

Chapter 41 -- Swelter'd Venom Sleeping Got

Since Hermione was eager to get started on the potion, Harry headed down to Snape's office very early, well over an hour before breakfast, using Dobby as an escort when he had finished straightening the common room. When he arrived, his guardian was going through what appeared to be the same large stack of parchments. Harry asked the broadly grinning house-elf to wait before stepping inside.

"I need some stuff," Harry said. "None of it's restricted, but it isn't in the usual student supplies."

Snape stood and accepted the list. With a doubtful glance at Harry, he went to his personal supplies cabinet. "May I ask why you now are *trying* to have dreams--usually it is the opposite." He handed out pollen essence and pickled worm skin.

"I'm not the one drinking it. It will have to be Hermione or Frina."

Snape glanced up as he handed him gold-leafed scarab wings.

Harry explained, "The explanation really isn't very interesting; they want to test a theory about the wombat assignment--"

"Ah," Snape said, sounding like everything made sense.

"So that *is* it?" Harry asked.

"I am not supposed to assist. None of the staff are, but I am surprised it took Ms. Granger that long to think of that." He handed Harry a leather pouch full of dyed bezel leaves and a tiny vial of concentrated black coat ash.

"She didn't," Harry could not resist saying, then followed it with a grin to make the point.

"She must be slipping."

"Thanks," Harry snipped at him. "You do need a break," he commented as he balanced the variety of containers against his arm. "Or a stiff drink."

"I am . . . looking forward to the party on that regard." Snape watched him juggling things before saying a little snidely, "Would you like something to carry that all in?"

Harry found the three of them in the girls' toilet and waved Dobby off with thanks. With his oversized eyes, the elf glanced doubtfully at the sign on the door, but did not comment about Harry's entrance into the wrong toilet, just bowed and said, "Good day, Master Harry." Harry put the ingredient sack down beside Hermione who was firing up a cauldron in the middle of the floor.

"Doesn't bother you to be in here, does it?" Hermione asked. Harry's eyes *were* on the washbasin tap, the one with the serpent.

"No."

Frina and Penelope were giving him curious looks. "Couldn't get Ron to come down?" he asked Hermione.

"He refused to get up early for an assignment."

"Well!" Myrtle said as she floated out of a stall. Frina and Penelope jumped back in surprise, one grabbing the other.

"Hi, Myrtle," Harry said congenially.

"WHO . . . is this?" Myrtle asked, floating nose to nose with one, then the other of the Durmstrang students. "And THIS?"

"Yet another ghost?" Frina asked. "No one purges them?"

Myrtle's face crinkled up before she burst into tears, covered her face and dove into the nearest toilet. Hermione had her wand out with an umbrella charm long before the water splashed into her work area.

"Try to be nice to her," Harry said quietly. "She used to be a student."

"What happened to her?" Penelope asked. "How long has she been here?"

"A long time," Hermione said as she adjusted the flame below the cauldron, "About fifty years."

"She was Voldemort's first victim," Harry said.

"What?" Penelope and Frina blurted in unison.

"That was back when he still went by his given name, Tom Riddle," Harry explained. He sat on the floor beside Hermione and helped her grind the beetle wings into powder. "He was the heir of Salazar Slytherin," Harry went on, "one of the school's founders. He opened the supposedly mythical Chamber of Secrets the founder left behind, and released the Basilisk, which did in poor Myrtle there."

They stood staring at him in shock.

"The entrance is just there," Harry added, pointing at the sinks.

"Right there?" Frina asked fearfully.

"Don't worry, the Basilisk is dead," Harry said reassuringly.

"Who killed it?" Penelope asked.

With her silver stirring stick Hermione pointed at Harry.

"*You* did?" Penelope said, "Is this what Professor Snape was referring to?"

"Yep. Want this now?" Harry asked Hermione in reference to the powder.

"Dump it in," she said, stirring rapidly as he did so.

"Figuring out how to kill Riddle was harder than sticking a sword through the Basilisk's head," Harry commented. "I can roast the skins if you want."

"Not quite yet. They might dry out," Hermione said, glancing at the recipe.

"You killed Riddle, er, Voldemort that time too?" Frina asked in confusion.

Harry took over stirring while Hermione opened more jars. "That was the third time I'd did essentially kill him," he said casually. "Too evil to die," he added flippantly.

Hermione added more ingredients and stirred thoroughly before saying, "It needs to simmer for an hour." She stood up to stretch her legs and wandered around the sinks. "Can you still open the Chamber?" she asked curiously.

Harry followed Hermione over as Penelope said, "Open the . . .?"

They stood before the faucet with the snake. "I don't know," he said. "The tunnel caved in some back then--it may be completely blocked now."

"I want to see," Hermione said. "I had a chance to see it. Do you want to see it again?" she asked hopefully.

Harry considered that. It was a very long time ago. A glance at the clock showed that they still had forty-five minutes before breakfast. He could still sense his younger instinct to explore without regard to risk and felt nostalgic about it. "Sure."

"Won't you get into trouble?" Penelope said quickly, stepping close.

Harry shrugged lightly. "I'm the only one in the world who can open it, I think." He turned to Hermione.

"I expect you are. I'd really like a look before we leave for good," she said, wheedling slightly.

Harry grinned at her. "I remember when you wouldn't do anything even slightly out of line. Used to make us bonkers."

Hermione laughed. "Go on then."

"It's probably sealed up," he muttered. Harry narrowed his eyes and stared intently at the snake figure. "Open the Chamber," he said. He knew he had spoken Parseltongue only because the visiting students tripped over each other stepping backward. Harry pulled Hermione back as the porcelain unit moved and folded in on itself, leaving a square gap in the floor. He and Hermione stared down into the dark hole.

"We've got a bit of time this morning or do you want to wait for another time?" Harry asked his friend.

"You're a Parselmouth?" Penelope said in utter shock.

"Yeah," Harry replied with extra casualness. He let her hang there, feeling as though she should learn to deal with it on her own, and if she couldn't, well . . .

"We have almost an hour and a half before class," Hermione said. "Time for a little exploring followed by a quick shower."

"We should go get Ron," Harry said.

Hermione used a bird spell to summon him. "He shouldn't be so lazy," she commented before bending down to squint into the darkness again. "How's the landing?" When Harry shrugged, she jumped in.

Looking into the hole after Hermione in concern, Frina asked "How far down is it?"

"It isn't too bad down here," Hermione shouted before Harry could respond. "A little obliterate spell and it's pretty clear."

"It occurs to me," Harry said to no one in particular, "that we got out last time by riding on the tail of a Phoenix."

Penelope and Frina gave him wide looks as though he had lost it. "My silver message spell isn't as good as hers; can one of you go down to Hagrid's cabin and ask him to send Fawkes to the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Sure," Frina said in a tone one might use to calm someone who had lost his head.

Enjoying their surprised dismay too much, he added, "Really, we will need Fawkes. You remember the bird Hagrid had in class a few weeks ago?" When they nodded, but still looked doubtful, Harry shouted, "I'm coming down," as he stepped into the hole.

At the bottom, he brushed himself off. "You have cleared it out. But boy does it stink."

"Didn't last time?"

"No. Not like this."

Harry led the way to the sealed chamber latch where he again had to ask in Parseltongue for it to open.

"Interesting locking mechanism," Hermione said. "I detect a theme."

Harry shook his head with a crooked grin and they stepped inside. Water still covered most of the floor and they held up their robes while they splashed through it. Rats scurried away from their approach. At the front, the source of the smell was clear. Face wrinkled in disgust, Harry approached the twisted Basilisk skeleton. Its skin hung in tatters like old cloth over most of the grey-stained protruding spinal bones.

"They never took the Basilisk away," Harry said. "I'm surprised."

"The sword is gone, though," Hermione observed.

"As is the diary. Dumbledore had them," Harry supplied.

"Hey!" a voice made them jump severely. It was Ron, entering from the hatchway. "Didn't imagine you'd come down here. . . yeech."

"Morning, Ron," Harry greeted his friend, who splashed over to them while holding his robes bunched at his waist. Harry slowly circled the long creature. In a shallow pool lay a long, bleached tooth. After examining it for a moment, he tossed it aside with a splash. He could remember the extreme pain of being bitten by it too much to want to keep it.

"Don't want it?" Ron asked, fetching it and slipping it into his pocket.

"You can have it," Harry said, stepping over to the large carvings on the wall. This place felt empty, dead. Maybe that was why Dumbledore had left it as a tomb.

They explored the sculpture and the perimeter of the room until a cry rent the air and Fawkes flew toward them low across the water. The bird fluttered to a perch on a high protruding bone and cocked its head at them.

"What's he doing here?" Hermione asked.

"That's our ride out," Ron teased. "Am I right?" he asked Harry. They all looked at each other with grins of shared experience and emotion.

"Goodness, I'm going to miss this place," Harry said with more than a hint of sarcasm. They all laughed uproariously.

"Bloody lucky to be alive," Ron teased him.

Harry removed his glasses to wipe his eyes free of tears of laughter.

"You outlived Voldemort, though; few thought you would manage that," Hermione said, squeezing Harry's hand after he had replaced his glasses. "Couldn't hope for more, though I think you got it anyway."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"Only a father, silly," she pointed out.

Harry, having difficulty balancing out the memories of this place with what she said, turned his gaze back to the long grim skeleton before them. Fawkes had his head tilted oddly as though listening in. He met the bird's tiny eyes and considered how very much Fawkes had seen through the years. A rush of odd thoughts flickered through his mind then as though he had accidentally Legilimized the bird. Visions of stone arches being constructed and books being collected and read, late candlelight discussions and arguments with two witches, one who always seemed to be smiling and a wizard, who always seemed to be scowling.

Harry staggered, bringing his friends near. Ron took his arm and held him up by it. "You all right?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked up at Fawkes again, stunned. The bird let out the loudest cry Harry had ever heard from it. "Nothing," Harry said as he shook them off. "Just too many memories."

"We should go," Hermione said, nervous now. More lightly, she said, "I want to finish the potion before class so it can simmer during the day."

Fawkes easily carried them back up through the floor of the girls' toilet. Frina and Penelope were stirring the potion when they arrived, announced by a loud Phoenix cry. The girls jumped to their feet and stood against the wall, even though they were already out of the way.

"Thank you, Fawkes," Harry said. The bird circled once, nearly colliding with Harry, before it vanished, leaving a feather fluttering downward. Harry caught it out of the air.

"When you said to send the Phoenix, I didn't believe you," Penelope said. "Fortunately, Frina did."

Harry held out the feather to her. She accepted it hesitantly. "That is a very rare thing."

"Have it anyway," Harry insisted, teasing. "Fawkes has more, I'm sure."

Hermione sat before the potion, stirred and examined it. "Maybe I'll skip breakfast and finish this up. Then it can brew until evening." She reached for the pollen and added a dusting to the bubbling surface.

"I will stay and help," Frina said, sitting beside her.

"Did you make enough for Opus and I?" Ron asked.

Hermione added more beetle wings and stirred slowly. "Enough for one of you, but let me try it tonight first since we aren't certain this is going to get us anywhere."

"Actually, we are sure," Harry said.

She looked way up at him from her low position. "We are?"

Harry nodded, then added a wink.

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Hermione clapped her Arithmancy book closed and stashed it in her bookbag as they all sat studying late in the common room that evening. "We have a fruit basket, torches . . . everything hopefully. Just have to go take my potion."

"I will take it as well, if you wish," Frina suggested.

"I didn't make enough for all four of us. You gave Opus his bottle, right?" she asked Ron.

He nodded, not lifting his gaze from his History textbook. She did not bother him further, presumably since he was actually working through the N.E.W.T. revision tables she had drawn up for him. He had not even noticed that Crookshanks was curled up around his feet, asleep.

Eventually they all headed up to bed after stretching out the kinks from sitting too long.

Harry was sound asleep when a commotion woke him. Frightened voices sounded from beyond the drapes of his bed. "This one," someone said and the drapes parted, letting in flickering torch light.

"Harry!" Penelope's voice called. Frina was rousing Ron, Harry noticed, as he put on his glasses and squinted at the next bed. "Hermione is sick. Come, please!" Penelope said, desperately grasping his pyjama-covered wrist.

Harry stumbled out of the room, just grabbing his dressing gown from the corner bedpost. "Did you call Madam Pomfrey?" he asked. Ron, who awoke faster at the news, stomped down the staircase ahead of him, and turned to head up the other which instantly turned to a slide.

"Parvati went to get Professor Sinistra," Frina stated calmly as she followed them down. "What is this?" she asked regarding the now nonexistent stairs.

Harry pulled out his wand and Accioed his broom from his trunk. "Ron! Here," he said as he mounted it. Ron gave up on climbing the polished slope and jumped on the back of Harry's broom and barely held on to his shoulder as they zipped up the passageway. At the landing they jumped off and stepped inside.

Hermione was on the floor, Lavender, Ginny and some other house girls were kneeling around her. Harry and Ron moved in beside. Hermione was clutching the edge of a long piece of torn bed drape and muttering something. She had apparently been sick as soiled damp rags were piled to the side.

"Hermione?" Ron prompted, shaking her.

"Ginny," Harry said, "Please go down to the Slytherin dungeon and make sure Opus is all right."

"What?" she blurted, disbelievingly.

Ron was lifting Hermione off the floor, trying to get her to release the drape from the death grip she had on it.

"He took the same potion," Harry explained. Ginny looked at him in shock, he assumed at the notion of the Slytherin dungeon at night. "Take Neville with you, or Dean," he suggested smartly when she stood reluctantly. Finally, still wide-eyed at the suggestion, she departed. He turned back to Hermione. She was completely nonsensical and Ron was trying to get through to her with verbal reassurances. "Just a second," Harry said to quiet him.

" . . . trapped, so dark, so alone . . . help, help," she muttered almost imperceptibly.

"Just take her to the hospital wing, I think," Harry said firmly to Ron, who appeared to pull himself together at having instructions to follow. Harry stood with Ron as he hefted the much smaller Hermione into his arms, her long hair tangling around her face.

"Hospital wing, yes," Ron muttered in a similar way to Hermione. "Pomfrey will know what to do."

Sinistra came in as they reached the dormitory door. "What are you doing in here?" she asked the boys, very surprised to see them.

"Herme's sick," Ron explained, voice breaking.

"Oh, dear. Well, come along then." She ushered them down the stairs and across the common room, opening the portrait with a wave before they arrived so they didn't have to slow down.

In the hospital wing Ron gently put her down on the last bed. She spasmed strangely and muttered something about darkness and fear again. Harry had never seen such a tragic look on Ron's face as he reached out to pull her hair aside; it made him very sorry he had mentioned anything about dreaming. Pomfrey shooed them aside brusquely. Ron grudgingly stepped back just a half step and moved back close as soon as the hospital witch shuffled around to the other side.

Ginny and Dean came in as they watched Pomfrey work. "Opus is fine, said he hadn't had any troubles at all even though he took the potion hours ago, just before sleeping," Ginny supplied.

Harry's brow furrowed as he took that in. Penelope's worried gaze caught his own, which was not reassuring. Hermione's mutterings replayed in Harry's mind. "What if?" he started to say. He stepped closer to Penelope and Frina. "I have an idea," he said, leading them away from the group around the bed. Quietly, he said, "What if she is dreaming someone else's wombat?"

"All of you: scram, scram," Pomfrey finally ordered, prompted by Ron and Ginny hovering directly in the way. Reluctantly they moved completely aside. Harry gestured adamantly for them to follow.

"I have an idea," he repeated. On the way to the attic, he explained what he was thinking.

"You think it's Malfoy and Parkinson's wombat she's dreaming of?" Ron asked, aghast.

"One way to find out," Harry said. He strode purposefully to the last crate on the end and ran through the un-spelling of it. It didn't open. He knelt hurriedly beside it. "Is there something to pry with?"

Frina transformed a stray pine crate slat into metal and handed it to him. "Thanks," Harry said. He inserted the end under the edge of the cover and pried hard because the adrenaline in his blood would not have allowed for less. The cover popped open easily, knocking him over, off-balance.

Flailing and screeching filled Harry's vision and ears. He managed to throw an arm over his eyes as needle-like claws descended on his face. Pain spiked along Harry's arm as he threw himself aside, trying to escape the blue and black, madly flapping thing that had latched onto his arm. The others around him were shouting.

Something web-like shot at Harry and the creature was gone, trapped in white netting that tangled its membranous wings up in odd directions. It hit the floor and skidding to the center of the attic where Penelope crouched with her wand out. Harry rolled over, clutching his arm which blossomed with streaks of pain. Blood soaked his pyjama sleeve where he pressed it tight to dull the searing.

"The hell," Ron muttered, stepping over to the trapped thing. It screeched at him and tried to hop away, on four feet, Harry noticed. Frina handed Harry a clean rag from the supplies table. He pressed it against the deep cuts on his arm with a wince. The creature had quieted and now moved oddly. On his knees Harry moved closer to it, checking the netting to be sure it was secure. The taut ends of the web pressed into the wood beam of the floor where Penelope held her wand point.

"Thanks," Harry said to her.

"You're welcome," she said, looking pleased and a little embarrassed.

"What's it doing?" Ron asked in disgust.

Harry squinted at it; it appeared to be cleaning its feet and the edges of its wings. It looked a little purplish to Harry now. Its tiny pointed head looked up at him, clearly sniffing him. Harry backed off a little.

"It likes you," Ron teased. "Imagine that."

"It wants the blood," Frina observed.

Harry, moving slowly because he was stunned by that notion, pulled the rag away from his arm. Dark streaks marred it where his arm still bled freely. The creature strained forward against the webbing with sad, hungry noises. "Can you get me another rag?" Harry asked.

Frina handed Harry another cloth which he traded for the soiled one on his arm. The bloody one he tossed within range of the transformed wombat, which eagerly picked it up with its dexterous front feet and gnawed on the darkest parts of it.

"I think I'm going to be ill," Ron murmured.

"Maybe check the others," Harry suggested. "Don't be surprised to find any normal bats."

The others went about opening the remaining crates. Many teams had turned theirs in already, essentially giving up. Only six in total remained. Ron gave a cry of victory when he opened his. "It's a bat now," he announced proudly.

"See if it will eat any fruit," Harry said tiredly, still watching the netted creature. His arm wasn't throbbing nearly as much as before. He pulled the rag aside to reassess the damage. The streaks had almost stopped bleeding. He blinked at his arm in confusion when one of the streaks disappeared as he was looking at it.

"Wha?" Harry muttered. The others were busy and did not take note. Harry looked up at the creature, watched it gnaw contentedly on the rag in one spot, before shifting to another damper section. Another cut disappeared. "Merlin," Harry said. "Come look at this."

Ron left his bat hanging with an Asian pear clutched in its feet. Frina and Penelope loosely replaced the lids on the crates they had just opened and stepped over as well.

"Your arm does not look so bad," Frina commented.

"*Now* it doesn't." He reached over and jerked the rag from the creature, which hissed at him as it lost possession. "Watch." Using the cleaner rag, Harry pressed a corner over the deepest of the remaining gashes before holding it out to the creature, which grabbed it up and began gnawing on it eagerly to recover the fresh blood there. "Look," Harry said, indicating his arm. The wound was narrowing and finally vanished.

"Bloody amazing," Ron said.

"It's like the powder of sympathy," Harry observed.

After a few minutes of careful feeding, all of Harry's wounds were healed, including the ones on his face, which Penelope wiped blood from for him. The creature was calm now and nearly riotously violet in color; the kind of color only Tonks would find appealing as hair. It finally dropped the rag and began grooming itself awkwardly through the webbing.

"Now what?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "Put it back in its crate?"

"Then let's check on Hermione," Ron said, thinking ahead.

"Go now, Ron. We'll clean up," Harry insisted.

"You'll escort him then?" Ron confirmed with Frina and Penelope using unusual seriousness. At their nods he dashed off.

They put each of the wombats away, including Hermione's and Frina's small sleeping one and Ron's and Opus' now greenish yellow swirled one which had to go into a larger crate. Harry was glad that Ron's grade had just gone up, if nothing else. The strange violet one of Malfoy's, they closed in, still netted, and canceled the webbing spell only after the lid was secure.

"I owe you one for catching that thing," Harry said to Penelope.

She tossed aside the rag she was wiping her hands on. "No. You cannot."

"Let me try, at least," Harry insisted, feeling this point was broadly important. Frina had moved to the other side of the attic, near the stairs where she waited with her head turned downward.

Penelope tilted her head to the side as though maybe accepting that.

"Can you show me that spell?" Harry asked.

"Of course," Penelope replied eagerly.



Chapter 42 -- Like a Hell-Broth Boil and Bubble

The next morning at breakfast, Hermione appeared with a chagrined expression. Ron jumped up and eagerly led her to their part of the table, strongly reminding Harry of his Animagus form.

"Hey, Hermione. How are you feeling?" Harry asked her.

"Not bad." She took her place between Ron and Ginny. "Can't complain about one night of bad dreams, can I? Not with how many you've had." This last she directed at Harry.

"We'll let you complain," Ron insisted. "Won't we?" he confirmed with his friend.

"Sure," Harry said with a smile.

She rolled her eyes in embarrassment and accepted the pumpkin juice Ron handed her solicitously.

Breakfast passed uneventfully. Post arrived, causing some to tease Ginny until she snapped at them, seeming truly tired of it. Most of the students left to get ready for class, but the six of them stayed on because Hermione was eating slowly, clearly lacking appetite.

Snape strode along to their section the table on his way out. "Bit of an exciting night, I hear," he said, eyes darting between them. All Harry could think was his guardian did not know quite how exciting. "Did you of all people mis-brew a dream-inducing potion, Ms. Granger?" Snape asked, curiously.

"No, sir--worked too well, I think." She glanced from him to the clock. "We should get to class," she said to her friends.

"Did you get enough to eat?" Ron asked in concern.

When she swallowed hard and nodded with a frown, they all stood up. Snape stepped back to give them room. Harry was just considering how exactly to explain to his guardian what had happened when a screech interrupted their departure. The remaining students in the Hall all froze as a something violet, a blurred bullet, dashed around the open door to the Hall and headed straight at Harry.

Everyone moved. Snape had his wand out, but missed with whatever spell he had incanted because the thing dodged it. Ron went up for the block but only got his fingers scratched for his trouble. Harry got a chest full of fuzzy critter that somehow managed to not actually puncture him with its numerous needle-like claws.

Seeing Snape aiming his wand, Harry backed away with his hand up. "It's all right!" he insisted. He carefully plucked the creature off his chest, but it squirmed out of his grip and scrambled up to his shoulder, where it clung hard to his robes. Everyone stared. Snape glared intently, but lowered his wand. Harry sighed and said to him, "Last night was more interesting than you know."

Malfoy charged through the door, wand out and when his eyes found Harry and the creature, he stalked over in pure anger. As he bore down on Harry, Malfoy pulled up short with a glance at the teacher, and forced himself calm. "Pansy thinks you messed with our assignment," he said, voice shaking in anger. Claw scratches marred his cheek, Harry saw.

"It's a long story," Harry said. The creature was actually burying its head in his hair and collar, to hide. Malfoy's face twisted at the sight of this.

"You should take points off Gryffindor for his ruining our assignment," Malfoy demanded of Snape, his face reddening.

"That is for your Care of Magical Creatures professor to decide, Mr. Malfoy."

"We didn't ruin it anyway," Harry said. "Why didn't you finish it yourself? Clearly you were going for this transformation from the beginning," he added, thinking aloud.

Malfoy dropped his arms and backed off warily. His eyes darted between Harry and Snape before he spun on his heel and stalked off. Harry plucked the transformed wombat off his neck again only to have it insist on climbing his arm to reach his shoulder again. "What am I going to do with this?"

Snape reached for it, only to have its vicious shrieking fill the Hall. He jerked his hand back . . . just in time. "Perhaps go down to Hagrid and ask," he said flatly, brows raised in worry as Harry petted it to calm it down.

"All right if I'm late for class, then?" Harry teased.

"I suppose," Snape sighed with false suffering. "If you can avoid bringing that . . . it would be better."

But Harry could not avoid bringing the creature; Hagrid insisted that it needed to stay with him. When Harry asked for how long, Hagrid had only mumbled something and insisted that it was Harry's fault he was paired with it. It had taken a long time for Harry to explain exactly what had happened the night before. Finally the argument that Malfoy had been leaving it there to suffer, as Hermione had seen in her dream, got him back in Hagrid's good favor so he could leave for Defense class.

As he stepped into class, he gave Snape an apologetic shrug for still having the creature. Everyone turned and stared at him in curiosity, except Malfoy and Parkinson, who sent him daggers with their eyes.

At the end of class Harry's friends gathered around. "How's he doing?" Ron asked.

"She actually, according to Hagrid," Harry said.

"It is cute." Penelope reached out to pet it, but it screeched and viciously tried to nip her.

"I hope all women aren't like that," Harry commented.

"They are," Dean breathed, while Neville nodded sagely along with him. The girls looked insulted as the rest of them laughed.

Harry still had the wombat bat at dinner time, since removing it from his person involved risking losing a finger. Left alone it seemed to have a livable disposition.

"You're goin' to have to name it," Ron commented teasingly.

Harry turned to the creature on his shoulder and peered at it. It raised its head from sniffing the aromas wafting up from the table to look at him as well. Ron tore off a hunk of roast beef and held it up for the beast. "Wah!" Ron shouted and jumped back when it snatched the meat out of his fingers in an eye blink. It proceeded to chew happily upon it.

"She get you?" Harry asked.

Ron reluctantly examined his hand as though expecting the worst. "No," he replied in relief. "Name her Killer, maybe," he said smartly.

"Looking for a name? Are you keeping that?" Ginny asked.

"It's keeping me. I don't seem to have any say," Harry complained.

"How about Fly Paper?" Ginny suggested as the creature crawled down Harry's front to take a closer look at his plate.

Harry lifted the wiry creature back to his shoulder, where she hissed until he handed her another piece of meat.

"Kali," Hermione stated with certainty, "goddess of destruction."

"I like that one," Harry said with a grin and tore off another chunk of the bloodiest part of his roast and set it aside for when "Kali" wanted it.

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"Well, I think we may have to manage our grade just from the essay," Hermione said to Frina in an apologetic tone. They were putting their very blue, still small wombat back in its crate. Only two other project crates still on the attic floor had been changed for larger ones.

"I will take the potion if you wish to make more," Frina offered.

"No," Hermione stated in a tone of finality. "It isn't worth it--believe me. Maybe just set an alarm for every two hours and if you think you were dreaming, come up and check." She shrugged, apparently not caring about the grade much anymore.

Ron held up his and Opus' project. It had beard-like fur around its chin in bright green and a yellow swirl on its back.

"You might just keep it out," Harry suggested. His own unintentional second project was asleep, locked in a crate in his dormitory. Hermione had suggested a Quiescent Charm, since it was a gentle one and Kali very small. It had worked, leaving him creature-free for the evening.

"What? Carry it around all day?" Ron asked in disbelief. When Harry and Penelope nodded knowledgeably, he slumped, "Oy."

"We might need to speed it along," Opus said, taking the animal expertly from Ron. It clung to the tall young man willingly.

"Yeah," Ron said carefully, "I think it likes you better. Maybe you can take it tonight?"

Opus grinned. "If you wish. If you clean up, ya? I have that big essay to complete. It takes me longer in English than you, I think."

"No problem," Ron insisted.

Frina and Penelope looked antsy as Opus departed. "Go on," Harry said to them with a grin. With relieved glances they followed Opus out. When everything was put away, they also tromped down the rickety wooden staircase out of the attic.

The three of them strolled down the quiet fourth floor corridor in a relaxed mood. "Your membrane energy was good today, Harry," Hermione said, recalling their earlier advanced D.A. session. She sounded unusually reassuring and encouraging.

"McGonagall's been helping me with it, you know," Harry pointed out.

"Well, but still," she insisted. She started to say more, but stopped.

"What she is *trying* to say," Ron interjected, "is that you should be able to try your full form. . . . Anytime."

Harry stared straight ahead as they walked. His friends were right, as usual. He let his curiosity war with the unknown of becoming something he did not fully understand and walked in silence.

More excited, Ron said, "Hey, then we can all go for a late-night stroll in the forest, you know. That would be great." Harry looked doubtful, but didn't reply in the face of Ron's enthusiasm. Not long ago he would have relished the idea, perhaps as much, mainly because both Sirius and his dad would have jumped at the chance.

"Why don't we just take 'mione down for a swim in the lake," Harry suggested without seriousness. "You can retrieve her if the giant squid comes along."

"Excellent idea!" Ron said boisterously.

"Oh, please," she said. "Though I could swim in the lake easily, couldn't I?"

"You honestly didn't think of that?" Harry asked in surprise. "What, the big tub in the prefect's bathroom is good enough?" he teased.

"Well . . . yes," she admitted with a major blush.

"Secret's out," Ron teased as he put an arm around her playfully, slowing her pace.

Harry bent over in laughter, since he had only been joking by suggesting it. He took a few steps ahead of them before turning when they did not catch up. He turned slowly because he really expected them to be snogging or something given the delay. Instead he found them still, frozen like mannequins, Ron's arm crooked oddly in the air around Hermione's shoulder.

