

Chapter 31 -- Fur and Snow

That evening, Harry gained admittance to the headmistress' office. His bookbag was slung weightily over his shoulder, full of his assigned and self-purchased alternative texts. It made a loud thud when he set it on the floor beside the visitor's chair. As he sat down, McGonagall waved the straight-backed old thing into an overstuffed armchair. He settled in comfortably and sighed. "Are you sure you have time for this, Professor?" Harry asked in concern.

"Tea?" she asked, rather than reply. At his nod, she tapped the teapot and it poured out two cups. As she handed one over, she said, "One of your most endearing qualities, Harry, is that you have never asked for, nor expected, anything in return for eliminating Voldemort." She smiled affectionately at him. "I will never forget the day after, when you insisted that you couldn't read your post because you had assignments to finish."

Harry sipped his tea and wondered what she *had* expected. His furrowed brow must have given him away.

"As opposed," she explained, even more amused, "to insisting on, say, a week off from your studies. Or even a year, frankly."

It was true; he *hadn't* thought of that. Too late to ask for a by on his N.E.W.T.s probably too, he thought darkly. He shrugged instead of responding.

She took her chair and with bright eyes shook her head lightly. "You saved so many students' lives, Harry. And many of ours, as well. Most of us would have traded anything for that, and yet you asked for nothing." She put her teacup down and refilled it. "I am glad Albus insisted on giving you something anyway, although how he ever managed to arrange it is beyond me."

Harry sort of considered that to be between him and Snape, so he didn't comment.

She sipped her fresh cup with pleasure. "I promised you that I would see you through your N.E.W.T.s so that you could gain admittance to the Auror's program, and I intend to follow through with that. Now, where shall we begin? What was the last assignment you had difficulty with?"

"Protasmic Elastic Transformations," Harry stated slowly, as though the words themselves were hazardous.

"It was just a special form of Elastic, which we covered in fifth year," she offered in a helpful tone. His face must have given him away, because her tone dropped as she said, "You didn't understand it then, either."

Reluctantly, Harry shook his head. "And it didn't make more sense the second time around, last week."

In a commiserating tone she said, "That can happen at this level of coursework. You fall a little behind and it escalates until everything is simply too hard to understand."

Harry nodded and dropped his gaze. "And I feel stupid when I don't even know what to ask to get another explanation. I'm afraid I'm just going to waste your time here."

"Oh, my dear Harry," she said with pained affection. "Goodness, imagine my class of all things making you feel less than worthy." She stood up with a rustle of her robes and came around the desk. She stood before him and said, "In the forty years I have been at this school, you are the student who has amazed me the most. You have already passed the most important test of your life--the rest of this is just so many small details. And I *will* get you through them."

* * *

Exhausted and with a History of Magic essay unfinished, Harry made his way back to the common room. Hermione, Ginny, Dean, and Ron were studying in the corner. The new students weren't around.

"That took a while," Ron commented upon seeing him.

"Tell me about it," Harry breathed as he plunked down in a nearby seat. He rubbed his eyes as he pulled out his half-filled essay parchment. It felt like torture to have to complete it, but he had no choice. "How did Ani go tonight?"

"No one made much progress," Hermione whispered. "We read one of the *Animagical* chapters aloud and discussed it, mostly. What do you think of the visiting students?"

"They're all right," Harry answered as he reread the first part of his essay titled *History of laws applying to Trolls and Giants*. He remembered Binns discussing something about them being only allowed to carry weapons that were all wood with no charms. He hadn't mentioned that yet.

"Just all right?" Hermione asked brightly.

Harry shrugged and pulled out his notes.

"Penelope is very pretty," Hermione went on.

Ginny asked, "Does she use something on her face at night? She has the nicest skin."

"I haven't noticed. You could ask her, I'm sure," Hermione said chummily. Harry was writing fast now, desperate to finish, so Hermione dropped the topic.

* * *

During Care of Magical Creatures the next day, Hagrid pulled out the Blue Wombats. They had mated, apparently because there were nearly a dozen small blue creatures which even Harry had to admit were very cute as they slept in their wooden crates. The girls were *obing* excessively as they gathered around, their winter cloaks brushing together noisily.

"Yer going ter be assigned one teh take care o' until the end of term. So find a partner," Hagrid instructed. "Nah, tha' won' do," he said as they chose their normal partners. "Split up a bit and take one o' the Durmstrang students, each a yers."

Hermione bit her lip and hauled Ron over to where the six Durmstrang students in this class were gathered. "Ron, why don't you partner with Opus?" she suggested brightly.

Ron opened his mouth to protest but was cut off by Hermione saying. "Frina, do you want to be my partner?"

"Everyone says you are the smartest in the school . . ." Frina said, sounding eager.

"Great," Hermione said.

Harry wandered over at that moment. "Do you haf a partner?" Penelope asked him, making Hermione bite her bottom lip very hard.

Harry shrugged and said, "No."

"Would you mind?"

Hagrid came by with small crates lined with shredded *Prophets* and *Witch Weeklies*. "That'd be fine," Harry replied levelly. Hagrid handed him a crate, and with one of his massive hands, lifted out a small blue ball of fur. Harry accepted it and placed it in the bedding. It curled up tighter and ignored them all. "What magical properties do these things have?" Harry asked as another was scooped out for Hermione. He watched with trepidation as Malfoy took one out of the big crate and handed it to Parkinson.

"Oh, ye'll find ou' soon enough," their teacher said happily.

Harry froze. Hermione giggled and leaned over to say, "They aren't dangerous, Harry."

"That's no fun," Frina complained, as she prodded theirs gently with her index finger. Her hair turned blue and everyone gasped. A few laughed. "What?" she asked curiously.

Harry heard Parkinson's annoying laugh and looked over at Malfoy whose blond mop had gone to the sapphire. Frina turned as well and her hand immediately went to her own head. "Aye," she breathed. Penelope doubled over in laughter, her delicate fingers half over her mouth. She had a much nicer laugh than Pansy.

* * *

After dinner, they all went up to the attic to check on their wombats. Each pairs' crate sat on the floor along one eve, charmed to prevent anyone else from opening it or even disturbing it. Harry stood aside and let Penelope open the crate. The small blue furball was absolutely still. She peered at it with a tilted head. "You don't think it likes to be touched?" she asked.

"Hermione?" Harry deferred.

"I don't know. The books referring to magic wombats have all been removed from the library." She sounded insulted. "I tried to look up more information with no luck. I think this assignment is about the process of figuring it out for ourselves." She and Frina stared down at theirs as well.

"Do you think it's hungry?" Ron asked. His and Opus' crate was two down from Hermione's. He stepped over to the supplies area where fresh bedding, dog's milk, dried blue corn, and a large mortar and pestle sat on an old heavy table. Hermione came over and the two of them mixed up a bottle with two tablespoons of ground corn as they had been instructed. Ron shook it as he took it back over to the crate and tried to get the wombat to accept it.

Opus crouched across from him. "You not ever lived on farm?"

"No," Ron replied, sounding as Malfoy might if asked the same question.

Opus took the bottle and with practiced motions, used his finger to get the wombat interested in it. It sucked eagerly at it after that. His hair didn't even change color.

"Wow," Penelope said. "It did not look hungry."

Ron looked proudly at his impromptu partner and gave Hermione a smile. The rest of them, with some instruction from Opus, gave all three of theirs bottles. After long minutes when they stopped drinking, they wouldn't give them up again. Harry shrugged and said, "Just leave it inside, I guess," as he picked up the lid and set it in place. He added an additional locking spell to their crate, just in case.

* * *

That night, Harry awoke with a start. He couldn't remember a dream or a shadow, so he wasn't sure why he was awake. He had been sleeping pretty well lately, so he was a little annoyed to be wide awake at three in the morning. As he lay on his back, staring into the darkness, he started worrying about their wombat. Maybe they shouldn't have left the bottle in the crate all this time, he thought. Although, what was the worst that could happen?

With a huff he rolled over and punched his pillow to fluff it, but he was now even more awake. Silently, he slid out of bed and down to his trunk. He hadn't taken out the Marauder's Map to actually use it in a long time. With his invisibility cloak and the Map, he crept out of the room.

The walk to the attic proved rather pleasant; the castle was dark and silent and he felt old comfort in its corridors and halls. Once in the attic, he turned up the oil lamp dangling from the ceiling. The crates in this light resembled coffins, which disturbed him. He stepped down to his, released the spells and lifted the lid before promptly dropping it and jumping back in horrified surprise. Instead of a cute, fuzzy, blue, bear-like thing, there was an oddly monkey-like, furry, blue, winged bat.

As Harry sat beside the crate, catching his breath, it moved its dark skin-covered wing to shade its fox-like head from the light. Harry's panic eased finally and he crouched to lean over the crate and take a better look. The bottle was still there, about half-full. He really needed to take it out, it almost certainly had gone sour. Because the chimneys ran up through the room, the attic was warm all the time, which would certainly have spoiled the milk. Bracing himself and wincing, he reached in with two fingers and plucked the bottle out without disturbing the occupant of the crate. He exhaled in relief and sat back to think. He and his partner now knew something none of the other groups knew, but what did it mean?

He decided that he needed to know what kind of bat it was. With the cloak and Map he nipped down to the library and brought back a book on flying mammals. Other than being blue, it looked an awful lot like a Livingstones fruit bat, which according to the entry could have a wingspan of six feet. Harry tried hard to imagine that and failed. This one was a lot smaller, but then it also was young.

He headed down the kitchens on a hunch and had Dobby put together a basket of fruit, including lots of blueberries, which he took back to the attic. He had left the crate open and had a bad moment before he found his bat hanging from the rafter above its crate. It blinked at him, turning its head this way and that to look him over. Harry dimmed the lamp and offered it different fruit, one kind at a time. It expressed some interest in the blueberries, but mostly it just dropped them on the floor. The orange it took up eagerly when Harry handed it a slice. Using the hooks on the bend in its wings as hands it quickly chewed down the wedge, sucking at the juice before dropping the remains. Harry gave it another.

It ate three-quarters of an entire orange before refusing the next slice. Harry tossed the peel and masticated wedges back in the basket along with every last stray blueberry. Lastly, he needed to put the wombat-bat back away. He looked at the crate in thought before emptying the bedding and putting just a little in one end. It took a little awkward coaxing but eventually he got the bat to hang on the inside of the crate, which he placed on the floor on its end before attaching the lid. He put on extra protective spells and took the basket away.

* * *

Yawning, Harry went down to breakfast. He intentionally sat across from Penelope, who gave him a casual good morning. "We should check our wombats before class, so eat fast," Harry said and then winked at Penelope. She blinked at him in surprise before returning to her plate, befuddled.

Later in the attic, Harry moved in first to reset the crate before anyone saw it, then stalled a bit to let the others get involved in their wombats, changing bedding and bottles. Penelope gave him a concerned look as Harry held the lid just cracked and waited until no one was watching. He put his finger to his lips as he opened it.

Inside wasn't what he was expecting either. Penelope almost gasped, but clamped it off. Inside was a much larger wombat, one with orange tiger stripes. Harry nodded to the corner where spare crates were kept. Penelope went over and picked out a larger one, filled it with bedding and brought it back. Using his body to block the view, Harry moved the sleeping form from one to the other before covering the new one. In rapid, covert silence, they put together a bottle and gave it to the creature before re-closing the lid.

"I have to recheck my essay before class," Harry announced in general. Hermione made a noise of acknowledgment as she and Frina tried to get their wombat to take a bottle. Theirs and Ron's were exactly the same as they'd been the day before. With a wag of his eyebrows at Penelope, Harry left. After a moment, Penelope followed, saying a quick goodbye to her friends.

"What did you do?" she asked when they were on the stairs.

"It was kind of an accident. Not a bad one," he said quickly. "Last night I couldn't sleep so I came up to check on it and . . ." he waited for a cluster of third-years to pass, several of whom said hello to Harry. ". . . you wouldn't believe what I found." He patted his chest at the memory of his racing heart.

"Vat?" she whispered eagerly, accent thickening.

They were at the portrait hole and waited as students came out of it. "I have to get my books for class," Harry said as they stepped through. The common room had a few mingling students in it. "Come up to the boy's dormitory," he said, thinking they could talk freely since it would be empty.

She looked shocked.

"Or . . . not," Harry retracted, a little amused. "Boy's can't go up the girl's staircase, but the reverse doesn't apply. A bit suspicious, I think," he said. "We can talk after classes then. We'll find someplace," he said dismissively and started up.

"It is really okay?" she asked uncertainly from the base of the stairs.

"Hermione has to come up all the time to get Ron moving some mornings," Harry said.

With a glance at the other students in the room, who weren't paying any attention, she followed. Harry then hoped the room wasn't a total mess. He opened the first door and stepped in. It wasn't as bad as it could be.

She looked all around curiously, especially at Dean's football posters. "Dis is a Muggle poster," she commented.

"Dean is Muggle-born," Harry explained offhandedly as he tossed a pair of Neville's socks onto his closed trunk lid.

"Both of his parents?" she asked in surprise.

"Far as I know. Hermione's the same."

That surprised her even more. She stepped around the ends of the beds. "Dis one is yours?" she asked. Her eyes moved avidly over the stuff on the night stand, the poster on the wall. "Do you play Quidditch?"

"Seeker."

She looked at him doubtfully. "You are too tall."

"I didn't used to be. No one told me to change positions for this year."

"No, I don't suppose dey would," she commented. Beside he and Ron's shared window, Ron had pinned up a few *Daily Prophet* articles regarding the final battle. She leaned over to look at the photo of him in the entrance hall. "It is de same picture as de chocolate frog card," she observed.

Harry could barely stand to look at that picture now. "Blue wombats," he said to draw her away. When she turned with a curious look, he said, "What I found last night at three in the morning was a real bat in our crate. What looked like a Livingstones fruit bat, except blue."

"Hm," she said. "Guess you couldn't come and get me."

He shook his head. "On a hunch I went to the kitchens and brought back fruit for it. It ate most of an orange, hence the stripes, I think. And it's phenomenal growth, too, I suppose."

"Wow. We should check again tonight. Three a.m. we meet in the common room?"

"Sure. We have to get to Potions, as much as I hate saying that." He turned to check the contents of his bookbag sitting beside the bed. Penelope headed out on her own. When she was gone, he unrolled the Auror's application that was slowly being crushed in the side pocket. He rolled it back up and stuffed it in the drawer of the night stand.

Harry and Penelope met up with the rest of their friends in the Entrance Hall. They headed down to the dungeon together. "Not your favorite?" Penelope asked Harry as she, Hermione, and Frina sat at a bench. Greer wasn't there yet but they were a little early.

"It never has been," Hermione said consolingly. "Though I don't know what Professor Greer has against you, Harry."

"I think I do," Harry said, remembering lunch the first day she arrived.

"You guys just didn't hit it off." Hermione commented.

"And we won't ever. She tried to get Severus fired," Harry said quietly.

"You didn't tell us that," Hermione said in a slightly blameful tone.

"You are referring to Professor Snape?" Frina asked in confusion. "You refer to your teachers by first name?" she asked in horror.

Harry shrugged. "The headmistress keeps telling me to call her 'Minerva'."

Hermione said, "Harry's special," with a broad grin. "And after the years of suffering in Snape's Potion class, he deserves it."

"Professor Snape used to teach Potions?" Penelope asked.

"Yep," Harry replied. "In fact he graded your school's O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. tests this past year."

"Did he?" Hermione asked with keen interest. Harry nodded in confirmation.

"It is too bad he cannot teach both," Frina said stoutly. "I like Professor Snape. He treats girls and boys the same." Penelope gave her friend a distressed look.

"There's a reason to like him," Hermione quipped in disbelief, garnering a difficult look from Harry.

Greer stomped in at that moment and conversation stopped.

By the end of double Potions, Penelope and Frina were very concerned. In the corridor on the way out, with Darsha trailing behind, Penelope said, "She is totally unfair to you."

Harry shrugged it off. "I have too many other things to worry about. And my N.E.W.T. grade is all that matters."

"I hope she grades *us* fairly," Frina said worriedly. "What do you think?" she asked Darsha.

"I liked the lecture," she replied. "Her pomposity does not matter." She gave Harry a measuring look when their eyes met. He ignored it.

"Bring her a present or something. Get on her good side," Harry suggested.

"Good idea," Hermione confirmed.

"We will do that at lunch," Frina said. "We have a few things we brought to give as presents, but your headmistress did not seem to expect any so we still have them."

* * *

Late that night, Harry went down to the common room without his cloak or Map. Penelope was waiting before the fire. He stepped over, making her jump.

"Sorry," Harry said.

She patted her chest and caught her breath. "I didn't hear you." She stood up and put on her cloak. Harry thought she looked a little sad.

Outside the portrait hole, he asked, "Are you glad you came to Hogwarts?"

"Very. Durmstrang lost many staff last year, so even de end of last year's classes were cancelled or not taught well. You were very lucky here. In one way," she added quickly. "I keep forgetting who I am conversing with," she said, half to herself. As they rounded the first corner, she said, "You are not at all as one would expect you to be."

"No?" Harry prompted. He wasn't sure he wanted to cover this topic, but he was a little curious what she meant by that.

She thought a moment. "You are not as . . . grand, I suppose is de word. Quieter than I have expected."

"Keeping low was important for staying alive," Harry pointed out.

"Very true," she agreed quietly. Harry sensed there was something there but didn't feel he could pry at it.

Up in the attic they opened the crate and found the same striped wombat as before, although it looked a little bigger than this afternoon.

"It is too cute to not pet," she said, reaching into the box to touch it on the head. Her long black hair turned blue striped with orange. She pulled her hair around and examined it with her other hand. "Hah," she breathed, but continued to pat the creature on the head.

"If your skin changes, maybe you should stop," Harry suggested in concern, taking a seat on the floor nearby.

Silence descended for many minutes, until Penelope said in an odd voice that sounded closed in by the low attic, "What was it like, destroying Voldemort?"

Harry tilted his head to the side and didn't reply. He noticed the strips in her hair oscillating a bit when she spoke.

"You did kill him, right? That isn't just a story?" she asked a little stiffly.

"Oh, yes," Harry said. "I had a little help, of course. My friends kept his followers at bay long enough for me to do it."

She shook her head. "De news reports said you were fulfilling some prophecy. Is dat why you were trying? Otherwise you were merely insane to try. You don't look like someone who could defeat such a powerful wizard."

"It was insane," Harry admitted, feeling the honesty of that relaxing him. "I'm amazed I succeeded when I think back on it. But I couldn't not try. He was there to kill me."

She lifted the wombat out and cradled it on her arm. Harry held his breath, afraid something bad might happen. It seemed to be asleep. "Don't move much, do they," Harry observed.

"I think it is a lovely thing. Like a baby bear." She held her hand out to check it for color. Seeing it normal she petted the wombat more. "Were you taking revenge when you killed him?" she asked.

Harry looked her over. He couldn't shake the notion that she sounded hopeful. Her hair definitely rippled that time. "No. I would have died had I tried."

"I don't understand."

"I don't want to explain."

She looked up. "I'm sorry. I'm too curious. It is easy to talk to you, which is very strange. You are so ordinary."

Harry grinned at that. He stood up and with a sigh, said, "I'd like to be." He went to the supplies table and put together two bottles. He had kept an orange from breakfast in his pocket. "I want to try something," he commented. He squeezed the orange into one of the bottles and brought them both over. She lifted the wombat to put it back in the crate; it clung to her robes with a kind of desperation.

Harry reached over and unhooked its broad claws so she could put it down. It pawed the bedding when she released it. "It wants something to hold on to," she said, sounding very concerned. She stood up and took off her cloak.

As she wrapped it into a tight bundle, Harry said, "You're going to use that?"

"I think it will like the fur collar." She put a few charms on it to keep it clean and untorn and stuffed it beside the wombat, down into the bedding. The creature grabbed the furry side and pulled itself over to it. "Zeems to like it." She looked up at him. "Harry?"

Harry had fallen into a trancelike state of memory. "Don't mind me," he said quietly, mentally shaking himself. He saw the bottles he had set beside the crate and picked up the orange-tinted one. "I want to see if it still wants some fruit." The two of them coaxed it to take the bottle and it happily went to it. "I assume it wouldn't eat it if it shouldn't," Harry said. "You think?" he asked her.

She lifted a shoulder. "Probably would just annoy it to switch back and forth to test."

By silent consensus they closed the lid again and left it there.



Chapter 32 -- Applying Oneself

It was a cold, windy day for the Slytherin-Ravenclaw match. Harry was very glad they weren't playing as he and his friends mounted the steps up to the stands. They emerged in a brisk breeze that froze his cheeks. He wrapped his new cloak tightly around himself as he sat between Ron and Penelope.

"For which side are you cheering?" Penelope asked.

"Oh . . ." Harry said and hesitated.

Ron's head snapped around at his indecision and he glared at Harry. "Don't tell me . . ." he breathed in annoyance.

"I like Suze. I wouldn't mind if she caught the Snitch," Harry explained calmly.

Ron grumbled but it sounded vaguely conciliatory.

The Gryffindor stands were backing Ravenclaw, so Harry kept his cheering for the Slytherin Seeker quiet. Roody, the Ravenclaw Seeker was around Harry's size and he was having a very hard time keeping up. Harry could see him deciding to just play his own game and ignore his pale, feather-light opposite.

The Slytherin Chasers, whom Harry had not had time to watch last game, were really very good. And very violent, rarely swerving out of the path of an opponent who tried to cut them off. Sometimes they would just take a bludger to the body rather than lose an offensive setup. Quickly the score was fifty to ten. The green-clad Beaters then focused on Roody, who could not handle both the violent harassment and his agile opponent. He let himself be forced farther out of the pitch area, where it was not impossible the Snitch was hovering, but it was unlikely.

Forty-five minutes into the match, the crowd rose to its feet as Suze turned and dove for the snitch. Roody was too far away but he turned anyway and sped toward the center of the arena. The Snitch dodged twice, but Suze stayed right with it and snagged it easily out of the air.

The Slytherin stands erupted into cheers. Harry grinned. Ron gave him a disgusted look as the crowd drew in its breath and shouts of warning went up. Harry turned in time to see Roody careen into Suze, unable to slow in time from his mad dive. Harry stiffened at the sound of the collision of bodies and brooms. Without forethought he dashed for the stairs and took them three at a time. Other spectators were also pouring onto the pitch.

When Harry arrived where the teams were landing, Suze was trying to stand up and her teammates were urging her to stay put. Roody was rubbing his elbow with a pained frown. Harry grabbed the front of his jersey and demanded, "What did you bloody well think you were doing?"

Roody gaped at him in complete shock and Harry released him with a small shove. Everyone around them quieted, waiting to see what might develop. Snape arrived and ordered Suze to sit down on the frozen grass to await Madame Pomfrey. Ron grabbed Harry's arm and tugged him away from the Ravenclaw team. "Hey there, mate. No fighting," he said in a strangely amiable tone. Hermione was giving him a very soft look.

Harry tried to justify his reaction. "She's too small, Roody should have been more careful."

"Harry, it's Quidditch," Ron stated as if that covered it.

Harry glanced back. A witch and a wizard he did not recognize were crouching beside Suze, fussing over her despite her protestations. Harry studied Suze's very ordinary looking parents as the crowd pressed in, blocking the view.

They walked slowly back to the castle. "You were starting a fight?" Penelope asked Harry.

"Wasn't trying to," Harry replied.

Ron supplied with a crooked grin, "Harry was just standing up for his date from the Christmas Ball.

Penelope blinked at that. "She is so young, no?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I was *ordered* to find a dance partner for the ball," he griped, trying to close the topic. "It wasn't a date."

Ron, still in a teasing mode, went on, "So he picked the girl that would make the teachers least happy with him."

"I had a nice time," Harry said defensively. "So did she."

* * *

Hermione found herself cornered on the way to Advanced D.A., of all times. "Ms. Granger," McGonagall intoned before opening her classroom door and inviting Hermione inside. Hermione followed and kept her face neutral as she waited for McGonagall to speak.

"How are things going?" the headmistress asked. "I had Harry to my office for tutoring just an hour ago, but I could not read him this evening."

"Pretty good, I think," Hermione said. "He is partnered with one of the new students on a Care of Magical Creatures project. Penelope. I get the sense that they've talked a little."

"Good," she breathed. "Harry, of all people, should not feel left out." She gestured that Hermione could leave.

Hermione hurried down to the Room of Requirement. She was now firmly determined to make Harry try the Canarevelatio spell today.

While the rest of the students worked on building what the book called membrane energy, Hermione cornered her friend. "Try for me, please," she pleaded. When he frowned, she pulled out the big guns. "Your father would be so proud of you, following in his footsteps." She held her breath. That was either going to work, or backfire badly.

Harry huffed and sat on the side bench to take off his shoe. Ron, seeing this, came over and sat beside him. Harry incanted the spell on his right foot. Nothing happened. When he shrugged, Hermione insisted chastisingly, "Try again." Harry did so, many times, still with no result.

Suze came over as well and stood beside Hermione, who said, "Maybe you are thinking of the wrong animal. What are you thinking of?"

"A stag, like my father and my Patronus," he said, a little annoyed despite them all trying to help.

Suze, in her lilting voice, said, "Just think of your spirit. That is what I did."

Harry's brow furrowed as he considered that. He scratched his head and thought a long time. Images of himself as various things flitted through his mind: Fawkes, a stag, a dog like Sirius. He tried to imagine himself as something else, though not anything in particular, as an essence, maybe, and spoke the spell.

"Whoa!" Ron exclaimed.

Harry looked down at his foot, which was now a big paw except scarlet furred. Bright scarlet. He was afraid to touch it, just stared at it, waiting for it change back, fearful it might not.

"What is that?" Hermione said reverently as she crouched to look it over. When she reached out to touch his foot, he jerked it instinctively away. "I'm not going to hurt you, Harry," she chastised him.

"It just bothers me," he explained. His foot morphed back at that moment and he breathed out a deep sigh.

"Let's see it again," Dean said.

"No," Harry said. "I saw it enough."

Over the groans of disappointment, Hermione said, "Come over and start working on your membrane energy. Come on," she urged, tugging on his arm which forced him to follow.

* * *

McGonagall stepped into the Defense classroom between sessions. She held out a rolled parchment to Snape. "I took the liberty of checking with the Ministry if Mr. Potter had applied." She waited for him to unroll the blank form. "I apologize if I have overstepped my bounds but I have an old promise I feel obliged to uphold and the application period is only open one more week. I have hopes for his N.E.W.T. result, but perhaps he doesn't. I will leave it to you."

"Thank you, Minerva," Snape said. "Perhaps there is one thing more you could do . . ." he added, as she moved to the door.

Harry inevitably stopped by, that evening in fact, as Snape worked in his office. "Sit down," Snape said to him.

Harry, caught a little off-guard by the tone which was more businesslike than expected, obeyed slowly as he tried to think of what he could be in trouble for. Snape waved the door closed and stepped before his desk, arms folded.

"Do you wish to apply for the Auror's program?" Snape asked him.

"Yes," Harry replied automatically. "I still have time, right?"

"Yes. Not much, however," Snape pointed out. "May I inquire what the delay is caused by? Clearly you won't be certain of your N.E.W.T.s until months after the deadline."

Harry looked away as he thought up an answer. When he didn't reply right away, Snape said, "Is it caused by your inability to know for certain that you have rightfully earned a spot?"

"Maybe," Harry hedged. He hadn't given it a terrible amount of thought, just kept putting it off.

"I have taken the liberty of having Headmistress McGonagall contact Ms. Tonks regarding your concerns. We have been assured by her that your application will be treated with as ordinary regard as possible. Also, that should you qualify, your testing will be equally as rigorous as your peers'."

Harry considered that. At one level, their interference bothered him, but at another he felt relieved. Snape reached into his pocket and pulled the application out. "Why don't you fill it out right now?"

Harry accepted the rough brown parchment. He hadn't filled in anything on his own copy, so starting again was all right. With one hand he flattened out the sheet on his lap as he reached in his bag for a quill. Snape set a bottle of ink on the edge of the desk for him to use. After pulling his chair closer to use Snape's desk for writing, Harry considered the many blank boxes. The questions at the end had seemed as daunting as when he had first looked it over.

"Certainly the first line does not present a problem," Snape commented snarkily.

Harry shot him a slightly annoyed look and filled in his name. It felt like he was gaming it already just with that. He kept Snape's reassurances in mind as he filled in his basic contact information, including the address in Shrewsthorpe, and date of his N.E.W.T. testing. He left the score boxes blank since the date was in the future. He willed those blanks to be filled in with the proper number of Os and Es when the time came.

Below the basic data were large, fancily-framed boxes. The first one said, *Describe in 500 words or less why you wish to pursue a career as an Auror.* Snape considered him as he thought this over. He stepped around to the back of the desk and sat in his chair. As he steepled his fingers before him, Snape said, "Perhaps you should answer the last question first. The answer to the first one may flow from that."

