

Chapter 21 - Potions with a Capital "P"

Tuesday Potions gave Harry more of a flashback than he ever expected to get. As they all took notes on the lecture, Greer called on him. She had a smile on her face that made him wonder with a jolt if she were actually Umbridge using a Polyjuice potion. It was a Nagini kind of smile.

"Tell me, Mr. Potter, what kind of caustic is shared by Beetlejubs and Bezoars?"

Harry blinked at her. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione move in a way that made him think she didn't know the answer either.

"Mr. Potter?" the teacher prompted with a acidic sweetness.

The question did remind him of something. Something from one of the other texts he had read the first few chapters of over the summer. He racked his memory. "Uh, Clian- Clyentate?" That wasn't quite right.

"Wrong, Mr. Potter," she announced airily, enormously pleased. Harry glanced at the other Gryffindors. All of them shrugged that they didn't know either, making Harry feel better.

Greer spent an inordinate amount of time hovering around his cauldron while they brewed as well. This didn't bother Harry much; she couldn't touch Snape for intimidation. He acted surprised to find her there when she finally did critique their potions.

"Perfect potion, Ms. Granger. Too much heat when you added the fly's legs, Potter. You will get graded down for that," she said happily as she strode on to the next bench, where the students suddenly stood straighter as she approached.

Harry glanced into Hermione's cauldron, then into his. They didn't look the least bit different. He shook his head.

At the end of class, Greer handed out essay assignments. This in itself was a little odd. She did it as they walked out the door. "Due Friday," she said happily. "That will leave your weekend free . . ." Several students actually thanked her for that.

Harry accepted his parchment slip and jammed it into his bag. Hermione read hers aloud as they walked, "*Describe the uses of the seven kinds of bezoar-based potions.* Doesn't sound too bad." She tucked it away in her book which she left in her hand since it didn't look like it would fit in her bag.

As they mounted the stairs to the ground floor, Harry looked around for a place to pull her aside. His secret was starting to tangle his insides and looking at her calm visage as she thought ahead to the rest of the day, reassured him that, she of all people, would understand. As they approached the Entrance Hall, he espied the staff lounge as Professor Vector stepped out of it. It looked empty and, although the door had closed, he knew the password.

Harry gave a tug on Hermione's arm. She turned to him with a questioning expression. "Um, there is something--" Harry started to say. His expression must have looked pained because her brow furrowed in concern.

"Hey there," Ginny said, stepping over to them.

Harry looked over at her and at Ron ambling up behind his sister.

"Uh," Hermione said.

"Lunch time," Harry announced, stepping through them all to lead the way. The thought of Ron finding out produced a cold fear in Harry, which made him feel trapped. He was very grateful that Hermione was smart enough not to prompt him more as they walked to their table.

As they sat at lunch, Hermione sent Harry questioning looks. He gave her small wry smiles in return. Ron asked her to read his essay for History and she occupied her self with that as she ate. *Well, it's like this*, he imagined himself saying to her. *Professor Snape, well, adopted me.* It sounded odd, even to him, in the context of the Great Hall filled with his loudly chattering peers. Six years of history complicated things incredibly.

Harry ate a nice crispy panini as he watched his two friends. They were sitting very close together; they had leaned in over the essay so they were touching all along their sides. It occurred to Harry with a twinge that Hermione's loyalty was almost certainly not first to him no matter the topic. Nor Ron's, he didn't expect. He turned to the head table. Snape's eyes narrowed for a half-second, a sign Harry knew that meant he was curious or even concerned. Harry managed a light smile for him before returning to his lunch.

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After Care of Magical Creatures that afternoon, Harry went up to the second floor. Snape was reading intently from a large book when Harry entered. He closed the door and waited for Snape to put down the hand he had raised for silence. Snape's lips moved as he recited something from the text, making Harry curious. At the end of the page, he put his hand down and looked up in question.

"This is quick," Harry assured him, glancing upside-down at the detailed page of curse applications. "Do you have those other seventh-year Potions texts?"

Snape's brow went up. He pointed to a bookshelf in the corner. Harry went over and crouched to look on the bottom shelf, the only shelf that held books with textbook-like bindings. "What is this other one?" Harry asked of a worn, narrow, thick volume titled *Potions Compendium*.

"You may borrow that as well, should you wish to. May I ask why you feel you need them?"

Harry sighed. "Greer asked me today what caustic Beetlejubs and Bezoars have in common. I almost remembered," he said in frustration. "It was in this one." He set the books on the corner of the desk and pulled out a blue-covered one. He flipped it open. "Catalyndate. I was close."

"It was not in your regular reading, I assume."

"No. It was not." Harry opened his bag to fit the books in. He pulled out the parchment slip with his essay assignment to keep it from getting crumpled. He glanced at it and froze with a growl. It was a different topic than Hermione's--a much harder one.

"Something the matter?" Snape asked mildly as he flipped through the volume in front of him.

"Yes, but I'll handle it." He pocketed the parchment and loaded the books into his bag. "I'll take this one too," he said and pulled the compendium from the shelf. It barely fit in his bag lying sideways on top. He shook his head, thinking that the assignment was due on Friday to make it hard for him to get help. As he reached the door, he said, "I'll have to see you later, sir. I have a lot to do."

Harry worked every spare minute on his Potions essay, neglecting his other class assignments. On Thursday night as they all sat around studying, he asked Hermione, "Can you read over my essay for tomorrow?"

Hermione wiped her fingers from the biscuit she had been eating and accepted his rolled parchment. "This is long, Harry," she observed as she unfurled the top of it. After she read the first part, she said, "What is this?"

Harry, holding out his assignment slip, said, "I received a different assignment than everyone else."

In disbelief Hermione looked at his slip. "Compare and contrast the three major brewing techniques of heat-simmer, brew-ferment, and flash. Include detailed cases where one is superior to another and explain why. Harry this is nuts. This isn't even a N.E.W.T. essay. No wonder you've had all of those other books out."

"Snape loaned them to me."

"He did?" she asked in surprise. "Didn't he insist you tell him why you needed them?" She picked up the compendium. "Wow, this is hard to find. I'm surprised he trusted you with it."

Harry blinked at that series of confused assertions. He couldn't imagine Snape withholding books from him, of all things. "I didn't tell him why. I didn't want to sound like I was whining about another teacher." This at least was the truth. "Can you read it over?"

"I am not going to be much help, I don't think, but I'll try." She read the first part of it. "Did you discuss crystallization differences?"

"No, I forgot about that." Harry made a note to himself on one of the many parchments he had been recording his readings on. "See, you're helping already."

"Harry, why didn't you complain in class yesterday?"

"She was waiting for me to. Like I'd give her the satisfaction."

"She shouldn't have done this. And you're too accustomed to hating the Potions teacher, that's for certain," she commented as she read. "Boy, this is long." She unfurled it all the way. "You have declared war right back, I see."

Harry grinned.

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In Potions the next day, Harry actually went so far as to use one of his old Occlusion exercises to keep his expression even as he fished out his essay and handed it forward. The student in front of him, Justin, weighed it in his hand and gave him a questioning glance. Harry just shrugged as though it were nothing. Surreptitiously, he watched as Greer glanced at a few of the essays as they came to the front, including his. But her reaction was to smile a bit more to herself, which confused him.

Deathly tired of the subject of Potions, but having no choice, Harry took out his quill and began taking notes.

After Potions they had no afternoon classes that day, so they went out on the lawn and relaxed in the sunshine.

"Greer didn't say anything," Hermione said in disbelief.

"You turned in that monster essay and she didn't make anything of it?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "I have no idea what she is up to. Even Snape never stooped that low. Exactly."

Hermione said, "No, he just didn't grade your potions at all sometimes. Dropped them on the floor, for example."

"Actually, he said he did grade them," Harry said.

"When did he say that?" she asked.

"Over the summer I got mad and accused him of it in front of McGonagall. It was pretty funny the way she laid into him." Harry didn't explain that Snape had gone on to point out a bit angrily that Harry should have realized a show was being put on for Malfoy, Nott, and company.

"Wow," Ron said. "Wish I'd been there to see that."

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It was a Hogsmeade weekend. Harry had a sense that Ron and Hermione wanted to hang out together, alone. He sent them on without him, saying he wanted to work on D.A. spells while it was quiet. In reality it was a good opportunity to spend time with his guardian without an excuse. Last weekend, he had told his friends he had been with Dumbledore longer than he really had.

Snape wasn't in his office. Harry went down to the dungeon and found him in the corridor, ferrying extra cauldrons from the classroom. "Are you here to help?" his guardian asked.

"If you want help."

"Yes, of course." He walked Harry patiently through the currently brewing potions and the instructions for each, which were placed beneath them on the shelf. "If you will handle these four for the next fifteen minutes, I will start another one." He set the two empty cauldrons up as Harry quickly reviewed the instructions for the ones he had been assigned. The next twenty minutes was a blur of hurried stirring and ingredient adding.

"Holding it together there, Harry?" Snape asked at one point.

"Yes, Severus, I am," Harry said, a little put out at being doubted. He stirred two cauldrons at once before turning the burner up on one of them, wishing for a third hand, then wondering if there were a spell for one.

Once the other two cauldrons were simmering, Snape checked Harry's work. He made an ingredient adjustment on one of them and then nodded. "They can simmer now. Thank you for assisting," Snape said as he closed the lids on the prepped ingredient jars and put them away in a small cabinet.

"If it is the only way to spend time with you . . ." Harry said as he read through the corresponding discussion for one of the potions.

"It isn't the only way. Shall we go up to my office and have lunch in?"

Harry put the book back on the shelf. "I'd like that."

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Hermione and Ron returned just before curfew, smiling and laughing. Harry forced down his feeling of being left out as he met them in the Entrance Hall. "Hey, Harry," Ron called and waved, his cheeks a little red from the sun.

"We just ate," Hermione explained when Harry gestured for them to go into the Hall.

"All right," Harry managed levelly.

"We could do second pudding," Ron suggested.

"No . . . we couldn't," Hermione retorted in disbelief.

"See you later," Harry said and joined the stream of students going in. He sat with Ginny, Neville and Colin.

As the plates of food appeared, Justin stopped beside them and said, "Hermione told us Greer gave you an essay assignment ten times harder than the rest of us and that was why she handed them out rather than just telling us the topic."

"Looks that way. I did finish it," Harry said with a grin.

"That's nuts. You should have complained," he insisted, sounding like he was willing to take on some of the unfairness of it.

"I'm sure that's what she wanted me to do," Harry said. Justin shrugged and stepped over to the next table. Harry took a glance at the head table, Greer had her eyes narrowed at him all right. "I don't know what her problem is, but I'm not giving in," he said quietly.

Pointing at him with her fork, Ginny said, "Harry, I think you like being persecuted."

Harry's lips cocked sideways. "I did have fun working on that essay even though it was wicked hard."

"Where are Ron and Hermione?" Ginny asked.

In a high pitched mimic of Hermione, Harry said, "We ate already in Hogsmeade and we're soooo tired."

Ginny laughed. "Oh yeah. I can see that. Getting serious, those two."

"That's why I split them up when we were fighting in the final battle," Neville said in a falsely stern voice. "I thought, if they are side-by-side they might forget we're fighting Voldemort."

They all laughed.

When he finished his plate, and before he stood to leave, Harry took another peek at the head table--this time to look for Snape. Even through the hair that had fallen over his face, he could see Snape's brow go up. Harry gave him a small smile. If he had glanced at Greer, he would have seen her eyes narrowing more at him.

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Tuesday in Potions, Harry waited impatiently for his essay to be returned. Greer strode back to the front of the room without returning it, but having returned everyone else's. Hermione gave him a wide-eyed look. He raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" she drawled.

"I didn't get my essay back, ma'am," Harry pointed out in the nicest voice he could manage.

"See me after class, Mr. Potter," she said in a stiff tone he didn't recognize.

Harry made it through class and brewing, but just barely. Greer seemed downright predatory today as she stalked around the room. She was too chubby to slither the way Snape used to, but she still managed. Her long fingernails tapped on the bench tops as she circled. At Harry's table, they all made faces of dismay at each other when her back was turned.

Finally the bell rang and everyone packed up and departed for lunch. Harry packed his bookbag and left it on the bench.

"You wanted to see me, Professor?" Harry asked. She hadn't looked up at him so he had been forced to walk up to her desk.

"Do you know the penalty for cheating in this school, Mr. Potter?"

Harry shrugged. "How does that matter, ma'am?"

Anger came through now. She had his essay in her hand, crumpled a bit. "Excessive assistance constitutes cheating, Mr. Potter," she announced in a victorious tone.

"I didn't get any help with that," Harry argued, pointing at the parchment.

"Don't lie to me; I can see right through you, my boy."

"Right." Harry said as he thought, *you haven't seen anything about seeing through people.*

"Who helped you with this?" she demanded. "Or need I not ask?"

"No one helped me with it," Harry repeated.

She huffed. "We'll see about that." She came around her desk and headed for the door. "Follow me," she ordered.

"Where are we going?"

"To see the headmaster. There are some other things he should be made aware of as well, I should think." She sounded righteous, much like Aunt Petunia often did.

Harry, thinking of Dumbledore not needing an interruption of his quiet contemplation, said, "I don't think it is worth bothering the headmaster for, ma'am. How about Professor McGonagall? She's the deputy headmistress."

They were going along the ground floor corridor now. "And your Head of House," Greer countered smartly.

"She has always been very impartial," Harry insisted.

Even though his legs didn't look any shorter than hers, he had to half-jog to keep up. She didn't respond to that assertion. Harry was out of breath when they made it to the far side of the second floor. She gave the password and the gargoyle leapt aside. Harry protested again, "I really don't think—"

She grabbed the collar of his robe and dragged him into the turning staircase. Harry was too startled to do more than regain his balance. Same as with Mulciber, she had him beat easily if he couldn't use magic. At the top, Greer barely waited for an invitation to her knock before opening the door. She pulled Harry in behind her, only letting go when they stood before the headmaster's desk.

Dumbledore glanced calmly up at them. He sat writing a letter it looked like, with his glasses perched on his nose.

"Headmaster Dumbledore," Greer began a bit pompously, "I have a number of problems with this student to discuss with you."

Dumbledore looked curiously at Harry as the latter straightened his robes from having his collar twisted. "Good morning, Harry," Dumbledore intoned.

"Good morning, Albus," Harry greeted him back. Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at that. Greer seemed rather startled by it, which was Harry's intent.

"Now, Gertie, what is your concern?" Dumbledore asked as he put his quill aside, blotted, and rolled up the letter.

"First off, I must say this boy is treated far too casually and leniently by your staff."

Dumbledore slipped his spectacles off and folded them slowly. "Well, you will have to forgive us for that, as we are very appreciative of having Voldemort gone." She sniffed a bit doubtfully, making Dumbledore elaborate, "If you had been one of the ones who were duped completely and drawn away from the school just when the students needed us the most, and upon realizing this, imagined the absolute worst, only to return to find Mr. Potter here standing over Voldemort's remains and the rest of his club students incarcerating his followers. We perhaps have gone a little soft on him. If we start to forget, we only need consider that the alternative outcome would have been utterly tragic." He gave Harry an affectionate glance before he sat straighter and went on, "Nevertheless, if there is a problem to be addressed, we will by all means do so." He favored her with a questioning expression.

Greer geared up her anger again as she pulled out Harry's essay. "Mr. Potter is receiving undue assistance on his assignments."

"I did not!"

"Harry," Dumbledore said in a firm tone. "You will get your turn."

Harry bit his lips as Greer went on. "I do not like my students receiving assistance on assignments that are used to determine a final grade. I have the records of his previous grades in Potions, they are marginal at best. It is not possible that he is capable of the work he is turning in as his own, yet he persists in lying about getting help. I am especially disappointed that it is presumably another staff member who is giving him said assistance."

She held out the essay, but Dumbledore waved it off.

Greer continued in a lower tone, "As well, I have observed what I believe to be an inappropriate relationship involving Mr. Potter and a member of your staff, which I am *certain* is outside the bounds of school regulations."

Harry stared at her now, trying to catch up with that. He was starting to suspect that she wasn't after him, but Snape. Dumbledore's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. "Harry, do you have a response to that?"

Harry mentally backed up. "I haven't had any more assistance on my assignments than normal. Hermione reads my essays over when she has time and notes things she thinks are wrong. She doesn't say how to fix it, though, so I don't consider it cheating and neither have any of the other teachers. I haven't had any help from a teacher with *any* of my Potions essays."

"Potter, you can't honestly expect me to believe you wrote this!" she held the essay out to him.

"I did," Harry insisted. "As to Professor Greer's second allegation, I'm not sure what she's referring to."

"Your grades took a very interesting turn upward the last two months of the previous year, Mr. Potter."

"I was studying harder."

"Don't play coy with me." Her voice dropped even lower, unimaginably low, as she pointed at the door with his rolled up essay. "I saw you in my office last Saturday. I'm certain you didn't know I was there." Harry shook his head and thought fiercely back to the weekend brewing session while she grinned happily at his discomfort.

"Harry?" Dumbledore prompted.

"I honestly don't know what she is referring to, sir. I spent twenty minutes or so helping Professor Snape with some potions."

"Potter," she said as though he assumed she was stupid. "He had his hand on your back as he explained the potions to you, and he stood much closer than would ever be appropriate in my experience, anyway."

Harry gave her a studious look. He was a little embarrassed, mostly because he knew Snape would not want Dumbledore to hear this.

Dumbledore stood up and paced slowly behind his desk, rocking side to side more than walking, as though he were stiff. "Professor, if you will allow me to address these issues in the order of their seriousness."

She became all prim again. "Of course, Headmaster."

"When I hired you to teach Potions, we both agreed that since you had not taught in seven years, and not so many classes at once, that it would be best if you were not also burdened with the duties of Potions master."

Flustered, Greer stammered, "Yes sir, but--"

Dumbledore held up his hand to forestall her. Harry grinned and ducked his head. He really did love Dumbledore.

"If you have changed your mind or are feeling as though your territory is being invaded, you should have come to me to re-negotiate."

"That doesn't have anything to do with this," she insisted, gesturing at Harry with the parchment essay.

"Ah, but it does, I believe," he countered kindly.

Greer's mouth twisted to the side as she took that in.

"Harry, perhaps you should explain . . ." Dumbledore was giving him a look that Harry read as, *see what happens when you keep things to yourself?*

Harry sighed and said, "Professor Snape is my d- . . . guardian." Dumbledore gave him a sharp, amused look at that. "He adopted me," Harry added, a little rattled by his near slip.

After a long stare Greer breathed, "You aren't serious?"

"I witnessed the papers myself," the headmaster supplied. "Was there anything in what you saw that exceeded the bounds of a parent-child relationship?"

Harry rolled his eyes uneasily. Greer muttered in barely audible speech, "No, not at all."

Dumbledore retook his seat. "As to the allegations of cheating, I suggest you ask Professor Snape how much, if any, help he provided on the assignment. Good day, Professor," he said dismissively. With a smile he said more brightly, "Good day, Harry."

At the bottom of the tower, Greer thrust the rolled parchment at him. "Get it signed off by Professor Snape that you didn't receive any help. Then I'll mark it." She stalked off.

Harry used a flattening charm on his essay to take out worst of the wrinkles, then re-rolled it carefully. His bag was still in the dungeon; he would have to retrieve it before lunch ended. He went around the corner just in case Snape was in his office. He wasn't, but the classroom door was open. A peek inside verified that Snape was cleaning up from the previous class. Bits of wood disappeared from the floor with a Banishing Charm as Harry stepped in and closed the door.

"Harry," Snape greeted him when he looked up.

"I need to have you sign something," Harry said. "And to warn you that Greer has it in for you."

"I am already aware of that," Snape commented easily as Harry stepped over to him.

"Did you know she was in her office last Saturday?" Harry asked. Snape shook his head with a thoughtful expression. He took the parchment Harry held out as he explained in an annoyed way, "She insists that you sign that you didn't help with it. Otherwise she won't give me a mark on it." Harry watched in mild trepidation as Snape's eyes scanned the first section of the essay. "She dragged me up to Dumbledore's office just now to accuse me of cheating," he said to fill the ongoing silence. When Snape went on reading, Harry, with growing concern, insisted, "You don't need to mark it too--just sign it."

"You did a good job on this," Snape commented. "Greer gives remarkably difficult essay assignments and could not have given you much time to finish this as it is only the third week of classes." He carried the essay, while still reading, over to the desk to pull out a quill. "Reyfreem is not a reagent," he said.

Harry glanced over his shoulder. "I said that wrong. I was pretty tired when I wrote that part."

"The entire class must be tired."

"No one else got that assignment," Harry said. "Everyone else had: describe the seven kinds of bezoar-based potions."

Snape looked up at that with an intense expression. "And you didn't complain?"

"I thought she was trying to get to me. I would have, if I'd known she was trying to get to you, by giving me an assignment she was certain you'd have to help with."

Snape quickly read over the rest of it. He pulled out his wand and obliterated the erroneous line. "Rewrite that and I'll sign it," he said, pushing the parchment over to Harry.

Harry laughed and shook his head. He crouched so he could write normally in the blank space and repaired the miswritten line. "I'm only doing this because I did know better, just didn't write it out very well."

"Of course, Harry," Snape stated patronizingly. He took the parchment back and added a line across the entire bottom edge of Harry's text and wrote just below it, *No assistance provided*, with his signature. As Harry rolled it up again, Snape said, "If I were you, I would insist it count as the mid-term."

"You think so?"

"Yes. I am impressed, Harry. Makes me think I didn't challenge you enough."

"Oh, you did," Harry strongly insisted, garnering a small smile from his guardian.

Essay in hand, Harry went back to the dungeon to collect his bag. The classroom was empty. He knocked on the office door and was told to enter.

"My assignment, Professor," Harry announced levelly. He brought it up to the desk and set it there. She kept writing in her log book with her quill, her grey roots showing in her thin scalp. She didn't look up. Instead she waved him off. Harry turned and started back to the door. Peeved at her silent dismissal of things, he turned at the door and said, "Professor, if you think you know how to see through people, you should look up Legilimency in the library next time you are there."

She gave him a withering look. "Did I ask for your advice, Mr. Potter? I am quite certain I didn't."

"I'll keep the second part of it to myself then, ma'am, which was listing the staff who know it. It is no matter to me. Good day, Professor," Harry finished in a calm, level voice that he thought even Dumbledore would be proud of.

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Breakfast was Harry's favorite meal, usually. This particular morning, however, it wasn't going as well. There was a lot more whispering and glances his way than normal. Much more. Students were passing around copies of what looked like the *Prophet*, and reading avidly. Harry tried not to look too alarmed by this as he reached for the honey.

Hermione was eating calmly and reading her own copy with her normal consumed expression. Harry resisted the strong urge to jerk it out of her hands. Torturous, long minutes passed as he tried to eat, tried to listen to the whispering, and waited for the paper.

Justin swept behind and hit him on the shoulder. "Hey, Harry," he said meaningfully.

"Huh?" Harry asked him.

"You don't have to explain," Justin said in a false sympathy as he stepped to his table. Harry resisted glancing at the head table, but just barely.

Luna stopped by next. "*Really*," she said, sounding disappointed in him.

"What?" Harry asked her. His uneven heartbeat was struggling with the notion that the reactions were just a little off from what he feared.

"Oh, this," Hermione said, grabbing Harry's attention. He swallowed and waited as she read something on the back page. She shook her head in confusion and with a dubious look, handed the paper over to Harry.

This reporter is bearing rumors that a certain wizard hero is in a family way. More to follow when verification can be obtained.

It was Skeeter's gossip column on the back page. "Family way?" Harry asked aloud, not sure whether to laugh or cry. Everyone around him broke out laughing.

"Who's the lucky girl, Harry?" Ginny asked suggestively, then flickered her eyelashes at him. They all giggled again.

"No one," Harry snapped, tossing the paper back on the table. "Argh," he breathed. Even Hermione couldn't keep from laughing. Harry shook his head and finally managed to eat some of his cold breakfast. Skeeter was getting close though; he really didn't know how much longer he had to work things out his own way, whatever that way was.

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After Herbology that afternoon, Harry watched Ron's and Hermione's backs as they disappeared into the rose garden, engrossed in conversation. This left Harry free to visit his guardian. He had a question about his Potions reading as well that he would much rather ask of Snape.

In the second floor corridor, Harry paused outside the door because Malfoy was inside. He looked to be having something explained to him, but it wasn't something out of their class textbook.

"I expect to finish this one next week," Malfoy was saying in what must be his Best Boy voice. "Which one should I order to read next? This book refers to another by Brutus Brindlestiff. Do you know of it?"

Shit, Harry thought, *what is Snape teaching him?* He had a flash of the future: him as an Auror facing off with a Malfoy armed with spells Snape had taught him. While he waited his shoulder tired, so he set his bag down beside the door. Malfoy noticed this and gave him that sly smile again. Harry leaned against the doorframe and waited patiently. Snape suggested a different book and gave Malfoy a slip with an address from which to obtain it.

The blonde boy slunk over to Harry. "Need extra help, Potter?" he asked snidely.

"No," Harry replied in an almost friendly tone, refusing to be baited. They passed close in the doorway.

"Come in, Mr. Potter," Snape said as he arranged a small stack of parchments on his desk. He glanced up at Malfoy and added, "and close the door."

Harry froze at that and at the dark look Malfoy was now giving him. The scene Greer had caused in the headmaster's office played through his mind. "Uh . . ." he started. Malfoy actually looked furious now as he glanced between them. Harry held the door open and said to the Slytherin boy. "What do you want, Malfoy?"

Malfoy's pale eyes looked him over in silent, disapproving appraisal.

Harry stepped closer to him and dove in. "How about the truth?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Snape's head come up sharply. He glanced that way. "Trust me," Harry explained.

Snape rested his chin on the back of his fingers and considered them both. "Mr. Malfoy does know how to keep things to himself," Snape stated in an oddly mild tone, leading Harry to wonder what he had on Malfoy. "Sit down, Harry. Mr. Malfoy, step in and close the door."

After Harry took a seat, Snape sighed and considered him in consternation a moment. Harry gave him a shrug. "Potter has apparently seen something here that I did not," Snape said. "Perhaps because you have been competing only against yourself, Mr. Malfoy, even though you didn't recognize it. To save you further effort and . . ." Here he looked over at Harry in question. " . . . to address something Mr. Potter is concerned about, I should tell you that I have adopted Mr. Potter."

Malfoy's mouth fell open. "What?" he finally breathed after long seconds of empty expression. He spun on his heel and paced a bit, actually whimpering once as he turned. After a few times across the floor he stepped over to Harry. "No wonder I couldn't bait you at all. It was taking all the fun out of it, frankly."

Harry chuckled silently and grinned at the other boy. Malfoy made a noise of despair and put his hand over his eyes a bit theatrically, although Harry expected he meant it. Finally he put his arm down and said to his teacher, "Is that all, sir?" in a rather worn tone.

Snape, fighting a grin, replied, "Yes, Mr. Malfoy."

At the door Malfoy stopped. "I couldn't tell the House that, sir. I'm not that cruel," he said before he left.

When the door closed, Snape gave Harry, who was still trying not to laugh, a questioning look. "I assume there was reason for that."

"There was," Harry insisted. "Haven't you noticed Greer is off your back?"

Snape raised a brow. "I did."

Harry sighed. "Let's just say that when she dragged me up to Dumbledore, she was pretty certain she had you gone." He watched Snape take that in before he added, "I really didn't feel like going through that again." Harry smiled again and quipped happily, "It is fun to beat Malfoy at anything, though. And to make him miserable."

"Was there something specific you wanted?" Snape asked slowly with a hint of dismay. "Or are you just visiting?"

Harry reached for his bag. "I did have have a Potions question, if you don't mind. But it's mostly a visit."

Snape accepted Harry's notes with a long exhale that implied he was trying hard to be tolerant. Harry laughed lightly, not buying it.



Chapter 22 - Painful Truth

"We have been given permission to do a few offensive spells," Snape said at the beginning of lecture. "Potter, come up here."

Harry, feeling a little trepidation, went up to the platform. As he faced his teacher, he had to remind himself that Snape was not going to do anything untoward.

"The first spell we are going to do today is the Mutushorum or Freezing Spell."

Harry growled lightly in disapproval of being part of the demonstration, causing many of the students to laugh.

"The canceling incantation for this is Locoinitio," Snape went on.

Hermione raised her hand. "Why is this a restricted spell?"

"Because if incanted with too much force it can cause damage by temporarily inhibiting breathing or even cardio function."

Hermione slowly put her hand down. "Oh." She glanced worriedly at Harry and sat back slowly in her chair.

"I would not be teaching you this spell if I didn't think all of you capable of controlling the force of your spells," Snape went on. He turned to Harry. "Are you ready, Potter?"

"No," Harry said, causing more chuckling.

"I suspect your ego can handle it," Snape said with a hint of derision.

Harry glanced at the ceiling. Snape raised his wand and paused just a moment before casting the spell. Without any forethought, Harry raised his wand as well. The Mutushorum scattered away. Snape crossed his arms and gave him a disapproving look.

"What was that?" Snape asked snidely.

"A Chrysanthemum block?" Harry replied sheepishly.

"Are you asking me or telling me?" Snape demanded.

"Telling you, sir. I can't just stand here and be spelled," Harry complained. Someone snorted at that in humor.

"Give me your wand," Snape said. When Harry gave him an appalled look. The teacher stepped over to him. "Potter," he said threateningly.

Harry closed his eyes and held out his wand. Snape took it and pocketed it before stepping back to his previous spot. Harry looked very uneasy. Snape dropped his wand and said with some disgust, "Potter, if I had designs on harming you, I have certainly had ample opportunity to do so . . . *unobserved*."

Harry gave him a dark look, but forced himself to relax. Snape aimed his wand and cast the spell at him. As promised, Harry couldn't move. Snape came over to him, lecturing as he went, "We can see that he is still breathing. And blinking, you will note."

Harry thrashed in his mind, trying to get free. His limbs refused to budge and straining made no difference, at all.

Snape went on, "Cast properly, no autonomous function should be disturbed." He put a hand on Harry's shoulder and pushed him backward. He tipped up like a statue. "Usually the target will fall over, but Mr. Potter was well balanced." He pulled Harry back level, squeezing his shoulder before he released it.

"This is not an Imperio, although one could bring about the state you are seeing with a command under an Imperius curse." He paced back away. Harry really hoped this would be over soon. "The spell will wear off on its own in an hour or so. But it can be canceled anytime with a *Locoinitio*." Snape spelled him as he spoke. Harry hit the floor on his hands and knees, startled.

Snape said levelly, "Then there is that. The victim eventually relaxes since their voluntary muscles are not functional." He watched Harry get to his feet slowly. "Ego still intact?" Snape asked him.

"Yes, sir," Harry said evenly. "Can I have my wand back?"

Snape held it out, handle first. Harry came over and retrieved it before returning to his seat. He slouched back in his desk chair, feeling grumpy. Hermione gave him a sympathetic look.

"Everyone pair up. Be extremely careful as you are trying out the spell, won't you?"

* * *

Classes wound on. Ron stopped complaining as much about the long periods Harry and Hermione insisted they spend on assignments. Harry suspected that his first set of grades weren't as good as he had hoped. Ron fidgeted a lot as he worked though, annoying Harry.

"Can we take a break?" Ron asked late one evening.

"Sure," Hermione said. She put her things away with a sigh, indicating that she too was tired of studying.

"Should we go for a walk around the castle?" Ron asked.

Hermione stretched her neck. "Sounds good." They dropped their stuff in their respective dormitories and headed out the portrait hole. The corridors were quiet and dark as they walked and shared minor gossip.

As they turned a corner, they heard a gasp and quick footsteps go one way, then another, toward them. Dennis Creevey came around the corner and stopped short upon seeing them. "Filch!" he gasped in horror.

Harry saw what had him panicked: the statue of Roland the Rider now sat upon something more like a possum or some member of the stoat family, rather than the usual armored steed. "Dennis, what are you doing?" Ron asked in his prefect voice.

"It was just a joke," Dennis insisted in a frightened voice.

Uneven footsteps sounded around the corner along with the malevolent voice of Filch. "I'll get you this time you little scoundrel. Hang ya' by your little toes I will . . . 'til they pull out of their boney little sockets."

Dennis moved to hide behind them. This was relatively easy for Dennis. Harry waved him away. "Go on," he hissed. Dennis gave him a very grateful look and ran off.

