished a few other old things and then lifted out a few old Hermione hats, uncovering the silver mirror in the corner on the very bottom. Harry stared at its cracked glass as a kind of agony took hold of his chest. He reached in and lifted it out. The silvering was corroded more where the glass had broken. Unthinking, he ran his finger along one of the breaks, drawing a line of blood along it as the edge bit his skin.

The sting in his finger resonated with the pain in his heart. Uncontrollably furious with himself, he kicked the trunk before him several times until his foot throbbed.

"My goodness, Potter," Snape said levelly from the doorway.

Harry stopped and hunched over, cradling the silver frame against himself.

Snape went on, "I don't know whether to scold you or simply ask what is wrong."

Harry brought himself under some control and backed up to sit on the bed with his back to the door and Snape.

"Are you quite finished?" Snape asked.

"Yes," Harry replied snappishly. Snape's unaffected tone made him want to fling himself out of control, but he resisted it.

After a long pause Snape approached and said, "May I ask what is wrong?"

Harry adjusted his arms around the mirror to hide it. "I don't want to talk about it," he said quietly, forcing his voice to come out approximately normal.

Snape stepped closer to the trunk. "You never opened it," he observed in an oddly easy tone.

The comment utterly chilled Harry. He wasn't facing Snape, he thought frantically, how did he know what was haunting him? Harry watched his new guardian reach into the trunk and lift out the small wrapped box he had given him on his birthday. Harry had forgotten completely about it. It must have fallen out of his pocket when he had put his robe away. Numbly, Harry accepted it as Snape handed it to him, now.

With the mirror face down in his lap, Harry unwrapped and opened the weighty box. Inside was a gold pocket watch with the cover embossed to resemble a snitch. Silver embossed wings arched fancifully around to frame the edges.

"It's beautiful," Harry said in amazement. The cover popped open when he pressed the tab on the bottom edge. The face was white with flourished numbers in maroon.

"Nine fifty-two, I believe," Snape stated.

It took Harry a moment to come to himself and realize he should set the time. He pulled the stem and dialed to the correct time, then wound it some so it would run. He closed it and admired its shape again. "Thank you," he said, feeling undone. He wondered if he ever again would trust his emotions to stay put.

"Do you need anything?" Snape eventually asked.

Harry finally looked up at him, at his intent dark eyes. "No," he replied, feeling calm now although his heart still ached. "I think I'm all set."



Chapter 16 - It's Always Calm

The next few days in the house in Shrewsthorpe passed unremarkably, considering. Harry finally had his things arranged in his room. Hedwig had adjusted to her surroundings and came back more quickly when he let her out to stretch her wings. When he awoke, the room ceased to surprise him.

"Are you settling in all right?" Snape asked him one morning.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied. It occurred to him that they didn't talk very much, just sat in silence, though it wasn't awkward at all. "Should we be having more conversation?" Harry asked.

Snape thought a moment. "If you wish to have one, simply start one."

Harry smoothed the butter on his bread more than necessary. "I just wondered if it was too quiet."

"There is no such thing," Snape insisted. "Not after ten continuous months at Hogwarts." He handed Harry the hazelnut butter. "Not to give you the idea that I am against a conversation now and then."

"It is amazingly quiet here," Harry observed. He bit into his bread and tried to think of something to talk about. Hedwig flew in at that moment and dropped a letter before heading off again. "I think she likes it here. She's out a lot more."

"The open fields and the grain storage have far more vermin for her to hunt than the dense forests around Hogsmeade," Snape commented.

"That is probably why she doesn't insist on table scraps." Harry turned his letter over; it was his annual Hogwarts letter. He tore it open and glanced past the usual welcoming paragraph to the supplies list. "I don't suppose I can go to Diagon Alley?"

"You cannot be seen, Harry. Even the Floo Network is not considered safe for you--that is why we took the train." With movements of vague annoyance, Harry folded the letter and put it in his pocket. Snape watched him and said, "Have patience. The Ministry is working hard to get them."

Harry nodded and, with less appetite, went back to eating breakfast.

Later that afternoon, Harry had a reply for Hermione ready in an envelope, and no owl. He stood at his window and looked out at the grey sky and damp pavement outside. During the day, lots of autos and bikes and walkers went past. Harry's attention was caught by a bright yellow slicker walking on their side of the road. The person threw back the hood of the coat, allowing wavy dark brown hair to fall behind her.

The girl looked to be his age with a pert nose and dark eyes. Harry watched her make her way up the road. As she came alongside the gate to their garden, she glanced up at the house and apparently saw Harry standing at the window because a flash of consternation crossed her brow. She put her head down and walked faster. Harry stepped back from the window. He understood how it felt to be watched and certainly didn't want to bring that feeling on someone else.

* * *

Harry's new routine began to feel mostly normal, although he found himself fidgeting fiercely during moments when he considered everything all at once and felt startled by it all. In the morning this often happened when he looked about his new room and it happened this morning. Hedwig fluffed herself and put her head under her wing, apparently believing it too early to rise. Even though it was early, Harry felt almost too well rested; he hadn't had a single dream of dark shadows since arriving. This led him to believe that they were figments of his post-Dementor uneasiness, rather than actual visions. He was glad to be rid of them, whatever the reason. He put on his dressing gown, stretched, and headed downstairs.

Breakfasts still felt odd in the closer space of the dining room in contrast to the high ceiling of the Great Hall. While Snape read the *Prophet* Harry looked about the room, trying to make the room feel familiar, even the unusual objects on the mantel such as the slender, engraved silver vase and the blackened wooden box with little drawers on three sides. On the other wall, the windmill turned slowly in the dark landscape painting.

Harry sat back when he had finished and Tidgy came in a moment later to collect his plate. As the elf departed, he bowed at Snape. Harry wished he did not do that. Even after a week, Harry wasn't used to it and suspected he would not ever be. Wishing he could go outside to look around, especially since it was a sunny morning, he propped his head on his hand and stared at the turning windmill.

Snape's voice interrupted his somewhat melancholy musings. "Is everything all right?"

Harry straightened and clasped his hands before him. "Yeah. Just, uh, a little bored. If I use an obsfucation charm, can I go out for a bit on my broomstick?"

"It would be best if you did not. Such a charm will not fool all of those wishing to find you." He spoke sternly but Harry didn't feel it as correction, but as something else he wasn't used to--protection. He gave up his imaginings of a quick flight of exploration. Thinking ahead of the long day inside, he must have sighed aloud because Snape said, "Perhaps I can show you a few spells?"

Harry brightened. "I'd like that."

"Go and move the items in the hall aside to get them out of the way, if you would."

Jumping up eagerly, Harry went to do this. The hall didn't contain very much-- just a padded bench that angled up at the ends, a tall oil lamp, a small tall table, and a large rug. Harry hovered all this aside beside the door to the drawing room. The resulting open space appeared perfect for dueling. Harry was pacing it off when Snape stepped in.

"Not quite large enough," Snape said, sounding amused.

Harry found himself smiling. "What good spells do you know?"

Snape stopped in the center of the floor. "All kinds. What would you like to learn?"

Harry thought that over. "You know. Something I've always wanted explained--why can't a wizard levitate himself? It'd be very useful. Professor Flitwick insisted it wouldn't work on yourself, but why won't it work on, say, my shoes, with me in them?"

Snape crossed his arms, looking smug but amused at Harry who was studying his footwear. "It isn't simply that the spell will not work on the caster. It is more complicated than that."

Harry wasn't entirely listening. "When I hover something else and then step on it; the spell still collapses. But if someone else hovers it, well, someone like Hermione, lots of others can step on it."

With a flick Snape hovered a small battered step stool from the kitchen and let it rest on the floor before Harry. "Levitation is a spell of gravity. It is deeply entwined with gravity. The caster must be rooted on the ground to successfully cast

it. If you were to levitate that stool . . . " Harry did so, holding it a foot above the floor. Snape went on, "As soon as you step upon it, you are no longer rooted to gravity. You can not push against gravity to retain the hover. Do you understand?"

Harry put one foot up on the floating stool, it twisted sideways, mostly because he wasn't maintaining the spell well while moving around. When he started to pick up his other foot, as soon as his weight began to lift from his lower foot, the stool sank in response. "Huh," Harry muttered, backing away and letting the stool rest on the floor.

"Come over here and I'll demonstrate it another way," Snape suggested. "You clearly have the levitation charm mastered. Given that you had six years to do so . . . one would hope that you would." He backed up a step. "In a moment I want you to try levitating it again. *Wingardium Leviosa*."

Snape was pointing his wand at Harry, who drifted upward and couldn't help trying to reach down with his toes, only to be lifted just out of reach. Harry glanced around, he wouldn't mind being this tall, he thought. Snape said, "Go ahead and try to levitate it now."

Harry twisted in the air to give it a go. The stool refused to budge, even on several tries, and indeed the spell didn't feel right. The floor met his feet and the stool jumped into the air. "So you're saying even if someone else levitates me, I still can't make it work."

"Correct."

Harry rested the stool back on the floor with a *thunk*. "I understand." He went to pick up the stool to take it back down to Tidgy. With it tucked under his arm, Harry asked, "So, what if I'm on an aeroplane and I'm trying to hover something on the same aeroplane?"

"I have to confess to never having been in such a contraption." He sounded pleased about that.

"Oh. Neither have I . . . but I wouldn't be on the ground in that case, so, would the spell work?"

Snape looked honestly uncertain. "I don't know," he answered reluctantly.

Harry started past with his burden. "That's okay. I still understand why it doesn't work."

* * *

The silence of the house was most acute at night. The road, so close to the house as to present a hazard to traffic, carried few automobiles after dark. Harry listened to the rush of blood in his ears as he drifted off to sleep.

Harry awoke with a jolt a few hours after falling into hard sleep. He wasn't certain what had awoken him; he thought perhaps he had heard something. His heart raced as he listened, straining in the silence around him. Harry had experienced too many incidents of paranoia that had saved his life to fall back to sleep, even in a quiet house. He picked up his wand, slipped out of bed, and padded to the door. Silently, he pushed it open and stretched his ears to listen. The clock in the library ticked just at the edge of hearing.

Especially if you feel unsafe, played in Harry's mind as he considered that he should just go back to bed. Not following instructions had led Harry to more pain than he cared to recall. Before he could change his mind, he stepped onto the balcony and along the wall to Snape's door. He listened as he stood there . . . still no sounds. It occurred to him then that Tidgy might have been working on something. But Harry hadn't heard him any other night.

Harry carefully turned the handle to the bedroom and stepped inside, taking the inside handle in his other grasp and letting it close and relatch in near silence. Halfway across the floor he whispered, "Severus?"

The form on the bed started instantly. "Harry?"

"I heard something," Harry said quietly.

Snape tossed the covers aside and, with his wand in his hand from the bedstand, stepped over to him. "Stay here."

Harry disobeyed and followed him to the doorway. Snape opened it and looked out. He tapped his wand on the door-frame. Faint blue sparkles spread along the wood down to the floor and, a moment later, out across the walls of the hall. As they framed the corridor leading to the back entryway, the sparkles dipped to red. Snape stepped back suddenly, pushing Harry back with his arm. They both stood there for a long moment, their breathing the only sound.

"How many?" Harry whispered very quietly.

"Several." He pushed Harry back farther. "Stay here."

"Not a chance. They don't know I'm here--draw them out and I'll hit them." Harry spelled his hands and knees with a murmured Gecko charm and ducked past Snape, who, in the inky darkness, reached out for him too late. Before he could be grabbed again, Harry climbed up the wall and over the ceiling along one of the dark beams. He lowered himself quietly into the far corner of the opposite balcony. In the dim light he could see Snape's form in the doorway, ducking down. This was a good setup--he could feel it.

Nothing happened for several breaths. Harry's mind raced. If he were attacking, he would come up under a cloak. Harry whispered, "*Accio cloak*," as he pointed at the steps. A grunt sounded from there and a struggle started with black limbs appearing and disappearing. Harry incanted a binding curse and a half-covered figure toppled down the stairs and lay still. Another figure moved across the floor and bent over the first. Harry, feeling less generous, fired a blasting curse this time.

This was a mistake because the blue line of the spell gave away his location. He leapt to his feet and, bent low, scuttled toward the other end of the balcony. A blast came up through the wood where he had been crouched, throwing wood chips and heat at his back. Harry stopped in the middle of the balcony, in case the other end was too obvious. His heart continued to beat rapidly from the near miss.

Snape fired something from the doorway of his bedroom and an exchange of spells ensued. Now they would know that there were two of them, Harry thought with a frown. A curse hit Snape in the shoulder, spinning him back against the door. "Severus," Harry breathed. When Snape didn't reappear in the doorway, Harry panicked. He spelled his hands, feet and knees again quickly and scurried up the wall and over the ceiling.

"What is this?" a deep voice asked from below. A spell struck Harry as he sped across, breaking the Gecko Charm. He fell away from the high ceiling and hung suspended. A twist of his body gave him a dim glimpse of Snape pointing his wand at him, presumably using a hover charm. Directly below him, a Death Eater raised his wand. He could see his teeth glinting in the spare light from the window as he took a breath to speak another curse.

Thinking quickly, Harry waved his wand to cancel out the hover charm. He landed, relatively softly, on the pudgy man about to spell him. The dark wizard hissed and grabbed Harry by the hair and they started to scuffle on the hard floor. Harry was about half the other man's weight, so in a moment, the wizard was on top, arm cocked to punch him.

"Well, well, well," a familiar voice said from the nearby doorway. Harry looked up at Lucius Malfoy striding slowly over to them. The man, Harry assumed it must be Mulciber, leaned back with a sadistic smirk. "Imagine finding you here, Mr. Potter," Malfoy said with a tone of anticipated pleasure. Harry could only see his light-colored eyes surrounded by the halo of his long hair. He raised his wand, Harry saw the disk of green flash around Malfoy's feet. Mulciber's weight was on his legs, he couldn't twist in time to reach it. The words were just forming on Malfoy's tongue. Harry shouted and grabbed Mulciber, desperately twisting them both over onto the floor. Green flashed everywhere around Harry, prickles of pain spiked along his arms where he clutched the man's soft upper arms.

Harry heard Snape shout, "*Expelliarmus!*" and Malfoy cursing. "Harry?" Snape asked in concern. With a grunt, Harry pushed the limp weight of Mulciber off of him with ominously tingling hands.

"Merlin, I hate that spell," Harry muttered and he heard Snape exhale in relief. Harry felt around the floor for his wand. When he had it in hand, he stood up beside his guardian. "Did we get all of them?"

"Yes." Snape put a chain binding charm on Malfoy, knocking him back to sit against the wall. "Can you keep an eye on him while I summon assistance?" he asked Harry. With his wand free he waved the chandeliers up brighter.

"Sure," Harry replied and raised his wand to point it at the blonde man. Snape stepped away quickly.

In a tired voice Malfoy said quietly, as his head lolled against the wall, "What are *you* doing here, Potter? We thought we'd have a little fun punishing our traitor . . . didn't expect to find you. Really didn't expect to find you. Couldn't find you, in fact."

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry said and rather enjoyed saying it.

In a taunting voice Malfoy said, "Wouldn't have expected you to be anyone's plaything."

"What are you talking about?"

Malfoy chuckled. "Of course, of course," he said in a patronizing voice. "You are probably potioned to not remember. Pathetic, but it does have certain . . . interesting possibilities."

"Shut up," Harry repeated with more force.

Snape came back out of the library. "The ministry will be here shortly." He raised his wand at Malfoy. "Check the one by the steps."

"Which one?"

"The one that isn't dead already."

Harry, with a grimace, stepped over to the two forms on the floor at the bottom of the steps. The one tangled in the invisibility cloak lay with his head at a very odd angle. The other had a broken nose and was also in a chain binding. "Doesn't look like he is going anywhere."

"Find their wands if you can."

Harry found one on the floor. The other may have been tangled in the dead man's cloak. As he searched, he heard Malfoy taunting Snape. "Was he your reward for turning against our Lord?"

"You didn't add a binding curse to his mouth?" Snape asked from across the room.

"I was finding his stupidity entertaining," Harry replied as he lifted the edge of the cloak where the man's hand was trapped under his thigh. He found the wand there and, biting his lip, slid it out. He brought them both back over.

Snape took them in hand. "I'm not taking any chances. Unlike you, Potter," he snapped harshly. Harry hadn't heard that tone in a long time; he cringed from it.

The outside door opened and Tonks, Shacklebolt, and another wizard stepped out of the entryway, wands out. They relaxed as they took in the scene.

"Lucius Malfoy," Shacklebolt said. "How very good to see you."

Malfoy growled at him.

"One of these is dead . . . Rookwood it looks like," Tonks said crouching next to the half-invisible Death Eater beside the last step.

The other Auror pointed at the struggling wizard chained beside the stairs. "I'll take him and come back."

Tonks stepped over to them. "Where is Pettigrew?" she asked Malfoy.

The blonde man laughed a little crazily. "As if I would answer questions from a freak like you. Freaks like you." He looked around at them all. "You are an insult to wizardry--you disgust me."

Harry crouched before the other man. "Too bad you missed the show, Malfoy. You know, the one in the Entrance Hall at Hogwarts. Twenty-two D.E. and nineteen students aged thirteen to seventeen . . . guess who won?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed in fury. "Gloat while you can, Potter."