Harry uncurled the parchment to reveal the last blank space. *Please include below any other details you would like considered with your application.* Harry stared at that with a vaguely floating feeling that was not very conducive to writing.

Snape's voice interrupted his pointless musings. "When did you decide to become an Auror?"

"When I found out there was such a thing. Nothing else has seemed remotely interesting since then," Harry replied. "I met Tonks and the others. They enjoyed what they were doing. They were always involved in whatever was going on." Always knew *what* was going on, Harry thought wryly. "Whatever they are assigned, always has some kind of meaning."

"I would not go that far," Snape commented from his leaned back position in his chair. "But your point is a valid one, nonetheless. All good material for the first box."

Harry shifted the parchment up and forced himself to rephrase what he had just said. It looked pale to him, but he had to put something down. "Do you think I should be applying?" he asked, looking for reassurance.

"Harry, if I didn't think it utterly unfair to do so, I would talk you out of it."

Harry blinked at him in surprise. "Why?"

Snape's hair had fallen half over his face as he stared over his steepled fingers. "Because it is a very hazardous occupation." He frowned inwardly and sighed.

"You don't think I'm used to that?" Harry asked.

"Perhaps too much so." Snape fell silent a long time before he said, "Promise me something, Harry."

"Of course."

"Never let your guard down," he said simply, then after a slight pause he went on in his earlier, generally helpful tone, "The second box asks about special skills, does it not?"

Harry made himself check the answer to this. "Yes," he said. He swallowed as he thought about that. "I'm resisting writing Parseltongue," he said. "As well as pointing out that I see Death Eaters in my vision at the edge of sleep."

"You have unique insight into the Dementors," Snape said.

"Don't you think they know that?"

"If you wish to be treated as an ordinary applicant, you must behave as one and assume they know nothing."

Harry managed to write something down to the effect that since he had temporarily been part of the Dementors' mind web, that he understood them rather better than the average wizard. He thought over his other skills. Seeker wasn't very meaningful, although his skill on a broom might be, in general. He wrote that down, trying to make it sound Quidditch-neutral.

After Harry paused again in thought, Snape commented, "Certainly you have more than two skills." At Harry's shrug he said, "Did you include your ability to teach spells to others?"

"Do you think they care?"

"It is rarer than you realize. Probably worth noting." As Harry added it, Snape said. "You are adept at Occlusion."

"Good one," Harry said, adding that with confidence.

"You pick up new spells quickly," Snape said.

Harry noted that, trying hard not to sound cocky in the phrasing. The list looked pretty good. "Last box," Harry said, considering his answer. "I suppose saying that I wouldn't know what else to do with myself wouldn't be the best thing."

"Do you have a backup plan?" Snape asked.

"No. Do you think I should?"

"For your own flexibility only. There is no chance they will turn you down for the program," Snape said evenly.

"I thought you said—" Harry said with ready offense.

Snape sat forward suddenly and interrupted him sharply. "You are consummately qualified, Potter—that is why you will not be turned down." Harry could hear plainly how Snape regretted that notion. His guardian went on, "If you are not qualified, no one is." He sat back again and stared at the far corner of the ceiling. "Use the last box to list the dark wizards you have survived battling, captured, or outrightly killed."

Harry couldn't read the tone Snape had used to say that. "Do you think I'll get past the first stage if I don't?"

"Most likely."

"Maybe I won't then."

"Your fellow applicants certainly would."

Harry stared at the blank space. "It would take a while to work it out." At Snape's snarky expression, Harry said, "I didn't mean it that way."

"The result is the same. Start from the beginning, if you must."

"How about from the vilest down?" Harry quipped in his own snarkiness. At Snape's accented shrug, Harry frowned, he found he couldn't just write, *I have fought the following dark wizards*, followed by a list. "I can't just write them out."

"Why not?"

Quietly, Harry replied, "Because I wish none of it had happened."

Snape rubbed his forehead before tossing his hair back and staring at the ceiling. "Why are you applying for this apprenticeship again?"

Feeling more uncertain than he ever had about it, Harry admitted, "I'm not sure."

"You need to figure it out," Snape commented levelly.

After a long pause, Harry asked, "Can I sleep on it?"

Snape ignored this plea. "What does Nymphadora Tonks have that you do not?" he asked.

That was a good question, Harry thought. He pulled off his glasses to rub his eyes as he pictured her going about her duties. "Control of her destiny?" he finally suggested.

Snape considered that at length before he said, "We should all be so lucky, Potter."

Pleading ever so slightly, Harry said, "I'm doing this because I want to. Not to stay alive . . . or to preserve everything that matters," he finished grimly.

"I would not recommend writing that," Snape commented.

"It *is* the other side of 'what else would I do with myself?'" Harry added and laughed painfully. He looked down at the parchment and sighed. "I don't feel so bad now about not starting this sooner."

"I really think you should list who you have faced and be done with it; it speaks for itself," Snape said. He pulled out his wand to make tea as he spoke.

"If I didn't become an Auror, what do you think I could do?"

"Aside from follow the path Lockhart so clearly blazed for us all and sell books with yourself on the cover, perhaps teach, since you show promise for that."

Having never considered that, Harry gave it due consideration now. "But you have the job I'd want," he pointed out, amused. Snape poured tea for them both with a momentarily alarmed expression. Harry assumed it was a put-on and laughed lightly. As he accepted the cup he said, "I do want to get away from this place."

"You should. And I am not just saying that because of my lack of confidence in which of us McGonagall would choose for this position, if faced with the choice."

Harry watched him top up his tea. A surge of gratitude at having a guardian flowed through him. His friends were scheming their flight from this place, making it clear by their optimism that they would not look back, nor feel much consideration for others not so well set up with plans. At the end of the year, he would essentially be left entirely to himself were it not for the wizard sitting before him.

"Shall I list them for you?" Snape asked, breaking Harry's reverie.

"I can." Harry did as he said he couldn't stand to do, and began listing. "Quirrell, Voldemort, Tom Riddle, Peter Pettigrew, Barty Crouch Jr. . . ."

"Sirius Black," Snape suggested. At Harry's disapproving look, he added, "The Ministry would count him."

Harry shook his head and re-dipped his quill, surprised to find only a ghostly ache where there had once been a gaping wound. He blinked at the parchment and waited for a moment of regret to pass before he returned to his task. "The twelve at the Ministry, Voldemort again so I won't list it, especially since I'm certain I would have been toast if Dumble-

dore hadn't shown up. Malfoy and company, which is a subset of the Ministry . . ." Harry looked up as he thought about that. "Anything happened with the other two, Avery and Jugson?"

"The Ministry thinks they have gone to ground permanently, although they are still looking." Snape studied his fingernails as he added, "Next to Crabbe and Goyle, they were the least effective members of the Dark Lord's inner circle."

Harry had forgotten about them. He forced himself to list them too. It was a long list. He glanced back at the first box. "Should I add that I think I would be good at it?"

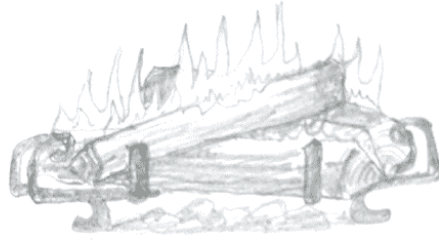
"No, because I think they will be spending the first year beating overconfidence out of you. That is only a guess, of course, based on interacting with many Aurors over the years. I certainly *hope* they will be doing so."

Harry left it off. He folded it up and took the envelope Snape offered. He copied the address from the top of the application onto the front and sealed it. Holding it in both hands, he said, "Is my detention over then?"

Snape raised an amused brow. "Yes."

Harry hesitated in the doorway as he considered how to thank Snape for putting his own inclinations aside. "Thank you, sir," he said simply.

Snape nodded as he returned to his earlier work.



Chapter 33 -- Old Wounds

A few weeks went by. Harry and Penelope had to change crates yet again as their wombat grew. It now ate fruit exclusively and it started resist returning to its crate. Dean accused them of using a larger crate just to make people wonder. They had to choose times to take care of it when others weren't coming up to check on their own projects. As they arrived one night during dinner time, Malfoy was just leaving. He looked angry and his whole hand was blue.

They went through the now-practiced procedure, using less bedding this time since they didn't have a larger crate, and it was crowded, which the creature didn't seem to mind. As they worked, Harry could not keep his mind off Malfoy's wombat. His eyes kept straying over to Malfoy and Parkinson's crate in the corner. He felt bad that he had forgotten his concern when he had first watched them take one.

As they closed the lid on their crate, Harry stepped over to the far one. "Want to check on it?" Penelope said from behind him.

"Yeah." He ran a long string of curse breaking spells on the crate, getting two flashes on random ones as the spells released. Then a series of unlock spells, which revealed nothing.

"Wow," Penelope breathed after the long series ceased.

Harry lifted the lid. Inside was something similar to a chrysalis. "What is that?" he asked aloud. The stiff skin of it rippled as something inside moved. Unnerved, Harry closed it and respelled it. "It's in some kind of defensive mode, I guess." He felt badly for it.

"What can we do?"

"Complain to Hagrid. I'll do that after class tomorrow."

* * *

Greer stalked around the classroom as they brewed. She paused beside their bench and peered into Frina's cauldron appraisingly. "More heat," she stated smartly.

Frina moved quickly to adjust the flame. Greer then eyed Harry's potion while he mostly ignored her. "And we are not allowed to say anything negative about Mr. Potter's potion," she said quite snidely.

Harry held off just barely on rolling his eyes or just snarling at her. His expectation that she'd grow bored of this theme had proved wrong. Clearly either his guardian or McGonagall had spoken with her at some point. He continued to ignore his teacher as he ground beetle wings into the finest powder that one could ever manage. Luckily, she had stopped asking him questions as well and he hoped it was because he almost never got them wrong. Padma fell under the teacher's unrelenting scrutiny next. She added too much rat brain powder and a cloud of noxious grey smoke mushroomed from her cauldron. The Slytherins jeered in whispered singsong and Padma looked as though she wanted to knock her setup onto the floor. Greer waved the contents away with a falsely sympathetic grin.

"Poor dear, perhaps next time," Greer said.

Padma bit her lip and took out her notes and sat down to review for the remainder of the session. The rest of them shared pained looks.

"She is too soft," Frina stated sadly.

"Greer is too--" Hermione began, sounding unusually vicious, but was cut off by the teacher asking her a question that was not in the reading, but she answered it correctly anyway. Under her breath after Greer turned to praise the Slytherin potions and assign them some points based on her praise, Hermione said, "If nothing else, we will ace our N.E.W.T.s if we survive this class."

* * *

"Don' worry, Harry," Hagrid said when he and the gamekeeper were in his cabin after class. "Can' really harm 'em. Yer weren' supposta look yeh know. Tha's cheating."

"We were worried about it," Harry explained.

"Ah, yer a softhearted one, Harry. Have time fer a spot o' tea?" Hagrid asked, lifting the big bucket off the fire to take it to the pump out back.

"Not really. I'm going to be late as it is for double Defense."

Harry ran to the Defense classroom and still arrived five minutes after the start, which Snape pointed out as he entered.

"You took five points from Slytherin last time I was late," Malfoy complained.

"You are correct," Snape said, "Five points from Gryffindor," he breathed and gave Harry a look that dared him to challenge it.

Harry frowned and sat down, but Penelope gave him a sympathetic smile which made it all right. The dark look she gave Snape after, made him a little uneasy.

After class Harry went to the front and said quietly, "I was talking to Hagrid about something important."

"You should have done it later. I have to be hard on you, or I could lose control of the class," Snape said.

"Or at least the Slytherin part of it," Harry commented with a sly grin.

"Perhaps you will do me a favor next session," Snape said as he flipped through the parchments that had been turned in.

"After *that*?" Harry asked with false sharpness.

Snape touched him on the arm and said with a small smile, "Yes, after that. I want to split the room up to cover two different things next week during the double session. Can you and Ms. Granger cover the examination review for the regular students, while I cover curse detection for the Durmstrang students? The Durmstrang students are not taking end of term examinations and it is a good chance to catch them up.

"Sure," Harry conceded.

Snape reached into the drawer of the desk and took out a roll of parchments tied with black ribbon. "Here are my notes for the term. Please don't lose them. Starred topics will be tested. Don't show that to anyone but Ms. Granger."

Harry nodded and put it in his bookbag. He said goodbye and stepped away, surprised to find Penelope hovering by the door, apparently waiting for him. "Thank you, Harry," Snape said as Harry crossed to the door.

"No problem, sir," he replied over his shoulder. Penelope followed him out, looking concerned.

In the corridor, when they had almost reached the portrait hole, she said in a low voice, "Professor Snape was good friends with Headmaster Karkaroff, you know."

"I wouldn't have said, 'friends'," Harry returned. They walked in silence until Harry led the way into the common room where they joined Ron and Hermione. Penelope appeared to wish to say more. "Don't hold back because of them," Harry said to her.

"What's up?" Hermione asked in concern.

"She is trying to warn me about Professor Snape, insists he was friends with Igor Karkaroff."

"Oh," Hermione snipped. She gave Penelope a pained smile. "Don't wade into that," she suggested.

Penelope gave her a dark look before ranting, "He was evil. You don't know how bad it was when he came back. It was a nightmare. He caused so many to die. And anyone who was with him, with Voldemort, well . . ." She looked them all over sharply, eyes bright. As she spun away to leave, Ron caught her with one of his long arms and dragged her back. "Let me go," she protested.

"Sit down," Ron said, exchanging places with her, so he was standing, holding her down in the chair by her arms.

Harry stared at Penelope's distressed face. She had her long hair pulled over her shoulder and ran her hands over it repeatedly in a form of self-comfort.

"Stay," Ron said before releasing her.

"It was terrible. Everyone took sides. Some took Karkaroff's because they thought he would restore order. They foolishly believed him." A tear dropped out of her right eye. She rubbed it away angrily. "It is so much nicer here. The place where Voldemort came himself. I don't understand."

"That was mostly Dumbledore's doing," Hermione said. "He worked hard to keep the outside world at bay." She glanced at Harry and they shared a frown.

Harry said, "Professor Snape is my adoptive father. He isn't a dark wizard. Even if he did know Karkaroff from way back."

She stared at him in surprise. "Dis is true?" she asked the assembled. When they nodded, she dabbed at her eye primly. "You would trust him? To be alone with him?" this she directed at Hermione.

"Harry lives with him," Hermione pointed out.

Harry nodded to confirm this and said, "If you need someone to talk to about what happened with Karkaroff, Professor Snape might be willing. I'll ask him if you want."

She looked alarmed at the notion, then relented slightly. "Perhaps I am keeping it too boxed up inside," she said dazedly. "But I would not have thought to talk to him."

"Or talk to any of us," Hermione offered.

Penelope looked over at her. "You faced twenty-two Death Eaters." She shook her head. "We only had to face each other," she said sadly.

"Sounds worse," Ron said. "It helps to know who your enemy is."

The other students in the common room were quieting to listen in. Ginny came over and crouched beside the chair. "Discussing bad stuff over here?"

"I would have wanted revenge," Penelope said as she stared at the far wall.

"Surprised Harry didn't," Ginny said. "Why was that, Harry?"

"Let's not go into the Harry part of it," he said.

"Keeping it all boxed up too?" Ginny teased.

"Yes. Thank you," Harry snapped at her although it had a playful edge to it. Ginny laughed.

"It's almost the end of term," Ron said. "We're coming up on the bloody anniversary, you know."

Ginny teased in a falsely excited way, "That means the press will be here."

"Merlin," Harry breathed.

Penelope looked at him with sad eyes. "It is so unreal to be here with you all," she breathed. "With the Destroyer of Voldemort and his friends. I write home to my mum and dad and I don't think they believe me."

"We would have taken out Karkaroff during the Tri-Wizard Tournament had we known," Ron said with feeling.

"Dumbledore would have kicked your arse," Ginny said to him.

"True," Ron said with a little alarm at the notion. His stomach growled at that moment. "It is dinner, right?" he asked hopefully.

"Why don't I take you to the girl's toilet to wash up," Hermione said to Penelope. "Ginny, can you get her kit? It is the purple one on the first night stand on the left." Ginny jumped up and went to the dormitory stairs.

In the toilet as Penelope washed her face, Hermione asked, "Did you lose someone?"

"My brother. My boyfriend."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, choking up herself at the thought.

"It was terrible. Every day or two there would be more bodies. You start to get used to it and just . . . check if they are someone you know," Penelope said. Ginny came in and handed over her purple toiletry kit.

"Why didn't you leave?" Hermione asked.

"Durmstrang Institute, it is not like Hogwarts School. It is spelled in more ways to hide it and protect it. You cannot just leave. The headmaster controls that."

Horrified, Hermione swallowed hard and helped Penelope put a bit of base under her eyes.

"I should just skip dinner," she said, looking at herself in the mirror.

"No. That isn't a good idea," Hermione insisted. "You have to stay around your friends. People who know what happened to you."

"Works for Harry," Ginny said as she crossed her arms and leaned against the next wash basin.

"Ginny," Hermione chastised her.

Ginny retorted, "Hey, thinking about how messed up Harry was always made me feel better. I never had Dementors in my head. Just Voldemort like he did."

Penelope froze as she put on a bit of blush. "He had Voldemort in his head?" she asked in a stunned voice. "You had . . . ?"

"Ginny, you are like Ron; I'm going to have to smack you to get you to shut up," Hermione said angrily. "If Harry feels like sharing stuff like that, he can do it himself. He has a hard enough time getting treated normally without you two reminding everyone of how messed up things have been."

"I tink he is very ordinary," Penelope opined carefully.

"Good," Hermione said forcefully. "Tell him that sometime, will you?"

"I did before." She started putting away her makeup. "He did zeem pleased to hear dis."

"I'm sure he was." Hermione said, moving to open the door. "It's a lifelong dream, I think."

Dinner passed in self-absorbed, reflective quiet at their part of the table. Everyone moved on automatic as they served themselves and ate. Harry had a sense that this was obvious to others and that they were being watched because of it. He finally turned and challenged the gazes from the head table. McGonagall looked away a little guiltily. Snape narrowed his eyes at them and stood up.

"Oops," Harry said as he turned back. "We're about to have company."

Hermione turned and watched Harry's guardian approach. Snape stopped behind Harry and asked, "Everything all right here?"

Harry watched Penelope across from him, studying Snape in a pained, worried way. "Uh," Harry started, then noticed that much of the table, up and down from them, were listening. "I'll explain later, sir."

Snape's hand fell on his shoulder. "Yes," he confirmed simply before walking back to the front.

At the end of dinner, Snape waited beside the hearth where Harry joined him. Standing in silence, they let the rest of the students and staff file out. When the Great Hall was empty, Harry checked the doors and saw Penelope hovering there. She had a fondness for that, apparently.

"Come in if you want," Harry invited.

"And the topic is?" Snape prompted.

"Durmstrang. Karkaroff," Harry replied levelly.

"I see," Snape breathed. "By all means, Ms. Tideweather. Come in," he invited dryly.

She stepped in silently and came over to them. The lamps in the Hall had dimmed themselves and now the fire provided most of the light. "Karkaroff was a desperate man," Snape stated, his gaze sliding over to her. "That kind is always the most dangerous."

"How well did you know him?" she asked.

"Hm. Better than average, I suppose," he replied reluctantly.

Harry stepped back and sat on the nearest bench, facing the fire.

"You are saying that is why he did it?" Penelope challenged him.

"He did it because he was weak. Durmstrang and its spells were a tool and a kind of shield, a powerful one built up by centuries of respelling. Taking over the school bought him time. Snape turned to look back at Harry sitting behind and to the side of him. He seemed to be deciding how best to proceed. "Only a weak man like Karkaroff would work so hard to take so many down with him when he fell."

"He took many down," Penelope agreed sadly. Her eyes darted around the Great Hall. "The risk here of de same?"

Snape replied, "The risk of that here is much lower--most of the magic left by the Hogwarts founders has been reduced to only the most passive spells."

Harry snorted quietly.

"Well, for the most part," Snape admitted. "Harry had the misfortune his second year to be led into a trap left by one of Hogwarts' founders."

"Who led you in?" she asked Harry, clearly distracted from her own dark musings. "The ghost of the founder?"

"Voldemort," Snape supplied.

"What?" she blurted in surprise.

"This school, for all its protections allowed Voldemort access many times. Wouldn't you say, Harry?" Snape prompted, seeming unwilling to let Harry sit out this conversation.

Harry, worried at Snape's tone, replied quietly, "A few, yeah."

"Your first year as I recall and your second."

"Voldemort was here--?" Penelope began in alarm.

Snape continued over her, "Your fourth he had to abduct you, since he could not access the castle, but yet again you prevailed."

"That was a draw at best," Harry pointed out.

"It made him mortal, therefore killable," Snape refuted in a hard tone. "Fifth, he certainly got the better of *you*. Sixth of course, we all know. Five times, Potter. My goodness."

"And your point is?" Harry asked in an annoyed tone. He didn't want to meet Penelope's gaze. The glimpse he had of it made it appear far too awed.

"That if you, with your penchant for feeling sorry for yourself, can persevere, then anyone can," he stated with his old rudeness.

"I had a lot of help. And I think having friends pitted against each other would be worse than facing clear evil."

"Hm," Snape replied noncommittally. To Penelope, he said flatly, "Healing and the blessing of failing memory take time. Be patient. Dwelling in the tragic past only keeps it alive."

She wrapped her arms around herself and looked between them with a strained expression. Harry gave her a soft frown, not finding anything useful to add. He didn't like the pained, wishful expression she was wearing now; he thought she was hoping for too much from him.

Snape crossed his arms and added, "It may help you to consider it an expensive lesson; next time you will see it coming. Such things do not happen because of only one person, especially when that person is a rather mediocre wizard at best."

She looked away with an unsatisfied wrinkle to her lips. When they had fallen silent a long time, she stepped away, her expression closed and inward. After the tall door closed behind her, Snape put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "And you are doing how?"

"All right," Harry said with a doubtful tone. "You really think it works to make someone feel better by telling them how much worse someone else has it?"

"Yes."

Harry shook his head, but didn't argue.

* * *

The next morning, their wombat, now actually the size of a small bear, outrightly refused to go back in the crate. It clung to Penelope and made a sad screeching noise when they tried to unhook it. "I'll keep it," she said.

"All day?"

"Why not?" she countered, patting it on the head. "It will eat from the fruit bowl at breakfast. Let us take it down."

"Okay," Harry agreed doubtfully, although he would have felt very bad about forcing it back into its box, so he was glad from that perspective, but he thought she was a little optimistic.

They were early for breakfast. Penelope sat with the wombat on her lap feeding it orange sections. Harry commented, "Slowly. Otherwise it will get full before breakfast is over."

The other students who were studying or talking stopped and looked over curiously. Penelope's matching blue hair with orange stripes was something to see. Ron and Hermione came in and froze. Hermione ran over. "Is that your wombat?" she asked. "Ours has barely grown at all and it's all blue. How did you get it to eat anything solid? Wow."

Harry laughed at her pile of comments. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I would!" she said sharply. "We are completely missing this assignment," she complained to Ron. They sat down, still gaping. Others came in and stopped by, amazed by the creature.

"Heh!" Hagrid said as he came in with McGonagall. "Look at tha', will ya? Harry, tha' yours?"

"Yes." Harry glanced at McGonagall who looked neutral on the topic of blue wombats.

Hagrid leaned down and patted the wombat on the top of the head. "Orange was a good choice," he said.

"I let it choose," Harry said.

"Interestin'," Hagrid drawled, then winked at Harry. As he passed by Hermione and her frustrated expression, he patted her on the head as well, though not as gently.

* * *

The day's classes went better than expected. The wombat mostly slept, although it insisted on being held. It turned out most anyone was more than eager to do this, so Harry and Penelope did not have much to do with it except keep track of its whereabouts.

By dinner its orange strips were bright and made of much longer fur, making it look a bit like a caterpillar. Hagrid stopped by again while Hermione was holding it. "Aye. She's a beaute. Mus' 'a had a lo' o' attention today."

"It did," Harry confirmed forcefully.

"Yer pret'y much done," Hagrid said, plucking at the long blue claws resting on Hermione's shoulder. "Can' grow much more en tha'." He put his sizable pinky against its mouth and it sniffed it before turning away. "Well tempered ta boot. Yer got a place to keep 'er for the nigh'?"

Hermione and Penelope nodded vigorously. "We've already set up a crate in the girl's dormitory," Hermione said as she patted it on the back and put her nose against the top of its head the way she did to Crookshanks.

Harry found himself starting to feel sorry for the thing.

* * *

Exhausted after his tutoring with McGonagall, Harry made his way down from the headmistress' office. As he passed one of the unused classrooms along a darkened corridor he thought he heard something. He quietly backed up a few steps and listened. Giggling followed by Malfoy's voice speaking low, came from behind the closed door. Harry rolled his eyes and stepped more quietly away, fearful of being detected. He just got out of range as Parkinson sighed and said something he really didn't want to hear clearly.

Literally shutting down with tiredness, Harry used the handrail heavily down a set of staircases. He wanted nothing more than to sleep, but he really needed to work on his Potions essay. As he trudged down the next corridor, Hermione came up to him.

"Harry," she said nicely. "Could you *please* help us with our wombat?"

Harry grinned at her tone and amiably walked along with her. "If I knew what I did, I would. But it was kind of an accident."

"Well . . . what happened?" she asked impatiently.

"The first night I couldn't sleep so I went up to check on it. It was about three in the morning. I didn't find quite the same thing in the crate."

"Oh," Hermione said thoughtfully. "I'll have to check the moon phases, zodiac, cloud cover, Merlin what could have caused it? We've been up there at one or later and it has been the same." When Harry shrugged, she said, "Maybe Frina and I will just sleep up there with it. Or take turns."

Harry was still working on his essay in the common room when Hermione and Frina headed up to the attic. "Want company?"

"Sure," Frina said eagerly. "Since we're babysitting *your* project."

"I'll take it to our dormitory," Harry offered.

"You can't have it," Frina countered stiffly, then laughed gaily.

As they walked, Harry feared they would all hear some couple having a rendezvous, and he blushed warmly just thinking of facing that with these two. Fortunately the way was quiet this time. Up in the attic Hermione went to their crate, opened it, and took out their wombat. "Boy, that is small," Harry criticized, garnering a dark look from his friend.

"Hermione said you told her your one turned into something else," Frina said.

"I don't know why it did, though," Harry admitted.

"You are just very lucky," Frina stated matter-of-factly.

He pulled out his parchments and worked on his essay as the two of them sat talking. Harry looked up as Hermione handed the creature over to her partner, amused by the shifting hair color. Hermione looked better with brown hair than blue. As he worked and listened, he was amazed by the things they talked about: personal things about growing up, interesting people they knew, bizarre relatives, parental annoyances. He couldn't imagine sitting around with Opus and doing the same thing. . . not a chance.

Harry finished his essay, finally. As he rolled it up, Hermione held her hand out for it. "Thanks," Harry said as he gave it up. He stood up to stretch and paced the length of the gable. At the window he remembered Malfoy's strange creature. He stood before it and described to them what he had seen. "Hagrid wasn't happy I'd looked."

"Let's look again," Hermione immediately said, setting Harry's essay on the floor to stand up. He stepped aside for her to run through the un-cursing spells herself, and the same ones were on it as before. Inside the box was now a hard-shelled blue chrysalis that was attached to the inside of the wood by an organic blue cord with root-like tendrils.

"Whoa," Hermione breathed. "What'd he do to it to make it do that?"

"I hate to think about it," Harry said, re-closing the lid. "At least it looks safe now."

* * *

Revising for end of term examinations and Quidditch practice occupied the next week. Harry did not think it possible for him to cram any more information into his brain, but somehow he seemed to manage, going from classes, to constant studying to quizzing by his friends without much rest in between.

Harry was taking a break, a nap really, on a window seat on the fifth floor. It was midday and McGonagall came by, stepping sprightly. "Everything all right, Harry?" she stopped and asked in concern upon seeing him there.

"Just tired, Professor." He bent his knees to move his feet out of the way for her to sit down, which she did. The sun lit her robes as it slanted through the glass beside her. Harry commented, "If I try to learn anything else, I think my brain will explode." As she smiled in real humor at that, he marveled that he was sitting here so casually with the headmistress of all people. He shifted up the stone frame to sit up more.

"Looking forward to a holiday, then?" she asked nicely.

"Very much so."

"And you filed an application for the Auror's program?" she asked factually, sounding way too much like Dumbledore.

"Yes, ma'am."

She smiled. Harry thought of mentioning what Hermione had told him, that demonstrating an Animagus spell at the N.E.W.T. testing was worth thirty bonus points. He hadn't made any progress since revealing something of his form, but then again he also had not had much time. Then again, they were not supposed to be working on it at all; he was pretty certain.

"It will all be over soon," she said helpfully.

"I don't necessarily want it to be."

She smiled more at that. "Even *you* will look back on this time with fondness, I think." She patted him on the leg. "Why don't we skip your tutoring until you return from break."