Harry whipped his wand out of his pocket and spun back around. He waved it around his head and shouted "*Bolerum!*" just as a blasting curse struck him. It took every ounce of strength to stay upright and in front of his friends as he followed with a Grand Flecture, hoping it would protect the two behind him.

A mummy-like form emerged in the swirls, although the grey things were falling away from it quickly as it struggled. "*Gravesco!*" Harry incanted with anger. The few clinging grey strands indicated the figure had collapsed suddenly and was trying to move sideways. Panting from the pain of the blasting curse, Harry shifted to keep between the attacker and his friends.

A muffled voice incanted something and Harry put up a Chrysanthemum block, a wide one to protect him and the others. Unfortunately, it did not hold well spread out so thin, so the curse knocked him back and made his body vibrate like a gong. He held onto his wand through it, but just barely. Immediately he returned an Unjackardum, aimed at the few remaining quivering grey strands, just as the Bolerum spell faded out, returning his opponent to invisibility.

A grunt sounded, followed by a ripping sound as the invisibility cloak tore, its weft weakened by the hex. A jagged figure appeared, trying to stand against the extreme weight Harry had cursed it with. Now that his assailant was nearly visible and he could aim carefully, Harry spelled the hardest blasting curse he could produce. His opponent flew backward, skidded on the stone floor and lay still.

Harry spun around to his friends, who still stood like wax figures, apparently untouched. Afraid to try anything to animate them without understanding how they were frozen, Harry staggered over to his opponent. Doubled over and coughing, he fell to his knees beside the supine figure and yanked the visible remains of the cloak aside.

"Malfoy," Harry whispered. The next thing Harry knew, he was flying backward. He hit the pillar between two windows with his back and shoulder as his foot arched behind him and smashed the colored panes of thick glass. His foot caught in the heavy leading of the window as he fell, turning him in the air and making him strike his back hard on the unforgiving floor.

As he drew a desperate, difficult breath into resisting lungs, he looked up and found Draco Malfoy standing over him, dissolved cloak and dilapidated robe clasped around him, wand aimed steadily. Shadows danced in Harry's mind, one very close.

"When did you become a Death Eater?" Harry gasped, mystified. The pale gaze and wand wavered in surprise. Harry latched desperately onto that advantage. He laughed. "Who do you think inherited Voldemort's power to see his servants?" he asked with as threatening an expression as he could manage.

The wand wavered a moment more as Harry slowly moved his hand to look for his wand beside him. His leg throbbed where it had caught in the window and his trouser leg clung wetly to his skin.

Malfoy's wand stabilized and his confused look receded as anger retook him. "You should die now, I think," he said, "Voldemort inheritor or not."

"I'd go with an Avada Kedavra, if I were you," Harry stated helpfully, preparing himself to launch at the boy's feet if he did so.

"Why?"

"It works so well on me," Harry stated amiably. He had found his wand--he was lying on it. "Go on then," Harry urged as his fingers closed around familiar warm wood.

"You aren't lying," Malfoy said, confused again. It was not a good mode for him; in fact he was looking rather unbalanced now and his eyes vibrated occasionally in his skull.

In one smooth movement Harry brought his wand around and put up a Chrysanthemum block, which was exactly the right thing for the bright, deadly, narrow, cutting curse that flared from Malfoy's wand. The block was strong enough that it expanded and knocked the other's wand away. As Malfoy dived to retrieve it, Harry sat up and waved a chain binding curse at him, collapsing him. He added a second, just for good measure.

Harry tried to catch his breath while he watched for any sign of the curses loosening. He made it to his knees with extreme effort just as running feet approached. Harry glanced half backward, not removing his wand's aim from his fallen opponent. Snape came around the corner, followed close behind by Neville and Dean.

"Harry," Snape exhaled in relief upon taking in the scene. He came up behind Harry and grasped his shoulders. Harry leaned gratefully backward into the support for his dizziness.

"What's with them?" Dean asked of Hermione and Ron.

"Do not touch them!" Snape warned, putting a hand up. "I'll take care of them." He turned back to Harry and squeezed his shoulders. "Draco Malfoy," he breathed. "I would not have believed it."

"I don't," Harry said, eyeing the apparently unconscious figure. "Check him for potions."

"What?" Snape asked, moving to comply. "A Polyjuice?"

"No," Harry said. He reached into his cloak pocket and pulled out the Map. With slow, effort-filled movements, he unfolded it. Snape glanced up from his search of Malfoy's clothes to watch Harry activate it. He rolled his eyes at the incantation before returning to his task. "He doesn't need that much help. See," Harry said, holding out the parchment. Snape

had found a small bottle in Malfoy's trouser pocket; he held it to the light momentarily before turning to the parchment Harry held out.

Snape stiffened severely. "L. Malfoy?" he breathed and with a quick, jerking motion pulled his wand back out and aimed it at the fallen, chained figure.

Malfoy's grey-blue eyes snapped open in that instant. Breathing heavily in anger, Snape stepped closer to stand fully over the other man. He waved the small bottle over him. "Elixir of Youth, I presume?" he snarled.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," Malfoy stated with pure malevolence. His face fell, resigned and disgusted. "Trouble was, I was enjoying my freedom a little too much."

With a start Harry thought of Suze. Suze and all the other little things.

"How long have you been here, Lucius?" Snape demanded.

"Since Easter Holiday," Harry answered. "I've been seeing his shadow, just didn't know it. And it must have been Draco trying to get out of Azkaban, probably a little tired of being there. I'm sure he isn't too happy with you," Harry said the last to Malfoy Senior. "Severus, can you wake them?" he nodded at his still-frozen friends.

Snape gestured fiercely for Neville and Dean to help guard Malfoy as he stepped over to Ron and Hermione. He looked them each over closely before tapping one then the other while saying something rather long and complicated. Ron swooned limp followed by Hermione, although they both immediately struggled to get up. Snape pulled Hermione to her feet first before helping Ron.

"Harry!" they said in alarm and came over.

"Blimey!" Ron muttered, pulling out his wand and standing beside Dean and Neville.

"You all right, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"No," he replied honestly since about six major parts of him were extraordinarily unhappy with him. His throbbing shoulder and his bloody leg were arguing for first place in the battle for most painful.

Snape stepped over to him and pulled him to his feet with an arm over his shoulder. "Pomfrey, *now*," he said. Harry gasped but managed to take his own weight.

Malfoy raised his head, the only thing he could have moved. "You disgust me, Severus, you bloody traitor. You should be dead."

Harry pulled his wand out and stalled Snape's retreat as he aimed it at Lucius Malfoy. "Don't you dare threaten him," Harry hissed.

"Don't bother, Harry. Come on," Snape said in a remarkably easy tone.

Harry relented and let himself be led away. McGonagall and the other teachers were coming down the corridor breathlessly. "Oh dear! Harry," she said in deep concern upon seeing him.

Snape tossed his head behind him. "Contact the Aurors. It is Lucius Malfoy, disguised as Draco."

Her eyes spread extraordinarily wide, and she gestured to Flitwick to go back the way they had come.

"Sure you want to walk?" Snape asked.

"Yes," Harry insisted. He was very tired of being carried and hovered.

As they turned the corner, Hermione and Ron following at Harry's plodding pace, Snape said, "You fared much better this time." He glanced behind them. "Even given that you had to protect your friends."

Through the haze of pain Harry's lips twitched into a smile at the tone of pride he heard. "Could have done better--should have used the chain binding right away," he said as they managed the stairs. He was regretting that mistake more and more as they walked.

Harry was leaning quite heavily on his guardian and Ron by the time they arrived at the hospital wing. The three of them helped him onto a bed and he very relieved to lay back on it.

"Mr. Potter," Pomfrey said in disbelief as she came beside the bed. "Again?"

Harry closed his eyes and let his exhausted self go.

The waking world returned reluctantly. Harry shifted and felt the distinctive semi-reclined position of a hospital bed. Memory flooded him and his arms jerked with an instinct to take action. A hand brushed the hair off his forehead, sending a bolt like electrical static through his scar and waking him completely.

"It's all right, Harry," Snape said from beside the bed. His gaze looked uncertain, though, when Harry found it with his blurry vision. His guardian held out his glasses which he accepted gratefully. Snape straightened in his chair. "Pomfrey said you may leave when you feel up to it." When Harry squinted at the clock in the dimness, Snape provided, "It is just after three in the morning."

"Maybe not worth waking my dormitory mates," he whispered. Experimentally, he moved his injured leg. It felt bandaged still. He pulled the covers aside to look and found his shin to his foot bound firmly in white cloth bandages.

"You had quite a bit of glass in your leg," Snape stated.

"It felt like it," Harry commented, stretching his shoulders and neck, glad to find only stiffness there. He tossed the covers back and sighed. "Any news?" he asked, thinking that the Aurors must have come and taken Malfoy away.

"The Ministry Aurors do wish to speak with you. They will probably come at lunchtime tomorrow to do so. Also, Minerva is rather pleased that this situation has been straightened out."

"Especially with the party coming up," Harry added, half-teasing.

"I think, more likely," Snape said with forced patience, "that she is happy to not have to worry so much about you . . . and the other students."

Harry grinned before his face fell. "I'm remembering all the things Malfoy has been up to."

"You are not alone in that," Snape stated forcefully. "I did not even suspect. I just assumed he was growing more obnoxious, which did not seem surprising, as well as better skilled at Occlumency. As you suspected, Draco switched places with his father during a visit to the prison over Easter Holiday."

"On Monday?" Harry asked, thinking of Knockturn Alley.

Snape replied, "Sunday, but it was he on Knockturn Alley Monday, according to Malfoy himself. He divulged some of what happened during the Veritas serum treatment they gave him before taking him away."

"Sorry to have missed that," Harry commented. "What about Jugson?"

"A plant, for the Aurors to capture. Put there after Lucius' hiding place was revealed. Lucius fetched him to be caught in his stead when Burke told him it was he who the Aurors were searching for." Snape ended with a wry expression.

Harry froze. "Oh," he muttered.

Snape stood. "You should rest," he said, patting Harry on the arm. "Now that you should be able to do so."

Harry sighed again as he relaxed against the pillow. The door to the wing fell closed. Harry was not very tired, but eventually he fell back into a calm sleep anyway.

* * *

Harry's friends came in early the next morning, as he was putting on his shoes. "Morning, Harry," Hermione and Ron greeted cheerfully as they came in the door followed by a troop of others.

"You end up here frequently," Penelope commented.

"Er, yeah," Harry agreed, a bit embarrassed. He shook out his robe prior to slipping it on. As he was straightening his robes around him, he heard an odd sound from behind Ron. "What's that?"

"Ah, well, this thing drove everyone nuts last night, 'til we silenced it. But 'Mione thought it might really need to get out and see you." He brought the crate containing Kali from behind his back.

"Oh," Harry said, remembering the creature. Its tiny paw reached between the slats and clawed at empty air in his direction. He took the crate and set it on the bed to release it. With an unearthly shriek it clamored up to his shoulder and circled his neck several times. It seemed nearly frantic.

"They're empathetic, I'm pretty sure," Hermione said. "And this one maybe the most because of the blood you gave it."

Harry patted Kali when she finally sat still and mewed piteously.

"Poor thing," Hermione said.

"Poor thing?" Ron echoed in disbelief. "That thing would take off your nose just as well as look at you! Poor thing," he repeated with a scoff.

Harry took his wand from the night stand, momentarily studying the flattened, unpolished edge of it. He was not going to get to Ollivander's until the school year was over, he realized, putting it into his pocket. Kali mewled while sniffing his ear, which tickled. "'S all right," he insisted, patting it again.

The doors opened and Snape strode in, just as Ron was complaining about his empty stomach and how they should be heading down to breakfast. Harry's guardian stepped into their group and looked him over. "You still have that?" he asked in dismay. Kali stretched toward Snape to sniff him.

"I don't have any choice," Harry said easily. "I'm starting to like her," he added.

Ron commented, "We should get her something to eat before she takes someone's hand off."

* * *

"What's McGonagall going to say?" Ron asked on the way to class after breakfast, nodding at Kali, who was crouching comfortably on Harry's shoulder.

"Guess we're about to find out," Harry breathed as they stepped through the classroom door.

They took their seats. McGonagall's gaze swept past them, alighting briefly on the creature then away.

"Sorry, Professor," Harry said, loud enough to be heard at the front of the room.

A little stiffly, she said, "It is an immature Chimrian, Mr. Potter. I do understand what that means."

Harry, out of the corner of his eye, could see Hermione pull out a quill and quickly jot that down. When McGonagall had gone over to speak with a Hufflepuff who had asked a question, Hermione said, "Guess we don't know everything for that essay yet."

After class, McGonagall stepped over as they packed up their books. "My office, Mr. Potter--the Aurors should be here shortly."

Harry nodded. His friends patted him on the arm as they departed, as though he might be the one in trouble. He waved them off a bit impatiently and followed McGonagall, who asked how he was feeling in a way which made him think she felt partially responsible. He reassured her as they walked that he was fine and hinted that he was happy to have had the chance to get even.

In her office Harry warmly greeted Tonks and Rogan. Seeing this, the headmistress said, "I will be down in the Great Hall, should you need me." Harry took a seat as the door closed behind her, lifting Kali from his shoulder to his lap.

"You have a new pet?" Rogan asked.

"A class assignment," Harry explained. "Well, someone else's class assignment. It's a long story." He thought some more. "Malfoy's actually."

"Seems to like you," Tonks said, watching Kali snuffle around Harry's hands. "Nice color too," she added, making Harry grinned. She went on, "Well, let's get started. Would have liked to have talked to you last night, but there were too many indignant teachers and hospital witches in the way." Harry tried to imagine that scene and was glad he had been unconscious for it. Tonks rearranged some parchments in front of her. "You really got hammered both incidents, didn't you?"

"Did better the second time," Harry insisted, worried that they might think less of him because of what happened. "Maybe," he hemmed, rethinking the two times.

Tonks sported a silly grin as she said, "Just one Death Eater, Harry," in a disappointed tone. She winked at Rogan, but Harry did not see it.

"I know," Harry admitted, self-recriminating.

"Harry," she said chastisingly. "I'm only teasing."

"Oh."

She dipped her quill in McGonagall's inkwell. "Let's start at the beginning." When Harry hesitated, she prompted, "Harry?"

With sweating palms Harry said, "I lied at the very beginning. I'm sorry."

She froze an instant before setting the loaded quill down on the blotter. With a befuddled expression she said, "Let's go over it first, then write it down after we have it straight." She looked honestly confused.

"It was Malfoy on Knockturn Alley that day, he said so himself," Harry explained.

She rubbed her lips thoughtfully. "And you told us Jugson. Why?"

"I didn't know who it was--I was guessing."

Both of their brows furrowed. Tonks said, "You called us down there, told us you saw one of the remaining Death Eaters."

"I did see one," he insisted. With a frown he added, "Just not the way you think." He rubbed his forehead and eyes, feeling a little unwell at having to confess this. "I was afraid I wouldn't be allowed to be an Auror if the Ministry found out . . . found out I still have visions I inherited from Voldemort." He studied Tonks for a reaction. She did not respond, just considered him closely. "I see his followers as shadows in my dreams," Harry confessed. "And I was a little tired that day and resting my eyes while I was waiting, and suddenly there were two shadows in my mind."

"Two?" she asked sharply.

"Well, yes--Severus and the unknown one."

Her face fell away into an odd stillness. "You see Severus as a shadow, as one of Voldemort's followers?" When Harry nodded, she asked quietly, "Doesn't that bother you?"

"No," Harry replied honestly. "I don't mind somehow." He didn't think he could explain how protective it felt at the house, when he knew the shadow was Snape, when he would come to check on him at night, as no one had ever done before.

She seemed alarmed and doubtful as she considered that, but eventually moved on. "And we know the rest of what happened in Knockturn Alley. What happened here at Hogwarts?"

Harry explained about his sleep becoming disturbed, about the respelling of the tower, the first attack, and Malfoy's change in behavior. He covered the second attack in more detail because he felt he had done better that time and his pride twisted uneasy around the two of them.

Tonks fiddled with the quill as she listened. When Harry finished, she looked over at Rogan. "What do you think? No one has commented on the discrepancy."

"Whitley is the one who would have, and you are right, he didn't," Rogan returned thoughtfully.

Tonks explained, "Whitley was the older gentlemen you met that day in Knockturn Alley. Came out of retirement to help us while we are short-handed." She flicked the quill over the backs of her fingers. "I would hate to think the Ministry wouldn't trust you, Harry, no matter what. But anything surrounding or even hinting at Voldemort makes them irrationally paranoid." She fell silent.

"Leave the earlier report the way it was," Rogan suggested in a low voice. "They've been strutting about getting Jugson. Skip to the dreams for this interview."

Harry looked between them and wondered suddenly which of them was in charge.

"I hate to make exceptions," Tonks said as she started to write, the quill scritchling loudly on the rough parchment. "It is the kind of thing that let everything get out of control in the first place when Voldemort first returned." She paused and excessively dipped the quill she was using. "But for you, Harry . . ." She glanced up at him with a small smile and kept writing.

Author's Notes: The Gravesco Spell is an invention of kraeg001 who graciously offered it. I changed the functionality of the Mauraders Map just slightly to make it more likely Harry would miss Malfoy's different first initial in the crowded Slytherin common room the night of the first attack.



Chapter 43 -- Silver'd in the Moon's Eclipse

Friday evening and the one-year anniversary party arrived. Harry pulled out his dress robes and held them up. They really were not anything special; in fact, they were stained and crumpled, although he could probably work out a spell to tidy them quickly.

"Do you want to borrow my new ones?" Dean asked. "My mum just sent them but she wouldn't mind, I'm sure." At Harry's indecisive glance, Dean quickly pulled them out of his trunk, still in the Muggle cardboard box. They were a beautiful dark maroon with an accent of gold at the collar, cuff and pockets.

"Wow," Harry breathed.

"I think they'd fit you," Dean said. Ron and Neville stepped in as Dean was holding the robes up to Harry's shoulders for size. "A little broad," his friend said, "but workable."

"New robes, Harry?" Neville asked.

"Dean's offering me his new ones, actually." He turned to Dean. "Do you have something else to wear?"

"I have my old ones, which are just fine."

"Wear those, Harry," Ron said. "You'll look like Godric himself up there."

He would be wearing peach, Harry wanted to joke, but held back since he thought he really shouldn't even hint at what he suspected. "You really don't mind?" Harry asked his friend.

"No, please. Makes a great statement for the house. And since we aren't winning the cup . . ." He shrugged.

The boys passed a pair of Ministry wizards on guard at the end of the corridor as they went down toward to the Great Hall. They nodded them through, but McGonagall waylaid them before they reached the grand stairs. "I think an entrance is in order again, Mr. Potter."

Harry grumbled. "Then it should be all the D.A., Professor."

She hesitated then bowed her head. "Go fetch them from the Hall," she instructed his friends. She gestured for Harry to step into the nearest classroom and closed the door. "Speech all ready?"

"I made a few changes, but yes." He waited for her to ask what changes.

"It is your speech--you may say what you wish," she stated as though reading his thoughts.

A few short minutes later, the D.A. returned, all twenty-one of them, including those who had been kept back from joining in the fight directly. Even a year later, they still looked too young to Harry, and he was glad he had thought of holding them back during the chaos that day; he was certain it was saving him now from deep regrets at the memory of that day.

Trebor, now a Second Year, said upon seeing Harry's expression, "Ron said we should come."

Harry forced his face to relax. "Yes, of course." He added a smile for good measure, which made Trebor look away with a blush.

McGonagall led the way down, and stopped before the large doors, reminding Harry vividly of his first sorting, so long ago. "Mr. Potter, you last," she said with a wink before she pulled open the doors and led them in.

The conversation in the Hall hushed as the students filed in, walking roughly in lines of two along the aisle open in the center of the large round tables. Harry followed last, taking the door from Ron ahead of him and letting it close behind him. The room shuffled to its feet as they passed. It felt more natural this time, Harry found, even when everyone began clapping. At the front the students split off to their tables, leaving Harry and the headmistress alone. She turned him to the filled hall and patted him on the shoulder. The clapping grew louder, punctuated by cheering that sounded Weasley in origin.

The crowd quieted. "Thank you all for coming," McGonagall said to the assembled. As she made more welcoming remarks, Harry looked around the room. The students were allocated to the last rows of tables with the front two rows for various Ministry people, reporters, and near the windows, members of the Order. He gave them a smile which they returned. With a pat on Harry's back, which he hoped wasn't to capture his wandering attention, McGonagall said, "With that, let's eat."

McGonagall led him onto the platform to stand beside Fudge's chair. Harry looked around at the other ministers at the table, giving Obolensky an extra nod.

"Good to see you, Mr. Potter," Obolensky said graciously.

Harry grinned. "Good to see you too, sir. It's been a while."

"Ah, yes. Well, time is what it is." He sat back and shifted his gaze to Harry's left. Harry turned to McGonagall as well and found her waiting for him.

"Perhaps a few introductions," she said.

They went around the table, starting with Conor Mallory, the Irish Minister of Magic and ending with Juba Oni, Priestess of the tribes of the Niger Bend, whose colorful garb made everyone else at the large table look positively staid. Everyone was in a party mood it seemed, based on their easy-going greetings. The other table on the platform contained yet more ministers and the four Heads of House. Introductions were made there as well, before Harry and the headmistress finally sat down.

Through dinner Harry managed small talk with the various people at the table. In between interruptions from Fudge, that is. Harry was surprised at the deferential attitude they all used with him.

"Mr. Potter, I hear you will be finishing school soon," Ms. Oni intoned formally in a rich accent. "Rumor has it you are becoming an Auror."

"Accepted him already," Fudge cut in proudly, then put a large bite of meat in his mouth.

"I've been accepted for the admittance examinations," Harry clarified in his Best Boy voice.

Oni went on in her deep melodic speech, "You honor us, young man, by continuing your pursuit of those engaged in the darker magicks."

Harry would have shrugged before a different audience, but he felt obliged to rise to their deference. "I, uh, I have just always wanted to be one," he explained soberly.

At a pause Obolensky said with a sly look, "Speaking of rumors, I hear! you haw a family now."

"What is this?" Fudge blurted in surprise, bordering on indignant.

"I'm living with Professor Snape now, sir," Harry said calmly, wondering which rumor had leapt to the minister's mind.

"Oh, well. I see," Fudge hedged before dabbing his mouth with his napkin.

The main meal concluded and the Hall began to hum more loudly with general conversation. McGonagall nudged Harry. "Ready, my boy?"

Harry *almost* corrected her. "Yes, ma'am."

She stood, which brought the Hall to a hush. "Mr. Potter is going to say a few words to mark the occasion before we enjoy dessert." Harry took that as his cue to join her at the edge of the platform and to his dismay, sporadic clapping actually broke out. McGonagall turned and tapped Harry's throat with her wand before returning to her seat. Harry experimentally cleared his throat--the sound of it rumbled in his ears.

"Thank you all for coming," he started.

"Oy, we've had this marked on our calendar since last year," Fred or George commented from the Weasley table.

"So has the headmistress, I think," Harry rejoined quietly. Many of the assembled chuckled. "It does seem a long time ago, doesn't it?" Harry continued as he scanned the bright faces at the many round tables, all attentively turned to him. "A nice contrast to the preceding year, I think, which is a bit of blur at this point," he added thoughtfully. He remembered the parchment in his pocket and reached for it. As he unfolded it, he said in an apologetic tone, "I actually have something prepared. . . ." He scanned the top of it. "Oh, yeah. Welcome the ministers, it says," he read out loud with a bit of chagrin. The Hall laughed lightly again. Harry half-turned to his table, then the other beside it, and used a sweep of his arm to take them in. "Welcome honored guests," he said formally. Several of them bowed their heads graciously, nearly all of them smiled in amusement.

Harry turned back to the Hall and glanced at his speech. It didn't seem quite right now but he tried to follow it anyway. He felt much more confident than he had expected to, buoyed perhaps by the general good mood. "Hard to believe it has been a year," he said, which was the next line in the speech.

"Oy, and Voldie hasn't come back yet," one of the twins said loudly. "Think ya got it right this time?"

The crowd shifted nervously while Harry fought a grin. He could see that the Weasley parents looked about to get up to go around the table to where their twins sat. Mrs. Weasley did actually get up. "Good thing I'm not keen on this speech anyway," Harry said. When he saw she had a hold of her son. "Molly, it's all right, really," he insisted.

Mrs. Weasley froze, suddenly the center of attention of a very large room full of people. Harry held up his parchment. "I do address that point later," he said in bit of a suffering tone. Mrs. Weasley slunk back to her chair, sending warning looks at the twins from her seat. "You have to understand," Harry said to everyone. "They are the closest thing to brothers I have. Don't hold it against them. We wouldn't be here now if it weren't for all of them," Harry stated with feeling, more grateful for the chance to say it than he would have thought possible. Most of the redheads bowed them in embarrassment. Harry heard George or Fred defensively say, "See mum."

"There are a lot of people whom, if not for them we wouldn't be here today." He glanced at the Order table, which had the most intent expressions in the room. When he found Lupin's gaze he held it a long moment. "So even though I'm the one up here making this speech, don't think this anniversary has that much to do with me." Harry had wanted to include

something to this effect in the written speech, but McGonagall had resisted. There were a few drunken mutterings of denial. He glanced back at McGonagall to see her expression, and found it serene and patient.

Another glance at his parchment and he said, while again taking in those behind him with an arm gesture, "As the presence of all of the assembled magical leaders attests to, this is an important event to mark. It is important to remember that we have to remain vigilant and cooperative when evil emerges. Otherwise we risk failing to overcome it."

The crowd fell silent or thoughtful, Harry hoped. He took in the head tables again and found Snape's intent gaze. The look startled him and he hesitated as he forgot what came next. Quickly, he ducked his head to his notes, shaking a bit at his own reaction to Snape's intense look of pride. He had no previous notion how much that could affect him.

He found his place with effort, because continuing with the speech meant shedding the warm emotion that had overtaken him. "The hard struggle against Voldemort should have taught us that every last one of us has an important part to play in resisting evil's spread. Something Dumbledore always reminded us of." Harry remembered the many times he was not believed and spoke the next line with feeling. "But especially important is the role of those in power, as their complacency is the most damaging to spreading the truth." Harry fell silent, as did the room. His notes looked like too much more of the same. He raised his eyes. "Fred, George," Harry quipped, "Care to lighten this up a bit?"

The room laughed, relieved. One of the twins said sheepishly, "We, uh, would like ta not be disowned. But thanks for thinking of us."

Harry folded the parchment away. The Hall waited with amazing patience while he thought. Finally, he said, "Maybe we should remember Voldemort for what he did not manage to destroy, since that is obviously what we most hold most dear: our friends and families. We should hold onto the new ties that were forged out of necessity." He resisted turning to Snape. "Then Voldemort will have failed utterly." He scratched his head and said, "I shouldn't be talking off the top of my head. That means it's time for pudding, I think." Initial noises of denial turned to happier ones. "Enjoy the rest of the evening," he concluded before stepping back.

The Weasleys started the clapping, Harry saw, before he turned to McGonagall to have the charm removed from his throat. She gave him a soft smile as he stepped by her and returned to his seat. The clapping at his table faded quickly, fortunately.

Fudge leaned in close and said, "You, uh, wouldn't be considering a career in politics, now would you?"

Harry was sorely tempted to lie and say yes. Only the thought of what the headline in the *Prophet* might read if he did, kept him in line. "No, sir."

"Ah, well. Doesn't seem your type of thing, really," the man said dismissively. Fresh plates and cutlery appeared, distracting him.

Harry was feeling too good to be bothered by this man. He disregarded him and looked for his friends in the far tables. Ron waved which Harry returned. Ron then gave him a thumbs-up which let him relax about his awkward speech.

Their distance communication ceased as the Hall fell silent and the lights dimmed. The center doors opened and the most enormous cake Harry had ever imagined was wheeled in by Dobby, who pulled it across the floor on wheels by a long wooden handle. Seven layers of luscious frosting and hundreds of sizzling sparklers creaked its way to the front of the Hall.

Dobby bowed and pointed at the cake. A flash and *bang!* followed and confetti rained down on the room in pink and silver. Harry at first feared that the entire thing had exploded, but it was just the top layer, which now sprouted the burning image of a phoenix. More house-elves appeared and began serving pieces by hand. Dobby took the first and second layers down with a snap of his fingers and carried it to the head table. Another snap and pieces appeared on each plate. With a wink and a bow he returned to assist in cutting up the rest. The glowing phoenix now served as a centerpiece.

"Thank you, Dobby!" Harry shouted over the excited crowd. Dobby turned with an exceptional grin and gave him another bow.

Harry took up a fork and paused. The cake was shifting between colors and he assumed flavors. When it was rich brown, he stuck his fork in it and took a bite. It was deliciously rich chocolate with light fluffy frosting. Halfway through his huge serving of cake, Harry turned to his table mates. They all appeared amused again. He gave Obolensky a questioning glance, since he was most likely to explain.

"We are all reminded of who you are, Mr. Potter, by your voracious cake eating."

Harry narrowed his eyes a bit as he puzzled that. Now that he had stopped eating, the remaining cake chunk was cycling through its flavors again. Distracted by stabbing his fork into the cake while it was bright green made Harry slow in responding.

"You are just a boy," Oni commented in the kind of tone Trelawney used when she pretended to prognosticate.

"Uh, little older than that," he said with a hint of defensiveness.