"I will, thanks. I got what I wanted; Voldemort is dead." Harry thought a moment. "That name doesn't have any power anymore, does it. Vold-e-mort. Just doesn't have the dark ring to it that it used to have. Sad, isn't it?" he asked mockingly.

Snape stepped over and patted Harry's shoulder. He looked up and Snape shook his head lightly. Harry took the hint and stood up and got out of the way. The Auror Harry didn't know returned and Shacklebolt took Malfoy away. The relay of prisoners and bodies continued until it was just the two of them and the Aurors.

"Well, he made a lot of threats regarding Pettigrew. Could be empty but we'll stand guard for the night and spell the place in the morning," Shacklebolt said. He and the others followed Snape's gesture for them to retire to the drawing room. Tidgy showed up with tea, shaking so the cups rattled. Harry took the tray before an accident happened and set it down, ignoring the dark look from Snape as he did so.

"You are in trouble, Potter," Snape said.

"Yes, sir," Harry said as he poured tea.

"I have to think of an appropriately severe punishment."

"Yes, sir," Harry repeated.

The Aurors looked between the two of them. "Kind of surprised to find you here, Harry," Tonks said.

"I live here," Harry said as he handed her a cup of tea on a saucer.

"You do?" she asked, confused. She looked to Snape for confirmation and received a raised brow in reply.

"It isn't generally known," Harry said, "but Severus adopted me."

Tonks dropped her cup and saucer. The noise of it smashing grated on Harry's nerves. The Auror cleaned it up with a sweep of her wand. "Adopted?" she choked. "You're kidding, right?" She looked between them. Harry gave her a hard stare. "All right, that was the wrong thing to say." She shook her head and breathed, "Wow."

Harry sat down and poured himself some tea, wishing it were mulled mead.

"When did this happen?" she asked, her voice forced into something conversational.

"August second," Harry said.

"Well, congratulations, Harry." She said automatically as she poured another cup for herself.

"Thank you," Harry said, trying to sound equally conversational.

Tonks looked at Snape over the rim of her new teacup, then blinked rapidly in disbelief.

Shacklebolt leaned forward. "This is Tristan Rogan, by the way," he said, indicating the other Auror. "I should have done introductions."

They each shook hands with Rogan. "Thank you for getting rid of Voldemort, Mr. Potter," Rogan said.

"No problem," Harry quipped.

"Who killed who in there?" Shacklebolt asked.

"I chained up Lucius and the other one. Harry did the other two," Snape stated.

"The two dead ones were Harry?" Tonks asked. She turned to him. "Getting a little rough, aren't we? Don't go for a Killing Curse as your first resort."

"I didn't," Harry said defensively. "The one on the stairs I put a binding curse on and he fell, got tangled in the invisibility cloak as well. Must have broken his neck tumbling. Malfoy used a Killing Curse on me and I ducked under Mulciber to avoid it. My hands are still tingling," he said, a little peeved, and held them up to look at them. They looked normal at least. "I would have blocked it, but I couldn't reach his feet--my legs were trapped."

"What?" Shacklebolt asked.

"The Killing Curse, when-" Harry stopped as he saw Snape shake his head. "Why can't I say?"

"Ask Dumbledore. He didn't tell the Ministry what happened--I assume he had his reasons."

Harry rolled his eyes. Rogan said tiredly, "I thought this Order business was over."

"It is," Harry said. "Or if it isn't, I wouldn't know anyway."

"It just sounded like you had a counter to the Avada Kedavra," Shacklebolt said.

"I do," Harry said with a challenging look at Snape. They all turned to him. "Well, I have something that worked once."

"When?" Tonks asked.

"A few months ago."

"I'd like to see it," Shacklebolt said.

"And therein lies the problem," Snape said dryly and with some anger.

Harry wondered if Dumbledore had kept quiet to protect him from some kind of spell experimentation. Shacklebolt interrupted his thoughts, "We wouldn't use it on him!"

"Then you cannot test it," Snape countered.

"We'd still like to hear about it," Tonks said.

The discussion went on through the night. Harry did explain how he'd countered the Killing Curse, even though Snape didn't recommend doing so. He was disappointed that they didn't think much of his description of what he did. Darkly,

he thought that, for anyone else, surviving it would have been impressive enough. For him they thought it rather unremarkable.

When the sun finally lit the room, Harry couldn't keep his eyes open. More of the same tea he had consumed all night was not going to help. As badly as he wanted to watch the Aurors work their protective spells, Harry couldn't keep his eyes open for more than the interior ones. He finally followed Snape's repeated advice to go to bed.

By the time Snape woke him, the Aurors had left. Snape bent over him and shook his shoulder to rouse him. "Wake up, Potter; it is very late in the morning."

Harry blinked at him. He had only slept fitfully. His hands still ached. He clenched and unclenched them to relieve it.

"Get up now," Snape insisted, reminding Harry of his Aunt Petunia, which reminded Harry that he was due some kind of punishment. He sat up, rubbed his eyes and found his glasses. "The Aurors insist that Pettigrew cannot enter the house, nor even approach it now," Snape explained.

Harry's stomach complained about being empty and sour from the tea. "Do you have anything for a burning stomach?" Harry asked.

"Of course." Snape departed and returned a minute later. He gave Harry a swallow of a purple, creamy potion in a tea-cup. It made his stomach feel better as soon as it slid down that far.

"Thanks," Harry said as he handed the cup back. "It's working already." He tossed the covers aside and stretched to try to get his body moving.

"I will expect you downstairs shortly," Snape said as he departed again.

Harry gathered clean robes and went down to the bath beside the kitchen. When he came out, freshened and more awake, he found Snape in the drawing room, writing a letter.

"Sit down, Potter," Snape said, indicating one of the chairs still around the small marble table from last night.

"Uh oh," Harry commented. At Snape's questioning look, he explained, "You always use my last name that way when you are angry with me." He turned one of the chairs to face the small desk and sat down.

"I am." Snape bent his head to the letter. Harry fidgeted as he waited. He wondered, if he complained about his aching hands, could he delay his punishment. His forearms ached too, now that he thought about it. He closed his eyes as he remembered that horrible green flashing. That reminded him of the memories of his mother screaming that the Dementors drew out of him. That made him feel slightly unwell and achy more places than his hands.

"Potter?"

"Yes." Harry didn't look up at him; he didn't want to risk his current thoughts being snagged from him.

"You look as though you are punishing yourself," Snape observed.

"Not intentionally," Harry said flatly. "I'm just remembering all the times I've seen that awful green light."

"That would be a form of self-torment, at the least," Snape pointed out. After a pause, he went on. "You disobeyed me, at a time when your safety, and more likely your life, was at risk. I will not tolerate that."

"You wanted to take them all on alone?" Harry asked.

"I was in a good position to do so. As well, the house is spelled in ways you do not know. It was on my side as well, but not after you were mixed in with the others."

"I didn't realize that."

"Why did you so unwisely try to cross back over?" Snape demanded.

"You were hit," Harry said defensively.

"Not severely."

"It looked it from where I was."

Snape crossed his arms. "Altruistic or not, it was a stupid thing to do. You had lost the advantage of stealth."

"I wasn't thinking; I admit that," Harry said, chastened. He had panicked in a fundamental way he hadn't in a long time.

"You need to control this hero complex of yours," Snape said. Harry just frowned in reply. "I admit, I cannot determine a good way of punishing you for your disobedience. The normal things, bed without dinner, restricting you to your room, restricting your access to your friends, seem unduly cruel given your past treatment by your relatives."

"I also considered simply transfiguring all of your Gryffindor things into Slytherin ones, but after hearing you speaking to Malfoy last night, I feel that would be merely symbolic." He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I ask you to tell me that you will not repeat what you did."

"I can't do that," Harry said.

"No?" Snape countered sharply.

"How can I let you face four Death Eaters alone? What if something happened to you? I'd end up having to deal with them anyway. Alone." He drew in a breath past a tight chest. "I can't lose anyone else," he confessed with a catch in his voice. His eyes were suddenly burning.

"Harry," Snape said. He stood up and came around the desk. After a moment's deliberation, he touched Harry on the shoulder. "All right, you may help, should there be a next time, BUT only at my direction."

Harry nodded, blinking to control the heat in his eyes. Snape stepped away, apparently dropping the issue.

* * *

That day, letters came in from his friends, redirected from the castle to home. He knew he should write them back today, but he couldn't think of anything to write about except what had happened the night before, and he wasn't supposed to tell anyone about that. Instead, he passed the time reading an account of taming wild dragons he had found on the miscellaneous shelf in the library, hoping it would give him something to talk about with Hagrid. Finally, dinner came around. Harry ate slowly to draw it out.

As Tidgy cleared the plates, Snape said, "Hopefully this evening will be quieter than the last. It was good that you woke me. I did not hear what you did, obviously. Do not hesitate to wake me in the future, for anything that disturbs you."

Harry nodded and finished his pumpkin juice. He wished the clock would move faster so he could reasonably go to sleep. He wished he had something meaningful to pass the time. "Do you have a copy of the text Greer is going to be using?"

"I do not know what text she intends to use. I have several Seventh Year texts if you would like to read them."

Harry stood up. "I would. I need something to do."

Snape told him where to find them in the library and Harry curled up on the lounge and tried to focus on chapter one of each book. After two hours, Harry decided this was a good way to study. The important points were repeated in each book, so he didn't have to figure out what they were on his own, which made reading a lot faster and easier.

Finally it was ten o'clock. Harry put the books back where he had found them and said goodnight to Snape in the drawing room.

After the previous night, his body didn't want to relax, even though his brain was exhausted. He didn't have any potion here since he hadn't needed any. If he had any left from Hogwarts he hadn't seen it when he unpacked. Harry turned onto his side and forced the tension out of his neck.

With a groan Harry woke a third time from fitful sleep. Persistent shadows paced him through a long hall that vaguely resembled the one downstairs except miles long rather than thirty feet. Exhausted beyond reason, Harry slipped on his robe and slippers and went down the balcony. He paused outside Snape's door. By going in he was changing things, he knew. This wasn't the same as thinking something was wrong externally; this was needing help and asking for it from an adult trusted with his care. He wasn't used to this at all and it made him very uneasy.

Deciding he needed the potion more than his pride, he knocked on the wood in front of him. After a moment, a voice told him to enter. Harry did so. The room was very dark. He stepped in what he judged to be halfway. "I'm sorry, Severus, but I can't sleep."

He heard Snape sit up. The lamp flared to a pale glow. Snape was rubbing his eyes. "Come here," he said. Harry stepped over as Snape stood up in the long shirt he slept in. He used the bed for balance, making Harry realize how tired he must be as well.

"I'm sorry," Harry repeated.

"Don't be. Sit down, I'll get you something."

Harry sat on the edge of the bed and waited longer than it took for the stomach potion. Eventually, Snape came back with a teacup half-full of his usual sleeping potion. "I checked the spells; everything is secure," Snape said as he sat beside Harry. He rubbed his forehead as he held out the cup. Harry drank it down and handed it back. "I assume your nightmares have returned," Snape said.

Harry hung his head. "Yes. But I think I've figured it out."

"What is that?"

"Malfoy said they didn't know where I was. Now they do. The dreams stopped when they didn't."

"Interesting theory," Snape said doubtfully.

Harry shook his head. "Not a theory," he argued groggily. "I know that's what the shadows are. You're one of them," he added reluctantly.

Snape closed his eyes a long moment. "I am very sorry for that, Harry," he whispered.

Rambling, Harry explained, "When you wake me . . . in my dream there is a shadow very close, and then you wake me and you are right there." Harry swayed as he gestured with his hand.

Snape put an arm behind him to lower him back to the bed. By the time he was horizontal, Harry was out. Snape studied his sleeping face before he said, "You cannot know how sorry I am." Then after a pause, "What have you done to me, Potter?" He freed his arm and sat up. He shook his head with a huff of self-disgust and pulled out his wand to hover the boy to his own bed.

When he had settled Harry in and covered him, he stared down at him by the warm lamplight. He had given the boy a double dose and did not expect he would wake up again. He left the lamp up a little, just in case.

* * *

Harry yawned widely and rubbed his disoriented head as he entered the dining room the next morning. As he sat down, he had to use his hands on the table for balance.

"I gave you quite a bit of the potion last night," Snape commented.

"Is that why I feel like this?" Harry asked, rubbing his eyes to coax them to stay open.

"Undoubtedly. It will wear off in a few hours," Snape said conversationally as he read the *Prophet*.

Malfoy's insinuations played through Harry's mind but he dismissed them.

"Would you like this?" Snape asked as he held out the newspaper.

"Am I in it?"

"Remarkably . . . no."

"Yeah, sure." Harry accepted it and read the text of a speech given by Fudge where he took credit for his Aurors apprehending four of the remaining free Death Eaters. Harry shook his head, but felt a little relieved at the anonymity.

* * *

The next day, Snape said, "I need to go to a meeting at Hogwarts. I don't want you left here alone; you should come with me."

"You said Pettigrew couldn't get in."

"Nevertheless . . . "

"You are worrying too much, sir," Harry criticized as he put his quill down from taking notes from the Potions texts. Snape seemed to take affront at that. Harry went on, "You said, and the Aurors said, that the other two D.E. are not consequential and probably aren't even with Pettigrew."

Darkly, Snape said, "I think you want him to show up, Potter. So you can do him in."

Harry looked down at his parchments. "Well, you said I couldn't go after him . . . "

"Revenge is not what you think it is."

Harry didn't look up at him. He pretended to go back to his notes.

With a dismissive tone, Snape said, "Very well, I will trust the Auror's spelling and assume that if it fails you will call for help, NOT try to handle it yourself."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, although he didn't look up as he did so, afraid his lie would show for certain.

In a darker tone Snape said, "And if not, then you will suffer the consequences." He stalked off with a swish of his robe.

As he heard the sound of the Floo powder canister scrapping on the mantel, Harry almost called him back. He had disappointed Snape and found himself hating to do that. He pulled his wand from his pocket and placed it on the desk beside his parchment as he went back to his notes.

An hour and a half later, Snape returned. Harry hadn't even moved. "Good meeting, sir?"

"Good enough. No opportunities for revenge, I assume?"

"No," Harry admitted, wishing this topic would get dropped.

* * *

Days later, Harry watched the yellow slicker go by again while he was looking for something in his trunk. He was careful this time to stay far enough from the glass so as to be invisible. The girl glanced up at his window and didn't see him, apparently because she continued by at the same pace. Harry wondered who she was. He envied her freedom to walk along the street. He slammed the trunk lid down hard in anger then sat on it until he had himself under control.

Pettigrew. Wormtail. He hated him now. Harry didn't want him in Azkaban, he wanted him dead, preferably after a bit of pain and some of that pathetic sniveling fear of his. Realizing that everyone from Dumbledore to Sirius would be alarmed by his fantasy, he stopped it and stood up.

* * *

Harry sat back on the lounge in the library and wrote to his friends after rereading their most recent letters. Snape sat at the very small table in the corner, taking notes out of a book almost too heavy for the table's spindly legs. Harry reviewed the letters, folded them up and set them aside, not feeling energetic enough to go fetch Hedwig from his room. His eyes weren't focusing well; he rubbed them hard which made them ache more.

The clock read just after six. Harry wished it said a little later, he was feeling rather tired even though he had not done anything strenuous all day. For no particularly good reason, he felt like he had played back-to-back Quidditch matches, long ones. He slouched in his chair and mindlessly rearranged the piles of letters.

"It is dinner time, I believe," Snape said easily. He stood and set aside the large book he had been reading.

Thinking of food made Harry feel much worse suddenly. "Uh, I think I'm not very hungry," he said. He disinterestedly stacked the letters and set a book on them as a weight. He rubbed his eyes again, more gently this time.

"You are certain?" Snape asked.

It made Harry woozy to even consider it. "Yeah." He pushed himself to his feet using the lounge back. "I think I'll just go up to my room." The floor tilted a little, but he made it to the door. Snape followed him across the hall. At the bottom of the staircase, Harry hefted himself up a step using the handrail. Focusing his eyes had grown more difficult as he walked, but he resisted rubbing the aching things yet again. Snape took hold of his left arm and turned him back. "Are you feeling unwell?" he demanded.

Harry recoiled from his tone and had to take a step backward up the stairs to keep from falling. "I'm all right," he insisted. He tried unsuccessfully to straighten his back. "I'm tired, is all." Even standing up a step, he was not up to his guardian's height. Snape leaned closer and looked him over. He still had a hold of Harry's arm. "Really," Harry insisted. "It's nothing." He was feeling weak despite his assertions and he dearly wanted to go to his room.

Snape's eyes narrowed as he studied Harry. He tossed his hand free of his long sleeve and raised it to Harry's forehead.

"It's not--" Harry mumbled.

"You are feverish," Snape stated. He released Harry's arm with a push to urge him upstairs. "Go to your room, then." He stepped away with a flare of his robe and headed down to the toilet beside the kitchen.

Anxious, Harry watched him disappear. He could only force himself to move by degrees. Finally, he turned to continue, an undefined ache of worry in his chest. At the top of the steps, Snape caught up to him.

"Come along," he said, retaking his arm. "I found an antipyretic. It will make you feel better, at least."