Harry nodded that he thought that was a good idea.

"I'll let you get back to your nap," she said with a smile in her voice.

* * *

"You are playing today?" Penelope asked as Harry hurried through of the common room. He needed to get down to the pitch early for a strategy meeting with Ron and Ginny. Ron didn't want to discuss it in the school--he thought someone might be listening in. Harry had to admit that Extendable Ears had become unnervingly common during the school year and Filch had not caught on to start confiscating them.

Harry paused long enough to reply, "Yes."

"I will be cheering for you," she said.

At the portrait hole, Harry said, "Thanks," with sincerity.

In the changing room they hurriedly suited up with pads. Ron said, "Overconfidence is our biggest enemy today." He paced before them, talking sternly. He went on in this vein for a while before going over a few plays he wanted to try out today before facing Ravenclaw later in the year. Harry considered pointing out that treating Hufflepuff as practice smacked of overconfidence, but he held back, mostly because he *was* feeling confident.

It was warmer today than the last game, although Harry still had one of his rabbit lined gloves on his left hand with which held the broom. His right he kept against his side, warm, until the whistle blew.

The match was long, although Gryffindor held the lead throughout. Harry paced Janet, the new Hufflepuff Seeker, for most of the match, confident that he could overtake her if she made a move. She didn't even try to fake him out, which Harry would have done in her place, frequently. In the end the snitch came up from behind. Harry caught sight of it in his peripheral vision, turned hard, and gave chase.

Janet followed, never managing to get position on him despite the rapidly dodging Snitch giving her a few openings. The crowd was on its feet and shouting as the chase went on, raising Harry's spirits as he gained on the elusive thing. It looped around him and he had to foot spin to catch it. He was still dizzy from the maneuver when he landed on the grass with the fluttering Snitch in hand. The team landed as well and thumped him hard, elated with the win even though it was not much of a contest. Hermione and Penelope came out as the team was moving to the changing room.

"You are very good," Penelope said, eyes bright. He had not seen quite that expression on her before, it was vaguely worshipful, but it didn't bother him for some reason.

"Thanks," Harry said with a broad smile, as the team moved off the pitch, slowing to wait for him. "I'll see you later--when I'm presentable," he added over his shoulder with a smile as he brushed his mussed hair back. He brought Hermione into that with a glance and found she had a far too pleased of a look on her face.

In the changing room Ginny said, "Well, that went all right." She sounded a little put out in contrast to the words.

"It went really well," Ron countered.

She shrugged and tossed her wrist guards haphazardly into a locker before bending and unsnapping her shin guards with quick, annoyed movements. Harry and Ron shared a perplexed look. Ron shrugged and ignored her. Harry figured Hermione would be better to talk to her than himself, so he didn't question her either.

* * *

"You've got it, I think," Hermione said excitedly. "Try again and think of your form this time."

Ginny closed her eyes and stood still for long breaths. Colors rippled over her robe like sunlight through water. A long time passed before a warping sound started, startling all of them. A fluttering thing fell to the floor and scrambled at the stones. Hermione was the first to react. She stepped quickly but carefully over and tried to lift the hawk up by the feet.

"All right!" Ron exclaimed, stepping over too.

The bird was too awkward to balance even with Hermione helping and it fluttered back to the floor, wings and claws scraping.

"Ginny, you remember how to disrupt the energy to release the form, right?" Hermione asked the bird, a little loudly and in a very concerned way.

Harry, in his usual seat off to the side, watched things with growing worry. He huffed and stood up as Ginny reappeared, half-sprawled on the floor. The room erupted in cheers, making Ginny grin broadly through her blinking disorientation.

Harry stepped right up to her. "No flying," he said firmly.

"What?" she replied.

"No flying. That's final." No one said anything immediately.

"You're no fun," she snapped at him.

He followed closely as she turned away. "Ginny, I mean it. You don't know the first thing about it. And what if you change back a hundred feet off the ground."

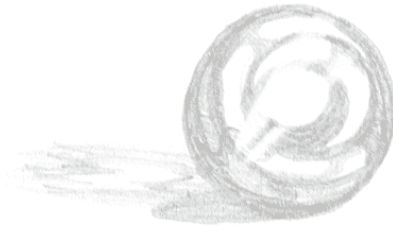
"Actually . . ." Neville started to say, holding up one finger. When Harry turned his hard gaze to him, he fell silent.

"I kinda have to agree with Harry," Ron said reluctantly.

Ginny huffed in frustration. "All right, all right," she breathed. She took a seat on the side bench and put her chin on her hands. "I'm sure I can find a cage to perch myself in," she muttered.

"You did great, though," Ron added in a concessionary way. "Wish I could do it."

"Yeah, you are all just jealous," she commented with another huff.



Chapter 34 -- Round About the Cauldron Go

Author Note: Starting with this chapter and running through until the Shakespeare three-witches chapter titles end there is a mini-whodunit in the story.

The morning of the train departing, they all shared a large breakfast. "Are you going back to Croatia?" Harry asked Frina.

"Yes. I miss my parents and they are worried about me. Oh, which reminds me. Opus!" she called to the Durmstrang students huddled in the doorway. "Do you mind?" she asked Harry.

"Mind what?" Harry responded.

Frina pushed the platter of bacon aside, climbed over the table agilely, and sat beside him. "Peni," she said as she reached around Harry and tugged on her friend's robe to get her attention. Opus had come over with a camera and now stood checking its settings on the other side of the table. Harry sighed and smiled as they leaned in close for the first picture. For the second one he relented and put his arms around both of them. A warm feeling started up in him as he did this; he could feel it responding to the sense of their shoulders and even their arms against his sides. He stretched his neck and forced it out of himself.

"Oh good," Penelope said. "My parents will finally belief me."

"Why wouldn't they?" Harry asked in confusion.

She shrugged broadly with an expression that said he would not understand the explanation.

* * *

Harry went home that evening. Snape had to stay at Hogwarts a few days longer to finish up marking and paperwork, but he pointed out that he could then stay in Shrewsthorpe until late Sunday if he did so.

Harry stepped out of the hearth at home and started when he found himself face to face with a purple-haired witch. "Tonks?" he said in surprise.

"Hey, Harry," she greeted him casually and balled up the parchment in her hand. "I can skip the note since you're here," she said as she banished it with a toss. "One of the old spells we left from last summer was triggered, so I came to investigate. Only the outer one was touched, so I suspect it was a neighbor kid crossing through your back garden."

"Guess they don't do that often," Harry said, thinking it strange that it had not gone off before now.

"Your wall is pretty high and a little crumbly at the top. That would dissuade most people," she said casually. "Every other protection is still in place, so don't worry about it. If it hadn't been your place, I probably wouldn't have come right away." She gave him a wink as she said this.

"Want some tea?" Harry offered, kind of hoping she would stay a little while.

She sighed and replied sincerely, "I really don't have time, Harry, but thanks." She put her stuff in her hipsack and sealed it with a spell. "I saw your application come in," she said, sounding teasing.

Harry couldn't read her voice. "Did it look okay?"

She laughed lightly. "Of course. We received a lot of applications this year, good ones. Still trying to decide how best to handle them all. I think we should just make the admission tests harder. That would be to your advantage, anyway," she said with a wink.

Harry looked away, a little embarrassed by praise from this quarter. The post that had arrived in his and Snape's absence was scattered over the table; he organized the envelopes as a distraction.

Tonks stepped to the hearth, nearly knocking over the rack with the poker and ash shovel. She righted the thing and took out a leather drawstring sack of Floo Powder. "What are you doing Sunday night?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"Care to hang out in London with me for the evening?" she asked. "I need to get out and I'd love to catch up with you."

Harry's heart sped up as he imagined that. His jealousy of Ron's freedom to explore London over last summer had not completely disappeared. "I'd love to."

"Clubbing all right with you? A little befuddlement charm will get you in past the bouncer at the places I like to go."

He blinked at that stretching of wizard law. "Sounds good," he replied.

"Want to meet me at Trafalgar or Soho?" she suggested. Upon seeing his reaction, she said, "I'll just come here and we'll go together."

"Great," Harry said.

"I really have to run," she said. "See ya." She stepped into the hearth and vanished in a column of green flame.

Harry fairly skipped up the stairs to his room with his bookbag. Sunday evening was going to take years to arrive, he thought.

* * *

Harry studied hard to pass the time and finished two long essays before Sunday lunch. An owl had arrived that morning from Snape saying that he would be delayed until Monday morning. Harry could not believe his luck; not only could Harry stay out late, he would not even have to explain his 'date' to his guardian. He wasn't sure at all what Snape would think, if anything at all, but he wasn't taking any chances with his first time out for an evening in London. With a woman. With someone he liked a lot and a woman. The thought was almost overwhelming.

* * *

Sunday night, as he was dressing in Muggle clothes, he decided he should leave a note in case Snape came home earlier than expected. As he was folding the parchment over and writing Snape's name on it, the hearth flared. The first thing Harry thought upon seeing Tonks was that he was very underdressed. Tonks was wearing shiny pants and a fuzzy yellow top. She read his expression and hooked an arm through his. "You look fine. Guys never dress as well as women anyway at these places."

They took the Floo into an upstairs parlor in Soho. When Harry arrived, the two well-dressed couples sitting around a table on the other side of the room were greeting Tonks like an old friend. "Your date?" a woman's high-pitched, nasal voice said loudly. "Let's see him. Come on, he has to pass inspection since you clearly have no sense yourself." At this, Harry stepped over to them and stood beside Tonks. He got the notion they were paired by gender by the way they sat. The woman who had spoken had sharp yellow eyes and very short auburn hair. Her many large earrings clanked as she leaned forward to inspect him.

"What's that? Lightening scars aren't in fashion now are they?" she asked in dismay, rubbing her forehead as though considering what it might be like to have one.

"And no fashion sense at all," the taller man said with a grimace. "Early eighties schoolboy," he breathed in clear horror.

Harry looked down at his plain black trousers and crisp white shirt. Tonks put her arm around him. "Ignore them. We're leaving now," she announced melodically, pressing her fingers into Harry's shoulder to turn him.

"Wait, wait," the ear-ringed woman said. "He hasn't passed yet. What does he do?"

"He catches dark wizards," Tonks said. "Let's go," she said to Harry.

"He's an Auror then? Thought you guys weren't supposed to date each other?" the other woman commented. "Looks a little young, frankly."

"He's not an Auror, yet," Tonks insisted. "And this is just old friends out for an evening." She gave Harry a push toward a closed door on the other side of the room.

"Shoulda said. We wouldn't have wasted our time," the ear-ringed woman commented loudly.

"Or his ego," the other woman quipped.

"His ego is just fine," Tonks reassured them, patting Harry on the shoulder. "Right, Harry?"

Harry shrugged and let Tonks open the door since she moved to it first.

"Wait a minute!" the woman said, striding over to them. "You aren't really?"

"Really what?" Harry asked.

She peered at him closely. "This is just a Clandestine charm, right?" she asked Tonks. "You aren't really out for an eve with Harry Potter--are you?"

"She's what?" the taller man exclaimed, spilling the black liquid he was pouring as he spoke. "Sorry 'bout the fashion comments, mate," he said quickly giving a wave of dismissal. "Studious ones never know how to dress," he said in a stage whisper to his male companion.

"Or how to have fun either," his companion came back with a nudge. He held his glass out for a refill and nudged again when he didn't get any.

"Well," Earrings said as she took the door from Tonks and held it for them while leaning on it heavily. "Have a nice evening. We'll have a nice drink and discuss He-Who-Shall-Be-Not-Named when you come back through."

"Voldemort," Harry supplied.

She bit her lip and said uneasily, "Yeah. That bloke."

On the pavement outside, Harry adjusted his cloak and breathed out in relief. "Interesting friends."

They walked along a tree-lined street. Ahead, bar patrons spilled onto the walk from the restaurants. "Acquaintances really. They run that Floo node like a social parlor. Keeps them occupied and mostly out of trouble. Though who knows what they were drinking."

They had dinner in one of the small, cramped places along a side street. Tonks, with her matching fuzzy top and yellow spiked hair, attracted more attention than Harry, which was a nice change.

After eating, as the sun set behind the buildings, they walked a distance to a place Tonks liked to go to dance. It was below ground and very large. It was also relatively deserted on a Sunday. The bouncer at the door paid them no heed beyond giving Tonks a nice hello that sounded insinuating to Harry.

Inside, ten or so couples gyrated on the dark dance floor, outlined by the changing colored lights behind them. With a grin Tonks led him over and cajoled him into joining in. The song shifted to another one. Harry counted out a swing rhythm and took Tonk's hands.

"Where did you learn to dance?" she asked as they moved around the floor.

"I hate to admit it, but McGonagall."

She laughed. "Poor Harry," she said in humor. "You're pretty good though."

"I had a lot of practice at the Christmas Ball."

They chatted about school. Harry asked about the apprenticeship, reluctantly, since he worried that if he got too tied up in it and was rejected, he would be really sunk.

The song shifted to a slow one and Tonks moved in close. This made it easier to talk over the music. "So, how is it having a dad after all this time?"

Harry shrugged to buy time. He had not been required to answer that question for a while. "I like it. I like knowing if I need something, he can't turn me away."

"That's what you like?" she asked in surprise. "You really haven't had anyone to rely on, have you?" she asked in a gentle tone.

"Guess not," Harry answered stiffly. She frowned and changed the topic.

During the fourth song, Tonks tensed and watched something over Harry's shoulder. Harry glanced that way, but didn't see anything or anyone in particular. Tonks huffed in annoyance and steered them to another part of the dance floor.

"Someone here you don't want to see?" Harry guessed.

"Ex-boyfriend," she said darkly. After dancing for a while longer in a manner that Harry was certain was designed to keep them from being recognized, she said, "Let's sit down. I'm thirsty."

She took his hand and led him to a high side table with permanent stools around it. The bartender came around immediately. "I'll have a scotch and he'll have a . . . an ale."

The bartender glanced closely at Harry before stepping away, but came back a few minutes later with their drinks. Harry sipped at his. He thought it could have stood to have been sweeter, but it wasn't bad. Tonks poured a dash of water into her tumbler of amber liquid before sipping it. "I have tomorrow off. First day in two weeks." After a minute of silence she added, "Being an Auror is too much work, Harry," as though warning him off from the whole notion.

Harry didn't reply; he was watching a man on the other side of the dance floor who was looking at Tonks' back. Her hair was still spiky yellow, which really gave her away. Harry thought then that she should have turned it black or some other normal color. The man approached, leading a young woman by the hand. They were both very well dressed.

"Tonks," the man greeted unctuously when he reached their table. His dark hair was styled foppishly and it flipped down when he leaned over and rested his elbow on the table facing her. Harry disliked him instantly.

Tonks gave no indication she felt anything. "Hello Rick," she said evenly.

"How have you been?" he asked, then didn't wait for a reply as he said, "Have you met Tara?" He pulled the fair-haired, tight-skirted woman closer to the table. She looked as though she wanted to resist but gave in quickly and held out a hand in greeting. Tonks shook it with a touch of coldness. Rick was going on in the same smooth tone, "Tara is working at the bank. Father and her actually get along, can you imagine?"

Rick leaned over the table, even more pointedly ignoring Harry, who decided that this was just as well. He assumed the man would bore of this game and leave soon enough, although the topics of the bank and father seemed to supply a lot of potential material. Harry at first assumed they were Muggles, but a little magic was dropped through the conversation, changing that assumption.

Finally, as though just noticing Tonks had a companion, Rick turned to Harry. "Oh," he said in a kind of girlish way. "Name's Richard, by the way. Richard Rothschild."

With deliberately slow, calm movement, Harry accepted the pro-offered hand. "Harry Potter," he said, very evenly.

The man froze, which Harry resisted reacting to. "Goodness, you are," Rick said, sounding stunned. He turned to Tara and leaned close to her. She was standing with her lean arms crossed, looking like she wished she were elsewhere. "It's Harry Potter," he said to her, still surprised. She blinked and found Harry's eyes and presumably his scar. Tonks gave Harry a roll of the eyes.

"Well," Rick offered, "why don't we join you for a drink?" Harry thought of saying, why don't you not? as the man smoothly took one of the other stools and gestured for Tara to do the same, all while simultaneously waving to the bartender.

Harry shot Tonks an apologetic look and received a disbelieving one in return. "So," Rick said breathily if not a little hungrily, "you are the, what does the chocolate frog card say . . .?"

"Destroyer of Voldemort," Harry finished for him, wanting to rattle the man if possible. He definitely got the girlfriend with that one.

"Yes," Rick said with more than a hint of pleasure. "So what are you doing with yourself now?" he asked, then ordered drinks for himself and Tara when the bartender appeared.

"I'm in school," Harry said. "I've applied to the Auror's program."

"Ah, well, you are in good company here, then," he said with a glance at Tonks.

Harry looked at Tonks as well, with a look he hoped conveyed some of his feelings. "Tonks is the reason I want to be an Auror," he said honestly, his gaze not wavering. "She's my inspiration." Her lips curled into a true smile, making Harry very glad he had said it.

"That's very sweet," Tara said. The drinks arrived. Rick accepted his and immediately began clinking the ice in it.

Harry turned to the girlfriend. "What do you do?" he asked.

She smiled lightly. "I work in finance at Bennett's of London. We do a lot of cross Muggle-Wizard project financing." Harry nodded sagely in a way he hoped looked knowledgeable. He didn't want to ask how that differed from accounting.

"Do you like it?" Harry asked.

"It's interesting and sometimes a lot of work," she said, seeming surprised to be addressed again.

"We are working with Goodley and Stevens right now," Rick put in. Harry had no idea who they were. "Where do you live?" he asked Harry.

"Shrewsthorpe," Harry replied, wondering how to get rid of him. Maybe they needed to finish their drinks and claim another appointment, he thought. He took a big gulp of ale to that end. Tonks had already finished her drink and waved for another. She seemed to be trying for a different kind of exit.

"Oh, you are very close to Riverden," Rick said. "The Frelander Estate encompasses it; it is just lovely. I was there once as a boy," he added as though this fact were important to share.

"We were there for Boxing Day dinner," Harry said evenly. "It is a big place. The stables were bigger than our house," he quipped to Tonks.

Rick froze at that. "You were?" He reassessed Harry at this point, seeming conflicted with his clothes and that notion.

Tonks said, in the air of one forced to participate, "He has a lot of horses, then?"

"Frelander only introduced us to the first twelve or so, but there were a lot more for just riding." Harry decided to just pretend it was him and Tonks. "I'd thought they were like Thestrals but his steeplechasers are huge animals. And they aren't magical, so how one controls them . . ." He looked alarmed at the notion.

Tara laughed. "They are usually pretty easy-going," she said, then backed off on her humor with a worried expression.

"Really?" Harry asked her quickly, afraid she assumed she had insulted him.

Rick nursed his drink, standoffish and fidgety now.

Tara relaxed a little. "Depends on the breed. I wouldn't have ridden my brother's Arabian for anything . . . it was totally out of control. My Morgan was like a big kitten for personality."

"Huh," Harry said. "Does sound like fun. But not worth getting adopted for," he murmured to Tonks, whose eyes went wide at that, so he gave her a mischievous grin. Rick gave him a close one as though dearly wanting to know what he had said.

A slow song started up. Harry stood and held his hand out to Tonks. "I promised the next slow one, remember?"

She set her fresh drink down with a thud and jumped off her stool to join him. When they were out on the floor, she said, "You are better at socializing than I imagined. Sorry about him." She laughed then. "You really knocked him with that comment about Boxing Day."

"It was some big event. I didn't realize when I accepted the invitation," Harry complained a bit.

"You were serious?" she asked, amazed. "I thought you made that up."

"No," Harry said stridently. "I wouldn't make things up to impress Mr. Rothschild there. Are you kidding?" he felt vaguely disappointed in her assumption.

"I'm sorry," Tonks said, "Of course you wouldn't. One of the things I like about you. Of the many."

Harry smiled and dropped his gaze.

"That and your humbleness, which always astounds me. You *are* the opposite of him. Total opposite."

"I hope so," Harry said strongly, making her laugh. He noticed in relief that the other couple were finishing their drinks and departing from the table. "So, I'm not sure the best way to ask this but . . ."

"What did I see in him?" she finished for him. At Harry's nod, she replied with a strained expression, "I'm not sure. He impressed my parents. He impressed me at first, frankly, but that wore off. Once everyone around you keeps saying how great it is that you are on the right track finally, it gets hard to get off the train."

Harry tried to imagine that and his face must have revealed something because she added, "When he turned his charm on just the right way, I could overlook a lot. And surprisingly few see past it, even though you weren't fooled at all."

They danced another song, a faster one, without separating. Harry was deciding that he really preferred slow dancing better. He and Tonks were exactly the same height, so they moved with surprisingly little awkwardness around the floor.

Several songs later, Tonks was dancing even closer, which was starting to affect him. The room felt too warm and the gaps where they moved apart felt too long. He pulled her closer without thinking, which brought a sharp look from her, a surprised and calculating one. Harry dropped his arms and turned to walk back to the table since the song was winding down anyway. At the table, his ale was too warm. He drank a big gulp of it anyway, feeling the need for anything that might calm him down.

Tonks didn't comment, but she did have a very small smile on her face. They finished their drinks in silence.

"Another round? Or do you want to go?" she asked.

"Maybe go," Harry said. He checked his pocket watch; it was just before eleven.

As they passed the bar, Tonks waved to the bartender and tossed a Muggle note on the bar. The bartender nodded good-bye with a wink. Out on the street it felt fresh and quiet, letting Harry relax. It was chilly now, making him glad he had worn his warm cloak.

"It's still pretty early," she said, sounding reluctant to quit the evening. "How does tea and biscuits sound to you?"

"Pretty good," Harry conceded. "Somewhere quiet?"

"Sure."

They walked back to the parlor they had used to Floo in. No one was around this time for which Harry was very grateful; he was tired of verbal jousting. Tonks stepped into the Floo and gave a location followed by a password. When she was gone, Harry followed.

They landed in a small flat with shelves lining the walls with all kinds of things on them. An owl fluttered in a cage in the corner. "This your place?" Harry asked.

"Yep," she replied. "You said 'quiet!'."

"I did, didn't I," Harry said, feeling a little nervous. He took a seat at the small table near the stove as she made tea.

She eventually placed the pot on the table and opened the biscuit tin. "Help yourself."

Harry, feeling hungry despite the big dinner he had had, accepted eagerly. The tea steeped and she poured out cups for each of them. Harry sipped his gratefully. The sudden silence was still ringing in his ears and the ale had made him groggy.

Two cups later, Tonks stood to clear things away. Harry had relaxed now, feeling less anxious about being at her place. She brought a few things back over from the shelves. One of them was a picture of her finishing the Auror's program. Harry looked at her glowing smile in the photo. As the photo moved, a middle-aged man put his hand around her shoulders proudly.

"Three years of training goes fast," she said wistfully.

"How many people apply normally?"

"Six or so take the tests. More apply but are rejected. I think you'll do fine on the tests." She held up the other thing. It looked like a large glass marble with swirling colors. It was a little dusty.

"What's that?" Harry asked. She handed it over. It had many balls inside one another each floating in a clear liquid. When shifted, it clunked inside as the spheres bumped.

She replied, "A promise ball, which it occurred to me that I could break now. Severus fulfilled it for me."

"What was it?" he asked, handing it back.

"A promise I made to myself to get you away from your aunt and uncle the first chance possible. I actually yelled at Dumbledore after the rescue, which stuns me even now to remember. He finally explained why you had to be there, which didn't help much." She tossed the ball in the air. "It bothered me a lot thinking of you there, so someone suggested using one of these to ease my mind. It worked. It magically binds you to take action when you can so you can relax and not obsess in the interim."

She stood and tossed it into the hearth where it smashed in a bright white flame. The glass crackled as the shards fell through the grate. As she stepped back to the table, she put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "It's good to see you doing so well." Her hand shifted to trail through his hair. "Everyone says that, you know, comments on how well you are doing."

Harry sighed in embarrassment and crossed his arms. She reached swiftly around him and forced them uncrossed, holding his wrists so he couldn't lift them. Her cheek was pressed against his from behind as she held that position. When she did move, it was to bend down to kiss him on the neck lightly.

Harry couldn't seem to draw a breath. Maybe that wasn't too much of a surprise as his chest had turned to putty. His will had gone; he just held still and waited for something else to happen. Tonks pulled him to his feet and kissed him fiercely, pressing him back over the table. Harry found he did have will, at least to pull her tighter.



Chapter 35 -- Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog

Harry woke with a start. "What time is it?" he asked. As memory flooded back, he was glad for the darkness because if the burn in his cheeks was any indication, he was blushing pretty badly.

"Ten to four," came the groggy reply.

Harry forced his heart to slow down. Snape would probably not be in before breakfast, or much before, he figured. Tonks shifted closer and Harry started yet again at the feel of so much of someone else's skin. From the sound of her sigh, he assumed she intended to simply fall back to sleep. Harry had been tired earlier but now he was wide awake and almost in panic. He lay in the darkness listening to her breathe and dwelling in memory until grey dawn lit the flat's single window.

In the eye-straining light, Harry sat up, rousing Tonks from sleep. "I should go," he said. "I really don't know what Severus will think if I'm not there." Harry had left a note, but it just seemed much simpler to avoid any conversation at all on the topic of his evening out.

She stretched and sat up, uncaring apparently about covers or not. "I can't imagine he'd care, but who knows," she said, yawning. "I couldn't imagine him as the father type, either." As she rubbed her eyes and pushed her rampantly blue hair back, Harry thought that she looked pretty nice. When she stood up with a mumble about making breakfast, he thought that even more so. He also thought that looking closely, in the long run, wasn't going to do him much good.

He sat down at the small table by the stove as she plunked down toast and hazelnut butter. She was only wearing a fuzzy pink robe. Harry, on the other hand, got completely dressed before daring to emerge.

She sat across from him and sipped a steaming hot cup of tea. She put her hand on her forehead and considered him in depth. "I keep trying to regret what I did, but I can't."

Harry didn't know how to respond to that. He certainly didn't regret beyond the ongoing embarrassment that he could not shake. In this, he apparently could not avoid learning about himself without whomever he was with learning it too. That had not occurred to him before. Nor had it ever occurred to him that Tonks may have been named appropriately.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Good," Harry replied with certainty, making her laugh.

"I broke a few Ministry rules, I'm sure." She sighed. "Good thing your application hasn't been accepted yet. Once it has, I'm essentially your boss, or one of them."

She sipped her tea again. "We can't repeat this," she said, sounding like she was talking to herself more than to Harry.

Harry had a feeling, in a week or so, that was going to seem more cruel than it did at this moment. "Yup," he said in agreement.

* * *

Harry was sitting, studying diligently, at the dining room table when Snape appeared from the Floo around ten in the morning. Harry managed a casual greeting, although he was Occluding his mind when he lifted his gaze from his book.

Snape seemed distracted, so it probably did not matter. "I need to visit Diagon Alley for some supplies, if you would like to accompany me."

Eager for a break, Harry put his books aside and stood to fetch his cloak. As he returned and hooked it around his collar, he was amazed that there was not some blatantly obvious difference in him announcing what had happened to the world. Snape seemed completely oblivious, which wouldn't be like him at all. Fighting a blush, Harry grabbed a handful of Floo powder and ducked into the hearth to hide it.

They walked along Diagon Alley away from Gringott's, where Harry had withdrawn what now seemed like an exorbitant number of Galleons. Good thing he didn't go out for dinner at nice restaurants regularly, he thought with some stress.

"I need to get something from a shop down here," Snape said, indicating Knockturn Alley. When Harry hesitated, looking down the street with sharp eyes, Snape said, "Never been?"

"Uh, once . . . accidentally. Hagrid rescued me, fortunately." He still did not like the looks of the place.

"I truly do not think you will have a problem, O, Destroyer of Voldemort," Snape commented snarkily.

Harry frowned at him. "Well, go on then," Harry urged with stung pride while indicating that Snape should lead the way.

Far from having a problem, Harry seemed to be upsetting the economy of the place. Many grimy witches and wizards ducked out of the way or Disapparated when their startled gaze fell upon him. A few just gave him a measuring look as though wondering how much he really could do.

"Far less crowded than expected," Snape stated airily, when they reached a shop called *Fiddlesticks and Sone*. Snape stood outside and waited for the proprietor to appear. An extremely thin, old man with a hump and sparse straggly red hair eventually emerged from the dark interior. Snape handed him a list; the man squinted at it with a foul expression before approximately smiling and shuffling back inside. "It is best to remain on the street," Snape offered as they waited.

Harry rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Late night?" Snape asked as a pair of hunched-over hags spotted Harry and promptly turned around and walked the other way.

"Loads of clubs in London, it turns out," Harry explained, avoiding Snape's gaze as he remembered the whole night yet again. This led to his limbs going tingly even through his tiredness. He leaned on a barrel of Black Cat syrup and closed his eyes to rest them. He opened them when he heard the voice of the shopkeeper. The shriveled old man handed over a worn basket and Snape handed him some coins. Harry watched this in a daze.