Oni grinned faintly. "A little." As he thought over a reply, she said, "Do not resist the cake because of us, please."

Harry glanced at his plate. He did wonder what flavor that could be. With a sideways glance at them all, he took a bite. It was sweet lime, strange but good. At least it wasn't spinach or something. They were grinning again, most of them. Harry shook his head and decided he was feeling good enough that he didn't care what they thought, even as important as they all were.

McGonagall patted Harry's arm when he finally gave up on his dessert. She stood and attracted the Hall's attention. "The fireworks will be starting shortly," she announced. "If everyone can make their way to the lawn. . . ."

The Great Hall began to empty, with people moving in animated groups to the three sets of doors. Those at the head tables stood as well. Obolensky stepped around Fudge, who looked a little food-groggy as he moved away.

"Werly nice speech. Not too long, but the important things said."

This sentiment was repeated by some of the other ministers. Harry chatted amiably with a few of those from the other table until the Hall was nearly empty and McGonagall urged them to move on. They followed her slowly out of the Hall, the Heads of House falling in behind. In the Entrance Hall Harry glanced back at Snape in his flowing emerald dress robes. Snape still fixed him with that intense gaze. Harry slowed and waved the others through the main doors to the outside.

"Severus," Harry said, forestalling Snape's stepping through as well. He turned to Harry with a questioning expression. Harry waited for Sinistra and Flitwick to depart and for the doors to boom closed, locking out the lively crowd sounds. "I, uh . . ." He began but didn't know where to start. He dropped his gaze and thought fiercely about what he wanted to say.

"Everything all right?" Snape asked, eyes flicking down to where Harry still had a hold of his sleeve.

"Yes. Really all right, actually," he said with a grin.

In a low voice Snape commented, "You did very well up there."

Harry tilted his head to the side as that overwhelming feeling returned, bringing a painful grin with it. Before he could reconsider himself out of it, he stepped forward and hugged his guardian, who stiffened in surprise. "Thank you. For everything," Harry said with firm sincerity.

Snape's shoulders fell as he relaxed. He patted Harry's shoulders and said, "You are quite welcome," just a little unsteadily.

Harry tightened his arms momentarily before stepping back, at least as far as Snape's hold on his shoulders would allow. He rested his hands on Snape's arms. Their eyes met an instant before Harry looked away. "Tonight has been easier than I thought it would be."

"You did make it look easy."

"Did I?" Harry asked, running his fingertips nervously over the soft fabric of Snape's sleeve. Something inside of him was straining to be acknowledged, unsettling him.

Snape pulled Harry's chin up to look him in the eye. After a breath he said, "Any parent would be very proud of you right now." A bit drier and with a touch of snideness, he added, "You who refuses to take credit for anything." Harry could not hold back a smile as Snape went on, "On this day, at least, you should be willing to admit that in the end it was you, and only you, who mattered."

Harry started to protest.

"Ah," Snape said sharply to cut him off. "I watched you do it, remember?"

The right-hand main door opened and Obolensky leaned in, saw them and stepped in quickly before pushing the door closed behind him. Harry stepped back and dropped his arms. "I must apologize," the Bulgarian minister said honestly. "Headmistress McGonagall sent me to see what the delay was." His eyes moved between them several times. "I did not mean to interrupt."

"It's all right," Harry said, heading for the doors. "I wasn't thinking about her waiting for us."

"You," Snape stated as he followed. "She is most certainly waiting for *you*."

Harry stepped out and down the steps. Overstuffed chairs and couches were arrayed on the lawn for the special guests to sit on. The grounds were full of meandering people and students, all creating a warm din of happy sound.

Snape watched Harry lean over to McGonagall and presumably apologize before taking a seat beside her. As Snape let the door to the castle close, Obolensky put a restraining hand on his arm. The Bulgarian leaned close as the first rockets lit the sky and asked, "Am I seeing how it is he is doing so well?"

Snape shook his head, but didn't explain further. The white streamers erupted into blue and silver flowers high above the lawn. Obolensky had not released him and Snape did not feel like tussling to free himself.

"I am curious," the man said in a low voice, barely audible over the crowd. His tone reminded Snape of Malfoy somehow, perhaps because it was loaded with a challenge while his face showed a friendly smile.

Snape reached down and casually peeled the Bulgarian's fingers from his arm. "What are you curious about?" he asked easily.

Obolensky waited for the booming explosions and echoes of the next set of fireworks to pass before he said, "You werle tormenting Mr. Potter a yearl ago, werle you not?"

"I was pointing out the obvious a year ago," Snape returned levelly. Harry had turned around to look back at them. Snape saw his eyes narrow as he noticed them still standing there. "Is there some point you are trying to get to?" Snape asked the Bulgarian as he nodded to Harry that everything was all right. Harry was resisting though; Snape could feel his questioning whether he should return. As with many things surrounding Potter, Snape felt both dismayed and touched simultaneously by his concern. He sent a firm *no* to the boy and Harry finally turned around to face the lawn with a quick glance at McGonagall.

"That was interlesting," Obolensky stated with a hint of darkness.

"He is my son now, Minister Obolensky," Snape stated, warming in anger inside his plush robes. "If I wish to teach and practice Legilimency with him, that is my concern. Trust that I taught him Occlusion first; he is free to block me out as he wishes. Now that he is nearly eighteen, he has been doing that quite a lot."

Obolensky grinned an instant before his serious expression returned. "Tlust that I am only concerned for him."

A yellow and red explosion lit the castle and them both. "Do not be." Snape insisted. "His few needs are easily met."

Obolensky gave him a strange look. "I cannot imagine his needs being simple or few. How is that possible?" he challenged.

Snape considered that Dumbledore always regarded the Bulgarian minister highly and imagined that given the past, his honest concern deserved addressing, especially since he was well aware of Snape's own history. He watched the colorful crowd and thought back to the boy he had brought home the previous summer, still dangerously headstrong and independent, but also in total contradiction, emotionally fragile, a veritable minefield of unexpected and unforeseeable weaknesses. Once they emerged though, he had managed to deal with them, one at a time, though some had re-emerged again in altered form. The afterimage of spiraling streamers burned in Snape's retinas as he said, "Perhaps they would not seem simple to anyone else. As difficult as it may be for you to believe, Mr. Potter and I are very similar and have little difficulty understanding one another."

Obolensky looked doubtful at this. "You have been charged with his carle on this notion?"

"By Albus Dumbledore," Snape stated.

"Interesting," he said, sounding like he was honestly trying to accept that.

Dryly, Snape stated, "Albus was always a bit eccentric and his motives rarely clear." He crossed his arms and turned in close to the Bulgarian. In a low tone he said, "But in this, they *were* clear. Harry required someone who understood what it was like to be marked by the Dark Lord. Marked and punished to do his bidding or suffer his evil whims." Obolensky leaned back slightly, Snape leaned in farther. "He needed someone for whom the Dark Lord's death meant the beginning of life, a total rethinking of who one is. To one who did not understand these things, he would have been a disturbing mystery, a burden even." He backed off from the minister and wishing to end the conversation, said, "Accept it or not."

When Snape turned back to the lawn, he found Harry's eyes on him again. Harry whispered to McGonagall and stood up quickly. Snape clasped his hands behind his back and affected a casual pose. Obolensky looked to still be considering things, and his dark brown eyes tracked Harry's approach thoughtfully. "You called him here?" he whispered.

"By no means," Snape growled back, also in a whisper.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, his eyes studying each of them in turn.

"Just discussing things, Mr. Potter," Obolensky said in a patent politician voice.

Harry clearly did not buy the tone. He looked to Snape instead, clearly hoping for an explanation. "It is no matter, Harry," Snape insisted. He nodded at the couches. "Minerva undoubtedly wishes you to remain with the special guests."

Harry's eyes darted between them. "Don't be long, then," he insisted before retreating.

"He is very loyal to you," the Bulgarian commented.

Quietly, Snape said, "That is not something I taught him." With a nod he stepped away from the minister and headed down the lawn. Harry eagerly made space beside himself on the bright flower print couch.

"What did he want?" Harry asked curiously.

Snape glanced back to see Obolensky joining a group a distance away. "Nothing worth explaining. Quite a set of robes," Snape commented levelly, looking Harry up and down.

"Dean loaned them to me," Harry said.

"That explains the pretentiousness."

"You think they're pretentious?" Harry asked in disbelief, glancing down at the rich fabric and sparkling cuffs.

"In those colors, they cannot be anything but," Snape opined.

McGonagall patted Harry's arm. "They are lovely robes, Harry," she assured him.

They sat in silence as the fireworks continued. Harry wished he could join his friends now, but thought it expected he would stay with the dignitaries longer. Lupin passed by a few rows away, carrying several mugs of mead. Harry waved at him. His former teacher grinned and veered their way. "Are those spoken for?" Harry asked.

"Not if you're asking," Lupin teased, holding a mug out to him when he reached them.

He still had two. "Can Severus have the other?"

Lupin smiled and shook his head as he gave up another mug. Harry thought Snape looked like he could use one. "You are doing well, Harry," Lupin said after a long swig of mead. "It's very good to see."

"Everyone keeps saying that," Harry complained. "Was I that messed up before?"

McGonagall looked away, apparently wary of replying. Lupin nodded while Snape remained neutral.

"Guess so," Harry said with a sigh.

"All that matters is how you are doing now," Lupin insisted. He held out his mug to toast it with Harry's. When Harry raised his, Lupin said, "To you, Harry," as he *clunked* their mugs together.

Harry's shoulders fell. "I can't take much more of this," he breathed.

McGonagall said, "Drink up, my boy, it will help."

Harry took a big swig, nearly wiped his mouth on his sleeve until he remembered that these were not his robes, wiped his lips with his fingers instead and said, "About this 'boy' thing . . ."

Lupin laughed heartily. Harry glanced up at him and did a double take, as Lupin had his hand out to Snape. "Congratulations, Severus," Lupin said soberly. A tense moment passed before Snape accepted the offered hand. "You should get the lion's share of the credit, I think," he went on.

Snape retrieved his hand and shifted uneasily. "You underestimate Potter's resiliency, Remus."

Harry looked between them, reassessing yet again their apparent view of his change over the last year. "I am sitting right here," he pointed out a little sharply.

"I realize that, Harry," Lupin said apologetically. "Just didn't think I was going to get another chance. I should probably be apologizing to Severus as well as congratulating him."

"That is most certainly unnecessary," Snape stated quietly, eyes straight ahead and distant.

Another tense moment passed. Harry swigged another gulp of mead and insisted, peeved, "Can we drop all discussions of Harry's state of mind for the rest of the evening? Please?"

"If you wish," Snape said.

"You don't realize, Harry," Lupin said, a little tipsy, "how your obvious good health has relieved the wizarding world's collective guilt."

"What?" Harry blurted.

"Ah uh, Remus," McGonagall said to cut him off. "I agree with Harry that the topic should be closed." She conjured another chair, a yellow tulip-patterned one. "Please have a seat and enjoy the rest of the fireworks."

Remus accepted the chair and gave Harry a smile over his shoulder.

Silently, Harry mouthed, "Collective guilt?" at him in question.

Lupin tipped his head to the side and turned away to face the lawn.

"Aye," Harry breathed before leaning back and drinking another swig of mead.



Chapter 44 -- More than the Wars of Our Fathers

Harry slept in late the morning after the party. So did most of his dormitory mates, except Neville, who apparently went alone for their usual run. It was Kali who woke Harry by clawing the inside of her crate. It took a long, sleep-hazy minute to determine the source of the little *scritch scritch scritch* noises. Harry reached under the drapes to unlatch her crate and lift her out. She scrambled over his chest, sniffing his clothes and fingers avidly with her tiny fox-like snout. Rubbing his eyes, Harry reviewed the party from the night before. It had gone all right, he decided. That notion gave him the energy to sit up and get out of bed.

The eyes of his fellow students had gone a little reverent again, he noticed, as he made his way down to the Great Hall with only Kali as an escort on his shoulder. She took her job seriously though, hissing at Parkinson and Wereporridge when Harry passed them on the staircase. Harry tried not to grin too broadly as he patted her head.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said brightly when he reached the Grand Staircase.

He returned her greeting and stepped into the Hall, which was flooded with bright, late-morning light. Hermione and Ron were already deep in conversation over a letter when he sat down.

"Hallo, Harry," Ron said without looking up.

"What's that?" Harry asked.

Hermione sat straight and said with a twinkle of excitement in her eye, "I've an offer for an internship at a solicitor's in London. It's a firm run by two Squibs who do work for both Wizards and Muggles. They sound very excited at the prospect of having an actual witch on staff." She looked over the letter again. "I have to find some courses in policy, but this is a good start."

"Sounds like fun," Harry said, thinking it sounded actually a little boring. Ron was silently doubtful as well, but they both hid it when their friend looked up from her letter to smile at them.

Classes were a little slow on Monday, even Defense, as though everyone was still groggy from the mead that many days later. Or maybe it was just the reminder that things weren't quite as critical as they used to be.

"Harry," Snape said as they all stood to leave class when the bell rang. Harry dropped his bag into his chair and waited beside his desk while his friends hovered nearby. Snape approached, giving Harry's companions an impatient gesture as though to brush them off. Ron took the hint, tugging Hermione toward the door by the crook of her arm. "A word, if you have a moment," Snape said.

"Sure," Harry replied. He stood casually beside his chair and waited for the room to empty out.

Snape stepped away to pace and clean up the large marble blocks they had been using to practice anti-cursing charms. Even after they were alone, he was slow in speaking. He hovered a second block into the corner, stacking it on the first. "Minerva mentioned something to me, offhandedly, that made me suspect that she is helping you become an Animagus."

"She is," Harry replied.

Snape's dark eyes came around to him, but Harry could not read what was behind them. "She also implied that you are having difficulty, still." Harry dropped his gaze and thought about a response. Snape strode over in that sudden manner of his and said sternly, "This difficulty stems from where?"

"It's complicated," he hedged.

Snape hesitated, but finally said, "I am . . . concerned that it stems from my earlier rebuking of you."

"I don't . . . maybe," Harry said, when he decided that was feeling truer than expected. He ran his hand over the worn, thickly refinished wood of the chair back beside him. "Mostly it is just that I don't really understand what I'm supposed to become."

"You don't know what animal it is?"

"I know what it is, kind of." Harry's tone took an annoyed turn. "From an old woodcut in a book Hagrid has."

Snape's brow went from furrowed to raised. "Ah."

Harry ran his hand over his head, tugging on the longer hair at the back.

Snape filled in the silence. "Not something normal then."

"No," Harry replied. "Something bizarre with claws like this . . ." He demonstrated with his fingers. "And long teeth, and too nasty to get a photograph of, apparently." He tried to read what Snape was thinking; he looked to be balancing between amusement and chagrin.

"Hm," Snape muttered, appearing to change tacks.

Quietly, but needing to explain to his guardian, Harry said, "Professor McGonagall thinks I'm uncomfortable with the notion of that much power. She thinks if I can't accept that, I shouldn't be an Auror."

Snape fell more thoughtful and rubbed his brow. Finally, he said, "I think, Harry, that I would find that heartening."

"What do you mean?"

"Until now, acquiring power for you has been a matter of survival. I think now you are realizing that you have the luxury of getting by without it. Great magical power is not something to be acquired without purpose. Power for the sake of itself does tend to corrupt even the least corruptible." He studied Harry while Harry thought that over. Snape interrupted his circular musings by saying, "But I must admit, Harry, that of all the wizards I know, power, even great power, worries me least in your hands."

Harry's jaw worked a moment. "Why?"

"Because you understand being the underling. Perhaps the second major reason Albus left you with your aunt and uncle, if not the first. I am beginning to suspect that he was more often than not thinking farther ahead than the defeat of Voldemort."

Seconds passed where Harry considered that without drawing a breath. When he finally did breathe in deeply, Snape asked, "So, what is your Animagus form?"

A little embarrassed, Harry said, "A Scarlet Mountain Gryffylis."

Snape raised his eyes to the ceiling and lightly sneered, "Somehow, not utterly inappropriate."

"Thanks," Harry said darkly. He moved his hand to his bag, and adjusted the straps for something to do. "It's the difference between an O and an E on the N.E.W.T."

"Minerva thinks you are going to do all right on the examination."

With a light frown Harry hefted his bag. "It's all easy for her--that's why she thinks that."

Snape held up a restraining hand. "There is something else." Harry lowered his bag back down and listened as Snape said, "The Elders of the Wizengamot met this morning to consider Draco Malfoy's situation."

When Snape paused, Harry prompted with a sense of doom, "And?"

"They have scheduled his full hearing for *after* he finishes school and takes his N.E.W.T.s." Harry made a sound of dismay. "It was argued that an immediate hearing had the potential to seriously limit his future."

Harry grimly considered Snape's words. His face must have given him away because Snape said, "I understand your dismay, because I am equally so. But Minerva cannot override the Wizengamot on this." Snape sighed. "It is less than a month and he is not his father. Yet, anyway," he added darkly.

Harry lifted his bookbag yet again. Flatly, he asked, "If he does something stupid and I put him in the hospital wing, how many points does Gryffindor lose?"

"I expect there will be a line ahead of you. He will be on a very short leash."

Harry felt too mixed up to get furiously angry. "Thanks for warning me. When does he get back?"

"Tomorrow morning."

Harry turned for the door. "Can I warn everyone?"

"If you wish."

* * *

Harry stomped into the common room. The portrait hole felt much too small to easily step through, he expected he should be happy about that. Maybe it was just that his bookbag was too heavy, rather than him being too tall. His friends were in the far corner near the windows, chatting amiably. As he dropped his bag beside Ron's, Hermione said, "What's up?" in a concerned way.

"Oh, only that Draco Malfoy is coming back to school tomorrow morning."

"What!?" their corner of the room exploded.

Harry explained what Snape had told him. Ron was incensed but Hermione was more understanding. "It is better in the long run if he's been able to take his N.E.W.T.s. Then at least he can do something useful with himself."

Harry plunked into a nearby chair. "That's an optimistic way to think of it," he criticized as he pulled out his wand, his thumb as usual, finding the flat spot that was starting to wear smooth. Hermione frowned in his direction, but didn't argue further. Harry Accioed Kali's crate down from his dormitory to let her out. She climbed madly over him before settling on his shoulder and hissing at Hermione, apparently for good measure.

"You that angry?" she asked quietly.

"No," Harry insisted. "Just annoyed at you for trying to be right, even for a Malfoy."

Hermione's eyes flickered over Kali expectantly, but the creature remained silent and eventually started grooming itself.

* * *

At breakfast Harry fed Kali bacon from his plate. Fatty food seemed to leave her groggy, making it easier to put her away for the day.

"Look who's here," Neville said grimly.

They all turned and watched McGonagall leading Draco in the main doors closest to the Slytherin table. A glance at the head table showed Snape eyeing the boy very darkly. The whole hall had fallen silent and turned to watch him walk to his usual place near Parkinson. He did not seem to appreciate the attention. Harry hated himself for it, but he felt just a tiny bit sorry for him.

As they departed at the end of breakfast, Ron looked like he was considering heading Malfoy off. Harry grabbed his robes and tugged him in the direction of the doors. "It's only a month. Just let it go."

"His dad kicked your arse. Twice."

"His dad," Harry reiterated. "Draco tries anything . . ." He quieted as the blonde boy crossed their path walking quickly to the Grand Staircase, looking like he wished he were invisible. Penelope and Frina both eyed Malfoy suspiciously with deep frowns.

Double potions was quieter than normal as everyone spent more than the usual amount of time eyeing Draco, who concentrated very hard on his brewing and ignored everyone in the room. Greer made her usual rounds and eventually stopped at the Slytherin table.

"You brew exactly the way your father does," she marveled. Harry's table all froze in various positions of pouring, reading, and stirring to turn their attention across the room.

"So?" Draco snapped at her.

"Well, it means your grades would be all the same anyway, does it not?" Greer asked in a forced matter-of-fact manner.

"That's it," Hermione breathed. Her stirring stick *twanged* as it struck the tabletop when she slammed it flat.

"Hermione," Harry said in a warning tone.

"Uh oh," Penelope said.

"Let her go, I want to see this," Dean said in a darkly curious way.

Harry, thinking of the new points rule McGonagall had informed him of, grinned slightly. "Go on, then," he urged his friend.

"No," she breathed harshly as she hesitated, though she looked a little ill from the effort.

"Why not?" Harry asked. "Imagine how much you'll regret later not saying--"

Hermione slapped her hand on the table before she yanked out her wand and waved her potion away. Neville peered into her empty cauldron in amazement. Greer, her attention drawn over by the sudden noise, strode their way. "Problem with your potion, Ms. Granger?"

"No," Hermione replied firmly. "Just a problem with you."

Greer noticed her empty cauldron and put her hands on her hips. "And how many points is your cheekiness worth, dear?"

"Don't call me that," Hermione threatened as she slid off her stool and stepped purposefully around the bench to face the teacher directly, rocking up on her toes to match her diminutive height. Neville made a small noise of discomfort or fear.

"You get a zero for the day, Ms. Granger," Greer said, leaning over Hermione slightly.

"I don't care; your grades are no more than a useless exercise in stroking your sorry pride anyway."

Everyone stiffened. Greer went a little purple around the edges of her face. "How dare you? Twenty points from Gryffindor."

Hermione swung her arm and balled her fist. Harry for a moment feared she was considering going for her wand, instead she poked the teacher with her finger. Half shouting, she asked, "What have you got against us all? Do you miss Voldemort or something?"

Greer's eyes narrowed to slits. "You, of all people, accuse me of consorting with dark wizards? You who are friends with that?" She pointed at Harry.

Hermione actually took a step backward, she was so surprised. "You think Harry is a dark wizard?" she blurted, nearly laughing.

Greer stalked to the other side of their bench, leaning forward in a vain attempt at looking menacing. "I've been watching you, Mr. Potter. Currying favor with those in power. Manipulating the rules to have things your way." Harry actually leaned back from the force of her barely controlled fury. "I know what you are. I know you can speak to the vilest of creatures."

Hermione interrupted her with a snarl. "The only dark wizard we've had in this class was Lucius Malfoy, and you treated him the best of all. You're still treating his son the best of all!"

Swinging to lean over Hermione, Greer sneered, "There has *never* been a Parselmouth who was not a dark wizard, Ms. Granger, who struts her pretty little over-read self around this school." When Hermione folded her lips into her mouth, Greer prompted viciously, "Am I right, Ms. Bookworm?"

"That doesn't mean anything," Hermione said, although it was too quiet.

"How can that not mean anything?" Greer mocked.

"You're a nutter," Dean said quietly.

"Another twenty points from Gryffindor," Greer stridently said.

Harry suppressed a grin, he couldn't feel bad, because he hadn't said anything about the ongoing change in point allocation. Nevertheless, they did have three weeks of classes to survive. "Hermione," he said gently.

His friend swung on him. "This doesn't bother you?" When he shrugged, she huffed in frustration.

"It isn't worth it," he explained. The whole class was watching, although a few were trying to brew at the same time. Oddly, Malfoy did not look on triumphantly, just exhaustedly. Harry addressed him, "So Draco, am I a dark wizard? You've probably seen more in the last month than everyone else here."

The whole class spun their heads around. Draco hesitated, tilted his head to the side, then glanced at the ceiling in a fidgety way that reminded Harry very strongly of Sirius. "No. Hardly," he finally scoffed. "Mr. Everybody-Loves-Me cannot possibly be a dark wizard." When Greer narrowed her eyes at him, he added. "You'd know already if he were because he's too chicken to take the Dark Lord's place." Draco turned to Harry with a piercing gaze. "Too chicken to control his followers, though I'm sure he could," he added quietly in a knowing tone.

The room had fallen silent and no one worked on their potion while they waited for Harry's response. Harry said, "I inherited more from Voldemort than anyone could want, but not that much." The room shifted uneasily, reminding him that he could unsettle his fellow students back to the way they used to treat him, which he really did not want.

Draco smiled crookedly, glancing around the room to check the effect of his words. "I think have it and you're just scared of it."

Harry forced his shoulders to relax and his face to neutral. "It had to work out that I was part of him," Harry said calmly. "Otherwise I couldn't have destroyed Voldemort and he would still be here. You wouldn't want that, would you, Draco?"

Draco laughed lightly, though it sounded forced. "No, of course not."

The room relaxed some with some glances of consternation at Harry. A few people returned to their notes for the potion. Greer clicked her wooden heels hard on the stone floor as she strode away from them. "Claim what you will, Mr. Potter," she insinuated darkly.

Harry rolled his eyes and returned to his copy of the potion instructions. Hermione grudgingly returned to her seat. As the legs of her stool shifted loudly on the stone floor, Greer turned and said, "And fifty points for your abominable behavior, Ms. Granger. And a week's detention."

Hermione seemed to not hear this as she opened her textbook to the next chapter and began taking notes. A minute later, she said, "Ron is going to kill me."

"No he won't," Harry replied easily. He gave her a flash of a knowing grin which left her puzzled.

At lunch they met Ron and Ginny in the Entrance Hall. Harry leaned over to Hermione and said, "Don't say anything."

"About what?" she whispered back.

"Anything. You'll see."

"Hey," Ron said in cheerful greeting. "Potions must not have been so bad today."

Hermione opened her mouth, but then forcibly closed it again. She glanced at the scoring gems, puzzled. "Guess it did go okay," she agreed. As Penelope and Frina arrived along with Neville, she shot Harry a look of confusion.

"I told you he wouldn't mind," Harry teased her as they walked in the Great Hall.

"So what is going on?" she asked in a whisper.

"My undo evil influence with those in charge," Harry said with a wide grin. Leaning into her ear, he explained, "McGonagall is reversing every point assignment she does."

Hermione's mouth fell open and Ron said, "What?" from across the table.

"Nothing." She waved him off and fell thoughtful. "Good thing you didn't say anything sooner," she said quietly. "Goodness, is that tempting."

No one else noticed the slight gain from the bottom Gryffindor had managed that morning. Harry watched his friend's face as it went more thoughtful and strategic as lunch progressed.

* * *

Harry, sleeping well and feeling more fit than he ever had, was looking forward to his last ever Quidditch match. He listened with only half an ear to Ron's pep talk before they flew out. The day was trying to be sunny, though at the moment the clouds were winning, but at least it was warm. Harry circled, eyeing Roody, the opposing Seeker. The black boy was considering him as well, but with a look of resignation. Harry wished he would just be determined and not look like Harry had beaten him already.

Ron gave them a thumbs-up as the crate of balls was opened. "Clean game--don't really need to tell you that," Harry heard Hooch say before the Snitch zipped free and he stopped following anything else. Roody watched it zigzag away as well and their eyes almost met, except Roody dropped his to stare at his broom handle.

The whistle sounded. Harry headed in the direction the Snitch had gone and began circling. Roody came up beside and paced him, dark eyes scanning all around them. Harry decided he better not underestimate him, even as defeated as he appeared, especially since he had been given the tricky task of stalling the game's conclusion as long as he could without actually losing the Snitch.

Meanwhile, Ginny, Hickory, and Quinn were playing harder than Harry had ever seen them, flying repeatedly and heedlessly at the goals; so much so that the Ravenclaw Beaters seemed hard-pressed to aim. The new plays helped Harry as well, because they distracted Roody as the score marched upward. At forty to zero Harry spotted the Snitch, or he thought he did out of the corner of his eye, even heard the crowd murmuring in that direction, but he pretended he didn't. Instead, he lazily changed course to circle the other way and Roody distractedly followed.

Harry, when Roody looked his way, took care to appear intent on his Snitch searching. At sixty to ten, which would be enough points, along with the one hundred-fifty for the Snitch, to get them out of last place for the cup, Roody turned suddenly. Instinctively, Harry followed, kicking his broom to top speed and aiming to cut the other Seeker off. The Snitch was feeling generous toward Ravenclaw though and dodged in Roody's favor. Harry veered sharply to try to get between the other Seeker and the golden ball. Roody had his hand out, straining, following the Snitch in a wide arc, slowly gaining on it with a painfully hopeful expression. But Harry had a better broom and at top speed he just managed a body block in time to jar Roody's arm off course.

The whistle blew. Harry braked his broom sharply and turned to see Madame Hooch signally a foul. At first he was certain it could not possibly be for him. Ron zipped over to argue with her, expressing disbelief. "Blatching, Mr. Weasley. I said a clean game. Free shot, Ravenclaw."

As they waited, Ginny steered over to Harry. "Tsk, tsk," she teased. Roody circled away, rubbing his upper arm and looking glum and frustrated.

"How many points does Ron want?" Harry asked her, feeling a little dark. Ron rushed up to defend the goals for the penalty throw.

She scoffed. "How far behind Slytherin are we?"

"Three hundred twenty, or something."

"Well?"

"I can't avoid the Snitch that long," Harry pointed out as Ardent tossed the Quaffle at the left post after a successful feint to the right, making the score sixty to twenty. "Well, dragging out my last ever game isn't the worst way to spend an afternoon," he muttered and steered his broom around to find the opposing Seeker.

Roody began avoiding Harry, which only made sense when one considered it. Fortunately, in working to avoid Harry, he did less looking around for the Snitch, so again when Harry spotted it, Roody failed to. And when Harry changed course languidly toward it, Roody went the other way as Harry had hoped.