"I wouldn't have done that," Ron commented. "He needs to learn not to be stupid."

"Look who's talking," Hermione hissed.

Filch was upon them, so angry spittle flew from his mouth as he raged at them, gesturing at the statue. "This is the last straw . . ."

"Sir," Ron said, "we just found the statue like this. We don't know who did it."

"I've taken more than enough from the lot o' you," he said, bloodshot eyes roving over them. "Ya' tryin' to tell me it's someone else. Who else is in this corridor, eh?"

"Look, we're both prefects, and she's Head Girl," Ron insisted, gesturing at their badges. "If we knew who did it, we'd tell you."

"I knows troublemakers when I see 'em and this one's been sticking in my craw for a long time now." He came right up to Harry with that. He dropped his cat on the floor and grabbed the collar of Harry's robe and dragged him away. Harry, thinking that this was happening far too often, struggled a bit but was outweighed as usual.

Filch let out a stream of invectives as he towed Harry down to his office. "Restrictions, my arse," he mumbled. "Treats 'em like a bunch a pansies, they does. Branding was the way in my day I'll tell yer." He tossed Harry into his office. Harry, a little rattled, took the visitor's seat he had half-fallen into.

"Really, sir," Ron said, stepping into the doorway. "Harry didn't do anything."

Filch ignored Ron. "It's just occurring to me, Potter, that with the headmaster feeling less than his usual self and you having no parents to squawk, that there is no real limit to your punishment." He grinned a yellow, toothy grin. With sadistic pleasure he said, "Well, now, yes, that does seem to be the case, doesn't it?"

"Didn't you hear? I got adopted over the summer." Harry said, rubbing his neck where his collar had cut into it.

"Nice try, Harry," Ron quipped. To Hermione, he said, "Maybe you should go get McGonagall."

She looked from Ron to Harry with a bit of a helpless frown. "I will if we really need to. She isn't usually very helpful in these situations." She fingered her wand pocket, looking concerned.

"Let's see now," Filch murmured to himself. "If this is your seventh offense that means we can use the hot irons." He chuckled to himself and pulled out a long file drawer. "Tenth, we can turn the flesh eatin' slugs on ya'. We must be at least up to that, Mr. Potter, hadn't we? Works slow, they does. Nice and slow." He chuckled again, showing half rotted teeth.

Harry swallowed hard despite himself and wondered, not for the first time, why Dumbledore kept Filch around. With long fingers that emerged from holes in his straggly grey gloves, Filch opened Harry's file and frowned at the top sheet. Harry recognized it from the back as a smaller copy of the application to the Wizard Family Council. The caretaker pulled it out and studied it intently, his hand shaking as he held it up. With an angry motion he stuffed it back into the file and slapped it shut, making everyone jump.

"Let's go up and see him then, eh?" he threatened, then said thoughtfully, "I trust he can dole out punishment--at least as well as I."

With extra forced confidence Harry asked, "Whom do you think he'll believe--you or me? Whom do you think he'll be more angry with?"

Filch growled low and long, sounding like his cat might. He slapped the file into the drawer and closed it with a boom. "Get outa my sight. I catch you agin' I don't care who your dad is, you understand me?"

Harry jumped to his feet and led the way out the door, forced to part his friends who were standing, mystified, in the doorway.

Two corridors and several staircases later, Hermione caught up with him. "Uh, Harry?" Harry slowed so they could come abreast. "What was that?" she asked carefully.

Harry stopped, breathing deeply from more than the fast walking. "It's what I said. I was adopted."

They both gaped at him. "You didn't tell us?" Hermione sputtered in disbelief.

"I didn't think you'd understand," Harry admitted. If anything, this made them gape more. Scrambling for a decent excuse, he said, "I'm seventeen, I assumed you would wonder what my problem was."

"Harry," Hermione said sharply. "We would never do that. I still need my parents, Ron still needs his, even though he fights with them half the time."

"Scuse me?" Ron said.

"Why would we think that?" Hermione asked. She sounded very hurt.

"I . . ." Harry started then stopped. He felt really awful. "I just didn't think you'd understand," he repeated miserably. He started walking slowly down the empty corridor away from them; they immediately came beside him again.

"I wish you'd trusted us, but we're really happy for you, Harry," she insisted. "You've been through so much; you really need someone besides us. Really. If you thought we'd feel put out."

"It isn't that," Harry said quietly. "It's just . . ." He stopped and grimaced.

"What's the problem?" Ron asked. "It isn't like you've been adopted by Snape or something."

Harry turned on him, his green eyes intense.

"Ron," Hermione said in a warning tone, putting a hand out to hold him back.

"You didn't!" Ron blurted in horror.

Figures at the end of the corridor by the staircases had stopped at the sound of Ron's voice. Hermione pushed them both forward, hard. In rapid speech she said, "The Room of Requirement is just around the corner. Hold it in until we get there."

The door to the room closed behind them and Ron was on Harry. "What the hell!?" he demanded. His voice died out quickly, bouncing off padded walls and floor.

Harry just stared at him, leaning toward his friend challengingly even though he was having to look up an awful lot. Hermione took Ron's arm. "Back off, Ron. You're making a huge mistake."

Ron shook her off. "That's sick," he said to Harry. "What the eff is wrong with you?"

A long pause ensued. Hermione took Ron's arm more gently this time and gave Harry a pained look.

"I knew you wouldn't understand," Harry said quietly, fiercely.

Hermione huffed in frustration. "Tell us what happened," she suggested helpfully.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Well . . . it is a bit of a surprise," she replied.

Harry's shoulders slumped. "You don't get it. You have parents you've had all your life, you can't possibly understand."

"Let's start with the basics," Hermione said slowly, gesturing for them to calm down. "When did this happen?"

"August second. Severus put—"

"'Severus', listen to you!" Ron exploded.

Harry fell back into a brooding silence where he glared at Ron.

"Ron, so help me. Shut up," Hermione said. "You aren't helping."

"Helping?" Ron asked with a false laugh. "Aren't you listening. He's telling us he's been adopted by *Snape*, the greasiest git in the wizarding world."

A shell closed around Harry at that, isolating him from Ron and letting him see his oldest friend in a way he hadn't before, as cruel and shallow. Hermione frowned as she watched this. "Harry, please," she said, grabbing his arm instead of Ron's. "You must admit that four, five months ago, this would have seemed very disturbing, even to you."

Harry dropped his gaze. Of course he could remember that. "Yes."

"All right," she said. "So you understand where Ron is right now. Tell us what happened," she pleaded. Harry's face went pained as he tried to sort out a story for them. "You spent the summer here . . ." Hermione prompted.

"It started before that," Harry said in a defeated voice. "The day Goyle and Crabbe grabbed me . . . tortured me. I know it'll be hard for you to believe, but Snape took care of me that night when we couldn't return right away. No one has ever done that for me." Harry turned sideways to them. "I didn't like that exposed feeling afterwards. He was always so cruel; I was terrified he was going to cut me down again and know really how to do it this time. But he never did. Instead, the night before the Quidditch match, when McGonagall turned Neville and me away, he asked me what I was dreaming, gave me a potion to sleep, even told me what was going on. He was the only one who bloody cared! The rest of them were too wrapped up in not feeling helpless or outrightly frightened to give me even a moment."

He paced around the soft floor of the empty, padded room. More reluctantly, he went on, "When I lost Sirius, I lost the only person I could ever turn to. I didn't think I'd have another chance to have someone like that again. Dumbledore suggested it to Snape and a month later, he asked me." He looked at each of them, pleading for understanding. "I'd spent half the summer around him at that point, helping brew potions for the stocks, helping him prep for Defense class."

Harry swallowed hard and ignored Ron's disgusted expression. "I said 'yes'. It's signed and filed with the Wizard Family Council. I spent the rest of the summer at our house in Shrewsthorpe." Ron blanched at that, comically disgusted. Harry stepped right up to him. "You don't know what it's like to have no place to call home. You with your quaint wizard house and property large enough to play Quidditch on it."

"You can't be jealous of *me*?" Ron sputtered.

"Why not?" Harry yelled back at him.

Ron gaped at him as though Harry had completely lost it. "You're a nutter," he said, not in a teasing way. "What are you saying, anyway? You went *home* with him?"

"Yes, he's my guardian," Harry insisted in the hardest tone he could manage.

Ron spasmed. "I can't take it," he said. "You don't let him touch you, do you?" he asked in horror.

Harry stared at him with absolutely no expression, then turned away and walked to the door.

"Harry," Hermione said, intercepting him. "Just give him a chance to get used to the idea . . . "

"What? You expect me to spend time *thinking* about that?" Ron asked in complete disbelief.

Harry opened the door and stepped through it. The corridor was even darker than before and completely deserted. He strode to the staircases and stopped when he got there. The dormitory was not an escape, but he was in no mood to talk to Snape, either. He headed for the headmaster's office instead. He had to talk to someone.

The lamps in the dark windowed tower office were supplemented by candles. The mood of it calmed Harry just on its own. Dumbledore relaxed in a lounge, writing in a large book. "Come in, Harry," he said welcomingly.

Harry shut the door quietly and stepped up to the desk. He couldn't figure out what to say.

"What is it, my dear boy?" Dumbledore asked. He set the book aside and stood up. "Have a seat," he insisted as he came around to the other side of the desk. Harry, his eyes heated now, took a seat in the visitor's chair after Dumbledore waved it into an overstuffed armchair. "What is it?" Dumbledore asked again.

"I told Ron and Hermione," Harry said quietly. Then after a pause. "Ron went berserk." That knowledge felt like one of the torn strands of the Dementor's web.

Dumbledore leaned back against the desk and clasped his hands before him. "Hmmm," he murmured.

"I realize now that I knew I'd be choosing between them," Harry said. "He refuses to understand."

"You may just need to give him time to absorb the idea," Dumbledore suggested.

Harry scoffed.

"You couldn't keep it secret forever."

"No. And I felt bad about doing that at all, anyway. It wasn't fair to Severus."

"Give it a little time, Harry," the headmaster stated sagely. "I still believe Mr. Weasley is a true friend to you."

Harry frowned and thought, *not anymore*. He stood up. "Thank you, sir. I needed someone to talk to before I go and share a dormitory room with him."

"Do you regret the adoption?" Dumbledore asked.

"No."

"Then the rest was inevitable. Accept that and move on. Do not apologize for taking what you truly need. You have given everyone else too much to even consider it. This is your time now."

Harry considered the old wizard for half a minute. This was a different attitude than he was used to from him. "Yes, sir. I'm realizing that."

"Good luck, Harry."

By the time Harry returned to the dormitory, Ron's drapes were closed. Harry changed and crawled into his own bed and closed his own drapes. He lay awake for quite a while until he relented and used a small sip of potion to knock himself out.

The next morning, Ron changed in silence and left quickly. Neville watched him stalk from the room. "What's up with him?" he asked Harry.

"We had a fight last night," Harry said.

"What about?" Dean asked.

"I don't want to talk about it. I don't feel like losing any more friends right now," Harry added as he pulled on his shoes.

"Harry," Neville chastised him. "You can't lose friends that easily."

"It took five minutes to lose him," Harry pointed out. He thrust his robe over his head and jerked it straight in anger.

At breakfast Hermione separated them on the bench. As everyone settled in, Dumbledore stood and announced that the Head of Gryffindor house was being reassigned to Professor Sinistra. He smiled broadly as he said this, as though it was the best thing that could have befallen the school. Harry's heart sank a little more as he heard it.

"What's that about, then?" Parvati asked the table in general.

Harry replied quietly, "McGonagall is too busy with her Deputy Headmistress duties to be our Head anymore." He and Hermione shared a look of understanding which was interrupted by breakfast appearing.

As he ate, Ron didn't look as though he had relented at all. Ginny prodded him, sensing his mood. "Ask Harry what's wrong," he finally snapped at her. Ginny gave Harry a questioning look, to which he dropped his gaze to his plate.

"Disgusting," Ron muttered a few minutes later.

Harry put his fork down and walked away. It wasn't until he was at the door to the hall that he realized Ginny had followed him. She took the door from him and closed it behind her. A few students sitting on the grand stairs gave them a curious look. Harry met her gaze before turning and heading up. Ginny followed him, eventually pulling him into the empty Transfiguration classroom. "What happened with Ron?" she asked bluntly.

Harry ran his fingers over the worn, carved surface of the desk beside him. "I told Ron and Hermione something I should have told them sooner, but I was afraid they were going to react the way Ron did," he confessed.

Ginny stared at him. "He gets unthinkingly vicious when he's really upset. Charlie's like that too." She stepped a little closer. "I don't suppose you'd tell me?"

Harry looked away.

"I promise not to behave like Ron." When he didn't respond, she said. "You have me really curious. Can I guess?"

"You are not going to guess this," Harry said, glancing around the classroom. The mice were skittering around in their cage.

"You're gay?"

Harry shook his head. "No."

"Yeah, too obvious, and I would expect better from Ron, but then again, maybe not."

"I have to get my books for class," Harry pointed out, voice flat. He started to turn to the door.

She grabbed his arm. "Look, I owe you a lot. You've never given me a chance to make it up to you. I can help with Ron, especially if he is in the wrong, but frankly, even if you are."

Harry stared into her bright eyes. He knew the knot in his middle would loosen if he told her. "Professor Snape adopted me."

Her eyes went wide and her mouth fell open as she read his face avidly as though looking for the truth in that. "Wow. That is a surprise." She exhaled hard and tilted her head to the side comically. "All right, that is really weird. Just as well I didn't keep guessing. Can I ask why?"

"Because he wanted to," Harry stated as though it were obvious. "I spent part of the summer at his house . . . met his parents."

"We are talking about the same Snape . . . the teacher here?"

"Ginny," Harry chastened her.

"Just checking. I thought you hated him, is all." She finally released his arm and rubbed her cheeks in thought. "Are you happy with it?"

"Very."

"Wow. Well, what else matters?" she said, clearly to herself. "You're much less moody now than you were at the end of last year. And frankly, he's a lot less nasty. I guess it works both ways." She glanced at the clock. "I'll work on Ron."

"Thanks."

As she reached the door, she said, "And I'll leave it to you to tell anyone else, because no one would believe me anyway. Who else does know?"

"McGonagall signed the papers as did Dumbledore. Hagrid knows. Ron and Hermione. Greer." He skipped mentioning Malfoy.

"Thanks for trusting me," Ginny said as she pulled the door open on the busy corridor.

"Thanks for believing I know what I'm doing."

* * *

The next evening, Ginny sat with Colin and Margory working on assignments.

"Do you understand this section of the text?" Margory asked the two of them. She turned her book around and pointed.

Ginny took it and read it through. "I thought it meant a binding charm wasn't like other object-producing spells because the bindings are not really physical."

"That can't be right, though," Colin said. "It says at the beginning of the chapter that they are all examples of the Grafting class of spell, which are all physical."

Margory frowned at her essay. "I don't know how to write this out to dodge the issue and this is due tomorrow."

"Why don't we just go ask," Ginny said. "I need a break anyway."

"You mean as in, just go ask Professor Snape?" Colin suggested in horror.

"He is the teacher," Ginny pointed out.

"You go ask him, then," Margory said.

"Watch my stuff."

As Ginny stepped out of the library, Colin jumped up. "I'd better go with her. What if she never comes back again?" With a hiss, Margory collected her things together as well and asked Dennis to watch it all.

Ginny looked at them both in surprise as they caught up to her. She walked with her textbook in her hand with her finger marking the page.

As she knocked on the Defense office door, she had to remind herself that this was Harry's dad to keep from leaving, or at least backing up to the middle of the corridor. The door swung open suddenly. "Ms. Weasley?" Snape greeted her, sort of.

"We have a question about the reading, sir," she said, proud of how casual it came out.

He gestured for them to enter. Colin jumped when the door boomed closed behind them. Ginny held out the book to the right page and pointed. She explained their confusion as he read it through.

He handed the book back and said, "Technically it isn't a Grafting spell. The book is incorrect." He glanced over them. "Any other issues?"

"Ron," Ginny replied, meeting the teacher's gaze steadily.

Snape tilted his head and considered her a long moment. "Yes, well, that is unfortunate."

"I'm trying to work on him, but . . ." Ginny said, then shrugged in frustration.

"I do appreciate that, Ms. Weasley." He gestured with his hand toward the door. "I believe you have essays to finish?"

On the way to the staircases, Colin said, "That was really strange; he was almost *nice*. What were you two on about anyway?"

"I expect everyone will know soon enough. I said I wouldn't say."

Margory frowned at her. "And who is your best friend?" she teased in annoyance.



Chapter 23 - A Time to Reap

"Severus," Dumbledore's voice came from the back of his office.

"You asked to see me?" Snape said as he stepped in. He could see the robed headmaster through the graceful limbs of a delicately balanced metal mobile on the desk. He went around to where the headmaster sat by the tall windows. A wren alighted on the sill before being caught in the wind and flitting away again.

A large diary sat in Dumbledore's lap and he held a white quill in his age-spotted hand. "This will be short, I know you have things to do," he said.

Snape locked his hands behind his back. "It is no matter, Albus."

"Harry was here a while ago," Dumbledore said slowly. "I wanted to tell you how very impressed I am with you. He seems very healed, especially given the rift currently separating him and Mr. Weasley."

Snape didn't reply, just stared out at the evening sky and the dark forest.

Dumbledore went on, "It eases my heart immeasurably to see his forgiveness. It still amazes me how calm and understanding humans become when their pain has been removed." He sighed. "Most of his anger *was* perfectly justified. We expected far too much from him in some instances and far too little in the rest." With slow movements, he opened the wide cover of the diary and pulled out the chocolate frog card he was using as a page marker. "Look at him," Dumbledore said, holding it up for Snape. "The eyes of someone older even than myself." He took the card back and held it up before himself. "But the Harry who visited not an hour ago had the eyes of a seventeen-year-old, as he should. You are to be commended for that."

Snape still didn't respond, even after a long silence.

"I think you were the best choice, Severus. You usually take nothing for granted, and I suspect neither does Mr. Potter. It makes for a good match."

After a minute Snape stood straightened and spoke finally, "My mother accused me of looking for atonement, my father of attempting to protect myself from the Ministry. Harry laughed at both of them." After a pause he added, "I earned his faith somehow; I do not know quite how."

"Harry is capable of fierce loyalty. Craves giving it, in fact. You earned it by being on his side when it mattered the most, and remaining there when you did not have to."

"He accuses me of understanding him too well."

"There is great power in that as well." Dumbledore tucked the card back away and sighed. "I was afraid we had sacrificed his future for our own, but I see that has not come to pass. Thank you, Severus," he said.

Snape bowed and, after a lengthy hesitation, departed.

* * *

Harry found himself calm around Ron now. He was generally polite to his friend and pretended the single syllable responses he received in return were sufficient. This seemed to ease the strain on Hermione a lot.

Ginny made a point of being extra nice when she was around, in fact, seemed to enjoy showing up her brother. "It's his choice," she would say when he was being difficult. Or, "He doesn't go around mocking dad, does he?"

After D.A. one evening, Harry trapped Ron after everyone else departed. Ron seemed surprised to find the two of them alone. "I just have to say a few things," Harry said.

"Yeah?" Ron retorted.

"For the first time in my life, I feel whole. Don't try to cheat me out of that."

Ron looked very taken aback. "I don't-"

"And don't make me choose between you and him. You aren't going to like my choice, as hard as it is to say that."

"I keep thinking you're under an Imperius Curse. I even went and looked up how to tell."

"So, am I?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"No. Doesn't seem like it," Ron conceded. "It still makes me nauseous to talk about this." He really did look unwell.

"Then we won't. I don't need to." With that, Harry left him standing alone in the Room of Requirement.

* * *

"Mr. Potter, come with me, please," Professor McGonagall said the next Saturday morning as they sat studying in the Library. They were rushing to finish things before Quidditch practice.

Harry closed his books and left them with Hermione. McGonagall's expression reminded him of the one she had the night Ron and he flew the Ford Anglia to school. Musing about why he might be in trouble, Harry followed in silence up to the headmaster's office.

Pomfrey sat whispering with Sprout in the main part of the office. McGonagall led Harry past them into a side room. Harry stopped in the doorway of what was clearly a bedroom. Dumbledore lay upon the bed, clothed in a bright blue dressing gown, covers pulled up to his waist.

"Harry," he said with affection and patted the bed beside him. Harry, stunned and pained to find his headmaster bedridden, moved to his side. Dumbledore grasped Harry's arm above the elbow. "My dear boy," he said with emotion.

"How are you, sir?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore smiled kindly. "I have been better," he replied amiably. "And how are you?" he asked pointedly.

"Pretty good, sir," Harry admitted.

"Quidditch is going well, I assume?"

"Very good." Harry then added in a burst of honesty, "Especially since Malfoy is too big to play Seeker, and he didn't make the team in any other position." McGonagall, standing by the door, rubbed her brow and appeared disapproving.

"Ah, not too much joy at another's expense, my boy."

"They'll have the last laugh, I think," Harry said. "If he didn't make at least Beater, they must be pretty good this year."

"It does all seem to even out in the end, Harry." Dumbledore lifted a gnarled hand and pushed his student's hair back, thumb brushing his distinct scar. "So good to be done with all that," the old wizard intoned. His intense blue eyes peered into Harry's. "So good," he repeated softly.

"Yes, sir."

Dumbledore put his hand behind Harry's head and pulled him forward against his chest. "I am so very proud of you," Dumbledore said. Harry gave in and rested his cheek and arm on the old wizard's broad chest in something of a hug.

"Minerva," Dumbledore said evenly. Harry would have sat up if a hand hadn't been holding his head down. Professor McGonagall's hem came into view as she stepped forward. "Take care of the school," Dumbledore intoned.

Harry took a sharp breath and held it. He squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself not to make a sound. If he made any sound, it would only be a scream of denial. He heard McGonagall say, "Of course, Albus," in a very unsteady voice. This only made it worse, forcing a tear out Harry's eye. He held perfectly still. It seemed incredibly important to do so.

No one moved for long moments. Harry heard someone sniffle from the doorway. McGonagall went into motion then, stepping around the bed, taking Harry's shoulders and pulling him to his feet. Harry held his eyes closed, trying desperately for control. She held him loosely, letting his forehead rest on her shoulder.

"Pomona, get Severus, will you?" Her voice was back to normal. "Get everyone else for that matter."

Short minutes later, Snape stepped through the unusually open headmaster's office door. Sinistra, Flitwick, Vector and Pomfrey stood in the doorway to the bedroom. When he reached them, one glance at Dumbledore's peaceful visage told him everything, and he shook his head. McGonagall gestured for him to come over to her side. Potter was clearly on the brink.

"The rest are on their way," Sprout said as she came in behind him.

Snape stepped around and turned the boy to him by the shoulders. Harry sniffled, eyes clenched shut. "Harry," Snape said. He glanced down at the old headmaster and put an arm around the boy. "Let's go into the other room."

As they stepped around the bed, Snape raised his gaze to the astounded ones of his colleagues. He shot them all a dark challenging one in return. They watched with wide eyes from the bedroom doorway as Snape led Harry to a spot before the headmaster's desk. Harry still had his forehead resting on Snape's shoulder. "Come now," he cajoled, "I don't think Albus wanted anyone to react this way, least of all you."

McGonagall stepped through the startled throng blocking the door, still paying little attention to the deceased. "Called him up here, in fact," she pointed out.

She and Snape's eyes locked a moment. "Quite an honor, Harry," Snape said. "Greatest wizard of our time wants you beside him." He stopped and rubbed his forehead with his free hand. More evenly he asked McGonagall, "You have notified the Ministry?"

"Not yet." She sighed and stepped over to the hearth.

Snape patted Harry on the back lightly and waited for him to pull himself together. His brow furrowed as he saw a disconnected pair of shoes coming up the still staircase. A gasp sounded and two sheepish faces appeared above an invisibility cloak.

"So it's true then?" Hermione asked. Ron beside her looked like he deeply regretted his current location. His adam's apple bounced as he swallowed hard.

"Yes," Snape replied.

McGonagall returned to the front of the office, giving the two on the steps a very disapproving glance. "Fudge and his retinue are on their way, so if you don't want to be on the front page of the *Prophet*, I'd take him down."

Harry lifted his head and gave his friends a very pained look and sniffled again. Snape looked him over and steered him by the arm. "Come on, Harry, you are a front page image to die for at the moment. Let's get you out of harm's way." A sharp look got Ron and Hermione moving as well.

At the bottom of the stairs, Harry hesitated about following his friends. He looked from them to Snape with a beaten expression. Snape stepped back over and said, "It is up to you."

Harry gave Hermione a long look before turning and walking the other way. Ron choked in shock. Hermione had to give him a tug on the arm to make him follow her.

Halfway down the corridor, Harry asked his guardian, "You don't mind?"

"Of course not."

In the Gryffindor tower Ron was still aghast. "Ron. Chill," Hermione insisted.

"I can't believe it," he said through clenched teeth.

"Did you find out what's going on?" someone asked.

"Dumbledore died," Hermione said quietly.

General exclamations of denial and unhappiness went around. Students were called out of the dormitories and told as well. The common room became crowded.

"Ron's taking it pretty hard," Dean commented, his eyes red-rimmed.

"That isn't what's bothering him," Hermione said with a disgusted shake of her head.

"What is?" Dean asked.

"Harry," Ron seethed, "went off with his *dad* rather than coming to the tower."

"What?" several people chorused.

"Too embarrassed to tell anyone," Ron said mockingly to Hermione.

Ginny stepped out of the crowd and said, incensed, "Ron, you can be so miserable!"

"That's the best you can do?" Ron retorted.

"He's your best friend. At least *try* to be understanding," Ginny argued in a low voice.

"Wait, wait, wait," Dean said, stepping between the three of them. "Let's back up to the 'dad' part."

"Harry was adopted by *Snape*," Ron explained.

"Ron, what have you been drinking, mate?"

Ron put his hands on his hips. "You think I'd make that up?"

"It's true," Ginny confirmed.

The entire room fell into an odd silence until Neville stepped over and said, "That's what you two have been fighting about?"

"It disgusts me. I can't take it," Ron stated sullenly.

Neville's eyes narrowed giving his usually friendly round face a menacing edge. He closed the rest of the space between them. "Harry found a father and all you can do is give him hell about it?" he asked, incredulous.

"It's *Snape*!"

"That's not your problem!" Neville shouted at him, surprising Ron and everyone else. "Ginny's right, you are a miserable friend."

The portrait hole opened at that moment and Professor McGonagall ducked to come in. The room erupted at her arrival.

"Dear me. Everyone calm down," she admonished them.

"Is it true?" Colin asked in dismay. "Professor Snape adopted Harry?"

McGonagall checked her reaction. "I had thought the topic would be the headmaster, but I see, as usual, that I am mistaken. The answer is 'yes'. And that is the end of that for the moment." She composed herself, giving Ron and Hermione stern looks as she did so. With a deep breath, she said, "I am here with solemn news. We have lost Headmaster Dumbledore."

Most everyone dropped their eyes, even though this wasn't news.

"He will be sorely missed by all, I am sure. There will be a memorial tomorrow; the time will be announced at breakfast."

Dennis raised his hand. McGonagall composed herself again and said, "Yes, Mr. Creevey?"

"What were his last words, Professor?" he asked curiously.

"Last words?" she echoed.

"Yes, ma'am," Dennis insisted solemnly. "Someone always records the last words of great wizards and witches. For example, Grettia Gobstobber's were, 'May there always be time for the growing of poppies and marigolds.'" After a pause, he added, "Marvin the Magnificent's were, 'Bloody, where did I drop my wand this time?'"

Half the students ducked their heads, this time to laugh. Even McGonagall smiled with crinkled eyes. "Ten points, Mr. Creevey, for making me laugh when I dearly need to." She cleared her throat and looked around the ceiling in thought. "Let's see. He told Potter that he was very proud of him." Everyone shuffled a little where they stood. "He told me to take care of the school . . . and that was it."

She took another deep breath. "And on that note. I expect the prefects to take up the slack for the rest of the day; the staff are very chaotic at the moment." She picked out the relevant students with her eyes before she departed.

Harry refilled his teacup and leaned back on the couch in Snape's office. "I miss him already," he said, thinking painfully that at dinner the center seat at the head table would be empty. He looked at Snape staring into his own cup. "Thanks for letting me come down here. I can't take a crowd right now."

"I prefer this to the alternatives as well." He stood up and paced over to the window. "The Ministry and the press are here in force," he observed.

"Did you lock the office door?"

Snape gave him a small smile. "Yes." Then after a pause: "I should not shirk my duties for long. Leaving my colleagues so startled was probably not wise."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

"You were otherwise distracted by internal matters in the headmaster's office, but we were the main attraction. Alarming really, given that the foremost wizard of our time had, moments before, passed on."

"You never told any of the other teachers?" Harry asked in surprise.

"It is none of their concern," Snape said, as though that were obvious.

They fell silent for a long time. A breeze blew in the open window, upsetting the papers on the desk. Harry fiddled with his cold teacup. "I feel bad that I feel so . . . liberated." Snape turned to him with an intense expression. Harry explained, "The two wizards who were running my life are both gone."

"The two most powerful wizards in the world, no less," Snape drawled, "of the century, perhaps, even." He paced across the floor and passed his eyes over the bookshelf on that side. He shook his head. "We are far too similar, you and I, for being so utterly different."

"Too many powerful wizards mucking about," Harry quipped sadly.

"That is what powerful wizards do, Harry," he said a little snidely. "Or they avoid mucking until the very last moment and only do it so no one else knows it is them and no one has the slightest clue what is going on."

"You're just trying to make me feel better, aren't you?"

Snape returned to the table and topped up his tea. "I am trying to make myself feel better." He drank down the cup as though wishing it contained something stronger and considered Harry. "And I suppose your little friends have gone up to the tower and told everyone."

"I expect," Harry said with a shirk. "If I'd thought of that . . . but I should have said something sooner anyway. I was being very unfair to you."

"Unfair to me?" Snape asked in confusion. "Believe me, Harry, I was quite content to keep my personal business, private."

"I was afraid you'd think I was embarrassed or something," Harry explained carefully. "I wasn't. I just knew I'd lose Ron's friendship," he said sadly. He thought a moment and considered Snape's angular features and rough hair. "It does ruin your reputation, doesn't it?" Harry asked with a crooked grin.

Snape frowned at him. "Yes, indeed," he said grimly, making Harry smile more. "A Gryffindor, no less," he went on in a disgusted tone.

Harry stared at the far wall and chewed his lip sadly. "I don't know where I'd be if I didn't have you right now," he said quietly.

Snape stepped back over and sat beside him. "I do believe this is the moment Albus had in mind when he made his suggestion to me."

Harry shook his head. "Mucking about as usual." Harry unwrapped a sweet from a bowl on the tray and popped it in his mouth. "Did you know this was coming? Did he warn anyone?"

"I should have. He made his peace with me the other day. But he has always been exceedingly old and he would initiate little conversations like that periodically, so I thought nothing much of it."

"He didn't say anything surprising?"

"No. In retrospect I am surprised by what he left out. The conversation was entirely about you," he complained in his most disgusted tone.

Harry laughed lightly and scrubbed his face with his hands to shake his seesawing emotions. Every time he thought about never seeing Dumbledore again his chest ached horribly. This mood overcame him again and he stared at the floor without seeing it.

After long minutes of silence, Snape said, "I should go."

Harry hoisted himself to his feet off the low couch. "Facing the Gryffindor tower *will* take my mind off of Dumbledore for a while," he commented bleakly.

At the door, Snape said, "Come and find me if you need to."

Silence fell over the crowded Gryffindor common room when Harry stepped in. He gave the room an uncertain smile, wondering what they were all thinking.

"Hey, Harry," Neville said, breaking the stillness.

"Neville," Harry returned as though they were having an ordinary conversation.

Dennis chimed in, "Does this mean Professor Snape doesn't hate Gryffindors anymore?"

"I doubt it," Harry replied dryly.

"He has been nicer in general, for Snape," Ginny pointed out.

Harry wanted to head for his dormitory room, but he had to get through this. He took the empty seat by the fire across from Lavender. She stared at him as though he had turned into a Dementor. Hermione came over and sat on the arm of the chair and crossed her arms.