Harry was led to sit on the edge of his bed. He could not find the strength for anything, so he waited mutely. Snape poured a blob of thick dark liquid into a small glass of water and handed it to him. "Drink it," he commanded levelly.

Harry put it to his lips and forced himself to swallow past a wave of nausea. Between sips he watched Snape recork the bottle and set it on the night stand along with a fresh jug of water and a cloth. Harry held the tainted water before his mouth and stared out at the dimmer main hall. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"You're what?"

Harry's lips moved mutely a few words before he repeated, "I'm sorry." He thought about drinking more of the dilute medicine, but he could not imagine swallowing around the anxiety tightening his throat. He held it out for Snape to take it back.

"Finish it," Snape said firmly. Harry tried to obey. His guardian paced away, rubbing the bridge of his nose. When Harry eventually set the empty glass aside, Snape asked, "Why are you apologizing?"

Harry thought that over and hesitated replying. He rubbed his eyes carefully and said in a quiet voice, "I don't mean to be a problem."

Snape froze with his hand pushing back his long hair. "You aren't. Have I given you that impression?" he asked in disbelief.

Harry could not find a response. The question had confused him. The hard tone and the words clattered together in his brain. "I just--" he stopped. He felt dizzy now and he could not understand why Snape wasn't angry with him, or was, but in some incomprehensible way.

"Lie down and rest; I'll check on you in an hour or so." When Harry did not comply immediately, Snape said, "Harry," in a firm tone.

That jarred him into moving, a bit like an automaton, to kick off his house shoes, pull off his glasses and lie on his side. The room did not cease to spin, it just did it sideways now, which was almost worse. Harry closed his eyes to block out the unstable view of his room.

Snape returned an hour later. With the heavy clouds was dark outside now, so he turned up the bedside lamp. Harry lay in his day robe, half curled on his side. A sheen of sweat coated the boy's face and he looked pale in the warm light. Snape pressed his hand to the damp forehead and found Harry was even warmer than before. Snape frowned, thinking that he had had too much faith in the potion he had given him.

"Harry," he said, shaking one boney shoulder.

Harry made a small noise and rolled onto his back. One hand clawed weakly at the damp robes clinging to him. He cracked his eyes and squinted at Snape, brow furrowing.

"How are you feeling?" Snape asked. Eyes unnaturally bright, Harry blinked at him without replying. Snape straightened. "I'll contact a Healer; you may have something more serious than an influenza."

Harry shook his head clumsily. "Doctors are expensive," he mumbled.

"I would not summon you a doctor; a Healer would be much more effective," Snape commented.

Harry's eyes moved around the room, squinting hard. He then looked at Snape in confusion. After swallowing hard, Harry said, "Professor?" in a way that made Snape suspect he had lost track of the here and now.

"Yes, definitely a Healer." Snape stood quickly. "Don't move."

Harry looked like he wanted to say something, but Snape did not give him the chance. Before the hearth, he hesitated contacting St. Mungos, and considered instead contacting McGonagall and having her find Madame Pomfrey. The high likelihood that they were both out of the country, led him to request the hospital after he tossed in the powder.

The hospital greeningwitch insisted that someone would arrive within fifteen to twenty minutes. Snape straightened his tall frame and went back up to the boy's room.

Harry was half sitting, leaning over to pour himself some water. Snape intervened, taking the jug from shaky hands. He filled the glass and held it out. Harry looked at him uncertainly before accepting it. Snape stood beside the bed as Harry thirstily drank it down, then took the glass back. Harry adjusted his glasses and looked around the room with blood-stained eyes. Snape soaked the cloth in water from the jug and folded it in thirds. He held it in his hand. "Harry?" he prompted.

Clearly disoriented, Harry looked up at him. "Where?"

Calmly, Snape replied, "You are home." When this only increased Harry agitation, Snape said, "It's all right, Harry, you are ill and not yourself." He held out the cold, damp cloth. "Put this on your forehead, it should make you feel better."

Biting his lip, Harry accepted it and removed his glasses to press it over his eyes. Snape thought he could see Harry's shoulders relax as the cold made itself felt. The sight again of Harry's sweat-soaked robe sent Snape to the wardrobe for a set of pyjamas.

Setting them on the bed before Harry, just as he was readjusting his glasses, startled the boy. He looked sharply up at Snape.

"Harry," Snape said, trying to reassure him. "You are feverish. Trust me for a short while until you feel better."

Harry swallowed hard again and thought that over. It occurred to Snape that depending upon how disoriented Harry was, there may be no basis for trust. He hesitated while he considered how best to proceed. As he mulled over this odd dilemma, Harry felt his robe front and reached for the clean clothes. Snape stepped back to give him a little space. He hoped the Healer wasn't too long in coming.

Changed, Harry clumsily crawled under the duvet and dropped back onto his pillow. Snape returned to his side and rewetted the cloth.

"I don't. . ." Harry began as Snape tugged off his glasses before laying the compress across his forehead. Snape chose to disregard Harry's confusion this time.

"The Healer will be here in a matter of minutes. Relax."

Surprisingly, Harry seemed to accept that. He reached up and adjusted the cool cloth before closing his eyes. Snape brought an old straight-backed chair from against the wall and sat beside the bed. Minutes later, Harry's eyes snapped open. His alarmed gaze took in the room. He reached a hand out before him as though expecting to touch something that was not there. More confused by encountering only air, Harry's arm dropped to the bed. "No spiders," he observed.

Snape did something unwise then. Unable to resist his curiosity; he leaned over and caught Harry's gaze and pried his mind open. He had a vision of a cramped space, light leaking in only in streaks. A woman's voice in a difficult tone was scorning him for the inconvenience he was causing everyone. Harry's fevered brain couldn't manage anything more than pathetic apology.

Snape closed the Legilimency down, reeling and nauseous from Harry's hallucinatory mind. It took many deep, cleansing breaths before he fully returned to himself. Pushing the chair aside, Snape moved to sit on the bed. He took Harry's arms in his hands and spoke his name. "You are not with the Dursleys anymore--you are with me," he stated. When this again caused more confusion in Harry's eyes, Snape released him and sat back with a huff. As compelled as he was to attempt to explain, he imagined the futility of it. Depending upon where Harry was, he may be incapable of understanding. "Just be calm, Harry," he said. "You aren't in your cupboard." A stab of something went through Snape as he said that, surprising and dismaying him.

Harry's bright eyes looked around, dwelling on the large stone hearth. "This'sa nice room," he slurred.

Snape raised a brow. "I'm glad you think so."

Harry's lips moved in silence before he said, "You're being really nice to me."

"I do try . . . to do so. Now."

The sound of the door knocker rescued him from further explanation.

A middle-aged wizard stood in the doorway. Snape barely heard his introduction of himself before he hurried him in and up the staircase. "He has been feverish almost two hours. I gave him an antipyretic to no effect." Snape realized he was rambling and forced himself to stop.

The Healer stepped over to the bed, set his battered leather case on the floor, and sat on the edge. "Hello, son. Not feeling so well, I hear," he said in a friendly tone.

Harry shook his head in agreement. "Who are you?" he breathed in a bit of a challenging tone.

"Healer Redletting." To Snape he said reassuringly, "There is something virulent going around." He pulled out his wand. "Open wide."

Harry opened his mouth and was spelled in a way that made color radiate all around the inside of his mouth.

"Any trouble breathing?" he asked. When Harry didn't reply, Redletting turned to Snape, who shook his head. He used a few more spells then sat back in thought. "I would have thought it was Bostick Influenza, but it doesn't look like it."

Snape found himself immensely disliking the man's indecision. Harry fingered the compress on his forehead as though noticing it for the first time. "I knew . . . I knew they wanted revenge," Harry stated knowingly.

"Did you?" Redletting said matter-of-factly before giving Snape a questioning look.

"He has been a little delirious," Snape explained easily, although he hoped Harry did not feel the need to talk too much.

"Apparently," the Healer agreed. He removed two vials of silvery liquid from his bag. He uncorked one and used a spell to charm a drop of blood out of Harry's finger without pricking his skin. The drop fell from Harry's unmarred fingertip into the vial.

"He still wants to kill me," Harry commented.

"Who does?" Redletting asked as he repeated this with the other vial.

"There isn't anything else left," Harry went on, ignoring the question.

Snape rubbed his chin and met the concerned, bordering on suspicious, gaze of the Healer. Redletting tightened the corks on the vials and shook them a moment before holding them up to look through them at the lamplight.

"He killed mum and dad, why not me?" Harry went on. Snape stepped around the bed to the other side as Harry said, "He can't if I kill him first."

Redletting swallowed hard and gave Harry a disturbed look. He looked reluctantly up at Snape as if afraid he perhaps now knew too much. Snape sighed and reached over to pull the compress aside. He had to gesture with his head to get the other wizard to look down at his patient.

"Yah!" the man said, startled.

His reaction startled Harry as well, making him roll away to escape. Snape sat down and pushed him back. "Professor?" Harry said in confusion.

"Great goblins," Redletting blurted.

"That is why he speaks so," Snape stated. He narrowed his eyes at the Healer. "Perhaps the Mistrapherian has finished," he prompted.

"Huh? Oh." Redletting held up the vials. "Ah, it is Bostick. Bad case of it." He rummaged around in his bag a moment as he said, "Raised Muggle, though, right? That lack of childhood exposure to Diabolvirus makes adult cases much harder." He pulled out two bottles and poured some of each into the water glass.

"Here you are, Mr. Potter," he said as he handed it to him. Snape considered then abandoned his notion of assisting Harry with the cup. Harry sniffed it doubtfully before taking a sip.

"The *Prophet* has been complaining about not knowing where he is," Redletting said.

Lowering his brow, Snape demanded, "You will not be saying, correct? As you heard, his life *is* in danger."

Redletting sat straight. "No, of course not," he said nervously. Snape decided the man was telling the truth. He considered using a memory charm on him but if he needed to contact him should Harry not recover, that would make it difficult. Redletting indicated the two bottles on the night stand. "One more dose in four hours and he'll be completely recovered."

Harry had finished the cup and held it out. "Good boy," Redletting said as he accepted it. Harry's eyes darkened and narrowed to such a degree that the Healer stood suddenly. "Well," he muttered as he picked up his bag. "I'll be going then."

Snape followed him downstairs. In the entryway Redletting paused and pulled a blank parchment pad from his pocket. He muttered a charm and the bill appeared on it. He tore off the top sheet and handed it over. Snape squinted at the illegible writing before pulling his coin purse from his cloak pocket. He handed over a galleon and four sickles.

"Do contact me if he isn't himself by morning," Redletting said as he stepped out. He turned and said, "And do tell him I was very honored to meet him."

Snape nodded him out. Back upstairs Harry was sound asleep. The color had returned to his cheeks and the sheen had dried from them. More tension than Snape realized had built in him, drained upon seeing those signs. He turned the lamp down and left.

Four hours later, Snape reluctantly roused a very heavily sleeping Harry. "How are you feeling?" he asked as he sat on the bed.

"Better," Harry breathed. He accepted the offered cup of medicine and took a gulp. "Throat's a little sore," he commented hoarsely.

"No confusion about where you are?"

Harry froze with the cup to his bottom lip. "No," he answered carefully. "Was I confused?"

"Rather," Snape replied dryly.

"Oh," Harry said. "I hope I wasn't too much trouble."

Snape remembered Harry's uneasiness around him which contrasted starkly with his current relaxed posture. "No trouble. You worried the Healer with your dark talk of revenge and killing, but I explained."

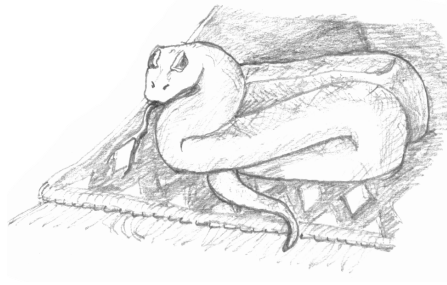
"I what?" Harry asked. He then frowned, as though upset he had been taken in. "Right," he commented.

Snape's look was intent, but he did not argue, simply set the remaining medicines aside and left Harry to sleep.

* * *

Harry realized that the girl in the yellow slicker went by at three-forty every day. He started making a point of being at his window at that time. He only ever saw her go in one direction. As unproductive as it was, he spent time wondering if she were walking in a loop or just going back after dark when he rarely looked out. He looked for clues to whether she was a Muggle or a witch and couldn't decide from what he saw. Weighing the two, he found reasons to wish for one or the other.

He considered sitting out in the garden at that time, but he wasn't supposed to go out. Frustrated, he started practicing Transfiguration spells using his Sneakoscope, which quickly rendered it even more inoperable than it had been before.



Chapter 17 - Unannounced Visitors

At breakfast one sunny morning, Snape said, "I have another meeting this afternoon. Do you think you can manage to behave yourself for a few hours?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

"You have been very quiet," Snape observed.

"So have you," Harry countered with a light grin.

"True."

"I thought you preferred that," Harry reminded him, just to make conversation.

"In general, yes. Do not use that as a reason to be silent." When Harry shrugged, Snape went on, "I realized this morning that we have only nine days remaining before I need to return for the next school year. I will expect you to return with me at that time." He said this in a tone that left no room for argument. "I will not have much time after that."

Harry took a deep breath. He hadn't told anyone what had happened. It wasn't the kind of news he would usually keep from his best friends. When he did tell them, he would have to explain why he had waited so long. That was assuming Ron hung around long enough to listen to that.

"I'll go back with you *then*, sir," Harry said. "I don't have much desire to be around here for long alone." As he said this he thought of the girl in the yellow slicker and wondered if that were really true.

As he departed, Snape repeated that Harry should call for help with the Floo at any sign of trouble. "Yes, yes," Harry said, "even if Pettigrew bows to the floor and begs me to kill him. I remember from last time."

Alone in the house, Harry sat back on his bed with the eminently practical writing tablet from Fred and George. It had a never out kind of charm for parchment and a spill-proof inkwell. He dipped his quill and addressed a reply to Hermione's last letter. Even though he hadn't said anything in particular to her, because he kept thinking he should explain things in person, she commented about how happy he sounded. Harry grinned as he reread her letter again and thought about what to say in return that didn't include anything about his current digs, which were still supposed to be secret.

Halfway through his long reply, the door knocker clacking downstairs. This pulled Harry out of his thoughts and he imagined the girl in the yellow slicker standing at the door. He put his things aside, jumped off the bed and peered out the window. A tall man and a younger woman stood outside. Harry easily recognized the nose on the man; although the slight greying around the temples was different. He rushed downstairs, stopping in the kitchen. "Tidgy? Can you make tea, please?" Harry asked the house-elf.

Tidgy's eyes filled to near overflowing instantly. "Of course, Master Harry," the elf said in near ecstasy.

Shaking his head in disgust, Harry went quickly to the door and swung it open. The occupants of the garden turned to him and turned from curious to rather surprised. "You must be Shazor Snape," Harry said to the man. The woman, from closer view, wasn't as young as he had thought, but wore makeup as though she were.

"And you are . . . Harry Potter," the man said, stunned. His voice wasn't as low as Severus' and his jaw line was rounder, but otherwise they were identical.

Harry stepped back. "Do you want to come in?"

"Is my son here?" Shazor asked warily.

In a casual way Harry replied, "He had a meeting at Hogwarts. He should be back anytime."

As they stepped into the hall, Shazor looked up in alarm at the hole burned in the balcony and the other burn marks on the walls. Harry realized only then how they must look; he didn't even notice them anymore.

"I'm so pleased to meet you," the woman said earnestly. Harry knew from some previous careful questioning that this must be Shazor's second wife. "I'm Gretta, by the way."

They shook hands and Harry led them into the drawing room. He gestured for them to sit and took a seat himself around the marble table. Gretta smiled at him again as though pleased just to be there with him. Shazor sat rigid, looking critically around the room.

"How are you doing after that nasty fight with He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named?" Gretta asked him.

"I'm doing fine, ma'am. Thank you."

"It is such a relief having him gone," she breathed. "So much trouble just a few bad wizards can create." Harry nodded in agreement.

"Gretta," Shazor said stiffly, "I am sure he does not want to speak of it."

"I am all right with speaking about it, sir," Harry said in a friendly manner. Indeed, he had been spared this for quite a while.

"Such a nice young man you are, dear," Gretta said affectionately as she patted him on the knee.

Tidgy came in with the tea, setting the tray on the table and bowing. "Thank you, Tidgy," Harry said as he started to pour. Tidgy looked as though he might burst into tears. He bowed very low and rushed from the room. Harry steadfastly ignored the looks of total shock he was receiving from the two guests.

They all sipped their tea. After a polite pause Shazor said, "I am wondering why you are here, Mr. Potter."

Harry looked into his cup and decided which tactic to take. It was Severus' place to explain things, he supposed, and he was really not certain what this man's reaction might be. "I was bored of living at my school." Thinking more explanation was in order, he added, "My headmaster didn't think anyone would imagine I'd be here."

"You are hiding?" he asked with an edge.

"Yes," Harry admitted, "from anyone who might want revenge on me."

Shazor arranged his robes and sat back down. "Perhaps given who you are, Mr. Potter, you can answer my questions." At Harry's shrug, he pulled out a copy of the *Prophet* from a few days ago. "I am curious if my son is at risk."