At hundred to thirty the crowd was even getting restless and the Slytherins were revitalizing some old songs that had fallen out of favor.

*Gryffindors 'r's dumb as an ox
Can't fly their way out of a box
Their Chasers are facing a Bludgering macing
Their Seeker is meeker than toads in a beaker*

Roody came alongside then, much closer than before. "You are being meek, aren't you?"

Harry sighed as they circled. "I'm trying to delay catching the Snitch. We need the points."

"That's sorry," Roody complained. "Just play the game."

"I wouldn't mind, but it means a lot to my house. You won it last year," he pointed out at Roody's rolling his eyes.

"I thought I was just lucky that you hadn't come up with it yet, that you didn't just take it away when you blocked me. I was *so* close."

"You were," Harry agreed. He slowed and turned his head to listen to a chant starting in the Slytherin section. It was only being carried on by a handful of voices, he was heartened to hear.

*Potter's a rotter
Kissed a hag's daughter
Slept with eels, slugs, snakes and an otter
so did his mater*

Roody cocked his head as well, brow furrowing as he listened to the repeat, which was more coherent. "Whoa, what is Professor Snape going to say to that?" he asked.

Harry shrugged but couldn't help grinning. He didn't get a chance to see what his guardian's reaction might be because the Snitch chose that moment to zip between them where they hovered. Both of them looked at each other and gave chase. As they swerved and bumped, Roody grunted, "Make me look good for my parents, that's all I ask."

The Snitch remained at its most elusive as they followed it across the pitch. Harry got a fleeting sense of the crowd rising up. The Snitch passed through the Gryffindor goal area and they each diverted in different directions to avoid the foul. Harry had guessed badly where the Snitch would reemerge; it headed almost directly for his opponent. Ron shouted something strident at Harry as he cranked his broom up and around the zone, thinking there was no way Roody would fail to catch the Snitch--he was right beside it.

Roody looked up at him bearing down, gave a smile, and took the golden ball out of the air before him. Harry veered right, which was actually up from the world view, to avoid colliding. The crowd groaned as the Ravenclaw stands erupted.

Harry flew over to where Ron hovered in stunned dismay. "I passed it up so many times," Harry said to him. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Ron muttered.

"Trying too hard, I think," Harry said.

"Yeah," Ron repeated emptily.

Ginny came alongside. The Ravenclaws were landing and leaping on one another; they looked exceedingly happy with themselves. The Gryffindors watched the celebration a moment before Ginny said, "Well, that game plan didn't quite work."

"Sorry," Harry repeated. "You guys looked great. I should have held up my end." He wanted to point out how uncooperative the Snitch had been, but didn't want to make excuses.

"Yeah," Ron repeated yet again.

Harry frowned as he watched Ron land and walk across the pitch dragging his broom. He followed with the others in silence. At the door to the changing rooms, Harry turned back to the crowd. He could see Roody in the center of the pitch, showing the Snitch off to a couple who were almost certainly his parents. They were all glowing rather radiantly with elation. Harry sighed again and stepped inside.

They removed their equipment in silence. Harry took off his wrist guards and stowed them in the basket rather than the locker, so they could be cleaned for next year. Feeling heavy and tired, he dropped onto a bench and watched Ron's sad motions as he unstrapped himself.

"I should have ended it sooner," Harry said, breaking the long silence. "I pushed it too far."

"It's all right, Harry," Ginny insisted. "We should have had a fixed score to go for so you didn't have to wonder or wait for some kind of signal."

Harry thought that over. "I had him easily--I just guessed wrong when it really mattered."

Ron tossed his stuff toward the basket, missing with most of it, and walked out.

"Don't worry 'bout him," Ginny said. "Big dinner and he'll forget all about it."

Harry chuckled. "I hope so."

At dinner Ron was more amiable, despite staring for a full minute at the paltry pile of red rubies in their hopper before entering the Hall. "We were trying too hard," he agreed, breaking his silence.

Harry, vastly relieved, said, "Doesn't mean it wouldn't have been nice to win."

Frina joined them, jostling Penelope and Darsha. "We joined the wrong house, no?" she said with a smile at the rest of them.

"Sorry," Harry apologized for what may have been the hundredth time. "I was trying to win it all or have a remote chance of winning it all, at least." Roody's annoyance at their strategy was seeming more reasonable now.

"You did not play your best," Penelope said, chastising him.

Harry frowned and thought of the excessively tall cylinder of emeralds. "It would be nice not to lose to Slytherin, though."

"Really?" Hermione prodded, "O honorary Slytherin."

"Heh, that's right," Ron said accusingly with his mouth full.

"It's not the same, believe me," Harry insisted. "There must be something--"

Snape strode over at that moment, hands on hips, looking a bit too pleased. "Well," he began airily. "It wasn't as though Gryffindor was any threat to Slytherin's dominance, but I did expect a better showing from this house, nonetheless."

Ron swallowed a big chunk of his second serving of roast and sounding worryingly like he might be winding up, said, "You know, sir . . ." Ron gestured with his fork. "There are advantages to last place." He smiled. "One just has to be willing to, uh, take advantage of them." He gave their professor a nice smile.

"Oh, dear," Snape muttered before turning to leave.

"What was that?" Harry asked his friend, but Ron just continued to smile.

* * *

Exhaustion felt routine as Harry rode the staircase down from the headmistress' office. This endless cycle of revising, classes, D.A., and tutoring had now gone on long enough that he was forgetting what free time felt like. He rubbed his eyes, adjusted his bag, and crossed the gargoyle's path, heard it move back into place before the doorway as he reached the center of the floor.

Another movement behind him caught his attention. Harry turned, feeling for his wand. Draco stepped into the large torch-lit alcove from the shadowy corridor. He stood haughtily with his bookbag slung over one shoulder. "Are you actually getting tutoring? From the headmistress?" he asked snidely.

Harry dropped his hand from his wand pocket when he noticed the other boy wasn't holding his. "What's it to you?" he retorted.

"That's pathetic. If you can't cut it, you should just fail like everyone else would. Why do you deserve special help?" he sneered rudely, disgustedly looking Harry up and down from his taller height.

Harry started to turn away and ignore the other boy. Draco took a hold of Harry's robe and forcefully pulled him back. Harry got an inkling as he disengaged Draco's hand that Azkaban had hardened something about the Slytherin. "You're one to be talking," Harry snarled, finding anger in him still from the memory of his own experience, "Mr. Delayed-Wizengamot-Hearing."

Draco, mouth twisted sourly, said, "I'll still manage better grades than you, without constant babying from the headmistress *and* a Head of House." He shoved Harry back and used a childish voice to say, "Poor little Potter, we have to help him set up for a nice little future." Harry, knocked off-balance, let his heavy bookbag fall to the floor. Draco was continuing in the same grating baby-tone, "Even the headmistress has to help him with such easy-weasy spells otherwise he might fail his N.E.W.T.s."

Stung much more than he would have preferred to be, Harry again resisted reaching for his wand.

"What?" Draco obnoxiously asked in a overdone disbelieving tone. "No argument from the hero of wizardry?"

"Bugger off, Malfoy," Harry breathed and leaned down to catch the straps of his bag.

"What? That the best you can do?" Draco asked breathily, sounding much too much like his father.

Harry released the straps of his bag and vaguely heard the sound of it resettling on the stone floor. Something inside himself was hardening as well, channeling fury into determination. Magical energy shifted his robes around him. He recognized it, smiled slightly, and relaxed himself in the way Hermione had repeated so many times: relaxed and thought fancifully of paws, claws and feathers. His view of Draco was twisting oddly, accentuated by the blonde boy stepping back suddenly and falling as he tripped on the hem of his robe.

Harry was above him now, much too far above him. He moved a foot and felt it levered on claws scraping the stones and catching on the mortar. Draco made a noise of fear which sounded almost musical; Harry felt the oddness of ears turning forward to listen. He lifted a hand, but really a brightly colored furry leg with a huge paw. The world tried to ripple downward again; he forced more membrane energy into the spell and Malfoy's terrified expression re-solidified below him.

With care Harry placed hand, or paw, down on Draco's chest. A tightening just there, like stretching his fingers made a row of four black claws appear and press their points into Draco's white shirt. Draco whimpered again. Harry sniffed now, noticing the sharp scents coming off the body below him. Strong sweat, ammonia, and the smell of cooked chicken skin battled for Harry's attention. The last was the most disturbing, as it implied Draco might be edible.

"Help," Draco yelped. Harry noticed his blue eyes were looking off to the side. Pulling himself to his internal sense, Harry stepped awkwardly back, lost his balance, and was utterly startled to find excessive limbs tossing themselves instinctively to the sides to right him. A sharp breeze accompanied this odd motion. Merlin, he had wings! He stepped back again and rested on his haunches since that was easiest and it still left him taller than everything around.

Draco scrambled away, pointing and trying to explain something to another figure. Harry turned his head and found Snape looking up at him, quite a ways up at him, one brow raised in a considerate expression. "Most impressive, Harry," Snape stated in a droll tone. When Draco moved to stand behind him, Snape asked in a falsely confused voice, "Problem, Mr. Malfoy?"

With a snarl Malfoy retreated, making a wide path around Harry before stepping rapidly down the corridor. Harry felt a little dizzy watching him retreat; he seemed to be seeing too much of both directions of corridor at once. He was ready to return to himself, especially since even Snape with the cacophonous overtones of pungent potion and wet charcoal ink clinging to his robes, also hinted at the scent of chicken. He remembered Hermione's concerned loud instructions to Ginny and relaxed again as he released the energy. The world twisted disturbingly before he could close his eyes on it. His knees hitting the floor jolted him back to himself.

Snape's hand closed around his upper arm and hauled him to his feet.

"You were there all this time?" Harry asked, finding his balance on two oddly round and clumsy, shod feet.

"It did not seem like intervening would do your battered ego any good. Had he pulled his wand, it would have been different." Snape looked him over as Harry brushed off his knees. "Was that the first time you have managed that?"

"Yes," Harry said, heart racing as he thought about it.

"I am certain Minerva would like to see it, in that case."

"Yeah, next session, maybe," Harry said, thinking he would feel silly running back up there now. "Strange really-- everything seems a little different: brighter and stronger smelling. And shorter," he added with a grin. Snape handed him his bookbag, which he hefted as they walked. Waving his arms, he said thoughtfully, "I don't know how to manage both arms and wings, though. That's too many limbs."

"There are no athletic requirements as part of the Animagus bonus section of the N.E.W.T." Snape stated reassuringly.

"Good," Harry said happily.

They walked to the staircases where they would split up. After a group of Third Years went by, Harry asked excitedly, "Do you think I can fly?"

Snape hesitated replying as though having an internal struggle with the question. "Hagrid would know, I presume," he finally said.

Harry, thinking now he had been wrong to put such restrictions on Ginny and that he should apologize, said, "I bet I can, at least short distances."

Snape still appeared to be struggling. "Consider that you cannot take your N.E.W.T.s from the hospital wing."

"Yeah, yeah," Harry said dismissively before heading along the balcony towards the corridor to the Gryffindor tower. He glanced back once to find that his guardian wore a familiar expression, but only familiar from long ago. Thinking maybe he should not have been so offhanded about things, he almost went back, but Snape was already heading down the staircase.

In the common room Harry leaned over between Ron and Hermione, which was difficult given how close together their heads hung over their assignments. "Guess what?" Harry said. When they both turned curious faces up to him, he said, "I managed my form."

"Harry! That's great!" Hermione exploded. "During your tutoring?"

Most of the common room had turned their way. More quietly, Harry said, "After, when Draco was harassing me. I don't think he'll do that again," he added with a cruel grin.

"Ha!" Ron said. "Well, let's see, come on."

Harry balked, glancing around at the crowded room. "Not here."

His friends quickly put their books aside. "We can go somewhere else like the Room of Requirement," Hermione said eagerly. "Neville," she said across the room, "have a minute?"

"No, but I'm assuming it's something I don't want to miss?"

"I'd say," Ron replied and gave Harry a shove toward the portrait hole.

"How about the lawn?" Harry suggested instead, thinking of trying a running start with some serious flapping.

"Really?" Hermione confirmed. She glanced at her watch. "It's twenty to ten, but why not? Just make it quick."

"And we've already lost the cup," Ron pointed out as they turned down one staircase after another. "Might as well make the most of that."

Hermione's expression made Harry wonder what she had come up with to try and win it despite their firm last place position. She bit her lips as they continued on. Seeing a familiar redhead on another staircase that was shifting from one place to another, Ron shouted, "Ginny, come with us! Harry's going to show us his form."

Many students started following after that. Harry caught up to his tall friend. "I don't need that much of an audience," he complained.

"Why not?" Ron retorted and gave him a big grin.

"Oh, sure, why not," Harry, feeling buoyant, gave in.

The large doors to the outside creaked open, letting in a breath of mild night air. "Beautiful night," Ron opined grandly as they stepped down to the lawn. A knot of students surrounded the three of them as they stopped.

Gesturing with his hands, Harry said, "Clear a path to the lake."

Glancing between each other, they backed up. Ron said, "What are you turning into, a whale?"

"Just give me some room," Harry said, thinking that if he didn't get airborne, the water would be a soft landing. He dropped his arms to his sides and tried to generate the same rippling energy he had managed before. Breaths passed with just a slight movement of his robes.

"Any year now," Parkinson sneered from behind him.

Harry turned and gave her a broad grin. "Thank you, Pansy," he said sincerely. Anger again forged the energy just the right way and the world twisted below him. He hoped he did not always need an insulting Slytherin around to manage this.

Expressions of surprise and fear echoed around him. Again he was not balancing all that well, or perhaps didn't know where the strength was in his limbs, and had to step backward to steady himself. His friends stepped in close before him.

"Wow, Harry!" Ron exclaimed. "Merlin, that's really something."

Harry moved his head around and tried to get used to the wide-angle view he had on the world. Stunned faces loomed in the corners of his vision. He twitched his nose; this many bodies around smelled like the Quidditch changing rooms at the end of a hot season. He tried his wings, bumping a few students aside.

Ginny said with a grin, "Try a flight over the lake where crashing isn't painful. It's not as hard as you think."

Harry leaned forward a bit and found his wings again, which felt like a second set of arms.

"Harry," Hermione said in deep concern and a touch on his leg, "you aren't *really*?"

Harry leaned forward down the lawn to lose the need to step backward when he lost his balance. He was grateful that he could not talk, since it meant he could not bother to argue with her. A few experimental steps forward went pretty well. He leaned more and picked up the pace, learning when he clawed his front foot with his back that he had to change his gait when he began to run. His wings threw themselves out level on their own and his feet felt lighter. A pump of his second arms and he did not touch down on his hands as expected. When he did touch them down it was much too hard, jolting through his shoulders. His back legs came forward to help and he managed to regain his pace.

The lake was approaching. Maybe he should slow to a stop and try again, he thought. A full moon lit the water, transforming the surface into mercury. He flapped harder; this time just as he pushed off with his stronger back legs. His feet did not touch before he flapped again. Cheers followed behind him. He kept flapping, glad to find the motion easy even with his full weight off the ground. His legs felt useless, so he pulled them up as he passed the lake edge. This was how he discovered that they were essential for weight balance. Just over the lake edge, he nearly stalled. Madly throwing his head down and his legs forward, he barely managed to keep flying. He pawed into the lake surface as he regained an acceptable flying speed again. A little altitude would give him some margin for error, he thought, flapping harder, and just slightly lifting his chin. That worked remarkably well, and the sudden easy lift made him try to shout his glee; it came out as a very strange call that echoed off the hills.

He was most of the way over the lake and needed to turn. Not knowing any better, he leaned like he would on a broom. The world slid around neatly, although it took some mad flapping at the end since he had lost too much speed doing it. There seemed to be a lot more people at the edge of the lake now. Harry hoped they had the sense to get out of the way, as he did not have much faith in a landing.

Something caught the corner of Harry's vision. A bird flew along beside him, diving and turning to keep pace. Harry grinned as he recognized the red-tail hawk. When he returned his attention forward, the lake edge and lawn were coming up startlingly fast. Concerned about slowing enough, Harry lifted his head too early and dragged his feet over the water's surface, sending plumes of lake water alongside before his paws found the mucky lake edge and his legs managed to make a running landing.

The students were cheering and Ron actually ran up and hugged him in glee. An otter came up beside him, shook itself before transforming into Hermione, who also put her hands around him as much as possible. Their eager touch took away the uneasiness that still lingered at transforming into something so strange.

Harry glanced up and found the teachers beyond his friends, their expressions unclear in the twilight. He must have tried to speak because something vaguely like "Uh oh" came out of his animal throat, making nearly everyone laugh forcefully. McGonagall stepped forward, followed closely by Greer, who was making comments that implied they should all be tossed out that very night.

McGonagall turned to the Potions professor. "Gertrude, do back off or I may have you make the appropriate point assignments." Greer, clearly confused by this, stepped back warily. Looking up at Harry, the headmistress said, "Looks like you managed, my boy."

Harry shifted his feet, mud was drying on his paws uncomfortably and pebbles were stuck between his toes, or pads he supposed they were. Hagrid stepped over, strangely at eye level. "Well, look a' you." He brushed the feathers on Harry's head back with an affectionate expression, then immediately pulled Harry into a bear hug. Harry put more membrane energy into the spell, afraid that if he transformed back now, he might be crushed.

Hagrid finally released him, sniffing and muttering how proud he was. Harry relaxed and let himself transform back to normal. His friends patted his arms and congratulated him. His hands were coated in mud, so he stood still until Hermione cleaned them with a spell. Her hair was wet from swimming, he noticed in amusement, although her robes were dry.

As they tramped past the teachers toward the main doors, followed by a circling hawk, Harry said to the headmistress, "Just wanted to make sure you didn't miss us, Professor." He then winked at Snape, who stood beside her.

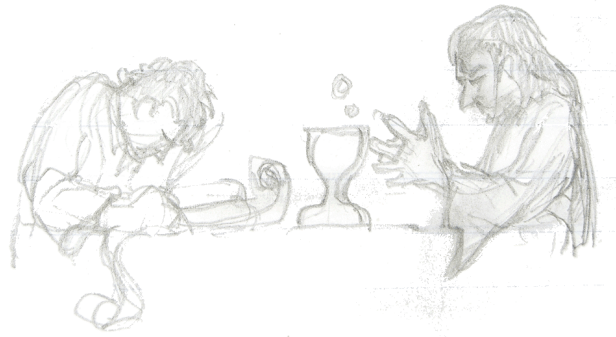
She smiled faintly, still looking serious. "I do appreciate that, Mr. Potter," she stated formally.

When the students were out of earshot, laughing and jostling as they stepped up to the main doors, McGonagall said to Snape, "I'll leave their punishment to you, Severus."

Snape drew himself up, spared a glance at Greer, and asked airily, "Punishment for what?" Greer's eyes popped out slightly as she started to fume. Directly to her, he added, "Having read every one of this school's regulations, I do not know of one that was violated this evening."

Greer put her hands on her hips. "Curfew?" she snarled.

McGonagall interceded, "Ah, yes, well, all houses were represented out here this evening. No point in knocking them all down," she stated easily before turning to head up the lawn. Greer grumbled as they all walked back at a sedate pace, enjoying the warm evening air. McGonagall finally said in admonishment, "Gertrude, they will be gone soon enough . . . just a few short weeks. Of course, others will take their place, as always happens." She fell thoughtful and turned to Snape. "Although, I do not think they will have equals for quite a while."



Chapter 45 -- Knock Down the Walls

In the common room it was a long time before everyone quieted down after their little Animagus romp. Harry accepted all of the congratulations and expressions of glee at his animal form. The younger house students began scheming how to become Animagi to find the next Griffin among them, since it was believed that one of them must be and it would be rather nice to have an ongoing mascot for the house. Harry shook his head in amusement as he half-listened to this. He had pulled out his unfinished assignments and was looking them over with a bit of dread; he was rather exhausted, and it was late.

As Harry stared with wavering focus at the parchment before him, the room gradually cleared out. Ron and Neville remained behind although they seemed to be revising rather than working on assignments. Harry was a little touched that they were giving up this much sleep for him. He reviewed his notes and sipped the hot cocoa Ron had fetched from the castle kitchen. Maybe if he just rested his eyes for a few minutes, he thought, then he might be refreshed enough to continue.

"Is he asleep?" Neville asked. Harry's head rested on his crooked arm, which rested in turn on the worn arm of the overstuffed couch. He wasn't moving much at all.

Ron leaned over to take a closer look. Quietly, he said, "Looks like it." With care Ron pulled the parchment out of Harry's loose fingers. "What's he working on?" he muttered. "Oh, Potions essay." He held it out to Neville. "Can you finish it for him? I know a Skiiving Note charm that will make your writing look like his."

Neville accepted the long parchment with reluctance. "I don't know . . ."

"You do all right in Potions," Ron insisted.

"I don't get graded as hard as he does." Neville read the half essay in silence for a long minute. "Harry takes these assignments as a personal battle, I don't know if he'd even want me to finish it for him, but I will if you *really* think I should."

"Maybe not then," said Ron, taking the long curling sheet back again. "What should we do with him? I can't stand to wake him--he's really out."

"I need to get to sleep as well," Neville admitted, glancing at his watch while rubbing one eye. "Think I'll skip running in the morning at this point."

"Well, there's an upside to late-night revising," Ron quipped. He stacked his books together and hefted them under his arm before standing up and considering Harry.

"Should we just leave him?" Neville asked casually, sounding like he was thinking ahead to being asleep himself.

Ron sighed and set his books back on the low table. "You know, he's the only student in this whole bloody school whose dad is also here." He pulled out his wand and thought a moment before casting a silver bird through the floor. Hefting his books again quickly, he muttered tiredly, "Let Snape finish his essay for him--I'm going to bed."

Neville hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, but then followed when Ron held the door open for him.

Harry felt something bump the fabric of his robe at the shoulder. This contrasted strangely with the dream he was having about playing Quidditch in the middle of a blizzard and trying in vain to catch the Snitch while wearing oversized, hand knitted, scarlet mittens.

"Harry," a familiar voice prompted him.

Sitting up sent painful kinks through Harry's neck, so he stretched his head in the other direction and tiredly considered his guardian. "I must have fallen asleep," he murmured, gazing bleary-eyed at the disarrayed and empty common room.

"Apparently," Snape said and held out a stone cup. "Drink this."

Inside the cup thick yellow and white liquids swirled in globs, but didn't mix. Harry sipped it and discovered it didn't taste anything like lemon as expected, but like musty curtains. His head cleared startlingly, so he drank the rest down while holding his nose. "What was that?" he asked as he handed the cup back.

Snape set the empty cup on the table and sat in the chair Ron had been studying in. "Farnsworth's Faffery, also called Slumber in a Jar. Feeling better?"

Harry felt like he had had a full night's sleep. "Much," he replied in amazement, expecting to feel the euphoric effect wearing off at any moment. His wakefulness held firm, however. "Is that potion restricted?" he asked, wishing he had known about it a long time ago.

Snape sat back, relaxed. "No. Nor is it difficult to brew. However, the key ingredient is hard to obtain."

"Which is?"

"Mummy powder."

Harry frowned at that disturbing thought. "Powdered mummy?"

"Powder of a unique fungus that only grows on undisturbed Egyptian mummies," Snape explained in a pedantic tone. Harry forcefully ignored his now churning stomach and turned to his parchments which someone had laid out on the table before him. Snape said, "Have enough energy to finish that now?"

"Yes." Harry picked up his quill and set to work. Snape leaned back in his chair and gazed at his steepled fingers before him. He looked to be settling in until Harry was finished.

Finally, after having to look up the Latin for wormwood, Harry wrote out the last line and held the parchment out before his guardian. Snape, who had until then been sitting in quiet contemplation, accepted it and started reading. Minutes later, he handed it back. "Well done," he said.

Harry rolled it up and put it in his bag. It was only three and he was rather wide-awake. His alternative Potions texts, with the marked pages, sat in a neat row in the bottom of his bookbag. He pulled them out.

Snape's eyes followed him doing this. "All set, Harry?" he asked.

"Yes. Thank you," Harry said sincerely.

Snape hefted his tall frame out of the sagging chair and shook his robes straight. "I shall see you later in the morning then," he said before departing.

Harry again thanked him and leaned back with *Potent Potions and Porridges*.

Morning light came through the room slowly enough that Harry did not notice it until the glare on the lamp base across from him made his eyes water. Warm orange light also glinted on the uneven glass in the windows on the far side of the room. Harry warmed Ron's unfinished cocoa and continued reading.

An hour later a voice disturbed his journey through useful moor plants. "You are still awake?" Penelope asked in concern.

Harry shrugged. "You're up early."

"I sometimes wake and cannot return to sleep," she said, adjusting her dressing gown.

To Harry's ear it sounded as though she did not like admitting that. He moved his books out of the way so she could sit on the couch. He looked into the stained mugs before him. "Sorry, I finished all the cocoa."

She grinned. "Dat is all right," she insisted. "Aren't you going to be too tired today?"

"I think I'll be all right," he said easily. She put down her toiletry kit, picked up one of the texts he had already finished, and flipped it open. He watched her do this, his eyes taking in her un-made-up, smooth skin and long lashes. A sleepy scent clung to her, reminding him of the night he spent with Tonks. Without conscious thought, he had leaned closer to her, something he realized only when she turned to him in question. He was busy sorting through the impulses coursing within him and really would not have kissed her, but it didn't matter, because she kissed him.

Harry leaned into her harder and put his arms around her almost desperately. He felt a bit like he had not eaten in a week, as he returned a rather devouring kiss. After a long minute she turned aside out of reach and said, "Maybe not in the common room . . . "

Harry froze, then quickly looked around the empty room. "Yeah, good point," he agreed, swallowing hard. It was much harder to let go of her and sit back than it should have been.

At breakfast Harry found his face heating up a lot, as in, every time he glanced at Penelope. She in turn spent a lot of time staring at her plate with a small grin on her lips. Harry forced himself to listen in to Hermione's and Ginny's conversation about test-taking strategies. The strange antsy excitement in his stomach lingered through the meal though, even when he started to worry about his N.E.W.T.s at the same time.

Harry handed in his Potions assignment with confidence, ignoring Greer's dark look as she accepted it. Malfoy turned in his right behind him. "Get help on that?" Draco asked in a falsely friendly tone.

"Professor always grades them like I do, so it wouldn't matter if I did," stated Harry even though the teacher in question was just feet away. Her eyes narrowed. Adopting an innocent tone, Harry asked, "Did you get Potion tutoring from Bellatrix while you had the chance?"

The other nearby students turned their way. Hermione, Frina, and Penelope came in at that moment, gossiping happily. Flatly, Draco said, "She isn't any good at Potions. Curses, though . . . " The last had a threatening ring to it.

"I could use some more practice before the N.E.W.T.s," Harry returned. "Let me know when you want to try them out."

"You should be so lucky to get a warning," said Draco in a very quiet voice.

* * *

Harry finally got a chance to pull Penelope aside on Sunday evening. They had all been studying in the Great Hall early in the evening but one by one the rest of them had drifted away, Ginny last, saying she had to meet another study group for a project. Free now to look across the table, Harry did so for nearly a minute, wishing there was no one else in the Hall. Thinking fiercely, he wondered where they could go to be alone that was not a broom cupboard.

She finally noticed his attention and looked up with that shy smile. Harry said, just as it popped into his head, "Want to go for a walk in the Rose Garden?"

"Right now?"

"Yeah."

She glanced down at her textbook and considered it before shutting it and saying, "Sure."

Harry grinned and they both quickly packed up their things and left. They dropped their bags just on the edge of the bailey and walked to the rose archway before the fountain. Harry watched for anyone else who might be around. With relief he decided that the garden was empty and took Penelope's warm hand. Maybe it was the torch light, but her eyes looked a little sadder than he expected to find them when she glanced up at him.

They walked slowly around the roughly circular path. There was a stone alcove with a bench on the far side, Harry knew, so he kept a lookout for it. "Here," he said, when he found it. He pulled out his wand and tapped one of the red roses on the corner of the path to turn it yellow, a signal that that area was occupied.

"You've been here many times, clearly," Penelope said.

"No," he insisted. "Everyone knows about the rose. Really." He sat down and brushed off her half of the bench. "Really, I've never been here with anyone," he said, worried she would not believe him.

She grinned at him. "I know that," she admitted. "Ginny said you had a girlfriend Cho, who finished school already, but that is all she knows about."

Harry scratched his brow. "It is really hard for us when you girls talk so much."

"I thought she would know."

"Ah," Harry said, feeling the mood slipping away into one of vague annoyance. His eyes had adjusted to the dim moonlight and he could see her grinning mischievously. Clusters of white roses glowed blue behind her.

After a pause she observed, "You never behave as I expect."

"No?" Harry returned, feeling at a loss for conversation as well.

"You are shy vit girls. Well, except Hermione. I would not have expected dat."

"Really?" Harry asked, just to say something. A haloed wisp of cloud was moving over the moon making it appear that the waning disk was sailing through the sky.

"And you are trying to goad Malfoy into a fight."

Harry thought about that one. "Hm," he muttered. "Maybe." Imagining a good duel with Malfoy did fill him with an eager raw anticipation. He pondered that pleasant thought as they sat in silence. Penelope sat back and sighed, seeming relaxed. It was nice just to get away from everyone and be in the quiet, Harry had to admit, for a little while anyway.