"I'm happy for you, Harry. Everyone else should be too," she said in a low voice while scanning the room. A few murmurs of assent followed this. She gave Ron, moping by the staircase, an especially long look.

"It's all right, Hermione." Harry sat back casually. "I'm happy. I don't care what anyone else thinks."

"Good for you," Hermione said. She patted his leg as she stood up. She stalked over to Ron to glare at him from closer range. Ron finally escaped up the stairs and disappeared.

Harry's shoulders fell as he watched this from the corner of his eye. Eventually everyone went back to their quiet conversations. The ones around Harry sounded like they may actually be about Dumbledore.

Severus Snape encountered a not dissimilar audience in the staff lounge, where McGonagall was preparing to speak to the press gathered in the Great Hall. He gave each stunned gazes an extra malevolent one in return.

"Wha's the matter here?" Hagrid said from his seat by the window.

McGonagall looked up from her notes and shook her head wryly. Sprout, standing at the half-giant's shoulder, said in a low voice, "We are a little surprised to discover Severus has adopted Potter."

"Ach, is tha' all?" He waved a great hand in dismissal. "Harry told me tha' ages ago. Doesna make no difference, 'cepting to Harry o' course."

The staff shifted uncomfortably but didn't argue.

McGonagall held out a parchment to Snape. "Read this over. Tell me if you see anything glaringly wrong or omitted."

It was a list of Dumbledore's accomplishments. Snape was stunned to find nothing on it that really held any meaning right then. "I don't think I am the right person to go over this." He started to hand it back.

McGonagall's head jerked up. "That boy has made you soft," she scoffed and snapped her fingers near his nose. "Get it together! I expected to rely on you."

Chastised, Snape took the parchment and a quill and sat down at the table to make edits.

* * *

That night Harry couldn't sleep. With a sigh he sat up in the darkness. He had lain awake for hours without feeling any more likely to sleep. The drawer of his nightstand held a half-full potion bottle, but he resisted using it. It felt disrespectful, somehow.

Silently, he pulled the drapes apart, put his legs over the edge of the bed and sat in thought. He noticed it then as he grew more alert: the castle didn't feel right. Harry pulled down his dressing gown, wrapped up in it, and quietly left the dormitory. On the stairs he realized he had forgotten his slippers. He decided it wasn't too cold and continued down to the common room. The silence felt oppressive, the castle too still as though it were waiting for something. He didn't have to be alone, he considered, as he eyed the soot-blackened, cold hearth.

In the corridor Harry stepped lightly, his bare feet slapping the worn stone floor. The sound kept him company as he headed to the staircases. Something definitely was different. He stopped at the top of the first staircase and took a deep breath, expecting to smell something of the change. His hand rubbed the top of the banister as though trying to awaken a spell in it, or a djinni.

The thought that Dumbledore's magic was that strong, that he could sense its loss, frightened him, made him long for reassurance from someone. He went down five long staircases. Even the portraits along the way seemed a little duller, less interested in him.

At Snape's door Harry hesitated because he realized it was three in the morning, but thought of walking back through the castle's empty corridors made him knock. The door opened after a brief moment. Snape gestured gallantly for him to enter. He still wore his robes from earlier in the day.

"You haven't slept?" Harry asked as he entered the dim office. Snape shook his head. Harry dropped onto the couch with a sigh. A lamp on the desk flared higher as Snape adjusted it. He didn't immediately turn back. Harry watched his stooped back as he fiddled with the guard on the lamp. He was surprised Snape didn't burn himself as he rotated the glass collar by the top edge.

"Does the castle feel different to you?" Harry asked, curious.

"Yes."

Harry wrapped his arms around himself and sat back. The two of them could have been alone in the castle for all the sense of life Harry now had of his surroundings. Finally, Snape turned his head to consider him. He pushed the lamp farther onto the desk and came over and sat beside him.

"I wish he hadn't gone," Harry said, blinking back a sudden dampness in his eyes.

Clasping his hands together tightly, Snape said, "His certainty that Riddle would rise, and return, was the only reason he was still with us."

"Still," Harry said. "I don't know if I like it here anymore," he said with a shiver, rubbing his arms.

"I think you will get used to it," he said levelly. He sat back as well and after a moment's hesitation, put an arm behind Harry, who leaned closer and rested his head on his shoulder.

Silent minutes later, Harry was asleep. Snape was grateful that they were in a comfortable position, because he didn't feel he could move. He listened to Harry's steady breathing for a while and wondered if Harry's sense of the changes in the castle were the same as his own occasional bouts of rampant uneasiness.

Harry shifted in his sleep and curled up his legs. For the first time Snape noticed that his charge was barefoot. Had Harry been awake, he'd have chastised him for it; as it was, he merely tightened his arm around him.

* * *

The Memorial service in the Great Hall was a staid affair. The students were in rows on the right side and the guests were arrayed on the left. The walls were lined, three-deep, with standing visitors. McGonagall made a long speech which Harry couldn't concentrate on, nor remember, as though it were in a different language. He felt worse today than he had the day before. A reporter, with a photographer in tow, slunk closer to the front along the center aisle to get a picture. Harry could see him scanning the students' faces as he went. Harry carefully kept Ron's taller frame beside him between himself and the stranger. Hermione had selected these seats in the middle for exactly this reason. Dean stood on Harry's other side in case someone came up the right aisle, although now it was too crowded for that to happen.

The speeches concluded. It required a full minute of silence for Harry to realize they had. A student a few rows ahead was sniffing repeatedly. At some signal Harry couldn't see, the crowd began to disperse. The four of them stayed put until most all the students had left. Harry could now fully see the stone platform at the front. Dumbledore was in the same sky-blue robe he had worn during the welcoming feast. The sight of his peaceful face and long beard laying across his chest was too much. Harry's eyes started to burn.

Grappling for control, he turned away from the sight. Dean took this as a cue to move and led the way out of their row. Harry followed close behind, eyes closed more than open. At the doors out of the hall, Dean stopped suddenly and Harry ran into his back. His friend's arm came around and pushed him against the wall behind the open door.

"They look like they're waiting," Dean said quietly of the reporters meandering in the Entrance Hall. "I assume for you, but maybe not." When Harry didn't respond, Dean turned his head around. "All right there?" he asked.

"No," Harry replied thickly. He brushed his face with his sleeve surreptitiously. Hermione was close beside him then, patting his arm. With enormous force of will, Harry won the battle with himself. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. He was pinned between Dean and Hermione. Out in the Entrance Hall he could hear Skeeter asking about him.

"Do you have something you can say?" Hermione asked.

Harry snorted. "No." After a beat he said as though quoting, "We'll all miss him."

"Good as it gets," Dean quipped. "Shall we go? Or we can wait 'em out. Your choice."

Harry leaned against the stone wall beside him and looked at Hermione. The Hall behind her was empty except for the platform and Dumbledore's still, supine figure. A chill ran over Harry's limbs.

Someone stepped sharply in the far set of doors. It was Snape. He glanced sideways at them before turning smartly around and shrugging melodramatically to someone beyond in the adjoining hall. He pulled out his wand and sliced the air with it as he stepped back out. All six doors swung closed with a *boom!*

Harry breathed out in relief. He stepped forward to sit backwards on the last bench on that side. Resting his head on his hands, he said, "I'm sorry. I just can't take it all today. I just want to be left the eff alone." When his friends shifted a bit, he added quickly, "Not by you. By them." He gestured at the closed doors. "I can stand to give a piece of myself away if people are worried about Voldemort being gone, but what I'm feeling now is no one's business." He sat back. "I'm sorry; I don't mean to rant."

"Losing him is hard, but it had to happen sometime," Hermione said sitting beside him.

Harry's brow furrowed. "It happened when he wanted it to," he said sharply. "He wanted to go." At her doubtful look, he went on. "You think I can't tell the difference between alive and dead? One moment he's talking to me and McGonagall and the next *poof!* he's gone like a snuffed candle?" Breathing hard, Harry looked away from their stunned faces. Angry now, rather than hurt, he stood up. "It sounds quiet out there."

Dean went to the center doors and peered between them. "No. Still crowded."

Harry huffed and paced a bit, sparing a glance for the blue figure lying at the front of the room. The center doors opened. McGonagall leaned in and said, "The press have been convinced to give up."

"Good," Harry breathed and stalked around her to leave.

She gave his friends a questioning glance. "A little moody," Ron commented as he followed Hermione out. "Ma'am," Dean said as he passed. "Mr. Thomas," she replied before pulling the door closed behind them all.

* * *

Classes resumed on Monday. Harry found himself resisting heading down to Defense class. He stalled until the last moment and made it just as Snape stepped upon the platform at the front.

"We had a rather distracting weekend, but I still expect all of you to perform the assigned spells today." Snape glanced at Harry as he took a seat. The other students studiously avoided glancing at the straggler.

In pairs they were called up to demonstrate a Ferrus counter curse. When Ron and Hermione stepped up, Snape said, "Perhaps you should wait for the next demonstration, Ms. Granger."

"Why?" Ron asked sharply.

"I would presume, or hope, Mr. Weasley," Snape sneered, "that you would prefer to aim dangerous spells at a different classmate." Several students giggled at that. Ron turned bright red and waited as Neville changed places with an also blushing Hermione.

Ron, feeling vexed, threw a very hard blasting curse at Neville, who countered it easily. They reversed and Ron countered the carefully controlled spell Neville sent his way.

"As usual Mr. Longbottom," Snape said, "nicely done." When Neville stood stunned, staring at the teacher, Snape said in a tone of thin patience, "You may return to your seat, Longbottom."

Neville blinked and shuffled off in a hurry. He sat at his desk and stared ahead while the next pair went ahead. Eventually he leaned over to Harry and whispered, "What did you do to him, then?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing," he insisted.

"No," Neville insisted. "Somethin'."

Harry watched Snape working with Padma on the spell. "He likes teaching this better," he suggested, mostly because he knew Snape wouldn't want anyone to suspect him of softening up.

* * *

Harry made it through the next two days without dwelling excessively on Dumbledore's memory. He was feeling set free, and the more time passed, the stronger that feeling became. Even the emptiness of the castle began to seem more like new potential.

It was easier to visit with Snape now that everyone knew. Or had heard but didn't believe, as he found out one day when Pansy Parkinson came to ask for help while Harry was there working on his Potions essay.

"You don't really think you can hang out here, do you?" she sneered at Harry.

Snape's gaze as he accepted the rewritten essay she handed over went positively dangerous. She backed up and looked nervous a moment before asking in an almost elf-like voice, "You aren't saying it's true, are you, sir?"

"Yes, Ms. Parkinson. It is."

Her whole body drooped in a positively tragic way. Her eyes slid over to Harry and looked him over with total distaste before she drooped still more. She sighed deeply. "My essay, sir. I'm turning it back in," she stated sadly and dutifully before shuffling out the door and closing it softly. Harry actually wished she had slammed it.

Harry thought that over, feeling an odd tugging of sympathy. "You do tend to look out for them . . . more than the average Head of House," Harry opined.

Snape stared at the closed door. "And I don't intend to change that," he said thoughtfully. He remained thoughtful a while before returning to marking assignment. Harry took his leave soon after, not really in the mood to ruin more Slytherin egos, although he wasn't sure why he cared.



Chapter 24 - Rendezvous

Harry thought of a use for the secret passage. It came to him in the shower that morning as though it were something he had thought of previously and simply forgotten. Grinning, he dressed and got ready for class. Even the prospect of Potions didn't diminish his newfound buoyant mood.

At breakfast as the post owls arrived, Pig dropped a letter in Harry's lap and zipped around Ron's head a few times until the redhead waved his hand to chase him away as though the small owl were a fly. Harry avoided looking up at Ron as he noticed the return address of the Burrow. As he was opening it, another owl, this one small and dark, dropped another one beside Harry's breakfast plate. It was from Lupin. After a moment of indecision Harry continued to open the one from Mrs. Weasley.

Dearest Harry, I do hope you are coping well with the loss of dear Albus. It has been rather glum here at the Burrow since the memorial, I'll confess, and I do apologize for not finding you afterwards, but it was too crowded to, apparently. We were both concerned that he meant too much to you to take his passing in stride. Ginny owed us with assurances that you are taking it well enough and with the news that you have acquired a guardian. I must admit, I felt I needed to confirm this with Prof. McGonagall, given our children's penchant for practical jokes. Minerva explained that you had not informed anyone of this, which worried me until Ginny explained your apparent reasons.

My dear Harry, I do apologize for the abominable behavior of my youngest son. Would it not have embarrassed you as well, I'd have sent him a howler straight off. Rest assured he has received a sharp missive instead with strict instructions to straighten up.

Harry casually lowered the letter and let his eyes move over the table. Ron was eating with his usual gusto although his eyes looked a little empty as they stared at a spot just above his plate. With a small frown Harry returned to the letter. He sort of wished Mrs. Weasley had let Ron work it out on his own.

I must admit to being surprised by who has taken you on as an adopted son, but I know the choice of accepting was certainly yours alone to make and that no one forced you to make it. Although Minerva tells us that it was Albus' intent that Severus should do this, I cannot help but imagine what your father would think.

Harry sighed and took a drink of pumpkin juice. His plate had gone cold. He nibbled on some toast as he went back to the letter and avoided Hermione's gaze, which seemed to be trying to catch his. He reread that last line and thought that his father wasn't exactly here to complain.

Well, Arthur informs me I should not have stated that last part, but I feel I should.

Harry grinned at the notion of them fighting over the letter, even as he felt a twinge at her desire to speak for his parents.

You are viewed as Albus' protégé, you know.

That startled him. He couldn't imagine living up to that and willed her to be mistaken.

Ginny believes you still wish to keep the adoption quiet despite your schoolmates all knowing. I expect that given your age, fewer in the wizarding world will take an interest than you expect.

Harry hoped that were true. The rest of the letter was wishes that he be happy. He folded it and put it in his pocket. Breakfast was winding down. He stashed Lupin's away as well and stood up with his friends.

During Transfiguration Harry considered that McGonagall seemed to be taking Dumbledore's death rather well; he was watching her circle the room helping students with a three-stage transfiguration. They were supposed to change an onyx crystal into a tulip, which qualified it as a metatranscendent transformation as the two were opposite classes of object. This class had become a bit of a letdown each Monday after the ease and fun of Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Harry watched the teacher help Justin with interest. The Hufflepuff couldn't do the spell either and Harry was hoping to pick something up before she came around to their table. Beside him, Hermione was trying to figure out how to get a yellow tulip with a red center, rather than just a yellow or just a red one. It was getting harder to not have her success pile onto his own frustration. Worse yet, this was making him understand Ron better.

Ron was still transfiguring the onyx crystal into quartz. Harry had that down at least. Getting the quartz to make it to thistle was proving beyond him. He got something that looked like a glass pine cone tinged green instead. It was pretty, but far from correct.

Justin finally managed the spell, but Harry couldn't tell how from the other side of the room. Harry tried it again himself, thinking, as he had been instructed, of the natural growth angles of quartz and the branching of the thistle plant. McGonagall had left him with the impression that she thought this an easy step. He thought hard about long spines as he incanted the first two spells. The resulting very spindly pine cone actually collapsed in a shower of quartz needles. Harry could hear the Slytherins laughing at him. He banished the mess and took another crystal from the box provided to each table. He had not ceased to notice that McGonagall always stocked their table well.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall said as she strode up to them, "that didn't sound very promising."

"No, Professor," Harry agreed. His newest onyx crystal sat before him, looking innocent. When he looked up at the teacher for any advice, he found her eyes tinged with something like regret. He lowered his wand to his lap and slouched a bit; transfigurations seemed unimportant all of a sudden.

"You are having trouble with the second step, correct?" she asked. At Harry's nod, she said, "Study the thistle a bit more." Harry did so. It sat in a pot on the table in the middle of the room, looking dangerous. McGonagall gave him a moment to consider it before saying, "It is alive, Harry; you must make it not only a shape transformation in step two, but also a protasmic one. Neither is really hard but both are necessary. Try it again."

As Harry stared at the chunk of smooth, dark rock before him, he remembered that Transfiguration was Dumbledore's subject as well. Harry regretted that he had never had a class with him, although it was just as well he couldn't see his current slow performance. He cast the two spells, the first now quite rote. Before him was . . . something. It was kind of a plant and it was kind of green. The weight of the long quartz needles on its leaves was making it droop as he studied it.

"Closer," McGonagall said flatly. "I think."

Harry was starting to dislike tulips rather a lot. Ron finally got a quartz crystal, to grand congratulations from Hermione, who was now trying for a purple tulip.

After classes, Harry finally had a chance to open his other letter when he let his friends go on ahead to the tower without him. He stood in a window looking out on a cloudy day and opened it. It was much shorter than Mrs. Weasley's.

Dear Harry, A great deal of news about you in the last week. Unfortunate that you didn't feel you could share your new home circumstances, but far be it from me to fault others for keeping secrets. I have been assured that Severus is treating you well, as odd as that notion is. It leads me to believe he must have been under far too much strain these many years. Trust that I and many others share your grief about Dumbledore. He truly had an impact on us all. Please owl if you need to speak of anything at all, Remus.

Harry folded the letter and put it with Mrs. Weasley's. Something that had been on his mind for a while came to the fore. He headed to the staircases with purpose.

"Professor?" Harry said as he pushed open the door to the headmistress's office. It had been left ajar, which would have been unusual before.

McGonagall sat at her desk, concentrating hard on the parchments before her. "Yes, Mr. Potter," she said in a flat tone.

"This is very quick, Professor," Harry said apologetically. "I was just wondering when Severus' birthday is."

McGonagall raised her eyes at that and grinned a little mischievously. She pulled out a file drawer and flipped through it and parted one of the files to peer at it without pulling it out. "November the twentieth," she replied with a small crooked grin.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"You are quite welcome, Harry," she said in a much more amiable tone.

Harry grinned to himself as he left her office and went straight to the kitchens to get what he needed for his prank. He needed a large cork and just the right size jar. Dobby turned out to be a great help, patiently bringing him one empty jar after another until he found one that made exactly the right noise when the cork was pulled. It was a small jar too, which was even better. Contemplating a bit of trouble made him feel better than he had in a very long time; he was just a little bothered that he didn't have Ron in on it, although he imagined he was going to enjoy it.

* * *

Late that evening, Snape looked up from the book he was studying when McGonagall entered his office. She had an odd look upon her face, as though reminded of something of that evoked mixed emotion.

"Among Albus' things I found a collection of these," she said, holding out a small sealed envelope.

Snape accepted it and examined it. The parchment looked aged, yellowed, especially around the gum seal. His first name was written in Dumbledore's hand on the front in faded ink. Snape made a noise of conflicting interest.

"You probably won't be able to open it," McGonagall commented.

With a doubtful look, Snape tried to slip his thumbnail under the seal--it steadfastly refused to budge or even tear a little.

"Pomona's and Hagrid's are that way as well. Mine was open when I found it. Most everyone's opened when I handed them out. Just as well to put off reading it," she opined.

He looked at the ordinary but unopenable seal again. "Powerful wizards mucking about," he breathed, annoyed. At McGonagall's dubious look, he explained, "Potter's words."

"Ah. I always thought not much was getting past him." She adjusted her robes and turned to leave. "There was no letter for him, by the way."

"Good."

* * *

As students settled in for Defense on Friday, a note was passed surreptitiously. It read, *Do not react. Act normal.* Used to this sort of thing, they followed it immediately, maybe too much.

Snape took roll call visually, his brow furrowing momentarily as he noticed Harry's absence. He scratched his brow and started the lecture, determined to give his charge no extra consideration.

"Today we will continue with cutting spells," he said. As he gave them an overview of what they would cover that day, he noticed that they all seemed somewhat extra attentive, almost innocently so. He shook that off and described the advanced narrow burning spell.

If Snape had turned around, he would have noticed one of the wooden panels behind him swing open. He almost certainly would have seen Harry step silently out from behind it and close it, tapping it once with his wand very lightly. The class obediently kept their eyes on the teacher as Harry pulled the small jar from his pocket and pulled the cork.

A loud *pop!* made Snape turn around. Harry stood behind him, hands in his pockets, looking inordinately pleased with himself. A few students giggled.

"Potter," Snape said with his old sneer. "You do not expect me to believe that you have managed to Apparate inside the castle. Or Apparate at all for that matter, since I know for a fact you are not licensed to do so."

Harry gave him a shrug and stepped around him. "Sorry I'm late, sir," he said.

Snape looked around behind him, then back at Harry, who was very much Occluding his mind, but made up for it with a very sweet expression of innocence. The class grinned as one now, even Malfoy and the other Slytherins.

"I am sorely tempted to take ten points from Gryffindor for your intentional disruption of class," Snape said in harder tone.

Neville piped up, "It would be worth it, sir."

Snape closed his eyes a long moment then managed to glare at the boy. "Stay after class, Mr. Potter."

"Yes, sir," Harry said easily.

At the end of what felt like a long class Harry did as he was told and hung beside his desk as the room emptied. He received a lot of winks and waves as his fellow students departed. Snape stepped down and over to him. He sighed in dismay and said, "You did not really Apparate, did you, Harry?"

Harry grinned widely. "You really think I could manage that?" he asked, flattered.

Snape glanced around the platform with narrowed eyes before turning back to him. "I am finding myself conditioned to not underestimate you."

Harry still smiled. "I didn't Apparate," he reassured him.

"Good," Snape said. "Things would have become very complicated had you done so."

Harry took the bottle and cork out of his pocket and held them up. He then laughed. "The look you gave me was pretty funny," he said. He set his noisemakers down and reached in his bag for a copy of his Map. He held it out for Snape. It was blank so he tapped it with his wand. The seven floors, the towers and the dungeons appeared. "And don't tell any students, I showed you this part," Harry said as he incanted, "Passages," while tapping the parchment again.

Snape's eyes narrowed as he looked the page over. "This reminds me of something," he breathed.

Nervously, Harry said, "Really?"

Snape gave him an intent look and held the parchment out.

"You can keep it," Harry offered.

"Does it do anything else?" Snape asked. When Harry shook his head, he added, "Pity. I presume you still have the original?" Harry looked away, reluctant to answer. Snape dropped his arm, making the parchment flutter. "Potter, I have no intention of taking it away from you. I suspect you have very few things that belonged to your father."

Harry relaxed. "I still have it," he admitted. "I've been trying to figure out how it works, without much luck. Even with some help from Remus." He shrugged. "I don't have time to work on it with classes now. Speaking of which, I'm going to get detention from McGonagall for being late again." He hurriedly packed up his things and slung his bag over his shoulder.

As he motioned a casual goodbye, Snape asked, "You really expect Minerva will do that?"

Harry breathed deeply. "We'll see."

Harry didn't get detention, but he received a very stern talking to in front of the class when he arrived. By the time he walked in the story had been told and McGonagall was ready for him.

When the tongue-lashing concluded and McGonagall returned to the lesson with a disappointed huff, Neville raised his hand and said, "If you'd seen the look on Professor Snape's face, ma'am, you'd think it worth it."

She glared at him a moment and said, "Yes, well, I didn't have the luxury of that, so it does not count in Mr. Potter's favor." She turned to stalk to the front of the room and murmured, "Next time, Potter, be sure to invite a few more bystanders."

Harry shared a look of relieved amusement with his friends.

* * *

The weather turned colder, but that didn't dissuade them from heading into Hogsmeade on Saturday. The crowd in the Three Broomsticks was thinner than the previous visit. Harry and his companions sat at a table by the side wall and Madame Rosmerta brought them a round of butterbeers immediately.

"We get such great service with you here, Harry," Hermione commented. Ron looked like he might be in agreement, but he didn't speak. Harry shook his head in dismay at both Rosmerta and Ron. They held up their mugs in a silent toast to Dumbledore before sipping the cold, sweet liquid.

"What is this?" Hermione asked the table in general. At their questioning looks, she nodded at a table near the window.

Harry turned and espied an ordinary witch in mauve robes sitting with a man whose back was to them. "That's Professor Snape, isn't it?" Hermione asked. Harry squinted and nodded that it probably was. "Who's the woman?" his friend asked. Harry just shrugged. "Huh," Hermione huffed suggestively. "Hasn't said anything?" she went on.

"Why would he?" Harry returned. As they chatted and drank a second round, Hermione's notion began to gnaw at Harry strangely. He shook it off several times, but his gaze seemed to end up over at the other table without his will.

* * *

Harry stood reading sections of the *Dragon Lair Book of Dangerous Spells* before D.A. Neville came over and tipped the front edge down to glance at the page he was on.

"Finding anything good?" Neville asked. "Where did you get that anyway? The library doesn't have a copy."

"Snape," Harry replied, lost in the description of something called the Cuisinart Spell. It sounded like the kind of thing that would kill a giant spider, if not at least cut its legs off. One would have to be very careful with it, though. Very careful.

"Goodness," Neville said, reading over Harry's shoulder now. "Professor Snape really loaned you this, or he just failed to notice you removing it from his shelf?"

Harry laughed lightly. "He really loaned it to me. Just warned me I was personally responsible for anything anyone did with anything they learned here."

"Still," Neville commented, reaching out and turning the page to read more of the next spell, the Nostrafresca. "Aye!" he said and dropped the page back down. The woodcut illustration was rather gruesome. "Don't teach anyone that one."

Harry closed the book, still smiling at Neville's antics. He put it back in his bag by the wall where Ron, Ginny and Hermione were standing.

"Something wrong, Neville?" Hermione asked.

"Just imagining being turned inside out by my nostrils," Neville said with a wince. "So nothing is really wrong."

More students wandered in, fourth-years, chatting boisterously. Harry still wasn't used to the fun feeling most members brought to the meetings now. It used to be so strained, almost to the breaking point, with everyone in a near panic that if they didn't get each spell right, they might not survive.

"Are we going to do any curse detection?" Ernie asked as he, Owen, and Laura wandered over to the four of them.

"I'll add it to the list," Hermione said, reaching for her bag, "if it isn't already on it."

"My parents owed to say they were thinking of getting rid of an old trunk in the attic that belonged to my great aunt. She always warned us the thing was full of stink cursing, eyeball eating, slime producing objects. As kids we never believed her, but she's gone now and we kinda want to look through it."

Harry, sympathetic to this, said, "Star it on the list; it sounds less dangerous than some of the other suggestions."

"Today we are doing more blocking, though, right?" Ginny asked. "I always get paired with Striver Bletchley during Defense class and I'm tired of landing on my bum."

"Want me to complain for you?" Harry asked.

"Oh!" Ginny said brightly. "You could do that, couldn't you? You don't think Professor would just instead pair me with someone worse, like Mortimer Montague?"

Harry thought that over. "I really don't know," he replied. "It would depend on how I asked, I suppose."

"Maybe not bother," Ginny said warily. "Just help me out so I can kick anyone's arse, please."

Harry grinned. "Sure thing." He turned to the room, which had about thirty students in it, and got everyone's attention to start.

* * *

Harry spent the week wracking his brain for a present idea. He had asked for the date with less than three weeks to spare, making him very glad that he hadn't put it off any longer. No good ideas came to mind, though. He finally broke down and went down to Hagrid's cabin to ask his advice.

"Tea," Hagrid said with authority. "Drinks a lo' of it, doesn't e?" he added at Harry's doubtful expression.

"Doesn't seem very creative or unusual," Harry commented, as he petted a bright young Fawkes who sat on his perch beside the hearth.

"Don't try so hard. Trust me--that'll only go wrong in the end. And HOW," Hagrid said with embarrassment. Harry wondered what brought on that flush of dismay, but held his questions when Hagrid muttered a bit about people who really didn't want an exotic pet even though they said they might . . . several times.

* * *

The weekend arrived. As Harry sat in the Three Broomsticks, mulling over his dilemma, Hermione nudged him and pointed at the door. Snape and the same woman entered and sat at a table in the corner. Snape seemed too preoccupied to take in the occupants of the room, which wasn't like him.

"I have to run an errand," Harry said suddenly, feeling an urgent need to get cracking on the present.

They waved him off, whispering between themselves. Harry pulled his cloak over his shoulders and walked down to the teashop.

As he turned off High Street, he encountered an eager face. Harry wondered why Skeeter seemed to be waiting for him. He shook off his suspicion and said a flat hello as he stepped by her. She beat him to the shop and put her foot at the edge of the door to hold it closed.

"You are a tough one to get at when you are in school, you know that? I am looking forward to you finishing, just so I can get access to you."

"What do you want, Ms. Skeeter?" Harry asked, continuing to stare through the glass into the shop.

"A moment of your time," she said as though it were the easiest thing in the world.

Harry sighed, "What do I get out of it?" When she hesitated replying, he added, "More stupid entries in the Rumors column?"

"I admit, the Dumbledore retrospectives have distracted me from tracking more of that rumor down." She did make that sound like a confession. Biting her lip, she went on, "How about doing something for me for old-times sake?"

Harry gave her a very doubtful look, then glanced up and down the street to see if anyone was approaching. He released the door handle and stepped around the side of the shop where the wall overlooked nothing but a sheep field back-dropped by the Forest in the distance.

"Look," Harry said as he crossed his arms and leaned against the peeling paint of the siding, "I'm continually reminded how much I'm owed by everyone. I've never called anyone on that, but I'm doing it now. Leave it be."

"Why? The public deserves to know," she said, sounding over-rehearsed.

"I don't ask for much. Actually," he said, leaning closer to her, "I haven't asked for anything. All I want is to be left to myself. The public deserves to know that Voldemort is really gone and I'd spend hours helping you convey that. But my life is mine."

She adjusted her heavy bag on her shoulder. "You wouldn't believe the rumors flying about you right now: You're secretly married. You keep illegal pet dragons. You have pregnant girlfriends. Sometimes all of the above in odd combinations."

Harry shook his head. "Why does anyone care?" he grumbled.

"Their own lives aren't interesting enough to hold their attention. Now you may argue that if they paid more attention to their own lives, rather than yours, that they may become more interesting." She shrugged. "It sells papers, so I'm not complaining." While she studied him, she took out a cigarette and put it between her lips. At his dismayed look, she said, "Yeah, I know; I'm supposed to smoke a pipe like a proper witch. I hear it all the time."

Harry didn't know how to tell her that wasn't at all what he was thinking.

Talking around the cigarette, she said, "Look, I know a nice scoop is staring me in the face, but I can't get anyone at the Ministry to talk. I've never seen anything like it." She took two long drags, then stamped out the cigarette on the cold ground. "Am I right?"

"Probably," Harry admitted.

"Help me and I'll drop it."

Harry closed his eyes. "What do you want?" he asked warily.

"Dumbledore's last words. Were you there?"

"Take care of the school," Harry replied, seeing no harm in that.

Deep in thought, Skeeter took out her pad and a normal quill. "I didn't buy that from your new headmistress. Serves me right." She didn't write anything down, just considered him. Eventually, she asked, "Are you worried about Jugson and Avery? No one else seems to be. I thought Fudge declared victory a little early."

Harry watched a flock of small birds circle and dive over the field. "I watched Voldemort torture Avery for being disloyal. I don't think he ever did anything he wasn't forced to. Jugson I don't know as much about. I do trust some of the Aurors and they seem to think they are unlikely to come out of hiding." He shrugged. He wasn't having dreams anymore, but he wasn't about to tell her that. "I feel safe," he added instead.

She made a few short notes. It made Harry wonder if he should be authorized to speak with her. He could mess up a lot of people should he choose to.

She put her pad back away. "I'm thinking that I'd prefer to hold this over you. I'll keep things quiet, if you answer my questions."

Harry felt the blanket of blackmail descending. "If that's what it takes," he heard himself say.

"So tell me what it is I'm keeping quiet about," she said as her quill went into her bag and she buckled it.

Harry grinned lightly. "I was adopted."

Her face twisted and immediately untwisted. "You're joking." She laughed, sounding regretful. "Figures. Got a few owls from some old friends saying just that. But it sounded like a dead end, Mr. Seventeen-Year-Old."

Harry shrugged, feeling sweetly like he had won this round even though it felt an unstable victory.

Skeeter stepped away, shaking her head. Harry followed her to the road and watched her stride slowly to the next street. As he entered Puddifoots, a bell chimed somewhere in the back.

After a long discussion with the teashop proprietress that almost qualified as an educational seminar about rare teas, he ordered a canister of high-altitude Himalayan first flush. Grateful to have that out of the way, but still feeling like he was failing in this task, he went back out to the road. Ron and Hermione were hovering outside the Three Broomsticks. Harry caught up to them and they headed toward the castle together.