"Let's go," Snape said easily. He stepped past Harry who followed automatically.

As he turned with another yawn, Harry realized with a jolt that there was one dark shape in his mind ahead of him, and one behind. He grabbed a handful of the back of Snape's cloak and pulled. His heart was racing as he responded to Snape's questioning look. "Shadow," he breathed.

Snape went instantly on alert. He grabbed Harry's upper arms and demanded, "Where?"

"Behind me," Harry whispered.

Snape peered sharply over Harry's shoulder as he surreptitiously pulled out his wand. His eyes moved avidly back and forth along the alley. Harry turned slowly around as well, trying not to attract attention as he did it. He pulled his wand

out of his pocket and into his sleeve, holding it where it wasn't visible. He didn't see anyone he recognized among the black robed figures standing in small clusters talking or moving with laden baskets and cauldrons among the shops.

"I assume you are certain about what you sense," Snape queried.

"Yes."

"Which one do you sense?"

"Did. I'm fully awake now. And I can't tell who it is anyway." He almost pointed out that all the shadows in his vision were alike, but censored it.

"Go inside," Snape said. "Call the Auror's office."

Harry obeyed. Inside the shop, he discovered that the bent-over man who had come out earlier *was* the son. An incredibly wizened old wizard sat at a counter logging the latest sale.

"I need to use your Floo," Harry said.

The son shuffled over to him, his eye twitching. "You are the Boy Who Lived?"

"Uh, yeah." Harry decided not to quibble about the term 'boy' just now.

A little peeved the man said, "Go on, then," as he gestured at the small hearth. "Who's to stop ya?"

Harry dashed over to the aged marble hearth and took out his pocket canister of Floo Powder and tossed some in. When he announced that he wanted the Ministry Auror office, the proprietor gagged in surprise behind him. Rogan's head appeared and Harry explained that he'd seen one of the remaining D.E. on Knockturn Alley.

By the time Harry stood up, four Aurors had Apparated into the shop. Tonks stepped over to Harry, who noticed that the shopkeepers had vanished along with half the contents of the shelves.

"Whom did you see?" she asked him. Nothing but professional focus showed in her posture, stabilizing Harry's heart rate. On the other hand, he resisted explaining his Voldemort inherited vision to her or anyone connected to the Ministry. Considering that a fifty-fifty chance was a pretty good one, he randomly said, "Jugson, I think. It was pretty quick though," he added to try to insure they considered either possibility.

The Aurors went out to the alley. Harry's gaze raised to Snape's just inside the doorway of the shop. He didn't react at all to Harry's lie. Harry approached him slowly, and when he came aside, Snape commanded, "Stay in here while they sweep the alley."

Presently, the Aurors returned and reentered the shop. The section of alley Harry could see through the grimy window was now utterly deserted. Rogan said, "I didn't like the answers Burke gave. Really didn't."

The others hadn't turned up anything. "We'll set up a stakeout then," one of the others said. Harry didn't know his name, he looked a lot older than the others. "You are certain you saw one of them, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, comfortable being certain with that answer.

No one argued with him or expressed any doubt.

* * *

Uneasiness haunted Harry that evening at the house. His emotions teetered between feeling euphoric and feeling cheated out of having his life to himself again.

During dinner, Snape stated, "I am quite certain you are safe here, now."

"It isn't that," Harry commented. He tore his bread into many small pieces as he collected his thoughts. "I don't want this vision anymore," he complained. "I'm tired of it." As he painstakingly buttered the many chunks of squashed bread he wondered if that were really true. He didn't mind, really, occasionally sensing that Snape was nearby.

Snape put down his utensils and held his mug without drinking from it. In a low voice he said, "I don't believe anything can be done."

"I didn't think so. And I wasn't asking you to try, just . . . wish things were different," he said wryly. "I've been doing less of that lately," he added, "which is good."

Snape topped up his mug of mead from the bottle on the table and sat back, cradling it in his long hands. "You really wish none of it had happened?"

Harry poked at his roast ox and Yorkshire pudding with his fork. "I don't know. Mostly. Though I'd be someone else in that case, which might not be better."

"You would still be with your parents, presumably," Snape observed levelly.

The comment felt a bit like bait, since Harry didn't know what Snape was getting at. With honesty he said, "I can't imagine that anymore--haven't been able to for a long time." He felt a little guilty at that notion but couldn't resolve it with a daydream that had drifted too far into fantasy. "It's the killing and fighting I could have skipped."

Snape returned to eating, appearing more relaxed. "And becoming an Auror will certainly isolate you from more of that," he stated with his classic snarkiness.

"I'll be old enough to deal with it and trained to," Harry pointed out. "I expect that will make a difference."

Snape nodded sideways, his way of accepting a point.

After dinner they settled into the library. Harry had no desire to study so he pulled a book off the shelf on Muggle-safe illusion spells instead.

The library was silent beyond the turning of pages, the lamp flames still and tall. Harry's mind wandered back to last night. He wondered at how much he had learned, too much to absorb it all at once, apparently, because the knowledge would sneak up on him at random times, as it did now. He stood up and changed books even though he wasn't finished with the one he was reading, simply needed the distraction.

* * *

Snape sat at his desk in the drawing room. It was Wednesday, which meant half of the holiday was gone already. He sorted through his old files, tossing things he didn't need into the hearth and a summer fire he had started just for that purpose. The window was wide open and a nice breeze carried away the extra heat.

Harry knocked on the doorframe. "There's a picnic this afternoon at the Burrow. I told Ron I'd come. Did you want to go?"

Snape considered Harry as he stood in his doorway in old jeans and a Chudley Cannons t-shirt. While every Weasley offspring disliked him, Harry's presence would most likely negate that. "I am enjoying the quiet, thank you," he replied.

"That's true. It probably won't be quiet there. All right then," Harry said. His tone almost could have been considered disappointed. "I'll be back late, I think," he added over his shoulder as he departed.

Snape just barely heard the flare of the Floo Powder over the wind in the trees across the street. He pulled out another stack of files and sorted through them. In the last one he found the old letter from Dumbledore that had been left for him after the wizard's death. The flap was open now. He set it aside until he had finished sorting through the entire drawer and had closed it with a satisfying thud. He leaned back in his chair and reluctantly pulled out the missive. The yellowing on the envelope made him expect that the letter would contain old notions. Within the envelope was a note card, with writing only on the inside, although the text was small and cramped as though the words had been forced to make space for each other.

Dearest Severus,

I would firstly like to thank you for your years of service. Once you came to me, you were the most faithful of servants, in all ways. Perhaps because your choices were so clear to you, this was true. Secondly, I want to sincerely thank you for taking on my last unfinished task.

Snape stopped there and huffed as he changed his understanding of the letter. The old wizard had charmed the entire message, not just the envelope. The envelope might very well have been sealed ten years previous as the color indicated.

By now his presence is most likely a given. It has been a year, and that can seem a very long time.

Snape blinked at that. A year? he wondered, before he understood Dumbledore meant a year from rescuing the boy from the Forbidden Forest. He felt consternation that the old wizard would have made that so significant. On the other hand, it did seem in retrospect, an incredibly long time; literally everything had changed in the interim.

Harry is incredibly special; although I suspect you still will not admit that. All the more reason to remind you once again. For him to be more than a vehicle of all our freedom, he needed more than he was getting. Understanding. Loyalty. Security. Consideration. By now you realize, I'm sure, how straightforward these things are to provide. You've already commented to me about his fierce loyalty and I know firsthand your own capacity for it. A good match, I'll always believe strongly, for that and other reasons. Learn how to receive these things in return, Severus, and I will truly feel I have tied up every loose end.

It was signed neatly below. Snape closed the card, feeling a little annoyed with the dead wizard, which even he could not be for long. He opened the card again to glance over it and noticed that a postscript had appeared at the bottom: "*Loyalty*" was always a safe euphemism to use with you. Snape slapped the card closed, now definitely annoyed. He re-filed it with his other old letters from the former headmaster and found something to read to force it out of his mind.

* * *

Harry did return very late. It was almost two, a whole twelve hours after he had left. Snape was reading with a pot of tea at the dining room table.

"You're still awake," Harry commented. "I didn't realize you were going to wait up for me."

"I wasn't precisely."

"Oh, good." Harry took a seat across from his guardian. His head pounded a bit, so he rubbed his temples. "It was a big party," he said. "A bunch of Ministry people and some from Gringott's, although no goblins. All the neighbors. Actually had enough for a real Quidditch match. You'll be pleased to hear I was at Chaser this time. Lots of younger kids wanted to play, so there were three Seekers per side."

"And you were the main attraction?" Snape prompted dryly.

"For a little while," he admitted with a frown, remembering autographing odd things people happened to have on hand, like Muggle money or even clothing. "And the kids were scared of me at first--I really hate that."

Snape put down his book. "They assume that since you did the impossible that you can do anything. Children are wary of that kind of power, for good reason, frankly."

Harry looked at him closely. "Have you been drinking some of the weird things they were serving tonight?"

"As someone who knows intimately what can go wrong with bad brewing, I usually avoid unknown concoctions." Snape squinted at him as Harry rubbed his temple again. "Were you *not* avoiding them?"

Reluctantly, Harry admitted, "I tried a few. Nothing that was on fire permanently. That was my rule."

"Pity. All kinds of intoxicating things burn off very easily," Snape said a little snidely. He stood and leaned over the table to look closely into Harry eyes. "At least your pupils are equally dilated and not excessively so. Want something for that headache?"

"You have something?"

Snape looked insulted. "Of course."

"I guess I shouldn't doubt you."

"I should say not." Snape left the room. He returned a few minutes later with three bottles of liquid. He poured a splash of each of them into a teacup. The result fizzed bright pink. He pushed it over to Harry.

"Thanks." Harry drank it down, swallowing bubbles to do so. His head cleared instantly. "You really are very good at those," he said honestly. "If that could be made into a sweet, you could license it to Fred and George." He held the teacup up. "*Professor Snape's Plain-thinking Pop-ups.*"

"And clearly you spent far too much time speaking with those two this evening."

"About two hours. More. You wouldn't believe the stuff they have going on. Scares *me*. Doesn't scare Ron or Ginny though. They just come back with some idea even more frightening." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Really much better," he said. "What is Absinthe anyway?" he asked in distracted curiosity.

Snape actually laughed. "Perhaps I *should* accompany you next time," he said, shaking his head.

* * *

Harry's sleep degraded that night making him decide that Snape's remedy hadn't completely cleared everything he had experimented with drinking. The next day the weather turned warmer still and Harry thought about sitting outside for the fresh air. There was a very old stone seat in the garden beside the door. He took his History of Magic textbook out there and set about clearing aside the ivy that had grown over the bench. As he did this, he noticed that roses grew beside it, nearly choked out. The yellow buds were very tiny as a result. With hands on hips, Harry surveyed the small area. At one point it had been laid out in a fairly organized manner.

With an eye toward putting off studying, Harry took his book inside and grabbed a pair of old dragonhide gloves that sat on the shelf above the coats. He also grabbed the orange Cannon's hat Ron had given him at the party the night before. It was a Muggle-safe hat that only showed a player on a broomstick when one was actually at a match, otherwise it was blank.

With his eyes and hands protected, Harry attacked the ivy, tossing the long yanked strands into the center of the bricked path from the gate. The dragonhide gloves made it easy to work around the roses and soon they were looking much happier and unencumbered.

Harry became so engrossed in the weeding that he didn't notice the door open. "What are you doing?" Snape asked.

Harry looked up from his kneeling position in the grass as he carefully pulled up something that was crowding out some bulbs that had emerged. He thought over his response. "Avoiding studying?" he replied.

Snape shot him a dubious look. "You are not a servant, Potter."

"I know that," Harry answered sharply. "I like doing this," he added as he pulled up a long runner root of a small linden that needed to come out. Indeed, yard chores were the few tasks the Dursleys had made him do that he hadn't abhorred. He had always thought it was because it let him spend time away from them, but it felt like more than that now. "You're not worried about what the neighbors'll think, are you?" Harry asked challengingly.

"Certainly not," Snape huffed and went back inside with a swish of his robe.

Harry grinned as he easily pulled up the linden now that its roots were exposed.

He weeded the house side of the garden before stepping back and reassessing. It occurred to him only now that there most likely were spells to accomplish this in a matter of minutes or seconds. Snape probably thought he was being the nutter Muggle for doing it by hand. It felt more satisfying this way, and it passed more time he would otherwise be reading *History of Magic*.

Someone had rather carefully laid out the garden long ago. Surrounding the bench were roses and some other small-leaved shrub he didn't recognize and beside that was a low bed of bulbs and in the corner, ivy emerged, meant to cover just the stone wall. He tapped his finger on his leg--he needed mulch to really finish the job by covering the newly exposed ground.

As he wondered where he would get some, light footsteps came along the road and stopped beside the gate. Harry turned and found himself face to face with the girl he had been watching every day from his window over the previous summer. Bit of a shock really, seeing her so close, where she could see him too. "Hi," Harry said. She was not wearing the slicker today, but a short cloak.

"Hello," she replied with a hint of uncertainty. "Do you live here?" she asked, eyes glancing down to his clay-clumped gloves, then his green and brown stained knees.

"Yes," Harry replied as he stooped to toss some stray strands of ivy onto the main pile.

"Hm. I didn't realize there was anyone else in the Snape household," she commented, sounding concerned to not be up on this. "This is still Severus Snape's house, correct?"

"Yes," Harry replied. He was taking advantage of the close proximity to fill in his understanding of her looks. Her skin was almost too smooth, and transparent and her nose definitely too pert, especially in view of the very proper accent. He pulled his hand, still clean, out of his glove and offered it. "I'm Harry, by the way."

"Oh," she said as though realizing her manners had been set aside. "Elizabeth. Peterson. My house is down the road two hundred meters or so past the station."

"Yes, I've seen you walking by a few times."

This appeared to unnerve her a bit. She blinked and recovered with ease and said, "I go to my lessons every day, almost, over the holidays. Piano and harp from Mrs. Blithewell, just around the corner." She pointed as she said this.

Harry, wondering fiercely if she were a witch or not and, thinking that he had nothing to lose, said, "Would you like to come in for tea?"

"Oh," she said, as though taken by vaguely pleasant surprise. "My lesson is in five minutes, so I really can't. Perhaps another time," she said with practiced ease.

"Sure," Harry said with no expectation. She bade him a pleasant day and went on her way. He watched her back as it disappeared around the gentle bend in the road. He suspected he may have spent too much time wondering about her--she seemed downright ordinary, really. Or maybe he was comparing her to Tonks. The latter seemed more likely, as he warmed at thinking of the Auror. He really had to not make that a habit.

Just before noon, when Harry was finally settling in for a good long read of Astronomy, a knock sounded on the door. A little mystified, Harry went to open it. Ginny stood in the garden, looking rosy as though from a brisk walk. "Ello," she said.

"Hi," Harry returned. "Come in," he invited, scratching his head idly. "Just wake up from the party?"

She hesitated. "Yeah," she admitted. "You left early, you know."

Harry shrugged, thinking he had been finished hours before he had actually left, and most of it was a blur.

"Did you get in trouble for being out so late?" she asked as she stepped in and eyed the entryway keenly.

"No." At her surprised look he shrugged as though not understanding her disbelief. He led her into the main hall and wondered if he should force her to say hello to Snape. His guardian saved him the decision as he stepped out of the library with a book under his arm. "Ms. Weasley," he said in a manner of greeting.

"Sir," she replied, straightening as she did so. She gave Harry an uncomfortable look when Snape disappeared into the drawing room.

Harry gestured toward the dining room. Once there, they sat down across from each other at the table. He assumed Winky would bring tea. "Enjoying the holiday?" Harry asked.

"Yes," she replied strongly. "One more term 'til summer," she added in a mantra-like way.

"Don't like school?"

"I dislike the hard work."

Winky came in with a tea set, startling Ginny severely. "*You* have a house-elf?" she asked in complete shock.

"Yes," Harry answered, intentionally in a tone that indicated he thought it the most normal thing in the world. He wanted to see how she reacted. She looked confused. After Winky shifted everything from her tray, he thanked her and poured for Ginny. Winky gave them a little curtsy, which wasn't normal, and departed. Harry tried not to appear too mystified by that, since it dismayed Ginny more.

She sipped her tea. "So how is *your* holiday going?" she asked in a normal chummy voice.

I got shagged, so it is going pretty well, Harry considered saying, then almost laughed. "Good. Fun party last night," he said quickly to cover after a long throat clearing. "And I'm finally meeting the neighbors here a bit."

Ginny sipped her tea before setting it down on the saucer and straightening both with unusual precision. "Do you like me?" she asked suddenly.

"Uh, you're nice," Harry replied.

"Oh." She sounded disappointed. Harry avoided smiling with some effort. Ginny ate a biscuit and glanced around the room with interest. "Nice house," she said.

"Thanks. It's nice to have one."

"Oh yeah. I 'spose it would be. Hope I'm not keeping you from something by being here."

Harry shook his head. "I have studying to do. Take your time."

She chuckled at that. "You have been a bookworm. Don't know what happened to the *fun* Harry."

"I wasn't fun at the party?" Harry asked.

"I didn't get to talk to you much--you were always surrounded, either by the kids or my brothers." She took another biscuit. "Well, one term more," she said again, sounding glum.

As though mention of school had conjured him, Snape stepped in. He poured himself a cup and held it. "Studying hard this break, Ms. Weasley?"

"Trying to, sir. My brothers, who don't have school assignments, like to throw big parties."

"Poor dear," Snape said in a classically snide tone.

Harry gave him a warning look.

Looking uncomfortable in Snape's presence, Ginny drank her tea quickly. Harry poured her more and took another biscuit so that she would take another. She smiled, apparently noticing his urging her to stay a while.

An awkward minute later, Snape set his cup down and rolled up one sleeve, presumably since it was warming up in the house. "Staying for lunch, Ms. Weasley?" he asked, making it sound less like an invitation than a point of interest.

"Uh, no. I don't think so." She swigged the last of her tea and stood up. "Nice to visit a bit, Harry," she said quickly.

Harry showed her to the door and waved her out of the garden. She gave him a fleeting glance over the shoulder that had more furrow to the brow than expected. Back in the drawing room, Harry said to Snape, "Did you chase her off on purpose?"

"No Weasley was ever chased off that easily," Snape replied as he looked for something in the little drawer of the desk.

"Yeah, I suppose," Harry agreed and stepped away.

* * *

When Harry slept badly the second night after the party, he wasn't so certain that his alcohol and potion consumption was the culprit. Saturday morning, after another poor night, he mentioned it at breakfast.

"The Ministry hasn't caught the D.E. you 'saw'. Are shadows involved in your dreams?" Snape asked.

"I'm not sure. Probably," he answered with a frown. He had grown very accustomed to not being harassed in his dreams and hated to imagine that was happening again. Plates with extra bacon appeared, spurring Harry to take up his fork.

"Need potion?"

Harry shook his head. "I have some."

After a moment Snape added, "You may wake me in the night, if you need someone to talk to."

"I appreciate that," Harry said, with a twinge of gratitude as he wrapped a long greasy strip around his fork.

That afternoon, Harry again grew bored of doing assignments. Thinking about the unfinished garden made him eager to continue on it. He decided to check the back garden where an old wardrobe, charmed to resist the rain, stood in for a shed. He found a claw shaped tool that would be good for loosening the hard soil and fertilizer in the form of a large woven sack of dragon dung--so old, it smelled fresh--so old, it would stand in for mulch in a pinch.

Harry carried his haul back around to the front and arranged it all before starting in. He used the claw tool around the plants and pulled up stray weeds he had missed last time, after deciding that they weren't magically growing back that quickly. He considered that would be a rather amusing way to curse a garden.

Footsteps came along the brick walk. Harry sat back from crawling around the shrubs to use the claw along the edge of the wall. "I have a few errands on Diagon Alley," Snape said. "I assume you are safe to leave for an hour or so. I am certain you would render either Jugson or Avery helpless with laughter were they to approach while you're are doing that." Harry tried to give him a dark look, but failed. Snape went on, in the same tone of dry, airy disbelief, "Barring that, I am certain you could beat them off with that thing you are holding."

Chuckling, Harry said, "Too bad if you don't like it. I'm doing it anyway."

"Hm," Snape muttered before disappearing back into the house.

Harry was just finishing mulching and was pretty happy with the way it all looked, when he turned and eyed the other tangled half. He thought maybe he should have had Snape buy a book of gardening spells while he was out.

"Hello again," Elizabeth said from just the other side of the low wall by the road.

Harry spun around and adjusted his cap as he greeted her. He realized that because if it, she didn't know who he was. "How does it look?"

"Vastly improved," she stated.

"That's what I thought," Harry said happily, surveying it again.

"You must really dislike studying," she commented, looking around.

"History, yes," Harry said. "Boring as it gets."

"I like history," she said. "Classes at Malvern are always at least somewhat interesting."

"Where's that?" Harry asked, never having heard of it. It didn't sound magical.

"Worcestershire." She pulled off her white gloves and put them in her pocket. "Where do you go to school?"

Harry grinned as he thought of replying St. Brutus'. "A boarding school in Scotland," he said with a shrug.

"With a boring History class," she added for him.

Harry considered that if he explained that the it was boring because the professor was dead, that might not go over so well. "Yes," he replied simply. "Would you like tea?" he asked, sensing that she was impatient about something.

"Yes, please," she replied eagerly, taking Harry by surprise, mostly because he had not imagined he had pinned her motivations correctly.

He led the way inside, dropping his gloves just inside the door and intentionally forgetting to remove his cap. In the hall, while she looked around, he leaned down the steps to the kitchen and asked Winky for afternoon tea. Winky came over to the bottom of the steps and actually gave him a wink, which she had never done before.

Shaking off the confusion from that, Harry turned back to Elizabeth. "Dining room," he said gesturing at the nearby door. With a smile she followed his gesture, glancing at his cap as she passed him. Harry pretended not to notice.

"This is nice," she said of the wooden-walled room. She glanced down and studied the patterned rug. It was Harry's favorite room as well, so he smiled at that as he sat down across from her. "Is the rug Belgian?" she asked.

"I don't know," Harry replied.

"You only know plants," she suggested in a level tone.

Harry, accustomed to harmless snideness, was nonetheless a little taken aback. "Actually, I don't know plants really, either," he replied. Winky arrived with the tea in that instant. She set the table and poured two cups.

"I wouldn't have expected a house-elf," Elizabeth said, clearly pleasantly surprised. She seemed to have a special tone of voice just for conveying that. "So you are Harry Snape? Or is your name something more formal, like Harold?"

Harry almost inhaled his tea. He cleared his throat as gently as possible. "No, just Harry," he managed hoarsely.

The Floo flared then and Elizabeth calmly put her cup down and watched as Snape bent under the mantel. Snape's eyes moved between them with a slightly suggestive expression. Elizabeth stood and held out her hand out. "Elizabeth Peterson, sir. We've met once, several years ago."

"Ah, yes," Snape said, shaking her hand.

"Rather surprised to find you have an addition to the household," she said pleasantly.

Snape swung his cloak off and draped it over his arm. "He is a recent addition," he stated helpfully.

"Surprising that no one knows," she went on insistently.

Snape seemed to search for a reply. As he did so, his eyes glanced over Harry's orange cap. "It didn't seem to warrant a formal announcement," he stated, matching her formal tone and almost matching her accent. Harry had to fight a grin. "I'll leave you two to your tea," he said politely, sounding very odd as a result. As he turned to the hall, Harry had the distinct impression that Snape was trying to tell him something. At the doorway, Snape glanced back one last time and Harry realized he was telling him he could remove the cap since his back was to the bright window.

As Elizabeth sat back down, Harry pulled off his cap and fluffed his fringe to hide his scar. She smiled when she saw he had removed it. They chatted for a half hour or so about the village; Harry learned a lot of things he had wondered about at one point before forgetting when he got used to the place, such as how long wizards had lived here in the relative open: 300 years, and what the resident Muggles thought of witches and wizards: they were mostly relatives of magical people who found it nice to easily have either kind of visitor.

Snape wandered back in after Winky had brought them a fresh pot. He poured himself a cup and stood sipping it. "Do you want to join us, sir?" Harry asked. Snape shook his head and took another sip.

Elizabeth said, "You should both come for dinner some evening. Mother would be most interested to meet you." For an instant, Harry thought she had recognized him without giving any indication, until she said, "Another Snape, how interesting," in a gossipy sort of way.

Snape gulped and jerked his cup away from himself. He looked like he may have burned his mouth. Harry cringed; he really should have corrected her immediately. His guardian looked about as amused as Harry had ever seen him. He rubbed the bridge of his nose as he fought to keep from laughing.

Elizabeth, uninterrupted, went on blithely, "Really surprising, you adopting a Muggle and all."

"What?" Harry blurted. Snape lowered his hand to give him a very odd expression. "What makes you think I'm a Muggle?" Harry asked her, stunned by the notion.

"Well, you were doing the gardening by hand," she said, as though that covered it completely.

"Oh." Harry thought of saying that he didn't know how to do it any other way. Instead, he said, "I prefer doing it by hand. I was killing time."

"Oh," she said, sounding completely mystified. Harry decided she must be a witch.

Why do you go to Malvern instead of Hogwarts?" he asked bluntly.

She sat back and crossed her legs. "Father doesn't believe in magical education. He's a Muggle. Mother tried to explain, but he insists I go to Oxford like himself." She ended with a shrug. "I prefer it now. Before, when I first started, I wasn't very happy about it. My mother has taught me some useful spells and she bought me a wand. I have it at home," she added proudly.

Harry stared at her, trying to take that in.

"So you probably know lots of spells," she said, apparently to fill the silence.

"Hundreds," Harry replied.

"Well," she waved her hand in the air, vaguely in Snape's direction. "You have a father for a teacher," she said dismissively.

Harry nodded, "True."

"Besides, things must have been simply dreadful last year with He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named visiting and all."

"Voldemort," Harry supplied flatly. "But still true."

"Much better to be away from things. Safer that way," she asserted in a different, flatter, tone.

"Not everyone in Shrewsthorpe was safe," Snape stated in one of his talking-to-a-dim-student voices.

"They were safe-er," she came back firmly, sounding like she was quoting someone else.

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Thrimbol would definitely agree and Horis Jourhart and Sora Dreamham," Snape stated, sounding a little relentless.

Elizabeth looked away. Harry did not recognize any of the names. "Who are they?" he asked.

Snape looked reluctant to explain. As he considered a response, Elizabeth said, "I was walking home the night the Mark floated over Trudy Thrimbol's house. What the hell did they want with her anyway?" she snapped in frustration, then flushed, apparently at her language.

Harry dropped his gaze and took a deep breath. He listened as Snape said, "She worked in the records department at the Ministry part time even though she was retired. That made her extremely useful." After a pause, he said, "Harry?" a bit sharply.

Harry raised his eyes as he frowned.

Snape put down his cup and stridently said, "You did everything you could have possibly done. Sooner than anyone expected you to."

"What are you talking about?" Elizabeth asked.

Snape crossed his arms and huffed. "His capacity for guilt is phenomenal," he snapped with a hint of anger. "I am attempting to persuade him to not take on any more. Especially any not his to bear."

She looked very confused. "Why would you be responsible?" she asked Harry.

Harry sighed. "Because killing Voldemort was my task. Maybe I could have done it sooner."

"What?" she breathed.

Snape scoffed. "Have you forgotten already how you did it?"

"No," Harry admitted in a difficult tone. The night in the abandoned manor had been key, Harry knew all too well. Only a month had passed after that. How much difference had that made? It probably made a difference to someone, another gnawing voice in his head commented. But he couldn't have hunted Voldemort down himself, hauled his friends off again somewhere unsafe, and he had needed them too, just as much. Snape was closely watching him think this over.

"Um . . ." Elizabeth interrupted his thoughts. She started to speak, then stopped, twice.

Snape put his hands down to lean over the table and said to her. "Yes, he is Harry Potter. Not Harry Snape," he barely managed the last, having to swallow a laugh to get it out. It bothered Harry rather a lot that his guardian was finding this so amusing, especially since he only ever found the darkest irony amusing. At Elizabeth's disbelieving look, Snape wanded the lamp up and came around behind Harry to pull his hair back. "See?"

"G'off," Harry protested, pushing his hand away.

"The Hero of Wizardry himself," Snape went on in an odd tone. Harry shot him a narrow look over his shoulder. Snape added, "Of course, he does not think that is a positive thing."

"Why not?" Elizabeth asked, sounding stunned in general.

"A very good question," Snape said, sounding too much like a teacher. He stepped back to the head of the table and crossed his arms. "Perhaps ask him. I'd be curious to hear the answer myself."

"Were you hiding?" she asked, amazed.

"No. I just--" he gestured at the cap. "Well, maybe," he conceded in a low tone. "It is hard to get to know someone that way."