Harry accepted the paper and glanced at the headline: *Ministry to seek out every last Death Eater and Associate of Voldemort*. He handed it back. "Why would he be?" Harry asked. "He--"

Shazor interrupted as he tucked the paper away, "Perhaps you are not the right person to speak with."

Calmly, Harry said, "I know he used to be a Death Eater, but the Ministry knows that he has been helping Albus Dumbledore for twenty years or so."

"He has?" Shazor asked. "How do you know that?"

"Because Dumbledore believes it," Harry said simply. "There are only three Death Eaters left free."

"Counting my son?"

Harry sat back with his cup. "I don't count Professor Snape."

Shazor relaxed at that and then with a furrowed brow asked, "May I inquire what happened in the main hall?"

"The hole?" Harry thought a moment. "I'm not sure, but I think that was Lucius Malfoy." He sipped his tea calmly.

"There was a fight here?"

"It mentions it in that article, I think," Harry explained. "Though it doesn't say where it happened."

Shazor took a biscuit from the open tin on the tray and examined it rather than eating it. "So you do not think there is any risk of the Ministry arresting my son?"

Harry took up a biscuit as well and munched on it. It was ginger flavored and very good. "The night of the attack, we sat around this table with Tonks, Rogan, and Shacklebolt until morning. They are Ministry Aurors," Harry clarified. "They had lots of opportunity to take him away if they'd wanted. They don't seem to have any interest in him. Quite the opposite--it was more like a reunion."

Shazor took that in. Harry was just topping up their tea when the Floo flare sounded in the dining room. With some trepidation Harry held still as footsteps came toward the drawing room. Severus stopped in the doorway and took in the scene with surprise that fast converted to resignation. "You did not inform me that you were coming," he criticized his father.

They all stood up in greeting. "I didn't think it necessary," Shazor said with an airy defensiveness.

Severus' eyes darted from Harry to his father before he pulled over another chair and they all returned to sitting. Harry poured out another cup of tea and passed it over.

"So," Severus stated levelly, "you have met Mr. Potter."

"Rather surprising person to have answer the door, I must admit," Shazor said. Severus raised a brow but didn't reply. Shazor made a noise of discomfort. "For several reasons," he hinted.

Harry looked between the two Snapes over the rim of his cup. "Is he referring to my dad?" he asked the younger one.

Severus sat back and crossed his arms challengingly. "I believe so."

"Oh," Harry stated casually. At Shazor's look, Harry went on with a shrug, "I didn't know him. Obviously." Harry picked up the teapot and discovered it was empty. He stood up with it and hesitated at the visitors' horrified expressions. Deciding to ignore them, he continued to leave for the kitchen.

"You have to forgive him," Severus sneered lightly, "he was raised as a Muggle . . . a Muggle house-elf."

Harry paused in the doorway to roll his eyes.

"I don't know whether to be more appalled by the strange manners of the hero of wizardry or your abominable manners, Severus," Shazor breathed.

When Harry's footsteps faded across the Hall, Snape commented, "He needs to learn that he need not cater to the adults around him. It is unfortunately the way he was raised."

After this formed a break in the conversation, Severus asked, "May I ask what you are here for?"

Shazor pulled out the *Prophet* again and handed it over. "Mr. Potter has already attempted to assure me that you are not one of the aforementioned."

Severus glanced at it and handed it back. "He is correct."

Shazor sipped his tea for a minute and frowned. "You joined them willingly--do they not know that?" he asked testily.

At that moment Harry stepped in with fresh tea. Shazor looked up sharply at him. Snape commented, "Mr. Potter knows most everything--do not concern yourself about him. If the Ministry ever knew, it has been forgotten, either accidentally or willfully. Should you wish to go over there and bring it up, they could very well take an interest, I am sure."

"I have no intention of doing so, Severus," he stated strongly.

Harry set the teapot down. "Should I leave?" he asked Severus.

"It does not matter. Sit down."

Shazor said in a voice that indicated his patience might be shallow, "I would like to speak with you alone. There are other matters to discuss."

Severus refilled his own tea and his father's and sat back with it in a forced casual attitude. "Most anything you need to discuss with me can be said in front of Harry. I have adopted him."

Shazor choked on the sip he had just taken. "You are not serious?" Gretta blinked her long eyelashes at Harry and then smiled at him sweetly, clearly charmed by the notion.

"Harry?" Severus prompted.

It took a moment for Harry to realize that he wanted him to pull out the adoption parchment. He went over to the bureau and pulled out the rolled, embossed application form. He handed it over to Severus, who handed it to his father.

As he unrolled it, Shazor asked, "Why?" in a very doubtful way.

Severus thought a moment. "I admit the reasons continue to change," he said vaguely.

Harry paused beside his chair and stared at Severus. "Is that happening to you too, sir?" he asked in quiet surprise.

Shazor let the parchment roll itself up again suddenly. "I would have appreciated being consulted before you took such a step," he said angrily. "As inheritor I would like to know he is worthy, even given who he is."

Still with forced casualness, Severus said, "Harry, how long did it take you to learn the Columnar spell?"

"The one we did a few days ago?" Harry asked. "Uh, I don't know."

"Ten minutes? Five, perhaps?"

Harry shrugged. "Something like that. It wasn't very hard."

Shazor blinked at that. Greta chimed in. She had taken hold of Shazor's arm apparently to calm him. "One would expect his magic to be very good, considering."

"Harry, in the bureau-" Severus stood suddenly. "Never mind. I will fetch it." He pulled another sheet out of a drawer and handed it to his father.

Harry recognized it from the back. "You have a copy of my O.W.L.s?" A little miffed, he added, "I don't plan to go on in Divination."

"Clap trap anyway," Shazor commented.

"Oh, Hon, that isn't true," Greta commented and patted him on the arm.

Harry sighed and held his mouth closed.

"And what do you plan to do after your schooling, Mr. Potter?" Shazor asked, now looking calculating rather than upset.

"Depending on how my N.E.W.T.s go, I plan to apply to the Auror's program."

"Goodness," Greta said, "haven't you had enough of that?"

"At the moment I feel that way, but in a month I think I won't," Harry replied evenly.

Shazor handed back the O.W.L. results. "Grades are all well and good. Are you an organized person?"

"I'm getting better," Harry admitted.

"Well mannered? Polite?" Shazor went on. "Never mind, you were polite to the house-elf as I recall." He shook his head. "At least he isn't blonde," he said.

Flatly, Harry said, "Severus was debating between adopting me or Draco Malfoy, but I had paper and Malfoy had rock." He took yet another biscuit and munched on it purely for the distraction.

Greta patted Shazor's arm. "He has your sense of humor," she pointed out. She smiled at Harry with that ultra-affectionate look again. Her gaze shifted past him and she said, "My, what a lovely snake! Is that yours?"

Harry had his wand out before he even turned around. Snape jumped up with his at ready as well, but Harry made it out the door of the drawing room first. "Nagini," he whispered as he watched the great snake make her way around the edge of the wall from the far corner of the hall. Red trailed behind her. Harry stepped across the open space, Nagini changed course to follow.

"Potter!" Severus berated and aimed his wand.

"NO!" Harry shouted. "She'll know where he is," he explained in a low voice. "He sent her because he couldn't get past the new spells."

"What is this?" Shazor asked from the drawing room doorway.

"Voldemort's pet snake, Nagini," Severus explained. "Pettigrew undoubtedly-"

The snake veered toward Snape's voice. *"This way,"* Harry hissed at her. She turned again. *"Where is your master?"* he asked her.

"I have not seen Master in a very long time."

"Oh. Dear. Merlin," Shazor exclaimed. "You cannot have adopted a Parselmouth," he moaned.

"Where is Wormtail?" Harry demanded. Nagini had slowed but she still approached. Blood smeared her jaws.

"Potter," Severus said threateningly, his wand still aimed at the snake.

"One minute more," Harry insisted. *"Wormtail cannot speak to you thusly. I speak to you as your master did--I see your mind as your master did. Tell me."*

Nagini hesitated. She lifted her head up and investigated the air with her tongue. *"Will you give me a warm place to sleep if I answer? It has been too cold for too long."*

"Light a fire, Severus," Harry said, pointing at the hearth at the end of the hall. "Put the rug in front of it."

With a questioning expression Severus stepped cautiously past Nagini's long tail and ignited a fire in the grate. He dragged the rug from the center of the hall to the hearth, keeping a careful eye on the snake as he did so.

"There," Harry said when it was set.

"Seven gardens south of this one and four east," she hissed and turned toward the fire. Harry repeated that aloud. Severus moved to the library, staying carefully clear of the snake. Harry watched as Nagini turned herself into a great coil before the hearth and rested her head on herself. Her eyes sank to half closed and her tongue flicked less frequently as she basked in the heat.

Harry, fierce determination burning through him, turned toward the door. Severus' voice pulled him up short. "Harry," he said sternly. Severus faltered as Nagini considered him as he passed her then sped up to intercept Harry, who was choosing to ignore him.

Forced to stop because Severus' much larger frame was in his path, Harry said in a low voice, "Get out of my way."

"I have contacted the Ministry. The Aurors will be here shortly," Severus explained.

"He's mine," Harry said. Pain and rage filled him at the thought of facing Pettigrew again. "I let him go once . . ." His jaw hardened and he held his wand out as though he thought of using it right then.

"If the boy has valid revenge to take, let him go," Shazor commented.

Severus shot him a warning look before turning back to his charge. "Harry, I cannot stop you because I do not wish to fight you." He sighed and lowered himself on one knee so Harry was looking down at him. This did capture Harry's attention, making him lower his wand.

"If you go, you will carve out a piece of yourself that you cannot get back. You have come so far, Harry," he said earnestly. "Far enough that I must implore you to let this go." He reached out and grasped Harry's upper arms as Harry reluctantly considered this, his expression varying between pained and determined. Severus went on, "You have your whole life ahead of you. You can choose to live it whole. If you choose to take a few moments of gratification in revenge you will forever live it incompletely."

Harry's shoulders fell. "He betrayed my mum and dad," he insisted in a dull voice. "He's the reason I've been alone all this time." A tear blinked out of his right eye at that.

"I know that," Severus said, sounding a little desperate. He stood up and in a smooth motion pulled Harry against himself. Harry rested his forehead against Snape's chest and sniffled faintly. "I'm trying to do what is best for you, Harry," Severus said quietly.

"Oh, dear," Gretta wailed into a kerchief. "So touching." She dabbed her eyes and nose and sniffed daintily.

Harry took a step back, released at that exact moment. Flushing, Harry breathed in and out, bringing himself under firm control. Shazor stared at his son as though he had never seen him before. Gretta sniffed again and gazed at them sadly.

A knock sounded on the door and it opened. Tonks stepped in. "Everything all right?" At Severus' assurances, she went on. "Good tip. Where did you get it?"

"From the snake." Snape indicated the large coil on the rug.

"Oh my," Tonks breathed. Nagini raised her head and considered the Auror.

Harry froze. "Tidgy," he breathed and started toward the rear of the hall. Severus grabbed his arm. "Ms. Tonks, please check the kitchen," he said.

Angrily, Harry said, "What? You are going to protect me from everything?"

"Yes," Severus said, as if that should be obvious.

Tonks re-emerged thirty seconds later. "Dead. I have to call the photographer over from the other location."

"What happened? You got him, right?" Harry asked. He tried to toss off Severus' grip and failed. He gave in with a huff and threw his arms down limply.

Tonks paused before them. "He seemed to think you'd be coming, Harry. Once he realized it was just us . . . he killed himself. Seemed pretty despondent about failing to get to you."

Harry jerked his arm again and this time Severus released it.

"You been hanging on to him all this time?" Tonks asked Severus in amusement.

"Trying."

Tonks chuckled lightly and tapped Harry on the chin with her fist. "Good to know someone is looking out for you, Harry, even at the cost of peeing you off royally." She leaned in close and whispered only for him, "Looks like you got yourself a real dad." She stepped back with a devilish grin and looked over at Nagini, who appeared to have gone back to sleep.

"What we are going to do with that, I don't know."

"She isn't evil," Harry commented. "She's just a snake."

Tonks looked doubtful, then shrugged. "Maybe the zoo then. Unless you want her?"

"No," Harry and Severus said together. Harry went on. "Give her a warm quiet place to sleep and she might be willing to answer any outstanding questions."

"Gee, where would we find a Parselmouth to talk to her? Hmmm."

Harry rolled his eyes.

When Tonks had departed, Shazor said bleakly as he shook his head, "A Parselmouth." Even Gretta looked unsympathetic about that.

Harry shrugged at Snape helplessly. "I wasn't born this way," he insisted.

"You weren't?" Severus asked in surprise.

"Dumbledore said I acquired Parseltongue along with this scar."

"Hmm. That is reassuring, Harry."

"It is? Why?" Harry asked in disbelief. "You sound like Greer," he added accusingly.

* * *

That night Harry tossed fitfully, visions of Pettigrew, cornered and angry, kept invading his thoughts. When the bed tilted, he jerked in surprise.

"Difficulty sleeping?" Snape's voice came from the darkness. The bedside lamp flared brighter, casting a halo of orange light around them. "Sit up."

With a frown Harry obeyed. Snape pressed a cup into his hand. "I don't want to need this all of the time," Harry commented tiredly.

"Firstly, it is a very mild potion. Secondly, I will not let that happen. You have had a stressful day. You need to sleep soundly to recover or this will only repeat itself tomorrow night."

Harry fingered the cup in indecision. Finally, he drank it down and handed it back. "Sorry about upsetting your father," Harry said.

Snape scoffed easily. "You have not seen him upset. And you are hardly to blame whether you naturally are a Parselmouth or acquired it."

"He seems pretty hard to please," Harry opined.

"And I am not?" Snape asked as though insulted.

Harry huffed in humor at his tone. "I don't know--maybe you are." He rubbed his forehead and put his hands over his eyes. "I think the potion is working." He lowered himself back down to his pillow and curled up on his side, welcoming the maw of sleep closing around him.

"Good night," Snape said. Harry merely murmured incoherently in response.

* * *

The next morning, Harry woke with the sun slicing between the curtains into his eyes. He padded downstairs in his dressing gown and slippers. The house was completely silent, reminding him with a twinge that Tidgy was gone. He stepped down the half flight to the kitchen. Whatever blood there had been was completely cleaned up. With a sad sigh, Harry took out the pans and started breakfast, ducking and leaning over a lot in a room designed for an elf.

"Potter," Snape said sharply. "What are you doing?"

Harry screwed the coffee pot together tightly and placed it on grate in the space made for it. "I assume that is a facetious question, sir," he commented and wrapped the hot toast in a towel. "I really don't mind and it seemed like the only way to get breakfast."

Snape took the towel and placed it on the tray. "I suppose you are correct on that last count." When the coffee boiled, he took that as well and carried it upstairs. In the dining room, he said, "We shall have to find another before the school year begins. It will not be easy on such short notice."

Harry had a thought. "Do you mind if I look for one?"

Snape gave him a derisive look. "With your extensive house-elf connections?"

"Yes."

Snape gestured with his hand that he was welcome to it.

After breakfast, Harry owed Dobby and that afternoon the doorbell chimed.

"Who is that, I wonder?" Snape muttered.

Harry jumped up. "I think it is the first house-elf applicant," Harry said brightly, even more amused by Snape's surprise. At the entry he waved in Dobby and a much dolled up Winky.

"See, Master Harry," Dobby said to her reassuringly.

"I am wanting no pay," she insisted.

"I figured that," Harry commented. As they entered the hall, Snape stepped over and looked over the two elves.

"Professor," Dobby greeted him, bowing. Winky did the same, not looking nearly as hopeful.

"Potter, in here a moment," Snape said. After he closed the drawing room door behind him, he said, "Crouch's old house-elf?" Harry nodded. "Probably the least likely choice I would have considered," he said aloud to himself. "Isn't she in the employ of Hogwarts?"

"They are willing to let her go. I checked that already."

"You do work fast, Mr. Potter."

"Hey, if you are going to yell at me every morning at breakf-"

"I did not yell at you."

"Scold then," Harry interjected. "Dobby vouches for her not being anything like him. She didn't do well after Crouch gave her clothes but he thinks she just needs to be bound to a household again."

"Most all of them do need to be. Ms. Granger's efforts notwithstanding, house-elves are not natural. They have been distorted, like an exotic breed of dog, to serve wizard needs. Are you set on this elf?"

"No, she is just the first one I thought of when you said they were hard to find."

When they stepped back into the hall, Dobby immediately ceased whispering to Winky and gave them a pleased look. Snape stepped over to them. "Tell me about your former master, Winky," he said.

She looked a little fearful and began turning her bright white tea-towel around in her hands. Quietly, she said, "He was maybe not nice wizard, but I loyal to him. I not saying anything."

"Look at me, Winky," Snape said in a tone not to be disobeyed. Harry took an unconscious step backward and bit his lip. After a moment Snape said, "You will do."

Winky looked very relieved and pathetically grateful while Dobby grinned toothily at Harry. "Dobby is going in that case," Dobby said, "Will be seeing Master Harry soon, he is thinking, at Hogwarts." At Harry's nod of agreement, he snapped his fingers and disappeared.

"He *is* an odd one," Snape commented. He turned his attention back to Winky. "You are prepared to be bound?" The elf nodded emphatically, keeping her eyes averted downward.