"They were looking pretty chummy in there," Hermione teased Harry as they left High Street and headed on the path to school.

"What?" Harry retorted defensively. He shrugged his cloaked shoulders to indicate he didn't care, but part of him thought he should have come up with a better present.

* * *

Harry arrived early for D.A. to set up some things. He wanted to try a few spells that countered potions, but making his fellow students drink stuff that would make them ill smacked of Fred and George so he wanted to be prepared. The lonely walk through the castle hadn't felt as uneasy this evening, for which he was grateful. He wondered idly as he set his bag inside whether the castle was adjusting to Dumbledore's absence or he was.

He glanced around the avocado tile floors and walls; the Room was apparently a little confused about what he wanted. He stepped back out and in a few times, thinking differently about what his real needs were for this session.

"Having fun?" a voice sneered from the shadow of a doorway across the corridor. Draco Malfoy stepped forward into the light of a flickering wall lamp. His face looked its usual condescending.

"Yes, actually," Harry replied easily. "What is it to you, anyway?"

In a mocking singsong, Malfoy said, "Ah, the famous Harry Potter, playing musical doors."

Harry shrugged but didn't open the door again. "Something you want?"

Malfoy pulled his wand out. "Yes, there is." Harry didn't move, just glanced at the wand as though it were harmless. "Don't taunt me, Potter," Malfoy threatened. "Get yours out."

"What, you want to duel?" Harry asked in properly sneering disbelief.

Malfoy smiled with pleasure. "Yes," he drawled.

"Come on in then," Harry said easily and opened the door. Inside was now a regulation dueling platform. The walls were solid granite all around with no windows.

Malfoy stepped in suspiciously although he let his wand fall. "This is a bloody interesting room, isn't it?"

As they stepped over to the platform, Harry said, "You must be bored now that you've lost your junior Death Eater status. How is your dad, anyway?"

Malfoy's lips crooked as he huffed. "He chose a losing side," he commented quietly then smiled a bit more.

Harry stood with his wand out at his side. "You've been getting along better than I'd imagined," he commented, "given how much has changed."

"I discovered that power vacuums are made to be filled," the blonde young man replied as he raised his wand to ready. Harry matched him. "You are clearly too stupid to do so," Malfoy went on.

Harry went on mockingly, "I'd have thought you'd miss running around in a dark robe with a mask, dodging in and out of shadows like a cockroach."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "I don't know how someone as pathetic as you brought down such a great wizard--"

"Don't worry," Harry cut him off. "The same thing wouldn't work on you--you actually have feelings."

This caught Malfoy off guard and he blinked a moment as he took it in. Then he scoffed, "You've been hanging around Snape too long." With no warning other than the movement of his arm, he fired a blasting curse at Harry who blocked it and sent one back that Malfoy also blocked.

"He's been teaching me on the side," Malfoy said maliciously. "Far as I can tell, you only have him for class." He fired a *Figuresempre* and got one in return, both of which were blocked easily.

Harry was starting to enjoy this. His heart was pumping nicely rather than panicky and his mind was clearly focused. "I finished Seventh Year Defense in one afternoon," Harry pointed out and cast a wide cutting spell at the other boy. It wouldn't have done more than given him a red streak on his skin, but Malfoy ducked and did what Harry'd hoped he would, he got angry and incanted something nasty back. Harry blocked the hatchet curse and the following narrow cutting spell that would have done real damage.

"Can we do this every week?" Harry asked hopefully as he stepped back into position after getting knocked back.

Malfoy growled and incanted something Harry didn't recognize. Harry put up a titan block since it was usually a good bet. Part of the spell bounced off, but the air sizzled with red tendrils after the block dissolved. Two of them struck Harry on the arm and chest before he could roll out of the way. From a kneeling position, he used a very hard *Figuresempre* back again, knocking Malfoy back, almost off the platform.

Harry's arm and chest burned as he stood up, wondering fiercely what had hit him.

The door opened at that moment and the two of them froze. Neville and Dean stepped in and looked between them. "Drat," Neville said, "What are we missing?"

Harry laughed despite the sharp streaks of pain. He didn't lower his wand. "Draw for now?" Harry asked the other.

Malfoy lowered his wand. "I don't want an audience," he said in a spoiled voice and jumped off the platform. After he had stalked out of the room, Harry unhooked his robe and unbuttoned his shirt to look at the damage. Nasty red snaking streaks were on his chest and upper arm.

"What is that?" Dean asked.

Harry winced and headed for the door. "Look up a spell with the incantation '*Aduroreptum*' for me, will you?" he said as he left for the hospital wing. "Thanks," he breathed as he closed the door.

Pomfrey was her usual unsympathetic toward him. "And what were you doing, young man?" she challenged him when he showed her the strange welts.

"Practicing spells," Harry said as though it were obvious and completely normal.

She went to the supplies and brought back a tin of salve. "Try that one."

Harry rubbed a little on and sighed at the instant relief.

She put her hands on her hips and stared at him. "Do recall that I have someone to report you to now."

"You may do so, Madam," Harry said easily. He was feeling cocky after holding up so well against Malfoy in an all-out duel. He grinned widely as he said, "He'd have to take points from Slytherin, so he probably wouldn't want to hear the whole story."

* * *

McGonagall gave them Hogsmeade privileges again the next weekend. Harry suspected she was trying to balance out losing Dumbledore. The opportunity worked well for Harry, otherwise he would have had to owl for the package from the shop and although it was a short flight, Hedwig wouldn't like the package if it were heavy. Hermione and Ron skipped going down because it was very windy. Harry enjoyed the solitary walk down the path to town. Only a few other

students were ahead of or behind him and they were a distance away. As he walked, all he heard was the crunch of his boots on the snow and the creak of the thin ice on edge of the lake. He slowed his pace, despite the biting wind, just to take it in longer.

At the teashop he pulled open the door and pulled off his hat and mittens. As he stepped up to the counter, he heard a gasp from near the window, followed by whispering. Harry stuffed his mittens into his cloak pocket and turned toward the sound. He recognized the violet-robed woman after a moment's consideration. She was leaning over, talking excitedly to Snape who gave Harry a positively disgusted look.

The shopkeeper came out of the back and, when he saw him, set Harry's package on the counter in a fancy bag with pink yarn for handles. Harry forced his smile down and put some coins on the counter and took up the bag. When he stepped back toward the door, the woman gave him such a bright look, he almost couldn't hold back on his grin.

"Sir," Harry said to Snape.

"Potter," Snape replied flatly.

"You know him?" the woman asked Snape in delighted surprise, severely testing Harry's control.

Snape hesitated just an instant. "He is a student at Hogwarts," he explained with a hint of short patience.

"Ma'am," Harry said.

She put out her hand. "Candide Breakstone," she said.

Harry took her hand. "Harry Potter," he said.

"Wow," she said gleefully. "You are."

Harry couldn't risk a glance at Snape, or he knew he would lose it.

"You must have things to be doing, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked impatiently.

Harry, feeling free since Snape had started the game this time, said conversationally, "Not really, sir." He turned back to the bright-eyed woman just as she finished giving Snape a sharp look. "So, what do you do?" Harry asked her.

"I'm an accountant. It is the end of the fiscal calendar year this month, so I spend all of my time with my firm's clients here in Hogsmeade."

Harry blinked at her before saying, "That's nice," as levelly as possible.

"Oh!" she said. She reached into her bag and pulled out a white mug. "Would you mind terribly?" she asked Harry with a pleading tone. She held it out.

Harry accepted and looked it over. It was some kind of a commemorative mug celebrating the *Year of the Dark Lord's Demise*. It had a fake seal format to it and lots of gold accent. "Yee," Harry uttered in dismay.

"Yes, it is rather horrid, I know," she admitted. "But my boss gave them to all of us. If you signed it, he would be livid with jealousy."

Harry swallowed hard, mostly because it was his fault this particular encounter had gone this far, and gave her a pleasant smile. He took a quill out of his bag and used the marker pen charm on it. Snape had taken the mug to look at it with an appalled expression. Harry took it back a little impatiently and signed it *To Candide, from your friend, Harry Potter*. He then spelled the fresh ink with a permanent charm.

"You have a spell for every possible autographing circumstance?" Snape asked him in his most snide tone.

"I do try, sir," Harry said sweetly as he handed the mug over to Candide. She looked at it with a glowing smile before stashing it in her bag. "Thank you," she said honestly.

"No problem. Nice to have met you." Harry said. He picked up his package from the floor and said, "Professor," to Snape in a very formal tone.

Later that evening back at the castle, Harry stopped by Snape's office. "Didn't mean to interrupt your date," he said as he stepped in.

Snape gave him a dark look. "I don't know if one would call it that," he said as he flipped through a large book on his desk.

Harry waited an appropriate amount of time before saying, "Candy the accountant?"

Snape's eyes came back up to him. He gave him a long dark look and said, "Go away, Potter, before I say something I'll regret."

Harry frowned a bit and departed in hard silence.

In the common room most of his friends were enjoying themselves with games or talk. Harry, not feeling sociable, collected his books and took them to the library, which was almost empty. He worked on Potions since he was in a bad mood already anyway and could use sharp phrasing in his essay as an outlet for it.

* * *

Harry's dark mood didn't abate much by Monday. He was quiet in Defense class, which attracted a few long looks from Snape, especially when Harry couldn't find any patience for his spelling partner, Lavender.

Snape stepped over and reviewed the Quiescent spell with her. Harry kept his eyes averted, watching Ron and Hermione practice making each other swoon onto large cushions. He rolled his eyes at the appropriateness of that, and waited for the chance to practice more. Finally, when Lavender was ready to try it again, Harry paid attention. Fortunately she still didn't have it right, and all he received was a dull buzzing in his ears.

* * *

Thursday was Snape's birthday. Harry's annoyed mood had lightened a bit, but not enough to make him relish the notion of giving a gift to him. He borrowed wrapping paper from another student in the House and wrapped the large square tin when everyone went to breakfast. He dropped it into his bag, thinking that an opportunity would arise to hand it over. He put it off until after the last class of the day. This was usually a good time to catch any teacher in their office, since they were often taking care of things before heading down to dinner.

Snape's door was closed. Harry knocked on it just in case, but there was no answer. Sighing, mostly because this meant he was going to have to work himself up to this again, he stepped away.

After dinner he came straight back. The door was open this time and Snape was filing things when Harry knocked on the doorframe. This was going to cost him some pride--he could feel it.

"Harry," Snape said evenly. It was the usual greeting, but Harry felt he could have used a tad more encouragement.

Harry checked the hallway and seeing it was empty, stepped farther in, unbuckling his bag as he walked. He set it on the visitor's chair and took out the lime-green wrapped present. As he placed the package on the desk, he said evenly, "Happy birthday, sir."

Snape put down the parchment he had in his hand and gave Harry and the gift a stunned look. Holding that gaze cost Harry more pride than he had expected. He hefted his bag and stepped out while he still had a little of it left.

* * *

Snape sat in the teashop alone that Saturday. It occurred to him now that it was the gift Potter was picking up when he had encountered him here. The boy had done a good job of not giving that away.

The proprietress brought him more hot water, turning his thoughts to the time. Candide had made it sound very doubtful that she would make it. But she had done that the weekend before as well. He did believe that she worked every day, including weekends, as the end of November grew closer, but he couldn't help but suspect that he had botched it somehow. Though tempted to blame the incident with Potter, since she had seemed mildly upset by his treatment of the boy, it had really started before that. The week before, when her friend had joined them briefly in the Three Broomsticks. After that Candide had insisted on meeting elsewhere with a tone that said, "if at all".

The door opening interrupted his musings. "Hope you weren't waiting too long," Candide greeted him as she stepped over. She set her packages on the floor, took the seat across the small table, and pulled over a cup and poured for herself. Her eyes were much more distracted than usual. He resisted the strong temptation to Legilimize her.

After a long sip she tossed off her cloak and let it fall over the back of her chair. "I don't think we should meet anymore," she stated simply.

"May I ask why?" Snape heard himself say.

She shrugged. "You can ask."

"Your friend Roberta didn't like me, I assume."

"She knows you better than I," Candide said. "She was three years behind you at Hogwarts, but I don't think you recognized her."

Snape shook his head.

"Anyway," Candide murmured, picking at her nails nervously.

"I certainly enjoy having tea with you," Snape said.

Her eyes darted around the room. "You are interesting to talk to. Most people aren't, really."

Snape raised both brows. This was one of the more endearing things she had ever said. A shadow moved outside the shop window. Snape rapped on the glass, startling Candide. "If you do not wish to have tea with me anymore, or mead, that is your choice," Snape said to her with a tone of finality.

The shadow outside hesitated then stepped up to the door and opened it. Harry shut the door behind him against the cold wind. "Sir?" he asked.

"Come over here, Harry," Snape invited.

Harry pulled his hat off and stashed it in his pocket. His cheeks were red from the wind and he was breathing as though he had been walking quickly. He loosened his cloak and coat collar. "Hello again," he said to the woman. She smiled and returned his greeting.

Snape stood up and took his own cloak down from the hat rack behind him. "You were not introduced properly last time," Snape said as he pulled his cloak around his shoulders. Harry watched this in confusion. "I'll head back to the castle with you," Snape explained to him.

"Okay," Harry said easily.

"Thank you for the birthday present, by the way. Well chosen."

Harry smiled at that, forgetting everything he had felt in between. "You're welcome, sir," he said brightly.

"It was your birthday?" Candide asked.

Harry rapidly looked between them, trying to figure out the situation. Snape turned to her, his hair falling into his face as he looked down to get his gloves out of his pocket. He nodded faintly as if it were no matter. As he clutched his black gloves in his hand, he exhaled audibly. "Harry, this is Candide Breakstone. Candide, this is my son, Harry."

Harry gave her a normal smile, thinking that Snape must have some reason for going straight at the jugular. Her expression was rather shocked. Her startled eyes gravitated to Harry who gave her a small nod. Snape had been plotting an exit--Harry could go for that. "I have a D.A. meeting to prepare for," he said to Snape. It was somewhat true, inasmuch as it was always true. "Nice meeting you again," he said to Candide.

On the way down the road, Harry said, "So she broke it off, eh?"

"Yes," Snape answered in a low tone.

"I don't know," Harry said, trying for a teasing voice. "She failed the Harry test."

"Very true. I would not have imagined such mindlessly adoring behavior from her."

"I am sorry," Harry said, minutes later, as they stepped along the path beside the lake. It was true; as odd as the notion had made him feel, he could see the other side of it easily now.

"It wasn't her--it was her friend," Snape complained. Something in his tone made Harry think this brought back bad memories, so he let the whole thing drop rather than risk sending Snape into a funk.

* * *

The next morning an owl dropped a letter in front of Harry. He opened it, surprised to find it was from Candide. *Was Severus serious? You nodded, but I simply cannot imagine. Please reply to the address below.* The address at the bottom was an in the care of one of the businesses in Hogsmeade.

"Interesting letter?" Hermione asked as Harry stared at it.

"Merlin, don't ask. Can I borrow a quill?" Harry wrote a reply on the back, explaining that yes, Severus had adopted him and should she care to, she could look up the filing with the Wizard Family Council. As to their odd behavior the first time around, that was a little game they played since the adoption wasn't general public knowledge. He signed it and folded it to take it to the owlery after breakfast. He gave the quill back and poked at his food again.

Later, as he handed the letter to Hedwig, he realized he was most likely reopening this thing between his guardian and this woman. He would have to try to hold the mindset he had had the day before when he had expressed regret as they were walking back to the castle. It wasn't going to be easy; he could feel it slipping away, even as Hedwig sailed out one of the upper openings.

* * *

Harry didn't want to be seen as having intervened, so when he went down to visit with Snape that evening, he left the topic well alone. He had brought all of his books and assignments to work on. Usually he selected just one to bring in case Snape was busy. This time he found himself settling in for a long evening.

Around the end of the second hour, Harry looked up to find Snape considering him in silence. "Would you like some tea?" his guardian finally asked.

Harry, having much more to finish that evening, said, "Sure." As tea was being made, he returned to his efforts at describing the origin of wizard community law in the five-hundreds. At least Binns seemed to have realized that something other than Giant wars and Goblin rebellions had happened in the past, though Harry wished it were something more interesting.

Snape set a cup of tea before Harry, who raised it to his nose and hesitated. It smelled of sunshine and fresh herb. Distracted from his reading he took a sip. It wasn't anything like any tea he had had before; it was earth and enchanted green leaves with a bit of toasted something at the end. He blinked into his cup. "Is this the stuff I got you?" he asked.

Snape sat back, holding his cup with his fingertips. He looked amused. "You didn't try it first?"

"I got talked into it. It was a special order." Harry took another sip and marveled all over again. "Wow." He felt better, realizing that he had managed all right on the gift after all.

* * *

Harry found himself hanging out in Snape's office a little more often that week, even though he really didn't have time. Instead of being there, he should have been finishing assignments before Quidditch practice or practicing spells for D.A.

Snape didn't comment or make an indication that he noticed Harry's change in visiting habits. Twice, Harry opened his mouth to ask if anything had happened with Candide, before he cut himself off at the last instant. The second time he had to scramble for another topic. "Big match this weekend," Harry said. This was at least true; it was Gryffindor against Slytherin.

"And you are expecting to win?" Snape asked.

"I actually don't know," he admitted. They had secretly watched the Slytherins practicing and they had appeared intense and disciplined in a wholly new way. Only Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw had played so far, so no one had seen Snape's house on the pitch. "Your new Seeker is awfully small," Harry commented thinking of the white-haired girl with grey eyes he had seen practicing and since then, noticed in the hallway. Ron had thought her name was Suze Zepher.

"Seekers are supposed to be," Snape pointed out rather pointedly.

"You think I'm too tall?"

"You are certainly getting there. But far be it for anyone to suggest you leave the position." When Harry gave him a dark look, he went on, "Did anyone try out against you?"

"No. That rarely happens though."

"Not on the Slytherin team. Positions are always in jeopardy," Snape stated.

"No wonder they all look so intent," Harry mused.

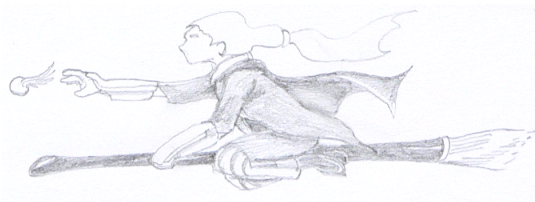
"I would expect."

"They don't look like they are having fun, though," Harry commented as he collected up his books. He needed to get to a meeting.

"Winning is its own reward," Snape observed.

"It would have to be," Harry quipped as he went to the door. "Later, sir," he said as he departed.

Author's note: Yes, I have Snape's birthday wrong, but this was written before jkrowling.com announced it on the calendar.



Chapter 25 -- Another Big Match

The weather turned warmer for the big Quidditch match. As they stood waiting to fly out, Harry noticed for the first time that he was taller than one Chaser and the same height as one of the Beaters. He mulled on this unexpected observation as Ron gave them a little pep talk before the door fell open. Ron clenched his fist and pounded the air a lot as he urged them on. Harry considered commenting that they all wanted to win as much as Ron, and that he didn't need to worry about that, but held back.

Finally the door fell open. It felt good to float out over the green expanse. He felt freer as the memory of the match of last year dimmed, overlaid by the here and now. He appraised Suze, the opposing Seeker, as they waited for Madam Hooch to release the balls. She gave them a long talking to, giving Harry time to notice that the girl was actually smaller than her broom, which had no label. Harry suspected, with a bit of a jolt, that meant it was a custom one. A sinking feeling tried to take hold of Harry's stomach. No Dementors this time, he reminded himself to help get back in game mode.

Madame Hooch's whistle blew just as the sun cut through the clouds. As Harry turned to take up his circling position, he saw Suze squint her very pale eyes in the bright light. With any luck, the Snitch would stay high, Harry thought.

Slytherin scored first on their first possession. Harry could read Ron's lips as he swore and paced between the posts. Suze dove suddenly. Harry, used to being faked out by Malfoy, turned and dove mildly to check if she were serious. When she continued to dive, the crowd began to rise. Harry pushed his speed up a notch. Suze pulled up a few feet from the ground and soared along at ground level, turning suddenly at the far wall and heading straight up. Her broom didn't seem to believe it had a rider aboard, the way it maneuvered.

Harry forced himself to ignore her and returned to scanning where he normally found the Snitch: above the stands on the periphery. Suze came around beside him and slowed instantly to pace him. The Slytherin stands cheered another goal. Harry ducked to circle lower and when she matched, with a floating ease, ducked again. She sped up then. Harry let her sail ahead and bend around the turn in the pitch. He regained a little altitude and continued looking for the Snitch as the opposition scored yet another goal.

Suze lapped him, coming up close beside on the outside. Harry hoped that she cut off part of the loop, otherwise her broom was faster than he had imagined a broom could be. She sloth rolled gracefully beneath him to pace on the inside. The crowd murmured at that provocative maneuver. Harry dove suddenly to test her. She matched him so easily it might have appeared to the crowd that they moved as one. Harry regripped his broom, feeling moisture between his palms and the straps of his wristguards.

Every move he made, she matched without appearing to even try. Harry flew in a wider loop and sped up, barely skimming the fabric covering the stands, watching intently for his target and trying to pretend he didn't have a shadow.

Someone shouted and one of the Slytherin Beaters came at them, swinging hard at a Bludger. Harry's first thought was to wonder why he was aiming at his own teammate, since Suze was directly in the path of it. His hesitation at this confusion cost him. She curved easily out of the way and the ball careened into Harry's chest, knocking him back into the fabric of the stands. His shoulder took the brunt of the collision with the wood of the staircase behind the bright cloth, and he ducked his head to try to protect it. Instinctively, he held onto the broom as he fell, bouncing off the tower once, and just righting his flight as he struck the dirt track around the pitch. The crowd made a noise of dismay, he was heartened to hear.

Harry slowly stood himself up off the ground and took a deep breath. No sharp pains resulted from this so, a little unsteady, he hovered his broom. The students in the stands above him were cheering down at him, all Ravenclaws. He gave them a small wave as he kicked off. Ginny swooped low to check on him. He waved her off as well.

More determined now, Harry scanned the pitch. The Slytherin Seeker was circling high, looking about herself with a cold assurance. Harry turned to pace beneath her, feeling she was a little high. She dropped smoothly beside him, giving him a sharp look. Harry wiped his forehead and blood came away on his fingers. He didn't feel any pain, so he wiped his hand on his cloak and ignored it, and her.

Gryffindor finally managed to score but it was answered within a minute. Harry shook his head and avoided checking on Ron, assuming Ginny would do that. He fell into a mode of cold concentration then, distracted only by having to wipe the blood that seeped into his right eye.

They circled slowly until the sun streamed out of the clouds again. Harry tail-turned and angled up at it, accelerating at the limit of his broom. Suze apparently felt she had no choice but to follow. Harry angled steeper and sideways a few times to mimic the way he would have to chase a Snitch. Behind him, he could hear her thick cloak flapping as she trailed close. Without warning, Harry tail-turned again back to level and cut into a tight spiral. He would have cleared her, but she panic-dodged to avoid a collision anyway. They were dizzyingly high, even Harry had to admit, although the fall from here was barely different from one at the height of the stands.

Harry spiraled downward a few turns before kicking violently out of it and plummeting level. Suze flew nearby, indecisive about following. Back at the level of the flags, Harry turned out in a broad, banked circle. She had decided to follow. Harry swerved, using the flag as a pick and forcing her to fly wider. He turned to maximize this advantage and used the next tower again as a pick. She stayed directly behind him after that, so close that he suspected her of holding his bristles. A glance back, as he wiped his face on his sleeve, showed her hands firmly on her own black broom handle. His brow stung fiercely from being rubbed on the gritty fabric of his sleeve, making him look around harder for the Snitch to end the match as soon as possible.

The crowd cheered but Harry didn't spare any attention for it to find out who had scored. The larger of the two green-clad Beaters loomed up around the next tower. Harry swerved hard and a Bludger struck him on the leg from behind. He had been flying at top speed making the next tower loom fast, requiring him to pull up sharply to avoid it. He clipped the Hogwarts flag on the top of it, sending it end over end to the ground.

Suze was no longer behind him. Harry turned and immediately had to duck a Bludger as he looked for her. She circled broadly, intently looking about for the Snitch. He sped up, then slowed as the Slytherin Beaters rose to block his path. The crowd booed something. Harry leaned back and reversed before dropping into a plummet when the Beaters started forward. He was too close to the ground for this maneuver, but he didn't care. His padded knees bounced on the grass as he recovered from the drop and looped under the overgrown Slytherins who couldn't move as agilely.

Harry came up behind Suze, breaking hard to match her. Her white hair was coming loose from its tie, and it flapped madly as she turned suddenly. He followed, forced to grip his broom as hard as he could to stay on it. The wind whipped his clothes as she sped up and he matched again, although it took two breaths for him to gain the same speed. He pulled up very close, this time on the inside, limiting where she could turn. He shifted his weight back on his broom, knowing she would slow down to cut away from him. When she moved her grip, he started breaking, matching her perfectly and leaving her no place to go except to fly farther out of the pitch area. She did so, looping tight considering their speed. Harry cut her off again, anticipating correctly that she would drop lower to avoid him.

Around the pitch they flew in their crazed dance, chased by the green-clad Beaters. Harry barely had any attention for searching for the snitch since it took everything he had to stay ahead of her and avoid getting bludgeoned. It required every ounce of preemptive strategy and instinct he had to maintain close proximity to her feather-light form and advanced broom.

She finally slowed down a bit. Harry was out of breath but didn't dare reveal it. Lack of air made him feel dizzy as a result. His hands felt tired as well, and he regripped a few times to help them recover. He swallowed hard and took a long slow breath to relieve his screaming lungs.

Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a golden flutter. Relieved more than excited, he didn't turn his head. Instead, he swerved the other way across the pitch, away from it, toward the Beaters who had returned to harassing the Gryffindor chasers, who were scoring easily without them.

One of them turned to Harry and redirected a Bludger his way. This gave Harry an excuse to turn back when he swerved to avoid it. Suze, directly behind him, swerved the other way to avoid a head-on. Harry's heart leapt--she was now heading in completely the opposite direction from the Snitch. He kicked his broom down fast and headed directly at it, finding it easily against the green grass behind it. His head swam with the acceleration.

The Snitch dodged upward as he closed on it, which forced him to break hard and lift, making him dizzy. One hand slipped free of the broom, too tired to hold on. He reached out with it and rolled upside down to stay with his target. The fluttering wings brushed his fingers as something collided with his right side. With no thoughts except for the Snitch, he tugged the broom to meet the collision and strained his arm at the shoulder. His hand closed over the struggling thing as another padded arm bumped his, hard. Harry marveled that Suze could have made it across the pitch so quickly.

A roar went through the crowd as the end of the game was announced. Harry, knocked off balance by Suze pulling away suddenly, struggled to right himself over his broom. His vision tried to tunnel in. He bent over himself to recover, but instead, blacked out completely.

For an instant, Harry imagined he was flying, which didn't alarm him too much. The blackness of his vision did more so. But that was wiped from his mind by his impact with the flat grass of the pitch.

Indistinct voices and running feet roused Harry. A high-pitched, elf-like voice nearby said plaintively, "I'm sorry, Professor. I should have had him beat."

"You got it!" Ron cried, accompanied by a ceasing charge of pounding footsteps.

Harry opened his eyes. The sun behind Ron was an orb painted on the shifting clouds. As he looked up at his friend, Harry considered with slow thought that it used to be much easier to breathe. More faces were appearing in his narrow vision, including Snape's, much closer.

"Potter," he said with an ambiguous tone as he crouched and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. The wraithlike Slytherin Seeker stood beside Snape, looking glum.

Harry wondered what made him think it was worth it. "Sorry for ruining your game, sir," Harry said.

"He's delirious!" Ron shouted in concern. "Quick, get him to Madam Pomfrey."

Harry found the strength to hold the Snitch up in Ron's direction. Ron took it from him with a wide smile. "Oh, well, that's all right then," he said.

Darkness took Harry at that moment with a last fleeting thought that, if he wanted to stay aware, he was going to have to breathe more despite the invisible troll that was apparently standing on his chest.

* * *

Harry woke up in the hospital wing. He felt around for his glasses on the side table and put them on. A basket of chocolate frogs was there as well as some jars of sweets. He wondered how long he had been out.

"And how are you feeling, Mr. Potter?" Madam Pomfrey asked. She stood at the foot of his bed, hands on her hips, looking very unsympathetic despite her words.

Harry touched the bandage on his forehead. "Not bad, Madam, thank you."

"You had quite a gash there. It was still bleeding when they hovered you in," she admonished him.

"I couldn't feel it," Harry said.

She humped, rolled her eyes and stalked off, muttering something about it not mattering if the Dark Lord was gone as long as there was still Quidditch.

The door to the wing opened and Hermione and Ron appeared. When they saw he was awake they rushed over. "Feeling better?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah. Have a frog," he said. Ron accepted one without meeting his eyes.

"Did Madam Pomfrey tell anyone you were awake?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't think so."

"Professor Snape wanted to be told." She pulled out her wand and put down the half-eaten frog. Talking around the chocolate, she said, "Let me see if I can do this." She closed her eyes and said, "*Flickerus Pravda Snape*." She pointed the wand at the wall in the direction of the rest of the castle. A silver bird shot out of it and disappeared through the stone. At Harry's impressed look, she said, "It only seems to work about half the time. I wasn't going to show it off until I had it down better."

Pomfrey stepped over to them. "Can Harry leave soon?" Hermione asked her.

"A double dose of blood replenisher requires a six-hour stay," she stated, leaving no room for argument. After straightening the covers with sharp movements, she stepped away again.

"Too bad," Hermione said. "You'll miss dinner." She took another bite of frog.

Harry pushed himself up a little straighter; his body complained in many, many places as he did so, making him glad he didn't have to move until at least late in the evening. He reached for a frog as well and unwrapped it slowly.

The door to the wing opened and Snape stepped in. Harry rubbed his eyes to try to perk himself up some and set his uneaten sweet on the night stand. Snape's expression as he approached wasn't readable. Ron reflexively stepped aside to get out of his way, although he didn't need to move all the way to the end of the bed, which he did. Ron put his hands in his pockets and looked away from all of them.

Harry turned from him to Snape, who stood with his arms crossed beside the bed. "Feeling better, I presume?" he asked. Snape's eyes flickered over to Ron, who studiously stared down the wing toward Pomfrey's office.

Harry began to have a sinking feeling that something had happened after he had passed out. "Yes, sir," Harry said. His shoulder throbbed at that moment and it occurred to him that winning wasn't necessarily fun after all.

"Ms. Zepher is considering resigning as Seeker."

"She shouldn't," Harry said stridently.

"Yes," Snape said. "I tried to explain that she lost not a battle of skill but one of will, of which she has far less experience than yourself. Perhaps you would speak with her, should you see her."

"Sure," Harry said, disregarding the startled look of dismay this caused on Ron's face.

Snape uncrossed his arms. "Should you need anything, Harry . . ." he said then looked between them. "I don't know who sent the bird."

Harry pointed at Hermione. "Hm," Snape said and turned to her. "Dumbledore would be most pleased to see his spell being replicated by a student. You need to temper your power, though, it burned out very fast after it arrived."

She brightened at that and felt thoughtful. "I'll show Harry," she said.

Snape nodded at her and departed with a swish of his cloak. Ron relaxed, sighing with relief when the door closed.

Hermione sat on the edge of the bed and taught Harry the bird spell. She then asked Ron to stand outside in the hallway to signal if he had received one because getting it to go through a wall was the hardest part. When their friend was out of hearing range, Hermione said, "Ron lost it with Professor Snape after you passed out. It was ugly. He's lucky he didn't get spelled into a newt or get a lifetime's detention or something. Give it a try," she said.

Harry, distracted by her story, couldn't generate anything. She started from the beginning, explaining the spell all over again, sending a bird through the wall to Ron, who waved in the window of the door that he got it. Harry put aside his questions and nearly panicked concern, and incanted the spell. A silver arrow that bounced off the wall was all he managed. He tried several more times, doing no better.

"Finish the story. Pomfrey will have let me go before I get this right."

Hermione sent another one, apparently to keep Ron occupied rather than to demonstrate. "It was really unfortunate, too, because it was clear to everyone else that Professor was really worried about you." She sighed, her eyes unfocused as she said, "Professor Snape put Ron in his place so forcefully that some of the Slytherins are demanding a new Head of House."