When her hand took hold of his, he jumped lightly he was so wrapped up in other, darker thoughts. She leaned closer, making him realize he needed to put his arm around her. Dark thoughts of dueling flittered away when she turned inward for a kiss.

It was getting on to real night, Harry thought much later, although he was reluctant to head back inside. It must be past curfew, he considered, then tossed that thought away. They couldn't give him detention for longer than the two weeks

remaining in the school year. Or, maybe Snape could, but Harry suspected he wouldn't. Harry dabbed his lips, which were raw from being wet. Penelope snuggled against him with a sigh, also seeming reluctant to move.

"So you will come visit me in Bern?" she asked, breaking the lengthy silence.

Harry lifted his chin and felt anxious as he realized, somehow for the first time, that shortly she would be returning to somewhere much farther away than England. "I'd like to, when I know my testing schedule. I've never been out of the country."

"No?" she asked in surprise. "You will like Switzerland--the mountains are beautiful."

Too bad it wasn't somewhere near Scotland, he thought wryly. What he said was, "We should head in. We may need a Disillusionment charm to get past Filch. He likes to hang around the doors catching people coming in late." They need not have worried, since Filch was rather occupied elsewhere.

They didn't meet anyone until the Grand Staircase, although in the corridor there was a strange set of green footprints on the floor going the other way. The Grand Staircase had many sloppy footprints on it in blue, yellow, and green. Students were gathered in the Entrance Hall in large clusters talking furiously. Justin, face red, stomped down the staircase, trailing yellow. At the bottom of the stairs he bent to look at the perfectly ordinary bottoms of his shoes and huffed in frustration. He seemed to be in Head Boy mode.

"Has anyone seen the headmistress?" he asked a group of Fifth Years. They shook their heads. Justin gave the Hall an annoyed once-over and caught sight of Harry. "Going out with a bang, eh, Potter?"

"What?" Harry returned, thoroughly confused.

Justin, sounding more fed up than Harry thought he could, said, "You will notice that no Gryffindors are trailing red."

It was true that Harry did not see any red footprints. "What's going on?" he asked. When Justin scoffed and walked away, Harry muttered, "Uh oh."

Malfoy strode passed, coming to a sharp halt when he spotted Harry. "Think you're funny don't you, Potter?" He shoved Harry, leaving a green hand-print on Harry robes.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry insisted, examining the stuff on his shirt. It looked like glowing paint, but it didn't smear or look likely to come off.

He headed down to the Great Hall with Penelope following, looking both bemused and amused. Behind him, he could hear Justin bemoan, "Cor! It's on your hands now too?"

Harry spotted Ginny, the Creevey brothers, and Frina sitting and reading, apparently unaffected by goings on. "Where's Ron and Hermione?" Harry asked. "What's happening?"

Ginny gave a great shrug. "Don't know," she breathed, clearly acting. Beside her the Creevey brothers looked innocent, maybe too much so, and across from them Frina flashed him a grin like a cat.

"Ron and Hermione?" Harry prompted again.

"The library," Ginny answered as though it were perfectly normal for them to be there, which it actually had not been lately.

McGonagall strode in just then and the room quieted. She stepped over to Harry, looking very stern. Her eyes flickered down to the green hand-print on his front as she said, "A word, Mr. Potter."

Harry moved to follow her quick departure, glancing back in time to see Ginny looking worried; he shot her an annoyed look in return. In the Entrance Hall they swept by Snape who stood grimly and actually growled lightly at Harry as he followed alongside. He was not trailing green, Harry was *very* relieved to see. There were many, many trails everywhere along the corridors and the door handles and moulding were spotted with finger-shaped blobs. Near a painting of a bog, were two small fingerprints that caused Harry to wonder if there were a hidden passage there that he didn't know about. He would have to come back later and check.

In the headmistress' office he was ordered to sit, which he did. Harry was beginning to feel a little bothered that they automatically assumed this was his doing, when he actually knew absolutely nothing. He was also feeling a little miffed at his friends because they hadn't said anything, assuming this prank was Ron and Hermione's, but at the moment it was his only defense so he squashed that reaction. "Professor," Harry said evenly, normally, but this was a mistake, as it made her gaze darken.

"A mere two weeks, Mr. Potter. That is all we have left." Professor McGonagall steepled her fingers with fidgety movements as she leaned forward in her chair. Snape stood beside the desk, arms crossed, brow low, eyes flinty. Harry would have considered him dangerously angry in a previous time. McGonagall went on, "Clearly Severus was correct--we were much too lenient on you earlier and you've taken liberties as a result, even with such short a time with in which to do it." She pulled out a file from a pile beside her, making Harry's palms sweat a little. He thought of denying knowing anything, but he had a sense that his delaying the two of them might help his friends cover their tracks, so he sat silent. The green paint substance on his robes had not faded, and he had a panicky feeling it might be permanent, which even he thought would be rather bad.

"Terribly childish of you all," McGonagall commented, but not so much to Harry as to the room. "Couldn't win the cup so you take it out on everyone else."

Harry bit his lip, thinking that she was digging herself a bit of a hole that might be useful later.

She went on, "I am reminded at the end of every year how maturity and age do not go hand-in-hand. Even for those who should have learned some sense of responsibility by now. Especially you," McGonagall added pointedly.

Flatly, letting a little anger show, he asked, "Why do you assume that I had anything to do with this?"

He knew he had caught her unawares, because she straightened suddenly in her chair and gazed at him uncertainly. She glanced at Snape in question before asking outright, "Did you do this, Mr. Potter?"

"No," he replied stiffly, anger churned in him as though looking for an outlet. "And I don't know who did it. Nor do I know what charm or compound this is." He poked at his robes again. When he looked up at his guardian, he had his thoughts un-Occluded. Snape, who had a look of consternation before, dropped his arms in surprise.

"He does not know," Snape said.

"So where have you been these last two hours, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked, sounding unconvinced.

Harry re-closed his mind and felt himself flush warmly. "Not any of your concern, really, Professor," he said. "I wasn't planning any pranks at the time."

"It is mine, though," Snape pointed out sternly.

Harry looked away from them both, annoyed at this position he had been forced into. Jaw tight, he said, "I was in the Rose Garden with someone." He was beginning to wish he had been part of the prank, because he was starting to feel maybe the teachers deserved it. He began hoping his friends were planning another, in fact. Standing up, Harry said, sounding hard even to his own ears, "May I go now, Professor?"

"No, Harry, sit down," McGonagall said more gently. Harry did so, slowly. His anger solidified at her new conciliatory mode. She said, "I apologize for falsely accusing you."

Realizing a response was expected, Harry said, "Yes, ma'am," sounding unconvinced and a bit like Draco to his own ears.

She frowned, eyes a little sad. "I am sorry, Harry. The disruption this is going to cause for the last week of classes is enormous and we are a little testy as a result." She evaluated his closed expression. "Well, I don't suppose there is anything I can say." She sighed. "Haven't seen that temper of yours in rather a long while, though I see it just below the surface now." She frowned at Snape apologetically as well. "Go on then, Harry. Tell your friends that if I can come up with any proof, they will be in serious, serious trouble."

Harry stood up with a quick motion, gave his guardian a dark glance and departed. On the staircase down, he felt anger at Snape as well, maybe because he expected more loyalty from him. Sirius would have defended him whether he knew Harry had been involved or not.

By the time he reached the tower, Harry's anger had shifted, so that when he entered the common room and found his friends whispering and giggling, he gave them a dark frown. Hermione came over to him. "Did you get blamed?" she asked.

"Oh, I would say so," Harry snapped at her. His friends' faces fell worried from gleeful. "Couldn't tell me about it beforehand?" he asked, changing tacks.

"We didn't want you to get into trouble," Hermione explained.

Harry gave her a derisive laugh. "That worked."

"It is pretty funny though," Ron said with a broad grin. "The Slytherins are the only ones who got the hands because of how their door works." He laughed. "We put the Invisible Stoolie Goo on each house's entrance. The Slytherins have to push their door open."

Harry glanced around at the other grinning Gryffindors in the room. Clearly everyone was in the know. "I do have a message from McGonagall. She says that if she can prove it, you will be in serious, serious trouble."

"Only two weeks' worth," Seamus retorted, while beside him, Neville nodded.

"I wouldn't underestimate her. Or the Deputy headmaster," Harry added with meaning.

Ron said, "She can't prove it unless she raids the experimental brewing room at Fred and George's place. They were more than happy to make the Goo in colors for us, and they promise not to sell it for at least a year."

Harry, feeling inordinately tired, waved them off and went up to the dormitory. Kali had only been out once that day and she reached through the cage bars a bit frantically when he entered. He let her out and she scampered and flapped madly around the fortunately empty room. Finally exhausting herself, she dropped onto the bed, fanning her wings slowly and breathing fast. "I know how you feel," Harry said, lying back to stare at the inside of his drapes. He eventually roused himself to get into his pyjamas and set the alarm for early, since he was feeling wound up and looked forward to a run the next morning.

Bright and early, it was just he and Neville for the run. "Still mad?" Neville asked when they were out of earshot of the castle.

"I don't know," Harry replied. He had brought Kali along this morning, thinking she might like more flying, and she flitted along beside them over the lake, swooping and diving to catch dragonflies in her mouth or feet depending on the size of insect.

"That's an odd pet, Harry," Neville commented when they rounded the path by the train station.

"Hey, when I first met you, you were looking for a lost toad."

"True. My gran remembered that as the best pet, which it was in her day, and insisted that was what my uncle buy me."

They ran in silence until the last leg when they were approaching the castle again. Harry, feeling the need to talk, said breathlessly because of their fast pace, "I think I expected more loyalty from Severus, at least the benefit of the doubt."

"Really?" Neville said immediately, sounding as though that would have been an odd thing to expect.

Harry frowned, feeling not well understood and as though he should drop the topic. A minute later Neville said, "I would think he has a lot of loyalty to Hogwarts, since it protected him for so long." Harry had not thought of that. Neville went on, "It was just a prank, and the paint will fade in two weeks. It was timed to the school year by the Weasley twins."

"Does every Gryffindor know about this?" Harry asked in annoyance as they slowed on the lawn and finally stopped.

Neville swung his arms side to side before bending to stretch his legs. "Pretty much." He looked up. "Someone wants to talk to you, I think."

Harry turned to the castle steps and found Snape standing there, arms crossed, looking as though he had been waiting patiently for a while. "Gee," he muttered, "am I in trouble for morning runs now too?"

"Harry," Neville chastised him. Harry turned back to his roommate in surprise. Neville scratched his head and gave him a wry smile. "No wonder you were running so fast, you must still be miffed. Go on, then."

Drenched in sweat and relishing the cool breeze off the lawn, Harry walked up to the steps alone. When Harry arrived, Snape said, "A little talk, I think."

Harry would have snapped back at him, could feel his jaw wanting to move even, but Neville's comment made him hold himself in check. They had run fast, he realized by the clock as they stepped through the still empty Entrance Hall.

In Snape's office Harry took a seat and dried his face on the front of his t-shirt while Snape poured him a cup of tea and sat down at his desk. After a long pause he prompted, "Something you need to say?"

Harry set the teacup down without drinking any. His palms were sweating and he had to rub them on his exercise shorts repeatedly to dry them. "I thought you'd be more loyal to me," he said, feeling stung just saying it.

Harry didn't think Snape could have reacted more had Harry actually struck him. With a jerk Snape turned his head away, then stared at the ceiling and rubbed his hand through his hair. "It is more complicated than that."

"Not to me." Harry considered adding that Sirius would not have assumed he was guilty, and even if he knew he were guilty, would have stood by him anyway. But Harry sensed there was a bridge there that, once burned, would be difficult to rebuild. He left it at that.

"The school is a mess," Snape said.

"The school is still standing," Harry pointed out between sips of the good tea. The scent reminded him of too many things. He wondered idly about Candide, but decided it was not the right time to ask. "I'd assume the pranksters are smart enough not to do permanent damage."

"We are hoping that is so, since we have not been able to obliterate it or even render it invisible. It implies that other outside parties are involved."

Harry just shrugged, having no interest in being generous right now.

"This is the kind of trouble I would expect from my own house, especially given that Mr. Nott has returned and he and Mr. Malfoy have resumed their previous close confidence. I had been keeping an eye on them with little thought to poten-

tially more troublesome Gryffindors." After a lengthy pause Snape, while running his knuckles over his chin, conceded, "I perhaps should have taken your side or a neutral position, but I had no imagining that such an elaborate scheme could have occurred without at least your knowledge. I am surprised at your friends."

So am I, Harry thought. He finished his tea and pushed his cup away, eyes fixed on the front of the desk. "Well, it did," Harry stated and wondered idly if his friends had not told him because they had believed he might let something slip to Snape. He shook his head in frustration.

Quietly, Snape said, "This school is important to me, Harry."

Thinking back to Neville's observation, Harry said, "I know." It was, after all, important to Harry as well. After a pause he said, "Something else you wanted?"

"I was hoping . . . that we could reach some kind of understanding," Snape reluctantly stated, as if those words were foreign and required dredging up from somewhere.

"We have," Harry said. "It goes something like, you don't trust me, the school is of primary importance . . ."

"Harry," Snape said to cut him off during his hesitation. "This is best discussed when the school year is over."

"Can I go to Switzerland?" Harry tossed out, interrupting.

Snape blinked as he took that in. "If you wish. I presume you will keep your testing schedule in mind when making plans."

"Yep."

Snape gestured that it was up to Harry. He looked tired, Harry realized, then wondered how much sleep he had managed to get last night. Feeling like he should help a little, Harry said, "If I tell you something, will you not tell McGonagall where you learned it?"

Snape nodded, actually looking regretful.

Harry said, "The paint will go away on its own when the school year is over."

Snape raised a brow and tilted his head in acknowledgment. Harry stood and went to the door but Snape's voice made him pause with his hand on the latch. "Do try to stay out of trouble."

Harry looked back and returned, "Does it earn me anything?"

"You are thinking like a Slytherin," Snape accused him.

"Hm," Harry muttered with a frown before going out.

* * *

During the next day, the other students were annoyed enough with Gryffindor House that Harry felt things were pretty even all around. The school floors were ubiquitously colorful, at least in the centers of the corridors and green hand-prints were on nearly every desk, door, handrail, and the Slytherin table in the Great Hall. Some Slytherins had taken to leaving nasty messages, drawn with just a plain fingertip, on walls and tables. Ironically enough, there was no easy way to remove them or cover them over, though one message on the wall about someone's choice of boyfriend had yellow foot-prints across it by the next class break. Harry wore an older robe, one without a big green hand-print on it, though it was tight around the shoulders.

As they waited for Snape to arrive for Defense, Harry listened to Hermione whisper to Ron something about maybe it might have been better to have set the cancellation on the Stoolie Goo to something shorter. "Too late," was Ron's reply.

Hermione's face brightened, "Know what . . ." she began in an excited whisper, just as Snape entered. She swallowed whatever she was going to say and took up her quill.

"Well," Snape said, as he spun on his heel on the platform at the front. His patience sounded very short. "I was thinking of another review session today since your examinations are so close, BUT," he added, pacing a bit. "I think, perhaps a workshop on curse neutralization would be more interesting." Harry's friends turned to him in question, requiring that he shrug at them, since he did not know where this was leading. Snape went on. "Let's see, the desks perhaps. Everyone up, push all but . . ." He appeared to count. "You three," he said, pointing at the Durmstrang girls near Harry, "consider yourselves Gryffindor?"

Frina and Penelope nodded after a second's hesitation. Darsha shook her head.

"Smart girl," Snape said. "Over there." He pointed at the wall to the left. "Everyone except the Gryffindors, over on that side."

"Uh oh," Neville muttered.

Everyone leapt up eagerly, their new trails on the floor barely noticeable additions. Malfoy had a rather pleased grin on his face. Snape said, "The rest of you, pull eight desks to the side." He pointed off to the right. They all obeyed in worrisome silence. "Now, off with you." He pointed at Harry and his friends. "For twenty minutes, no more," he commanded them.

Harry and his friends looked at each other before collecting up their books and shuffling out with glances back at their classmates. When the classroom door boomed closed behind them, Seamus said, "You mentioned something about underestimating the deputy headmaster?"

"Twenty minutes," Hermione reminded them all.

"It'll be practice for the N.E.W.T. Come on," Ron urged. "Cocoa sounds good again." He headed off down the corridor and after a moment they all followed him down toward the kitchens.

Exactly nineteen and a half minutes later they stood before the Defense classroom door again. "Sorry 'bout this," Harry said to Penelope.

She smiled nicely and shrugged. Ron, spotting this, elbowed Harry hard on the arm. "Something you haven't told us?" he asked.

"What?" Harry returned too forcefully. Everyone turned to him then, but fortunately, the door opened.

Snape gestured abruptly for them to enter. Their classmates were sitting along the platform edge looking gleeful. Eight desks sat in the center of the floor, the other's pushed and piled against the left wall. Harry led the way in with some trepidation. He put his bag on the floor by the door as the others were doing behind him.

Back at the front of the room, Snape said, "All of the desks are cursed in different ways. All in a way that we covered, or . . . at least in a way related to something in your reading. You have ten minutes before you must all take a seat."

They all took that in before pulling out their wands and shuffling around to reach a desk. "Can we help each other?" Harry asked, eyeing Penelope looking under and around at the desk beside her.

"Since that will probably be more entertaining, certainly," Snape said. He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow as he took in the scene.

Harry bit his lip and tried to concentrate. How would one curse a desk, he thought to himself. There were too many possibilities. On the far side from him, Neville had removed a sticking curse and gave a shout before moving to sit. "One curse per desk?" Harry quickly asked Snape.

"I did not say that," Snape replied smoothly.

Neville froze, half sitting, and slowly moved away from the desk. He looked a little defeated to hear that. Harry ran through the basic un-cursing charms he knew to no avail. Beside him Hermione was going through a longer list. Harry stopped them all. "Everyone copy Hermione," he said.

They all quieted and Hermione started over. After a long string of incantations four of the desks had two curses removed each and grumbles from the watching students made Harry think they were making good progress. "Anyone have any others?" Harry asked them all.

Neville knew three more counter-curses, which released one more curse. Frina had a few strange suggestions, which, if the desks each had two curses, freed up one more desk. Three minutes remained. Into the game now Harry had them split into groups to each tackle a remaining desk. He, Frina, and Penelope worked on the one that still had two unknown curses on it. As time ticked down, they made no progress on theirs, although Hermione and Ron finished un-cursing one other desk, which Hermione sat in proudly. Ron took a previously un-cursed seat beside her, both raising their hands at their success.

"Time," Snape intoned firmly. "You all should be sitting, I believe."

Everyone shuffled towards a seat, except Penelope who said to Harry, "You shouldn't take that one," indicating the doubly cursed desk.

"It's all right," Harry insisted, blocking her with his arm from sitting down. He pointed at a safe desk off to the side. "Take that one." Ron was standing up to come over, concern in his gaze. Harry, feeling the weight of fate like he hadn't in long while, and refusing to let himself glance at his guardian, sat at the desk. He promptly passed out.

"Mr. Weasley," Snape sneered. "Everyone should be sitting."

Ron looked up from the hunched over, long, grey-haired figure of his friend with an appalled expression.

"It isn't permanent, Mr. Weasley," Snape commented tiredly.

Ron backed off slowly, giving Snape a baleful look. He sat down only because Hermione pulled him down. They looked around for the other cursed desk; Dean was sitting at it., but he shrugged, indicating nothing had happened.

"Well," Snape breathed, stepping down from the platform. "Not as satisfying an exercise as had been hoped. Should have listened to Mr. Malfoy and made it three curses per desk."

"What's wrong with Harry?" Hermione insisted.

"Sleeping curse," Snape replied. When Hermione slapped her hand on her desk in disappointment, he added snidely, "Too obvious, Ms. Granger?" He snapped his fingers before Harry, who lifted his head groggily before it fell back onto his arms with a thud. "Probably needs the sleep anyway," he quipped. "As well as an aging curse, both will cancel when he is removed from the desk. Mr. Thomas on the other hand will be inflicted all day." Snape said this last with an airy dismissal as he spun back to the front of the classroom.

"Thiw Tahw?" Dean said, then put his hand over his mouth.

"Dean?" Ron prompted in confusion as he slid out of his desk now that Snape's back was turned.

"Oh, a backwards curse," Hermione muttered. "Didn't think of that one either." She got up and followed Ron along with the rest of the students.

Ron lifted Harry up by his collar and examined his aged, sleeping face. "Cor, how old is he?"

The other students were gathering around as well. Snape replied, "About a hundred." He turned and studied Harry as well with a curious look.

Ron dragged his alarming looking friend from the desk and placed him on the floor. Harry's long grey hair shrunk away as did his wrinkles. He rubbed his eyes and looked up at everyone crowded around. "What happened?" he asked sharply.

"You were zonked by a sleeping spell," Ron said, giving him a hand up. "Right after you aged a hundred years."

Harry looked doubtful about that before stretching his arms and saying, "That would explain why I'm so creaky."

The room was rearranged to the muttered complaints of the other students, who clearly had hoped for a more interesting show.

After dinner, which was colorful and full of gossip about what Snape had done to them, the Gryffindors tramped up to the solitude of their tower. Penelope took a seat right beside Harry to study. Harry, not used to having someone insist on being so close all the time had to conjure a smile for her. He didn't mind, really, but it did feel odd.

* * *

Days later, Harry, feeling knotted up over several things, was walking aimlessly around the darkened castle rather than returning to his revising and his friends. When he reached the corridor with the Defense classroom, he couldn't fail to notice the light streaming from under the heavy door. He lifted the latch, pushed the door open, and leaned in. Snape stood in the far corner, wand out, facing the darkened windows. He held a book in his open palm near the light from one of the smoking lamps. When his dark gaze came up, he looked pensive and slightly wary.

"Hi," Harry said, stepping inside and re-latching the door. Snape stiffly returned the greeting and continued to stand as he was. Curious, Harry approached.

One-handed, Snape closed the book he held and dropped it to his side. With a shuttered expression, he said, "Something I can do for you?"

Harry shrugged and tried not to show his increased curiosity. "I was taking a walk to think. Saw your light," he added, gesturing back at the door. Snape turned and set the book with two others on the table behind him. His slump-shouldered posture reminded Harry of the old Snape just a little too much. "What are you working on?" Harry asked casually, his thoughts beginning to feel disturbingly suspicious rather than just curious.

Snape slowly turned back around, biting his lip. He looked reluctant to answer and Harry assumed he wouldn't. With his gaze focused beyond the far wall, Snape explained, "Something I should have worked out sooner. Especially since I have set myself out to be an exemplary teacher of Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"You are," Harry confirmed.

With a wry grin Snape looked down at his wand, running his fingers over it. "I have been relying on your teaching, Harry. In this, anyway." He studied Harry a moment as though looking for something in his gaze. "But it is unacceptable."

"What are we discussing?" Harry asked, concerned by Snape's dark tone.

Snape sighed before replying with yet another frown, "The Patronus charm. It will be tested on the N.E.W.T. and I have not covered it."

"Nearly every Seventh Year knows it already. Those that want to learn it."

"Because of *you*."

"And Hermione, Ron, Neville, and others." Harry scoffed. "You make it sound like I taught all of them myself." Snape returned to thoughtfully examining his wand. It still bothered Harry rather a lot that Snape apparently could not produce a Patronus; it implied that he could not think of anything happy enough to. It felt risky to do so, but Harry asked, "Do you want help with it?"

Snape laughed mirthlessly and turned to stare out the darkened window. "It is late--you should be in your dormitory," he said flatly.

Frowning, Harry said, "Is there a Bogart around the castle anywhere?"

"Why?" Snape asked without turning from the window.

"Because, before, one would turn into a Dementor when I faced it. Although that might not be true anymore," he added, thinking about it some more. This made him wonder what a Bogart would turn into for him, now. Maybe he would rather wonder than know for certain.

Snape shifted, rubbed his hair back. "I have a Lethifold. I had not considered actually having something to practice on; it had not seemed feasible. He turned around, fortunately looking less dark and more generally thoughtful. "I will fetch it from my office."

Harry opened the top book on the table, *Damageless Defense*, the one Snape had been holding when Harry came in. It had a pretty good description of the Patronus, he thought as he scanned it. The sound of something metal scraping on stone made Harry turn. Snape had just placed a small trunk on the floor. It had a row of heavy silver latches all around the lid. Snape looked around the room with his hands on his hips before sliding the trunk into the far corner and backing away from it. With repeated Alohamora spells he released the latches. They both watched a little tensely, but nothing happened.

"Maybe it died," Harry suggested.

"Only fire can kill it: A hot one of dried conifer logs."

They watched the unmoving trunk another minute. Harry glanced at the book again and asked, "How far have you got into this?" Snape didn't reply, but his gaze hardened visibly. Harry wished this were easier, but he was determined now.

Snape took the book and glanced over it as though to stall. He paced away and said, "I can get only vapor, not any sort of form."

"You're almost there, then," Harry said brightly, relieved Snape was doing that well. Falling into D.A. mode, he added, "You just need to think of something a little happier."

Snape did not react to that. Harry pulled out his wand and turned the long way down the room. He cleared his throat, and said, "*Expecto Patronum*." Vapor poured from his wand as glowing fog and solidified into a stag, which was nearly blinding so close. The stag started to turn and Harry canceled the spell.

"What were you thinking of?" Snape asked.

Harry paused, caught off-guard by the question. In the past he had thought of his parents, but now that felt too remote. "I . . . was thinking about the future, I think." It was true, he had not been thinking of anything in particular, just allowing himself to feel a fundamental optimism.

"Hm," Snape muttered and paced once. Harry was jarred from his own musings by Snape's outburst of dismay. He turned and saw what had caused it; the trunk was open and empty, and Snape was pacing the edge of the room with purpose. Harry joined him in searching for the Lethifold under the tables and desks.

As Harry looked under the table at the front, he found himself laughing. "This would be embarrassing to have to explain," he said.

"Most definitely," Snape agreed as he opened the door and checked the corridor before stuffing his robe under the door and spelling it into place. "The only consolation would be that because it involved both of us, Minerva could not simply hire you immediately upon firing *me*." Harry laughed again, even though he was uncertain the situation warranted humor. Snape shook out the first curtain on the end, saying, "You need a holiday if you are finding this that amusing."

Harry shook out the curtain nearest him. "I won't deny I need a holiday," he said forcefully.

When Snape shook the next curtain a dark form resembling a discarded cloak fell out of it. He jumped back and aimed his wand at it instinctively before dropping his wand hand, apparently disgusted with his own jumpiness. Harry made a noise of deep relief and stepped over beside his guardian. "Only dangerous if you are asleep," Snape sneered at himself. "I will not deny that I could use a holiday as well."

Harry gestured at the unmoving dark form on the floor. "Think of pouring hope out of your wand . . . that works for me. Give it a go," he urged.

Snape sighed in a defeated way, but he backed up and aimed his wand . . . and just stood there, eyes moving around the floor and the wall. He glanced sharply at Harry, who waited with infinite patience beside the first row of desks. With a frown Snape finally spoke the spell and a vapor curled out of his wand before fading out. Snape dropped his wand hand and rubbed his forehead harder than usual.

Harry crossed his arms and waited in a relaxed pose, not showing any of the distress he felt. "Maybe you are trying too hard?" he suggested. He wanted to turn away, but it felt important to show he had faith in this. Snape drew his lips in and raised his wand again, perhaps because the Lethifold had shifted ever so slightly, as though an unfelt breeze had ruffled it. With half-closed eyes Snape spoke the incantation again. This time the vapor curled around itself several times and twisted away. Harry at first thought it was drifting and dissipating yet again, but it actually had coalesced into an asp. The viper swam through the air and struck at the Lethifold.

An unearthly squeal somewhere between a swine and sea bird went up as the Patronus struck. Dark cloth and coiling, glowing snake tumbled together along the edge of the wall. The snake struck repeatedly, long teeth flashing as they battled.

Harry shook off his mesmerization. "If you want your Lethifold back you better cancel the spell."

Snape hesitated just an instant before he waved the charm away. He looked a little stunned. Eventually, he exhaled and stated, "An Egyptian cobra."

Harry shrugged, trying to seem like that was an okay Patronus, but he couldn't help grinning. "You did it though."

"Yes. Thank you for your assistance," he said stiffly.

Harry grinned more. The Lethifold lay small and kinked in the corner of the room, completely unmoving. "Need help putting that away?"

"No," Snape assured him. He waved a charm at the crate and pushed it over beside the dark creature with his foot and waved another charm at the trunk. Rushing air sounded and the Lethifold was sucked into the crate. Snape waved the lid shut and latched it all around before picking it up to take it back to his office. At the door Harry tugged the robe clear of the door gap and shook it out before draping it over his arm.

"Ever tried to become an Animagus?" Harry asked.

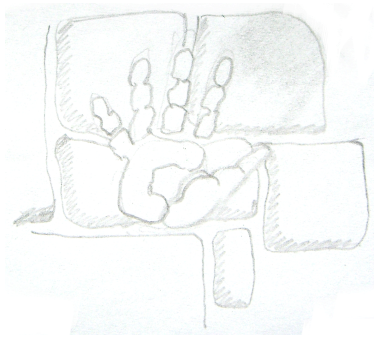
Snape raised his eyes briefly to the ceiling. "Yes, of course," he replied darkly. He paused to unspell his office door before saying, "Now I truly wish I had managed, given the animal I most likely would be."