Harry stood to the side and watched, arms wrapped around himself. He had a feeling he wasn't going to like this. Snape pulled his wand out of his pocket and held it out over her head. As she started to shift to her knees, he said, "Stand. I think Potter would feel better if you do." His gaze slid over to Harry for an instant. Winky looked alarmed as she stood straight again.

Snape incanted something long and Latin. A yellow glow formed around Winky's small frame as he finished. She reached out her long hands as though a child looking for a sweet. Snape reached his hand out, palm down. Winky grasped it and kissed the back of it. At that moment, the glow flashed away.

"Potter?" Snape said, gesturing that he should take his place.

"I can't do that," Harry said.

"It is simpler if you do. You inherit her along with the house," he stated levelly. When Harry shook his head again, clearly uncomfortable, Snape said, "As you wish." To Winky, he said, "You will give Master Harry the same obedience as myself."

"Yes, Master," she said stridently.

"There are no limits to your run of the house. Go." He dismissed her.

She stepped across the Great Hall and down to the kitchen, peering in each room she passed.

Harry went up to his room. He badly needed a distraction after that, so he reread the last few letters from each of his friends. After that, he took out his new Map and worked on adding color to it. Eventually his stomach distracted him; he hadn't really had a good meal that day since at lunch he hadn't wanted to incur Snape's annoyance again and only had an apple from the fruit basket.

He wandered downstairs to the dining room. Snape was there, reading the post. Harry took a seat across from him, then jumped when dinner appeared on the table in a sparkle of spell, Hogwart's style. Harry, mouth watering, pulled over a plate with a pile of thin sliced roast beef surrounded by small potatoes. A bowl of fruit salad in some kind of creamy dressing also had appeared.

After waiting for Snape to serve himself, Harry started eating. The meat was really good. Harry ate what he had taken and took more.

"I will admit," Snape said between bites, "that you did very well choosing a house-elf."

"It *is* pretty good," Harry agreed, then felt a little guilty about Tidgy until pudding distracted him from it.



Chapter 18 - Mum

That evening in the library, sleepy from eating too much and feeling unusually secure now that he wasn't hunted, curiosity overcame Harry's better sense. "Can I ask you something?" he said to Snape.

"Only if you do not insist upon an answer."

"Is your mum still alive?"

Snape looked up from the ledger he was filling in. "Yes."

When nothing else was forthcoming, Harry asked, "Where does she live?"

"Quite a distance from here," came the level reply that sounded unwelcoming of further inquiry.

Harry put his book aside and considered whether this was worth the struggle. He sighed lightly and asked, "Do you see her at all?"

"Not in ten years," Snape replied and this time gave the very distinct impression that the topic had grown unsavory.

Harry sat back and considered that. "I can't imagine," he commented. Snape put his quill down and gave Harry a long look. "Ron said he didn't speak to his dad all Easter break. I can't even imagine that," Harry marveled. The very thought gave him a stab of jealousy that only faded reluctantly.

"You are thinking you would like to meet her, I assume," Snape said evenly if not a touch darkly.

Harry shrugged. "I hadn't thought of it until your dad showed up yesterday."

Snape closed the ledger and pushed it aside. "She lives in an autonomous coven in the eastern part of the country."

"I don't know what that is," Harry pointed out.

"It is a women-only community. A Muggle might call it a cooperative or even a cult, I suppose."

After thinking that over, Harry said slowly, "That sorta implies that your dad didn't treat her very well." When Snape didn't respond, Harry asked, "I'm out of line, aren't I?"

"No. Not if he is not here," he added dryly.

"So how long has your dad been remarried?" Harry asked, feeling emboldened.

"Almost ten years, to the extreme displeasure of my mother." Snape sat back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. "My mother is not exactly pleased with me, either."

"A son who's a teacher doesn't seem that bad," Harry opined.

"I think she saw only malicious intent in that."

Harry gave him a startled look. "Huh," he said, then remembered that he himself had only seen malicious intent in Snape at one point. After a long pause Harry said, "You really don't think she'd like to see you again?"

"And I am accused of being blunt," Snape commented as an aside. "I really do not know," he added with a hint of impatience.

"Ten years is a long time," Harry observed.

"I suppose it is not unreasonable to write her," Snape stated quietly.

"It is up to you, sir."

"I think you are oversimplifying the situation, but perhaps that is to be expected in your case." He sounded a little tired as he said this.

Harry got up from the lounge to depart for his room, partly because he was tired too and partly to give Snape a chance to write.

Snape's voice halted him in the doorway. "Franklin is away on another errand. May I borrow your owl?"

Harry brought Hedwig downstairs and perched her on the back of Snape's chair, where she proceeded to preen her wings. "Goodnight, sir," Harry said as he stepped out again.

Snape pulled a sheet of correspondence parchment out of the bottom drawer of the desk. It had a pleasant faint blue sheen, rather than a yellowed one. Trying hard to hold Potter's simple notion of familial loyalty in his mind rather than the memory of their last difficult meeting, he wrote out the salutation in neat script.

Each line required lengthy deliberation, especially because he did not want it to seem as if it did. Eventually, he wrote, *I hope this letter finds you well and that you have made a home for yourself at the coven. I assume you have heard of the Dark Lord's final demise. This has freed me to consider the future more broadly than I have previously been able. At the beginning of August I adopted a son who, as I expect all orphans do, obsesses over issues of family. He is very interested in meeting you, if you are amenable. I as well am curious how you are faring.*

He read that over, surprised to find that he was truly curious how she was. Potter was correct, perhaps, that ten years was a long time. He signed with a standard closure imploring a reply, finding that easier than asking for one outright. By the time he had the letter sealed in an envelope and addressed, Hedwig had her head under her wing. She perked up immediately at the sound of her name and took the letter in her claw. Snape stood up, intending to open the window wider, but the white owl swooped cleanly through the narrow opening before he could reach it. He watched her ghostlike form flit away over the trees before turning back to the warm, lamplit room.

* * *

Hedwig returned at the end of lunch the next day, a huge, Hogwarts kind of midday meal that made Harry again eat more than he could really fit in his stomach. Snape took the letter from her and she flapped up to Harry's shoulder and nipped his ear.

Harry looked at her and gave her a strip of chicken. "Long flight, I guess," he commented. She finished that piece and bobbed her head to request another. Harry fed her a choicer strip. Snape stood with the letter in hand and left the dining room.

In the drawing room he closed the door and opened the letter while sitting at the desk. The first thing he noticed was that the salutation was just his name. *It was rather surprising to find this marvelous white owl delivering a letter from you. First off, let me assure you that I have indeed made a home here at Dreveshire, odd for you to question that might not be true.* Snape flinched and put the letter down. He had forgotten how aggravating her penchant for misunderstanding could be.

He rubbed his temple and continued. *I have to remind myself that eleven years is a long time and people can change in unlikely ways. Something has apparently changed with you--the Severus I knew would not have had the slightest inclination toward parenting. I suppose he is the child of an associate of yours, many of whom were killed recently I am told. I am being advised by my Covenelder, against my instinct I might add, to give you another chance. One which you do not deserve but, in the interests of satisfying the curiosity of this boy, and my own, I will grant.*

Old arguments and bitter feelings rose up in Snape's mind much clearer now than they had yesterday when he agreed to pen his letter. They made him feel more angry than he had in a very long time.

Harry sat alone at the table, feeling pensive. Hedwig sat on the chair back beside him, fluffing herself and preening occasionally. He was starting to regret his suggestion. The dinner plates disappeared. After a while, Winky appeared. She wore a different tea towel now, but still a very bright, clean one.

"Master Harry is liking pudding?" she asked.

"Is it chocolate?"

She thought a moment. "It could be if Master Harry wishes."

"Yes, I'd like that."

Winky returned with a large tray containing one small plate with a slice of chocolate cake. She placed this before Harry and snapped her fingers, sending the tray away somewhere. Her magic amazed him; she did much more than Tidgy ever seemed to, without thought.

"Master is not being happy," she said, clasping her hands before her and leaning toward him.

"Huh?" Harry uttered. He wasn't accustomed to getting concern from this quarter. Then with a chill, he realized that she was referring to Snape. Harry frowned and put his fork down, deeply regretting his interference.

"Winky can . . . calm Master, but does not know. Winky not instructed."

He remembered now how she had kept the Death Eater Barty Junior under her power for years. "No, don't do that. Master Severus wouldn't want that."

She frowned and dropped her eyes. "Is Master being violent when he very angry? Winky is not allowing anyone to be hurt . . ."

"No," Harry replied, his heart sinking. He hadn't heard anything and wondered what she had seen. Maybe she just sensed things like that. He was starting to realize that he knew nothing about house-elves and maybe nothing about Snape. "It's all right, Winky. I don't think you need to do anything."

She started to turn away. "Winky will return if needed, Master Harry."

"Thank you, Winky," Harry said with forced calm.

Harry poked his fork into his cake and made himself take a bite. The chocolate would make him feel better, he assumed. He did not feel he could move. If he went up to his room, Snape might think he had given up on him. Of course, Snape could not know what Winky just came and told him, either.

Harry was saved from making a decision by Snape's return. As he took his seat, a fresh hot plate of food appeared before him. He stared at it a moment in a kind of surprised annoyance before he took up his fork.

"I'm sorry, sir. I shou-" Harry started to say.

Snape cut him off. "Don't, Potter. You apologize too much. It is one of your more annoying habits," he snapped.

Harry felt like some kind of spell had passed through his flesh. He waited in silent stillness for what might come next.

Snape rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. "I'm sorry, Harry; I should not have said that, at least not in that manner." His eyes roamed over the plate in front of him, unsettled.

"It's all right, sir," Harry insisted. Compared to things Snape had said in the past, that was nothing. But the meanings of things had changed; he had let them change, in fact. Harry longed to say something to undo everything, then wondered what it was about him that made him always wish for that. He took a small bite of cake just for an excuse to move.

"You are too concessionary," Snape said in a rambling way. "You need not be so careful around me. I am concerned you do this because you fear that if you displease me you could be sent away." In a harder tone, as though this were an old argument he wanted settled, Snape went on. "That won't happen. You cannot be sent away."

Searching for a response, Harry stared at his guardian with a pained expression. He had never seen this side of Snape before, had not even thought it existed. The letter had clearly undermined him. "I do appreciate that," Harry finally said. "And at the risk of conceding, I can certainly get by without meeting your mum."

Snape pushed his plate away. It disappeared an instant later. "She did agree to see us."

Harry blinked at that. Clearly this wasn't something he was going to understand anytime soon. "You told her about me?"

"I knew it was the only way to get her to even consider it."

"Gee, Mum, Harry Potter and I would like to drop by . . ." Harry said flippantly.

Snape laughed strangely. "She does not know it is Harry Potter," he said a little mischievously. "I did not feel I could use you in that way. If the mere fact of my adopting did not peak her curiosity . . ."

The landscape was becoming a little clearer now. Snape's tone and mannerisms were giving Harry a sense of underlying damage that was usually kept well masked. Snape was remasking it even as he spoke. Harry hoped this meeting went well, or he was going to have one more thing to deeply regret.

* * *

Four days later, they took the Floo from the Shrewsthorpe train station to a pub in a very small village in the East Midlands countryside. They walked from the quiet pub--where no one had paid them any attention when they arrived in the hearth--down a narrow lane that once had been paved with river stone, but now was mostly dirt and dust. A mile along, a gate formed of an elaborate rose bush appeared in the stone wall along the road. Harry marveled at the way the rose wood wound around itself as it met in the middle.

"I believe they practice a bit of Druidic magic," Snape said as Harry continued to study it. He pulled a cord beside the gate and a rusty bell at the top rang dully.

They waited. Eventually, a bent-over old witch appeared beyond the flowered arch. She uttered a spell and gestured for them to enter. "We are here to see--"

"Anita, yes, yes," the old woman interrupted. "This way," she said pleasantly, gesturing with her long walking stick. She waited for them to pass, then muttered something at the rose gate. She smiled mildly at them and started to lead the way, then stopped with a startled expression. She stepped up to Harry and gazed quizzically at him.

"Hmm, no more poppy tea before noon, me thinks," she muttered as she started up the brick path that meandered through a rampant garden. At the first low building, they entered. "Wait here, dears," she said and went out the far door.

Harry wandered around the room. Books lined low, roughhewn shelves along two walls. Crowded paintings of widely varying skill hung above. The furniture was all composed of antler and bone with needlework pillows. He had to admit, the decor didn't appeal to him much. He stepped back over to the window and looked out over the garden and the roses forming the entrance.

"Severus," an unfamiliar voice said with mixed emotion. Harry turned slowly and watched as a thin woman with a strong jaw line and short grey hair came in the door on the far side. The old woman who had met them at the gate stepped in before her as though on guard. Anita reached out and brushed Snape's sleeve. "You have literally not changed at all," she said in surprise. She collected herself. "Anastasia, this is my son, Severus."

Snape shook the old witch's hand. "I have heard quite a lot about you," she said as though challenging him to try anything.

"Clearly," Snape said dryly.

Anita took a deep breath and glanced around their side of the room. "Did you bring your son?" she asked.

Snape turned to Harry, gesturing with his arm, and Harry realized it must seem strange, him rooted to this spot way over here. Harry forced his feet to move. He carefully navigated around the prongs of the furniture as he went over to them.

"Ma'am," Harry said in greeting when he reached them.

She was more than surprised when she recognized him; she appeared to fall into a trance for a long moment. "This is your son?" she breathed. She turned to Snape. "You adopted Harry Potter?"

Snape bowed his head, sending his hair forward. "Yes."

She put her fingertips to her forehead in a very familiar gesture. "I can't believe they allowed you to do that. I assumed you had adopted one of your fellow Death Eaters' children."

Harry searched in vain for a response since the adoption had taken a bit of arguing on that exact point. Left hanging by the silence, Anita said dazedly, "Well, have a seat." She moved to one of the antler rocking chairs and gestured for them to take the couch. Snape and Harry sat there. The old witch sat to the side on a stool, her staff between her knees. Harry wondered if the whole thing wasn't a wand of some kind and how that would work if it were. Their eyes met and, after a moment, she nodded. Harry was certain she was answering his unspoken question. Used to Legilimency, Harry nodded in return and looked back at Anita.

"I need a moment to take this in," she said, staring at Harry perplexedly. She took a deep breath and asked, "So, you are living in the house in Shrewsthorpe?"

Harry answered, "For a few more days until classes begin at Hogwarts." He wasn't feeling very generous toward her. He kept remembering what her letter had done to Snape.

She clasped and unclasped her hands as though distressed. "You wanted this?" she asked him.

"To visit? Yes."

"I mean, to be adopted," she clarified.

"Yes," Harry replied evenly. "Very much so."

She turned to Snape who gave her a look as though, *you were saying?* "You believe you can find atonement this way?" she asked him bluntly. Snape's eyes narrowed.

Harry made a noise like a suppressed laugh. "You didn't tell me your parents were so much alike," he said.

"What?" Anita asked, *very* sharply.

"Shazor accused him of adopting me to protect himself from the Ministry. Actually, I should say, congratulated. You accuse him of having some kind of internal retribution to pay. Neither of you assumes he has altruistic motives." He could see she did not expect this much from him.

"You imagine he does?" she returned in a mocking tone.

Harry looked at her and thought, if you had seen him stopping me from going after Pettigrew, you wouldn't doubt it. The old witch cleared her throat, attracting Anita's attention. She gave Anita a solemn nod. Harry took a deep breath and Occluded his mind. He then intentionally waited for the old witch to look his way. She tilted her head to the side as if to say, *ah, well.*

"So, three weeks into this, you are still happy?" she asked Harry.

In a purely curious tone Harry said, "May I ask why you are asking me?"

A little uncomfortably, she replied, "Anastasia, my Covenelder, is helping me."

"I cannot read either of them now. The boy is as good as he is at hiding his mind once he realizes he needs to."

Anita looked at Harry a little suspiciously. "He taught you that?"

"Yes."

"You have something to hide?" Anita asked him.

Harry shrugged lightly. "I think you should trust people and what they tell you voluntarily. Everyone has things they would like to keep to themselves. Even from a Covenelder living in the middle of nowhere."

"Old wounds they would like to continue nursing, for example," Anastasia said airily.

Harry pushed his glasses up and gave her a long look. She gave him an innocent one in return. "For example," Harry acknowledged grudgingly.

"Anita," Anastasia said, "I agree with the boy. You should trust first in this case. Severus could not have brought a more powerful icon of his true self or a better peacemaker. He has met you much farther than halfway." She waited for Anita to respond. When a time passed, she said, "What is still bothering you?"

After a long moment, Anita said quietly, "I raised a dark wizard."

Harry glanced at Snape, who was staring at the floor before his mother's chair.

"You would never believe I changed," Snape said. "Twenty years have gone by and you still refuse."

Her eyes went dark. "You were a monster--there was no path back for you."

Harry bit his lip and waited for someone else to speak.

Anita took a deep, calming breath. "I fear now that you have fooled this boy," she gestured to Harry.

In a level tone, as though he were being extra patient with a student, Snape said, "Even if you have no faith in me, you are seriously underestimating two people, Albus Dumbledore and Harry himself." Snape stood up and looked back at Harry still on the couch. "Are you ready?" he asked factually.