"What?" Harry asked. He tried the spell again. The silver arrow left a burn mark on the wall this time. "Why?"

"He made it a little too clear, although he didn't say it outright, that you were all that mattered," Hermione said cautiously.

Harry gave her a doubtful look then felt chagrined. He tried the spell again, this time it was a bird, but it spiraled away out the window. Ron opened the door and watched it leave. "I don't think I'm going to get it," Harry said to him.

"I can't either," Ron commented, "so that makes me feel better."

Harry intentionally didn't react to Ron's talking to him, although he and Hermione shared a very fleeting look of understanding as Ron sighed and fidgeted a bit.

* * *

Harry saw Suze the next day, sitting in the Great Hall after lunch. She was with a small group of younger Slytherins whom Harry didn't know. The rest of the Slytherin table was empty. Harry waved his friends off and stepped over there. The group looked up in surprise at his approach.

"Can I talk to you?" he asked Suze.

She blinked her pale eyes at him and shrugged one shoulder. "I'll see you 'round," she said to her friends as she slid off the bench.

She followed Harry to the front of the room to the bench below the tall window at the end of the head table. She reluctantly, it seemed, sat beside him and didn't meet his eyes. "Professor Snape mentioned that you were considering leaving the team," he said. She clasped her hands together and didn't respond. "Don't do that. If we played ten matches, you'd win the next nine, I'm certain," Harry said with painful honesty.

She looked up, her white brow furrowed. Harry wondered if she were part something other than human, or just albino. "What year are you?" he asked.

"Third," she said.

"You have all those years of Quidditch ahead," Harry said, sounding a little jealous, which at one level he was. "You're very good now. Even just another year is going to make you completely unbeatable." He could see the impact of his words in her eyes. It made him a little nervous to think he had that much sway.

Her eyes moved over him at that. "You think I *am* good enough to play?" she asked slowly.

"Are you kidding? You are the optimal seeker and you have a killer broom. You just need a little more playing experience. Some things you can't pick up on the practice pitch. Don't quit because you lost to me," Harry insisted. "I'd feel really awful if you did that."

She looked stunned by that.

"I gave that match everything I had and it was essentially a tie. And you didn't end up in the hospital wing overnight, so in essence, you won." When she didn't reply, he went on, "Learning to lose and keep going is an essential skill in everything--you'll set a bad precedent for yourself if you give up this easily now."

"I let my team down," she said quietly. "Everyone else was playing really well."

"Hey, they want to put up another seeker against you, let them try. I can't imagine they have another one better than you."

She went thoughtful at that. "Hm," she breathed.

Harry stood up and Suze nodded a goodbye. She looked like she was going to sit there for a while longer, thinking.

* * *

"Are you brewing in the dungeon today?" Harry asked his guardian the next Sunday as he stood just inside the office door.

"No," Snape replied, "the stocks are set until next term."

"Oh," Harry said, a little disappointed. He wandered around the office a bit, pulling down a book about the history of Dementors.

A knock sounded on the door and Malfoy stepped in. "Professor, I have--" he stopped upon seeing Harry. "Figures you'd be here." To Snape he said, "I have my extra credit essay," he said, handing over a scroll. "For what it is worth," he added darkly.

Snape unrolled it and glanced at it. "If it makes you feel any better, Mr. Malfoy, I will inform you that I am grading Mr. Potter twice as hard as yourself, or any of the other students."

"What?" Harry blurted.

Malfoy laughed at him, got control of himself, and then laughed again as he departed. The laughter echoed in the hallway. Harry shoved the book he held back onto the shelf. Dully, he said, "I'd better get back to revising."

* * *

Harry sat in the common room reading his Potions notes. He was bored with it, with all studying, really. His eyes kept getting dragged back to the flames in the hearth which, despite being pretty ordinary, seemed much more interesting than bone growth potions.

Hermione dropped into the chair across from him. "You aren't waiting until the last minute again, are you?"

"What?" Harry asked her.

She gave him a disapproving look, not unlike the one usually reserved for Ron. "The Christmas Ball, Harry," she said as though he were a little slow.

"Headmistress just announced it two days ago. I have two weeks," Harry retorted. At her raised brow, he frowned.

"Okay, I get your point."

More quietly, she said, "Whom are you going to ask?"

Harry laughed painfully. "I have no idea."

"Whom would you like to?"

"Tonks," Harry returned without thinking.

Hermione took that in. "Are you serious?" At Harry's shrug, she said, "She's a little old for you; she must be twenty-three, twenty-four."

"I wasn't serious about inviting her--you just asked me who I'd like to ask," Harry retorted.

"Oh," Hermione murmured, looking a bit parentish in her concern.

Harry frowned more deeply. "I hate these things," he said darkly, accepting the truth of it as he did so. At her sad look, he explained, "There isn't a girl in this school I can connect with."

"That's not true, Harry," she said, sounding a little offended. "I understand you." After a pause she added, "Ginny does too."

"She's going with Dean."

Very quietly, Hermione said, "I think she'd rather go with you."

"I'm not getting into that," Harry insisted firmly.

Hermione sat back, "Let's see. Seventh Year girls," she murmured as she tapped her finger on the chair arm. She mumbled off a few names thoughtfully. Eventually she frowned. "How about Sixth Years?" At Harry's shrug, she thought some more. "Mirna isn't too bad. A Ravenclaw. And she just broke up with someone so she is . . . probably not the best bet."

* * *

Harry stepped into Snape's office and dropped into the visitor's chair with a huff. "Can I borrow Candy for the ball?" he asked in frustration.

Snape eyed him oddly. "You aren't serious--are you?"

"McGonagall insists I have a partner, if not a date." More angrily, Harry said, "This Ball is apparently a bit of a P.R. thing. The press has been invited as well to show, quote, how much things have returned to normal here."

"Harry," Snape said sharply. "You aren't being singled out and used, as you seem to be implying." Harry looked away at that, still fuming. Snape said stiffly, "Step out into the hallway there." He gestured with his hand. "And ask the next girl who comes along. She will most certainly say, 'yes'."

Harry dropped his gaze to the floor and flushed.

"What is the problem?" Snape asked harshly.

"I don't know," Harry mumbled.

"It is one ball, Potter. Not a commitment. Just a party. I think you are taking it too seriously. You are the single most famous individual in this school. Half the girls who already have dates would drop them if asked to go by you."

"I don't want to do that," Harry said stridently. He wondered fleetingly what Cho was doing now. Her last letter was months ago, she was probably busy. Harry asked, "You don't think McGonagall is using me?"

"I should hope not. If you feel that to be true, you should most certainly discuss it with her, as I am certain she would not want you believing it." Snape sounded as though his anger had solidified somehow.

Feeling worse than he did before coming here, Harry stood up to stalk out.

"Harry," Snape said in a less harsh tone. "I don't mean to be . . . unsympathetic to what you clearly believe is a dilemma, but you are making much too much out of this." At Harry's frown, he went on. "Pick a girl. Ask her. And you will be finished with it. There are literally hundreds of girls in this school, surely one of them will suffice for one evening."

Harry could hear in his tone that Snape truly was unsympathetic, but Harry wasn't looking for sympathy, he didn't think, just a way out. With a frown at the heat of anger that still burned in his chest, Harry departed.



Chapter 26 -- The Christmas Ball

Harry studied in the library, in the far corner, mostly to avoid Hermione and anyone else who might see fit to remind him he needed a date. He had ten days; that was plenty of time. The previous night he had seriously considered owling Cho, but upon reviewing her last two letters, decided that she had dropped hints of an engagement that he had not picked up on before. He had also looked for Mirna at dinner last night and thought she looked down and teary-eyed, which reminded him of Cho in a bad way.

The whole thing made him angry with McGonagall again. He found himself wanting somewhat to get even.

He sat with his back to the corner, blocked in nicely by shelving and a plant. He was feeling sullen toward Snape and McGonagall, and maybe even Hermione and Ron. His Transfiguration text was not holding his attention. Even his usual method of forcing his attention on a subject, that of imagining himself needing some skill or knowledge as an Auror, wasn't working right now.

A group of students went by, talking in low tones about Quidditch. Harry recognized one of the tall, bulky Slytherin Beaters over the low shelf in front of him. Wereporridge was his name. Harry wondered that he could actually read. Then he heard a familiar high-pitched voice, lilting a bit so as to not sound too loud in the library.

Harry's brow went up as the seed of an idea germinated. What if their little Gryffindor hero took a Slytherin to the ball? he wondered. She most likely wasn't going already since third-years couldn't unless invited by an older student. The group sat down at a table, talking over a book. Harry tried to hear what they were saying, but couldn't.

Thinking that he would love to get this over with, Harry stood up and went over to them. Wereporridge gave him a very challenging look as Harry approached. "Can I talk to you for just a moment?" Harry asked Suze.

Wereporridge stood up at that. "What about?" he asked Harry as he towered over him.

"I suppose if I told you it wasn't any of your business, you probably wouldn't go for that," Harry sighed.

"You would suppose correctly," the other boy replied in a low voice.

Harry glanced at the other three; they looked a little alarmed by their fellow's behavior. If he were actually going to take her to the ball, he would have to be willing to have them know it. "I want to ask Suze to the ball," Harry explained to Wereporridge.

"You what?" One of the others asked in disbelief.

Wereporridge pushed his finger painfully into Harry's chest. "Why in the world would she go with a loser Gryffindor?" Harry glanced at Suze--she looked stunned and not much else. Wereporridge went on, shoving Harry with his hand now. "We don't mix with non-Slytherins, get away."

Peeved a little, Harry said, "I am the adopted son of your Head of House, you know."

Wereporridge blinked at that and looked a little concerned as he considered it. Harry ignored him and turned back to Suze. "Uh," Harry said, suddenly not sure the best way to proceed. "Think about it, I guess," he said to her still-stunned gaze. "Let me know."

As he walked back to his corner and picked up his books, he could hear their table whispering avidly. On his way out, he gave Suze a casual smile. At the door to the library he considered going back to the common room. At least if Hermione asked him if he had asked anyone, he could say he had.

In the corridor Suze caught up with him. "You weren't just teasing in there?" she asked.

"No," Harry answered stridently. "Why would I do that?"

"It wasn't just some Gryffindor practical joke?" she asked next.

Harry stared at her pale eyes, thinking that Snape had no clue how hard this was. His other backup plan, of pretending to invite someone from outside the school and then falling deathly ill the night of the ball from a potion he could cook up, was seeming better all the time. "No," Harry replied, a little frustrated. Feeling like he should explain, he said, "I thought we'd have something to talk about. I discovered at the last ball, that matters more than I expected it to." It occurred to Harry then that she hadn't been in school during the Tri-Wizard Tournament. That, Merlin forbid, she might have learned he won it from a chocolate frog card.

He shrugged. "I really am asking you. And it is up to you," he restated.

Her eyes darted around the walls a moment. As though thinking aloud, she said, "I don't get to go otherwise and it sounds like fun. They don't hold them very often." She put her pale hands on her hips. "Why are you inviting me?" she asked curiously.

"I'll be honest with you," Harry said. "I have to invite someone. You are the first person I've asked because you are the first person who came to mind who isn't already dating someone, or who wouldn't be too giggly to spend an evening with."

She studied him long moment. "You are really Professor Snape's son?"

"Yes."

"That is so odd," she breathed. "All right-"

Harry held up his hand and interrupted her. "I feel compelled to warn you," he said. "The press are going to be there, since this ball is partly a show for the outside world." Her eyes narrowed at that. "So if you don't like that kind of attention, you aren't going to like going."

"Clearly, you do," she observed sarcastically.

Harry laughed. "I hate this whole thing. I'm trying to make the best of it," he rambled.

"You are telling me that the press are going to be taking pictures at the ball and that my mum and dad might pick up the *Prophet* at breakfast and see the two of us on the front page?" A strange crooked smile had formed on her face.

"If you view it that way, then you can probably survive the evening."

"Sounds like fun," she said earnestly.

"Oh, good," Harry breathed in relief. "Professor Snape thought I was pathetic for having such a difficult time finding a date. He was kind of angry even, although I shouldn't have asked to borrow his girlfriend."

"You what!" she blurted in shock.

"That probably *was* a mistake," Harry confirmed thoughtfully.

Suze doubled over laughing, then made herself stop with effort and dabbed her eyes, still chuckling occasionally. "I'll see you the night of the ball, then."

"I'll meet in you in the Entrance Hall at the bottom of the staircase," Harry said.

"Til then," she said with an unfading smile.

* * *

Hermione actually held off on saying anything until four days before the ball. She wouldn't have needed to say *anything* if she had been able to correctly interpret the odd looks the Slytherins were always giving Harry as he and his friends went about their classes.

Examinations were starting in two days and he was panicking over his new understanding of the higher standard he had been put under in most of his subjects. He was buried in a textbook when she came over and leaned on the arms of the chair and put her nose close to his.

"I have a date," Harry said to her, cutting off her question.

"Who?" she asked, sounding like she might not believe him. Harry noticed others nearby stopping to listen to the answer.

"You'll see," Harry replied. "No one you know."

"Someone outside the school?"

"No. We have a lot in common. She thinks posing for the press will be fun, so I think I'll actually survive the evening."

Hermione breathed out loudly. "Well, that's good. Glad to hear it. I'm curious as Crookshanks, but I deserve the torture of not knowing, I think." She went back to studying with Ron and Neville.

* * *

Hermione wasn't the only one checking up on Harry. McGonagall called him up to her office the night before examinations started. When he opened the door, she immediately put down her quill and closed the large book she had been writing in. "Mr. Potter, come in," she invited.

Harry closed the door and stood before the desk. The room didn't look that different since she had taken over from Dumbledore. There were still a few of those mysterious balanced contraptions around, but the biggest difference was the shelves were cleared and held just a few rows of books and some glass sculptures.

"Did you find a partner for the ball?" she asked blatantly.

"Yes," Harry replied flatly.

"Good," she smiled. "Now you are going to be opening the ball--"

"Just me and my date?" Harry blurted.

She gave him a disapproving look. "You and the Head Boy and Girl. So three couples. We are opening with a waltz," she started, looking like maybe she was already at the ball in her mind. At Harry's alarmed expression, she returned to the present and said. "You don't know how to dance, do you, Harry?"

"No, Professor," Harry admitted, expecting her to change her mind about the whole plan.

She stood up. "You need to learn then," she said resolutely.

Harry dropped his head and said with the barest hint of a whine, "And I thought I was past all the things I was going to have to get over at this school."

When he looked up, she looked displeased. "This is one of the normal teenage things, Mr. Potter, getting over the awkwardness of asking a pretty girl to dance and then managing a reasonable facsimile of actually dancing with her. Lifelong torment by a powerful dark wizard bent on killing you is not a normal teenage thing to have to get over. You should be basking in this opportunity to be a normal young man for once."

She pulled out her wand and tapped the sculpture of a swan behind her. It began spinning and playing a song like a music box, although it sounded much better than a Muggle one. When she stepped around the desk and stood before him, Harry gave in, mostly because he was afraid he had offended her with his comment, which he really hadn't meant to do.

She took his hands, placed them, and then counted to the music. On the third round of counting, she stepped backward, pulling him with her. After four bars he finally had a vague hang of it. After ten he thought it was actually pretty easy. They began turning as the music continued. "Around the dance floor counter clockwise. Got it?"

Harry nodded, forcing himself to not look at his feet.

"You're a natural, Harry," she said. Then she laughed lightly at his expression of disbelief. She finally released him and stepped back to the swan. "One more. My favorite is swing."

* * *

End of term examinations left Harry a wreck, but he was hopeful that he had done all right. Everyone else, even Hermione, seemed strung out by them, so at least he was in good company.

The evening of the ball was the evening before everyone left for holiday. After his last examination, he pulled out his dress robes and took them to Hermione for a quick flattening charm, which she did before handing them back.

"I'd tell you to do it yourself, but you look so pathetic," she said. "I hope your date realizes how determined you are to not have a good time," she said evenly.

"I told her I hated the whole notion of it, so 'yes'," Harry replied in a put-off tone.

"My goodness," Hermione said. "You aren't taking a Slytherin are you?" she teased him.

Harry gave her a very sly grin.

"Ah," she breathed in audibly. "Harry!" She hit him on the arm. "No wonder no one knows who it is. I can't believe you."

"Hey, it wasn't easy. I had to argue that I was an honorary Slytherin because of Severus to even get a chance to ask."

"I can imagine. They are pretty insular when it comes to dating. And everything else." She held the robes up against him. "Put those on and come back down," she commanded him. Others were congregating in the common room as well, getting hair styled and exchanging jewelry and scarves.

Harry slipped back up to the dormitory and did so. When he came back down, she looked him over appraisingly, tugging on the shoulders and the cuffs. "Okay. Just fits. You look good. Although . . . you might try to do something with your hair," she said critically.

"I was," Harry retorted, a little offended. He went back up to the dormitory for his kit. He espied his watch on the side table and slipped it into his pocket. In the toilet it was crowded with boys all trying to improve their appearance. Harry wetted his hair down and combed it repeatedly until it dried. It looked a little better as a result. He combed it carefully one more time when he got a chance at the mirror.

"Why are you always hiding your scar under your fringe?" Dean asked him from the next sink over.

Harry stared at his friend in the mirror. "Cause I don't like to see it, so I don't expect anyone else to," Harry replied. He combed his hair apart, revealing it completely. "It's the first thing everyone looks at when they meet me, like there's no more to me than that." He squinted and leaned into the mirror, rubbing the jagged scar with his finger. Mystified, he whispered, "I think it's fading."

Half the boys in the room stopped what they were doing and turned to him.

"Do you think so?" Harry asked Dean, leaning toward his friend.

"Maybe," Dean answered. "It looks flatter, maybe. Not so carved into your skin like it used to. Though I have to admit, I don't pay that much attention to it."

As Harry turned back to the mirror to comb his fringe forward again, Dean said, "Who are you going with tonight?"

"You'll see," Harry breathed airily, glad to have something else to think about.

Right on time, Harry reached the top of the staircase. As he had walked to the Entrance Hall, he had passed many transformed female classmates and had really started to wonder, and worry a bit, what Suze was going to look like. His date for the evening stood by the curl in the railing at the bottom of the steps, looking pretty much herself except for the stylish slate grey robes she wore that made her skin look much warmer than normal. She had a sparkling tie loose in her long white hair.

As Harry considered the crowd from his high perch, he noticed Professor Snape eyeing Suze and starting through the crowd toward her. Harry hesitated, curious. Snape asked her something and she gestured as she replied. Harry headed down to them, thinking Snape might be challenging her being there as a Third-Year.

"Severus," Harry said in greeting. "Suze." He offered her his arm. As he did so he received such a priceless look of surprise from Snape, he almost broke out laughing. "I'll see you inside, sir," Harry said evenly with a broad grin.

The Great Hall was laid out with round tables each with a floating horizontal wreath full of candles. Harry led Suze to the center of the floor where they stopped to admire the decorations. Monstrous pine trees sparkled from each corner, fairies flickering among their branches carrying little colored lanterns.

McGonagall stepped up to them. "Mr. Potter," she said. Her eyes flicked down to Suze. "Ms. Zepher," she said without missing a beat. Harry was a little disappointed in her reaction. "You are at the head table there," she pointed at the large oval table at the front of the hall where the platform normally sat but had been removed.

As the headmistress stepped away, Suze said, "Cool."

Harry turned to her and gauged that she was taller than his shoulder, which was higher than he remembered. "Did you use a height charm or potion or something?" Harry asked.

She pulled at the knee of her robe and stuck out her left foot to reveal matching glittery shoes with thick, thick soles--at least five inches thick. They must be heavy. "You are walking really well in those," Harry commented. "But you didn't have to wear them." When she looked up at him curiously, he went on, "It will make it easier to dance, but you shouldn't worry about being yourself."

She blinked at that, apparently trying to take it in. Harry shrugged and led the way to the head table where Hermione and Ron were already standing, watching them in surprise. Ron gaped at them, but Hermione held out her hand to Suze and introduced herself. Hermione was dressed in blazing red with long red gloves that stretched above her elbows.

"That's a shy outfit," Harry said.

Ron gave him a look of dismay and quickly looked away to avoid having it be seen by their mutual friend. "I've decided red is my favorite color," Hermione said happily.

Justin and Lavender stepped over. "Is she with you?" Justin asked of Suze. At Harry's nod, he asked, "Aren't you the Slytherin Seeker?"

"Yes," Suze replied in a voice that said, *if you are making something of it, be prepared*.

"Oh," Justin said, glancing oddly at Harry who smiled sweetly in return.

They moved behind their table as the hall began to fill. The headmistress and the four Heads of House also joined the head table. Harry took a seat near the middle, was actually herded there by the headmistress. As he held the chair out for Suze, he received another sharp look from Snape. Ignoring it, Harry sat down and watched the amassed students arranging their seating. Finally, when everyone was seated and the sound of movement quieted, Professor McGonagall leaned over to the students at the table and said, "Everyone ready?" At the resulting general nodding and shrugging, she stood up and clinked her goblet for attention.

"Welcome. I hope everyone enjoys this evening as much as I intend to. After the feast there will be a quintet providing music for dancing. I do hope you all have a wonderful holiday and return to us whole and safe in the new year. But for now, let's eat."

Harry picked up the menu on his plate and said, "Duck." A plate of duck, potatoes and little carrots materialized before him. Suze shifted in her seat and peered at the menu before ordering lamb. When it arrived, he gave her a smile, which he was glad to see made her relax.

During the long dinner, Harry lost his date to Ron when his friend asked Suze which Quidditch team she followed and she replied Falmouth. What ensued was a frighteningly detailed discussion of defense tactics. Harry shared an amusingly dismayed look with Hermione over their dates' bent heads and gesturing fingers.

Harry turned instead to the headmistress who looked as though she was enjoying her job of presiding. "Professor," Harry said.

"Mr. Potter," she returned. "Having a good time?"

"Mostly it's been dinner," Harry pointed out as a *Prophet* photographer moved in and took a few photographs. Harry ignored him.

"Ah, just wait," she said. "I love balls. The music. The movement of the couples on the floor."

"I got that sense, ma'am," Harry said in a slightly suffering tone.

She looked out over the murmuring crowd and sighed. "I think I'm going to miss you when you are gone, Harry."

Harry wondered at that comment, since he was trying to be a bit difficult. "I'm not going far."

Her lips twitched. "I suppose not."

Harry turned back to Suze. She said, "I'm sorry, I should be talking to you, not your friend."

"That's okay. Catching the headmistress after . . ." Harry leaned forward to peek into McGonagall's goblet. " . . . a bit of mead is always an interesting experience."

Suze giggled, but not in an annoying way. Their plates vanished and the lights dimmed except for the fairy lights that hung in a square around the area designated for dancing.

McGonagall stood with a sweeping motion of her arm. The students at the head table stood as well when they noticed. "Mr. Potter," McGonagall said, inviting him to lead. Snape gave them a dark look as they collected themselves. Harry held his arm out to Suze, who accepted it with high decorum. He gave Snape a look back that he hoped said, *you said to ask anyone*. The look he received in answer he could have interpreted as, *don't try anything*, but Harry couldn't imagine that was what it meant.

They stepped off the platform, passing the quintet of string musicians who now sat on a platform beside the dance floor. As he watched Ron positioning his arms with Hermione, he wondered where they had learned to dance.

"I hope you can dance," Harry said. "I just learned two days ago."

"My mum sent me to ballet for five years. Thought it would make me grow taller," she replied.

The music started and Harry managed to remember the correct foot to start with. After that it flowed smoothly. "You're not bad," she commented.

Harry watched the photographer as he crouched to take a photo of Justin and Lavender. "I hate to admit it, but the headmistress had to teach me," Harry confessed.

Suze grinned. The photographer came over to them. Harry danced without turning until he finished. Suze smiled nicely for each shot. In comparison, Harry wondered if he would look glum.

At the end of the first piece, McGonagall swept past. "Careful, my boy, you look like you might be having fun."

"So what are you doing after Hogwarts?" Suze asked when the headmistress was out of range.

"I'm going to try to get into the Auror's program," Harry said. "If that doesn't work, I'm not sure." The next song started up and more couples came onto the floor. "How about you?"

"Me?" she asked in surprise. "I'd love to play Quidditch. My mum is an actuary, and my dad is a spell developer. They aren't so keen on sports as a profession."

"Your dad's a what?" Harry asked. "I've never heard of that. Who does he work for?"

"A publisher of spell books called Yuring Press. The second largest. He also does research to figure out old spells that have been forgotten. He goes to estate sales of old families and looks for forgotten books or even notebooks and diaries. He found two rare books at the Black estate, for example. Kept him busy for over a year."

Harry stopped dead at that.

"What is it?" she asked in alarm.

Harry shook his head and found the pace of the song again with his feet. "Nothing. Just remembering. That's not usually a good thing for me," he quipped darkly.

As Suze glanced over her shoulder at the head table, she asked in concern, "Do you think Professor Snape is upset with me?"

"No, why would he be?"

"I'm worried about that look he gave us earlier," she said. She really did sound worried, making Harry realize that even a student with two normal parents could crave approval from another adult.

"That look was for me. Trust me," he said reassuringly.

After that song, they sat back at the head table. The teachers were there, talking amongst themselves. Rita Skeeter stepped over and crouched between Harry's and Suze's chairs. "Hello, Harry," she said in a falsely friendly tone.

"Ms. Skeeter."

"And who is your lovely date?"

"This is Suze Zepher," Harry said. Suze held out her hand to Skeeter, who shook it while appraising the girl. "Suze is Seeker on the Slytherin team. She is going to be a professional Quidditch player," Harry provided. Skeeter grudgingly jotted that down. "Maybe ask her who she is hoping to play for," Harry said levelly. Suze's eyes went wide.

"What do I get in return?" Skeeter asked quietly, glancing at the teachers who were keeping a casual-appearing eye on the proceedings. She watched Harry think that over. "Do you have anything right now I might want?" she asked a little snidely.

"Lots. Nothing I want to give up. Give me a topic."

"The last set of D.E. that were caught. That seemed fishy. The releases and interviews from the Ministry didn't jib."

"I'll anonymously confirm that was fishy," Harry returned quietly.

"Off the record?" she prompted.

"I don't want you to print the truth," Harry stated calmly.

"So much for inheriting Dumbledore's mantle," she said sarcastically.

"I wouldn't want it anyway," Harry came back.

"So of the five, three were killed. Tell me how."

Harry turned a bit so he was facing her better in case the teachers could read lips. "Rookwood fell down the stairs after a binding curse and broke his neck. Mulciber got in the way of Malfoy's Killing Curse. Pettigrew killed himself when the Aurors showed up. He'd hoped it would be me." Harry knew that only the last was official.

"Okay," Skeeter said. "Ms. Zepher, who would you like to play for?" she asked, back to her friendly tone.

Suze's jaw fell open and she pulled it closed again when Harry winked at her. "Falmouth. They are my favorite team. I like their defensive strategies."

Skeeter jotted that down. "I do something for you, Potter. . . you end up owing me more."

"I realize that," Harry said blandly. "A delay would be nice."

"I'm good at what I do," Skeeter snapped at him as she closed her notebook the quill pinched between the pages.

When she was gone, Suze started to speak. Harry stood and invited her back out on the dance floor where they could talk out of range of prying ears. "Thanks for that," she said. "How did you know all that?"

"Because the D.E. were all after me when they were caught. The binding curse was mine and I ducked under Mulciber to avoid Lucius Malfoy's Avada Kedavra."

She gaped. "You say that so calmly. Guess you could be an Auror."

"I don't know what else I'd do."

They danced another song. Harry noticed Hermione looked like she was thinking of switching partners. *Next one*, he mouthed at her. She nodded.

"So you haven't asked the obvious question," Suze said a little put-upon.

"What would that be?"

She gave him a dark look. "Isn't it obvious?" she asked in annoyance. "Why I look this way?"

"It's just the way you are," Harry said. From anyone else that might have sounded stupid. She blinked at him as though assessing that. "Is it a wizard thing?" Harry asked.

"Of course."

"You have to understand--I was raised a Muggle," he explained.

"Really?" she asked. At his nod, she said, "Then maybe you don't know what Triptendora is." He shook his head. She went on, "It is also called Wizard Measles. It is easy to treat but if you get it as an infant and it isn't treated in time . . . you end up with no color and very short."

After a moment, Harry said, "So your parents weren't very smart, I guess."

"That's just it--they're very smart. I don't know what their problem was," she said sharply.

"They mean well most of the time?"

"They mean well all of the time. Makes me crazy. They are perfectionists like you wouldn't believe."

They passed the head table in silence. After passing the quintet, Harry said. "You probably remind them of their failure. Through no fault of your own," he added quickly. "That would make them hard to live with I can imagine."

"I hadn't thought of that." She blinked at him in surprise. After a pause, she asked, "What do I do about it?"

He shrugged. "Live with it. Tolerate their craziness." At her doubtful look, he said, "I was raised by my magic-hating aunt and uncle who lied about how my parents died, kept me locked in a broom cupboard until I was eleven, and barely fed me enough to stay alive. That's why I am small for my age."

"You're serious, aren't you?" she asked warily.

With long-suffering humor, he said, "Why is it when I tell people about myself, they assume I'm making it up?"

She giggled then apologized for it.

Harry said, "Well-meaning would go a long way in my view of parenting."

The evening ended with one last waltz. Ginny had cut in on his dancing with Padma the song before. Harry insisted they both switch back to their original partners for it. Suze still seemed as chipper as when the evening had started. Harry wondered at that--he was exhausted. "Hope you had an okay time," he said, stifling a yawn.

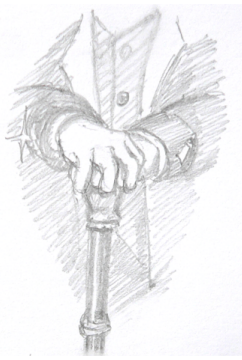
"I did. I hope they have a few more of these while I'm in school."

"Tell McGonagall. She loves them too."

"Cool."

As the song ended, Harry bent down and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Thanks for coming with me."

She ducked her head and giggled. "Thanks for the invitation," she returned with a grin.



Chapter 27 -- Holiday Blues

The train left Hogsmeade right on schedule the next morning. Harry had gone down to the platform with the rest of the students and he waved Ron and Hermione off as the train chugged away. They both shouted, "Merry Christmas!" to him out the window, making Harry realize that Ron must have finally accepted things at some point without Harry noticing.

Hogsmeade lay quiet as Harry wandered up the street to Puddifoots where he had tea and a scone. Six months to go, he thought. He envied Suze her upcoming years here. His friends would think he was a nutter for that; they were all so eager to leave. But he had missed a lot over the last six years, he was beginning to realize. Being tormented by Voldemort had cheated him out of things, like getting to know most of his classmates. Getting through a year without something suspicious and tragic happening had been impossible and had left him with only stolen moments of enjoyment.

Harry paid for the tea and stepped back out into the crisp air. He strolled slowly back to the castle through a light dusting of snow. The Entrance Hall and the Great Hall were empty and echoing too much, so Harry wandered up to the Defense office in search of company. The door was open and Snape was packing books from the shelf behind his desk into a small trunk.

Snape glanced up at him and said, "I am caught up with marking, so we can leave shortly."

Harry was looking forward to Christmas with mixed expectations. "Whenever you're ready."

"You appear to have survived the ball," Snape commented as he compared the spines of two books.

"It was all right," Harry said as he leaned casually against the doorframe. In the window snow lay in little ridges on the sash, haloed by ice crystals.

Snape raised his dark eyes from the books. "Interesting choice of date."

Harry chewed his lip. "You did say . . ."

"Yes, I did. It was unexpected, nonetheless, but you seem to have handled it appropriately, in the end."

Harry crossed his arms and leaned harder on the doorframe. "Why wouldn't I have?" he asked, sensing that he was wading into something murky.

Snape selected one of the books in his hands for the trunk. "As you yourself said: I do look out for my students," he stated.

Something inside of Harry shifted and he didn't like the feel of it. He tried to pin down the squirming thing. "As opposed to me," he heard himself say.

Snape set the book he had just pulled out onto the desk. His eyes narrowed as his head tilted to the side. "In this, I do not expect you to need it."