"Really?" she asked doubtfully. "I would have talked to you longer the other day, had I known."

"Yes, but that wouldn't have been talking to *me*," Harry insisted. "Just someone you thought you knew from the *Prophet*."

"No," she insisted, "I would have been talking to a wizard--I thought you were a Muggle."

Harry sighed and gave up trying to explain.

She sat straighter. "In any event, you are very welcome to the village, hero or not," she said in a nicely prim tone. "I think I must be going, now," she added suddenly and stood up. Harry showed her to the door, where she shook his hand and gazed in amazement at his scar before stepping out. "Very nice to have met you," she turned and said in an almost comically proper voice. Harry waved her off, hoping he didn't wear too dismayed an expression.

When he returned to the dining room, Snape was in her chair, having another spot of tea.

"Now everyone will know I'm here--won't they?" he said dully as he sat down.

"Within minutes, I believe," Snape stated. After a long pause, he added, "You are who you are. There is no sense running from that."

Harry stared into his cold teacup. "She bothered me," he said.

"And why shouldn't she?" Snape asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know," he replied in an annoyed tone, not wanting to voice the reasons for his disappointment.

Later, as he was finally reading a bit in his Astronomy text, a post owl arrived, flitting straight in the open window. Harry accepted the letter and noticed the return address of Switzerland. He opened it as he nibbled on the last chocolate biscuit. There was a letter as well as a copy of the photo Opus took. The photo took him by surprise--his eyes were brighter and happier than he imagined they looked most of the time. He set it aside. When Snape raised his chin to look over at it, Harry pushed it around to his guardian, who lifted it to examine it more closely. Snape raised a brow and placed it back on the table.

Dear Harry, Hope you are having a fine holiday. Currently we are visiting my grandparents in Geneva. My mother and father were rather stunned by the photograph. They insist I invite you to come visit during the summer, so I am doing so, even though I am certain you are much too busy. I am looking forward to returning to Hogwarts and am very glad to be there rather than Durmstrang even though I miss many friends terribly. I have not been studying as much as I should be. I hope you are having this problem too so that it will not be as noticeable. See you very soon, Penelope.

That evening, many visitors came to the door to say hello as though they had just moved in or something. They were all very pleased to meet Harry. All wanted the two of them to come for dinner very soon. Harry was glad they were due to leave for Hogwarts too soon to accept any invitations. Elizabeth returned with her mother who actually patted Harry on the head with her white gloved hand, pushing the control of his annoyance to the limit. Elizabeth gave him a very apologetic wince that balanced some of it out.

As he closed the door when they had finally said goodbye for the last time, he exhaled in relief and leaned back against it. "Maybe we should leave in the *morning* tomorrow," he muttered.



Chapter 36 -- Wool of Bat and Tongue of Dog

Early Sunday evening, as he came down the stairs to depart for school, Harry considered that the house really did feel like it was equally his.

In the dining room, Snape asked, "Ready to go?"

Harry rechecked his bookbag for his texts and nodded. He stepped into the hearth and took a handful of the coarse powder Snape offered him.

* * *

The visiting Durmstrang students had returned, as well as the rest of the students, for Sunday dinner. Harry sat down with his friends; everyone chatted vigorously about their activities.

"How did your holiday go?" Penelope asked Harry with shy interest.

"Oh, good," Harry said, feeling more than a bit uncomfortable.

She seemed to sense his unease and turned to Frina with her next question.

"Don't mind him," Ron insisted to Penelope. "He had a rough break."

"What, your picnic qualified as 'rough'?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"I meant being stalked by Death Eaters," Ron said.

"I told you about that?" Harry asked him in confusion, certain that Snape wouldn't have said anything. Frina and Penelope turned at those words and listened with trepidation.

"After the second kamikaze, yes," Ron replied, amused.

"Oh. Did I say anything else I didn't mean to?" Harry asked seriously.

Ron laughed. "I don't know. Why wouldn't you want us to know? No one else has seen those two."

"No one else sees Death Eaters with their eyes closed," Harry breathed very quietly to himself. When he fell silent in thought, Penelope gave him a sympathetic look.

* * *

Harry had studied only cursorily over Easter break, so when Greer asked him a question during the first Potions class, he did not know the answer, which was a first for months and a bad way to start the last term of his school years. Greer asked one of the Ravenclaws, who answered correctly. A moment later, Parkinson's annoying laugh rang out. Harry

glanced over to see Malfoy leaning over and whispering to her. Harry looked away and ignored them for the rest of the class, which was harder than usual; Malfoy seemed to be making more snide comments today, keeping the students around him entertained. Although Harry could not actually hear the comments from the other side of the room, they were making him a bit aggravated, or maybe it was just that he had a few Hufflepuffs laughing.

Dean leaned over and elbowed Harry, he assumed to keep him from retorting and making more trouble. Harry gave him a weak smile and returned to his notes. Dean sighed and returned to his own notes. The sigh seemed too heartfelt for the current situation, making Harry wonder what was bothering him.

More snickering brought Harry's gaze up before he could stop himself. Malfoy sat smugly with his arms crossed, fingering the material of his uniform. Harry wondered if Pansy beside him was taking notes for both of them. He wished Greer would penalize them for the disruption they were causing, especially since it looked like Malfoy wasn't paying attention, but the teacher didn't seem to be noticing anything was amiss and pointing it out would certainly be a mistake.

Hagrid had taken care of Harry's and Penelope's wombat over break, so after Potions Harry went down to the game-keeper's cabin to see if he should take it back. It was sleeping in a crate on the floor, still curled around Penelope's cloak. Fawkes' perch overlooked it and the two made for a brightly colored pair.

The wombat had not grown much and when he commented on that, Hagrid said, "It was done growing Harry. And in record time too. Yeh musta given i' everything it needed." It still looked small when Hagrid scooped it up with his large hand and gave it to him. "You kin turn i' in next class, ifn yer wan'. I'll see that i' ge's sen' to Australia and released."

"I'll have to talk to Penelope about that," Harry said, accepting the cloak as well.

He carried the wombat up to the castle, hitched on his hip. It looked around in interest as he walked into the main doors and along the entrance hall. He had half-expected it to be alarmed after Hagrid's small, quiet cabin, but it seemed a little curious about what everyone was doing. When he found Hermione, Ginny, and Penelope in the Great Hall, they jumped up to greet the wombat rather than him.

* * *

Returning to school did not help Harry's dreams. The second night, he awoke with a start and required a long minute to feel oriented and safe in a different bed than he had slept in over holiday.

"Harry?" Ron said in a faint whisper.

Harry pulled the drapes aside quietly. "Yeah?"

Ron's grey silhouette hovered beside his bed. "Need anything?"

"No."

"Wanna go for a walk around the castle?"

"Maybe not," Harry replied, although he could clearly remember their walks before Voldemort was destroyed.

Ron's shadow moved away. "Let me know if you change your mind," he whispered as he crawled back into his bed.

Harry lay awake for a while, grateful for his friend's attempts at helping. He tried in vain to catch the threads of the shadows in his dream. They made less sense than they had in the past, moving counter to each other somehow rather than just coming at him. He thought maybe he should owl Tonks and try to explain somehow that his dreams made him think something was happening, without explaining everything. Thoughts of her made him grin in the darkness and relax enough to sleep, which he finally did, in time to feel mostly rested in the morning.

The next day, Harry and Penelope agreed to turn in their wombat. Hagrid accepted it with a grin and put it in a pen behind his cabin before starting the lecture on electric walking sticks--long insects that zapped painfully if you touched them. Hagrid had them in a box. As they all leaned in to look, little lightening bolts flickered between the camouflaged things. Harry stepped back to let others see. As he did so, he noticed Malfoy had his hand right on Parkinson's bum as they stood waiting to take their turn at the crate. Malfoy gave Harry a snarky once-over at his expression. Surprised by this bold rudeness, Harry stepped around to the other side, closer to the pen where the wombat was rolling around holding its back foot as though to playfully attack it. Not the brightest animal, he thought.

In Defense Against the Dark Arts, Snape paired them up for a full practice session. "I have discovered that some of you are taking the liberty of dueling on your own time, which I might point out is strictly against school rules. I have decided that it would be best to just get it out of your systems during class."

Penelope and Hermione dueled first. Harry watched almost mystified at how polite they were about it, with their low power spells and long pauses between offense and defense. It was like watching a ping-pong match between two grandmothers. Opus and Neville went next. This was a little more interesting to watch since both of them looked like they felt they had something to prove. Neville lost, unfortunately, when his blasting curse was rebounded by some kind of flexible block Harry had never seen. Neville lost his balance and had to jump off the back of the platform to keep from falling on his head. Harry had not noticed until that moment, but Neville looked more athletic than he remembered.

"Mr. Potter," Snape said, inviting him up with a sweep of his fingers. "And . . ."

"Oh please, let it be me," Malfoy murmured.

"Despite the interruption, why not?" Snape drawled, indicating he should come up.

Harry pulled out his wand and moved to the center of the platform. As they stood back to back, Harry said, "You going to cheat again?"

The other boy scoffed. "I don't need to cheat to beat you."

"Good luck," Harry sneered as the count started.

On ten they both issued blasting curses which they both managed to block. Harry was first with the next one, a Figure-sempre which was blocked easily. Harry decided that Malfoy had been practicing since their last 'draw'. Malfoy, grinning with almost disturbing pleasure, made Harry wait before he incanted a chain binding curse. Harry ducked under it and it wrapped up one of the wooden stands behind him with a loud clatter.

Malfoy was supposed to wait for Harry's next one, but instead he spelled at the same time Harry did and their curses met in the middle with a spectacular explosion of light. The other students *obed* in an impressed kind of way. Malfoy was faster than expected again, with a spell Harry did not know. In a panic he put up a Titan block since it was the first thing to pop into his head. When the strange spell hit, it jolted him to his knees and made him drop his wand.

As he grabbed up his wand and tried quickly to aim back, he discovered Snape had stepped in the middle. "No permanently damaging curses, Mr. Malfoy," he stated angrily.

In a bit of an overdone whine, Malfoy retorted, "It isn't if he counters it."

Harry got to his feet and shook his arms out, which were tingling painfully.

"Take your seat. Ten points from Slytherin for that, Mr. Malfoy." Snape turned to Harry; he seemed to want to ask if he was all right, but held back. "A Chrysanthemum block would have been a better option and generally is for an unknown attack," he said factually, although it had a layer of something under it, something seeking to soothe, perhaps.

Harry took his seat, still rubbing his tingling arms. Malfoy glanced over and grinned as he saw that. Harry dropped his arms and pretended they didn't hurt anymore as Ron and Dean were paired up on the platform.

* * *

More members of the Advanced D.A. were managing to achieve their Animagus forms. Hermione became an otter in the next session, to a long run of cheering. She actually came over and chewed on Harry's shoe, when he stayed off to the side while everyone else gathered around. Harry laughed despite himself, especially when she changed back and ended up on all fours.

"Maybe I should stand up some before changing back," she said, blushing fiercely.

"I'm glad I'm spared such embarrassment," Harry opined.

She slapped him on the leg. "Not for long," she chided.

Dean also managed his form late in the same session. He turned into a Moor pony. He turned back again quickly when the others began arguing over who got the first ride. Four students were now Animagi since Suze had managed her white mink form over holiday. In a buoyant mood, they broke up to return to their assignments for tomorrow.

On the way back from the Room of Requirement, the thing Harry had feared earlier did happen, but fortunately he was with Ron, Ginny, Dean and Hermione. As they passed a cupboard, voices could be heard talking low.

Hermione, closest to the door, actually giggled, utterly surprising Harry. They all moved on as quickly as they could while remaining silent. When they were out of range, Hermione said, "Boy, thought Malfoy was really attached to Parkinson."

"He does seem to be," Ginny commented.

"Why was he back there with someone else?" she asked, amused.

"How could you tell?" Ron asked doubtfully.

"I could hear them talking; couldn't you?"

"I wasn't listening that closely," Ron grumbled uncomfortably.

As they reached the stairs, Hermione said thoughtfully, "Sounded a bit like Eloise, actually, whom I thought was going with Moon. Ah well, anyone dumb enough to trust him, gets what they deserve," she said dismissively.

* * *

Harry was dreaming. Not a bad dream like he had been having, but a more pleasant one in which he was dancing in the Great Hall with Tonks, who was wearing a rather extravagant fuzzy yellow ball gown that flared wide around her. The hall was decorated similarly to the way it had been for the Tri-Wizard Tournament except that the walls themselves glittered. And through the tall windows the stars winked brightly rather than ominously.

Tonks smiled at him with equally bright eyes and laughed as they spun intermittently fast and slow. Harry pulled her close but in the dream he could not feel her the way he expected to. She leaned forward with a sly grin and kissed him softly, timidly. Harry did not understand why she was kissing him so when she had done it much more aggressively before. He reached out dream hands toward her to try to make things right, painfully aware that this was not right somehow.

A pleasant sigh snapped Harry awake. Lips were on his and the transition from dream to reality hard to distinguish. "Wha?" Harry said, grabbing the figure above him. He could feel narrow shoulders under his hands.

"Harry," a familiar voice whispered.

Harry sat up and grabbed up his wand and used a Lumos charm. The light revealed that the drapes around his bed were closed tight and that Ginny knelt on the bed beside him. She had a very crooked smile and bright eyes.

"What are you doing?" Harry demanded in a harsh whisper.

"You don't have to be quiet--I used a Silencio on the drapes," she said in a normal voice. She reached out a hand and touched his arm. "I wanted to see you," she said quietly despite her previous assertion.

"Ah . . ." Harry said as he rubbed his hair back to think. "You shouldn't be here," he finally said.

"Why not?" she asked smartly. "The dormitory steps don't keep girls out, even at night. Don't you want me here?"

"I was sleeping. And . . ." he trailed off as her hand brushed his upper arm with tantalizing lightness. He grabbed her hand in his and held it away. "I don't think this is a good idea."

Her face had fallen when he had restrained her. Harry set the wand aside, still glowing, and sat up straighter. "Really, Ginny, Ron is just in the next bed," he pointed out a little distressed. "What were you thinking?"

She frowned a bit and said, half to herself, "I see the way you look at her."

"What way?" he asked.

"*That way*," she said as though he were slow.

Harry became distant and thoughtful. "Do I really?" he asked a little eagerly.

With a grumbling huff, she tossed aside the drapes and departed. When Harry heard the dormitory door click closed, he breathed out in a deep sigh of relief, but he could not relax and it took over an hour to fall back to sleep.

* * *

The old, half-ruined, stone cabin faced the constant wind from the sea. Whoever had built it was either an idiot or really wanted a view. A figure approached along a grassy path, wand waving occasionally before him to ward off protective alarms. He approached quietly enough that the occupant did not detect him until he stepped into view.

"You!"

A sweet smile then. "I have something I need from you."

Slight relaxation accompanied this statement although the man continued eyeing the other suspiciously. "Take whatever you want," he said with a gesture at the drooping roof of the cabin behind him. He then laughed a little maniacally at his own sarcasm.

"It is true you only have one thing left. And you really have no choice but to give it to me." The visitor fired a binding curse from his ready wand.

* * *

Harry stretched his neck as he stared at the glass sphere before him. A moment ago it had been an orange, so he was at least making progress. But any moment now it was going to switch back. He sighed; he was tired and not really in the mood to change things into other things. He had had a difficult time at breakfast pretending everything was normal; a much harder time than Ginny, who appeared to have forgotten it all. His forced casualness had attracted his friends' at-

tention, although they had not pressed him to explain. Harry took off his glasses to rub his sore eyes. At some point he had fallen again into the mode of being tired all the time. Too easily, he thought, although people interrupting his sleep certainly did not help.

When he put his glasses back on, he found McGonagall observing him. He sniffed and returned to the next phase of the transfiguration which was to turn the air in the center of the sphere into smoke. Fortunately, even Hermione was having a tough time with this one; her sphere kept cracking open when she attempted that stage. Today, since Harry was stalling, she was the one using up all the oranges at their table in a bid to get it right as fast as possible.

McGonagall eventually stepped around to them. "We can go over it again this evening, Mr. Potter, if need be," she said in reference to his tutoring session.

"I really need to get this?" Harry asked.

She frowned. "It is commonly on the N.E.W.T., I'm afraid, since it tests all forms of multi-transformation at once. A little hint to you: if they give you just the end points for the transfiguration rather than the steps, assume that the steps are applied in order of easiest to hardest, because that is typical of the test design.

"Hm," Hermione muttered sounding like she were committing that to memory. "Thank you, Professor."

Harry, realizing that he could work on his spell again later, casually used the smoke transformation on his sphere out of boredom. It actually worked.

"Hey," Hermione said brightly, "nicely done." In a frowning voice she added, "So, what did you do?"

"If I could tell you, I would," Harry commented. "I doubt I can repeat it."

She set another orange before him, moving his smoky sphere gently to the side. "Do it quick while you still remember."

Harry tried, but could not work it correctly again, even when he made himself pretend he didn't care if it worked.

* * *

Harry left his friends studying in the library and took the long way around to the tower, to dump off his books, just for a chance to stretch his legs which were stiff from the hard chair he had been sitting in the last few hours. He was looking ahead to his tutoring session, so he was not paying too close attention to what was happening around him. As a result, when a figure burst out of a side corridor and looked around, it startled him more than he would have liked.

"Suze?" Harry asked in concern at the way she glanced around herself. She relaxed a bit upon seeing him there, giving Harry the notion that she feared he might be someone else. He stepped over to her. "What's going on?" he asked.

She composed herself and surreptitiously glanced around behind him. "Nothing," she replied; for a Slytherin it was a very poor lie. She straightened her ponytail efficiently and started to walk away.

Harry, worried, said, "No, really," as he reached out a hand to her shoulder to slow her down.

She jumped away from him and snarled, "Don't touch me!"

Stunned silly, Harry jumped back himself and stared at her. "I didn't--" he started, then stopped. "I'm sorry," he finally managed, holding his hands to the side and a little back. She turned again and walked away, but Harry followed. "Suze, what's wrong?" he asked in concern.

She stopped at the bend where the sunlight tried valiantly to light the corridor through thick clouds. "Who do you think you are, my big brother?" she accused him.

"Uh," Harry said, feeling like he had missed part of the conversation somehow. He knew she had no siblings, so he dove in as though he were following along. "If necessary," he said.

Her shoulders fell as though admitting defeat. Harry knew that feeling well: the one where your strength leaves you because someone says that they will help. "I can take care of myself," she insisted.

"If you won't talk to me, you should talk to Professor Snape," Harry insisted. "Whatever is wrong. . . ."

She gave him a glance as though he were an idiot and strode away again. Harry let her go this time. As she disappeared down a short set of steps where the wings connected, someone stepped up beside Harry. He turned as Malfoy, arms crossed, pert nose a little high, said, "Bit of a wench."

Anger poured into Harry as heat in his veins. His hands balled into tight fists at his sides. Malfoy gave him a glance that said, *what is your problem?* In a low voice, Harry threatened, "Don't you ever . . ."

The blonde boy scoffed and walked away, shaking his head. Harry reached into his robe and put his hand around his wand but did not pull it out. So badly did he want to hit the other in the back with something jarring; something that would land him in the hospital wing or St. Mungo's for a week. With a quiet growl he let go of his wand and went around floor the other way.

Snape was in his office, grading as usual. His first glance at Harry seemed to tell him a lot. "What is it?" he asked, setting his quill down beside the stack of parchments.

Harry, too keyed up to sit, pushed the visitor's chair out of the way of his pacing route. He knew he had to say this just the right way, but as he thought it over, he realized that he did not know anything for certain. He swore lightly in frustration.

"I do hope you don't use that language around the other staff members," Snape said with a touch of snide.

"Huh? Oh, no. I don't." He stopped and gestured with his hands as he said, "Look, I think there's a problem with one of your students." Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose and Occluded his mind; if Suze did not want to say anything herself, he could not by rights give her away. "Are you keeping a close watch on Malfoy?" Harry asked.

"Not so much lately, I must admit," Snape said. His intent gaze made Harry suspect he had noticed that Harry had closed his mind. "There are other, far more problematic students to watch over."

Harry struggled for words. "I think he's getting . . . aggressive, maybe is the word, with some of the female students."

"That does not sound like Mr. Malfoy," Snape opined with certainty.

Harry thought back to the scene of minutes before. The events were coincidental, maybe?

"Whom are you protecting, by the way?" Snape asked.

His guardian's bluntness surprised Harry enough that he almost dropped his Occlusion. Gathering himself together, he replied in frustration, "The person who should be here talking to you."

Snape interlocked his fingers before himself and stared at them a long moment. "I will speak with him and a few others." He paused before saying, "Do not do anything stupid yourself."

"How did you know I was thinking that?"

Snape gave him a small smile and a raised brow in reply.

Harry noticed the clock. "I have to get to my Transfiguration tutoring," he said in a rush.

Carrying his full backpack, because he had not made it to the tower to drop it off, Harry headed for the gargoyles. As the stairs turned upward, he rested his forehead against the center stone post that turned with him. He almost dropped his bag from surprise at the shadows moving in his mind.

The steps stopped at the top and McGonagall said, "Are you all right, Harry?" Her door was open as usual and she stood reading something before the bookcase near the doorway.

"I think so," Harry said, hefting his heavy bag into the room by its straining straps.

"What was that just now?" she asked as he plopped into the visitor's chair.

With a frown he replied, "I've been seeing a lot of shadows lately."

The book she held hit the desk with a slap. Almost accusingly, she said, "You are still seeing that green vision from before?"

With a reluctant frown, he replied, "Yes."

"Does Severus know this?" she demanded.

"Yes." She relaxed marginally, so he added, "I owled Tonks as well." Although this was a bit of a lie, as he had only told the Auror he was having worrisome dreams. She had owled back saying they were very close to picking up at least one of the last two, but could not go into detail.

"Well, at least you are willing to tell someone you are in danger, unlike before."

A little peeved, Harry said, "I'm a little better able to take care of myself now, Professor."

"Nevertheless, it was Albus' intent that this place be safe for you and it is mine as well. My staff and I will review and renew the spelling that was set up to protect you last year."

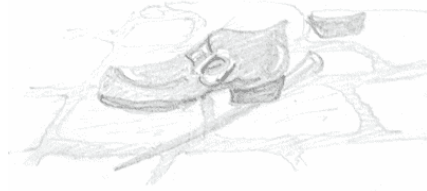
Harry paused in pulling out his Transfiguration textbook. "The castle was spelled to protect *me*, specifically?" He felt a little touched by this notion, then thought more. "But it didn't work. Voldemort just walked in."

"Yes, well," she sighed. "It should not have been that easy," she stated offhandedly as she set an orange out on the desk. "His powers were still growing, it seems."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Good thing he's gone, then," he said as he found the right chapter in his book and placed that on the desk as well.

She smiled lightly at him. "Yes. It means we may devote our full attention to attenuated multi-transformational charmed objects."

"That's what I was thinking," Harry agreed, trying to sound excited by that notion, but it came out as suffering instead.



Chapter 37 -- Adder's Fork and Blind-Worm's Sting

Professor Snape approached Draco Malfoy as he sat in the Slytherin common room, playing wizard chess with Fredericka Fredrick, a fifth year. "Mr. Malfoy," Snape said to get his attention before gesturing with his fingers that the boy should follow.

Malfoy looked up cockily at his professor. With a very casual shrug he stood and followed Snape to a dungeon classroom. As Snape shut the door, Malfoy strode casually over to a stool and hitched his hip upon it. He waited for his professor to speak with a tilted head expression of haughty impatience. Snape could not help but be glad to be getting rid of the boy in three short months.

"I have had a complaint about you, Mr. Malfoy."

"Yeah? Can't imagine who that would have been," he sneered. "You listening to Gryffindors now?"

"Only the ones I trust, I will admit," Snape said. "But nevertheless. You had slipped below my attention so it came as a surprise."

"He's made you weak," Malfoy said. "You wanted that?"

"What you think is of no matter. You are required to heed me, not the other way around." Snape paced to the high windows before turning suddenly back. "Are you guilty of what Mr. Potter accuses you of? It occurs to me that I have not ever seen you socializing with Ms. Fredrick before this."

Malfoy shrugged. "What's it to you? You my baby sitter now?"

"I am if you are crossing the line," he replied in a very hard tone. The blonde boy was adeptly Occluding his mind, making Snape suspect that Harry was correct. "If I see you again with a student below sixth year, I will make your life very miserable," he promised.

The boy grinned crookedly and shook his head in disgust. After a long pause Malfoy said, "You fooled everyone, you know." When Snape did not immediately respond, he suggested, "Or are you fooling them now, maybe? Potter doesn't seem that stupid, but maybe he is."

"None of that is any of your concern," Snape said dismissively.

"Really?" He slipped off the stool and stepped over to his teacher. "You betrayed . . . a lot of people."

"They deserved to be," Snape stated.

Malfoy gave him that sloppy grin again. "It's too bad Voldemort didn't catch you at it," he said with a hint of relish at the notion.

Snape grabbed up the front of the boy's robes and lifted him up to his toes. "Is there a particular reason you are taunting me? Or are you really that foolishly overconfident? Your father is not going to be able to do anything for you . . . *ever*." He released him, angry that he had lost control. With a frown he headed for the door.

"That's what you think," Malfoy said quietly.

"Just remember what I said," Snape returned in his most threatening voice.

* * *

That weekend, Snape and four other teachers were assigned to respell the castle. Harry watched them very early Saturday morning before most students were awake. Hagrid and he stood at the bottom of the steps as McGonagall and Sprout formed a blue field around the main doors. When the glow stabilized, they stepped back and watched it fade to invisible.

McGonagall stepped over to Harry. "Looks like hard work, Professor," he opined.

She shook her head. "The castle is designed to hold magic so it takes much easier than an ordinary object would. Every last stone was selected for its metal and crystalline content, especially around the doors."

Harry considered that if he had ever managed to get around to reading *Hogwarts: A History*, he undoubtedly would have known that.

Unexpectedly, Neville came out wearing very Muggle clothes, exercise clothes in fact. He looked surprised to find them all standing there. McGonagall gestured for him to head out. "Good morning, Mr. Longbottom," she said graciously.

"Morning, Professor," he said in a questioning tone.

Harry wondered what he was up to that the headmistress was so casual about.

"Just renewing the protective spells, my boy," McGonagall explained to Neville. At some point she had adopted Dumbledore's form of address for them; Harry kept intending to point out its inappropriateness, but could not bring himself to.

"Good idea, ma'am," Neville stated shyly, with a strange glance at Harry.

Harry wondered at the look and watched Neville as he moved off, went to the corner of the outer wall, and put one foot up on it and bent over his knee. Harry watched his friend rather than the teachers as the risers themselves were charmed. Neville changed feet a few times, then jogged off to the edge of the forest and started around the edge of the lawn. Harry tracked him as he fell into a smooth stride around the lawn edge.

Later, at breakfast, Harry said to Neville, "I didn't know you ran."

"I started over Christmas. A Muggle friend of mine got me started on it. It's really relaxing."

Harry gave him a doubtful look and returned to nibbling his bacon. Neville did look different now; better proportioned maybe, as though he might actually be muscular under his robes. Harry wondered if the running had done that.

"What were the teachers doing this morning?" Frina asked Harry. "I saw you outside with them."

Harry, noticing Penelope's gaze come up curiously, blushed. He was finding himself much more concerned about her opinion of things. "They were renewing the protective spells on the castle."

"Do any of the spells keep people in?" Penelope asked cautiously.

"Just out," Harry replied reassuringly with a kind smile, thinking that Ginny would not like this look either.

"Good," she breathed.

* * *

"What do I get, Mr. Potter, if I take today's potion, ice concentrate it, mix it with Dermanus powder and boil it for five days?" Greer sounded victorious by the end of the question.

"Calamnute," Harry replied confidently without looking up and without hesitating. The other four textbooks were bloody useful.

When Greer spun away with a huff, Frina asked curiously, "Doesn't the house usually get points for answering such a question?"

Greer spun back around. "What house are you in, young lady?"

"I do not have a house."

"You are at the Gryffindor table, are you not?" Greer sneered.

"We were not sorted, as you call it. We board in their tower, yes," Darsha explained calmly when Frina was at a loss for words.

"Ten points from Gryffindor then, for your cheek," she snapped at Frina.

When Greer had moved on out of immediate hearing range, Frina apologized in an angry, stressed whisper.

"It's not your fault," Harry assured her.

"Ron is very keen to win this house cup, right?" Frina insisted.

"I think he is going to have to do without it," Harry commented flatly.

* * *

Harry walked back from checking on Hermione and Frina's wombat for them while they finished up a difficult Arithmency assignment. The fifth floor corridor was quiet and empty, his footsteps echoing off the stone walls. He thought ahead to his half-finished History assignment; just the notion of it made his brain slow down.

His steps faltered when the hair on his arms prickled as though a draft had swept by him. Harry stopped and looked around. The corridor was empty, a half moon revealed through the dark windows on the end. Even so, he reached for his wand. Nothing moved as he turned his head back and forth and began to feel a little silly for his paranoia.