"To leave?" Harry asked in surprise. "If you really want . . ." He studied Snape. Whatever had emerged to unhinge him was completely submerged again. Harry wouldn't have known it was ever there, looking at him now.

Anita stood as well. "We prepared lunch for you," she said a little strained. "Please, give us a chance to be decent hosts, at least."

Snape bowed acceptance of that after a brief hesitation. Anita led the way out the back to a stone paved area with a wooden table. Harry only now got glimpses of the other inhabitants, working in the gardens, weaving; he thought he heard a fire roaring hot nearby and imagined a kiln or a blacksmith. A wave of Anita's wand set the table.

A little sheepishly, she said, "I assumed your son would be a little younger, so I invited two of the young girls who live here to join us. They are nine and eleven. I think they will be thrilled to meet Harry."

The old witch had stepped away. She returned accompanied by a woman with long blonde hair with two sun-bleached children in tow.

"Severus' new son is a little older than I imagined, Caroline," Anita apologized to the woman as they gathered at the table.

Harry held out his hand. Caroline accepted it and said, "Caroline. We only have one name here," she explained.

"Harry Potter," Harry said.

The two girls gasped and the woman froze halfway to sitting down. "My goodness," she said.

"Are you really?" one of the girls asked.

"All my life," Harry returned.

"I want to sit next to Harry," one of them insisted and immediately leapt around the table to squeeze between Snape and him. The other, upon seeing this, jumped up as well. "Me too!" She took the short end of the bench. Snape moved down to make more room for them all.

"Hello," Harry said, feeling strange to be pressed between two glowing children with wide blue eyes of amazement.

"I'm Rattanita," one of them said. "Call me Ratta."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," Harry said lightly, making her giggle.

"I'm called Princess, but that isn't my real name," the other one ended in a whisper.

"You have to forgive them," Caroline said. "They are very sociable, but we get very few visitors. Especially not ones that they already worship."

"When are you coming out with a poster?" Princess demanded.

Harry gave her an alarmed look in return. "Never, if I have anything to say about it." When she pouted, looking honestly crushed, Harry said, "You can always magically blow up the chocolate frog card."

Princess leaned forward to look at her sister in excitement. "Good idea!"

"I didn't really say that," Harry said in disgust, taking off his glasses to rub his eyes.

Snape said, "Ah, it is good to see how well Potter has adjusted to his fame."

Harry narrowed his eyes at him. "Don't go there," he said in mock threat.

Ratta grabbed his arm rather hard and said, "I can't believe it! Harry Potter," as she shook him.

"Girls," Caroline admonished them. "Some decorum now, if you can manage."

They released him and sat up straight, primly putting their serviettes in their laps. Harry decided he preferred them the other way.

Salad arrived with dark red tomatoes and crisp cucumbers. Then cold soup. Then roasted vegetable sandwiches. "You eat well here," Harry said to the girls.

They shrugged. "What is your favorite food?" one of them asked.

"Chocolate cake," Harry replied.

"Birthday cake?" the other asked for confirmation.

"Yep. The first one I ever had was the best one," he said, falling into a mode of entertaining them. "Even though a giant had squashed it by carrying it in his pocket."

"No!" Princess insisted. "Don't be silly."

"I'm not," Harry said.

"How do you remember the first birthday cake you ever had?" Ratta asked in accusation.

"I was eleven. Your age."

"You didn't get one before that?" Ratta asked in horror.

"Not a one."

"We'll make you one!" They insisted.

"That's okay, really. I had chocolate cake for pudding last night. Our house-elf makes it all the time," Harry insisted, only then realizing the oddness of that.

"You still have that house-elf?" Anita asked Snape.

Snape shook his head. "A different one."

"What happened to Tidgy?" Anita asked suspiciously.

When no one answered, one of the girls parroted while tugging on Harry's arm, "What happened to him?"

Harry took a deep breath and replied, "He was eaten by a snake. A really big one."

Anita gave him a disbelieving look at the same time as the girls whined, "Nooooo, silly."

"I keep telling you the truth; I can't help it if you don't believe me."

Princess put her hands on her hips in mock disgust. "What happened to the snake?" she asked as though to test his story.

"I told it to go sleep by the hearth. Then the Ministry took it away."

Princess eyed him strangely as though realizing he wasn't playing the game properly; his tall tales were not supposed to be true.

"You *told* it to go sleep by the hearth?" Anita asked carefully.

Snape said quietly, "You have no sense of when to hide the truth, Potter." The entire table had frozen, staring warily at Harry. To the table, Snape said, "You have to realize that he was raised as a Muggle; he doesn't understand the implications of what he is admitting to."

The girls leaned around Harry and whispered, then slid off the bench and scampered off. Harry felt a little alone on his end of the table now.

"More tea, anyone?" Anastasia brightly asked, her aged hand holding the pot up unsteadily in invitation.

The girls returned, giggling. Harry turned to them in surprise. Princess held up a green garter snake for his inspection.

"Girls," Caroline said, although it didn't have the sharp edge it could have.

"We want to see him talk to it," Ratta insisted. "We've never seen anyone talk to a snake before."

"Because only dark wizards can do that," Caroline replied slowly, eyeing Harry.

"Mum, don't be dumb! It's Harry Potter." She handed him the snake. It was all of two foot long and as green as grass. It asked to be put down.

"It wants to be left alone." At their doubtful expressions, he insisted, "That's what it just said."

"Oh, you can't really talk to snakes," Princess said in disappointment. "I could have told you that."

Harry sighed. "What do you want me to ask it?"

Caroline sat back with her tea. "Ask it if it ate Peralla's Crickets. They all disappeared one day."

"Where were they?" Harry asked.

"In a small white box," Ratta provided.

Harry asked the snake that. Everyone at the table stiffened as he did. "Whoa," Princess breathed. The snake nodded. "It did! Did you see that mum--it nodded!" she exclaimed. "You really can talk to snakes." She took the garter back gently and set it down in a patch of tarragon nearby.

"You sound really strange when you do that," Ratta said.

"I can't hear it," Harry said. "I just think I'm talking normally." Snape gave him a surprised look at that. Harry shrugged in return.

Ice cream was served for pudding. Harry savored every bite of each of four flavors, thinking with satisfaction that it was probably twice as good as anything Dudley ever ate in front of him. Princess curled up in Caroline's lap across from him despite being far too big to do so easily. Caroline alternated bites between herself and her daughter. She set the spoon down to wipe her mouth, then ran her fingers through Princess' hair before kissing her on the top of the head. Princess looked up and got a kiss on the forehead as well. Caroline picked up the spoon again.

Realizing that he was staring, Harry went back to his ice cream, feeling colder inside than the ice cream could account for.

Ratta came up to him and nudged him shyly. "Can you sign this?" she asked, holding his chocolate frog card.

"Oh, get mine too!" Princess said, sitting up suddenly, unbalancing her mother and herself.

"I got it," Ratta insisted, pulling another roughed up card from her pocket.

Harry borrowed a quill and signed them both personally. With ginger motions they picked the cards up and carried them off, careful not to smudge the ink.

"Thank you," Caroline said across from him. Harry shrugged that it was no big deal.

The girls returned and now sat more quietly beside him. "Did a giant really squash your birthday cake?" Princess asked.

"Not really," Harry said. "It was only a half-giant."

Princess punched him on the arm. "What other funny things have happened to you? Tell us something else."

Harry gazed at her as though she were crazy. "How much time do you have?"

"Not that long," Caroline replied for them.

"Awwww," the girls complained. Princess grabbed his arm yet again. "Tell us something," she pleaded.

"Uh, about what?"

After a moment's deliberation, Ratta said, "The Tri-Wizard Tournament on the card. Tell us about that. How did you win it?"

"A dark wizard pretending to be a friendly wizard made sure I won it. I wouldn't have otherwise."

"Why did they put it down, then?" Ratta demanded, insulted.

"They didn't ask me before they wrote that. Otherwise I'd have told them to take it off."

"Did you get the bad wizard in the end?" Princess asked conspiratorially.

"No. The teachers did." Harry remembered that terrible moment in Moody's office when he realized the other wizard intended to kill him. He had already been shattered by Cedric's death and his narrow escape from Voldemort. He had been helpless, in shock. His heart pumped at the memory even two years later.

"Girls," Caroline said quietly. She gave them a palm down gesture with her hand, and they fell silent.

"I do hope you are helping this boy heal?" Anita demanded of Snape.

Taken aback, Snape didn't answer immediately. Harry did. "He is," he said quietly.

"More ice cream?" Princess asked him, looking concerned.

"Thanks," Harry said with a smile which removed her strained look instantly.

They made their goodbyes soon after that, while there was still plenty of good daylight left for the walk back to the pub. The train station was quiet as well when arrived there. Traffic on the road in the village was light and soon Harry relaxed as the door closed behind him inside their house.

"I'll tell Winky that dinner can be late and light."

"I suspect she already knows," Harry said.

"She is unusually perceptive," Snape agreed.

Post had arrived in their absence. Harry picked up two letters and took them up to his room to write replies. He told Hermione about the two little girls without saying where he had met them. Neville had been helping him with the parchment spell, even going into the wizard library in London to look for books that might help.

After a small dinner, Harry wrote a long note discussing what he had learned since they had last corresponded and tried out some spells Neville suggested in his letter. He was running out of blank parchment. If he tore a blank sheet off of the writing tablet, it threatened to not give you another. And once a sheet had been spelled, it never worked quite right for a new spell. He went downstairs and found Snape in the drawing room at the desk as usual. When he looked up, Harry asked, "Do you have any parchment?"

Snape pulled open a drawer beside him. "It is here--help yourself."

Harry came over and pulled out five sheets before shutting the drawer again. He hesitated there. "The visit went all right," Harry commented. Snape made an ambivalent motion with his head. Harry could not see him well since he was bent over some kind of form and this made his hair fall over his face. "Sorry about the Parselmouth thing. It just isn't important to me, so I can't remember that other people care so much."

Snape didn't reply, so Harry stepped away. "Hey, can I go to Diagon Alley now and get my school stuff?"

"I thought we would do that on the way to Hogwarts."

"Okay," Harry agreed and realized that Snape was right, he was trying too hard to please him, but doing otherwise wasn't really imaginable.

After playing around with some new parchment spells in his room for a while, Harry grew too tired to continue. He changed into his pyjamas, noting that they seemed too tight, and crawled into bed. He dropped off to sleep after a short while, undisturbed by dreams.

Something touching his hair woke him. Harry, lying on his stomach, turned his head to see what it was. A shadow loomed close in his mind, outlined by the dim light from the hall beyond in his real vision. He was actually starting to get used to that.

"I did not realize you would be so soundly asleep already," Snape said apologetically.

"Long day," Harry muttered.

The bed tilted slightly. "I realized something about you today, Harry."

"So did I," Harry murmured.

"What was that?"

"You are the only person who understands anything," Harry said sleepily.

"Hm."

A long silence ensued. Harry had to fight drifting off again. "Are you going to tell me?"

"I think not, upon further reflection."

Harry frowned into his pillow. "You are just here to make me nuts?"

"No," Snape countered softly. Harry started as something brushed his hair again. He opened his eyes to catch the dim silhouette of Snape's hand. He turned his face into the pillow as he realized that Snape had caught him staring at Princess and her mother. Flushed with embarrassment, he burrowed down under the covers. A hand rested on his covered shoulder a long moment before the bed tilted again and Snape left. A warm anxiety had replaced the cold ache and Harry marveled at how much better that felt.



Chapter 19 - Year Seven Begins

The morning of their return to Hogwarts, Harry packed his trunk and hovered it down to the main hall. He felt as though he had just arrived, and he wasn't really ready to leave yet, but the thought that the house would be here waiting made him feel whole in a new way. As he looked around the hall, the sun cut through the clouds and in the small windows at the end. The damage was still present from the battle; Snape had decided that he would prefer the noisy repairs happen while they were absent.

Harry stepped into the dining room and took a seat at the empty table. Tea came after a few minutes. Harry poured some for himself and sipped it, mostly to have something to do.

Snape finally came down as well. "Ready to leave it would appear?" he asked.

Plates of beans and toast arrived. Harry nodded. "Packed, anyway," he heard himself say.

Snape looked up at him with a strange expression. Harry returned to his breakfast without clarifying. They both ate quickly and the plates vanished immediately after. Snape drank down an extra cup of tea before he stood up.

A small trunk sat beside Harry's in the hall. Snape stood beside his, thoughtful. "Not that it is impossible or even difficult to return, but I dislike needing to do so," he explained "I believe that is everything, though." He looked Harry over. "We shall stop in Diagon Alley first, so let's take the Floo, Minerva has had the Great Hall hooked in for the remainder of the summer."

He hovered both trunks to the dining room hearth. As the trunks rested back on the floor he said, "Do you have your list for school?"

Harry pulled it from his pocket and waved it before restowing it. Snape started to reach toward the canister of Floo powder, then stopped. "I perhaps should ask if you need money for your supplies," he said.

"No," Harry said.

"Hm," Snape said as he took down the canister. "May I ask what source of funds you are using?"

"There is still some money left in my mum and dad's vault," Harry replied dismissively. Talking about this reminded him of living with the Dursleys. Maybe it was just the awkwardness. "It is enough to get through school," Harry said. "But, I don't know how much an apprenticeship costs."

Snape raised a brow. "For you, I would expect, nothing." Harry growled lightly at that. Snape held the canister out to him. As Harry took a handful, Snape said, "You will let me know if you need anything?"

"Sure," Harry replied curtly, wanting to cut the topic off. Snape gestured for him to go first into the Floo. Harry hovered his trunk into the hearth and stood behind it as he tossed the powder down beside his feet.

* * *

The sun shone over Diagon Alley as they stepped out into it from the Apothecary's, whose Floo they had used. "I have to go up to Gringott's first," Harry said, gesturing at the grand building at the next intersection.

"Be back here in an hour," Snape said.

Harry headed off, halting the activities of everyone in the street with his mere presence. He smiled faintly at everyone he passed and kept going even when suddenly befuddled people failed to move out of the way.

The Goblins earned his undying respect by not giving him the slightest consideration for being who he was and insisting on inspecting his key and himself suspiciously. Inside his vault, after filling his sack with a variety of coinage, Harry did a quick count: only 400 galleons and change remained. It didn't sound that bad, but he needed to find out exactly how much an apprenticeship cost. He only knew that the good ones were considered expensive.

Back out on the street, a few wizards and witches he didn't know greeted him as though they did. "I have to get books for school," he explained as he escaped.

Inside the bookstore, a familiar voice cried, "Harry!" and Hermione came up and gave him a hug then looked at him sharply. "I think you've grown three inches; you're taller than me."

Harry looked at her in alarm, suspicion building in his mind as he thought about all the potions he had drunk in the last month. "It's good to see you," Harry said honestly.

"Bet you are happy to get out," she said. She leaned to the side and looked out the window of the shop. Harry glanced that way to find it full of people looking in.

"In one sense," Harry said in a pained voice.

"Well, let's get our books and get an ice cream. Ron and Ginny aren't getting supplies until later, they're both in Romania."

As they collected their assigned texts, Harry kept trying to think of a way of explaining his new situation. Every time he opened his mouth to try, someone interrupted, shaking his hand or even hugging him. They all seemed very happy. He imagined her reaction, how it wasn't the right place for it, and sighed quietly as he gave up.

At Fortescue's they sat at the outside table and ate large sundaes. Suddenly, Hermione said, "Hello, Professor," to someone behind Harry. Harry jumped and almost pulled out his pocket watch before he thought better of it. He turned his head to look instead, meeting Snape's oh-so-level gaze. Harry couldn't decide quite what to do.

"Mr. Potter," Snape greeted him with a knowing look.

"Have a seat, sir," Harry invited, indicating one of the three empty chairs. Hermione nearly choked, but covered it quickly.

"Ms. Granger?"

"Yes, sir. Please," she said quickly, shooting a shocked glance at Harry, who felt a bit twisted up inside.

Snape took a seat, crossed his arms and considered them. "Get all of your schoolbooks, Potter?" he asked.

Harry, while relieved that Snape was willing to play this game while he hesitated, felt very bad about it. "Yes, sir."

Snape had reverted smoothly to his old slightly sneering tone. "Do you have other things to get before we return to Hogwarts?"

"A few things." This time Harry did pull out his watch. "I still have twenty-five minutes, Professor."

"But you are eating ice cream," Snape pointed out as though that didn't make any sense.

"I am," Harry said a little defiantly. "It is slow going, doing shopping, I needed a break."

"Perhaps if you didn't invite your fan club, it would go faster," Snape remarked. Witches and wizards had started to gather in the road near them, whispering.

Harry's brow furrowed. "Next time I'll remember not to."

"I didn't mean to get you in trouble, Harry," Hermione said. "I assumed you were here alone." She stood up. "I'll help you finish getting things. I'm going to Flourish and Blotts. Do you need quills and parchment?"

Harry nodded. "I have to get some things for Hedwig." He took a last bite of his ice cream; it had melted mostly anyway. "Do we get Hogsmeade weekends this year?" Harry asked Snape.

"I believe the headmaster is considering doubling them, in fact."

"Well, then I can skip the sweet shop." Harry stood as well.