Harry draped the robe over the back of the visitor's chair. "One of the deadliest snakes," he said.

"Yes," Snape agreed in a tone that made it seem as though his thoughts were a little far away, or long ago.

Harry frowned. "It's late . . . I better get to the tower."

Snape put the small trunk into a cabinet and locked it. "Good night, Harry," he said.



Chapter 46 -- End of an Era

"Okay," Hermione whispered, when they stopped at an empty corner of the second floor corridor. "I have an idea. Ron, you said your brothers could make any color of the Goo?" At Ron's nod, she went on. "We need clear."

"Clear?" Ron confirmed.

"Invisible color." Hermione insisted.

"Oh," Ron said, still trying to cotton on.

"You think that will work?" Harry asked, sort of understanding but also doubtful. He was keeping an eye out; some First Years were wandering in their direction, but slowly.

Hermione said, "The colors when they go on top of each other, completely hide the ones beneath. Well, owl George and ask him to try it and send us some if it works. A LOT of it."

Ron shrugged and said he would ask. Harry felt a little relieved that they had a plan, their fellow students were behaving surly toward them still and it would be good to move on from a prank that had long outlasted its novelty.

* * *

A few nights later, Harry crept down the staircases carrying a canister of invisible Goo and a homemade straw brush resembling a miniature broom. He had insisted on being allowed to do the Slytherin door. He had won with the argument that he was the only one for whom getting caught by the Slytherin Head of House would not matter.

A little nervous despite his assertions of confidence to his friends, Harry stopped before the Slytherin common room door and looked both ways. He imagined the conversation he would have with the headmistress should he get caught and had to take a slow breath to relax. Under his invisibility cloak he still had to pay attention, lest someone bump into him. With care, and starting right at the edge of the hidden door, Harry dipped the brush and began painting. The bristles made a lot of noise, grating loudly in the stone corridor. This made Harry realize that it was Greer whom he actually had to worry about down here. Setting down the canister of Goo, Harry wiped his hands well on his pants and pulled out his wand to put a Silencing charm on the brush. He returned to painting the floor, leaving a space for himself to get around it to do the door as well.

Finished with the floor, he considered that he really needed to do the other side of the door since that side got handled more by students pushing it to go out. Frowning, Harry shuffled over against the wall and waited, hoping someone would go in or out on a late-night errand. He should have come sooner to overhear the password, it now occurred to him.

Long minutes ticked away. Harry sighed. He had a lot of time before his friends wondered what happened, since they had said an hour and it had only been half that, at most. Harry was pulling out his pocket watch to check the time when a disgusted voice said, "What now, Potter?"

Startled, Harry jerked his head down the corridor. Draco stood there, arms crossed, sneer firmly in place.

Harry glanced down at himself, wondering if his feet were showing or he had left something on the floor.

Very snidely Draco breathed, "Yes, I can see you, *through* the cloak."

Harry pulled the cloak off his head. "How?"

"Someone taught me," he breathed haughtily.

Harry considered that. "Not Dumbledore I assume."

Laughing mockingly, Draco confirmed, "No. Not Dumbledore." He looked Harry over. "Not in enough trouble yet that you are out looking for more. Please, I can fetch Professor Greer, if that will help you."

"Reversing trouble, actually," Harry said, holding out the can, inside which sloshed an unseen liquid.

"Thank Merlin," Draco huffed. "What a hag it has been." With a distant expression, he made a hand print on the wall in a small space where there weren't quite as many.

"The floor and the door are done," Harry said, feeling gracious since this was Draco's territory. "Give it a try."

Haughtily, Draco asked, "Why is the floor still green with a thousand miserable footprints?"

"It doesn't work like that. Someone has to touch it and then something else." Harry gestured for him to walk over the floor then moved to remain facing Draco, hand not far from his wand pocket, although Draco seemed too self-absorbed to start anything.

Draco stepped briskly to the door and put his hands flat upon it before going back to the wall and obliterating his previous mark. "That's an improvement, I'll admit," he murmured.

"Open the door so I can do the inside of it," Harry suggested.

Draco sauntered back to the door. "Shooting star," he said and the door cracked open. He stepped back for Harry to open it. Harry, who didn't want to turn his back on Draco, gestured in return for *him* to open it. Draco scoffed condescendingly. "I don't even have my wand at the moment."

Harry's eyes narrowed in suspicion at that. "Why not?"

"I loaned it to someone--not that it is any of your business."

Harry gave him a doubtful look but reached to pull on the crack at the edge of the door. He glanced inside to make sure the room was empty before shuffling in to paint. As he worked, Draco stood aside, arms crossed, looking like an overseer. "So," Harry said conversationally. "I'm curious to know if you really changed places with your dad willingly." When no reply was forthcoming, he turned to the other boy.

"I don't think you'd understand, Potter," Draco said flatly. He shifted against the doorjamb to lean on it harder. "Or maybe you would. Father is certain you have Professor Snape under an Imperius curse, though he can't figure why you would bother. I, of course, know better. You missed a spot," he said, pointing at the lower corner.

Harry frowned at him, but then crouched to paint the lower part of the door with a crooked grin. "Sorry, forgot you Slytherins crawl out the door on occasion. You didn't answer the question."

In a less confident voice Draco said, "He insisted. Not that it is anything to you." His shoulder twitched then and with a huff he stalked inside. "He's my father . . . even though he did end up on the losing side." Draco spun back and in a more angry voice, said, "You won, Potter. You destroyed my father's Master. The Ministry took our fortune. You took my mentor. What else do you want?"

"Just to be left alone, I suppose," Harry said, dropping the brush into the canister and rolling up his invisibility cloak, careful to keep it clear of the Goo since he was unsure what would happen if it got some on it.

Draco laughed. "Well, that's something you'll never have, Mr. Hero." He gave Harry a sadistic smile. A door opened on the far side of the common room and Nott stepped out, holding out a wand. He stashed it away quickly upon seeing Harry there.

Harry glanced between the two of them, but their faces both had gone flat. "Going to pass your tests after this little time?" Harry asked Nott.

Nott just shrugged uncaringly, so with a sigh, Harry stepped backward, pulling the door with him to close it.

"Watch your back, Potter," Draco said suggestively before it shut completely.

"Thanks," Harry replied sarcastically.

* * *

The next morning, excited conversation filled the Entrance Hall as everyone marveled at their newfound powers to *remove* all of the colored paint everywhere. Some of the younger students were shuffling around the hall obliterating swathes of color, then leaping to get the last few stray spots.

"Well, that worked bloody well," Ron said in a tired voice. He patted Hermione's shoulder and led the way down the Grand Staircase.

At the end of the week, during Potions, Harry wondered what else his House had cooked up. Hermione, after scratching something madly in the margin of her notes that looked like arithmetic, pulled her wand into her sleeve and thoughtfully considered the bench to their right and one row ahead. Harry stirred his cauldron and observed her. Justin, Cory and the other Hufflepuffs at the table in question were busy brewing and paying little attention to anything else since the assigned potion, Ulgants salve, was the hardest they had ever been assigned.

Carefully watching his cauldron for the subtle fizzing indicated in the instructions, Harry spared little attention for his friend, until she whispered a spell. A moment later a very stressed Cory blurted, "Bloody hell," when his potion turned black.

"Mr. Corkrin," Greer snapped at him. "I'll not have that language in my classroom. Five points from Hufflepuff for that."

Hermione waved her wand slightly; Cory breathed a sigh of relief and returned to stirring his cauldron while dropping in toad toes, one at a time. Hermione rushed to add her own toad digits and stir, just in time, Harry believed, since the tiny bubbles had almost ceased breaking the surface.

Hermione next subtly twitched her wand at Mandy and Michael. Harry was beginning to worry a bit, but remained silent, since drawing any attention would only make things worse. Penelope and Frina were too absorbed in their brewing to notice a centaur galloping through, much less Hermione with her wand in her sleeve.

Michael spoke loudly, "Boy, I think my potion is the best, don't you?" he confidently asked Mandy. His tablemate glanced very doubtfully into his cauldron. Greer, attracted by his statements, veered that way.

"My boy, what are you on about?"

"Look, it's perfect," he said proudly to the teacher.

"You are surely addled by too much revising, Mr. Corner. That must be the most noxious Ulgants salve I have ever had the misfortune of smelling."

"No!" Michael argued.

"Five points from Ravenclaw for your delusion, Mr. Corner."

Hermione bit her lip and added diced rat brain to her cauldron. Harry was tempted to point out that her potion was not stellar at this point either, due to her distracted brewing. What he did whisper was, "Ron has been a very bad influence on you." When Hermione just shrugged, Harry added, "You should have used the Bragging curse on one of the Slytherins."

"Next," she assured him. "Bet it gets the opposite reaction."

At the end of a very long Potions class, Harry wished he could return to bed. He was honestly worried about Hermione, whose eyes looked a little wild with stress and determination. It would all be over soon, he reminded himself and tried to concentrate on his own revision tables.

At the end of lunch, they all trooped by the brass cauldron, which spat forth their N.E.W.T. schedule, folded neatly into a diamond shape. Harry caught his out of the air and moved aside.

"We have to get to Binns' class," Hermione pointed out urgently as he stopped to open it. He stashed it away instead and followed his friends.

As Binns started to lecture on Wizard Criminal Law in the nineteenth century, Harry opened his schedule in his lap. Defense first, followed by Care of Magical Creatures. Then after lunch, Potions and Divination; that was day one. He rubbed his eyes before looking at day two and again reminded himself that it would all be over soon.

"How's it look?" Hermione whispered.

Whispering back, Harry said, "Like a test schedule only a nutter could love."

Several students turned around and grinned at him. Binns droned on. Seeing Hermione jot something down, Harry picked up his quill and started listening more seriously to the lecture.

As they arrived for Care of Magical Creatures in the afternoon, they turned in their long, long essay parchments on blue wombats. Harry's and Penelope's along with Hermione's and Frina's were definitely much thicker rolls than the other students'. Hagrid tossed them into a wooden bucket, which he then placed beside the door to his cabin, and said, "Well, we should do a lit'l reviewing before yer N.E.W.T.s." He pulled out a ratty parchment that had tea and whiskey stains on it. Malfoy huffed in annoyance and Harry shot him a warning look.

Malfoy held up two fingers and mouthed "Two a.m. Astronomy Tower," at Harry with a challenging expression. Harry hesitated just an instant before nodding.

"Now then, Brinkenpops. Who kin tell me how to catch a Brinkenpop?" Hermione and many others raised their hand. "The rest of yeh fergot?" Hagrid asked loudly in disbelief. More people raised their hand. "Well, tha's better. Unicorns can perform wha' four magic functions?"

After dinner, Harry did something he would never have imagined he would do. He went to Snape's office and told him ahead of time that he was about to break the rules.

"I just wanted to warn you that I'm dueling Draco tonight," Harry said, standing just inside the door to Snape's office. Snape still looked like he needed a real night's sleep.

"You really feel the need to do that?" asked Snape after putting down his quill and rubbing his neck.

"Yes. I'm dying to do that."

Snape rested his chin on his hand and considered Harry. "Willing to tell me the time and place?"

"No."

"Overconfidence, Harry," Snape chastised.

Harry straightened his shoulders. "I'll let someone else know," he pointed out. "Since I need a second."

"Ms. Granger, please, or Ms. Weasley."

"Not Ron?" Harry asked, letting the door to the office close just in case anyone was walking by in the corridor.

"I must admit, I trust his judgment less than that of your other friends."

"Penelope?" Harry tossed out, curious what the response would be.

Snape tilted his head again. "Her magic is limited by low confidence or bad experience, or both. Her judgment seems fine."

"All of them, then?"

Snape hesitated, lips working in silence. "Do not allow the duel become an all out war, if you can help it."

Harry hadn't considered that. "Okay," he agreed, settling on Ginny in his mind and hoping immediately that Penelope didn't find out.

In the common room that evening it took a half hour for Harry to catch Ginny's eye to slip her a note without anyone else noticing. As soon as she surreptitiously read it, Harry wished he had made the reason clearer for why he was asking her to meet him at 1:30 that morning, because her eyes revealed a strange struggle. She slipped the note away without looking up at him.

* * *

"I'm sorry," Harry said first thing when he stepped down into the common room to meet Ginny. She wore a dressing gown over her nightgown and she waited with her arms wrapped around herself. He went on, "I should have been clearer. I need a second for a duel in half of an hour."

She straightened and blinked. "Oh. Okay. Uh . . ." She looked down at herself. "Let me go change, just a minute." At the stairs she added, "Or a few, since I have to be silent."

Five minutes later, she reappeared in her regular school robes, wand in hand. "Thanks," Harry said with feeling. "I appreciate this. Snape insisted . . ."

"You told Professor Snape you were dueling?" she interrupted in shock.

"It does make it harder to punish me if he hears about it later," Harry pointed out pleasantly as he held open the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"True," Ginny admitted. "Why me? Why not Ron?"

Voice quiet in the empty corridor, Harry replied, "Believe it or not, Severus preferred you over your brother. He also had faith in Hermione, but she needs sleep more than you right now because of revising."

"Huh. Maybe there is hope for my final grade after all."

"You aren't doing well in Defense?" Harry asked in disbelief.

"Practical is fine--I hate taking examinations," she complained tiredly.

They were ten minutes early, but Draco and Nott were waiting when they arrived, standing casually beside the stairs leading into the tower. Nott's face had thinned to skull-like during his absence for recovery, lending him a poisonous look.

"Thought you'd bring Longbottom," Draco said.

"He's too stressed from revising," Harry explained. "You don't accept my second?"

Draco shrugged. Harry looked to Nott who stood silent and unreactive, though he still looked calculating. He moved only when Draco did, to walk up the stairs to the tower. Nott and Ginny moved off to opposite sides of the large room, the last room before roof level. The telescopes were packed in trunks along one wall, and they would have to be careful not to damage them. The room was a little too small for duelling, which made it harder to counter what was spelled, which made it more dangerous.

Harry and Draco started back to back, and this time Harry remained silent and focused rather than taunting his old enemy. They parted, counted off, turned and spelled at exactly the same moment. Draco flew backward, struck with Harry's Blasting Curse. The white arc of light, that had emerged from Draco's wand as he sailed backward, spun its way slowly toward Harry. Harry had not heard the incantation that produced it. He tried a series of counter-curses to no effect. Across the room Draco was standing up using the wall, licking his lips in apparent anticipation of his opponent's fate.

"Come, now Potter, just one little spell," Draco taunted. "It isn't in any textbook this school would use, even with Snape teaching the class."

Harry found himself backing up and trying a series of blocks, but even the most advanced ones he knew had little or no effect. The arc now felt like a scythe inextricably approaching him. He swallowed hard and thought frantically.

"A Doppelganger," Ginny said insistently.

"I don't know that one," Harry shouted, still backing up.

Draco complained, "No help from the second until you are down."

"Like you don't cheat every time," Harry snapped, ducking down rather than backing all the way to the wall. The arc dipped as well, not fooled. Harry began to wonder frantically what it was going to do to him.

Ginny shouted, "Stand still and tap your forehead with the incantation *Doppelgangerus*. Quickly." Harry moved to the other side of the narrow oval on his side of the room and did as she said. Ginny added stridently, "Wait for it to form before you move."

Harry needed a lot of will to hold still while faced with the curved blade of light turning ever faster toward him. A shimmer formed before Harry's eyes, a shimmer like a mask with eyeholes. He dove aside just as the arc rotated in to strike, and looked back in time to see an explosion of light swallowed up by sparkles. As he got to his feet, Draco incanted something angrily, it sounded like a Fire Charm. Harry reacted without thought, putting up a Freezing counter. Another explosion erupted, though it swallowed itself rapidly.

Harry didn't flinch during the following barrage of spells and counters, and half a minute later Draco was down just as the door to the tower swung open.

"Well," Professor McGonagall breathed. "I should have guessed, but I continue to expect better of you, Mr. Potter." Filch shuffled in behind her, carrying his wide-eyed cat and grinning fiercely.

Harry, for the very first time, didn't feel her disappointment. He slowly lowered his wand hand and held her gaze steadily as she approached. He felt outside of this place, and this room, as though it had lost its meaning. Her eyes darted over his face. "Hm," was all she said before stalking over to the small white ferret trapped in a power pentagram on the floor by Nott's feet. "Undo this, Mr. Potter," she said, gesturing at the floor.

Harry hesitated, only because he was trying to read her mood. She had not commanded him; her voice was unexpectedly flat, conversational even. He waved the spells away. Draco reappeared in a heap and floundered to stand up. Nott watched him struggle for a few seconds before reaching down to help him.

"No second, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

Harry glanced around. A voice incanted a Disillusionment reversal before Ginny appeared and stepped forward.

"Nicely done, Ms. Weasley," said McGonagall. "Didn't see you there." She turned to the Slytherins "Fifty points from your house for each of you for duelling."

"What about them?" Draco demanded when she turned to leave.

"Unfortunately we don't have a system that accommodates negative points, Mr. Malfoy, otherwise I would."

Harry wondered if it had actually become that bad. He had noticed that their gems had seemed even more paltry than before, as though everyone in the House was now in the spirit of making the best of the situation. As he followed the headmistress down the staircase, he hoped a hundred points put Slytherin behind Ravenclaw, then thought of Snape and sort of hoped not, but then thought again of Malfoy and Parkinson and hoped so again.

At the seventh floor McGonagall turned on Harry and said stiffly, "I'll be informing your guardian, who can deal with you as he pleases." When Harry just shrugged casually, she stiffened. "Goodness, I hope Severus knows what he has got himself into."

Draco and Nott glanced back at them several times as they departed, glowering in defeat. Harry watched McGonagall stride away in the other direction, leaving Filch, who was muttering to his cat. As Harry watched the headmistress' robe billowing behind her, he mulled her comment over with a little concern.

"Best get along now," Filch said. "Never know what might happen to ya out late like this. Eh?"

Harry and Ginny walked away, reviewing the duel in low tones. "Thanks," Harry said, when they stepped through the portrait hole. "For the spell--it saved my skin."

She grinned, clearly enjoying that notion. "I had to learn that one a long time ago to make my brothers think I was in my room when I was out secretly practicing Quidditch."

"Good thing," Harry breathed. He gave her a wave as he headed for the boys' dormitory. She gave him a smile with just a hint of melancholy.

* * *

Hermione's strange new hobby of spelling her fellow students reduced over the next week, so Harry didn't bother Ron, the mad reviser, with it. Harry found himself ignoring most everything and holding dearly to the notion that it would all be over before he knew it, one way the other. They revised and quizzed each other constantly over the next week. Harry doubted anything could sink into his exhausted brain, but somehow it did, since he did better on Hermione's practice examinations at the end of the week than he had with the ones at the beginning.

Ron looked haunted and frantic during the day and he mumbled a lot in his sleep, which he didn't normally. The Durmstrang students were holding up much better, not seeming to dread the looming examinations the way the rest of them

did, although Darsha was less civil than usual as though sensitive to getting distracted. Harry didn't take it personally since he didn't believe he was at his best either.

Draco ignored him now, although Harry found Nott's eyes on him more often when he looked over at the Slytherins during class, making Harry think Draco's last words to him in the Dungeon were good advice.

* * *

The first day of N.E.W.T.s finally arrived. Nervous, even though the first test was his best subject, Harry took a seat at one of the old desks and focused his thoughts exclusively on Defense against the Dark Arts, valiantly calming the swirling in his mind of book pages and notes that tried to overwhelm him like a wave. Beside him, Neville, who had knocked the chair over while pulling it out, was apologizing with a stutter. Harry decided that he fortunately was not feeling *that* nervous. The old witch across from him gave him a nice smile, adjusted her tiny glasses as she studied him, then said, "Well, we'll go through the tests anyway, dear boy."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry agreed. Beside him he heard Neville saying, "Sir? Sir?" Harry turned and found that the middle-aged wizard across from Neville was staring at *him*. The man sat straight finally and tried to find his place in his parchments. "Well, uh, Longbottom, right? You probably aren't as dangerous as that one over there."

Harry scoffed loudly enough to carry, then cleared his throat when his testwitch looked up in confusion. She had pulled a silver pill box out of a large case beside her and set it on the table. "Curse neutralization first," she said in her plodding voice. "Remove the pin from inside the box." She backed up her chair as though expecting the worst to happen. Harry ran through the Curse Removal spells he had had copious opportunity to practice on Malfoy's wombat crate. The pillbox popped open and he held out the straight pin by its pearl end.

"Yes, very good," the testwitch said in relief as she scooted her chair closer in.

Harry turned to give a victorious grin to Neville and found his friend had already handed his pin over. Harry gave a low growl of happy challenge as the testwitch brought out three dolls and explained that one of them was charmed, one was cursed, and one was a transfigured stuffed bear. She informed him that he was required to determine which was which without undoing any of the spells.

Harry sat up and studied the three old cloth dolls with china faces. Other than being old and grimy in slightly different ways, they looked identical. He took out his wand and prodded one of them and nothing happened. Two tables down there was a shriek, the sound of a knocked over chair, then someone, maybe Justin, saying in great distress, "*That's* the cursed one. That one." Harry leaned back as far as possible before prodding the middle one. Finally, he shook himself and incanted the curse detection spell Snape used, the one on the right, still unprodded, flared red. "That one's cursed," Harry said.

The testwitch smiled sweetly. Neville cleared his throat. Harry glanced that way and found Neville's testwizard was putting away the dolls. With a groan of annoyance Harry scratched his head. How does one detect charmed? he wondered. With a blush ahead of time, Harry leaned over the remaining two and whispered, "Good dolly." The one in the middle opened its eyes. Harry glanced around to make sure no one else had heard him.

Next came a series of curses he had to counter. Harry did as instructed and stood before the desk, wand out. The testwitch was very gentle with her curses, seeming very reluctant to risk hurting him. They got through that quickly enough and the old witch smiled broadly as she made notes on her parchment at the end.

Harry and Neville finished at the same time. As they stepped away together, Harry said, "You were doing well."

Neville replied, "I'm sure you got a better score."

"I don't know," Harry returned with a smile. They returned to the corridor to wait for the next section to begin. "Is the Defense N.E.W.T required for growing plants?" Harry teased.

"They said they'd like to see it, because some things like *Magisterum* and *Pickwicker* can get dangerous, unexpected like. And there's an entire greenhouse full of *Pickwicker* at Waxman's."

"What do they use it for?"

"Treasure chests--try to break in and they swallow you whole. People like them for traveling abroad, because they're light."

Harry grinned at that image and leaned heavily against the wall. He sighed and thought ahead to the written test for *Care of Magical Creatures*.

Lunch was quiet all around. Students were either studying or had caught the general mood of pained panic and kept their conversations low in deference to it. Ron was cramming for *Divination* so Harry offered to quiz him and as a result lunch became a bit of a game, with Frina, Penelope, and Ron guessing answers in between Hermione's scoffing and eye-rolling. After a bit of this they switched to *Care of Magical Creatures*.

Harry felt confident about Potions. He had even looked up the instructions for Farnsworth's Faffery, just in case, although he thought it would come in useful at some point anyway. The written test was first. Harry, seated with his friends, waited for the signal to begin. The first question: *What ten potions use mossbeak?* was easy enough, although a few people groaned upon turning over their examination parchments. Two hours later, Harry turned his long sheet back over and stretched his shoulders. He shared a smile with Hermione and checked on Penelope, who looked less elated and more worried than expected.

The practical section was two potions, the Draught of Living Death and Moonstone Elixir. There were many ingredients to choose from, hundreds maybe. Several students stood before the supplies area with hands on their heads, looking distraught. Harry collected his needed ingredients and brewed with studious care. He finished with just five minutes to spare, and long after Hermione, but he was not going to unnecessarily rush this examination section.

Care of Magical Creatures was harder than expected and he was glad for the quizzing session at lunch since it gave him two answers he otherwise wouldn't have known.

At the end of the day, Harry, stumbled to the dormitory, fell onto his bed, and fell asleep. Penelope woke him two hours later. "Your friends wish to know if you are coming to eat," she said as she sat on the edge of the bed.

Harry eyed her there and considered that they were alone and that the common room sounded very quiet outside the dormitory door, so it was unlikely anyone would come in. He pulled her down onto the bed, feeling gratified just to put his arms around her.

Snape stopped by as Harry sat down to dinner. "And your testing went how?"

"Good," Harry assured him, feeling confident since he could list on one hand of fingers the questions he wasn't sure of from all three tests that day.

"Even Ms. Granger looks ready to be finished," Snape observed, looking over Harry's friends.

Hermione nodded tiredly, making them all grin..

* * *

The next day, Harry had his *Transfiguration* examination right after lunch. *Astronomy* and *Herbology* that morning were a bit of a blur. Unusually, tea was provided at lunch in big kettles. Harry drank three cups and as he left with his friends, wished he had drunk a fourth.

The hardest part of the examination was the globe transformation. Harry managed to get a wisp of smoke inside the delicate glass on his third try, just inside the time limit. Breathing out deeply in an attempt to overcome his utter relief, Harry waited for the next items to be set before him, a pair of baby chicks to be turned into cotton balls. Beside him, Lavender's chicks were leaping for freedom as white puffballs with legs.

At the very end, as the testwizard was straightening his score sheet, Harry said, "I'd like to do an extra credit transfiguration."

The middle-aged wizard with a birthmark in the shape of Wales on his brow, said, "Which one would that be? Oh, no, let me guess, Animagus?" At Harry's nod the man went on in an amazed tone, "There have been so very many of those this year. Well, go ahead," he prompted as though it had become rote.

With a frown, because Harry had hoped to surprise the man at least a little bit, he stood up behind the desk. The room was crowded, but there was just enough space. He hoped. He breathed deeply and tried to manage the spells through the veil of fatigue clouding his thoughts. Imagining Malfoy mocking him for not getting into the Auror's program, Harry felt the rippling pass over his flesh. A moment later he was looking down at the now diminutive wizard in old grey robes. The testwizard looked up at him, unblinking and stunned. The rest of the room had fallen eerily quiet.

Harry flapped his wings once to get the testwizard to shake out of his spell. The man blinked, appeared to consider ducking under the table, and quickly made a note instead. Harry released the membrane around himself and his view shrunk down to normal.

"Well," the testwizard breathed. "Interesting. Can you, uh, fly?" he asked, sounding honestly curious. Harry leaned on the back of the chair and nodded. "Well, full points for that, I would say. You are all finished." Harry stood straight and started to leave, only turning back when the testwizard said quietly, "Honored to have met you, Mr. Potter."

In the common room before dinner, Harry was wishing for a butterbeer, or a real beer, or mead even, anything to calm the crazy circling of his thoughts and the accelerated beating of his heart. Repeating to himself that it was all over didn't seem to help at all. Around him, his friends sat or, in Ron's case lay, on the floor, with expressions of shell shock and over-stress. Harry didn't want to move, even though he wasn't relaxed, because he feared tensing even one muscle more than it was already.

"I think it's dinner time," Ron mumbled from the floor, his gaze centered beyond the ceiling.

A minute later Ginny came down the staircase. "Shall I get you all trays?" she asked solicitously. They all twitched and shifted slightly but no one actually stood up. "How did it go today?" she then asked brightly.

"Pretty good," Ron answered in a muffled voice. He seemed to have rolled over and now had his face against the rug.

Ginny laughed. "Shall I fetch Madam Pomfrey?" she asked kindly, though it was clearly a tease.

Ron raised a finger over his head. "Just you wait!" he proclaimed, then lost energy and fell silent.

"Dinner," Harry said and managed to sit up. He thought food would help, or knock him completely unconscious. Either way, it would be an improvement.

The Great Hall was even quieter than usual. Some students still had N.E.W.T.s the next morning, so stacks of books and parchments littered the tables. Harry barely tasted dinner, would have sworn he had not eaten, except that he remembered serving himself and later his plate was empty. For once, Ron only managed one serving of everything, with his head propped heavily on his palm and his fork hand a little uncertain and slow.

Snape came by at the end of the meal. "Feeling all right?" he asked, sounding surprised to find them all in such a state. General nodding and grunts went around. Harry looked up at his guardian with a doleful expression of exhaustion, bringing Snape's hand to his shoulder. "How did your Transfiguration examination go?"

Harry brightened at the memory. "Really good. I got full extra credit and I managed the hardest practical just in time. So I think it went okay. A few questions on the written I didn't know, but only a few." His eyes fell half closed as this brief flicker of elation wore off.

Snape patted his shoulder. "Go to bed, Harry. If you cannot sleep, send me a silver bird--I'll bring you something."

As Snape turned to leave, Ron asked, "What about the rest of us?" sounding hurt.

"What about you, Mr. Weasley?" Snape prompted before he was distracted by Harry's head nodding to his chest and jerking up again. "Do you need to be hovered to your dormitory?" Snape asked.

"No, no," Harry insisted, standing up as a blind man might, with judicious use of the table to guide him. "I'll make it. No hovering." As he walked to the doors, his friends akliter behind him, he stated, "I'm going to make it out of this school without ever being hovered again."

* * *

The next day, mostly recovered from his examinations but with mixed emotion, Harry followed his friends down to the Great Hall for the Leaving Feast. Some of the portraits waved at them as they passed. Students were talking excitedly about the upcoming summer holiday and going home, but Harry remembered clearly when this was his only home.