Harry considered that, before he pushed himself straight. He didn't feel like arguing over something he wasn't clear on himself. "Let me know when you're ready. I'll be in the tower," he said before walking away.

* * *

The next morning in the Zepher household, Suze rubbed her eyes and sat down to breakfast. Her mother had woken her early to eat with them. Even though it was not a work day, both her parents were dressed well and sitting properly, her mother with her pinky extended as she gripped her teacup.

"How did your examinations go?" her father asked, sounding not too confident of the answer.

"All right," Suze replied, feeling defiant but working hard to keep it out of her voice.

"Hm," her father said in a "we'll see" kind of way.

Suze frowned and buttered her toast rather than get into anything. They acted like she didn't try at all.

"Wurther's called a meeting for this afternoon," her mother announced to her father from behind the orange-tinted *Financial Times*. "I'll pick up your robes on the way back."

Suze wondered if her parents had ever been interesting people who went to balls. She propped her chin on her hand and remembered yesterday evening while munching her toast. It seemed even more fun in retrospect than it had at the time, and Harry had been much nicer than she had imagined. She sighed a bit as she cracked her egg with her butter knife. They had rotated around the Hall so many times she could still feel the movement this morning.

Hope I can live down being at the ball with a Gryffindor, Suze had commented when she had felt a little more at ease.

I'll tell you a secret, Harry had said. *The Sorting Hat tried to put me in Slytherin, but I made it change its mind*.

She had laughed very hard at that notion, and without thinking had said, *You are the very picture of Gryffindor. I hear they're going to replace the lion with your face*. This was a rephrasing of a snide Slytherin comment and she had immediately wished to retract it.

He had made a noise as though she had mortally wounded him, then laughed. *Merlin, I hope not*, he had said, not angry at all.

"Are your school supplies all set?" her mother asked sternly, interrupting her pleasant reverie. "Make a list if you need anything. I'll get things today but I don't want to have to go out again before the holidays." Her tone indicated impatience held over from past times when Suze had forgotten things.

Suze got up and made the list right then. She bit her tongue as she handed it over, and her mother took it without comment, wearing a serious expression. By the time Suze returned to it, her egg was cold. She ate it anyway.

A scratching at the window announced the post owl, so her mother pointed her wand over her shoulder to open it. The owl dropped the paper, picked up a sickle in its beak from a small bowl on the table, and flew off again. The window closed itself after the owl left.

Suze watched, barely breathing, as her father unrolled the *Prophet*. He read the headlines and then flipped it to unfold it. On the front page was a photo from the ball. It showed Harry on the left talking to the headmistress as Professors Snape and Sprout looked on with polite attentiveness. She was cut off; not even a hint of sleeve showing. Suze sighed as she squinted to read the headline and the first part of the article before the paper moved. It was boring stuff about how things were completely normal at Hogwarts. Or as normal as they ever were, as McGonagall was quoted. Pages rustled as her parents read. Suze heated a piece of toast from the bread basket with her wand and buttered it.

Being a professional Quidditch player sounds like fun, Harry had said.

I don't know what else I would do, she had returned, echoing his earlier comment.

Just keep getting a little better all the time. You don't have far to go from what I can see. She replayed that in her mind a few times, pinning dangerous hope on it--hope that would not have come from anyone else's opinion.

Her father's confused voice said, "Isn't this you?" He folded the paper around, then folded it in half again before laying it on the table for her to see. Down the right-hand column was a rather nice picture of the two of them dancing. They were swaying to the music and Harry was talking silently. "Isn't that Harry Potter?" her father asked in near utter confusion.

"Yeah," Suze replied as casually as possible. "Harry asked me to the ball," she stated as though it happened everyday.

Her mum put the *Times* down and leaned over to look. She grabbed up the paper in a sudden motion and read out the caption, "*Harry Potter and Suze Zepher enjoying the Hogwarts Christmas Ball.* I didn't know you knew Harry Potter," she said in surprise.

Suze shrugged. "He's the Gryffindor Seeker."

"We know that," her father said. "But isn't he a Seventh-Year?"

"We just went as friends, Dad," she said, borrowing one of their tones.

"I didn't mean that," he said, "I'm just surprised you got to know him that well."

"We had a good match--we talked about it afterwards. That's how we got to know each other," she felt compelled to explain. They rarely asked her about her friends or her playing, even though they seemed to follow the school's Quidditch matches rather closely.

"Slytherin lost that match," her father pointed out.

A little miffed, she said, "Yes, but Potter ended up in the hospital wing overnight."

"You put Harry Potter in the dispensary?" her mother asked, appalled.

"One of the Beaters did. Potter got knocked into a tower by a Bludger and despite bleeding like crazy, he wouldn't quit. He passed out from lack of blood right after catching the Snitch and fell about sixteen feet." In a darkly determined voice, she added, "I was so close to beating him to it."

Her parents appeared startled by this speech.

"You should come to the matches more often," Suze commented levelly.

"All right. From now on we'll try to do that," her mother said. Suze couldn't tell if she were really excited by the notion or thought it would make it easier to keep tabs on their daughter.

* * *

Diagon Alley was decorated up for Christmas: wreaths with twinkling miniature lanterns hung on each lamp post, house-elves in green and red costume tossed glittering dust on passers-by. A dusting of snow lightened the scene and neatly covered the grime.

Harry went to Gringott's first. As he waited behind a hunchback, a family with four misbehaving small children, and a hag, for a goblin to take him to his vault, he tried to estimate what his list was going to cost. It was at least fifty or sixty

galleons, he thought. Once he got to his vault, this seemed like an extravagant amount given his dwindling piles of coins. But he reassured himself with the thought that even after he filled his sack, he would still make it through the school year.

Back out on the road, Harry headed first for the Quidditch supply store. He had only yesterday thought of what to get Ron, and if it were going to work out, he would have to act fast as there were only seven days until Christmas. At the shop he purchased an authentic Chudley Canons cloak, cringing a bit at that much orange fabric in a single garment. The stitching on the logo was nice, though, unlike the cheap versions he had sometimes seen.

He folded it up tightly and took it immediately to the Post. He had already written the letter out, which he took out to reread as he waited in queue. The letter was basically a plea for the team to autograph the cloak. Harry had not missed the look Ron had given the Bulgarian bat at Harry's birthday party. He hoped his own personal request would be enough to get the cloak back signed in time for gift-giving. He suspected with chagrin that it would be, and felt a little uneasy about doing this at all, but he had not thought of anything better and was desperate.

With the cloak owed off to the team captain, Harry went back down to the bookstore. He perused the recent arrivals, looking for anything Hermione or Snape might appreciate. He pushed through the crowd to move around the table and picked up a new book on advanced counter curses and flipped it open to read a few random pages. Beyond the book, his eye was caught by the sight of a silver-tipped cane tapping along the floor as someone approached.

Startled a bit, Harry raised his eyes. A greying, portly man in a fine, three-piece suit and satin-lined cloak approached, but unlike Malfoy, this man seemed to need the cane since he kept it close beside his right leg as he walked.

"Hm," the man said as he stopped a polite distance away. "You must be Mr. Potter." His voice was deep and rolling.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied, wondering if he should know this man.

After a pause the man said as though it were a point of information, "I am Alfred Freeland."

Harry froze but recovered quickly and held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, sir," he said honestly.

The man's grey eyes looked Harry over. "You look to be doing well, Mr. Potter."

A witch pushed her way behind Harry, nearly losing her hat. "I'm doing all right, sir," he acknowledged. Then thinking quickly, added, "I did appreciate your offer, sir."

Freeland smiled faintly at that. "I wonder . . . would you be willing to grace my table with your presence, on Boxing Day?"

Harry hesitated only an instant. "I'd be honored, sir."

"I'll have an invitation sent to you then. Do you have a card?"

"No," Harry admitted, laughing lightly at that notion. From his knapsack he pulled out a parchment and never-out quill. He wrote out his address and handed it over.

"Shrewsthorpe," Freeland read from it. "You are very close by, indeed. My estate is in Riverden, just two towns over." He gave Harry a polite smile. "I look forward to your visit," he said and gave Harry a small bow of the head.

"So do I, sir," Harry managed to remember to say.

* * *

Harry carried his haul back to the house and immediately took it to his room. He realized now that he was going to have to get more wrapping paper, but he had a few days to manage that. The evening felt very quiet in comparison to being at Hogwarts or even shopping. The fire in the dining room hearth made the room comfortable as they sat down to dinner.

"One term down," Harry commented, finding himself falling into this countdown.

Snape raised his head and pushed his hair back from one side. "Looking forward to finishing?"

"Yes and no," Harry replied honestly. He felt like he should, since every other student was, but he also resisted the thought of moving on, since it was all he knew.

"How did your examinations go?" Snape asked.

"Pretty good, I think. You haven't finished marking the Defense ones yet?"

"Not quite."

Harry frowned as he reconsidered. "Are you really grading me twice as hard as the other students?"

"Yes."

Flustered, Harry mumbled, "I might not have done so well, then."

A platter of roast mutton appeared, covered in sauce, it smelled wonderful. As he served himself, Harry complained, "Geesh, Greer is doing that too, I know, and the other day I suspected McGonagall of it as well. I think my grades are in trouble."

Snape smiled a little slyly as he accepted the serving spoons when Harry finished with them. Harry shook his head and sighed, prompting Snape to say, "All that matters at this point are your N.E.W.T.s."

"Yeah, I suppose," Harry breathed, not feeling much better about that.

An owl arrived late as they were enjoying a bit of chocolate cake. Harry accepted the creamy white envelope and the aged bird took off again.

"What is that?" Snape asked curiously.

"An invitation to dinner, I expect," Harry said. The card-shaped envelope was addressed to *Harry Potter & Guest*. He tugged the wax seal open and took out the card which had a message written upon it in gold flowing script. Boxing Day dinner at seven o'clock was the summary of its lengthy prose.

Snape was examining the seal on the envelope with a lowered brow. Harry handed him the card as well and retook his seat. "You knew this invitation was coming?" Snape asked.

Harry lifted a shoulder. "I ran into Lord Frelander in Diagon Alley yesterday," he replied casually.

Snape stared at him. "This is a rather highbrow event, Harry."

"So . . . dress robes, you are saying?"

"At the very least."

* * *

A few days later, Harry woke to a surprise breakfast guest. Sitting at the table looking mussed and casual as though she might have spent the night, was Candide. Harry hoped he covered his uncertainty quickly enough as he sat farther down the table than normal, across from an empty chair.

Breakfast arrived and she asked in a friendly tone, "How did your term go?"

"Well enough," Harry replied, grateful that he could occupy himself with eating rather than conversation.

He ate and listened to them talk about everything from Ministry politics to gossip about her officemates. When he finished, Harry rose from the table, picked up his cup of coffee, and mumbled that he wanted to get his holiday assignments out of the way. The pair nodded at him as he departed.

In his room Harry buried himself in his schoolwork, starting with his Potions assignment. At lunchtime he was called down to eat. Harry took his Transfiguration textbook with him. It was his weakest subject, and looking over his essay grades from the previous term made him think McGonagall believed so too. At the table he opened the book before him like a suit of armor. He was aware of Snape's eyes passing over him, but his guardian didn't chastise him for being unsoberly occupied.

During the afternoon, Harry spent an hour or two reading in the window of his room, sitting on his trunk. He found himself hoping the girl in the yellow slicker would walk by, although he couldn't decide whether he would run down and try to introduce himself or not. She would probably be wearing a different coat in the winter, but he thought he would still recognize her.

He didn't need to decide, as she didn't pass by while he was waiting.

Harry did not bring a book down to dinner because he simply could not study any longer. He found Snape and Candide playing a card game with Harry's wizard pack while they waited for Winky to serve. They were drinking something in little metal cups, and Candide was laughing much more than usual.

Dinner materialized. Harry, not feeling particularly hungry, picked at his plate in a desultory fashion. Candide tried gregariously to involve him in the conversation.

"So, Harry," she said, "How much longer do you think the Minister of Magic can ride the popularity he gained when Voldemort was defeated? He's waiting a long time to call an election."

Flatly, Harry replied, "I don't read the political items in the *Prophet*."

In a slightly snide tone, Snape explained, "He doesn't like to read about himself--you must understand."

"Lucky for you," Harry said levelly, "nothing shows up in the *Prophet* about you."

Had Candide not been sitting across from them both, this comment would have garnered a very different reaction. As it was, Snape simply peered down his nose at him, shoulders stiff. Candide said, "There was that nice picture of you dancing with someone the other day. You didn't even see that?"

Harry shook his head.

At the conclusion of the meal, Harry tried to use the excuse of assignments to get away, but Candide urged him strongly to join in some three-person game she wished to play.

"I've never played card games with more than one person," Harry explained in an apologetic way.

"Perhaps it is time you learned," Snape said in one of his more insistent on obedience tones.

Harry retook his seat, trying to not appear too much as though he were giving in. He listened politely to the rules of the game and the random strategy hints she proceeded to impart. After the deal, Harry picked up the nine cards before him and sorted them as instructed.

After several rounds and many corrections he finally had a basic sense of the strategy. He couldn't win a hand, though, but he did manage to prevent Candide from winning one with a lucky play. "Figures you two would gang up," she commented as she collected the cards to redeal.

At ten, when he could reasonably do so, Harry claimed he was too tired to continue and this got him out of a new game that was about to be introduced.

* * *

The following morning, only Snape was in the dining room, having a coffee. Harry sat across from him, glad to have a quiet breakfast. Breakfast failed to appear though, and Harry was forced by boredom to read some of the paper. As he was turning to page two, footsteps sounded behind him and Candide shuffled in, looking in dire need of coffee. Harry froze, then pulled the paper up before him to hide his reaction, which was more severe than expected.

When he had his expression under control, Harry lowered the paper and folded it casually beside his plate. "Good morning," he managed in return to her greeting. Not feeling social enough for this, he ate fast and left for his room.

Harry paced for a minute before pulling out a quill and parchment to write to Hermione. After the basic greetings and hopes that her holiday was going well, he stalled. *Candide has moved in*, he considered writing, but it sounded so odd. *Candide has been visiting*, he wrote instead. Whatever generosity he had felt toward her had dissipated utterly. He wondered at that, reminding himself that he had been determined not to allow it to slip away completely.

I've been learning to play cards, he added. Certainly Snape deserved someone, he thought, remembering the real regret he had expressed when she had broken it off. Snape had used him to make some kind of point with her, but Harry could only guess what the point had been, exactly.

He finished the letter with meaningless chatter, folded it up, and attached it to her present. Hedwig came to the window from the neighbor's pine when Harry opened it. She flew off again, willingly carrying the thick book and light letter.

Harry didn't sleep well that night, which was becoming a trend during this break. He woke several times with bad dreams but did not want to ask for potion, if only because it would mean interrupting both of their sleep, at the least. At worst Snape would want to know what he was dreaming about, and he wanted to keep to himself his queer dreams of being left behind.

* * *

The next afternoon, a Christmas tree appeared in the main hall. Not a large one; one that in fact had the look of the last chicken in the shop, but it was decorated with an array of interesting glittery spells, one of which made the branches themselves glow green intermittently. A few presents were under it already for him from Anita, Dobby, Gretta and Shazor. There was also one for Snape, presumably from Candide, as it was not signed. Harry thought of fetching his gifts, but realized that he had not bought anything for Candide, so he didn't. He had had no notion before that moment that he might need one and didn't, in any event, have any idea what he might get her.

Harry fetched his books instead and went to the library to study until dinner.

"It's really sweet," Candide said in a playful tone, leaning in the doorway of the drawing room where Snape sat making notes from a textbook.

"What is?" he asked in a very doubtful tone.

"Harry's fallen asleep over his book in the library," she said with a grin.

Snape stood suddenly and stalked past her with purpose. At the door to the library he stopped and surveyed the scene. Harry was slumped over the small desk, his head pillowed on what appeared to be his History of Magic textbook. Snape,

with angry motions, stepped in and started to close the French doors, but paused to say, "If you'll excuse us for a moment." He shut the doors on Candide's concerned face.

Snape stepped over to the desk. "Potter," he said sharply. Harry jumped awake and rubbed his eyes. Snape demanded, "You are not sleeping properly?"

Harry frowned but didn't reply. He closed his textbook, the pages had become rippled from the moist heat of his face. Snape said, "Go up to your room. You have two hours before dinner to get a little sleep."

Harry stacked his history book with the others and, scratching his head, left the room. In the hall he encountered Candide, who looked curiously at him. Tired, he turned away mutely and went up the stairs to his room.

In what felt like minutes after he put his head on the pillow, a sharp rap sounded on the door to his room. He assumed it meant dinner and forced himself with effort to sit up.

Dinner was very quiet and even a little tense. Harry waited after finishing his plate for tea to be served. He really needed to spend more time on his assignment for McGonagall. Before the holiday, he had had a notion of rereading the textbook carefully from start to finish, and he had not given up on doing so yet, but he would need some serious tea to even consider working on that this evening.

That night in his room, Harry read Transfiguration until he could not keep his eyes from falling closed at each new sentence. Eyes aching, he put the book aside and turned down the lamp before flopping onto his pillow.

At midnight, in the bedroom at the other end of the balcony, Snape sat up. "I should check on him," he said after exhaling loudly.

Carefully, Candide said, "You were a little harsh with him earlier . . . "

Snape huffed again. "Harry periodically has difficulty sleeping but I only find out when he becomes narcoleptic," he explained impatiently as he pulled on a pair of slippers and a dressing gown.

Harry rolled over when he heard the door latch click open. "Still awake?" Snape asked. When Harry didn't respond, Snape stepped over to the bed and stood beside it. "Are you having nightmares?" he asked factually. When Harry shrugged, Snape said, "Why didn't you say?"

All Harry could think of to do was to shrug again, so he did nothing.

"What is in your nightmares?" Snape asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," Harry replied. After a pause he added, "There aren't any shadows or anything," in a slightly desperate tone. He *really* did not want to talk about it.

Snape stood silently for a while in thought before sitting on the edge of the bed. "You have had a nightmare already tonight?" At Harry's reluctant nod, he said, "What was in this dream?"

"I don't want to say," Harry repeated tiredly. "It's a stupid dream."

"If it is keeping you up for days at a time, it cannot be insignificant," Snape pointed out. "Where were you in the dream?" Snape asked in a soft, demanding tone.

Harry sighed in frustration. He really wanted to be left alone to try to sleep. "In the ocean," he finally replied reluctantly.

"*In* the ocean; doing what?"

"Swimming. Treading water. I've fallen overboard," Harry admitted sadly.

They both sat still for a long moment before Harry continued, "No one notices. No one on the boat notices," he clarified. In his mind he could see the vision from the dream of Snape, Candide and formless others laughing and drinking, unable to hear his calls. He frowned. "It's a stupid dream," he repeated, finally turning to look at his guardian.

Snape eyed him a moment in surprise before bending over to rest his forehead on his palm. His hair fell around his face. "Harry, you are not being pushed aside, or abandoned," he stated forcefully.

"I know that," Harry retorted in a difficult tone. "I said it was dumb," Harry insisted, feeling an ache of uneasiness despite his assertion.

Snape rubbed his eyebrow. "Do you have potion?" he asked.

"I don't want any," Harry said stiffly.

"You wish to continue to fall asleep while studying? Shall we expect you to fall asleep during meals now as well?" Snape asked facetiously.

Stung, Harry rolled away, curling his legs up a bit and ducking his head. He wanted to just tell his guardian to go away, but he could not quite bring himself to do it. He ignored him instead.

Snape sat in silence for a long minute before standing to leave. Back in his room, Candide asked if everything was all right. "He is having nightmares," Snape said. "A not uncommon occurrence with him," he added as he turned the lamp down.

At three in the morning, Snape found himself still lying awake. He rose with cautious movements to check on the boy again. Harry actually seemed to be asleep this time, Snape discovered with relief. Although, the duvet was crooked on the bed, implying that he had not been sleeping undisturbed. Snape moved to straighten it and found that Harry's hand was clutching it. Pulling it free drew a noise of complaint from the sleeping form, so he hesitated straightening it farther. With a start Harry woke up and immediately rolled away again onto his side, tugging the duvet around himself tightly.

At five in the morning, Snape again rose to check on him, strongly compelled to do so. Harry was sitting in the window this time, staring out of a pane that had the frost cleared from it. He was sitting on his trunk, wrapped in the duvet from the bed. The fire burned high in the hearth as though recently fed new wood.

Snape stepped over to him and stared out at the crystallized street light and snowy road. "Is there anything I can do, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. He looked exhausted.

Back in Snape's room, Candide said in a mystified voice, "Checking again?"

"He is being difficult and obstinate," Snape commented.

She rolled over and peered at him in the dim light. "He's seventeen; he's supposed to be." When Snape didn't respond, she said a little impatiently, "Don't you remember being his age?"

"I try not to."

She laughed mirthlessly at that. "Well, that would be normal for his age, believe me. I think you're taking it too seriously."

Snape sat on the edge of the bed and mulled things over in silence. Candide broke into his thoughts by asking in honest curiosity, "Isn't he usually difficult?"

"No," Snape replied, "only when he's distressed." While Candide froze and considered that, Snape added, "Your presence is disturbing him more than I imagined it would." He went on, "Perhaps it would be best if you departed today."

"I can leave first thing," she said in an ambiguous tone.

"Perhaps after lunch and please make some external excuse, if you will. His capacity for nightmares is second only to his one for guilt. I do not want him suspecting."

She fluffed her pillow before plunking her head back on it. "My parents are wondering why I haven't made it to their house yet. They're hinting strongly that I should be bringing you."

Snape exhaled audibly. "That is as good an excuse as any," he said a bit forcefully.

* * *

Breakfast proceeded in silence until Candide finally said to Harry, "Severus told me that you're invited to the Freelanders' for Boxing Day." At Harry's nod, she said, "Too bad it isn't summer, the estate is supposed to be beautiful. You'll probably get a tour of the house, though." When Harry shrugged again, she gave up.

After lunch, as Harry sat reading his Transfiguration textbook and drinking tea, Candide came back down with her satchel. Harry took this in with surprise.

"I have to get to my parent's house," she explained with reluctance. "They are about to send another owl, I'm sure," she added in a long-suffering tone. "Here is your present, though." She handed over a smallish yellow-wrapped box. Harry accepted it slowly.

"It's nothing much," she said, "compared to what you undoubtedly deserve."

Harry cradled it against his arm. "Thanks."

She smiled kindly at him before turning to Severus for a quick hug. Then she was gone in a flash of green in the hearth.

Harry frowned lightly at the gift. "I didn't realize she was leaving today," he said, thinking again that he would not have known what to get her.

"She has delayed visiting her family twice already," Snape commented. "There was some pressure in fact for my visiting with them as well," he added with honest dislike of that notion.

"Oh," Harry breathed. He stood to take the gift and put it under the tree and realized that tomorrow was Christmas Eve. He went up and fetched his presents for Snape and put them under as well. Hedwig had not returned from taking Neville his present, although she had returned with Harry's gift from Hermione, which was also under the tree now. Gifts for him definitely dominated.

Harry returned to rereading his Transfiguration text in the dining room, finding it much easier to concentrate now, which he credited to the tea.

In the middle of Chapter 6, Harry asked, "Do you know the theory of Holistic Hovering?"

Snape shook his head, looking like he might not have ever heard of it.

Harry frowned and sighed. "Of all the N.E.W.T.s I need to get at least an 'E' on, this one is the most in doubt."

"Have you asked Minerva for extra help?"

Harry shook his head. "She's sorta busy. Hermione helps when she has time."

"Ms. Granger's remarkable grasp of certain subjects, notwithstanding, especially for a Gryffindor--"

"Oh," Harry interrupted. "She did the same thing I did--talked the Sorting Hat out of putting her in Ravenclaw."

Snape looked disturbed by that. "That hat needs a spell rework, I think. Nevertheless, I believe you would find a teacher's assistance more useful. Do not be hesitant about seeking help from Professor McGonagall. I expect she would make time for you if you expressed a need for it."

A pair of owls arriving cut their conversation short. Harry opened the window and used a severing charm to cut the strings to the package they were jointly carrying. With grateful sweeps of their wings they took off again. Harry read the label as he brought it to the table. "All right!" he said in excitement. "I was afraid this wasn't going to make it in time." He tore the box open. There were two orange cloaks inside, which explained the weight. He snapped the first cloak out. It was signed to him. He stared at it in confusion.

"Goodness," Snape exclaimed snidely. "Where do you plan to wear that?"

"I don't." He pulled out the other one. "It's for Ron's present." This one wasn't signed quite as extravagantly, but it was still nicely done in a variety of ink colors.

Snape lifted the corner and read one or two. "Well, at least you are learning to use your influence for *something*."

"You think I abused it?" Harry asked in concern.

"Did you send them two cloaks?" Snape asked. When Harry shook his head, he said, "Then clearly the Canons do not feel that you are."

"I couldn't think of anything else to get him," Harry complained. "And Ron was jealous of the Bulgarian Quiddich bat I received from their national team."

"I expect he will be pleased," Snape commented unreadably.

Harry packed it up quickly and said, "I hope Hedwig returns soon."

"You may use Franklin. He is a much larger owl and that isn't exactly light."

"Thanks," Harry said and took it to his room to wrap it. He stuffed the other cloak deep in a trunk with the thought that if Ron ever saw it, it would diminish his own cloak considerably, in his friend's eyes anyway. Once that present was away, Harry relaxed and returned to his studies, making notes now of things he should ask McGonagall when he had the chance.

Author's note: For the interesting plotline it brings up, I've taken Harry's Pippy Longstocking-style fortune away. Frankly the only evidence that we have that Harry has limitless funds is Harry himself as an eleven-year-old who has never had any money. I'm using this questionable judgment as the basis for his actually being able to run out. I am not arguing that this is how it will be in canon, just my universe. I'm trying to have Harry go through normal growing things and this is one I couldn't pass up.



Chapter 28 -- A First Christmas

This evening at home seemed much quieter than the previous one. It occurred to Harry that if Snape enjoyed playing card games with Candide, he might like playing something else. "Do you like wizard chess?" Harry asked.

"I do not dislike it," came the even reply.

Harry went and fetched the set from his room and set it up on the small table in the library. He was promptly and utterly beaten two games in a row.

Harry shook his head as he set the board up again.

"You want to play another?" Snape asked in surprise.

"Sure. Why not?"

"You usually are not so sanguine about losing," Snape pointed out.

"I'm not?" Harry asked.

"You nearly killed yourself on the Quidditch pitch rather than lose to a younger, more skilled opponent."

"Yeah, but that's different. I lose at this to Ron all the time," he explained as he put the last pieces in place. He counted the moves this time. It only took seven to be beaten this game. Harry thought over the sequence before quickly resetting the board. "Can you replay that?" he asked.

Snape did so. Harry saw the trap point this time and sat a while before making another move that threatened one of Snape's pieces. It was a poor tradeoff though, which he resisted.

"Better," Snape said as he took Harry's piece. Harry took Snape's in exchange. Even so, he could not foresee anything other than a long slow death.

"I've lost, can we start again?" At Snape's nod, Harry reset the board again. After three rounds he finally managed to almost avoid the trap altogether but had sacrificed too many pieces.

"May I make a suggestion?" Snape asked.

"Sure."

Snape reset the board this time and then made the first few moves on both sides. "Move these two from the back row. That frees the rook to move here and defend this pawn. Then I cannot even set it up."

Harry looked the board over. "All right," he said, rubbing his eyes. It was late and he was tired. After putting the board aside, he went up to his room with a casual goodnight. He slept quite soundly that night.

* * *

The day before Christmas, Franklin returned with Ron's present to Harry and a card from Mrs. Weasley to them both. Dinner was duck, roasted until it had a dark crispy skin. Harry ate until he was groggy from it. As the dinner plates disappeared, he pulled out his Transfiguration text despite his heavy eyes and forced himself to read it.

Snape sat back with something thick in a little metal cup. "You are going to study on Christmas eve?" he asked in surprise.

Harry looked up from his text. "I was trying to reread this during break and I'm running out of time."

"You are taking your studies very seriously."

Harry frowned. "I feel like I'm letting McGonagall down, I'm doing so poorly. I think she thinks I'm really dumb."

Snape tilted his head at him with a look of disbelief. "I am quite certain she does not think that," he said reassuringly, a little amused even.

"She has no patience with me," Harry commented.

"She is not known for that. Does she have patience with other students who are struggling?"

"Neville," Harry said after a moment's thought. "Somewhat."

Snape sighed lightly. "Yes, well."

"That's different," Harry guessed.

"In what way?" Snape probed.

Harry opened his mouth to reply then found he didn't have one. He and Neville were very similar. "I don't know." He closed his textbook and leaned his chin on his palms. "Certainly getting picked out for a Mark wasn't in my best interest," he commented in annoyance. Although if he hadn't been, where would the wizarding world be now, he wondered before putting such thoughts aside.

"And that is the only difference that you see?"

Harry shrugged. He remembered getting ready for the ball and asked as he pushed his fringe back, "Do you think my scar's getting fainter?"

Snape appeared surprised by the question as he set his drink down and leaned forward across the table. He reached out and brushed his thumb over the jagged scar, making Harry jump as though a shock had gone through him. Harry rubbed it, decided it wasn't tingling, and muttered, "That was odd."

Snape looked at him uncertainly before saying, "It might be fading. You keep it obscured most of the time, so it is difficult to say."

Harry fidgeted with his hands before opening his textbook again. Snape's eyes remained on him for a long minute before he too went and fetched something to read.

* * *

Christmas morning, Harry put on his dressing gown and headed downstairs just after seven. He had gone to bed early and finally felt well rested and alert. He sat before the shining tree and looked over the presents. He imagined Ron was

probably opening his right about now and he smiled to himself. Snape stepped over, carrying a cup of coffee. Harry held one of his gifts up to him. Snape placed his cup on the floor and opened it. It wasn't a bad gift, except that Snape would have figured out that it existed easily enough in his own time.

"I didn't realize they were ever releasing a supplement," he said in a very pleased voice as he flipped open the *Potions Compendium Update Volume 1*. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Harry replied. He shook the present from Hermione. "Books all around then," he quipped as he tore the wrapping. It was a Transfiguration study guide for the N.E.W.T. He sighed at the notion that everyone knew he was struggling. "Ever practical," he muttered of his friend.

Inside the present from Ron was a vast collection of Weasley Wizard Weezes experimental candies and novelties. "You didn't see those," Harry said, closing the lid quickly.

"I am endeavoring to forget," Snape said stiffly but with a vague humor.

Harry set that box aside and pulled out the present from Neville. This one was a little more mysterious. Inside was a half dome of crystal with something like an egg inside it. Harry peered at it curiously.

"You don't know what it is?" Snape asked. When Harry shook his head, he went on, "Set it on the window sill for a few days."

A little worried, Harry set it on the book from Hermione. He handed Snape the other present from him. "It worked well the last time," Harry commented as Snape opened the wrap to reveal a canister of robusta shade-grown Polynesian coffee. His guardian actually smiled lightly in amusement. "Open yours," he prompted.

Harry pulled out the present from Snape. He gave the large box a light curious shake. It sounded like clothes. He opened it and pulled out a long black satin cloak with a red velvet lining. "Wow," Harry said, and stood up to swing it over his shoulders. The pewter clasp was in the shape of a snake. With a huff of false offense at that, he hooked it and turned around. "It's great. Thank you," he said honestly as he flicked the corner out to see the flash of red.

Harry sat cross-legged on the floor, still wearing the cloak, and reached for the next present. It was from Gretta and Shazor. Harry hadn't intentionally grabbed that one ahead of the one from Anita. He pretended he hadn't thought of any significance to that as he unwrapped it. Inside was a painted mask with a comic happy face. A little confused and intrigued he lifted it out and dropped it immediately back into the tissue when it distorted to an equally overdone look of surprise with a round mouth and brows steeply angled outwards.

"A wizard carnivale mask," Snape provided. "I assume you have never seen one, given your reaction."

"No," Harry breathed. He put the box lid underneath and set the in the box with the others to avoid touching it again. Snape reached over and lifted it out. The mask went neutral, with a flat mouth and brow. Harry watched him turn it over.

"It is from Rio De Janeiro," he said. "Gretta does like to travel," he went on as he put it back into the box. It held its neutral expression, even after he had released it.

Harry pulled his eyes away from it and over to the next gift on hand-printed paper. Inside was a handsewn book of quotes and a few poems, something they had put together at the coven. Harry flipped through and read a few words of wisdom, most a bit trite, before setting it with the others.