"Out of hero-worshipping chocolate frogs already?" Snape gibed.

Harry gave him a narrow look. "No. I just like to have a good stash of things at the beginning of the year. I never know when the staff will decide I'm going to be a prisoner again," he replied with more than a hint of annoyance.

"Where shall I meet you?" Hermione asked as she organized her things in a businesslike manner.

"In front of the Apothecary's," Harry replied.

"See you then. Nice to see you, Professor." She left quickly.

"You'd best get going, Harry," Snape said when she was out of hearing.

Harry nodded and looked around for Eeylop's, remembering it was behind him. "Can you hold onto this?" he asked, indicating his heavy bag of books.

Snape gave him a very dubious look but then relented immediately. "Yes."

After Harry had purchased a new perch and water holder for Hedwig's cage, as well as more broom polish at the shop across from Eeylop's, he met Hermione before the brick wall leading to the Leaky Cauldron. As they waited for Snape, she said, "You've clearly been hanging out with the teachers way too long."

Harry sighed, feeling trapped by the momentum of his situation. "I didn't have much choice."

"Now that they've caught everyone that matters, you could go to the Burrow," she pointed out. "Ron and Ginny wouldn't be there but Mr. And Mrs. Weasley would be."

"Huh," Harry muttered. That hadn't even occurred to him. He had been thinking ahead to a quiet week before classes started, although he would like to see the Weasley parents. Snape arriving saved him from having to voice his indecision.

Hermione immediately noticed that their teacher was carrying Harry's books. Harry took them back with a thanks, even though he had to hold too much in each hand to do it. He made his goodbyes to his friend, then he and Snape stepped into the shop just as a small crowd of surprised witches began to form at the nearby brick wall, blocking the archway open which made it ripple in annoyance.

Harry's trunk and cage with Hedwig still sat behind the counter beside the hearth. Snape thanked Jiggers for holding it all for him. The man just waved him off. Harry thought they must know each other well.

In the Great Hall, Harry dragged his trunk out of the hearth. The hall was empty except for Snape, who arrived behind him. "Can you handle that alone?" he asked.

"Yep. I can hover it to the tower. But I have a question for you," Harry said stridently, catching Snape's full attention. Harry held out his arm; the sleeve didn't make it to his wrist, clearly too short. "Have you been giving me growth potion?" Harry asked accusingly.

"No, do you want some?" Snape replied evenly.

Harry stared at him as though not believing him.

"Really, Potter. You can be six and a half feet by Christmas should you so desire. How tall would you like to be?"

"Not that tall," Harry retorted. "I just thought . . ." He scratched his head.

"I would not give you such a significant potion without telling you," Snape insisted. "I did not realize this was such a sensitive topic or I would have offered some."

"I don't want to cheat," Harry said stiffly.

"As you wish. Anything else you would like to accuse me of? I need to take care of some things before a staff meeting."

"No. Sorry, sir," Harry said apologetically.

* * *

Harry settled into his dormitory. It didn't feel as closed in as it had before. The prospect of the empty beds soon filling with his friends made it much less so. Upon closing his trunk lid, he realized that it was lunch time and headed excitedly down to the Great Hall.

Several of the teachers were there and greeted him warmly. Snape and Dumbledore were absent so Harry sat across from Hagrid, who gave him a wink. "Good ter see yer, Harry. Hope yeh had a good time away."

Harry nodded and served himself chips, not bothering to converse much because he was too hungry to.

After lunch, Harry followed Hagrid down to his cabin, happy to just be able to wander outside. "Anything happen while I was away?"

"I' was vera quiet, Harry. Everyone left." Hagrid commented.

"Everyone?"

"Pretty much. Professor Sprout was around fer a few days. I helped her with a coupla things. Filch o' course, was here. Eager teh get away they all were."

"I can imagine," Harry commented to himself as Hagrid watered his garden from a large can. "What is that?" Harry asked about several long rows of stalks.

"Thassa . . . blue corn," Hagrid said a little slowly. Harry recognized that tone and wondered what blue wombats ate. At least it wasn't a blue dragon, or a blue sea monster, or some large, hungry, dangerous blue thing. "So where'd they hide yer, Harry? Now tha' you can say, I suspect."

Harry blinked at him. Was it possible Dumbledore hadn't told anyone? "I was with Severus," Harry said.

"Really?" Hagrid asked in surprise. "No one'd suspect tha', I s'pose."

"That's what he thought. No one would suspect he adopted me either."

Hagrid laughed and patted Harry on the back as he put the large red can back under the water spout. In the cabin Hagrid made tea and they sat down around the crate he was using as a table. "Ah," the half-giant said in pleasure as he took a sip. He looked suddenly at Harry. "Now wait a second here . . ."

"He did, really," Harry said, enjoying the warmth of the cup in his hands even in the warm summer weather.

"Well, tha's a surprise. Glad to hear it though; ya' deserve a family, Harry. Though I am a bit . . . uh, b'fuddled by your choice . . ."

"I think it was a good one," Harry said defensively.

Hagrid patted his knee. "Tha's all that matters."

Harry's face twisted as he said, "I, uh, haven't figured out how to tell Ron and Hermione, so can you not discuss it in front of them until I do?"

"'Course, my boy. O' course."

* * *

By dinner all of the teachers had arrived and were gossiping when Harry came into the Great Hall. He felt a little out of place as he approached the table. Dumbledore gestured from the end that he should come down beside him where there was an empty seat across from Snape. Relaxing, Harry took the offered place and returned Snape's slightly formal greeting.

Dumbledore patted Harry on the arm and said, "And how are you doing, my boy?"

"Good, sir," he replied sincerely, although he felt odd about being the only student, more so than he had at the beginning of summer. The teachers were talking vigorously amongst themselves as though at a reunion. They all sounded very happy. As he scanned them, Sprout gave him a nice smile, McGonagall a wink. His last year here, Harry considered with mixed emotion.

His eyes strayed to Snape, who was holding his sleeve back as he reached for his goblet. Unusual, countering tensions pulled at Harry as their gazes met, as though he could clearly hold in his mind, for the first time, all of the conflicting things he felt about Snape and being in school. Dumbledore's pale gaze graced him knowingly, making his face heat up. Harry turned to his mutton and potatoes and ignored them all in favor of eating.

* * *

The last week of summer holiday rushed past. Harry, thinking ahead with obsessive concern to his N.E.W.T.s, read and took notes on the first three chapters of all of his books. He wrote to Ron back and forth. Ron was traveling around a lot

visiting relatives before returning and Harry had to change owls each letter because they had travelled too far to be willing to go again immediately. Everyone, it seemed, was enjoying the freedom to move about safely.

The night before the students returned, Snape suggested eating dinner in his office instead of with the staff. "I feel I have been somewhat derelict with you," he said as Harry sat down across from him.

"You warned me you were going to be busy," Harry said as he uncovered his tray. Half a roast duck, jacket potato, and string beans were on his plate. "Looks good."

Snape said, "I am quite certain they are having chicken in the Great Hall."

"I got the trays from Dobby, remember," Harry said slyly.

As they ate, Snape asked, "Are you all ready for classes? I probably should have asked you that sooner."

"Yes, I am," Harry assured him.

They had a quiet evening of small talk that lasted until late into the evening. "I am perhaps leaving too much for tomorrow," Snape eventually commented. "But we have not had much time this week."

"It's only going to get busier, isn't it?" Harry asked.

"For at least the first few weeks. I will make time for you if you need me, but you will have to let me know," Snape said with a hint of firmness.

"I understand, sir."

Snape banished the trays with a wave of his wand. "You should probably get a good night's sleep as tomorrow you traditionally do not, correct?"

"Usually not. Especially not the night after you threatened to expel me," Harry said, teasing.

"You deserved to be," Snape stated unapologetically.

Harry stood and put the visitor's chair back where it belonged. "Fortunately, it wasn't up to you."

With a raised brow Snape acknowledged, "Fortunately." With a nod he sent Harry away.

* * *

"Sit here, Harry!" Colin Creevey urged from farther down when Harry and his friends started to sit in the middle of the table for the welcoming feast. Harry shrugged and moved down to where the ends of the tables were left empty for the new house members. As Harry put his leg over the bench, Colin said conspiratorially, "You should welcome the new students to Gryffindor, Harry. Make a good impression for the house."

"Oh," Harry said ambivalently.

"Good idea," Ron interjected in agreement. "Make the others jealous."

Harry rolled his eyes and watched as the sorting hat was brought out and placed on a stool. The First Years shuffled in slowly, tightly packed in a group as though for mutual protection. McGonagall shepherded the alarmingly small children along up to the front, where she explained the procedure to them. The hat had a shorter poem this year--it was back to its old self, it seemed, now that things had calmed down. A few new students swallowed hard and looked uncomfortably at the old thing.

"Jona Albert," McGonagall read off. A sandy-haired boy took a deep breath and went up to the hat.

"Gryffindor!" the hat exclaimed before he could even rest it on his head. The boy jumped and dropped the hat on the floor but recovered it quickly and smoothly to its perch. He looked up at the cheering table on the left side and walked quickly over. Colin shook his hand vigorously as the boy sat down beside him. Jona grinned happily at Colin, looked across at Harry and froze in place.

"Hi," Harry said and smiled in welcome. A Hufflepuff was sorted out as they sat looking at one another. Harry held out his hand. Shaking visibly, Jona accepted it limply. "Harry Potter," Harry said by way of introduction.

"Uh huh," Jona muttered fearfully.

"This was not a good idea, Colin," Harry commented. Hermione waved and said hello to Jona, trying to distract him.

Another student was sorted into Gryffindor, a girl with auburn pigtails high on her head. She fairly bounced over to the table and sat beside Jona. "Hi, I'm Maybella," she said perkily and waved back at Hermione.

Jona elbowed her and whispered, "That's Harry Potter," as he pointed across the table.

Maybella's mouth fell agape. "Hi," Harry tried again. The girl actually looked horrified. "I really am harmless," Harry assured them.

The table fast filled up and the sorting was finished. Ten new Gryffindors sat chatting shyly, eating cakes and drinking pumpkin juice. New students at the other tables would occasionally stand up on their bench to get a look at Harry. He ignored them, although he did wave at Malfoy as he walked between the tables, garnering a seething look in return.

Harry eventually managed to get a few words out of Jona after much effort. "You killed Voldemort?" Jona asked in a small, disbelieving voice. The entire end of the table fell silent.

"Yes," Harry said factually. Ten sets of awestruck eyes stared unblinkingly at him.

"In the castle here, right?" A girl two down on the bench asked.

"Right out there," Harry pointed out the main doors to the Hall. "You walked past the spot."

"Hey, are they putting a plaque in that spot?" Ron asked excitedly.

"Merlin, I hope not," Harry returned.

"You should have seen it," Colin said in a low voice. "Harry hit him with a Killing Curse and he flickered green and just crumpled!"

Harry looked down at his hands. "Not something you want to do to someone unless you absolutely have to."

Colin banked his excitement. "Well, of course. And you did something to him before that; he wasn't fighting back."

"What did you do?" The pigtailed girl asked in a whisper.

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me," Harry said to her, as if that were the end of it.

"Aw," many of the new students and some of the older ones complained.

Harry yawned and rubbed his eyes. "Pass the pumpkin juice, Hermione."

"You aren't going to say?" someone exclaimed.

Harry drank half of his juice and looked at their eager faces. He had to be honest with himself and admit that he didn't like remembering. It made him raw all over again to do so. "I attacked him with my mind," Harry said. "I didn't use a spell, until the end."

"Whoa," someone whispered low and long.

"How did you get into his head?" Jona asked eagerly; he seemed to be coming out of his shell, finally.

Harry, feeling a little annoyed with their worshipfulness, said darkly, "I always had been. He was always putting visions in my head, especially while I was sleeping. I turned it around on him that day--went after him." He glanced around to survey the effects of that statement. Many of the students appeared to have stopped breathing as they stared at him.

"Didn't they try to stop that from happening?" Colin asked him. This was new to him as well.

Hermione cut in. "Occlumency lessons. Poor Harry." She shook her head.

"They did help in the end," Harry pointed out and stifled yet another yawn.

Someone leaned in behind him suddenly. "Not sleeping well, Harry?" Snape asked in his ear.

Harry looked up at him and gestured with his finger for him to come close again. "I was up late making a banner for the common room," Harry said back.

Snape straightened and looked at him closely as if assessing the truth of that. Harry shrugged. The professor's gaze then flickered over the First Years with a look of dark disdain. "*Ten* new Gryffindors. Just what we need," he sneered sarcastically and, after another glare at them, stalked off.

"Who was that?" Maybella asked in concern.

Harry suppressed his grin. "Professor Snape," he replied, "the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"What!" Ron exploded, then put his head in his hands. "Oh no! He isn't teaching Potions anymore. And I wanted to take Defense."

"Is that Greer up there?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked where she pointed. "Yes."

"Any good?"

"I got off on the wrong foot with her, but she seems okay."

"The text didn't look that tough."

The Gryffindor First Years were tracking Snape as he glided out of the hall. "We *have* to take Defense, right?" someone asked.

"Yes, it is required for first through fifth," Harry replied. "You don't need to worry. The Defense teachers always try to kill *me*. I'm hopeful this year though." He shrugged, enjoying their confused horror.

Ron stood up as well. "I'm not," he whined. "Maybe I can drop out now." Hermione slugged him on the arm. "Professor Snape isn't that bad," she said, making Harry feel better.

"I still remember his comment about your teeth," Ron pointed out.

"Well, there is that."

"See you all around," Harry said to the First Years with a little wave, smiling through his frown.

Out in the Entrance Hall Hermione asked, "What did Professor Snape want anyway?"

Harry waved her off. "We've had an ongoing conversation about something."

"You are having a regular conversation with Snape?" Ron asked, sounding sickened.

"Yes," Harry said flatly. "Try hanging around here for the summer. I needed someone to talk to."

"Stay with us!" Ron said sharply.

"I wanted to," Harry insisted, remembering the beginning of the summer when that sounded like heaven. Someone was tugging on his sleeve, but he was feeling too angry at Ron to pay attention to it. "I had four Death Eaters and Voldemort's pet snake to deal with as it was. You really wanted me to put your family at risk?" he asked hotly. Ron didn't immediately find a reply. Harry looked down at Maybella's strained expression as she stood clutching his sleeve. "Sorry, Maybella," he said. "We shouldn't be arguing here."

"You didn't tell us about the Death Eaters," Ron accused him.

"I wasn't supposed to," Harry replied in defeat.

"So those D.E. the Ministry touted capturing; you did that?"

"Not alone," Harry said and too late realized his mistake.

"Who helped you?"

Harry hesitated, an ache forming in his chest. "Tonks and some other Ministry Aurors showed up," he hedged and felt very bad for it for many reasons. Maybella released his sleeve, so Harry looked back down at her, loosely grasping her shoulder as she started to step back, apparently overwhelmed by his tirade. "Did you want something?" he asked her gently.

After a long pause, she asked, "Where?"

Harry blinked at her. "Oh, you mean Voldemort. Not the four Death Eaters." Harry stepped over to the spot and pointed at the stone floor. "Right here, I think. It was morning, which makes the hall look a little different." He glanced over at her and the other fifty students piled in the doorways watching.

"There were a lot of Death Eaters here too," Ron supplied.

"True. Ron was right in front," Harry said to Maybella. "He and Hermione." The students' heads all turned. "So, Ron, how many Death Eaters were there?"

"I didn't want to count."

"Twenty-two," Hermione stated.

"Gloating, Potter?" Malfoy said as he pushed his way out the door and stepped over. He was a good five inches taller than Harry now.

"You better believe it," Harry said. The students chuckled.

"Just you wait, Potter," Malfoy said in a low voice.

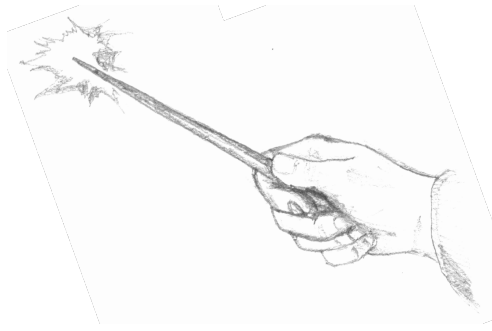
"That is exactly what your father said. Right after I put a binding curse on him so the Ministry could haul him back to Azkaban."

Malfoy took a step back and sneered harder. "You better be ready to duel in class tomorrow morning."

"Oh, I am," Harry said with a sly smile.

Malfoy lost his. "My father said you were playing at something. We'll see how long that lasts now that I'm back."

Harry had to work hard not to burst out laughing. He shook his head as he stepped away and his friends followed. "See you in class," he said sweetly to Malfoy. He gave the other gaping students a smile before turning to walk up the stairs.



Chapter 20 - Settling In

Ron had to be dragged to class the next morning. He sat in his seat between Harry and Hermione with his back hunched. Snape strolled in on the hour and looked them all over. "Well, some of you that I had thought I was rid of," he stared pointedly at Ron and then Neville, "I seem to have back again. A side-effect I had not considered, I admit, when I asked to teach this subject." He picked up the class list and glanced at it. "Well, one cannot have everything," he breathed.