When they reached the second floor, Hermione walked quickly ahead of them, confusing Ron, which confused Harry, as he had believed Ron knew what she was up to. Hermione stopped at the top of the staircase to look around the walls and then frantically around the people milling in the Entrance Hall. When they reached her beside the doors, she waved them back and continued to look around as well as watch the stairwell up from the dungeon. Ron and Harry shared a hopeless and worried look but did as she bade them. A minute later, she turned and said, "Draw Malfoy over there by the wall, will you?"

Harry considered suggesting something reasonable like: maybe she should take a Calming draught and go to bed early. Instead, he wandered over to the blonde boy and said, "So, given up finally?" mostly because he had been fantasizing something akin to this conversation.

"I told you, you won," Draco snapped darkly. "Trying to make me change my mind?"

Harry drifted toward the wall Hermione had indicated, the one beside the tall main doors. "That was before the duel," said Harry in a challenging way to ensure Draco's continued attention. Draco followed and Harry glanced over at his friends and saw Hermione chatting with Greer. Harry opened his mouth to say something in response when Greer, red-faced charged their way.

"Six points, Mr. Malfoy . . . eight points, actually it should be, four for each of your insulting remarks. And it should be more considering how well I've treated you this term."

"What?" Draco asked, truly, completely confused. He glared at Harry who honestly shrugged back. Greer stalked off while Harry wondered why Hermione was giving points to Slytherin.

McGonagall stepped down the staircase and into the Great Hall, freezing the gems. The students began whispering fiercely and glancing at the score. A few giggled even. Harry blinked and accidentally bumped into Ron as he rejoined his friends. Gryffindor was far behind in last, but the other three houses were in a straight tie with three hundred twenty six points each. Slowly, all of them turned to Hermione who looked much less frantic and very smug instead.

Ron shook his head and then put his head against the wall and laughed heartily. They all joined in as they walked into the Great Hall, until tears were staining their cheeks and Harry had to take off his glasses to dry his eyes on his sleeve. "I don't bloody well believe it," Ron kept repeating while they all sat down.

"They all won," Frina said as she and Penelope joined them.

"They all lost," Harry pointed out, still very amused.

Snape stopped beside them on the way to the front, looking disgusted. "I should have known." With a pursed mouth he looked over each of them before returning a narrow gaze at Hermione. "I should have known the paint charm was merely . . . a distraction."

Harry turned to his friend in surprise. She sat straight and leveled her face. "Oh, yes, of course." They all chuckled again, despite trying not to. Snape groaned and stalked away.

At the head table McGonagall said to Snape, "Well, I think this is a first."

"It was quite well settled," Snape crossed his arms and said in a low voice, "until someone deducted a hundred points for a mere duel. From only one house, I might add."

"I might remind you of the story Albus used to tell of the time three hundred years ago when Hufflepuff went a hundred points to the negative and all the students in that House disappeared. *Poof!* And no one could find them for a week until one of them owled from Iceland." She took a long sip from her goblet as though alarmed at the very notion of that happening while she was headmistress. "I'll confess I was a little afraid of even tempting anything of that sort."

Snape's brow furrowed farther, though he looked more concerned now. "I had not heard that story," he admitted. He picked up his goblet as well, peered into it and appeared disappointed by its contents. "Leaving Gryffindor's points alone did not change the outcome, in any event," he conceded.

McGonagall stood and brought the students to silence. "Well, we've arrived at the end of another year. I did not imagine it could be more memorable than the last . . . but somehow it feels so at this point." She managed a smile. "We seem to have no clear winner for the house cup. So . . ." She waved her wand and banners dropped down from the ceiling, swirled with the colors that had until recently marred the schools floors. The students frowned, except the Gryffindors who couldn't help grinning.

McGonagall went on, "I certainly do hope you all return to us safe for next year, those of you who are due to, of course. And to the rest of you, who are moving on, the best of luck to you all." Harry was certain her eyes came over to him at that moment. She adjusted her chair in preparation for sitting again and concluded, "But, we are all hungry, I'm sure, so let's eat."

A few owls flitted in during the subdued dinner. Errol, slow and as clumsy as ever, stumbled through a landing on their table. Harry found he had more sympathy for the bird than he had before so he helped it right itself. It held its leg out to him, even though the letter clearly was addressed to Ron. Harry took the letter and gave the bird a boost to get airborne before handing the letter over to his friend, who seemed surprised to see it.

Ron put down his fork and opened the envelope. When he fished inside, he gave out a strange squeal. "Look, look," he insisted to Harry. "My finishing present, look!" Harry examined the small stack of tickets Ron held. Little Quidditch players on broomstick circled the edges in orange ink. "Tickets to see the Cannons." He gazed heavenward. "Thank you dad," he whispered pathetically. "Hermione! Want to come? It is just four days away. Oh, what a perfect end of school present," he marveled.

"Sure Ron," Hermione agreed.

"And Harry," Ron said, gripping Harry's sleeve and almost making him spill his butterbeer. "And dad. And me. That's four. Uh, sorry Ginny," he said.

She shrugged. "That's all right . . . they're playing the Falcons."

"Don't like them, then?" Harry asked.

Ginny made a cutting motion across her throat after checking that Ron wasn't watching.

Dinner concluded quietly, which was fine with Harry's worn nerves.

"Do you wish to take the train with your friends?" Snape asked him as the Hall slowly emptied out. The Seventh Years were almost the only ones left.

"It's a little out of the way, but yeah, I think I would."

Snape nodded that he understood. "I will see you at home late in the evening, then."

"You can leave right away?" Harry asked.

Snape frowned. "I have much too much to finish. I'll bring it with me and come back when necessary. It is all paperwork this year rather than potions."

Harry's friends were standing up to go as well. "I'll see you at breakfast," he said as they moved to the doors, Harry with Penelope's hand in his. Snape nodded once and drifted ahead of them.

Suze angled past them at the doors and said to Harry, "Too bad you are all finished."

"I was thinking the opposite," Harry said, making her grin. He then had a thought. "Hey, do you go to the Falmouth home games?" When she nodded vigorously, he asked, "Are you going to be at the Chudley match? We'll be there, Ron got tickets from his dad."

"Yes," she replied eagerly. "Just in the bleachers though."

"That's where these are," Ron said, still clutching his tickets to his chest. "We can meet up then."

"By the banners," Suze suggested. "Do you need another ticket?" She fished in her small bag and pulled out a pair. "My parents don't particularly like to go and if I'm meeting people they'll let me go alone." She held the ticket out, wavering between giving it to Harry or Ron.

Harry reached out for it. "Thanks," he said. She smiled broadly in return.

As they walked through the corridors, Penelope said, "You are not intending that for me?"

"Can you make it?" When she shook her head sadly, he said, "I'll find someone to use it." At the very top of the stairs, Harry said, "I can't believe we're leaving for good."

"It *is* hard to imagine," Hermione agreed.

"I can't bloody wait to be out of here," Ron stated. "How many times have I wished to be like Fred and George I cannot tell you." He threw up his hands and announced loudly, "And we're alive!"

Harry and Hermione laughed while Penelope eyes widened in alarm. McGonagall came beside them. "Having a nice evening?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes, Professor," Ron said with great feeling. "A wonderful evening."

As she swept away, McGonagall said, "Good thing your N.E.W.T.s are completed, Mr. Weasley, I don't think you could have survived another."

* * *

The next morning Harry said goodbye to everyone, all the teachers, especially Hagrid, but not Filch who stood in the Entrance Hall glowering at them as they tramped by on the way out.

"Visit often, Harry," McGonagall said as he shook her hand yet again.

"I will, Professor." She retained his hand and tugged him back as he turned to depart. "And go easy on my deputy headmaster over the summer holiday," she stated quietly, but apparently in complete seriousness.

"Yes, ma'am."

The train ride required almost no time, it seemed, as though a time-turner sped it along the tracks back to London. On the platform, students were exchanging addresses and notes and saying goodbyes. Harry stacked his trunk and Hedwig's and Kali's cages onto a trolley. Hedwig fluffed herself, annoyed, as Kali sniffed her through the tiny bars.

Hermione restrained Harry as he started toward the gateway. "You can't take a Chimrian out in Muggle public Harry. An owl is bad enough."

He hurriedly dug out an old robe which he tossed over Kali's cage. Her needle-long claws immediately came through the fabric, moving it. Hermione waved an Impermeable Charm at it and the motion stopped. She then gave Harry a firm hug.

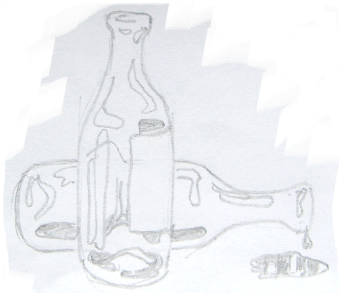
"I'll be seeing you, Hermione," Harry insisted.

She nodded, making the hair on her lowered head bob as she dabbed at her eyes. Ron shrugged and appeared vaguely embarrassed.

"I have to catch another train," Penelope said, glancing at the clock on the platform.

Harry gave her a hug and a kiss, while his friends found other things to occupy their attention. Then Penelope ran off, Opus pushing Penelope's and Frina's trunks with his own on a trolley. He shook Harry's hand as he went by, then waved to them all before disappearing through the archway.

Mrs. Weasley came and collected her children while Harry made plans to meet his friends as soon as possible, the next day if they could work it out. When they were gone, Harry took a seat in the sunny slice at the end of the platform, waiting for the next train back north again.



Chapter 47 -- The Game of Life

The next morning Harry bounded down the steps, forcing Snape to step backward out of his path. "Off somewhere?" Snape asked in surprise.

"Yep. Ron, Ginny, Hermione and I are going into London for the day," he replied brightly. He stopped and looking hesitant, asked, "That's all right, isn't it?"

Snape tossed one long-sleeved hand to the side and said, "Of course." Harry gave him a smile and went to the dining room where he grabbed up toast, quickly buttered. Snape asked, "You will be returning at what time?"

Harry chewed and made a thoughtful noise. "Late, maybe."

Snape thought a moment. "Not later than 1:00, if you would."

"Okay," Harry readily agreed. He was looking forward to the day with hungry anticipation. Before he stuffed the last of the bread in his mouth, he was already reaching for the Floo Powder.

"Have a good day," Snape intoned. Harry, chewing, just nodded. "Do try to exercise some caution." Harry waved him off and stepped into the hearth.

After stopping at Gringott's to change some Galleons into Pounds, Harry and his friends wandered the city in good spirits. They walked in pairs, Harry sometimes with Ron and sometimes with Ginny, who didn't seem to expect anything, which allowed him to relax. When it rained lightly they ducked into a sandwich shop, where they drank three pots of tea and talked for several hours. The sun broke through as they departed, so they walked around Regent's Park and rented paddle boats. A plantsman had to yell at them when their water fight got out of hand. He seemed a little confused as to how they were making so much water fly everywhere without using anything but their hands. Giggling, because they Harry and Ron had threatened, when Hermione sided with the park staff, to dump her into the water to make her transform, they walked toward the the exit to the park. By the time they reached the north side, the scent of food drove them to search for an early lunch.

Stuffed with Indian food, which Ron could not cease raving about, they took the underground to the Victoria and Albert. Feet aching after hours of strolling the many, many rooms, they found a pub and settled in to recover. Harry leaned his head back against the paneled wall, exhausted. Only four in the afternoon and this already felt like the longest, funnest day of his life. Hermione had taken off a shoe to rub her foot. Ron solicitously offered to rub it for her, making Ginny roll her eyes. Thirsty, they ordered another round of beers after the first quickly disappeared.

A few other patrons cheered at the football match that was on the tellie over the bar. Harry tried to follow it as Hermione and Ginny discussed shoes. It looked like a very boring game since the players were always stuck on the ground. He watched idly until he was distracted by an old man in an even older appearing cloak, approaching along the booths with a stunned expression on his face. Everyone hushed when he leaned on their table for support.

In a quavering voice he said, "So very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Potter," while holding out his hand. Harry returned the jittery handshake and wondered just how old the man was, since with his thin hair, age-spotted scalp, and

straggly sideburns, he was possible a hundred and fifty. As if reading Harry's thoughts, the man said, "In my day, it was Grindelwald, you know. We thought no one could get any eviler than 'im. Should never think that."

"Jake," the barman said, approaching. "You botherin' these youngsters?"

"It's all right, sir," Hermione quickly said. Harry had just opened his mouth to say something similar. He closed it and shook his head but the man approached anyway.

"No, it isn't," the barman said, putting a hand on Jake's arm, then pulling it back, apparently because he got a kink in his shoulder. "Come on, Jake," he insisted as he rubbed his neck in painful annoyance.

"Really, sir," Hermione insisted. "He's a friend . . . of an old friend." She squinted a bit at the old wizard and said, "You're Jacarro Sazelac, aren't you?"

The man smiled faintly. "Ay, you know this old bloke?" the barman asked, stunned.

"Pull up a chair," Ron insisted, when Hermione elbowed him. "Would you like something?"

"Scrumpy, but they don't serve that anymore," the man muttered nostalgically.

"How about cider?" Ron asked, and went to fetch it after yet another elbow in the ribs.

Jake leaned over to Harry. "Ya' got yourself some fine friends here, young man."

"You mentioned Grindelwald," Ginny prompted in an interested voice at the same time as Hermione asked, "Did you know Dumbledore well?" Harry waved them to silence as the barman returned with the cider.

"Don't believe a word 'e tells you," the barman announced loudly, exasperated, as he plunked down the drink. "Mad as a hatter. Shouldn't be on the street."

Jake sipped his cider and smacked his lips. "Cold at least. Yeah, Social try to pick me up sometimes. Never seem to quite manage," he stated easily as though amused. He took another longer drink and said, "I knew Albus Dumbledore. He was older than me, believe it or not, though 'e never seemed to quite look it, the ol' weasel."

"Did you fight Grindelwald?" Harry asked.

Jake half smiled, half frowned, as he considered Harry sideways. "Not in the sense you would perhaps think meaningful. I was Assistant to the Minister of Magic when Grinnwald made his announcement that he was king. *He* was a mad one--made the announcement to the Muggles too. That was a mess in itself. Fortunately most Muggle newspapers thought it a hoax. Then the fires started. He liked starting fires it turned out and them Muggles certainly noticed those.

"No, the only thing I found myself able to do was keep the Minster, Fishbane, 'is name was, outta Albus' hair while 'e fought him." He studied Harry for a long moment. "Albus was a lot older than you, young man, hundred maybe, but he lost his former mentor, Druis Xerxentot, the finest wizard in those days, in the very first battle. That woke everyone up, let me tell you. People refused to believe he was really dead to avoid believing things had got so bad so quick like. No one was used to fighting dark wizards back then, thought they was over all that long ago. Above it."

They all drank and listened raptly as Jake went on. Jake sipped his second cider slower than the first with much animated lip-smacking. "Fortunately, Grindelwald was a loner, though that just meant there weren't any stupid people dragging him back, neither. Albus put out a call for help for anyone who knew how to fight dark magic, which was considered beneath most witches and wizards back then. Now they teach it to you all, I hear, and don't I know who's doing *that* was. I did a little searching in the Ministry Archives for anything I could find and sent 'im an owl or two." He shrugged.

His bloodshot eyes took them all in one at a time. "Did you kids all fight Voldemort, or you just keeping Potter company now?"

"They stood in front of me during the final battle," said Harry with laugh of chagrin. "I was a little too distracted to defend myself."

Jake winked at them and toasted them sloppily with his mug. After a large gulp, he said, "Don't get to be my age--your friends'll all be dead." They all gave each other bemused looks while Jake finished his cider. "Well, the misses will be wonderin' where I'm at." He stood up shakily.

"The misses?" Hermione mouthed silently in disbelief.

"Gretel, my fourth. Don't have more than three wives. Second one's the best, remember that," he said to Harry, then chuckled as he shuffled out. When he was outside they all broke out laughing.

"Shouldn't encourage 'im," the barman complained when he came by later to collect empties.

Harry stared at the time and the last of their drinks. "Maybe we should go too."

Out on the pavement, they were walking a little unsteadily but the fresh air felt good. "Hermione," Ron said jokingly, "will you be my second wife?" This made them all double-over with laughter.

"No," Hermione replied forcefully, making them all laugh again. Harry had a hard time stopping giggling once he started. They stopped at a corner and looked around themselves. "Where are we?" Hermione asked.

Ron reached for his wand, and Harry had to shove his arm to get it out of sight of a group of women walking together in identical t-shirts and fake bunny ears. One wore a veil and little red horns. "Wha' was that?" Ron asked loudly, garnering sharp looks from a few of them.

One street seemed much quieter than the others. "Let's go this way," Harry said, starting out without waiting for a consensus. They walked a few blocks until they reached an area of nightclubs. Harry blinked down into the nearest one. "I love this place," he announced.

Ron laughed. "What are you talking about? You haven't been here."

"Yes, I have," Harry insisted. "With Tonks. Had a great time, well, 'til her ex tried to join us, but . . ."

"What?" the others all said together, moving in closer with avid expressions. Harry looked them over and thought over what he might add to that to improve things. Nothing came to mind. "When was this?" Hermione demanded, insinuating.

"Uh, maybe I don't want to say," Harry said, blushing.

"I think . . . we need another round," Ron concluded. He headed down the steps into the nightclub, Ginny's eyes following him in concern.

"Sounds good," Harry concurred.

In the club the barman gave Harry a friendly hello. Ron leaned over the bar, "Was he in here with a woman whose hair always changes color?"

"Sure, Tonks. She used to come in here a lot."

Ron elbowed Harry painfully before dragging him to the far wall where it was a little quieter. "Why didn't you say?"

Harry shrugged, wondering how he had lost control of his tongue. Hermione eventually brought over two drinks and handed one to Ron. Ginny gave the drink she held to Harry. "Not having any?" Harry asked, sipping gratefully from the straw to cover his embarrassment. She shook her head, looking grim and very Mrs. Weasleyish.

It was just after two when the door of the house in Shrewsthorpe creaked open, following no little fumbling with the lock. Ginny hauled a stumbling Harry across the threshold and stopped before a dark figure, outlined by the light from the hall beyond. She was very glad she had not joined the others in the last two rounds. The dichotomy of Snape as dreaded professor and Harry's guardian made her lick her lips nervously before she said, "Sir. Evenin', sir. Had to get a portkey to the station. Little worried about taking the Floo, you see," she explained, having had her brother Charlie knocked cold by landing on his head once after a night at the Leaky Cauldron.

Snape didn't respond or make any move to assist. Ginny tightened her hold on Harry's wrist at her shoulder and despite the extra weight it meant taking, urged him to step forward, hoping they both wouldn't tumble over Harry's drunken feet.

"Severus," Harry slurred in a greeting.

"You may just leave him here, Ms. Weasley," Snape intoned with just enough edge to chill anyone, let alone a student at Hogwarts.

Ginny cringed, extremely grateful that it wasn't her facing this. She wondered how Ron was fairing and whether he had let Hermione convince him to go home with her and make up an explanation tomorrow, as difficult as that would be. "Yes, sir," she said. "Ya' all right, Harry?" she asked. Not wanting to simply drop him on the floor, she propped him against the wall and gradually let go of him.

"Yeah, 's great," he managed, sounding happily out of place. "Than's."

Ginny backed up to the door, wondering if she should say something in Harry's defense. Harry straightened and pushed away from the wall, although he swayed a bit as he stood there. Snape's eyes were barely visible in the dark entryway. Ginny breathed deeply and said, "See ya' later, Harry." As she stepped out, she added quietly, "Probably much later." The door closed quietly and relatched when Ginny pulled tight on it from the other side.

"Hiya," Harry said, working his way down the wall a few feet. "Sorry. I'm a little late, I think."

"Hm." A pause ensued where Harry squinted at his guardian in the dim light. "Come with me," Snape finally said, apparently reaching some decision.

Harry pushed away from the wall and had to immediately catch himself on the other wall, but fortunately, the corridor of the entryway was narrow. Snape grabbed Harry's arm and hauled him firmly along with Harry barely keeping up as they crossed the main hall.

"Ow," Harry complained about the tight grip, but it didn't relax. "Where're we going?"

When they reached the toilet, Snape dropped Harry onto the bench across from the tub and turned the lamp up. "What were you drinking and how much?" Snape demanded.

Harry rubbed his arm where it had been clutched and thought that over. Snape roughly tweaked his chin up, making him reply, "Uh, mead, cider, coupla ciders, something bright blue. Those were good," he added in sudden memory.

Snape shook his head and went to the cupboard and searched among the myriad bottles. "I am tempted to simply let you suffer," he stated. "But you may have consumed enough to do you harm." He came over with a very small bottle of black liquid. "You do realize alcohol is toxic in excess quantities, do you not?" he asked snidely.

Harry considered that at length, not likely to come up with a response. Snape, with jerky movements, opened the bottle, lifted the glass stem out of it and held it horizontal so it would not drip. "Put out your tongue," he said.

"What is that?" Harry asked, never having seen it.

"It is going to make you empty the contents of your stomach."

"Wha?" Harry sounded dismayed.

"Because there is drink in your stomach you have not absorbed yet," Snape explained. His tone continued to harden. "Given your state, I expect you will inevitably do so anyway. You might as well make the most of it. Stick out your tongue."

Harry frowned and turned away. Even seated he was swaying as the room swung on an uneven axis.

"I am not giving you a choice," Snape pointed out, sounding vaguely malevolent now on top of stony. Harry, after a brief battle with himself, opened his mouth. Snape let two drops fall from the stem onto his tongue. Harry put his head in his hands to wait, moaning slightly. "I do hope you aren't expecting sympathy," said Snape.

With a hint of petulance, Harry said, "I just wanted to go to bed."

"You would have awoken most unwell in that case."

Harry frowned as nausea rolled through him. He fought it the first wave, but not the second.

When he stood straight from the toilet, he was handed a warm, damp cloth. Harry cleaned his face and rinsed his mouth thoroughly in the sink. His stomach felt better, but the room still reeled unnervingly. He dried his face and tried to hang the towel back up. Snape took it from him with a sharp motion and tossed it aside.

"What's wrong?" Harry demanded, glancing at his disheveled self in the mirror before looking quickly away, but not without straightening his shirt in a way that left it crooked on the opposite side.

"What is wrong?" Snape echoed in disbelief. "You are incapacitated with drink . . . that is what is wrong. Have you forgotten that you are a powerful wizard?" he demanded. "Did you consider what enormous damage you could do with that wand of yours in the state you are in?" Harry felt his pockets. "Did you lose it?" Snape asked derisively.

Defensive now, Harry snapped, "No, it's right here," as he pulled it from his back pocket. He didn't admit that it should have been in the wand pocket of his cloak. He did not remember moving it.

Snape crossed his arms, straightened, and sneered, "I admit, I expected better from you. Or more intelligent behavior, at least."

"Why are you being so mean?" Harry demanded, unable, presumably because of the alcohol, to fortify himself against the disapproval.

Snape hmpfed. "You may suffer in the morning then, if that is your desire." He pointed at the door to the toilet. "Go up to your room."

Harry gave him a dark look and tried to stalk past him angrily. He lost his balance, though, and had to catch himself on the doorframe. He clipped the bone of his shoulder and the pain made him angry. "You don't care about me," he muttered.

He didn't see Snape's eyes flicker to the ceiling in annoyance. "No, clearly not. Do you need help getting to bed?" he asked, sounding about as ungracious about the offer as one possibly could. Wounded green eyes came around to Snape, who huffed again in response. "You are hopeless right now," he commented. "Whatever it is, it is better left 'til morning. Come." He took hold of his charge's arm again and lead him across the hall to the steps. At the bottom Harry shook himself free with a jerking motion and stomped up on his own with generous use of the handrail.

Snape followed behind and stood in the doorway, watching Harry weave his way to the bed and fall on it. "I don't understand why I'm not allowed to have any fun. Just because you never have any doesn't mean you have to be so cruel," complained Harry, voice muffled by the duvet.

Snape stepped into the room partway, arms crossed, eyes dark. "It is not cruelty. I simply want to make it eminently clear that I disapprove of your behavior."

"S cruel," Harry insisted groggily, rolling over and putting his feet, shoes and all, on the bed. His face reflected pain as though he might lose control.

Snape stepped over and rather ungently removed Harry's shoes before dropping them on the floor and crossing his arms again. "Shall I have treated you in the manner my father did under these exact circumstances?" he asked, voice like a knife edge. "He took my wand and locked me out of the house, too incapacitated to even get out of the rain." When Harry didn't comment, Snape said more vehemently, "You think it is cruel to make certain you are not sick in your bed, to make certain you actually make it to your bed?"

Harry didn't want to accept that. He rubbed his eyes and said, "Do you have that pink stuff? My head is cracking open."

"You think you deserve it?"

Rubbing his temple now, Harry sat up on one elbow. Sounding close to the edge of control, he murmured, "Didn't I do everything I was supposed to? You said I did. I was tired of remembering being responsible." He rubbed his dry eyes then and added sadly, "I did everything."

"Yes," Snape agreed stiffly, "you did everything." With a slow shake of his head he went out and minutes later returned with a fizzing cup of pink liquid, which he handed over. As Harry gratefully sipped it, Snape said firmly. "Repeat this and you will be grounded for a week. No visitors. Repeat it again it will be two weeks."

Harry finished off the last of the liquid and sighed as the pounding in his head eased. "You're saying I'm not allowed to drink at all?"

"I am saying you are not allowed to lose control to it. There is a crossover point where your judgment about how drunk you are is impaired. Do not cross it again. I am surprised Ms. Granger let you, frankly."

"She was ahead of us," Harry pointed out.

"Good thing Ms. Weasley was behind, then, otherwise none of you may have found your way home."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, remembering Ginny turning down additional drinks. She had looked a little disapproving, he remembered now. Harry dropped back onto the bed, feeling almost normal. He watched as Snape went to the wardrobe, brought over a fresh set of pyjamas and dropped them on the foot of the bed. He then re-crossed his arms, still looking disapproving. "Are you set for the night?" he asked stonily.

Harry nodded and reached for his pyjamas which prompted Snape to depart.

Harry was awoken by a knocking on his door. He rolled over groggily, believing it to be in his dream. "Get up," Snape's voice said as he opened the door. Harry just groaned, reminded distressingly of his Aunt Petunia and every morning of the first eleven years of his life. "Up," Snape repeated.

"W' time is it?" Harry asked, his brain feeling as though it had an anchor tied to it, dragging him forcefully down into sleep.

"Eight. I am not going to allow you to sleep late simply because you stayed out late." When Harry didn't move he said, "Up, or I will teach you a spell you will definitely not enjoy." Harry opened his eyes, alarm shaking the lethargy off somewhat. Snape continued in a darker tone, "It would be ironic to use it on you as I learned it from your father that way."

"Oh dear," Harry murmured, forcing himself to sit up. "I'm up, I'm up," he insisted, rubbing his eyes hard since they were gritty and ached abominably.

"Breakfast will be on the table shortly," Snape said, making even that sound like a command.

Harry stumbled around the room and managed to put on some clothes, which was difficult as his eyes would not stay open very long at one time. Somehow he made it downstairs and into a chair at the table, where he propped his head up on his hand. He wanted nothing in the world more than to be back in bed, asleep, or at least attempting to sleep. Breakfast appeared. Snape poured him coffee and pushed it closer, even though it was well within reach.

"You must have had quite a bit. The 'pink stuff' as you call it usually renders one more recovered than this."

"I had a lot," Harry admitted, forking a sausage and chewing it down. He felt better almost immediately. "Ron must really be hurting," he said, then wondered where he had ended up since the last blurry thing Harry remembered was Hermione trying to convince him to come home with her instead. He also considered that it was nice of Ginny to make sure he got home. "So I'm not grounded?" he asked, thinking of checking up on his friends.

"Not this time. Some jubilation is to be expected when you finish school . . . though I am surprised just how much you indulged in," he added in a dark tone.

"You lose track like you said," Harry agreed, thinking he would definitely have to work out a way to avoid that. Harry buttered his toast and nibbled that down as he thought over the night before. "I'm sorry I said you were cruel."

"I wanted to make it clear I was angry with you. That feeling of lifted responsibility alcohol produces is a trap. I would let you despise me before allowing you to fall into it."

"So, if it does happen again . . . ?" Harry began.

Snape's eyes narrowed and his face, which had relaxed, hardened. "You will not like me, then."

"Yeah, I bet," Harry breathed, feeling cowed and little surprised to be so, especially after last night when he was feeling so independent and self-possessed. Harry sighed and moved his coffee in a way that cued Snape to refill it for him.

Harry took the Floo to the Burrow late in the morning. Mrs. Weasley gave him the usual hug, but it didn't have much feeling behind it. Ginny sat in the living room reading *Witch Weekly*. "Didn't expect to see you so soon," she said.

Harry sat beside her on the worn cushion. Mrs. Weasley headed back to the kitchen and started making cooking noises. Quietly, Harry said, "Snape wasn't happy, but I got off with a warning."

Ginny laughed. "Wow, didn't look like that was going to be the case last night."

"I blackmailed him a bit," Harry said, studying his fingers.

"You what? And how does one do that?"

"I reminded him that I did away with Voldemort," Harry said. "Think I can see Ron?"