Candide's present he lifted up and, rather than risk breaking it by shaking it, opened the bright wrapping. Inside were handmade dark chocolates, each one just a little different from the next, all of them a little strangely shaped. Harry tried one and made a long noise of delight. Thickly, he said, "These are good." He lifted out another one, stripped with raspberry color, before he closed the box and stacked it on top of the one from Ron.

"Huh, no jumper," Harry commented.

"No what?"

"Uh, Mrs. Weasley always knits everyone jumpers with a big letter or picture on them," Harry explained.

"That . . . would explain a lot," Snape said carefully. At Harry's slightly challenging look, he added, "about your wardrobe."

"Hey, the thought that someone would actually make something for me, rather than give me some way oversized, badly dyed, hand-me-down was really touching," he explained. He carried the glass dome and Weezes up to his room and brought the study guide and chocolates to the dining room.

Snape stepped in a few minutes later and hovered near the hearth. "Do you have other holiday rituals you are accustomed to?" he finally asked.

"I don't have any at all--I don't think," Harry said. Snape took a seat across from him and eyed the chocolates. Harry pushed them over and Snape selected one with an odd daintiness. "Hm," he said appreciatively as he tasted it. Breakfast arrived on the table, distracting both of them.

* * *

"Are you almost ready?" Snape called up from the main hall.

Harry checked himself in the mirror again. He was wearing his dress robes yet again--it had to be a record. His hair looked as good as it ever did. From the balcony, he said, "Right here."

Snape, looking much better groomed than usual, almost startlingly so, led him to the entryway and pulled down their cloaks. Harry watched as Snape pulled out and examined some thick white sheets from a pocket before re-stowing them.

"What are those?"

"Calling cards." He held one out; it was like a large Muggle business card but larger and more stylish. "Essential for a such an occasion."

"I don't have any," Harry said. After Freelanders had asked for one earlier, he should have thought of this sooner himself.

"Go write up a few on nice parchment. Quickly," Snape said.

Harry dashed to the library. He cut up a few sheets of thick cream parchment and pulled out the peach quill Dumbledore had given him. Writing carefully, he put his name and address on each: his name in the middle and the address along the bottom, smaller. The only title he had ever been given, by the sweet company that made chocolate frogs, he did not relish using, so he stopped with that. He made up five of them before stashing the quill away.

In the entryway, Snape draped the new cloak over Harry's shoulders and opened the door. A horse-drawn carriage stood outside on the dark road, flickering lanterns hanging on its sides. "It is the appropriate way to arrive for an event like this," he explained at Harry's hesitation.

Harry climbed inside and closed the half door. He leaned out as they pulled away with a snap of a whip. The shod hooves on the road seemed too loud at first, but the sound fell into the background after the first mile. A few cars passed them, accelerating fast. A town went by; the pavements full of people milling in the warm glow from the shops.

Finally, they pulled through a pillared gate of white stone and up a cobbled drive. Harry glanced out and caught his breath at the massive building and organized grounds. Their carriage waited in a short line to be unloaded at the steps, where a red carpet had been laid out, dusted with fresh snow. Harry wished he owned better dress robes, or even a Muggle coat with tails.

"Only you would get invited to such a thing, Potter," Snape commented. He sounded a little put-off, or even jealous.

Harry considered that he should have explained the whole story, but at that moment they pulled up before the grand entrance and the carriage door was opened by a footman. Harry stepped down and waited for his guardian before ascending to the bright light pouring from the doorway.

Inside was a marble floor and two-story hall with a gilt balcony all around. The plaster ceiling was sculpted elaborately with garlands. A dour man in tails bowed and took their cloaks as another stepped up to lead them to the threshold of the next room, which was even larger than the first. Harry could not fathom this as his own; how could all this belong to one person?

Before them a tall, lithe woman with her glasses on a jeweled stick stood with her arm through a stout man's. The man handed over a card and the butler read it out loudly. "Mr. and Mrs. Trout of the Devonshire Trouts." From across the room a small man with a pince-nez came over and greeted them warmly as old friends, otherwise there was no acknowledgment, which was surprising, considering the volume of the announcement and the number of people in the ballroom. Harry had had no sense of the scale of the event he had agreed to attend.

"There are Muggle lords here. Peers even," Snape observed under his breath.

As they stepped forward, Harry glanced at his guardian who looked haughty and alert. If he stuck with that, Harry could manage. Snape handed his card to the man who read it out without seeming to think it out of line. He handed it back. Harry handed him his after. The man had to squint at the oddly bright ink before he announced the name, causing most of the room to stop and turn. Harry fought the flush coming into his cheeks.

Harry waited a moment to receive his handwritten card back, but the man had stashed it in his inside suit pocket with a smile. Harry sighed. Freelander himself came over.

"Good to see you, Mr. Potter. And . . . Snape, Professor. Correct?" he said, shaking Snape's hand. "Please come in."

A waiter swooped in with mugs of mulled mead that spoke profoundly of clove and cinnamon. Harry couldn't resist. He immediately had to switch hands as he was introduced to two Peers and some solicitor who seemed very self-assured. Harry wondered who was Muggle and who was Witch or Wizard. This wasn't a problem he had expected to have. Everyone eyed him appraisingly the way Fudge had a habit of doing. After a minute or so of conversation, the looks wore off, thankfully.

They circled the room. Harry realized after the second group that he was being herded by Freelander or his wife or by the butler even. He was grateful when they sat down to dinner at a table that rivaled the house ones at Hogwarts. A man by the name of Ratslinger sat across from them with his young wife or mistress; Harry wasn't clear which. He was middle aged with closely spaced eyes. Harry hadn't understood quite what he did. The man's introduction had included Lord of Morals, but he hadn't caught the rest.

As the first course was set before them all by an army of staff, Harry leaned over to Snape and said, "This party is mostly Muggles, right?"

"Half and half, I would guess," Snape said.

"Why don't you think Fudge is here?"

"I expect he was invited. I expect he had several competing events this evening. Do you wish he were here?" Snape asked snidely.

"No. I was just trying to figure things out."

"It isn't worth it," Snape opined.

After dinner they joined the tour of the house and stables. They lagged behind the group to talk more easily. One garish baroque room flowed into the next, distinguishable only by wall color or a unique tapestry or painting.

Freelander came up to them as the bulk of the tour moved around a turn. He joined them as they stared at a scene of a knight bowing to a dragon who looked to be considering whether roasting or barbecuing would leave the man more tender. "So glad you could make it, Mr. Potter," he said sincerely. "I don't think we were quite introduced properly," he added, looking to Snape.

With a faint sense of doom Harry said, "This is my guardian, Lord Freelander. He teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts."

Freelander looked Snape over far differently this time. "Huh," he said, clearly mystified. He looked Harry up and down next. "You appear to be doing well. That is what matters," he added a little flatly.

They continued following the tour. Harry ignored Snape's questioning glance until Freelander had moved ahead to explain the origin of a large landscape painting in a room at the end. Harry stopped and waited until the rest of the group had entirely gathered around for the story. He and Snape were stalling in the wide preceding corridor that seemed to serve no purpose but to hold paintings of other large manors.

"I'm sorry; I should have explained completely," Harry said quietly.

Snape stood examining a painting that showed a garish fountain of Neptune in the foreground and paths leading in all directions; the one up the center led to a yellow estate house in the distance. He turned and said in a slightly disinterested voice, "Explained what?"

"Freelander wanted to adopt me."

Snape blinked in surprise. He tilted his face to the ceiling as he took that in. "And you said 'no'?" he said in a disbelieving manner.

"Of course I said 'no'," Harry replied smartly.

In a bit of a sneer Snape said, "I cannot believe you would have chosen me over this," as he swept his hand to indicate the room.

Harry, annoyed with his guardian's tone, said, "It wasn't like that. I turned him down in May."

"You could have changed your mind. You most likely still could," Snape said with a harsh undertone that Harry hadn't heard in a long time. "The Wizard Family Council would jump at the chance to place you in a proper home."

Harry frowned. "Don't do this," he pleaded quietly. When Snape didn't respond, Harry said, "I don't need all this stuff. What would I do with it?"

Snape crossed his arms. "It isn't the 'stuff', Potter--it is the power. Something you have been utterly unable to grasp," he said condescendingly. "You, whose idea of influence is getting a Canon's cloak autographed."

Harry stared at a bright painting of a lake with a path beside it leading to an open domed building on a bit of a point. He wished he had turned Freelander's party invitation down. As though that thought might have summoned the man, he approached. "You have fallen far behind," he said in a gracious tone.

Harry looked to his guardian, who had masked his expression, fortunately. They followed through the next wing and out to the stables, which were connected by a covered walkway to the main house.

The stall doors each had a brass plaque with the horse's name. The first one said, "Studebaker." The massive brown animal turned and studied them a moment before turning back to the pile of hay in the corner.

"Steeplechase, this one," Frelander said with the same tone of voice Ron used to discuss Quidditch. "As is the next." They were given a little history and siring on each one as they went.

At the end of that row they turned and headed back. "What about these?" Harry asked of the next row of stalls. A beautiful black horse with a long white blaze peered out at them curiously from one of them.

"Those are just the riding horses," Frelander said dismissively.

The black horse whinnied as though insulted. Another farther down answered from inside its stall. Harry stood glued to that spot imagining that. When he looked up at Snape, his guardian had an expression that said *figures*. Harry shot him a sharp look in return before they followed Frelander back out the way they had entered.

Brooms were better than horses, Harry told himself. Except a broom didn't exude the raw power and borderline wildness the black horse had. He shook off the regret that tried to weasel its way into him.

The carriage ride home was silent until they passed the intervening town. Harry felt he needed to say something. He adjusted his cloak, grateful for it. "The cloak is warm. Thanks," he said.

"You are welcome," Snape said quietly, barely audible over the clopping of the hooves outside. He sounded uncertain. Harry didn't know what to say, feared saying the wrong thing. He closed his eyes and dozed off to the regular rocking of the carriage.

Back in Shrewsthorpe, they alighted and entered the unlit house. Harry hung up his cloak and stepped into the dim hall. He waved the chandelier up brighter and turned to wait for Snape to emerge from the entryway. When he did, he gave Harry a vaguely dark look. With an ache of frustration, Harry huffed at him, unable to find words to make the situation all right again.

"You prefer this?" Snape asked snidely with a wave of his arm to indicate the main hall.

"Yes," Harry insisted.

"You are a fool," Snape said as he turned to stalk off. Harry followed close behind, grasping for a retort. At the stairs, Snape turned on him and said, "They owe you everything, those wizards and Muggles tonight. You should have taken everything you could from them."

Harry considered that Snape saw the world very differently than he did. "I don't want what they have," he said firmly.

Snape shook his head disgustedly and continued up to his room.

* * *

At breakfast Snape seemed to have calmed down. Harry was sitting at the table working on holiday assignments when his guardian came in. His first reaction to seeing him there appeared the opposite of the night before. Harry thought he almost looked grateful, but covered it so quickly, he couldn't be certain.

Harry sighed and bent back to writing about the formation of Goblin monetary law in the fifteen hundreds. A cup of black coffee appeared before Snape and he drank it in silence as Harry worked.

After long minutes, Snape said conversationally, "Getting everything finished?"

"Yep," Harry replied, glad Snape sounded normal.

Another long pause. "Need help with anything?"

Harry hesitated, then said with a grin, "You could look over my Potions essay. . . ."

Later in the day, the sun came out of the clouds. Harry went up to his room to exchange the textbooks he was working on and to put away his mail, including a letter from Ron that was incoherent with gratitude for the Canon's cloak. At first Harry didn't notice anything, but as he turned to the door he suddenly swung around again. The window was now nicely framed in a dark green ivy. Harry stepped over to it. It was emerging from the glass dome from Neville that he had placed on the sill and forgotten about. Tiny little buds were on the branches, hinting at a variety of colors between the green capsules around them.

He stepped back and admired it. The room did look much better that way, much less wintry.

* * *

Harry was asleep, calmly asleep, when a noise woke him. It was the noise of the logs in the hearth shifting. They made the hollow, high, rasping sound of the coal they had become. Dark and light flickered in his mind, flame and shadow. He rolled over upon recognizing the noise, and pulled the covers up a bit higher against the chill of the room. The noise repeated, sounding less natural. Harry raised his head and found Snape adding fresh wood to the fire.

Finally, his guardian stood and brushed off his hands. He turned and noticed Harry was awake.

"You're the house-elf tonight?" Harry teased.

"It is especially cold and she had not come around yet," Snape explained. He came over to the bed and stood above him. "You seem to be sleeping well," he commented.

"Really well." He couldn't remember any dreams at all, just restful darkness. "When are we going back to Hogwarts?"

"The day after tomorrow."

Harry nodded and mumbled, "All right." Fleeting, he realized that this had been the first normal Christmas he had ever had. Gifts from grandparents, even, sort of. "Thank you for the nice Christmas," Harry said as Snape moved to the door.

The figure in the flickering dimness turned. "I am glad it turned out to be so. Good night, Harry."

"Night," Harry said back just before the door clicked closed.

* * *

The Weasley household was still strewn here and there with the remains of presents being opened when Harry stepped out of the Floo. He had selfishly been enjoying his time at home, but Ron's third owl where he mentioned his mum inviting him over, brought him to the Weasley hearthstone. Harry kicked a half-burned strip of pink ribbon off his shoe and savored the fact that for the first time he needn't view the Burrow with deeply buried longing.

Mrs. Weasley came downstairs and gave him a firm hug. "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Weasley," Harry greeted her.

"Happy Christmas, Harry dear. Did you get everything you wanted?" she asked, tweaking him on the chin.

Harry considered his lack of jealous pang upon arriving as good as he could have imagined. "Yes, but, uh, I didn't receive a jumper, I don't think," he teased.

"Didn't do any knitting this year, dear," she said.

"No?"

"Been trying out something different--would you like to see?"

More footsteps sounded on the stairs and Ron appeared. "Harry! Oh, Mum's showin' you her new craft, what?" He sounded a little pained. From a large wooden sewing box beside the rocking chair, Mrs. Weasley pulled out and proudly held up a set of colorfully decorated robes. "She's into needlepoint now," Ron explained.

"What do you think?" Mrs. Weasley asked, shaking the garment flat. It was festooned with a bizarre array of shapes: flowers along the cuff and collar, but dragons on the breast and then--only partially filled in--gnomes along the hem. Even if muted colors had been selected, the design would still not hold out in even wizard public.

"That's . . ." Harry began, trying hard for words in the face of her proud expression. "Really . . . expertly sewn." Which was true; he hadn't imagined needlepoint gnomes looking quite so realistic. And ugly.

Ron leaned over. "Thank Merlin she's too slow to get at my dress robes yet," he whispered.

* * *

As he and Snape took the Floo back to Hogwarts castle before the next term, Harry wondered at how he was allowed to skip the train that everyone else was required to take. Not that he was the only student around in the days before classes restarted. Four other students had stayed over because of family schedules or problems. Harry joined them in the Great Hall the afternoon he arrived.

Pansy Parkinson gave him a dissuading look at he sat down, but she was the only Slytherin, so she remained silent. There was also a second-year Gryffindor named Desmond Hern and two fourth-years from Hufflepuff Harry didn't know the names of until they were introduced as Quinton Alden and Frobin Waxwing. All but Parkinson seemed surprised to have him sitting there.

"Did you have a good Christmas?" Desmond asked.

"Yes. Thanks," Harry replied as he took out his Transfiguration textbook.

"Professor Snape get you everything you wanted for Christmas?" Pansy asked in a rude tone. The other students stiffened.

Harry shrugged. "I didn't ask for anything. But I got some nice things anyway," he answered calmly.

"You really live with him now?" Desmond asked, sounding uncertain how he felt about that.

"Yes," Harry replied, sounding much more annoyed than he intended. Desmond visibly closed his mouth tightly and bent over his own school work.

A few minutes later the two Hufflepuffs were arguing in close whispers. Frobin finally shushed the other and asked Harry in a pained whisper, "There isn't any sign of You-Know-Who coming back, is there?"

Harry looked at her. She had short hair pulled nonetheless into two tight ponytails on the top of her head. Her truly worried brown eyes looked large in the cloudy light of the hall. With certainty, Harry replied, "No." She relaxed a little at this answer, but not entirely. "I would know," Harry insisted. "My scar tingled or burned when he was doing much of anything and it hasn't done anything at all. In fact it's fading," he added, rubbing it unconsciously.

"Really?" Frobin asked hopefully. All eyes at the table were staring at him, wide-eyed.

"Really," Harry replied with extra assurance, returning to his textbook in the hope that they would return to theirs.



Chapter 29 -- Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered

The new term began as winter settled in hard around the castle. Harry had not imagined it possible, but Ron and Hermione seemed even more glued together than they had before break. He had expected some commiseration from Ginny on this, but found that she wasn't paying much attention to anything but Dean.

At first he felt merely mystified by all of it. That was until he noticed that he had faded into the background along with everything else, then he felt a little annoyed. The weather was definitely conducive to sitting close together, he considered, more than once. As the first few days passed, it began to grate on him more, making him feel unsettled and anxious. He started avoiding his friends when it was convenient to do so.

Friday evening, Harry stood in the common room with his bookbag over his shoulder, looking for someplace to settle in to talk or even study. The room, to his eye, seemed paired up into fixed sets. He didn't feel like interrupting anyone, so with a sigh he headed out the portrait hole, thinking of the library. He wandered instead to Snape's office. His guardian was researching something in stacks of books piled on the desk.

"Do you mind if I study here?" Harry asked.

Snape, his long finger holding his place in the text, looked up at him. "Not at all." As Harry sat in the visitor's chair and dropped his bag hard on the floor, Snape asked, "Is something wrong?"

Harry wrinkled his face up as he thought over an answer. "All of my friends are, I don't know, wrapped up in each other." He shook his head in light disgust. "Voldemort could Apparate into the common room right now and no one would notice." Harry cracked his Transfiguration text open and slouched over as he read.

"Hm," Snape murmured.

"What?" Harry asked, feeling a little annoyed.

"I am surprised you do not understand."

Harry frowned at him. "They've all lost their heads," he complained. "What's to understand?"

"You've never fallen for someone?" Snape asked.

Harry thought about Cho, how he had thought about her when she wasn't around, how he had been jealous of others around her. It seemed dumb in retrospect. With a hint of anger Harry said, "Not like that."

"Well, you will," Snape stated dryly.

"Yeah, right," Harry breathed. He tried to read the first paragraph of chapter ten yet again. His mind refused to take it in. Anger had built in him, generated by some source he wasn't aware of before. He glanced up at Snape to find his guardian considering him in silence. Snape closed the book before him and clasped his hands on the desk.

"What?" Harry asked sharply.

Snape didn't react, just continued to consider him. Harry closed his book as well, a little harder and with a huff of frustration. "You are doing one of those Dumbledore things, aren't you?" Harry asked. "Just waiting to see what I'll say."

"I am actually trying to determine what the problem likely is before venturing to ask anything," Snape said. "You are clearly jealous."

"I'm not," Harry returned smartly. "I have too much work to do to spend my time mooning over someone like they all are. Fat chance, anyway, given how hard it was to find a partner for the ball."

Snape reopened the book he had been reading and looked for his page. "I cannot believe it was that difficult," he opined.

Harry stuffed his book away in his bag, disgusted and angry now. He was shaking a bit as he moved, he was so furious. "You think just anyone would go with some freakishly dangerous person . . ." With a jerk he stood up and hefted his bag. ". . . who has spent the last seven years as nothing but a puppet a dark wizard, as—what did McGonagall call it—a Vold-o-meter?"

As he turned to the door a spell flew over his shoulder and highlighted the doorframe for an instant. He tried the handle anyway, but it wouldn't budge.

"Sit down," Snape intoned.

Harry remained facing the door, but let his bookbag slide to the floor. His fury had peaked and ebbed quickly, leaving him achy, hurt and without purpose. Snape didn't speak as Harry gathered himself together before turning around. He didn't meet Snape's eyes as he abandoned his bag and returned to the chair. The twisty ache in his chest was only intensifying.

They sat in silence, he trying to imagine getting to know someone as closely as Ron and Hermione knew each other. It seemed impossible. "I can't imagine explaining it all," he breathed out in a pained way. "And who in the world would stick around for the whole story?" He wrapped his arms around himself as though he were cold.

"I am not unsympathetic to your dilemma," Snape stated. His chin rested on his bent fingers, thumb picking at the edges of his nails. "But there are twenty-seven girls in your year—"

"Please don't," Harry interrupted, willing him to stop. "I've been through them all with Hermione already. Sixth-year too. Thank you for trying," he added sarcastically. "I don't think you realize how many students are just plain scared of me. The others are disgustingly adoring or think I'm a freak."

"I believe you are exaggerating," Snape said.

"If I pull my wand out at dinner, care to lay a bet on how many people duck under a table?"

"You are mistaking awe for fear. But neither is conducive to getting to know someone," Snape admitted. "And trying *that* would not improve the situation."

"I have some sweets that will turn my eyes red. I could do that tomorrow. Imagine how many nightmares I could cause with that," he said provocatively.

"Harry," Snape chastised him in dismay.

"No one will ever understand," Harry said quietly, sounding bleak.

"May I offer some advice?" Snape asked. At Harry's annoyed shrug, Snape said, "You need to adjust your goals. If you set yourself exclusively to finding someone to be everything to you, you will almost certainly fail, after much frustration, I

might add." Snape stood and came slowly around the desk. "Set yourself instead to looking for a friend of the opposite sex. It is much easier to get to know someone casually. If more is possible it will flow on its own from there."

Ignoring Snape's gaze, Harry stared out the window as his guardian spoke. "Okay, so where is this person?" he huffed.

"Perhaps not here at Hogwarts," Snape admitted.

"Maybe not even a witch," Harry mumbled.

Snape raised a brow. "If you are willing to open the field that wide your possibilities do increase considerably." With his knuckle he tweaked Harry's chin to bring his eyes back over. "Do not destroy yourself worrying about it in the interim. That is the worst you can do."

Harry frowned deeply and tapped his foot against the chair leg impatiently as he returned to staring out the window. Snape made sense, but it didn't improve his mood any to hear it.

Snape went on with yet another sigh. "I know it is not easy. Especially since your friends are most likely intimate at this point."

Harry turned to him in surprise. He thought a moment before rolling his eyes. "Yeah, probably," he mumbled. That thought *really* didn't help.

Snape frowned. "You may very well have to settle for never being fully understood."

"Did you tell Candy your whole past?" Harry asked bluntly.

With a shake of the head, Snape reluctantly replied, "No."

"That's setting a good example. You're saying I should live a lie?" When Snape didn't reply, even though he looked for a moment like he was going to, Harry said in frustration, "I can't imagine going over it all again. But, what's the point in being close to someone if they . . . don't understand?" His eyes were burning, making him blink.

Snape frowned and rubbed his forehead as he stepped back around the desk. "I do not know what to say to you, Harry, except perhaps that I don't believe anyone is fully understood by anyone else."

Harry rubbed his left eye under his glasses. "I really can't imagine explaining it all," he murmured, repeating himself. "It takes something out of me every time I have to."

"I have no answers for you," Snape repeated. "I will, however, point out that everyone is different. Do not make assumptions about someone until you know them very well. You clearly dislike others doing it to you."

Harry gazed sadly at the floor, thinking idly about that. He thought about the girls in the school, most of whom seemed giggly or fashion obsessed and really not worth getting to know. It was daunting to think of trying to get to know any of them better, especially since if he sat down beside them they would either giggle annoyingly or gape in surprise.

Snape's voice pulled him from his circling thoughts. "There was something I wanted to discuss with you, since you are here." When Harry looked up, he went on, "I saw your first term grades—"

"I haven't even seen them," Harry complained.

Ignoring the interruption, Snape said, "You received an 'A' in Potions."

"What?" Harry blurted. "Greer really hates me," he commented.

"Also in Transfiguration."

Harry did frown at that. "What about the rest? Did I get an 'O' in anything?"

"Hm," Snape replied. Harry kicked the chair leg with his heel in frustration. "You need to do better," Snape insisted.

This felt like the final blow. He put his head in his hand and sat hunched over. "I can't try any harder than I have been," he said. "I'm doing better than that in Potions," he insisted. "She's not grading me fairly."

"What is the basis for Frenkels Salve?"

"Isisin and Chamomile."

"What four potions use Uyrs Iodyn?"

"Uh, Draught of Isis, Venidyn, Smith's Semper, and . . ." He tugged his hair back as he thought. "Just a second, something else uses Venidyn as an ingredient. Uh, Hope's Harm Reducer." Harry waited as Snape considered him a long moment. Harry said defensively, "You said I did well on that big essay. Don't you think that was at least an 'E'?"

"Yes. I expect that is how I'd have marked it--if not higher."

"She only gave me an 'A' on it, you know."

"Perhaps your Potions grade is in error, then. But the Transfiguration one is not." When Harry groaned in frustration, Snape said, "I am certain Minerva would give you extra tutoring if you asked."

Harry pulled his book out again and flipped back to chapter ten, tired of talking about it when he could try to do something about it. "I'll think about it."

* * *

Harry sat in the library studying. Normally, he would have found his friends here, but he was starting to suspect that Hermione was catering to Ron's dislike of studying in a place where he was forced to be quiet. He joined Neville at a large table and took out his books. Snow fell heavily outside the nearby window in large flakes that floated and swirled mesmerizingly. Harry had to repeatedly force his gaze to return to his parchments.

Neville fidgeted a lot as he studied. Harry finally took a break from rereading his notes to ask him what he was working on. "Transfiguration," Neville replied. "My worst."

"Mine too." It felt good to share studying complaints with someone. Neville seemed like a safe person to revise with. There were fewer interruptions from others. "I have to get a good N.E.W.T. score," Harry breathed. "It's not looking good right now."

"You'll do all right, Harry," Neville said without looking up. "You always do."

"Doesn't feel like it this time."

Luna came by a few minutes later. "Want to go for a walk?" she asked.

Harry blinked at her in surprise until he realized she was asking Neville, who surprised him further by answering brightly, "Yeah!"

When they had gone, Harry frowned. It looked awfully cold outside to him. He really didn't get it, he thought.

An hour later, Suze wandered by. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

She glanced around them as though to check if anyone were listening. "You have this club, the D.A., right?" At Harry's nod, she went on. "Can I join?"

"Sure," Harry said.

"Well, you don't have any Slytherins in it. I thought maybe they weren't allowed."

Harry's brow furrowed as he thought about that. "We don't keep them out. It's just that no one has ever asked." He reached into his pocket and took out his fake Galleon. Next Thursday at 7:30 had been scheduled. He showed her how to read the serial number.

She accepted it and asked, "Why the coin?" as she tossed it off her palm.

"Because we were illegal under Umbridge and we needed to vary the time to avoid her." And the Slytherins she had hunting us down, he almost added. "It'd be great if you could come."

She pocketed the coin and gave him a smile before walking away.

* * *

Harry was very grateful for his new cloak during astronomy class late one evening. The stars blazed in the night sky as they all huddled under their telescopes on the astronomy tower roof. The wind was low but the clear sky left the air bone-chillingly cold. Ron and Hermione were bundled under her cloak together, which was awkward, as they weren't allowed to share telescopes. Sinistra eyed them a few times but didn't comment. Harry kind of wished she would.

He sighed and moved two degrees right ascension with the dial. He pulled his hands inside his cloak as he stared at Arc-turus. Inside his cloak he pulled out his pocket watch and used a charm to light the face of it. He preferred his own watch to the one Sinistra provided. He checked the telescope and his watch, back and forth. As the star passed the crosshairs he noted the time. He glanced around. Only Hermione also seemed to be noting the extra credit meridian passage of Acturus on the assignment sheet.

He rarely worked out the extra credit questions, especially since he could be packing up his lenses instead of shivering. The second part of the question, How does nutation affect the reliability of your answer? He thought hard and jotted down quickly that it could be off by nine minutes of angular distance but that the component of that in the right ascension was small. He didn't know by how much or how to compute it, so he stopped there. Rolling up his parchment quickly, Harry frowned as he noticed Hermione had her telescope put away already because Ron was helping.

* * *

In Defense they were doing curse breaking. Each of them came up and picked out a box from a widely varying collection on the front table. For the assignment one needed to retrieve what was inside. This explained why Snape had not wanted visitors the last two days. Harry waited and took the last one remaining, a burnished brass box with large hinges. Once closed magically, it didn't look likely that there was another way into it even with Muggle power tools.

Harry had grown in the habit of sitting in the far back of the room. His friends seemed confused by this, but they changed as well and sat nearby. Harry returned to the last desk in the middle row and stared at the box.

Malfoy let out a cry of surprise as his sleeve caught fire when he simply tried the latch on his inlaid wood box. Parkinson used a water charm on him, leaving him damp all over. Harry looked over his notes as he suppressed a laugh.

Harry rubbed his eyes as he read; he was tired from Astronomy last night, which had gone until one in the morning. Snape swished by, pausing behind him. After a moment, fingers rested on Harry's shoulder. He glanced up at his guardian and gave him a weak smile and then, a little nervously, looked around at his friends. At the desk beside his, Neville

was chewing his lip, staring with concentration at his glass box. Hermione and Ron were bent over a parchment so close that their hair touched. Harry assumed they were plotting out how to proceed on their battered old jewelry boxes.

Harry took out his wand and used the curse detection charm Snape had used the night Malfoy and company had attacked. The blue lines zipped around the lid and turned red at the hinges. An obvious place to curse this particular box, really. He glanced again over his shoulder at Snape, who gave him a somewhat soft look, for him anyway.

As Snape moved on, Harry thought about what curse he might use to foul big hinges like these. There were a lot of possibilities. He started through them one at a time, beginning with a counter for a sticking charm.

The seventh attempt--an oil charm to counter a possible ancient aging charm--caused a flare of gold fire to blast out the sides. That wasn't what he had expected to happen and he worried what it meant.

Hermione looked over. "What was that?"

"Don't know." He ran the curse detection spell again and it remained blue all over now, but he was still very hesitant to try the lid.

"What spell was that you just used?"

"One we are going to do in D.A.," Harry answered distractedly, hoping she didn't ask to see it now, because he was busy thinking. It had taken him a week to work it out. It detected bad intention in the form of a curse. Harry carefully considered what else he should try, since he didn't want his robes ignited or his hair to turn green, as had happened with Padma. He avoided looking up at Snape; this was between him and the box only, as far as he was concerned.

As he sat thinking, the hinges flared gold again. On a hunch he repeated the curse detection and found the hinges back to red again. "Huh," he muttered and tried to think of what that might imply. Moments later, Ron leapt up, crying out in surprise and shaking his hand, which was surrounded by a flickering halo.

Snape stepped over and forced him back into his chair with a sharp admonishment that it was only an illusion. A flick of the teacher's wand canceled the octarine fire.

"I followed the suggestions from the lecture exactly," Ron complained as he looked his hand over in concern.

"You need to think a little more creatively than that," Snape sneered as he stalked away. In the front row he paused and observed Malfoy using a cutting spell to simply remove the lid of his box. A smoky haze floated from his desk.

"Got it!" The Slytherin said proudly as he produced the metal ball from inside the box.

"I did mention, didn't I, that you would be marked down for damage to the box?" Snape asked snidely.

Malfoy shrugged and tossed the ball into the air and caught it. The cuff of his sleeve was brown and shriveled. "I get extra credit for being first though, right?" he asked cockily.

Harry returned to contemplating his box. Some kind of timing charm or curse was on it, perhaps. He tried a few more simpler curse-detection spells and they were clear. It must be a charm then. Beside him, Hermione was pulling the ball from her box with a broad grin. Figures, Harry thought with a sigh. Ron's box was soon to follow, he considered, now that he would get full-time help.

As Harry lifted his wand to try one of the timer cancel charms he had seen Mrs. Weasley use for cakes, Hermione's box let out an ear splitting wail. She stared at it in shock for many painful seconds before slamming the lid shut. It promptly popped open again and returned to full volume. Ron stood up and jumped on the lid, and for a moment there was silence. The lid however had other ideas and, despite appearing to be made of dilapidated, pink cloth-covered wood, it tossed him onto the floor when it popped open again.