He tossed the list aside on the front table and unrolled another parchment. "As all but the least astute of you know, this is Defense Against the Dark Arts. It is *optional*. If you do not intend to work hard, you should not be here right now. This class is for those who intend to take the Defense N.E.W.T. at the end of this year. I will expect everyone to do exceptionally well on it should they stay."

His eyes took in the silent room again before he looked over the other parchment. "These . . . are notes left by your previous instructor, Mr. Grey. He felt obliged to . . . warn, I suppose one could say, the incoming teacher about certain students." Reading now, Snape went on, "Mr. Weasley, he states, is the most accident-prone student he has ever taught. Ms. Patil cannot demonstrate a spell without giggling first. Mr. Potter, he writes . . ." Snape glanced up at this point with a chastising look. "Is arrogant, presumptuous to the point of distraction, and apparently feels he should be teaching the class."

Harry winced a little, but held Snape's gaze. When Snape started rolling up the parchment, Harry raised his hand.

With a raised brow Snape prompted, "Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"There are no comments about . . . students from any of the other houses?" He had almost said Slytherins, but then thought better.

While continuing to roll the parchment tightly, Snape replied, "I believe it says Ms. Abbot shows promise, but she is unable to focus."

Hannah, who had been gazing out the window at the clouds, snapped her head around at that, eliciting a chuckle from the class.

"Other questions, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked with an unusual underlying tone. No one else seemed to hear it.

Ron raised his hand. When Snape's questioning look turned his way, he said, "Professor Grey didn't like Harry and me. His comments are unfair."

"He wasn't as bad as some of the others," Hermione countered. "He didn't try to kill Harry, for example."

"Yes, he did," Ron retorted. Harry slapped him on the arm to shut him up.

Snape took that in. "Explain that, Mr. Weasley," Snape insisted sharply as he stepped to the edge of the platform.

Ron's mouth fell open and he hesitated with a drawn-out, "Ah . . ."

With a frown and a huff Harry bailed his friend out. "He got really angry one day and challenged me to a duel. Which we had, just inside the Forbidden Forest. I don't think he was trying to really do me in though; the spell Ron is thinking of was just some kind of variant of a Blasting Curse that I ducked."

"Yeah, but the tree behind you just exploded!" Ron insisted and then slapped himself on the forehead and muttered, "Shit."

With another dirty look at his friend, Harry went on. "Basically, I beat him easily after that one shot and he left me alone after that."

Snape looked dangerous. "I presume that you didn't inform anyone else of this, Mr. Potter?"

"No, sir," he admitted quietly.

"Stupid boy," Snape muttered and went back to the table, where he put the comment parchment back down, crumpled from his hand gripping it.

"I'd think you'd be happy to hear that, sir," Ron said accusingly.

"Ron," Harry said in a low tone as he grabbed his friend's sleeve. Snape was giving Ron a dangerously dark look, making Harry's heart race a little. "You are not starting out the term well at all here." Ron pulled his arm out of reach and refused to look at his friend. Harry sat back with a sigh and crossed his arms.

"Stay after, Mr. Potter," Snape said as he flipped through his copy of the textbook.

"Yes, sir."

Snape smoothly moved on, "I will assume you have all read chapter one. Who can tell me the six crippling curses?"

At the end of class, Harry hung back. Hermione dragged Ron out before he could try to stay after as well. Malfoy stalled too but a sharp look from the teacher sent him out. When they were alone, Snape said, "Mr. Weasley needs to learn to think before he speaks."

"Tell me about it. He has the First Years terrified of me."

"That isn't far from awestruck, in any event," Snape commented as he stepped off the platform and over to Harry.

Harry met his gaze before dropping his again. He felt worse about not telling his friends the truth. He waited for Snape to say something about that. Instead, his teacher after a long pause said, "I am going to report the incident, so expect to get called to the headmaster's office to explain it."

"You think it's worth bothering Dumbledore for?" Harry commented. "Grey isn't teaching here anymore."

"It will undoubtedly be Professor McGonagall who questions you. This is for you to know, only, for the moment, but you are going to be assigned a new Head of House, probably at the end of the month. McGonagall is taking over more of the headmaster duties and does not have time for both."

At Harry's sad expression, Snape said, "It is inevitable, I am afraid."

Harry swallowed hard. "Do you think it's all right if I go up and visit Dumbledore sometimes?"

"I am quite certain that he would rather welcome that," Snape said. "The password is Roverandom." Snape stepped back to the front table. "Do you need a note for your next class?"

Harry hoisted his bookbag. "No. It's Transfiguration." He gave Snape a sly smile and departed.

"Sorry, Professor," Harry said as he stepped into the Transfiguration classroom in the middle of the roll call. "Professor Snape kept me after."

She lowered her parchment and studied him over her glasses. "I am going to assume you are not in trouble already . . ."

Harry paused in setting his bag down on the floor under the table. "Uh . . ." At McGonagall's disapproving look, Harry explained, "It is for something that happened last year." He glared at Ron. "Something someone should have kept their mouth shut about. I've been informed, ma'am, that I will be explaining it to you at some point."

"In my copious spare time, Mr. Potter," she breathed.

"It wasn't Harry's fault," Ron muttered.

"Ron," Harry and Hermione said in unison. "You've helped too much already today," Harry finished softly.

At the end of Transfiguration, McGonagall stepped over to Harry as they collected up the crickets they had been transforming into crockery. "Stay after, Mr. Potter. I would rather miss lunch than add anything to my schedule at this point."

"Yes, Professor," Harry said.

The door fell closed behind the last student. Harry hefted his bag onto the table and left it there. McGonagall was storing the crickets in a large, screened-in cage full of grass clippings and a ragged and skeletal potted fern. He helped her empty out the boxes, sometimes having to prod the clingy black insects from the inside of the lid.

"I have to admit, Harry, that I haven't managed to locate the right paperwork to record Severus' conflict of interest, shall we say. Nor have I had to time to determine which policy applies to punishment." She shut the cage and hovered it to the top shelf. "If he sent you to me, he presumably doesn't want to punish you for it himself."

"You misunderstand, ma'am. He just said he wanted it reported."

She stopped straightening things up and asked, "Wanted what reported?"

Harry swallowed hard and said, "Professor Grey's attempt on my life, ma'am."

McGonagall's eyes lifted to the ceiling. "You had to have a full set, didn't you, Harry?"

"I personally don't count the incident with Lupin," Harry said defensively as he crossed his arms.

"Everyone else does," she said. "So what happened?"

Harry summarized the events, pointing out that Ron thought the spell more violent than he did.

"What night was this? Do you remember the date?"

"I could figure it out from my study notes, I remember what he was trying to teach that week."

"Figure it out. Write out what happened. Sign it. Have Ron read it and sign it. Give that to me. It would help me a lot." She picked up her books from the front desk. "I admit it is much simpler now that he isn't here to be kicked out. If you can at all help it, don't get into a duel with another teacher for at least the next few months," she said stridently.

Harry followed her toward the door. "What about Severus?"

She put her hand on the door handle and gave him a soft grin. "You are on your own there, Mr. Potter."

"I am all right with that, Professor." Harry grinned back.

* * *

Potions with Greer wasn't the same as with Snape. She lectured more slowly as though they weren't very smart, leaving them rushed to brew before the end of the class, unless it was double-Potions. Hermione didn't seem to like or dislike Greer, which was okay with Harry. The other students, except the Slytherins, made a show of making her feel welcome, giving her little presents for the first week. While Harry thought it inexplicable, it did have the advantage of improving her mood.

She hadn't lost her impression that he was a little dim. Even by the end of the first week, she still seemed surprised when he turned in a successful potion at the end of class. Harry found this more annoying than it really deserved.

"Greer's okay," Hermione commented on the way out of class.

"She thinks I'm an idiot," Harry griped.

"Well, you do keep exceeding her expectations at least," she replied brightly.

"Yeah, great."

* * *

Harry enjoyed Defense the way Snape taught it. He seemed less concerned with their safety than previous teachers, or maybe it was just that they were Seventh Years now and expected to figure things out and control what they were doing. This meant they were allowed to try rather loud, bright, dangerous spells on occasion, sometimes even on each other. The added benefit of this was that Hermione didn't dominate the way she did in most other classes, since she didn't necessarily want to make as much noise as was required by a particular spell. He and Neville and most of the other boys found the noise half of the fun of things and shouted the spells energetically. Most, but not all, of the girls remained more demur as they practiced and demonstrated.

"Like this," Neville said to Justin while drawing a tiny rapid corkscrew in the air with his wand; a trail of shiny gold bled off from it and hovered. Snape was working with two of the other Hufflepuffs and Parkinson in the front, and had been for almost ten minutes. He glanced their way and then disregarded them.

Justin tried it a few times but he only got a gold sparkle or two. Hermione gave them a chastising look. "At least work on one of the spells from class, Harry," she whispered.

Neville answered before Harry had a chance, "This one is good for an ice curse, which is coming up after this."

"Is it?" Hermione asked with interest and leaned in to join them a bit, as did Ron.

From the front of the room, Snape cleared his throat. They all sat straight in their seats and waited more patiently for their fellow students to manage the assigned spells.

Finally the Hufflepuffs returned to their seats, looking worn by the extra effort they had been put to. Snape surveyed them a moment before announcing, "Mr. Longbottom wishes to demonstrate a few counters to the next curse, I believe."

Ron swallowed a smile as Neville slunk out of his seat and up to the platform opposite the teacher. Unlike in D.A., he stood a little slump-shouldered, but he had his wand up and ready.

Snape, looking unforgiving, said, "Mr. Longbottom will be demonstrating an Ororbis, correct?"

Neville nodded, obviously concentrating hard, but quickly adding, "Yes, sir."

Snape sent an ice curse his way after a "Ready?" Neville's arm was a blur as he drew a fast expanding spiral of gold ribbon in the air before him. As the curse arrived, tiny ice chips rained down onto the floor, not reaching him. The charm was strong enough that it hovered many seconds after the attack.

Snape waited for it to fade before saying, "And the heating charm from the assigned reading?"

"Yes, sir."

When Snape spelled him, Neville performed both the heating charm on himself followed quickly by a fireball spell, which went off like a photographer's flash. Snape lowered his wand. "Timing is usually considered too sensitive to use that counter against an ice curse," he stated, apparently for the edification of the room. "Mr. Longbottom, however, managed to get the timing precisely correct, as surprising as that is. Although it did not leave him time for much of a heating charm as a backup. Take your seat," he ordered Neville.

Neville lowered his wand and jumped off the platform. Harry could tell by Snape's expression that his fellow student had earned a little of his grudging respect, but he doubted Neville realized this; he took his seat with a sigh, looking only relieved to have survived the test.

As Harry left class, he glanced back to nod a goodbye and noticed Malfoy standing beside Snape's desk with his book open as though to ask a question. His chin-length blonde hair hung forward to frame his light eyes as he gave Harry a small sly grin. Harry rolled his eyes in return and closed the door behind him.

* * *

"Ms. Granger, may I speak to you a moment?" Professor Greer asked as the students filed out at the end of class.

"Yes, ma'am." Hermione waved Harry and Dean on and stepped to the front of the room.

"You are a very intelligent young lady, Ms. Granger. May I ask what career you plan to follow upon finishing school?"

"I haven't decided, Professor, something in Muggle relations. I'm looking for something outside the Ministry if I can find it."

"Why is that, dear?"

"They were too slow to admit that Voldemort was back. I haven't forgiven them for that."

"Dear me, you are a strident one, aren't you?" As she spoke, she arranged the potions turned in by the students into a locked drawer of her desk. "You have been here for six years; perhaps you can answer a few questions that have been bothering me?" Greer said this in an extra-friendly voice.

"I can try, ma'am."

"The students seem very pleased to not have Professor Snape."

Hermione frowned inwardly and hesitated. "He wasn't the nicest Potions teacher, Professor. The Slytherins aren't happy he's gone; that's why there are only two in the Seventh Year class."

"You have him for Defense though, still?"

"Yes, ma'am. I think he is happier teaching that." Hermione shifted her bookbag, wondering if she was out of line. Snape's demeanor had improved, although she felt uneasy about voicing a guess as to why.

"Hm," Greer muttered thoughtfully. "I've heard a few jokes about Parselmouths in this class, which is unexpected." She hesitated, her voice sounding forced steady. "I realize it is a bit unthinkable, but is there someone in this school who speaks Parseltongue?"

Hermione laughed lightly. "Yes, of course." She didn't notice Greer's alarm at this. "Harry Potter does. Everyone knows that."

Greer's expression went flat. Slowly, she said, "Really? That is very interesting. Thank you, dear. That is all."

Hermione smiled helpfully and exited, failing to understand the quirky, dark, false smile the teacher responded with.

* * *

Saturday was the first chance Harry had to wander to the fourth floor outside of class time. Snape was in his office grading essays. He greeted Harry relatively warmly, for Snape. Harry took a seat opposite the desk. "It will take me another hour to finish these," Snape said.

"That's okay," Harry said. He pulled out his Transfiguration essay and worked on that.

Finally, Snape rolled the essays up into bundles by class and tied them. "How was your first week of seventh year?"

Harry finished the sentence he was writing out as he replied, "Fine." He put his parchment and textbooks away. "The First Years are still terrified of me. And some of the other students as well who should know better. I'm not used to that yet and I can't figure out how to get past it with them."

"Does it matter?"

"It bothers me. I'm not scary or dangerous. They step against the wall to let me pass in the corridor like I'm going to explode or go on a spelling spree. Ron just thinks it's funny." Harry waited for him to ask if he had told Ron and Hermione anything, which he hadn't. Why the opportunity never seemed to arrive, he wasn't certain. His dreading the moment of revelation might have something to do with it.

Instead, Snape opined levelly, "Give them time. They read those newspapers that you pass off as rubbish. People like heroes and are slow to give them up."

They had tea and talked for an hour, until Harry noticed the clock. "I have D.A." He stood up.

"You are still holding that?" Snape asked in real surprise.

Harry pulled the Galleon from his pocket to check that he remembered the date and time correctly.

"What is that?" Snape asked.

Harry held the coin out. "Hermione created those for our meetings. The date and time are coded in the serial number with a Protean charm. We had to do that to avoid Umbridge."

Snape handed it back. "Bright girl."

"Too smart for her own good," Harry quipped.

"One wonders what she sees in Mr. Weasley," Snape commented idly as he placed the rolled essays into his satchel.

Harry hadn't thought about it like that. He shrugged. "They've always liked each other."

"Hm."

"Gotta run." At the door, he stopped. "Do you have time tomorrow?"

"Some. I will be brewing a few potions in the dungeon in the morning. Most weekends in fact."

"I'll try to come down," Harry said brightly.

* * *

Sunday morning, Harry helped out in the dungeon for a little while, until Greer started hovering annoyingly. Harry begged off, not wanting to make trouble for Snape. As he headed back up the staircase, he realized that he was free to visit Dumbledore.

After the staircase bore him up to the office door, Harry knocked with anticipation that made him realize he should have remembered to visit sooner. Dumbledore stood looking out the window behind the desk, his hands clasped behind his back. "Hello Harry," he said, even before he turned.

"Good morning, sir," Harry replied brightly. On the desk a model of the solar system was rotating and catching the light from the window each rapid time around.

"Is there something on your mind, my boy, or are you just visiting?"

Harry took his eyes from the blue and green hollow orb with one white moon that represented the earth. "Just visiting."

"Please, have a seat." Dumbledore invited him around the desk and conjured a pair of overstuffed chairs in a bright flowery pattern. From their seats they had a nice view of the lawn, part of the pitch and a vast expanse of forested hills. "You are doing very well, I hear."

"We've barely had any assignments," Harry pointed out.

"I didn't mean in your school works," Dumbledore replied gently.

"Oh." He took a deep breath. "I guess I am. Good to be able to go out if I want. No one seems to think Avery or Jugson is any threat."

"The Ministry believes they will remain in hiding for a long while or leave the country. They were both considered by the Aurors and Professor Snape to be a bit of a drag, in fact, on Voldemort's organization."

Harry remembered seeing Voldemort brutally punish Avery in the graveyard. He *had* been a simpering wimp. Maybe Voldemort had kept him around just to take out his anger on. Harry fidgeted with his feet as a cloud moved over the sun. He thought about his inability to tell his friends about his new situation and fidgeted again.

"Something else is bothering you. Can I help?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry pulled his eyes from the view and looked at the headmaster. From this close distance, he looked much older than Harry remembered. It made Harry ache uneasily. He dropped his gaze and admitted, "I haven't told Ron and Hermione about being adopted."

"Hm." Dumbledore sat back and steepled his fingers. "Would you like a butterbeer? I think I would." He conjured two bottles and handed one over. Harry sipped his: it was icy cold which was refreshing before the sun-soaked window. "I assume you believe that they will disapprove?"

Harry nodded and felt the persistent knot in his stomach tightening up. He drank more butterbeer, but it didn't loosen.

Dumbledore said gently, "In your place, I'd give them a chance. But then again, you know them better than I. A true friend feels obliged to share his thoughts but in the end he, or she, should support you. I believe they are true friends to you."

Harry's stomach loosened a little.

A silence fell. Dumbledore finally interrupted it. "Quidditch starts soon. A full season for your last year. No Voldemort. No Dementors."

"I'm looking forward to it, sir," Harry said, more upbeat and glowing a little in anticipation.