He let his wand hand fall to his side and took a step along the corridor. The next instant, he was sprawled face down on the floor. He rolled over immediately, propped on one stinging hand, wand held out. No target appeared. He had heard no incantation and had seen no spell trail. Breathing heavily, he moved the aim of his wand around him. The corridor remained utterly still.

"*Accio Cloak*," Harry incanted, thinking only then that someone might be standing close-by, invisible. Nothing happened. He repeated the spell in the other direction, also with no effect. He shifted to get up and found his legs befuddled somehow. He could move them, but they refused to get under him, so it was impossible to stand. Heart racing harder at his predicament, Harry pulled himself along the floor a few feet, slowly because he did not want to lower his wand and use both hands.

Harry needed help. He aimed his wand at the floor and began a Pravda Bird spell. As he spoke it and the bird emerged, his wand and the bird were blasted away from his hand. His wand clattered along the floor and stopped beside a marble statue of Corin Cornelius, who was carved giving a lesson on broom safety. The silver bird spiraled along the wall beyond the statue and vanished in a small cloud of silver sparks.

Harry looked frantically back along the path the spell must have taken, peering closely at the air for any sign of disturbance. No sound or movement could be detected. He considered yelling for help, wondered if anyone would even hear him, or if his pride could withstand it. At the sound of his wand scraping on the floor he whipped his head back around. His wand was lying halfway between himself and the statue now, tantalizingly close.

Wondering again with a stab of fear what was wrong with his legs, Harry pulled himself along the floor toward his wand. This time there was a spell flash from behind him and he was thrown forward by a blasting curse. Stabbing pain shot through his skull as his nose and teeth struck unyielding stone.

Harry carefully raised his head and put his hand over his nose, which bled freely. A fancy black boot appeared beside his wand, beneath an invisible hem, making him realize in surprise that it *was* a cloak. He swallowed blood and watched in horror as the boot rested on his wand on the uneven stones of the floor, clearly intending to break it.

Harry threw out his left hand, and with all his will, shouted "*Accio wand!*" In his mind thoughts of Dumbledore setting him up to get that wand mixed with the emotion of the Final Battle, the most important time he had used it. The wand scraped harshly out from under the boot sole and hit his palm with a slap. He immediately cast his own blasting curse at the spot above where the boot had just re-vanished. The spell shattered against the wall and echoed up and down the corridor. His aim, left-handed, had not been very good and the figure undoubtedly had moved quickly away. Whatever the reason, the miss made him snarl in fury.

He rolled to a sitting position and switched the wand to his bloody right hand and cast a rapid succession of blasting curses in an arc, all of them shattering harmlessly on the wall. As he scanned the hallway again for any small sign, he rubbed his face painfully on his sleeve to keep more blood from his nose from streaming into his mouth.

A minute of silence passed beyond Harry's harsh breathing, until voices sounded from the adjoining corridor. Harry worried that whoever it was might get hurt as well. When the figures turned the corner and saw him on the floor, they hesitated before continuing.

Harry recognized the halo of white hair on the smallest figure. "Did you see anyone?" Harry asked loudly, his voice flattened by his plugged nose. The Slytherins approached faster now, all of them pulling out their wands and looking around themselves avidly.

"No," Suze said as they passed Cornelius. "What happened?"

Harry closed his eyes in a moment of extreme embarrassment. "Someone kicked my arse; someone under an invisibility cloak." He tried to stand up, which, if he had wanted to preserve the remainder of his dignity, he should not have tried.

Harry groaned and sat back down and pulled his robes aside. His feet were flipped in odd directions. Suze gasped and leaned down to look closer in disturbed fascination. Someone else made a distressed stomach noise. Calmly, Harry said, "I think someone took the bones out of my legs." Experimentally he moved his left leg and found that below the knee he had no control over it. His foot dragged behind as he moved it along the stones. With a huff of utter frustration, Harry sat back and said, "Suze, can you get Professor Snape or the headmistress? Please?"

Suze nodded and stood straight. "Portny," she ordered Wereporridge, "Take him to the dispensary."

Wereporridge shrugged his too broad shoulders and stooped down to pick Harry up. "Hey," Harry said in alarm, "Don't you know a Hover spell?"

"You don't want to see his Hover spell," Parkinson said dryly, "as much fun as it would be to see him use it on you."

Harry kept quiet then. Suze ran swiftly ahead of them, light as a dancer and nearly soundless in her soft shoes.

Suze rushed down four corridors and one set of stairs. Snape didn't answer his office door and the classroom was dark. It was evening, but maybe they were holding a staff meeting. By the time she made it down the many long staircases to the entrance hall, she was out of breath and disgusted by it. She had guessed right, though; several teachers were meandering before the open door to the staff room, chatting. The four Heads of House were standing around McGonagall.

Breathless, Suze pounded over to them and tried to explain.

"Ms. Zepher?" McGonagall said in question, putting a hand on Suze's shoulder.

"Harry," Suze breathed and watched their expressions and demeanors shift starkly to alarm as she took a breath to continue. "Attacked on the fifth floor . . ."

"What?" two of them said together as Snape moved quickly by her.

"Team taking him to the hospital wing," she said urgently to his back. He turned his head an instant to glance back before he continued rapidly up the stairs. McGonagall followed behind with the others.

Harry, to his utter dismay, was dropped onto a bed in the hospital wing. To avoid messing the linens he yanked off his shoes, bending his legs disturbingly in the process. Pansy's loud voice rang out for Madam Pomfrey, grating on Harry's sore nerves. Pomfrey bustled over and waved the other students away. They backed off to the other side of the wing and stood there uneasily.

Pomfrey lifted Harry's chin and looked at his nose. "My, my, what happened, Mr. Potter?" she asked, and for once sounded genuinely sympathetic.

"My face hit the floor when someone hit me with a blasting curse." No sooner had he said this, than the double doors to the wing burst open and Snape came through them. Harry dropped his eyes, feeling furiously ashamed. Pomfrey lifted his head again and spelled his nose unbroken. It felt much better immediately, making him sigh in relief. He could even half-way breathe through it now.

Snape came aside the bed as the headmistress entered the wing followed by Suze. "What happened?" Snape asked in alarm.

"Someone got the better of me. Obviously," Harry replied in disgust.

"Who?" McGonagall asked.

"Don't know," he said angrily, gesturing with his hands. "He or she was under an invisibility cloak."

Snape's eyes shifted to the Slytherin Quidditch players across the room. Preemptively, Harry said, "If they hadn't happened to come around the corner, I don't know what would have happened. I couldn't even manage to hold my own." Indeed, the notion that he had been expertly toyed with was grinding harder on his pride now that he had the luxury of thinking clearly.

Harry held still while Pomfrey made his broken tooth grow back in. She then handed him a warm wet towel to clean his face and hands followed by a sip of blood replenisher. "And this; your favorite," she said pleasantly as she poured out a cup from the distinctive Skele-gro bottle.

"Skele-gro?" Snape asked sharply.

Harry pulled his robe aside and moved a leg to demonstrate. Snape stiffened in surprise at the odd floppiness of his foot. McGonagall looked grimly thoughtful.

"Didn't want me running away, whoever it was," Harry commented darkly as he accepted the cup. He forced the liquid down past the stomach churning taste and handed the cup back.

"Bad night coming up, Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said sympathetically as she capped the bottle and set it on the side table.

"To go with my bad evening," he muttered and dropped back on the pillow.

"No idea at all who it was?" Snape asked, sounding frustrated as he leaned over the bed slightly.

Harry shook his head. "I only saw his or her boot. I didn't recognize it. It was a nice one, though." He pulled out his wand and sat back up to reach the towel to wipe the blood smears off of it. The wood had been badly gouged when he had compelled it to come to him. Maybe Ollivander could fix it, he thought, as he stashed it back in his pocket. At least it still worked.

"I'll have your friends bring your things for the night," McGonagall said before turning to leave. "And I'll speak with you," she said to the Slytherins, gesturing broadly for them to lead the way out of the wing. Harry gave Suze a small smile of thanks when she glanced back at him before the door closed.

Harry flopped back again with his hand over his eyes. "I was useless," he muttered. "I tried to Accio the cloak away, but that didn't work. I couldn't think of anyway else to reveal him . . . or her."

"There are a few things you could have tried," Snape said evenly. "A Bolero spell for example."

"Can you show me?" Harry asked, desperate and eager.

"Tomorrow, certainly. When you can stand."

Harry moved one limp leg. "Yeah," he breathed. He shook his head and sighed. "Not really Auror material, I don't think."

Snape's hand moved to his shoulder. "Harry, truly your pride cannot be that fragile," he said in disbelief, sounding almost amused. At Harry's dark frown, he added, "We will arm you so it cannot happen again, all right?"

Harry looked away, biting his lips at the pain blossoming in his legs from the Skele-gro. He nodded. Snape removed his hand. "I have grading to do, but I can bring it down here."

"That's all right," Harry said dismissively.

"You are certain?" He looked surprised but willing to give in.

Harry nodded, feeling his ineptness did not need an audience. As Snape stepped hesitantly away, the doors opened to reveal his friends. Snape nodded at them as they passed.

"Harry! What happened?" Hermione asked as she came over, sounding like it might be at least partially his fault. Ron carried Harry's pyjamas and kit, which he placed under the night stand. He looked too accustomed to doing that.

Harry growled, but he sat up a bit on the pillows to explain what happened.

Eventually, his friends were shooed from the room by Madame Pomfrey. Harry took out his things to change out of his school clothes, and buried in between his pyjama top and bottom he found the Marauder's Map. Grinning at his friends' foresight, he unfolded it and activated it after checking that Pomfrey was safely in her office.

On the Map the last students were heading for their respective House rooms. J. Finch-Fletchley was still in the library, moving around in the stacks. His friends were walking on the staircase. P. Tidewater was with the other Durmstrang students in the Gryffindor common room along with many others. He scanned all the names on the page. In the House rooms they were stacked up tight together. He did not see an Avery or Jugson among them, or any others he didn't rec-

ognize. Sighing, he folded it up and stashed it in the pocket of his robe and lay down to sleep, confident in the spells on the wing to not let in anyone with ill intent. Desperate for a good rest, he forcefully Occluded his mind as he relaxed into sleep.

* * *

"Bella, *pot!*" a harsh voice whispered.

Bellatrix Lestrange sat up on the thinly padded stone pallet and squinted into the darkness. She hesitated a long time before moving to the cell door. When she did move, it was in near total silence. The halo of blonde hair was unmistakable. "Lucius?" she breathed in confusion and extreme suspicion, "what are you doing out of your cell?"

Malfoy looked down the corridor in each direction before replying, "I need your help. I can't get past the outer guards without an assistant." He held up a sparkling silver-framed gem on a chain around his neck. "A friend finally came through with this." He fingered it lovingly. "Some betray while others are brilliantly loyal. One never seems to know," he whispered, as though speaking to himself. It could have been a pledge to revenge.

She gasped and grabbed the bars hard. "Is that an Ampliment?" she asked hungrily.

"Yes," Malfoy replied, the word drawn out in a hiss. He stashed the shining thing back inside his robe. "I can only assume you would like to depart this place as well?" he asked cockily.

She laughed quietly. "You always have such a way with words."

* * *

Harry was dreaming, a groggy, pain-filled dream that teased at being pleasant. He breathed out and breathed in another's warm breath. This jerked him fully into wakefulness just as soft lips found his.

"*Ginny*," Harry admonished, very dismayed.

The figure above him stood straight with a gasp and moved off. Quickly, Harry painfully sat up and reached for the bedside lamp just as the door to the wing opened with a *swoosh*. All he saw was a silhouette with very long hair turning into the dim light of the corridor.

"Peni," Harry breathed in complete shock. "Ugh," he groaned. Compelled to follow, he put on his glasses and reached for the carved crutches sitting against the wall at the head of the bed.

Rushing, and with his mind still swimming in sleep, he clumsily hobbled across the room. He thunked unceremoniously through the double doors at the end and paused because his hands were shaking on the crutches with exhaustion from carrying nearly all his weight. The corridor was long empty and his strength wavered alarmingly. He stood swaying on the highly-polished, forked tree branches, trying to figure out what to do. The pain in his feet now overwhelmed his thoughts, making a decision impossible.

A figure appeared at the end of the corridor, billowing robes highlighted by the flickering sconces on the left side. "Harry?" Snape's voice sounded.

"Did you see anyone?" Harry asked.

Snape glanced around himself in alarm before replying, "No. And since we just finished thoroughly searching the castle, I would hope not."

He came aside as Harry mumbled, "Maybe I was dreaming, then."

"Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said as she strolled purposefully through the doors to the wing. "What are you doing out here?"

Harry's feet throbbed ominously almost making him choke on his reply. "I don't know." He must be insane to be upright on newly grown foot bones, he decided. Only a *Crucio* had ever been more painful than what he was experiencing right now.

Snape stepped closer and took one of the crutches away before slipping an arm under his. "Take these, Madam," he said, holding it out. Pomfrey took one than the other crutch in hand and Snape hefted Harry into his arms. The hospital witch held the door open for them. "You must have grown," Snape complained breathlessly as he carried his charge back into the dispensary.

Harry, stunned silly by the utter relief of being off his feet, did not reply. At his bed he expected to be dumped unceremoniously as *Wereporridge* had done earlier. Instead, he was lowered carefully to the mattress.

"What ever possessed you to get up?" Snape asked harshly, hand moving to Harry's shoulder as he released him.

Harry closed his eyes. "I don't want to get into it." Numb relief had given way to painful heat in his feet and ankles. Pomfrey's hands on them relieved some of it as she gently twisted his feet one way then the other. When she finished, she tossed the duvet up over his legs and stalked away.

Snape straightened the covers as he said, "Trouble sleeping?"

"It's strange sleeping here," Harry said, thinking past nocturnal visitors. "The respelling has made the dormitory easy to sleep in. It doesn't feel like that here." He thought that over more as rubbed his eyes. "It's like the shadows are blocked out some when I'm in the tower. Is that possible?"

"Perhaps," Snape replied, sounding concerned. "A number of night-calming spells were added to the Gryffindor tower with the intent of helping you sleep."

Harry tugged his glasses off and set them aside. He dropped his head back on the pillow and closed his tired eyes. "Could use one of those spells here right now," he mumbled.

"The castle has been thoroughly searched," he said. In a firmer tone, he added, "Do not get up again until morning, Harry."

"Yeah, all right," Harry murmured, half asleep already. His trepidation about nightmares did not hold sleep at bay.

Harry was in the Forbidden Forest at twilight. An aquamarine light shimmered in the cooling air as a breeze vibrated the leaves above him. A shadow floated by him. He stepped back in fear of it but it did not seem to notice him there. Other shadows flashed between the trees, hiding, watching.

Looking around him in a panic, Harry tried to find a place to hide himself, but the tall wide trunks shifted away from him when he approached them to obscure himself. He could not hide and he didn't seem to have his wand, since he was still in his pyjamas. He wrapped his arms around himself from the chill of the dew collecting on his thin clothes as he moved.

Harry froze in place as two shadows shifted into the open and clashed. A horrible screeching went up and the trees faded away, revealing a dull green world. Many dark forms converged and retreated. A bolt of pain shot through Harry, forcing him to his knees. He reached out a desperate hand toward the wavering shadow in the middle of the cluster as it flattened and shrank, drawing a burst of wind towards it as it popped into nothingness.

Harry snapped awake with a gasp. The hospital wing surrounded him with its odd peacefulness. At the last moment of the dream he had seen another shadow flicker into the open, full of malevolence. He wondered what was going to happen next but he could not recapture it, even by closing his eyes. His face was wet; he dried it with a swipe of his sleeve and hurriedly fumbled for his glasses. Panicking now as the meaning of the dream flooded through him, he swung his legs

over the edge of the bed and reached for the crutches. Memory of the earlier pain in his feet warred with his extreme need to check on his guardian.

"Mr. Potter!" Pomfrey said as she strode up the wing from her office.

"I have to . . ." Harry tried to explain.

"You have nothing you need to do at this hour, Mr. Potter," she stated, hands on hips. Her strict manner relaxed, however, when she looked over his face.

"I have to see Severus," Harry insisted, heart stopping panic filling him again as he said it.

"I will fetch him, then. YOU stay put." She stalked off.

Still holding the crutches in each hand as he sat on the edge of the bed, Harry tried to hold himself steady. It did not work all that well, though. The odd pain in the dream had unnerved him badly, and like a broken record it kept replaying itself in his head as he waited.

Finally, voices could be heard in the corridor. "I'm *am* sorry, Professor, for disturbing you," Pomfrey was saying.

The doors opened as Snape said, "It is no matter." The crutch from Harry's left hand hit the floor when Snape stepped into the dim light of the wing. Relief, like a spell of weakness, rendered Harry's arms useless and he could not retain his grip on it. Snape strode quickly over and scooped up the fallen crutch, gathered it up with the other Harry still held, and set them aside, his expression intently curious and concerned.

Pomfrey took them up and placed them a little farther away. "Only if the hospital wing is on fire, Mr. Potter," she chastised him before striding away.

"Harry, what is wrong?" Snape asked in concern.

Harry clasped his shaking hands together to quell them. Snape, apparently seeing this, grasped them and sat on the edge of the bed beside him. "Harry?" he prompted again more forcefully.

"I thought . . ." he started to reply before cutting himself off. He could not think it again. Realizing he needed to explain somehow, he said, "Shadows are killing each other." Snape sat straight and gripped Harry's hands tighter.

"How close by?" Snape asked.

"I don't know," Harry replied. "And I don't just see it, I can feel it too." Words failed him, so he fell silent, even though he truly wanted Snape to understand. He rubbed at his chest where the stab of pain had gone through him in the dream.

"What is he saying?" Pomfrey asked. She stood between the beds, hands clasped before her the way she held them when she was diagnosing something.

Snape put an arm around Harry and pulled him sideways to lean against him. "I believe he is saying that Voldemort's former servants are killing each other and that he feels them dying." Pomfrey took a step backward. Harry frowned and dropped his gaze so he didn't see Snape give the hospital witch a most displeased expression. Snape sighed and said, "You are safe here, Harry."

"I want to know what is happening, though," he murmured. Strength was returning to his limbs, so he sat straighter against the reassuring weight of Snape's arm.

"We should inform Minerva anyway. I can summon her," Snape said, as he reached into his robes for his wand.

"I'll fetch her," Pomfrey said, forestalling him. "A little less abrupt to be woken in person," she chastised. She spun on her toe and walked out.

Harry let his head fall to the side, onto Snape's shoulder. The warmth and solidity of him chased away the last of Harry's earlier panic and with the calm the rest of his strength flooded back as well, as though the vision had half paralyzed him somehow.

Eventually, the door opened again. McGonagall hesitated momentarily at the sight before her, until Pomfrey's passing her made her step forward. As she approached, she put up a hand to stop Snape from explaining. "Ministry contacted me just before Madam Pomfrey arrived. Seems there was an attempted breakout from Azkaban tonight. A bit of a battle ensued as a result and two former Death Eaters were killed."

"Who?" Snape asked.

"The Lestrangle brothers," she replied. "It was apparently Bellatrix Lestrangle and Lucius Malfoy who initiated the breakout. The Ministry assure me that they are all back in custody now."

It bothered Harry that he had felt such pain and regret at the death of one who had tortured Neville's parents. In the dream he had been reaching out to save him, which sickened him now. He was pulled back to the present by Snape's arm shifting so that just a hand rested against his back.

"He saw it in his mind," Snape explained quietly to McGonagall.

Harry looked away; he didn't want anyone to know that. McGonagall stepped closer and said, "I'm sorry, Harry. I wish I had a spell to cut you free of them." For a moment it seemed she would say more, but she patted his shoulder instead. "Need anything?"

Harry shook his head, still not looking up at her.

"Will you be all right now?" Snape asked. "Do you want me to stay?"

Feeling renewed embarrassment, Harry shook his head with certainty. Snape stood up but hovered near the end of the bed. Harry put his glasses aside yet again and lay down. Exhaustion tugged at him despite his aching bones. His eyes fell closed on their own. Footsteps headed away, scuffing lightly on the stone floor. As the door creaked open, he heard McGonagall say, "I do apologize, Severus," before their voices faded out.

In the dim corridor leading to the staircase, Snape asked, "For what? I do not think even Albus could have severed him from these remnants of Voldemort's mind. They are a part of him, probably have been since he received that scar."

McGonagall clasped her hands before her as they stopped at the bottom of the stairs before parting. "That wasn't what I was referring to." She smiled slyly and said, "I was apologizing for ever doubting that you could take care of him."

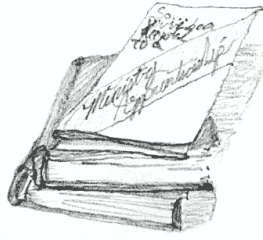
Snape stiffened and put his hand on the handrail curling upward. "Hm," he huffed lightly while shooting her a dark look that lacked real conviction. He turned away and stepped up.

She grinned and shook her head. "Goodness, I hate admitting that Albus was right," she said to his back.

He paused midway up and turned, still holding the narrow eyed look from before. "Dare I ask about what?" he inquired with some snide.

McGonagall grinned more. "He must have been. Can't imagine you've changed that much," she commented playfully.

He jerked back around with an abrupt snarl before heading up and through the door to the next wing.



Chapter 38 -- Lizard's Leg and Howlet's Wing

Harry was released the next morning. The muscles in his ankles felt badly bruised but he took pride in his ability to force himself to walk normally out the door anyway. He wanted to get to the tower before his friends departed to come visit him.

"Harry!" Ginny greeted him warmly when he stepped through the portrait hole. She looked as though she was trying to finish up an assignment in a hurry before breakfast. Her eyes were a little puffy as though she had had a late night. "Sorry, Binns' essay," she explained as she bent back over her parchment and wrote furiously. "Glad you're better, though," she said sincerely as she scrawled.

Harry went up to his room where he received equally warm greetings from his dormitory mates. A little embarrassed by the attention, he changed his robes quickly and followed them down to breakfast. As they entered the Hall, many students turned to look at him and whispered to each other. Harry shook his head and took a seat, hoping food would come soon so everyone would stop talking about him and start eating instead. His friends all gave him sympathetic expressions. Penelope looked downright sorry. Harry, anxious to talk to her alone, ducked his head and rearranged his napkin. He had not felt this embarrassed by attention since the Tri-Wizard Tournament.

Parkinson stopped by their table on the arm of Malfoy, who looked positively gleeful. He gave Harry a kind of kissy-face. "Too bad it wasn't Voldemort, Potter," Parkinson said mockingly. "Didn't seem to have any trouble with him." She laughed gratingly as Harry turned away from them and rolled his eyes.

"Get lost," Ron threatened them.

"Hah," Parkinson laughed as they strolled to the front. "Carried to the hospital wing . . . by a Slytherin."

"Aye?" Ron asked when they were gone. "That true?"

Harry rubbed his forehead as he felt himself flush. The whole Great Hall would have heard her. "Yeah. Wereporridge."

Ron burst out with a laugh before quickly clamping a hand over his mouth. "Sorry," he mumbled in a sincerity belied by his inability to keep from laughing with his eyes.

"Bring it up in ten years when I can laugh too, all right?" Harry snipped at him, although he could not seem to dredge up any real anger.

"I wonder who it was?" Hermione said as she arranged her napkin in her lap. She picked up the copy of the *Prophet* beside her. To Harry she said, "You should read this."

"What is it?" Ron asked, mouth full of toast.

Hermione said in an imparting big news voice, "Malfoy and the Lestranges tried to escape from Azkaban last night."

"I knew that," Harry said. When she asked how he could know, he replied simply, "McGonagall."

"Came and woke you up to tell you that?" Hermione asked disbelievingly.

"Not exactly," Harry replied, not feeling like getting into it right there. "I'll explain later." He scanned the paper; the article heading *Death Eaters' Grim Gaolbreak* was at the top. When Ron prompted him, he started reading aloud. "Convicted Voldemort Lieutenants Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange attempted last night to break out of Azkaban. Mr. Malfoy had apparently come into possession of an Ampliment. Their plans--"

"What's that?" Ron interrupted to ask.

Harry looked up at Hermione for an explanation. "A magic amplifier. Only works on some kinds of spells though. Rare and strictly regulated."

"Figures he'd have one, then," Harry commented before continuing. "Their plans went awry when Mrs. Lestrange tried to release her husband Rodolphus who was caged with his brother Rabastan. A fight apparently ensued in which Mrs. Lestrange, using a wand fashioned from a pear tree from the prison yard and strands of Kneazle fur, killed Rabastan with an Unforgivable Curse." Harry paused as the memory of the shadow shrinking to nothing played through his mind along with the quivery chilling feel of it.

Hermione took the paper back, saying informationally, "Rodolphus then attacked Bellatrix and she took him out as well. All right, there, Harry?"

"Yeah," he insisted, taking up his fork. He decided firmly that he didn't care what the lot of them all did to each other.

Their first class that day was double Herbology. As they walked to the greenhouses, Harry hung back slightly, tugging on Penelope's robe to slow her down as well. "I need to talk to you," Harry said quietly.

"Later, perhaps," she replied, glancing around shyly. There was no more time as they had arrived at the foggy glass door to the classroom.

Late that afternoon, Ron and Hermione dropped Harry off at the Defense classroom. McGonagall insisted that Harry not move around the school without at least two students or a teacher with him. Since he rarely went about alone, he thought he could tolerate that. He waved his friends off and closed the door.

"How are you feeling?" Snape asked.

"Embarrassed," Harry muttered.

Snape used the edge of another book to prop open the one in front of him before stepping around the front table. "Let's take care of that, then, shall we?" Harry put his bookbag on a chair in the last row and pulled out his wand as he came to the front. "Cloaked opponent," Snape said as though announcing a class topic. "I assume you attempted to Accio it, as I have seen you do that previously."

"Yep. Didn't work."

"It is possible to charm objects to stay put against an Accio, of course. I would not recommend attempting to counter it in the heat of battle as it is tricky. Instead, I think it is easier to utilize spells that work on everything in the immediate vicinity, invisible or otherwise." Snape studied him as though to make sure he was paying full attention before he stepped briskly onto the platform. Snape spread out a series of wooden stands before backing up to the far end and aiming his wand. "Do duck down," he suggested.

Harry, a little alarmed, backed up and squatted between two desks. Snape narrowed his eyes and said, "*Bolarum!*" while circling the wand over his head. The air filled suddenly with hundreds of spinning grey things which encircled anything upright. Snape immediately held his wand before him and used a Grand Flecture, causing the spinning blobs heading his way to flow around him. Harry ducked down farther as they whistled close over his own head.

The room fell silent. Semi-amorphous grey bindings were around all of the wooden stands and even the curtains. "You must be fast though with another spell once you locate your opponent--the bindings are easily tossed off." Snape canceled the spell on most of the bound objects, ignoring the curtains. "You try," he said, gesturing at the spot where he had been standing.

Harry, ankles painful from crouching, limped over to the indicated spot and waited for Snape to stand aside. He fingering the gouge in the handle of his wand and focused his mind.

They covered four other spells, repeating them until Snape was satisfied Harry had them down smoothly. Harry rubbed his eyes. Lack of sleep and his painful ankles were wearing him down.

"Feel better about your chances next time?" Snape asked.

"Yep. Thanks," he replied gratefully.

A knock sounded on the door before it opened and McGonagall leaned in. "May I have a word with Harry?" she asked.

Snape gestured that she could. "I will be in my office if you need me," he said as he departed.

When the door closed, McGonagall sighed. "Have you had other thoughts about what happened?"

"No," Harry admitted. "I don't know who it was. I don't even have a good guess beyond the obvious."

"I am considering questioning the Durmstrang students individually," she said thoughtfully.

"Don't do that, Professor," Harry said quickly.

She gave him a considering look. "Why not?" she asked with a bit of challenge.

Harry sighed. "They are all on edge after what Karkaroff pulled last year."

"You are saying that he and I are comparable?"

"Your position is," Harry insisted. "They don't know you that well." He could not bear to imagine Penelope getting questioned alone in the headmistress' office. He sighed and walked along the platform, slowly because his ankles complained immediately. "I don't think it was one of them anyway."

"Why is that?"

"Because I don't know any of them that well. Whoever it was, it was way more personal than that."

"Professor Snape has spoken to the students in his house who immediately leapt to mind. All of them were accounted for at the time."

"If you do question the visiting students, can you have Hermione or someone there?" Harry pleaded.

"That is an excellent idea, Mr. Potter, I shall do that. And please watch yourself since, as usual, we are unable to protect you," she added darkly.

"I will, ma'am," he insisted.

That evening in the common room, Harry, deciding he was not going to get a better opportunity, jerked his head to the side when Penelope looked up at him. He stood up, stepped away and waited. She hesitated with a pained face, their

friends all glancing up now in curiosity. Finally she put her books aside and stood to join him. Harry led her over to the empty corner by the bookshelf under the staircase to the girls dormitory. She glanced nervously back at her friends.