The students returned to putting their hands over their ears. Hermione canceled the alarm on the second try and the room fell blessedly silent. Many students sighed in relief. "Drat," Hermione muttered. "Thought I'd managed full marks, too."

Harry savored that comment for a while as he tried the timing spells he knew. None of them worked. This wasn't an assignment where they could do more research so it must be something simpler or more common. He went through in his mind the spells that reinitiated themselves. The only common one he could think of was the filing charm for letters that returned them to their proper envelope. It had a white flare but maybe that was only on parchment or paper.

He did the cancel spell for the filing charm. Nothing appeared to happen. He did the oil charm again and this time the lid popped open. Hermione looked over sharply. Harry gave her a victorious look as he Accioed the ball out, just in case the lid had designs on eating his hand.

"Five points for Gryffindor, Mr. Potter," Snape said from the front of the room.

"That's not fair!" Malfoy complained.

With narrow eyes and a dark challenging tone, Snape asked the Slytherin, "What, precisely, is not fair about it?"

Malfoy, frowning, declined to respond.

* * *

A week later, Harry sat studying before D.A. on one of the fifth floor window seats, far from the usual active areas of the castle. He liked this spot; in the evening the sun shined in through the colored glass. As well, the owlery was nearby and the birds flitted past regularly, keeping him company.

He read through his Transfiguration essay for the third time and sighed. It didn't read like one he would have written for Potions or Defense where he really understood what he was writing about. Transfiguration had only grown harder. The assignments seemed to have less and less to do with the book and lecture, leaving him frustrated, especially since Hermione didn't seem to have this problem. When Harry would ask her a question now to help clarify something, the answer would only generate more questions, since he had fallen too far behind to understand the immediate answer. Rereading the textbook from last year had helped some. Maybe he should order some alternative textbooks, he considered. That had helped with Potions a lot. Hermione had some catalogues, he would have to remember to ask her for them. At the last possible moment Harry headed down to D.A.

During this session they finished up curse detection from the previous meeting then the four of them stood off to the side talking about what to do next. Neville whispered, "I really want to do Animagia." He gave Harry a wince as he did so; Harry figured he worried that because of Sirius, this would be a sore topic. Neville's glanced nervously at the others. "We've been discussing it and . . . well . . ."

Hermione also gave Harry a pained smile. "I'd like to try it as well," she finished for Neville. "What do you think, Harry?"

Harry rubbed his cheek in thought. "It's worth trying. I'm pretty sure it's against school rules so we can't have everyone working on it. Why don't we split the group as we have been talking about doing, into advanced and intermediate. Only people you trust to not mention it to a teacher get into the advanced group."

Hermione said slowly, "And you'll stick with the intermediate?"

"For now," Harry said, "I'll do both." He didn't have much hope for figuring out a transfiguration that advanced, but he couldn't stand to not try.

He watched Neville collect Luna with a shy smile and take her aside to talk to her. Harry watched them with an ache of jealousy before collecting up the newer members and leading them to the far side of the room.

"Good evening, Severus," McGonagall said as he stepped into the headmistress's office. It was late and she had on a long black dressing gown for warmth, apparently not willing to stoke the fire up so close to not needing it.

"You sent me for me . . ." he prompted.

She paced across the back wall, along the glass-fronted cabinets. "Yes," she breathed, clearly thinking how to proceed. "I don't wish to interfere with Harry . . ." she began and looked over at him. When he didn't react, she went on, "but I have noticed he has withdrawn himself from his friends. Three times this week I have seen him studying alone on the fifth floor. I only note it because he seems unhappy, frankly, which is in great contrast to how he was at the end of summer."

Snape crossed his arms and stepped slowly over to the celestial model on the corner of the desk. The breeze from his movement made the etched glass globe rock on its spindle. He touched it to make it turn slowly.

McGonagall prompted in the tense stillness, "Have you spoken with him?"

Snape nodded. "Yes."

"Hm," she prompted.

Reluctantly, but with a tone of being unburdened, he said, "I believe the immediate problem is that he is the only one of his friends without a love interest. Secondarily, he sees no hope for one in the immediate future. Thirdly, at no point does he feel he can expect to be understood by anyone."

"Ah."

Snape touched the glass sphere to halt its turning. "I had no good advice to offer him," he stated in frustration.

She came up to the other side of the desk and leaned on it. "This is a tough age anyway, and getting to know members of the opposite sex would be even harder for him."

"I do not see that," Snape said doubtfully.

She studied him closely. "Everyone thinks they already know him and they are certainly completely mistaken about him. He can't approach anyone without it seeming too significant for whomever he approaches." She sighed. "I assume the ball brought this on."

"That, his friends' close relationships, and other things," Snape commented, failing to mention Candide.

She fell silent with her brow furrowed. "So many lovely young ladies in this—"

"Do not mention that fact to him," Snape said sternly. "His friends have already walked through the list with him and he is adamant about the uselessness of it."

She shook her head with a sad smile. "All right. You clearly speak with him regularly, and intimately, so I am going to assume you are keeping an eye on him." She tossed her robes back as she sat down. "There is something else I've been meaning to discuss with you."

Snape straightened his shoulders, clasped his hands behind his back, and gave her an attentive tilt of the head.

"I've been trying to convince Pomona to be my deputy headmistress, without luck, I must add. She insists she cannot lose the time from her research projects." She smiled wryly. "Not to drive home the point that you were not my first choice, because you usually handle things precisely the way I would, but would you consider being my deputy headmaster?"

Snape, not having ever considered this, did so now. When he had thought it over in silence for half a minute, McGonagall added, "You are already doing many of the duties, as you probably realize. But there would more paperwork, for example."

"You do not expect the board to complain?" Snape finally asked.

She tapped her finger on the desk. "I honestly don't know how much cachet I have with the board. This would be one way of finding out." She clasped her hands together. "Does this mean you are saying yes?"

Snape's eyes roved around the office as he stalled. "Would I be in charge of performance evaluations?"

"Why?"

"I wish to discuss grading criteria with Ms. Greer," he replied, his tone lower.

"Hmm. If it is grading involving Mr. Potter, you will have to leave it to me in any event." She sighed lightly. "I wondered about that Potions grade."

"He is doing better work than that, I am quite certain."

"I'll speak with her then." She fell thoughtful a moment. "And with regard to Mr. Potter's other difficulties, perhaps there is something we can do . . ."

At Snape's curious look, she waved him off with a mischievous smile.



Chapter 30 -- Transformations

"First session went well, don't you think?" Hermione said brightly as they studied in the common room after advanced D.A. Ron nodded energetically. He was actually, honestly reading the book Hermione had ordered. The original title *Animagical* had been charmed to read *Remedial Potions*. Harry had ordered some alternative Transfiguration textbooks at the same time. They might have helped if he could find the time to read them.

Hermione took the ring off her pinky and charmed it to the same time next week. She had issued plain silver rings to the ten students who wanted to work on becoming Animagi. The date and time were engraved on the inside. Harry had helped her with a parchment charm to make the date and time into a nice flourishing script that scrolled around the inside.

Harry suppressed a sigh at the memory of his own frustration at the session and pretended to be too involved in his own book to respond.

"Boy, I really want to know what animal I am. I think that is the most interesting part," Ron said quietly without lifting his nose from his book.

"You are most likely what your Patronus is, but that isn't always true," Hermione lectured.

"McGonagall's Patronus is a tiger but she's a house cat as an Animagus," Harry commented.

"When did you see Professor McGonagall's Patronus?" Hermione asked, then answered her own question quickly. "Oh yeah, the Dementor attack. How could I forget?"

"Snape have one?" Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. It bothered him to remember. The thought that it might not be possible for Snape to think of anything happy enough to generate one was hard to accept. He frowned and really tried to get into his reading to have something else to think about.

* * *

Harry continued to work hard in his classes, to the point where he was really looking forward to Easter holiday, even though it was still a month and a half away. The advanced D.A. group was starting to hang out more together outside of sessions, everyone except Suze. When she had asked Harry why some of the sixth and seventh-years weren't going to the regular meetings anymore, he had willingly told her. Without knowing her all that well, he found himself trusting her completely. When she had expressed keen interest in joining as well, he had asked Hermione to give her a ring.

They were sitting in the Great Hall when Hermione joined them. "Did you hear?" she asked in a whisper. Obviously, none of them had, so she said, "We are getting eleven Durmstrang students for the rest of the year. Seems they don't have much of an advanced Potions or Defense Against the Dark Arts classes right now, so some of the students wanting to take those are coming here."

"When are they arriving?" Ginny asked with avid interest.

"In a week or so." Hermione looked sideways at Harry, who had the N.E.W.T. preparation study guide in front of his nose. "Did you hear that, Harry?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I heard you," he said in disinterest.

Hermione rolled her eyes and huffed in frustration. The conversation soon returned to Animagia.

* * *

"You have a lot of scrolls to go through," Harry commented to Snape as he stopped in for a visit before dinner. They were all of odd, varying sizes, some with faded gold braid hanging off the wooden dowels.

"Policy documents," he explained. He considered Harry a moment. "The school's board approved my posting as deputy headmaster."

Harry's eyes went wide. "You're the deputy headmaster now?" he asked in wary surprise.

"Yes," Snape confirmed, a little snarkily. "Thinking about getting into trouble?"

"Uh, no," Harry replied quickly. "Better not, I guess."

"That was always true, but perhaps more so, now," he said, as he returned to reading.

Harry lifted one of the smaller scrolls and unwound a foot of it. It was a detailed description of scheduling procedure. He wondered how he could ask for one that would cover what spells were forbidden for students to work on. After rolling that one up neatly, he picked up another. This one was about grounds maintenance. Insomnia would not be a problem with one of these by one's bedside.

"Looking for something in particular?" Snape asked without raising his gaze.

"No. Just curious," Harry lied. "Guess I'll leave you to it."

When he reached the door, Snape said, "Minerva will most likely announce it at dinner tonight."

"Thanks for the warning. My friends will be thrilled."

Snape grinned lightly as he raised his eyes. Harry shook his head and smiled, giving up on his suffering mode.

McGonagall did announce it at dinner and Harry's friends did all turn to him with surprised and, at least one, impressed expression. He just shrugged in return and insisted that he could not have given them much warning.

"Boy," Ron muttered as he served himself roast. "Good thing this didn't all happen years ago, we'd have got both of you expelled."

The others laughed and Harry ducked his head to adjusting his napkin in his lap to hide the twinge; the last six years certainly would have gone differently. He remained withdrawn through the meal, listening to his housemates carry on a spirited discussion of the relative merits of two *Wizard Wireless* performers Bretagne Lancelot and Treegrove Simsdaughter. Idly, as he ate his pudding, he wondered that Snape didn't have a *Wireless* set somewhere in the house. Maybe they did have one; a proper wizard household should.

He was mulling over what a *Wireless* set might look like, thinking over each of several objects in the house which had unclear purpose, so he didn't notice when the table around him fell quiet. Ron uttering, "Sir," a little formally, brought Harry's attention back and he looked up to find Snape standing behind and to the side of him.

"A bit brooding, aren't we, Mr. Potter?" he asked, although the tone didn't match the words, being too concerned.

Harry pushed his glasses on firmly and gave a slight shrug. He couldn't shake the what-ifs that were clawing at his mind right then.

"e's just sad 'cause 'e can't cause trouble no more," Seamus commented with a snicker.

Harry managed to brighten up a bit, although it seemed to hit his pride to do so. He sensed that Snape saw through it, and that made him feel unexpectedly better.

* * *

"All right," Hermione said loudly to get everyone's attention during advanced D.A. "This is the spell. The incantation is *Canarevelatio* but you **MUST** have your animal in mind when you do it. If you can't visualize anything, you aren't supposed to be trying it. Foot is safer than hand, because if you have a wing or something, changing it over might cut off your limb, and that will take some explaining to Madam Pomfrey."

Everyone shuffled a little nervously. But most took out their wand and some also sat on the floor to remove a shoe. Harry sat off to the side watching, hoping no one got hurt doing this. Ginny had her shoe off already and was concentrating hard.

"I'll go first," Hermione said, seeing this. She sat in a chair and closed her eyes for a long minute. She opened them and tapped her foot while speaking the spell. Nothing happened. "Hm," she said. She tried again with no luck. After many attempts, she gave up with a huff. Harry felt a little amused at her expense. Neville tried next, also with no luck. Ginny, finally running out of patience, shouted the spell and whacked her arch hard with her wand. At first Harry thought she had also failed, but Ginny squealed in surprise. Everyone gathered around her. Ron said, "I don't see anything."

"It was there," Ginny insisted. "Feathers. Brown ones with little white stripes. Right about here." Due to the close crowding of students, Harry couldn't see where she indicated.

"Try it again," Ron urged excitedly.

Around the twentieth try, Ginny could reliably change her foot into a bird foot. It looked grotesque sticking off her leg and it faded quickly, morphing back to her own after a few seconds.

Neville said, "I have a bird book. We can look it up later." He was looking over Dean's shoulder at his sketch of what Ginny's foot had looked like.

"I'm next," Ron said brightly. Like the others, he couldn't produce anything.

Several more students tried with no success. Suze went last. "What is your Patronus?" Hermione asked her.

"I can't do one," she said defensively. "I haven't learned that yet. But I've been listening and I want to try."

"Go ahead, then," Hermione said. Harry could hear in her voice that his bright friend assumed nothing would come of it. She had been evenhanded with Suze but Harry suspected she had only agreed to let her in because Harry had asked. She had not been in the regular D.A. long enough, really.

Suze sat on the floor and bent her pale foot toward herself. She sat quietly for a long time before incanting the spell. Even from where Harry was, he could see her foot transform into a little white paw. The room broke out into awed noises.

"What is it?" Ron asked, leaning over to peer at it more closely. It stayed transformed a lot longer than Ginny's bird foot.

"A mink," she replied factually. "That was always my favorite." It finally faded.

"Wow," Hermione said, impressed. "Well you guys are going to have to help the rest of us out. But I think we are done for the night. I have an essay to finish."

General grumbling went around at the thought of uncompleted schoolwork. Hermione turned to Harry, still sitting off to the side. "What about-?" Ron started to say before he cut himself off.

Hermione came over to Harry and sat close beside him. "Don't even want to try?" she asked in a pained voice.

"I'm really rotten at this stuff," he said.

"Harry," she said admonishingly. "Listen to you. You're good at nearly everything. Don't get down on yourself."

"I'm getting an 'A' in Transfiguration. That's all I'm going to get on the N.E.W.T., if I'm lucky. I'm not going to get into the Auror's program." The thought of that made his chest tighten up. He forced himself to breathe deeply.

"They can't keep *you* out of the Auror's program, Harry," Ron said in a disbelieving tone.

Harry stood suddenly and said stridently to his face, "If I don't deserve to be in it, then I shouldn't be." He stalked off, leaving his friends frowning at each other.

* * *

The next day at dinner, Hermione said to Harry, "Why don't you ask McGonagall for help?"

"Like she has time," Harry said smartly.

"She'd make time for you," Hermione said in her talking to an idiot voice. "She now has an assistant, remember? Go ask her after dinner. Do you want me to ask her for you? I don't mind," she offered, sounding ready to jump up just then.

Harry looked defeated as he put his napkin in his lap. The food had not appeared yet, which was a little slow. He wished for it as a distraction.

The doors to the Great Hall opened and a tall young lady wearing Durmstrang student robes and very long black hair stepped in a little uncertainly. She was followed by an Indian girl in the same outfit who had her long hair in a thick braid wrapped around her head. McGonagall was heading down the center of the Hall with her long stride.

"Welcome," she said with broadly spread arms. Three more girls stepped in as the first held the door open.

"What? Are they all girls then?" Ron asked sarcastically.

Harry didn't see it but when he turned, Ron was rubbing his arm as if he had been struck hard on it, presumably by Hermione. McGonagall waved her wand to open both doors, revealing six more students.

"There are boys," Hermione said smartly of the three, stern looking, olive-complected young men standing at the back, two with crossed arms, one with eyebrows like Krum. If Harry had looked at his friend, he would have seen her keenly eyeing him to see where his interest seemed to fall. The first girl who had appeared had caught his eye. He watched her as they stepped up the Hall, glancing at the ceiling and the students with equal interest.

"Please come in," McGonagall said in a very kind voice. She led them to the ends of the tables where the students were far less crowded due to the proximity of the staff table. "Have a seat at any table. I'm sure you're hungry from your journey."

She addressed the whole room. "Everyone, these are visiting students from Durmstrang Institute. They are here to take advanced classes for the rest of the year here at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I expect you all to welcome them and make them feel at home as they settle in." Her eyes took in the room as though trying to pick out all the

troublemakers. She turned and stepped around to the staff table, whose occupants looked as though they were trying to eye the new students without actually appearing to do so.

Food finally arrived after McGonagall returned to her seat. Ron whispered to Hermione and she shushed him sharply. He rolled his eyes in disgust and served himself from the bowl of potatoes that had appeared. Conversation in the Hall didn't return to its previous volume as everyone talked of the new arrivals in muted voices.

At one point the three newcomers sitting with the Gryffindors stood up to peer down the table in their direction. Hermione said to Harry, "You could wave."

"What?" Harry asked, looking up from his study guide, which he was now intent on simply memorizing cover to cover.

She laughed. "Too late." Ron had a smirk on his face. Harry shook his head at both of them in annoyance.

After dinner Hermione left the table quickly, then returned as they were all standing up. At the doors they glanced back at the newcomers gathered in the front being introduced to the staff.

Back in the tower they gathered their books for studying. Hermione came back down from her dormitory and said, "Three new trunks are in our room and more beds have been added."

"That's right," Ron said jealously. "It must have been awfully spacious in there with only three of you with a whole floor."

Hermione just shrugged. "Now it's normal, I think. But it does seem crowded," she admitted.

The portrait hole opened and Professor Sinistra stepped in followed by three of the new students. Everyone in the common room stopped what they were doing and watched them enter. The two longhaired girls were there and a shorter one with a flat topped head of dusty brown hair. She stood like a Quidditch beater might, with a lot of physical confidence.

"Students, we have a few additions for the rest of the year. They will be living with the girls in the seventh-year dormitory." Sinistra gestured over her head for Hermione to step forward. Harry stepped up a riser to get a better view over Ron's shoulder. "Girls, this is Hermione Granger. She is Head Girl and is also in your dormitory. Please come to her with any questions you have." Hermione gave them a smile which was only returned very weakly.

"This is Penelope Tidewater," she said, introducing the tall girl who had led the way into the Great Hall. "Darsha Seth," she said, indicating the Indian girl, who did smile at the room. "And Frina Chuchinick." Frina nodded at the room, her light colored eyes taking everyone in with vague suspicion. "Hermione will show you up to your room. Your trunks are there already."

Harry stepped aside as the group approached. Frina spotted Ron's Prefect badge and shook his hand in what seemed an official way. "Ron Weasley," he said, in an oddly deep voice. Harry had a feeling he was imitating Percy and had to turn away to hide his near laugh.

Ginny and several other girls followed the newcomers up as well. Ron said with some glee, "Well that will put a damper on studying tonight." He turned to Harry and shook his head. "I can't believe . . ."

"What?" Harry asked when Ron had stopped suddenly.

"Uh, that Durmstrang can't teach a decent Defense class," he finished hurriedly. "Hope they like Snape. Seems like their type. No offense intended," he added, touching Harry on the shoulder.

"None taken. I would agree, really. Kind of a stoic bunch."

Ron picked up his bookbag from the floor by the stairs. "I'm sure they'll loosen up once they've been here a while," he said with an unexpected comic certainty. They took seats near the hearth and took out their books.

As predicted, the girls were a long time returning. Hermione and Ginny, when they finally reappeared, came over and sat with them. "They were tired from the train, so they're going to sleep," Hermione said. "They seem nice enough. A little standoffish, maybe, but I'm sure they'll open up once they get to know people," she said reassuringly, oddly echoing Ron.

* * *

The next morning at breakfast, Ron and Harry grew tired of waiting for Hermione to appear and went down without her. Ginny was also apparently helping the new arrivals make their way around this morning because she didn't appear either.

"Girls," Ron breathed in dismay as they exited the portrait hole. "How good do they have to look for breakfast anyway?"

This was the first time in a long time that Harry had been alone with Ron. As they walked down the corridor to the staircases, he swallowed hard and said, "So things are going well with you and Hermione?"

Ron tilted his head from side to side. "Yeah," he answered noncommittally.

Harry frowned. He was really darn curious just how close they were but he had no idea how to ask. He would need an entire evening with Ron to even get near the topic. And maybe a jug of mead as well. With a quiet sigh he let it go for now.

In the Great Hall they took up their normal seats near the center of the table. Neville was already there. He gave them a smile as they sat down. "Where are the others?"

"Who knows?" Ron asked in disgust. "They're girls. It could be HOURS."

Neville laughed. "Luna's not like that."

"Consider yourself lucky," Ron commented as he took an apple out of the basket on the table and bit into it with a loud crunch.

As it turned out, it was just another five minutes. Hermione led the way to the bench across from the three of them and invited the new students to sit. They thanked Hermione politely and sat almost in unison, although it was clear they were not accustomed to stepping over the bench. Penelope had to lift her hair to the side to avoid sitting on it. They took up their serviettes and primly arranged them.

Frina, sitting across from Harry, looked over at him and froze. Harry had to fight a frown as their eyes locked. She nudged Penelope beside her, to no avail, since her friend was discussing the ceiling with Hermione in great detail.

"Hello," Harry said evenly.

"Hello," Frina returned in an accent he didn't recognize. She seemed to recover herself and tossed her head as though she realized she'd been silly. "Very pleased to meet you," she said as though quoting a phrase book.

"Where are you from?" Harry asked.

"Split. That is in Croatia."

"Ah," Harry said, happy to have a geographic reference for the accent.

With a small smile, she nudged her companion, again to no avail.

"Where is your friend from?" Harry asked.

"Switzerland. The German part." She gave Harry a wink.

"Just asking," Harry returned defensively as food appeared before them.

"So much easier than the serving line at Durmstrang," she said. "The Prefects get to get in line first, behind the teachers. It is ridiculous," she complained. She picked up her fork and began eating with the same relish Ron did, slowing down only when her plate was empty and she had to pause to serve herself seconds. When she glanced up at him, she seemed surprised all over again to be across from him.

The conversation about the enchanted ceiling, its spells and history, finally completed. Frina yet again nudged Penelope and asked, "Did you meet my new friend?" Penelope dabbed her mouth and looked across where Frina indicated. With a quirky smile Frina said, "This is Harry Potter. I am pretty sure anyway. I am told he has this scar."

Harry frowned lightly at that and Penelope's shocked expression. She definitely fell into the *he could get dangerous at any moment* category. "Hello," he said.

"Hullo," she returned hesitantly as she stared at him. After a moment she too seemed to realize she was behaving oddly and pushed her shoulders back. "You are, uh, normal looking," she said in a light German accent.

"Thanks," Harry said with a little sarcasm. Beside him, Ron ducked his head.

"I haven't heard that one," he said with amusement. "And it probably isn't true."

Harry addressed his plate a bit more than the students around him.

"I am not intending to be rude," Penelope said evenly, sounding concerned.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, "I should have done introductions. These are my friends. Ginny Weasley. Across from her is Dean Thomas. This is Harry Potter." She ignored the gasp from Darsha on her left. "Ron Weasley, *my* boyfriend. Neville Longbottom. Over here are Dennis and Colin Creevey." The Creevey brothers gave cheerful waves.

"You are friends with the Destroyer of Voldemort?" Darsha quietly asked Hermione in her heavily accented English. It carried well down the table.

"Someone has to be," Ron quipped.

"Ron," Hermione said in such a darkly dangerous voice that Neville instinctively shifted away from his friend in case something bad were about to befall him.

Harry had to resist shooting the new Indian student a dangerous look just to see how she would react. He sighed faintly and pushed his scramble around with his fork, not the least bit hungry anymore. He pushed the plate away and it disappeared. His pumpkin juice sat untouched. He drank it, acutely aware that he was the center of immediate attention.

"I'll see you in class," he said as he stood up to leave. "Nice meeting you all," he said flatly.

At the head table McGonagall watched Harry depart with abnormally slumped shoulders. "Ten points from Gryffindor," she murmured. Snape, in the seat on her right, turned to her in surprise. She stared at her nails in thought as breakfast wound down.

* * *

Two rows of new desks had been added to the Defense classroom. By the time everyone arrived, it was rather crowded. Harry and his friends took the back right section of seats. Especially with the new students, Harry decided he liked being back here and able to watch them all without effort. Penelope and Frina mouthed hellos as they sat down. Hermione responded in a very friendly way. Harry gave them a weak smile. Ron frowned in apparent annoyance, which Harry wondered about.

Snape stepped up to the platform and said, "We may need to find a different room. We'll see how it goes today."

Snape lectured at length about advanced blocking and counter-cursing, much of which they had already covered. Hermione didn't even take many notes. Dean, beside Harry, seemed intent upon this review session as did some of the others who apparently felt weak in it.

"A demonstration then," Snape said, looking over the room. "Who is the strongest among you in this?" he asked the Durmstrang students.

The new students all turned to the tallest boy, who stood up slowly. He had a mop of curly dark hair and a roman nose below his prominent forehead. As he stepped up to the platform, he moved with easy confidence.

"You can do all of the spells I just reviewed, Mr. Opus?" Snape asked him.

"Yes," he responded in his very deep voice.

"Mr. Longbottom," Snape said. "Come up here."

Neville recovered from his surprise and came up. "Me, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, Longbottom." Snape directed him to stand at the other end, ignoring when he almost tripped over his own feet getting into position. "A Figuresempre, an Expellimarius, and a Mutushorum, in that order." He stepped back to get out of the way.

Neville ran through the attacks. Each was blocked easily. "This is the best you have?" Opus asked Snape.

"May I run through them again, sir?" Neville asked, seeming to try not to sound *too* eager.

"No. You may return to your seat."

Neville actually looked like he considered arguing, before he gave in. "I was trying to be polite," he complained as he sat down in the seat ahead of Harry's.

"You know those attacks, correct?" Snape asked Opus. He looked over the class. "Who wishes to block for Mr. Opus?"

Hermione stood up immediately and stepped to the front. Harry sat forward and watched with some nervousness until he noticed Ron didn't look concerned at all. As Hermione stood across from Opus, wand out, the new student said, "I cannot send curses at a lady. We are never required to do this."

"Good chance to get used to it then," Snape stated with false helpfulness. He gestured for him to begin.

Opus lowered his wand hand to his side. "I will not do this."

"What are you concerned about?" Snape asked with impatience. "I am quite certain Durmstrang does not tolerate arguing with the instructor."

Opus cringed and gestured in Hermione's direction. "That she will get injured. She is so small--imagine if her block fails." Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared back at him.

"Mr. Opus," Snape stated, "the two students you have faced, Ms. Granger and Mr. Longbottom, provided blocking for all nineteen students who attacked the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters in the Entrance Hall of this castle. You truly need not worry about her block failing."

The Durmstrang students, especially the three living in Gryffindor, gaped at Hermione. Opus relented with a concerned ripple to his brow. He incanted a very weak Figuresempre which Hermione blocked, barely needing to move her wand.

Snape stepped in a little angrily. To the two other Durmstrang boys, he said, "Either of you willing give Ms. Granger a chance to demonstrate her blocks?" When they merely looked at each other and shrunk down in their seats, Snape huffed. "Mr. Potter, come up here."

Harry got to his feet. The Durmstrang students were whispering avidly amongst themselves as he stepped onto the platform. He followed Snape's gesture for him to take Opus' place and the tall boy stepped over to the wall and leaned against it, holding his wrist in his hand.

"Yes," Snape intoned while eyeing the visitors. "*The* Harry Potter." He stepped back again. "What is your strongest attacking spell?"

"Uh, blasting curse, I guess."

"That then. Full power, Mr. Potter."

At the other end Hermione took a deep breath and concentrated. Harry spelled her with about ninety percent of what he could do. It struck her Chrysanthemum block and scattered around the room, shaking the window panes and desks, even upsetting a stack of books on Snape's front table. She was forced to take a step back as it hit, and she grumbled to herself about that.

"You *are* light, Ms. Granger," Snape commented. "Even a good block will move the caster when it is hit hard. Now, Mr. Opus."

Harry retook his seat, disregarding the stunned expressions of the new students as he walked between their desks. Opus gave it a good show this time, although Hermione looked displeased. She returned to her seat looking dangerous.

A few more pairs went through the spells. The quality of the Durmstrang blocks dropped off after the first five demonstrators. Snape had asked for them to come up in order of skill. Frina was second followed by Penelope and two others. They were each paired at random with a Hogwarts student.

One of the Durmstrang girls Harry didn't know, raised her hand before the next pair was chosen. When Snape acknowledged her, she asked, "Are these all purebloods in this class? Because we are not . . ."

Snape rubbed his forehead and glanced at them all under his hand. They remained silent, waiting to see what Snape would say. "Ms. Travoli, such notions are not acceptable here. Although you may well hear them expressed on very rare occasion by one or two students." He glared at Malfoy sharply as he said this.

He stepped down to the floor of the classroom and stopped before her desk. "What you are seeing isn't breeding or even nurture; it is the end result of two years desperation against overwhelming odds. Eighty percent of what these students know, or most of them anyway, they taught themselves. I am not trying to demonstrate either school's superiority here, I simply need to know where you are to revise the syllabus for this course."

He returned to the platform. "I have every intention of bringing every one of you to the same level at the end of this year. It is going to require a great deal of work on your part, but I see no reason why it is not possible."

The Durmstrang students appeared relieved at that. The next student came up and was paired with Parkinson.

* * *

"Ms. Granger," A familiar voice said as Hermione and Ron walked to lunch. They turned to McGonagall, who stood down a side hallway. "A moment."

Hermione received a sympathetic look from Ron before she stepped over to the headmistress. McGonagall steered her down to Snape's office. As they entered, Snape shelved the book he had been holding and crossed his arms.

"What happened this morning?" McGonagall demanded. Hermione, faced with incriminating Ron, who had only made things more difficult, shrugged. "Ms. Granger," McGonagall prompted dangerously.

She frowned as she replied, "There were two, oh-Merlin-I-can't-believe-it's-him and one he-might-kill-anyone-at-any-moment. Should have warned them, I guess."

Snape's eyes narrowed in thought. McGonagall huffed. "These are some of Durmstrang's best students. They aren't lily-white by any measure."

"We didn't handle it well either," Hermione admitted, spreading the blame around.

"Then you deserved to lose the points you did," McGonagall breathed as an aside.

Hermione's jaw dropped open. She closed it without comment; McGonagall seemed too upset to risk arguing with.

"You will do better?" McGonagall asked with a threatening certainty.

"Yes, ma'am," she replied smartly. "And you are going to start tutoring him in Transfiguration then, right?" Hermione added, leaning forward in anger. Surprised at herself, she backed down immediately. "Sorry Professor, that was out of line." She glanced at Professor Snape and found him looking at her with positive regard.

"He hasn't asked," the headmistress pointed out.

"You're going to have to make him do it," Hermione said. "You know him. He thinks you're too busy, so he won't ask."

McGonagall drew herself up straight. "All right," she said. "I'll do that. And you will take care of the social direction?"

"Yes, ma'am," Hermione replied with confidence. "I think Harry won sympathy points, frankly, so it's probably all right from this morning." She glanced at Snape who had a neutral, thoughtful expression. He hadn't said a word, she realized, as she departed.

* * *

After the last class of the afternoon, they gathered in the Great Hall with the new Gryffindor boarders. The three young Durmstrang ladies settled in quickly and intently to their assignments. Harry found himself across from Penelope. She gave him the occasional considering look, which he ignored as he worked out his Astronomy assignment.

As students arrived for dinner, McGonagall strode in. She tapped Harry on the shoulder and gestured for him to follow her. He obeyed, stepping over the bench and down the aisle. When they were out of earshot, the headmistress said. "You have no D.A. tonight, correct?"

"Uh, correct," Harry replied. They had no official D.A., just Advanced, which he couldn't admit to.

"Bring your Transfiguration books to my office at eight," she said. "Ah, Pomona," she then said to the teacher walking past, turning away from Harry. He blinked at her in confusion as she stepped around the head table, intent upon another conversation.

He sighed and returned to his friends.

"What was that about?" Ron asked. When Harry moved his silver ring to his other hand, the signal that he couldn't make the meeting, Ron said, "Oh."

They put their books and parchments away as dinner arrived.