"Look," Harry started. He was immediately cut off by her saying, "I'm sorry."

When they both hesitated, she prompted, "You first, I think."

The problem was, Harry was not sure what he wanted to say. "I apologize for thinking you were Ginny," he said quietly. "I hope I didn't hurt your feelings."

"I assumed you expected or wished me to be," she said, sounding as though she were treading carefully.

"No," Harry insisted, surprised.

She relaxed with a silly grin. "I was so worried about you getting attacked and hurt," she muttered quickly, sounding grateful for a chance to express herself. "I thought you might want company, but you were asleep and . . ." She flushed then, eyes darting away. "I should not have woken you so, I think."

Harry could not hold back a grin. "It's all right, really."

They fell into an awkward silence. "Everyone is looking, are dey not?" she asked nervously.

"I expect so," Harry replied, scanning the edge of his vision. They certainly were quiet over there. "Maybe we should go back over," he suggested, hoping to be saved from trying to say anything more.

* * *

"Harry," Hermione said in a businesslike tone as they stood in the Room of Requirement before D.A. "This book is a little better, I think. I just ordered it from the library in Edinburgh. Or, should I say, I had Remus Lupin order it and send it, since I was afraid they might send a note to McGonagall if I had it sent here direct."

"You told Remus what we were working on?" Harry asked, feeling a little uneasy about that.

"I asked him for advice. He was pretty amused, really. Think about it--he isn't going to tell. And he watched his school-mates struggle with exactly the same thing." She made him sit down and they read sections together that she had marked.

When they had discussed the section on Transmogrifying Formation, she stood up and said, "Come on let's try it."

Harry stood slowly. "I don't think this is going to work," he breathed.

"Harry, it isn't that hard once you get the hang of it."

"Transfiguration has always been easy for you," Harry pointed out sharply.

"That isn't all there is to it, though," she said, sounding a little sad. "You haven't even wanted to repeat your form revelation to figure out what it is."

Harry couldn't deny that. The large, oddly bright, dog-like foot had rendered him very reluctant about the whole thing.

"Hagrid would know what it is, why don't you go ask him? He wouldn't tell what we were up to, I'm sure." At Harry's doubtful look, she added, "He doesn't have the same loyalty to McGonagall."

"I'll think about it," Harry said to put her off.

"Let's work on this spell then. Come on." She tugged on his arm to give him no way out.

* * *

Harry almost hated Potions again. It was getting very close. Greer paced by their bench for the tenth time, nose high, which made it hard for her to look down and made her look a little silly. Harry ignored her. She had already taken fifteen points off Gryffindor for questions he, Dean, and Frina had been only partially correct on. Greer had finally, and unfortunately, discovered that she could assign house points however she wished.

"What base would I get if I added four centipede segments after the boil?" Greer asked of Justin.

Justin who was busy with a critical part of his brewing, did not answer beyond a drawn out, "Um," to stall.

Greer answered for him. "Dryer's Caraway is the answer," she said. "A common N.E.W.T. question, by the way," she added in a helpful tone.

Justin looked relieved as he hurried to mix powdered bull's horn into his cauldron. Greer gave Harry a dark grin as she circled around.

"We have to do something," Dean leaned over and said. "She didn't take anything off. She only takes points off of Gryffindor now."

"I noticed," Harry said quietly, ignoring the teacher. Penelope and Frina looked at them in concern.

"Shh," Hermione said, although she looked pained. Harry assumed she was thinking of Ron's reaction two days ago when he saw the totals after last Potions class. She had had a hard time explaining to Ron what had happened to their lead. Harry felt the effort for the cup wasn't going to be worth it, but he did not want to voice that to his friends. That and he really would not mind if the Great Hall were in Gryffindor colors for the Leaving Feast--his last Leaving Feast.

* * *

"How are you doing, by the way?" Snape asked as he handed over a cup of tea while they sat in his office Thursday morning when Snape had an open slot. Hagrid had escorted Harry up after Care of Magical Creatures.

Harry thought of his failure at fending off his invisible attacker, his uncertainty over Penelope, his ongoing failure at generating enough magical energy to transform into whatever creature his Animagus form took, and his annoyance with Greer. He shrugged in lieu of a reply, and sipped steaming hot tea. After a long moment, he said in a sudden thought, "Do you think I could drop Potions and just take the N.E.W.T.?"

"What?" Snape asked in confusion.

"Our eighty point lead for the cup disappeared in three days," Harry said, just barely holding his anger at bay. He held up his hands. "And honestly, I don't actually think it's worth the trouble, but . . ." He stopped at Snape's very doubtful look. "Really, it's too much of a battle," he insisted, now sounding a bit angry. "But it just occurred to me that if I'm not in Potions class, then Greer won't take so many points off, or give so many away to the other houses."

"You truly think that your presence makes that much of a difference?" Snape asked. "And I did not realize you believed there was a problem."

"She stares at me every time she does it," Harry griped, eager to vent now that he had started. "That's why I think so. And yes, there's a problem." He remembered Ron's anguish at lunch yesterday when Hermione told him what had happened yet again. He had come within inches of sniping at Harry. "My friends are angry with *me* now, but I don't know what to do. You used to do this too, but not so perniciously," he added emphatically. This garnered a closed look from Snape. Harry sighed and started to put his books away. "Sorry, I told myself I wasn't going to complain about other teachers to you, and I should stop."

"You need not leave," Snape pointed out, sounding like he really wanted Harry to stay. "You truly believe there is a point problem?"

Harry pulled his History book back out. "It seems petty to give you a precise accounting of the points assigned in the last two class periods, but I can. And if you don't believe me, I'm sure Hermione remembers."

"I would trust your accounting, Harry," Snape insisted. "I will speak to Minerva."

"Oh good, Greer won't know where that came from."

"You have another suggestion?" Snape asked snidely.

Harry forced himself to relax. "No," he replied quietly. "I just think she'll come up with some other way to take revenge." Harry sighed and opened his textbook.

"Speaking of revenge, are you still having visions?" Snape asked before Harry could start reading.

"Occasionally," Harry admitted. "Though they've got a little better lately." This was somewhat true. When he had them, his dreams were less threatening but still shadowy in a strange way he wasn't used to.

"I wish we knew whom you sensed on Knockturn Alley for certain," Snape said. "Although, I cannot imagine either one managing to pierce the protections of this castle, or besting you, cloak or not."

"I looked at the Map that night, but I didn't see anyone on it who shouldn't have been."

Snape's eyes considered him. "How good is the Map?"

"It knew Moody was really Crouch," Harry explained. When Snape raised a brow in surprise, Harry went on. "I didn't realize it was his son though. I thought it was Crouch Senior in your office that night. And of course I didn't know it was actually Moody." Harry set his cup down on the edge of the desk before leaning back and staring upward. "Trusting him was such a mistake."

"More?" Snape asked, reaching for the teapot. When Harry shook his head, Snape commented dryly, "We were all fooled, Harry, in case you are still holding yourself solely responsible for that as well."

Harry studied the ceiling. "I guess not," he conceded.

Snape stood suddenly and went to the window. After a moment he muttered, "Hm," and went back to his desk. "Hawks rarely can be convinced to deliver post," he commented.

Harry froze. "What?" he asked, too sharply.

With an intent look, Snape said, "I've noticed a hawk around the castle. It delivered a letter a few mornings ago." As Harry growled and put his books away quickly, Snape asked suggestively, "Somewhere you need to be?"

Angry, Harry hefted his bag. "A red-tail, right?"

"Yes." Snape's eyes narrowed, but Harry did not feel any Legilimency. "Is that hawk something special?" Snape asked slowly.

Harry shrugged instead of replying, put his things together quickly, and departed.

He found Ron sitting alone in the common room since Hermione had Arithmancy at that hour. "Wha?" his friend greeted him. "You about without an escort?"

"Never mind that," Harry said harshly. "Come here--I need to talk to you." He dragged him out and down to an empty classroom.

"Your sister has been flying?"

"No!"

"You're certain?"

Ron thought a moment, staring at the bright window with a deep expression. "I really don't think so. She'd have told me--or bragged about it at least."

Harry exhaled harshly. "She better not be." He noticed the clock. "We have to get to class."

"And *you* have to have an escort," Ron said firmly, poking Harry painfully in the chest.

* * *

At breakfast the next morning, the room shifted as the post owls came in the upper windows. Harry watched the incoming birds closely, until Ginny sat across from Dean, two chairs down, complaining about some essay assignment Binns had given them. A little chagrined, Harry returned to buttering his toast.

Footsteps walked briskly up the hall and stopped beside him. He glanced up to find Snape holding out something for him; it was a copy of the *Prophet*. Snape's expression was a little different, unusually intent for just an instant. Harry took his eyes away from his guardian and unrolled the paper.

Jugson, Death Eater, Apprehended, the headline read. Harry blinked at it and quickly scanned the accompanying text. The man had been hiding out at Borgin & Burkes on Knockturn Alley, the shop Harry had accidentally Flooed into once. Ministry Aurors also arrested one of the shopkeepers, Illustrius Burke.

Harry was surprised that he had guessed right. He held the paper back out to Snape as Ron asked, "What's up?". Ron put his fork down and poured juice for himself. "Oh, hello, Professor," he added awkwardly upon seeing Snape there.

"They have captured Jugson," Snape explained.

Ron hit Harry on the shoulder. "And without your help this time," he teased.

"Not precisely," Snape said dryly. He rolled up the paper and stepped away with a swish of robe.

"They got him from your reporting the shadow?" Ron asked quietly as he took a thick slab of butter for his bread.

Ginny piped in, "What is this?"

Whispering, Harry explained, "Over holiday I sensed a shadow on Diagon Alley. Knockturn Alley, actually. Snape'd needed ingredients from a shop down there. The Aurors just arrested him."

"Good job, Harry," Ginny congratulated him.

"How was it down there, by the way?" Ron asked around a thickly buttered piece of toast.

Harry grinned. "Pretty funny. I scared nearly everyone away, so it was really quiet." He let his friends finish laughing before he said in a low voice, "But I lied to the Aurors--I didn't tell them that I could see a D.E. in my mind. I told them I'd actually seen one of them and I had to guess which it might have been."

"Why did you lie?" Hermione asked, concerned and a little chastising.

Harry frowned and tossed his toast onto his plate, half eaten. No one around them seemed to be listening in. "Because I was afraid if they knew I inherited that from Voldemort, they wouldn't let me into the Auror's program."

"Oh, probably a good thought," Ron commented, frowning as he considered things further. He gestured with his butter-coated knife while saying, "Ministry can be funny about things like that." He glanced worriedly across at Hermione before returning to eating. She refrained from comment with a frown of her own.

A letter dropped before Harry. In a fit of coincidence, it had the Ministry seal on it.

"Look, they're onto you already," Ron teased.

Harry opened the envelope and found a letter and a brochure about the Auror's program. Heart racing now, he scanned the letter. "They accepted my application," he said excitedly.

No one around him moved. Finally, Ron said in a Greer-like tone, "Of course they did, Harry."

"Tonks insisted they were going to treat it fairly," Harry said, suddenly miffed.

"I'm sure they did," Hermione said reassuringly, giving Ron a warning look.

"Harry, be reasonable," Ron said. "What did you write on your application anyway?"

Harry finished reading the letter which was clearly a form letter and flipped open the brochure. "Uh, Severus made me list all of the dark wizards I'd caught or battled."

Hermione ducked her head. Ron rubbed the bridge of his nose. Harry couldn't tell if they were trying not to laugh or something else.

"Harry," Ron began in a tone to fill him in. He waved off Hermione as he said, "How could you honestly think that you wouldn't get accepted?"

"I suppose," Harry conceded, folding up the brochure and putting both away.

"Aye," Ron breathed and pounded his forehead with his fist. Harry glanced around at his friends. They were not amused; they actually looked a bit tired of him. He vowed not to bring it up again.

Later, when they were settled into the common room after classes, Harry again pulled out the brochure entitled *So you've been accepted to a Ministry Apprenticeship* and read it carefully. Most of it he could have guessed, but on the back, a list of qualifications to be covered during testing for the Auror's program had been penned into the box for this. Mentally he checked off that he was all right with: *advanced spell mastery, potion identification and brewing, low tendency to panic*, beneath these was one he hadn't considered: *good physical condition a must*. From a Muggle perspective, he did not qualify at all as athletic. Getting around on a broom during Quidditch was sometimes a workout, but probably not at the level they meant.

"Good reading?" Dean asked.

"I have to get into shape," Harry said a little worriedly.

Frina looked up from her parchment. "I am surprised Hogwarts has no workout rooms. Durmstrang has three."

Hermione chimed in, "I think English wizards are loath to appear to use their muscles for anything." She reached over and shook Ron's skinny arm to demonstrate. "Wha?" he blurted, since he had not been paying attention.

"I've been running to lose weight if you want to come along," Neville offered from the couch, where he was reading the Quibbler, sideways this time rather than the normal upside-down. "I don't go very fast, but I try for an hour every three days."

"That'd be great," Harry said, instantly relieved to have some help.

"Tomorrow before breakfast, then," Neville said before returning to his textbook.

"Aye," Harry breathed. "All right," he agreed, thinking he had no choice, really.

"Someone else has to go as well," Ron pointed out. When everyone turned to him expectantly, he said, "Ugh, *before* breakfast?"



Chapter 39 -- A Charm of Pow'rf'ul Trouble

The weather warmed up, making their morning runs a lot more pleasant. By breakfast time, though, Harry found he wanted nothing more than to eat the way Ron usually did.

They piled onto the benches in the Great Hall after quick showers, their hair still damp. Despite the quick grooming, Penelope seemed to think he looked fine. Her considerate expression startled him when his eyes met hers, and reminded him that he had to manage to talk to her alone, which was bloody difficult when he needed escorting at all times.

When the food appeared, he and Ron actually battled over the spoon for the eggs. "Go on then," Harry said, giving it up. Ron immediately served Harry a large pile of scramble with a grin.

"Better this morning?" Hermione asked.

"Yep," Harry assured her. Neville had insisted the first two weeks were the worst before it got much easier. "Not too bad today; although I'm still ready to go back to bed."

He glanced around the Hall as he usually did at breakfast, looking at who was paying him special attention. Greer was, as usual. They had not caught Harry's attacker and in his more annoyed moments, Harry wondered if it wasn't her. McGonagall seemed to think it was someone inside the castle due to the protective spells. Harry didn't quite have that much faith in the castle's spells, even if she insisted no one could have come in. McGonagall definitely had not liked his suggesting the Potions professor, so he had not pressed it. Given the way the points were going--they were now seventy behind Slytherin--he hoped it was her, and that she tried it again.

Pig dropped a letter before Ron, who flipped it open and read it with a worried expression. His face brightened halfway through. "Dad got a promotion," he said happily.

"That's great," Hermione said at about the same time Harry did.

He read more of the letter. "He's now Assistant Department Head. Mum says it's a nice rise and it can't possibly be any more hours." Ron looked up and down the table, then looked confused. "Wonder where Ginny is," he said.

Harry's chest froze and melted. He looked up and scanned the birds circling overhead. He listened to Hermione say, "I think he'll like working for Amelia Bones." There were too many birds to track easily what kind they were. Maybe she was just finishing an assignment at the last moment, Harry considered, when he didn't see any unusual species coasting overhead.

He had just given up and returned to his eggs when a whip-like sound and screech came from the front of the Hall. The whole large room quieted and everyone turned. Professor Snape had a large bird in a net. It fluttered on the head table futilely, knocking everything about.

"Shit," Harry breathed and immediately stood and strode toward the front. Halfway to the head table the fluttering abruptly ceased and Ginny, tangled in a net, was sprawled over the white linen and plates.

"Ms. Weasley," Snape greeted her darkly.

"Goodness," McGonagall said, sounding dismayed. Some of the other teachers stood up to better peer down the long table.

Gasps and giggling sounded from the around the Hall. Ginny was just managing to stand when Harry reached her. "I said no flying," Harry snapped angrily at her.

"Who are you, my mother?" she snarled back, her eyes darting to Ron and Hermione who had come up behind Harry.

"Everything that happens is my responsibility, or didn't you consider that?" he came right back.

"Hm," McGonagall murmured. With forced politeness, she addressed Harry. "Mr. Potter, just how many Animagi do we have?"

Harry stalled to think, surprised at how quickly she had put that together. "Seven," he reluctantly replied.

Her brows went up rather high. She stood and leaned over the table to address the Hall. "May I have your attention. I want all Animagi up here before the head table, please."

The avid whispering around the Hall, which had paused for the announcement, restarted fiercely. Students stood and came to the front, including three Slytherins. Harry looked over the two beside Suze in surprise.

"This is a few more than seven," McGonagall observed dryly.

"Not all of them are ours, Professor," Harry explained.

"Well, let's see them," she commanded. "Ms. Weasley, we know yours, obviously. Mr. Weasley?"

Ron, blushing, but also looking a bit like he had been given a rare chance to show off, stepped forward and closed his eyes. Long seconds he stood there before an Irish setter took his place. It looked up at the headmistress with its large eyes. The buzzing conversations of the Hall surged and Harry glanced around at the wide-eyed gazes of the rest of the students.

"Not surprising somehow, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall opined as Ron changed back, already mid-blush. "Ms. Granger . . ." she said next.

Hermione changed where she stood into a brown otter that slithered around in a circle once before transforming back.

"Fine. Mr. Longbottom?" She sounded surprised, although as well like she did not want to sound so.

Neville looked down at the floor before changing into a lion. The whole school *oobed* at this and more students stood up on the benches to see better. Neville's tail swished back and forth.

"Very nice, Mr. Longbottom," McGonagall said in shock. Neville, when he changed back, blushed as well and scuffed his feet as he stepped back. "Mr. Thomas, can you top that?" the headmistress asked. She had completely lost her scolding tone and now sounded as though she might be enjoying herself.

"I can try, ma'am." He changed into a moor pony.

"I'd say that equals it, at least," she said as she leaned forward to look him over better.

"Mr. Pullman," she prompted the Hufflepuff Chaser, who had to scrunch his eyes up in deep concentration before turning into a billy goat.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry shook his head. At her questioning expression, he explained, "I can't do it." She looked disappointed, making him drop his gaze.

"Mr. Peranna?" she turned to the Slytherins instead.

The tallest of the Slytherins changed into a raven and immediately back. "I'm registered, ma'am," he stated in a very deep voice.

"So am I," Ginny interjected. At their surprised looks, she said, "Dad took me into the Ministry over holiday to file for it. I just don't have my card yet," she added less assertively.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Ron demanded.

"Why didn't *you* ask Dad?" she retorted. Ron looked as though that had not even occurred to him.

"Ms. Parkinson?" McGonagall prompted, ending their arguing.

Pansy sighed and transformed. At first it seemed that she had disappeared, but they all looked at the floor where a long red centipede slithered between the stones. Many students along the house tables shuffled to try to see as well. Pansy reappeared a blink later.

"And the youngest by far . . . Ms. Zepher," McGonagall prompted, sounding impressed. Snape as well, studied her intently. She changed into a white mink that stood on its hind legs and observed them. "Nicely done," the headmistress said, then added chastisingly, "Although, if you can manage that, there are no spells in my class that are beyond you."

Suze changed back, looking chagrined.

In an official headmistress voice McGonagall said, "I expect you all to register. I'll provide you with the forms." She turned to Harry, "And you, Mr. Potter. I will see *you* in my office." She stood and stepped quickly down the table. Harry wandered to the end to meet her and followed her out. The whole school watched them depart, whispering fiercely.

Once in her office, Harry took the visitor's chair she gestured at. She went to a shelf and took down the teapot. He watched her make tea and set it to steep on the desk. She set out two cups and waited patiently with her hands clasped for it to steep enough. Eventually, she poured them each a cup and pushed one to Harry.

Harry, confused, accepted it. McGonagall sipped hers with a faraway expression and said, "I think ten minutes will seem appropriately stern, don't you?"

"Ma'am?"

"For your thorough chewing out. Ten minutes?"

"Uh, I'm not sure what you mean," he replied carefully.

She smiled faintly. "There must not have been any injuries. Pomfrey has always watched for them."

"There weren't as far as I know," Harry said.

"When did this start?"

"A few weeks after Christmas," Harry confessed, cradling the teacup in his hands to draw off its warmth.

"Seven, in that time?" she breathed, stunned.

Harry double-checked that in his mind. "Yes, ma'am," he replied, dropping his gaze.

"I do not know what to do with you, Mr. Potter."

Harry hoped he had not gotten Snape into equal trouble. "Severus didn't know," he thought to insist, hoping it was not too late to sound believable. When she remained silent, he raised his eyes to hers. Her expression looked strange, maybe even affectionate. He blinked in confusion.

She set her cup and saucer aside. "This school does not have a medal for students who inspire others to learn far beyond their year."

"Are you saying I'm not in trouble?" he asked in disbelief. He was tempted to point out that Hermione was the main inspiration, but decided that could come out as blame passing. It bothered him to stay silent on this point, but he did so with difficulty; he could always apologize to Hermione later.

She stood and came around the desk. As she passed him, she put a firm hand down on his right shoulder. "To everyone else's view, you are in serious trouble. But in reality, you are not." Harry's shoulder relaxed under her long fingers. "But, I will have to take a hundred points from Gryffindor for it to be believable."

"Ugh," Harry groaned in pain at that thought.

"I will, however, reverse any other point changes Gertrude chooses to make for the remainder of the year." She gave him a twinkling eye. "I expect that will more than balance out."

Harry had to force down a wide grin. "I expect it will," he said with happy expectation.

After the proper time had passed, Harry headed back down to the Great Hall. Ron had just returned from checking the gems used for House scoring. He looked sad.

"We'll manage, Ron. Don't worry," Harry insisted as he stepped over the bench and warmed his plate with a heating charm.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said sincerely. Her eyes followed McGonagall as she strode to the front. When the headmistress returned to her breakfast, Hermione said, "You must have taken the blame."

Harry shrugged. "I could have stopped it so I have every right to it. Don't worry about it." He was worried though; Snape was giving him a *very* stern look. In the midst of all the new spell work and interesting discovery, Harry had somehow overlooked the potential to disappoint his guardian.

Frina and Penelope looked a bit like they had been run over by something. Hermione reassured them repeatedly that everything was all right, that they had been in much worse trouble in the past. Harry wondered if they were feeling left out, rather than worried as Hermione assumed.

Breakfast ended. The plates cleared themselves and the students filed out. Harry waved off his friends and stepped to the front where Snape sat eyeing him with a shuttered expression. McGonagall had started to depart with the others, but returned upon seeing the two of them remaining behind. She clasped her hands before her and waited for the other staff to leave.

When their half of the hall had cleared, the headmistress said, "I think we are even with Mr. Potter--we failed him as well recently." She patted Harry's shoulder as she turned away. "Go easy on him, Severus. I did."

Harry was grateful to see that Snape's posture eased at her comments, at least somewhat.

"We have class right now. We *will* discuss this later," his guardian stated as he stood up.

"Yes, sir," Harry agreed.

After a long day of classes, during which many students came up and congratulated him and his friends and only a few complained about the points, Harry trudged to the Defense office escorted by Ron, Hermione, Frina, and Penelope. The four of them stood behind Harry with almost comic formality as the office door opened.

Snape took in the scene before gesturing that Harry should enter. At the last instant, as the door was re-closing, Penelope stepped forward and halted it with her foot. Before she could speak, and it looked to be something deeply felt, Snape cut her off by saying, "Your forthrightness is admirable, Ms. Tideweather, but misplaced."

Harry said, "It's all right, Peni." As he stepped in, he waved them away with an expression that made it clear they were overreacting.

The door closed. Snape returned to his chair and steepled his fingers before him. "Peni?" he echoed.

"What?" Harry retorted defensively as he stood before the desk. "She thinks you were in with Karkaroff, of course she's worried."

Snape looked like he was resisting a retort he might regret. He clasped his hands tightly. "Minerva was ridiculously lenient with you," he stated darkly, making Harry swallow hard.

"I hadn't thought until after that I might get you in trouble," Harry said. "I certainly didn't mean to do that. Is that what's bothering you?"

His guardian's eyes narrowed in thought. "Partially," he admitted. "Your flaunting of the rules has always bothered me."

Harry frowned and took the visitor's chair by dropping into it. He glanced at the many fancy scrolls now filling a shelf off to the left. "Did you actually find the rule that we were breaking?" he asked, taking a chance.

Snape looked slightly taken aback. His focus went distant as he considered the question. "There is a general rule against students working on dangerous spells without supervision. I expect that would apply."

"It wasn't dangerous. No one got hurt. By that definition, my walking down a hallway alone violates the rules."

Snape rubbed his forehead hard with his fingertips. "Why did you not ask for supervision? It would have been provided."

"It wouldn't have been the same," Harry said.

"It would not have been following in the footsteps of the Marauders, you mean?" Snape challenged him fiercely.

Forcefully, because Snape had caught him off guard with this interpretation, Harry retorted, "It had nothing to do with that!" He leaned forward, hands propped on the arms of the chair, furious. "Don't you dare believe that," he added.

"So what was the purpose?" Snape sneered.

Harry breathed in and out to calm himself. "Thirty bonus points on the N.E.W.T." he replied. "And I don't mean to sound obnoxious, but there wasn't much else left to work on." Still angry, Harry stated darkly, "Not many footsteps to follow, given that they're nearly all dead." When Snape didn't comment, Harry went on, a spike of desperation driving his words. "Why would you even think that, or better yet, think it had anything to do with you?"

Snape still did not respond, although his expression lost some of its flatness.

Harry swore under his breath. "We ran out of things to do and it sounded interesting. That was it. I've been working on it for the points, but it isn't as though I've managed to get anywhere with it . . . it is Transfiguration after all."

"You truly have not mastered the spell?" Snape asked.

"NO," Harry nearly shouted. "So I'll get an 'A' on my N.E.W.T. Happy?"

Snape sat back suddenly. "I do not, in the least, wish you to fail your tests," he stated, sounding frustrated. He frowned deeply. "Perhaps I am overreacting. And as Minerva said, we have failed to protect you as well."

"I don't see the connection. But I'll take it," Harry said. "I really don't mean to make you angry."

Snape exhaled loudly. "Any other rules you are despicably flaunting at the moment?" When Harry shook his head, Snape challenged him. "None? You have not broken a single other rule this year?"

"Uh, I opened Malfoy's wombat crate because I was worried about how it was faring. But Hagrid already rebuked me for that. I'd told him I was worried about what it was turning into," he explained. "Uh . . ." Harry thought more. At Snape's expectant expression, Harry quickly said, "I let Malfoy talk me into a duel. But I think I won, so I didn't bother mentioning it. I think that's why he was so tough during class the other day . . . he was trying to get even." Harry eventually shook his head. "I can't think of anything else."

Snape rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Rather boring year, then."

"Not really," Harry insisted. More lightly, he said, "Someone is still trying to kill me. That makes it feel normal."

Snape's hair fell into his face as his head lowered. "I do apologize for not finding out who it is." He stood and came around the desk, face still curtained. "I expected it only would require an interview or two with a few of my students to discover it. But surprisingly, no one knows anything. Even of the things they are unwilling to speak, nothing was useful."

Harry, not really comfortable with Legilimency being used like that on his behalf, fidgeted with his feet.

"Well, continue to not go about alone," Snape said in a dismissive voice. As Harry stood, he added, "And please, no more severe rules violations."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. He thought of pointing out how little time there was left to make that much trouble, but decided against it.

* * *

During Quidditch practice, Harry hovered, waiting, while Ron re-explained a play he wanted the Chasers to practice. Harry and the Beaters were pretending to be opponents, but at the moment they weren't doing anything. Normally, Harry would not have minded hanging out in midair on a broom on a nice day, but today, for the very first time ever, he thought maybe he should be studying instead. Realizing he was thinking this made him rub his head, hard.

Harry flew a lap on his broom to distract himself while Ron and Ginny debated how the play should run, but he could not shake the vague angst that he would be better off right that moment with a book open in front of him, or his notes. He needed to write up quiz sheets for their revising for an Astronomy examination two days away. He needed to take a look at the bookmarked sections of the supplemental texts for the Potions N.E.W.T. He needed . . . Harry sloth rolled and hung upside down to distract himself further.

From his upside-down viewpoint, he noticed the Durmstrang students sitting in the stands, books open in front of them. Other students were here and there on the benches, talking or reading. With his hand Harry tweaked the broom handle and turned himself to better look at the Durmstrang students. Penelope sat bent over a small book, her dark hair shining in the sunlight. The angle of her shoulder was kind of pleasing, he thought idly.

"Bored?" Ron asked from where he and Ginny hovered. When Harry turned upright and shrugged, Ron said, "Well, let's run it again, before Harry decides to try flying without his broom."

Harry positioned himself with Sloper and Carren on either side and prepared to make appropriate defensive maneuvers when the Chasers came down the pitch. When Ginny came at him he swerved away slightly before aiming back at her, smooth on his old familiar broom and feeling aggressively strong, which he attributed to running since nothing else could account for it. The certainty of his movements made her pass the Quaffle off earlier than Hickory was expecting it and the other Chaser had to dive to get it.

"Sorry, let's do that again," she said in a disgusted tone. She sped around to her fellow Chaser to pick up the Quaffle and return to the starting position. The others reset without comment. Ginny gave Harry a narrow, challenging look before she said, "Go."

Harry repeated the same thing and this time she held her course despite his cutting her off. In the end Harry dodged away to avoid the foul, and their robes brushed at high-speed. Harry turned and gave Chase as Ginny passed the Quaffle upward as Hickory rotated around. Sloper swung between them aiming his broom straight at the center post. Hickory threw the Quaffle hard to him, which he ducked rather than caught. Ginny caught it instead, flying beyond him and tossed it through the left-hand goal.

Ron cheered from his position as opposition keeper. "All right! Let's repeat it with a Bludger in play."

* * *

Harry rode the turning stone staircase for his next tutoring session with some unease, a little worried McGonagall would change her mind about letting him off. He stepped into the office at her invitation and took the overstuffed chair already facing the desk. As he unpacked his bookbag, she came around and held out a book. "I've already read that one," he pointed out upon reading the title *Animagical*. He placed his other books on the edge of the desk.

She withdrew it and turned it around to flip through it. "Have you tried a Canarevelatio?" she asked.

Harry set down the quill he had just taken out for note taking. It sounded suspiciously as though she were trying to help him become an Animagus. This possibility had not occurred to him. "Yes, ma'am."

She considered him in silence. "And it didn't work? You should be able to predict your form, in any event, I'd expect."

Feeling reluctant now, Harry replied, "No, the revelation did work."

A little befuddled, she said, "That is half the difficulty of the Animagia. Have you been working on the various energies? This book does a rather remarkable job of explaining them all."

"Yes, ma'am."

"A stag is a grazer. They are usually easier to attain. Unlike Mr. Longbottom's rather predatory hunter."

"What's that?" Harry blurted. He had not known there was a difference.

"Prey forms are easier to attain than predator. I expect your stag form is easier than you realize. As your godfather used to tell it, it took him much longer to work out the Animagia energies and your father never let Sirius live down how slow he was in achieving his form."

Harry shook his head. "It's not a stag. . . . I don't know what it is." His father had been prey, he thought with a queer, cold shiver.

Her brow furrowed. She put the book down on the desk and rested her hand beside it. "Let's see the Canarevelatio."

Harry reached for an excuse. "Are you sure you want to cover this instead of last week's class session?"

"It is worth thirty points on the N.E.W.T., as I'm certain you are aware. It would most certainly push you over the top to the grade you need. Go on."

Harry pulled off his shoe and sock. After a deep breath he incanted the spell. On the first try the same bright paw appeared. With a sudden movement, McGonagall leaned in close and reached for it. Harry tried to pull away, but she was faster.

"Hold still," she said distractedly.

Harry had to bite his lower lip to keep from jerking his foot away again. The nerves on his paw were in some different arrangement and her touch felt *very* odd. She pressed on his toe, causing a vicious long black claw to protrude. Harry was gaping at it when his foot changed back.

She stood straight, deep in thought. "It would make sense, actually, for you to be something predatorial, Harry. No offense."

"What is it?" Harry breathed.

She considered him in silence. "You are very uncomfortable with your form, aren't you?"

"I don't even know *what* it is," he pointed out defensively.

She crouched before him and put a hand on his bare human foot. "Harry," she began soothingly, then stopped. "Repeat the spell one more time," she said easily.

Harry sighed and obliged her. She looked over the rough paw pads and pushed out each of four long claws. If he had seen claws like that on something in the Forbidden Forest, he would have run the other way.

"Not precisely a cat, but not a canine either," she said in thought. "I don't know quite what you are, Harry." She continued to hold his foot again after it had normalized. Eventually, she said, "We all have the potential in us to become something unexpected. It doesn't make us less ourselves. It doesn't make us dangerous, unless we let it." She stood then, with apparently stiff knees. "I'm not sure what you are uneasy about, exactly, but I expect that you of all people will not become something you despise, no matter how much power you may attain."

He took in her words with a little confusion, but they were finding a hearing inside him somewhere. He felt much calmer as he considered them.

McGonagall was speaking again. "Next time you can, go down to Hagrid and ask him what that is. He will most certainly know," she said as she stepped back to her chair. "Now, where were we. . . .?"

Harry was still thoughtful when he returned to the common room, escorted by Professor Sinistra, and joined his friends working on various assignments.

"Is everything okay?" Penelope asked him. Everyone else looked up to see the answer to this.

"Yeah, it's fine," Harry replied. "No worries," he added with a small smile.

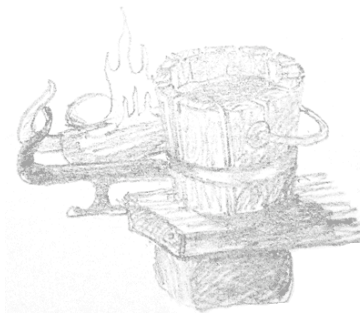
"Your headmistress is very nice," Frina commented.

Harry studied her. McGonagall must have questioned them, he realized. His eyes went to Hermione, who nodded with a wry smile.

"I told her not to bother," Harry pointed out.

"She has to consider every possibility, Harry," Hermione pointed out.

Harry flipped open one of his alternative Potions texts to look for more essay material about blood-based brewing techniques. "She hasn't considered the right one yet, apparently," he commented.



Chapter 40 -- Boil Thou First i' the Charmed Pot

It was a fine sunny day for Slytherin vs. Hufflepuff. Spring seemed eager to give way to summer. The lawn fairly glowed in lush greens as they all tramped down to the pitch. Overhead, the banners snapped in a steady wind and they found seats in the second row from the front. The other stands were also crowded; apparently everyone thought it a fine day for Quidditch.

The old leather-covered crate with the balls was carried out and placed on the pitch. Madam Hooch stood beside it, waiting. Ron leaned close. "Still cheering for Slytherin?" he asked Harry.

Harry gave him a smiling glance to which Ron rolled his eyes hopelessly. "Janet doesn't have a chance," Harry asserted quietly. Except it is sunny, he thought and wondered if the Hufflepuff Seeker would realize how sensitive Suze's eyes were to the light.

The teams flew out, looking eager and energized. They hovered impatiently in formation while Madam Hooch gave them the usual warnings about what she was going to be watching for.

For a Hufflepuff match it was a rough game and much closer than expected, until Suze finally caught the snitch. Harry had watched her circling high in order to look down while searching. Even so, she squinted a lot in the bright light. Janet, if she had tried to take advantage, did not do so successfully.

As they left the stands, Ron muttered, "That's a one hundred ten point difference, so that puts Slytherin up by . . . uff, I can't even think it."

"We have another match," Harry pointed out.

"Don't catch the Snitch until we are two hundred points ahead then, okay?" Ron said sarcastically.

When they reached the lawn, Harry said, "It really means that much to you? The cup?" Harry did not want it to mean so much that losing it would ruin the end of their school days.

Ron scuffed his big feet through the grass. "It'd be nice to win it," he insisted glumly.

* * *

Harry looked up from his book in the library as a silver bird shot up through the table. Frina and Penelope looked up sharply as well. Harry gave a tug on the bird's beak and it unfurled into a scrap of silver parchment that he just managed to read before it sparked out of existence.

"I'm late," he realized, glancing at the clock. The message had asked if he was going to make it to advanced D.A.

As he collected his books, Penelope asked, "Can we come?"

Harry looked them over, down the line to Darsha, who blatantly returned to her Potions textbook. "As long as no one says anything," Harry said, feeling that he would like them to come along, especially Penelope.

Frina and Penelope shook their heads and they all turned to Darsha. "She is already an Animagus: A Squirrel," Frina commented. "In her part of India they teach them Animagia as young children."

Harry gestured with his head, "Come on, then--saves me from finding an escort." He glanced back at Darsha who continued to ignore them. He disregarded his concern of what she might say on the basis that she had not reported to the headmistress when all Animagi were called up. Out in the empty corridor, he said, "Strictly speaking, this is still against the rules."

"Why are you still working on it then?" Penelope asked.

"Sinistra is available to help and has to be present when anyone tries to change form, so we aren't breaking as many rules. McGonagall just wants the school at large to think we've been punished and stopped. Mostly we are doing it because some of our friends haven't managed it yet, like Seamus, Luna, and Justin."

"And you," Frina pointed out.

"Yeah," Harry muttered. He did not miss Penelope elbowing her friend on the arm as they turned a corner. "It's all right," he assured her. "Headmistress is helping me with it now," he added.

"You do get special treatment," Frina stated.

As Harry opened his mouth to defensively say, "Not all the time," Penelope rather forcefully said, "He deserves to."

"I don't know about that," Harry insisted, surprised by her level of emotion.

"You do," she repeated, making Harry hesitate in opening the meeting room door where they had stopped. Her fierce assertion made him uneasy as well as touched.

Inside the Room of Requirement, Hermione looked surprised to see the two Durmstrang students. "I needed an escort," Harry explained with an innocent shrug.

Hermione frowned and stepped away from Justin and the other Ravenclaws in the group. "There probably isn't time to get you all the way through it," she stated. Her eyes met Harry's and he could see her give in. "But you can get started, anyway."

* * *

At the end of a particularly long tutoring session, McGonagall said, "Just a moment."

Harry had about four hours of assignments yet to complete that night, but he put his bookbag back down and retook his seat. She had her hands clasped before her on the desk. "Have you spoken to Hagrid?" When Harry shook his head she stood up and took down her cloak from the hat rack in the corner. "Come then," she said brightly.

"We're going right now?" Harry asked in surprise.

"You are running out of time, my boy. Come along."

The grounds were dark from a new moon. The torches beside the door cast misleading light over the steps as they exited.

At Hagrid's cabin, the headmistress knocked loudly. Hagrid opened the door and greeted them with surprise. "Come in. Come in," he invited genially, reminding Harry with a twinge that he had not visited in a while. "Tea?" he asked, holding up his big bucket.

"Yes, thank you," McGonagall replied politely.

Hagrid went out back and returned presently. He poured water from the bucket into a cauldron which he swung over the fire. Harry sat on a footstool near the grate, enjoying the heat from the flames. Fawkes was enjoying the fire as well, sleeping with his head under one wing.

"Ta wha' do I owe this visit?" Hagrid asked, as he lowered his great frame into his regular chair.

"Harry needs some assistance from you, but has been too shy to request it," McGonagall supplied.

"Harry!" Hagrid chastised him. "You ken come ter me anytime. You know tho'."

"It's complicated," Harry insisted, wishing he were elsewhere even though he liked seeing Hagrid.

Hagrid poured hot water from the cauldron into his massive unglazed teapot and set it on the hearthstone to steep. "Well, wha' can I do fer you, Harry?" he asked.

Reluctantly, Harry explained, "I've been working on becoming an Animagus, but I don't know what animal I'm supposed to become. I can make a foot of it, but it's something really odd." He looked over at McGonagall; she was studying her clasped hands rather intently.

Hagrid sat straight. "Hm. Well, le's have a look, then."

Harry, concentrating on the thirty bonus points, pulled off his shoe and sock. He did the spell and stared at the strange paw. Even after this much repetition, he still was not comfortable with the looks of it.

"Hmmm," Hagrid murmured. Harry again was forced to withstand having his claws pushed out, one by one. It didn't hurt, but it made him very uneasy and possessive of his foot.

"Can' do anything quite average, eh, Harry?" Hagrid teased.

Harry searched for a retort, surprised to find he did not just wish that he were a stag, even though that would have made things much simpler. "Guess not," he muttered. What did he want to be? he wondered and started to feel curious for the first time about what this thing was.

Hagrid hefted himself to his feet and went over to a low, rough bookshelf. He murmured aloud as he flipped through one book before selecting another. "Retractable, non-reticulated, ash grey pads . . ." Harry squinted at the book title in the firelight, *Exotic Creatures of the Urals and Surrounds, Care e³ Feeding*. Uneasiness flowed all the way into Harry's fingertips it so filled him.

"Please don't find it in there," Harry whispered when the wait stretched too long. He was starting to wish Snape were here, he was so anxious.

"Huh?" Hagrid said, distracted from the book. He returned to it with a disapproving glance at Harry. Presently, he said, "I think this is i'." He whistled in an impressed way as he brought the book over. "I'd love ter see one," he said reverently, which made Harry's insides flip.

With weak hands, Harry accepted the heavy book presented to him. McGonagall came over and read over his shoulder. Harry blinked at the hand-painted woodcut, grateful for the stabilizing feel of McGonagall's hand on his shoulder.

"Scarlet Mountain Gryffylis," McGonagall read aloud. "Scarlet is certainly accurate."

Harry looked at the image: it was of a winged creature that looked vaguely like a Hippogriff except thin and wirey. Parts of the drawing were vague, like the transition from feather to fur, which the artist had apparently been unclear on. He

hoped the artist had been unclear on the disproportionately long rear legs. They almost looked like a stag's. It did not have a bird tail, but a lion one it looked like, so he suspected it did not fly well. The head was catlike with a longish snout and long canine teeth. Long feathers stood out behind its ears in a haphazard fashion, sort of like a peacock's might, giving it a foppish look.

Harry swallowed hard. He felt numb as he handed the book back.

"Have a good vision of it in your mind?" McGonagall asked helpfully.

Harry nodded emphatically. He would not be forgetting that image.

"Some o' the details on these ol' woodcuts can be wrong," Hagrid pointed out. "Not all are from, uh, firs' hand observation," he added, then cleared his throat and put the book away. Harry imagined gibbering mountain dwellers trying to explain what had killed all the sheep. He felt vaguely unwell.

McGonagall poured some tea into a large ceramic mug and pressed it into his hands. She patted his shoulder. "It doesn't change who you are, Harry," she said gently. "And you are finding out that the danger of learning Animagia isn't all physical. Were any of your friends distressed by what they became?"

Harry shook his head, then said, "Neville always seemed embarrassed, but I think he was really pleased, inside." He swallowed and wondered why he did not feel the same. "Why can't I just be something normal?" he griped.

"Aye," Hagrid said as he refilled his own tankard with tea. "Tha's a beautiful an' rare creature the Scarlet is. Don' be bad mouthin' it now. Unlike other Griffin species, the males sometimes have wings."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Only female Griffins ha' wings, normally," Hagrid said as he tossed another massive log on the fire and sat back. "N.E.W.T. question, Harry," he added chastisingly. "O.W.L. for that matter," he added in a mutter.

Hagrid and the headmistress made small talk for a while while Harry stared into the flames. His unfinished assignments loomed ahead of him and he was grateful for the mundanity of that notion.

At the base of the front steps, McGonagall slowed and tugged Harry to a stop by his shoulder. Her eyes held more concern than he was used to seeing as she said, "You have the potential for great power, Harry, and by choosing to be an Auror, you are virtually guaranteeing that you will realize that power." She squeezed his shoulder harder. "If you are truly uncomfortable with that, then maybe you should rethink your plans."

Harry frowned as he stared out at the blackness of the lake in the distance. "You think that's what's bothering me?"

She grinned. "If your Animagus form were a rabbit, what would you be thinking right now?"

Harry could not hold in his dismayed reaction to that thought. "I'd wonder what was wrong with me, I guess," he replied with a laugh in his voice.

"You've never been like everyone else, Harry. Nor can I imagine why you would wish to be," she added, her thoughts sounding distant.

The castle door opened and a figure stepped halfway out of it. In the tricky light, Harry had to fall back on recognizing Snape's distinctive profile. Harry forced his mind to settle and walked that way.

"Everything all right?" Snape asked.

"Everything is just fine, Severus. We were visiting with Hagrid," McGonagall said in her usual matter-of-fact tone.

Harry managed a small smile for his guardian. He wanted to talk to him, but he wanted time to sort things out himself a bit first.

Harry was up very late finishing his assignments. Hermione and Penelope had tried to stay up with him but they eventually had to give up. Tomorrow was going to be a pepper-up day, Harry considered with a frown. He stood to toss another log on the fire and a blast of heat came out as the coals were disturbed. The room didn't need the warmth--he just needed the company. He sat back on the couch and reviewed last week's History notes for anything else he should add to his essay about Wizard criminal law in the seventeenth century. Relaxed, he leaned his head back as he scanned his own handwriting. The tower felt very safe since the respelling. Harry was rarely bothered by odd notions, even late at night and alone as he was.

Finally, at three in the morning, after wrestling his wandering thoughts from a certain female student, Harry wrote out the last line of the essay. He packed everything up and crept up to his dormitory room as quietly as possible.

* * *

The very next day, as Transfiguration was ending, McGonagall strode over as they packed up their books. "A word, if you have a moment, Mr. Potter," she said.

Harry wondered what she had to say already after last night. He had managed to hold his yawning to a minimum during class, he had thought, so hopefully it wasn't that. As the classroom door closed, his friends gestured that they would be waiting in the corridor.

"I meant to discuss this last night, but it did not come up," McGonagall said. "The week after next is the anniversary of your destroying Voldemort. In case you had not remembered," she added in her most professorish tone.

"I couldn't exactly forget, ma'am."

"Hm, no I suppose not," she replied amiably. She urged the last few rats into their cages and hovered them to a shelf. Then she considered Harry in silence before saying, "Would you like another party like the last one?"

Harry, taken aback by being handed such decisionmaking, hesitated. He had not really enjoyed the last one, nor remembered it all that clearly, but it sounded like fun now. "Do I have to give a speech?"

She breathed in audibly. "Yes."

"Is there an alternative to a big party?" Harry asked whinging slightly.

McGonagall gave him a light smile. "I have been considering alternatives only because we have not found your attacker. I am thinking that it should be kept small, in any event, just major dignitaries and the students."

"A speech?" Harry confirmed.

"I'll help you write it, if you wish."

"I'll need the help," he admitted, feeling nervous already.

* * *

During Care of Magical Creatures, Harry noticed the toe of Malfoy's boot as he crouched to assemble cages for the Brinkenpops that Hagrid was going to catch that night for the next class session. The pens had to be made of green bamboo woven with strands of wild grape vine. Brinkenpops would easily escape a cage that was not made of living material. The Slytherin was working quietly and diligently on the weaving and tying as though he might be enjoying it. He also appeared to be wearing very nice boots.

Harry stepped around to the blonde boy. "Let me see your boot," he said.

Malfoy gave him such a look of derision that Harry thought he should have picked a different tack. "Shoe shopping, Potter?" Draco asked with full snide.

"In a sense," Harry replied in the hardest tone he could manage.

The other boy rolled his eyes and stuck his foot out while pulling up his robes. They were nice boots, but they had unfamiliar bright silver clasps and lower heels than the ones Harry remembered.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled as he shirked away. He should have just sneaked a look, but he had been too confident to think that deviously.

"Yeah, anytime, Mr. Harry Cobbler," Malfoy sneered.

* * *

Harry sat in Snape's office while he worked on his Potions essay. He found this worked well for getting the best grade, no matter how tough Greer felt like grading him. Since Easter holiday, he had not spent much time here things had been so busy.

He finished rereading the chapter in the assigned text and read over what he had written so far. They were repeating fungus-based potions, which was fine with him, even though Snape intimated that they should be covering other topics before the end of the year. Harry's alternative texts had bookmarks now with sections Snape believed would be covered on the N.E.W.T. Harry had not yet found the time to go over them carefully. The way things were going, he would end up reading them the night before the examination.

With some care Harry wrote out several paragraphs explaining the ingredient conversions possible with different fungi. Since the fungi were not magical, this was a fairly straightforward topic and not difficult. It appealed to his Muggle sense of the world, he decided as he wrote.

Finally, he finished the essay and held it out. "Would you mind?" Harry asked his guardian. Snape looked up from the stack of parchments before him and reached out to take it.

While Snape read, Harry tried not to fidget too much. He let his mind wander to other things, like the fact that he had not yet explained to Snape that he knew what his Animagus form was. The night they had visited Hagrid, McGonagall had left it to him, and he had not let go of that momentum. He was certain that Snape would insist upon working out exactly what was bothering Harry, and he did not feel like doing that. He had not decided yet if McGonagall was right.

"You are missing two uses for lungwort. Other than that it looks fine." He handed the rolled parchment back.

Harry spread it out and opened his class notes to check what he had written. When he found the missing items, he amended his essay and rolled it up with satisfaction.

"Ready for the party on Friday?" Snape asked.

"I'm not too thrilled with the speech I'm supposed to give." It was only Monday and Harry was determined to improve it by the end of the week, at least into something he would not gag at.

Snape fought a twisted grin. "You are giving a prepared speech. How quaint."

"I wasn't given a choice."

"Your influence must be wearing off," Snape commented. "You need another dark wizard to destroy to boost it up again."

"Guess this mystery attacker's reputation isn't high enough."

"I suspect not. But one never knows. It could be Salazar himself, back from the dead."

Harry considered the stack of parchments on Snape's desk. "Are you a little overworked?" Harry asked.

"Perhaps. Why do you ask?"

"You're being . . . flippant, or something," Harry observed.

Snape bent his head forward to make a note on a sheet before him. "Oh? Have I insulted you?"

"No," Harry reassured him.

"I must be slipping."

"Like that," Harry said with a little force.

Snape studied him through a curtain of hair as he rubbed his forehead. "I will be grateful for this year ending. I will not have the Potions master duties next year; although, presumably, I will still have those of the deputy headmaster." He sighed and said, "Although next year you will not be here."

That was an odd notion, Harry thought. Snape here, himself . . . at home, doing something, hopefully his apprenticeship. "Just a month and a bit left," Harry said thoughtfully.

"Ready for your N.E.W.T.s?"

Harry thought about his Animagus form. "Not quite. But I haven't given up on it."

Snape spun his chair and pulled two books from the shelf behind him. "There are a few other Defense spells I think you should know, just in case they are included." He flipped the top book open and ran his long finger down the page.

"You aren't going to cover them in class?" Harry asked in confusion.

Without looking up Snape replied, "I am already covering more than any Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor ever has at this institution; I do not have the energy to teach exceptionally complicated, past extra-credit standardized examination spells to that many remedially competent students."

Harry felt he should defend his fellows. "They aren't that bad."

"Still," Snape insisted, now flipping open the second book and marking a page before paging rapidly ahead. "These aren't generally useful spells, just historically on the examination. Teaching them to you is remarkably little effort."

Harry sat back and dropped his shoulders at that unexpected compliment.

"Here we are," Snape said before standing up. "Get out your wand."

Standing slowly as he reached into his pocket, Harry said, "You don't want to move to the classroom?" He had visions of burned books and smashed potion bottles, since that is what surrounded them at the moment.

"A lesson in attenuation as well would not be out-of-line," Snape drolled.

"My attenuation is really good," Harry insisted. "How many students do you want injured during your class?" he asked with a touch of snideness.

Snape gave him a silent doubtful look. "We will go over that after," he finally said. "First the Macedonum." He moved to stand beside the desk and gestured for Harry to push the visitor's seat aside. Harry obeyed, then stood still while the spell was cast in his direction. The stone floor warped beneath his feet and he was forced to put out a hand, oddly now sideways to the floor, to keep from falling over as he sank into a deep dip forming around him. The dip did not hold still; as his chin reached normal floor height, it surged upward into a peak, which rolled him aside. He stopped himself tumbling just before he reached a case of glass bottles full of dark viscous liquids.

Rubbing a bruised spot on his shoulder, Harry stepped back to the center of the now-flat floor, while giving his guardian a challenging look. "That's an interesting one," he commented in a low voice. "Might even work on a cloaked opponent."

"Only if you can put enough power into it." Snape set the visitor's chair into the center of the open office floor before the desk, stepped back, and said, "You try."

"What, I don't get to try it on you?" Harry asked levelly, trying for a disappointed tone. He aimed the wand and said the incantation but the only effect was a faint ripple in the floor like a stone falling into water. He tried it again to the same paltry result. A glance at his guardian revealed Snape standing with his arms crossed looking reserved.

"More power?" Harry asked. When Snape merely raised a brow as though this were a test, Harry incanted it again, shouting this time and pouring a lot into it. The room shivered, stones and all. Snape grabbed his arm, presumably to cut him off.

"This is not an ordinary spell," Snape said, losing his momentarily alarmed expression after a glance around the room. "Power only helps if you are focussing properly. The spell is a wave and more random power is as likely to interfere as to build up." He stood beside Harry. "Watch again." Snape aimed his wand and lifted a small peak in the floor before it reversed to a valley then flattened out.

"How do you get one or the other?" Harry asked.

"Unfortunately, you do not have control over that. But you must have coherent power, that is critical."

Determined, Harry aimed his wand again, turning it slowly in his fingers as he thought about focussing magic. After long seconds he dropped his arm. "How do I do that?"

With a small grin Snape said, "You practice it--it is something you must get a feel for." He repeated the spell, again creating a small peak. "For myself, I imagine I am pushing the spell in my mind through something as small as the wand. But I expect everyone is different." He stepped back again to give Harry a clear space.

Harry narrowed his eyes, and his thoughts, as he raised his wand again. When he spoke the spell a ripple again formed, though the ripples seemed taller this time. Determined to not get impatient with himself, he repeated it again and again.

"Think about it differently," Snape suggested, almost gently, considering how his normal suggestions sounded.

Harry imagined his magic as a funnel, as a laser, and as a snitch even, because when it darted it looked like a line. Imagining it as the narrow stab of pain from his scar when Voldemort was near worked best, although the resulting peak was not very high and was still surrounded by ripples.

"Must better," Snape said. "How were you focusing?"

"Don't ask," Harry muttered.

Snape looked mystified, but did not ask. "Practice that one. Care to learn another?" his guardian said instead.

Harry glanced at the time. "One more."

* * *

"Will you come up with us to check our wombat?" Hermione asked Harry late the next night as he worked on his Astronomy assignment. Frina and Penelope stood by the portrait hole, waiting. "I'll help you with that," his friend offered to entice him as she pointed at his essay.

Harry grinned. "Sure."

The girls all took out their wands as they walked, which Harry found a little over careful. He left his in his pocket. When they reached the attic, Parkinson was just respelling hers and Malfoy's crate.

"How's your wombat?" Harry asked, wishing they had arrived just a minute earlier.

"Fine."

"Working on it alone now?" Harry asked.

"Draco wasn't very useful anyway," she complained with a very miffed tone. She stepped by them all a little quickly. Harry had not meant to upset her, but apparently he had anyhow. Hermione gave him a wry grin and a shrug.

"A tangle of webs weaved," Frina stated philosophically as she watched Parkinson disappear down the rickety steps.

"Pretty much," Hermione agreed. She unspelled their crate and lifted out the occupant. It was a little bigger and they had eventually convinced it to eat a few blueberries, so it had grown tufts of brighter blue fur on its back. These spots made Hermione's appearance all the stranger as she carried the animal over to the supply table.

Harry followed her over and ran a finger over the top of its small head. "Never got it to change into a bat like yours did," Hermione said.

"Maybe you need to dream about it for that to work," Harry commented idly, thinking back to that night when he had woken in concern for their animal.

Hermione dropped the can of dog milk, splashing the contents across the wood roof beams. The wombat crawled up her arm in a panic. Harry plucked it off and carried it to Frina, who was coming over quickly to help. "What did you say?" Hermione asked in surprise.

"Uh, I think I may have been dreaming about the wombat that night." More defensively, he said, "I don't know. I have so many strange dreams," he shrugged.

Hermione fell into deep thought. "We have tried just about everything," she said smartly. "Wonder how we'd get that to work? Maybe a dream potion. They're easy. Can you get me a few supplies, Harry?"

"Is the potion a forbidden one?" he asked carefully.

"I don't think so," Hermione replied, returning to the here and now.

"It's just that Severus was more than a little upset about the unsupervised Animagi club." Harry really did not want to tempt that again, even for the sake of her assignment. He suggested, "Give me the ingredient list, I'll just ask him for them. That's safest."

Hermione took the parchment scrap Frina offered and wrote out five things. "I have everything else. We'll use the usual brewing location since it takes most of a day," she added with a smile. "Just bring the stuff there."

Harry took the list and tried to read her expression. "I don't mean to sound unhelpful."

"Harry," she said. "It's all right. Believe me; I understand that you don't want to get into trouble. It's a new thing for you," she teased, "but I understand."

On the walk back Penelope stayed beside Harry. "What are your plans after school?" she asked.

"I have my Auror's testing but other than that I'm free."

"Would you like to visit me in Bern?" she asked eagerly.

"I think I'd like that. The testing schedule isn't set, though; I'd have to let you know later."

She smiled broadly despite his uncertain answer. "My parents would be very excited to have you visit. The whole city would."

"Uh," Harry began.

"Or a quiet visit, of course," she amended quickly while grabbing his arm, apparently to reinforce her insistence.

"That might be better," Harry stated.