"Oh, well." She thought a moment and leaned forward to look into the kitchen. "His punishment is YTBD." At Harry's questioning look, she explained, "Yet To Be Determined. But go on up, what can they do to you? Though, I'll warn you, Ron isn't feeling so good."

Harry glanced at the busy Mrs. Weasley and headed to the stairs. In Ron's room, his friend was lying in bed still a little greenish. "ello," he managed, upon turning his head to look at Harry coming in the door. "You look good," he accused. "How's that?"

Harry reached into his pocket and took out three small bottles, from which he poured out a splash of each into a grungy water glass beside the bed. He held it out to his friend saying, "Compliments of your least favorite Potions professor."

Ron managed to sit up halfway and accept it. "Who, Greer?"

"You never had Greer as a teacher."

Ron sipped the fizzing liquid. "I heard 'Mione complaining enough." He swallowed the rest of it. "Wow," he breathed, blinking brightly. "Get the recipe for that."

"He won't tell me so I think it's restricted."

"Who cares?" Ron exclaimed, sitting up. "No wonder you look so chipper. You get that last night?"

"After being forced to puke."

"I didn't need forcing," Ron said, slipping out of his pyjamas and into some clothes. "I need to go do damage control so this Quidditch match is still possible. Merlin, what was I thinking last night?"

* * *

Over the next days, Harry spent a great deal of time on correspondence. Friends and acquaintances from school all owled as the holiday began, saying how their time was going to be spent and providing addresses for the summer. Harry wrote back explaining his planned trip and his testing so many times he thought he should learn a parchment duplication spell. Even McGonagall wrote, wishing him luck on his continued application to the Auror's program. Harry wrote a very carefully penned letter back to her. As he sealed it up in an envelope he wondered why he had tried so hard, since he never did before and hadn't when writing her an essay just two weeks ago.

Harry also wrote a long letter to Penelope where he hoped her travels home had gone smoothly and giving her news of others from their letters. He sort of missed her already but he could easily get wrapped up in other things, for a while anyway, until he thought about being *really* close to her.

Snape came into the drawing room where Harry was working at the desk. "I'm almost done," Harry said, thinking his guardian wanted to sit there.

Snape waved him off. "I ordered you this," he said, holding out a large book, still wrapped in brown paper.

Harry opened it and read the cover. *Menacing Mastery*, it read. Harry pulled his head back and looked up in surprise. "This was in the restricted section at Hogwarts." When Snape gave him a look that implied he had incriminated himself, Harry explained, "Sometimes we were actually *allowed* in. But mostly not," he said as he opened the book. It contained a lot of very nasty things like disemboweling curses and inferno spells. "Thanks," Harry said. He set the book aside for later study and asked, "I can still go to Switzerland, right?"

"If you can fit it in, I don't see why not," Snape responded while he straightened the files stacked on the credenza.

Harry collected up his letters and the new book and stood to leave. "Thanks," he said again.

Snape shrugged lightly. "You are of age and may do as you wish . . . as long as it doesn't interfere with the peace of this household. Or threaten your future," he added with a sharp look.

* * *

The portkey to the Falmouth match dropped Mr. Weasley, Harry, Snape, Ron and Hermione between the circular towers of a small castle, overlooking an expanse of green lawn and, far below, a bay.

"Ugh, Pendennis," Ron grouched. "I think they do this to all the visiting fans."

"Where *is* the pitch?" Harry asked.

Ron pointed across the inlet to a similar castle on the other side. "Over there, in a spatial slice. Why did we not appear *there*, you may ask?" Ron continued to complain.

"Really?" Harry asked, trying to imagine a gap big enough to hold an entire arena. He could see an unusual number of people meandering around the towers across the way. A pair of gulls noisily flew overhead and the wind gusted onshore, making it almost chilly. A distant figure in a large orange hat disappeared as Harry watched him.

Ron put his hands in his pockets, looking happy to impart Quidditch history. "They've been extending the spells for two hundred years, from when it only seated three hundred rather than twelve thousand."

"Well, shall we go then?" Mr. Weasley asked. "Coast is clear. Heh, literally," he added with a crooked grin as he gestured at the empty lawn dipping down to hillside out of view and finally the ocean.

Ron quickly turned his bright cloak around so the autographed side faced out; he then took his father's arm. "Can't bloody wait to have the license," he muttered just before they Disapparated. Presently, Mr. Weasley reappeared, graciously offered Hermione an arm and disappeared with another *pop!*

"We need to find time for those lessons," Harry said, holding up his arm to be grasped.

Near the silver entrance, marked by tall, glistening banners, they found Suze waiting. She gave Harry a nice smile and greeted her professor a little shyly. Mr. Weasley introduced himself warmly, which brought her smile back. The area outside the seating was full of gregarious witches and wizards, some carrying drinks and snacks, others talking and gesturing broadly about the upcoming game.

Just as they found their seats, the sun came out, sweeping the blue-grey light from the stands and making the gilding on the banner poles sparkle. Blinking in the glare, even with the shade of his cap, Harry filed into a row between Suze and Snape. The stands were crowded even this early, maybe because the weather was so nice.

"You don't mind that I'm cheering for Falmouth?" Suze asked, pinching the corner of her grey cloak where a black falcon head logo resided with the encircling motto *Let us win, but if we cannot win, let us break a few beads*.

"No, not at all," Harry assured her. "There are other Falmouth fans in the visitor's section," he pointed out, gesturing at the two fans just down from them. ". . . so you won't be cheering alone, which is good, because I expect you'll be doing it often, if Ron's assessment of the Cannons' season is accurate."

"Sounds like it is," she opined a little pertly.

"Don't rub it in," Harry insisted with a smile.

"Want anything?" Ron shouted. "I'm going down for treats."

Harry leaned forward to look past Snape and Mr. Weasley. "What do they have?"

Ron started to list many things Harry had not heard of, such as Crusted Caterwauls and Delectable Delicates. "I'll just get you something," he finally said, seeing Harry's expression.

"Thanks."

Ron came back with something that at first Harry thought was an ordinary caramel apple, since it was red underneath, on a stick and smelled of caramel.

"Yum, a Cherry Bomb," Suze said beside him.

"Did you want something?" Harry only now thought to ask.

"No, it's unlucky to get anything before the game starts," she said knowingly.

"Ah." Harry started to take a bite of his treat only to have it spit a caramel-covered fruit ball into his mouth before he even got close. He pretended to expect that and chewed the sticky sweet. It tasted pretty good, actually. He tried not to imagine growing up like this, with regular sunny afternoons watching Quidditch, eating exploding candy. Tried, but didn't quite succeed. Snape was eyeing his sweet, Harry noticed when he glanced at him. "Want some?"

"No."

"Certain?"

"Quite," Snape replied in his driest voice.

Harry grinned and opened his mouth for another morsel; the treat was on target again. By the time the teams were being introduced, Harry had had his fill and given it up to Hermione who had originally insisted she did not want anything too sweet. She looked to be enjoying it from what Harry could see this many seats away.

The teams circled. Suze called out to a few of the Falcons by first name, shouting encouragingly. The Cannons fans in front of them turned around a few times in annoyance before finally ignoring her. For someone her size, she really could shout.

The Quaffle was tossed into the air and the teams became blurs of color. The Chudley first possession was wasted on a poor shot and Falmouth came back immediately and only did not score because a misdirected Bludger clipped the shooting Chaser's broom tail. As the game went on, Harry made himself relax, since he really didn't care who won beyond making Ron happy, and Ron seemed happy just to be here.

An off-key song started up among the more orange-clad fans. The words were not flattering at all. Harry glanced down their row and saw that Ron was mouthing the words and glancing at Mr. Weasley, who had his arms crossed and appeared sternly disapproving.

"You don't know the songs?" Suze asked Harry.

"I've never been to a match before."

"Really?" she sounded completely disbelieving.

"I went to the World Cup a few years ago. That's it."

"I was there too. Took months to talk my dad into taking me. Fortunately we left that evening; otherwise, I don't think I'd have heard the end of it."

"Good time to have left," Harry agreed.

"You were there that night?" she asked curiously after cheering a Falmouth goal.

"Yeah. What a night," he said at the memory. "Mr. Weasley sent us into the woods to get out of the way and we lost track of people and then someone sends a Dark Mark over our heads, using MY wand."

"Really?" she blurted, stunned and a little amused. A Cannon had fallen off her broom onto the turf and medi-witches were tending her.

"What are you discussing?" Snape asked when the crowd quieted.

"My last Quidditch match: the World Cup."

"Ah," Snape said somewhat snidely. "Surprising you wanted to go to another, given that."

Down on the field, they were picking up the fallen player on a large orange tarp and a substitution was announced.

"Someone used your wand?" Suze prompted curiously.

"Yeah, and there I was, trying to explain that I didn't know where I'd lost it. I didn't even know what the Mark meant-

"Wait," Suze said sharply. "YOU didn't know what the Dark Mark was?"

"No," Harry insisted.

Her face twisted in doubt. "Professor, is he telling the truth?" she asked Snape.

The game restarted and Falmouth nearly scored twice, one shot after another, the second shot bouncing off the ring. The crowd groaned. Snape replied. "I assume so. Remarkably naïve boy, Harry was."

"See?" Harry said in chagrin.

The game continued. A Falmouth player fell and this time the medi-witches took their time moving him off the pitch. The referee called a rare halt to the game, bringing both Seekers to the ground in the center of the grass where they proceeded to chat like old friends. Harry sat back, wishing he had not given away his secret so quickly. But then, a commotion from down the bench made them all lean forward. Ron was red faced and Mr. Weasley had a hold of his cloak, which meant he had a hold, in a way, around Ron's neck.

"Ronald Biliious . . ." Mr. Weasley was stating furiously, "I cannot believe a son of mine would use such language." He tugged Ron before him in Harry's direction. "Harry, would you mind terribly changing places with my son, who is apparently incapable of holding his tongue and temper at a harmless Quidditch match."

Harry glanced from Hermione's pained expression to the gaping looks from the two grey-robed Falmouth fans in the next row forward and finally to Ron's beet-red face. "Sure, Mr. Weasley," Harry replied agreeably. As he stood and let Ron pass, he said goodbye to Suze with ease, knowing that she and Ron would not have difficulty discussing the game. Furious, Ron took Harry's seat and crossed his arms. Harry slipped down the row to sit beside Hermione, wondering how long it would be before Ron realized he was sitting beside Snape.

Harry said hello to Hermione, wanted to ask what happened, but the furtive glances from the Falmouth fans with bad haircuts just ahead of them made him hold back. The game resumed, but the crowd remained quiet. One of the Falmouth fans scoffed and said to the other, "Gee hope this one doesn't claim to have fought Voldemort too. What a numbskull the redhead was."

Harry narrowed his eyes and glanced at Hermione. "I see the problem," he said.

She leaned close. "You could take your cap off."

"That would be too easy," Harry returned, watching Falmouth score easily on a simple dodge play. The fans in front of them leapt up and did a strange little victory routine that ended with four hands slapping over their heads followed by bumped hips. "Maybe I haven't missed that much," he commented to himself.

"I would say," Hermione confirmed dryly.

The Cannons finally scored, off an admittedly dirty play involving a Beater-pinch that could have been called as a foul. Harry was glad he wasn't on a broom facing the oversized Cannon Beaters. One of the Falmouth fans spun on them and snipped, "That the only way you can score?" Harry, not really wanting to get into a position of defending that, simply shrugged. The man scoffed. "You friends with that loon down there?" he asked indicating Ron.

"Best friends," Harry replied distinctly.

"Amazing he has friends," the thinner man said, the one whose bad haircut left him with a triangular bald spot that Harry had to work not to stare at.

"Yeah," the chubby one on the right agreed gregariously. "Bet 'e also claims to be in the Order. Order of the Pigeon, wasn't it called?" he added with a laugh.

Harry glared at the man as the world tried to close in on him. He could feel the green haze, sucked in by his anger, hovering just beyond the sphere of his vision. His hand was on his wand pocket when Hermione jerked him by the elbow. "Harry!" she whispered harshly. He dropped his arm and shook himself. The first man was eyeing him warily now, but at least it quieted him down.

The score was eighty to ten and the Cannons' Seeker was diving, apparently for the Snitch. The stands rose up, but he either was faking or lost track of it, because he returned to circling high. The fans, happy to stretch, remained standing. Mr. Weasley turned from talking to Snape and asked how things were going. "Fine," Hermione replied brightly. "Harry's only gone for his wand once," she teased.

"Hermione," Harry quietly chastised her. Snape, eyes narrowed, slid past Mr. Weasley with purpose. Harry just heard Hermione's whispered apology as Snape came alongside him in the crowded space and put an arm around his shoulders, gripped hard, and leaned over him. "You what?"

"I was just checking that I had it," Harry insisted, surprised by the concern Snape was showing.

"No green visions?" Snape whispered matter-of-factly.

"No," Harry replied, which was mostly true. He was again surprised, this time by Snape's perception.

The chubby Falmouth fan turned and made faces. He nudged his friend and pointed over his shoulder. The other turned and said, "Ha, he's in trouble with dad?"

Snape looked up and after a pause said, "Something you need, Mr. Trellis?"

Confused, the chubby man asked, "Do I know you?"

"No," Snape replied darkly. "Nor do you wish to."

The man's eyes bugged a little before he turned to his friend. "Dad's a friggin' dark magic goon . . . wonderful."

Snape's eyes narrowed to slits and Harry asked with a touch of innocence, "Not thinking at all about where your wand might be, are you?"

Snape backed off and released him. "As you were, Harry," he said easily, but he remained standing beside him. Gradually, everyone returned to sitting on the benches when it became clear the game was going on a lot longer.

After Falmouth scored ninety and they were forced to watch the victory dance yet again, Hermione nudged Harry. He looked down and saw that she had her wand up her sleeve. With a malicious grin she whispered something, of which

Harry only caught the word "binding". Curious, he watched the two before them. Nothing immediately happened. After a minute though the one on the right began shifting oddly in his seat and stamping his foot. Finally as though exasperated, he reached down and tried to take his shoe off, unsuccessfully. Hermione covered a giggle. Another minute of frantic tugging ensued before the spell wore off.

To Harry's surprise, Hermione immediately nudged him again. She muttered something while glancing at the sky. Harry waited for the result, trying not to be too obviously amused. A gull passed close overhead, then another, one dropping on the shoulder of the left-hand fan's robe and the other on his head. Harry had to duck and pretend brush off his jeans to hide his laugh while the Falmouth fans cleaned up with discarded sweet wrappers.

This time, Harry nudged his friend, after furtive movements to pull his wand into his sleeve. "*Caldera Garmentia*," he whispered while pointing at the chubby man on the right, who immediately began fanning himself with the colorful team report in his hand and complaining about the sunlight. He had completely unhooked his robe, and was getting dirty looks from the little old ladies in orange in front of him, before Harry canceled the spell.

Snape leaned in. "I assume that was you."

"Why would you assume that?" Harry asked innocently and received a very doubtful raised brow in reply.

Mercifully, the Falmouth Seeker caught the Snitch ten minutes later. Ron groaned in genuine-sounding pain and put his head in his hands. Harry wondered how he could still have been that hopeful. "Better luck next time, I'm sure," Harry shouted to his friend as they all stood up and waited to file out.

The Falmouth fans stood on tiptoe, hoping to find a fast way out. The chubby one turned around with a frown at Snape, who apparently made him uneasy, which made Harry smile. The scorching sun was beaming down full time now and Harry pulled off his cap and wiped his brow unthinkingly. The man yelped in surprise, making Harry tense. He avoided the stunned man's gaze but it could not be helped. The man tugged hard on his friend's robe saying, "It's 'Arry Potter, it's 'Arry Potter." This got everyone else's attention as well.

Hermione gave Harry a sympathetic frown when it was clear that the top rows of their section had stopped shuffling toward the exit because everyone had turned to look for him. Harry stuffed his cap into his pocket resignedly. The two Falmouth fans moved away, pushed aside by others moving in. "Eh, did 'Arry Potter make yer shoe too tight?" The thin one asked the other excitedly as they were swallowed by the crowd.

"Oy, imagine that if 'e did," the other said, sounding bizarrely reverent. They glanced back with eyes full of amazement. Harry studiously avoided glancing directly their way. A wizened little wizard came forward from the surrounding crowd and shook Harry's hand in silence, nodding continuously. This cued others to move in as well. Harry shook a lot of hands before the stands emptied out and he could put his cap back on.

As they made their way down to the grass, a group in orange approached. It took a moment to realize it was the Cannons themselves, some still carrying their brooms. Ron grabbed Harry's arm to bring him to a halt and wait for the others to come aside. The team stopped. "Oy," one of them said, "We 'eard 'Arry Potter was here."

Harry glanced at Ron, who had gone moony-eyed, and shook his head. He slipped off his cap again and stepped around his friend who seemed to be stuck in place. The Keeper, a tall man with a ruddy face and dark hair pulled back in a short ponytail high on his head, came forward and gave Harry a powerful handshake. Beside him, Ron murmured, "Roybus Barbicon," kind of adoringly. Harry stepped back, "My friend, Ron," he said, pushing Ron forward.

"Wow," was all Ron managed, as his hand was shaken.

Handshakes went all around as they were introduced to the team. Harry got a bruising hug from one of the Beaters, a hulking woman with cropped hair who didn't seem to speak any English. "Natasha," Barbicon had to prompt to get her to let go. Natasha finally did, patting Harry on the head and looking teary-eyed. Barbicon then asked, "Can we get a picture? With the team?"

Harry shrugged, but then nodded upon seeing Ron's very hopeful face. They stepped onto the pitch before the goal posts and lined up. Snape and Mr. Weasley declined to get into the picture, but Suze was dragged into it, despite her clear Falcon affiliation. The team photographer, a man about Flitwick's size, bustled about getting everyone adjusted just so before firing off a flash pan that burned like a pyre while he took several pictures.

"Anytime you need tickets," Barbicon said to Harry after they broke up. "Just owl the office; you know our address," he said with a crooked grin and an elbow jab in the direction of Ron's cloak.

"Yep. And thanks for that."

The man made an odd noise like a hissing scoff. "S nothing. Really." Harry realized then that the man was actually nervous talking to *him*. The man's gaze went distant. "Oy, Gregor come over here, meet our biggest fan," he shouted and gestured with his arm. Harry turned as a group of four in plain robes approached. They had a confident swagger to them, although they looked wary as well. "Falmouth Captain," Barbicon said to Harry, apparently noticing his lack of recognition. Suze sidled over beside Harry as the others arrived and rocked up on her toes while biting her lower lip.

"Co-opting our fans," one of the Falcons accused, indicating Suze.

Barbicon replied, "No, just a friend of Harry Potter's here."

"Ah, so it is," Gregor said dryly, his thin sandy hair tossing easily in the wind. He shook Harry's hand perfunctorily. Behind the captain, a bald man with one long eyebrow, lowered it an inch as he looked Harry over closely, making the hair on Harry's neck bristle. Harry shook hands with him too, not giving away his unease. The man's eyes sparkled strangely as they exchanged pleasantries. Harry introduced Suze to them who, unlike Ron, didn't seem to be moony at all, just interested.

When the four had sauntered off in the direction of the open end of the pitch, Harry said flatly, "Unnerving group."

"They're a little surly, all right," Barbicon commented with a shrug.

"No," Harry murmured, still feeling uneasy as though their recent proximity made him now require a counter-curse, "it's not that."

Barbicon pushed his shoulders back and watched the four Falcon's step out of sight. "Well, I'll be sure not to insult them to their faces anymore."

"I'd do that," Harry confirmed. He looked down at Suze beside him.

"I didn't like them," she stated, sounding confused.

Barbicon said consolingly, "The others are much nicer; too bad they didn't come out."

She adjusted her cloak which had been pushed crooked by the steady breeze. "I don't think I want to play for them."

"Four years is a long time," Harry said reassuringly. Snape still gazed over where the four had disappeared. Ron with Hermione beside him was chatting animatedly with the Cannons a few feet away, not paying attention.

"You can play for *us*," Barbicon said brightly, holding out his broom to Suze.

"What?" one of the others complained; "You were taken off recruiting, remember?"

"Yes, after I brought you in," Barbicon returned teasingly, his ruddy face pulled into a broad smile.

Harry grinned, thinking that Ron had picked the right team to cheer for. Barbicon held his broom out farther to Suze. "That's a Mortabella," Suze said, looking it over.

"Gift from my grandmum," Barbicon stated brightly.

"No," Suze said, shaking her head.

"No, really," the man insisted, sounding serious now. Harry wanted to break out laughing but held back. Barbicon went on. "What position do you play, Keeper?"

"You are teasing me," Suze insisted, clearly not happy about that notion.

Harry said, "He teases everyone, I think."

"'Cept this bloke," Barbicon said conspiratorially, indicating Harry. "Not sure what he'd do to me . . ."

Harry straightened and blinked in surprise, wondering how he appeared to this big man. Suze, giving Barbicon a doubtful look, insisted, "He wouldn't do anything." She accepted the broom though, and looked it over with an expert eye. "Can I really try this?"

"Sure. Just bring it back before the next match."

Suze looked to Harry who gestured that she accept. She shucked her cloak to the grass and kicked off. The team watched her circle and slalom lazily before returning to their conversations. Suze veered suddenly a few times, then headed straight at the tallest bleacher. Barbicon grabbed Harry's sleeve. "What's she doing?"

"Her favorite maneuver," Harry answered calmly. The grip on Harry's sleeve tightened as Suze accelerated and pulled a right angle diagonal at just the last moment to avoid crashing, then flew a fast corkscrew that tightened each turn ending in spin, which she halted perfectly level.

"Her favorite, eh?"

"So her opponent ends up in the hospital wing," Harry said.

After watching her slalom some more, Barbicon said, "You play Seeker, right?"

"Yep. I was out of the hospital wing by the next day," Harry stated reassuringly.

"Toss out the practice snitch," Barbicon suggested loudly. A blonde man frowned from the other group, but obeyed. The Snitch fluttered a moment just above the ground before taking off under the control of a pointed wand.

The Cannon's Seeker stepped over. "We aren't really having a tryout, are we?"

Barbicon shook his head as Suze gave chase to the Snitch and they all watched. "Broom flies like there's no one on it," he observed after a minute. After two, Suze had caught the Snitch despite it being rather controlled rather illusively. She landed with it in hand after one of those braking dives that looks like an imminent collision with the ground.

"Nice broom," she said to Barbicon as she handed it back. She was at least a little out of breath.

"When do you finish school?" the Cannon's captain asked in an innocent tone.

"Four years," Harry supplied

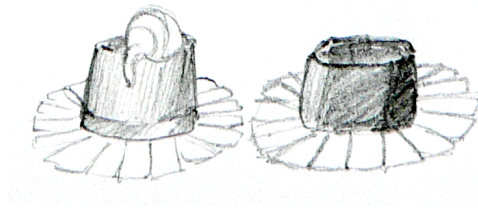
"Oh, good," the current Seeker breathed in relief. "I'll have broken my neck again by then, so that's okay."

Later, while they walked around the lee side of the castle to get to a portkey, Suze asked Harry, "Do you really think I can play professional?" She sounded very hopeful.

"You impressed their captain and had their Seeker worried," he pointed out. Seeing that more was needed, he added, "Why not? Just keep working at it."

She frowned thoughtfully until they came to a halt at a torn crisps wrapper weighted down with a smooth grey rock. "You were wrong, Professor," Suze said. When Snape turned to her curiously, she said, "Winning *won't* everything."

Mr. Weasley picked up the wrapper and the rock and held the wrapper out so everyone could reach it. Snape responded, "There *are* times when it is." His eyes flicked to Harry. "Fortunately, they are rare."



Chapter 48 -- Distant Shores

Harry finished a long letter to Penelope and sealed it up. The large white owl which had delivered *her* letter, waited on a chair back as he wrote. Harry handed the owl his reply, which it immediately departed with out the window, then took her scented letter to the drawing room, where his guardian worked on large piles of parchment. Snape looked up when he entered and dropped his quill down, seeming grateful for a distraction.

"The only time I can go to Switzerland is next week, since my Auror testing is the week after," said Harry. He was trying to not feel too hopeful about managing to arrange his first trip to the Continent.

Snape rubbed his temple thoughtfully, then said, "Are you eager to travel alone?"

"Um." He shrugged. "I've never gone very far before, so I guess not."

"There is an extensive library, the Bibliothèque Magie Vieux near Geneva, which I have always thought worth a visit. If you wish, we can travel together most of the way." He watched Harry think that over, before adding, while he slowly rubbed his long fingers together, "If you see this as some kind of right of passage, then by all means--"

"No," Harry replied quickly. There would be a lot of hours on trains, he considered. And finding one's way around unfamiliar places. "I'd like to have someone along. Can we leave on Sunday, then?"

Snape glanced over the parchments spread before him in thought. "I'll manage to make it work."

* * *

Harry was not familiar with packing for traveling, just for school. He put things in and out of his trunk, unable to decide if he needed them or not. He also had to consider that on Muggle trains, he would have to handle his trunk by hand, not magic, so he didn't want it to be overly full.

Snape stopped by his room. "Are you eating lunch?" he asked.

"I'm trying to pack."

"You will want a smaller container. Just a moment." Snape returned with a half-size trunk, red with silver corners and latch. "Do try to fit everything you need in that, without the use of magic, if possible." He started to leave but paused to say, "And come down to lunch."

During sandwiches and tea, Harry studied the itinerary from the travel agent, fascinated by the spell used for the animated logo of a witch on a broomstick with a big heavy trunk balanced on the back of it. Everytime the animation repeated the turnk had destination stickers from different continents. The schedule below indicated that it would take most of a day to arrive in Bern from when they departed. A very long day where they would try to maximize magical transport, which, as Harry expected, wasn't terribly organized.

First they would Floo to Canterbury where they had to catch the train and then a ferry across the Channel. Then they could Floo or take a train, a decision to be made when they arrived on the Continent, but it seemed likely that they would have to catch the train to Cologne, where they could definitely use another Floo network to Lake Constantz. Although, the travel agent warned them that the pub was hard to find and the lines could be very long at the hearth, but it was a pub, so they could manage to pass the time there or they could buy a token to hold their place and explore the old town a

while. Then onto the German-Swiss border where they had to catch a train again because foreigners were not allowed to Floo inside Switzerland. It all looked very complicated to Harry, and as adventuresome as it sounded, he was glad he would not have to navigate it alone.

That evening, Harry finally finished packing. He had sent letters to his friends, telling them in detail where he was going and for how long, now that he knew for certain. Hedwig's cage was empty and Kali was gnawing on the small stuffed bear he had bought her to play with. Elizabeth had promised to come and take care of both of them. Nervous and excited at the prospect of distant travel, Harry headed down to find Snape.

He found his guardian in the drawing room working on his endless piles of paperwork. "I'm all packed for tomorrow morning," Harry said, feeling as though that were some kind of major victory.

"Ready to leave, then? Ready for your first visit to the Continent?"

"Definitely."

"Ready to meet your lady friend's parents for the first time?"

Harry opened his mouth, then thought that over. "Maybe."

Snape continued on in the same matter-of-fact tone, "Ready to spend unsupervised hours alone with said lady friend?"

Harry tried very hard not to give himself away as he replied, "Yes."

"Take a seat, Harry. We should have a little talk."

Harry scratched his ear and pulled over a chair from the wall to before the desk. He did not like the tone of that. With crossed arms he waited for Snape to finish what he was doing. Snape finally did, putting his quill down and considering Harry for an uncomfortable span of silence.

Snape steepled his fingers and grimaced lightly. "We have never discussed certain things."

Harry's clothes suddenly felt too tight and his collar itchy. "Guess not."

"You need to be aware of certain things when you faced with a situation which may not be conducive to circumspect decision making," Snape said. Harry thought that had to be the most roundabout thing he had ever heard. Snape went on, "Going on eighteen, you almost certainly believe you know everything."

All the things Tonks had discussed during their one night together flitted through his mind, making him flush as well as making his collar damp. He didn't feel utterly ignorant, really, but didn't wish to argue that point either.

Snape had fallen silent. Harry Occluded his mind and looked up at him, cueing him to continue. "You need to be very careful, more careful than your friends need be. Your reputation is a commodity, one that can be traded upon by those with less than your best interest at heart."

Brow furrowed, Harry said sharply, "You think Penelope—"

Snape firmly cut him short. "I am not speaking of anyone in particular. I do not think it wise to completely trust anyone when we are speaking of things such as progeny you are not intending to produce. You must always take your own precautions, is what I am insisting."

"I understand what you are saying," Harry said, discomfort translating into anger as he spoke.

Snape answered the anger with a steely tone, "But are you knowledgeable enough to manage?"

Harry forced himself not to squirm; he really wanted this conversation over with. "Yes," he breathed, keeping his anger down. When Snape gave him a doubtful look, Harry asked, "You have a book I can read or something?"

Snape frowned and muttered, "No, unfortunately I was not thinking ahead."

"I really think I can manage." Harry was feeling more grateful to Tonks by the moment. "Really. I'll be very careful," he said as though by rote.

"Do so," Snape said firmly before returning to his thick stacks of parchment.

* * *

Ron and Hermione met them in Canterbury early in the morning to see them off. They walked down the quiet main street while waiting for the train, their luggage beside the platform disguised as two pet carriers containing very ornery rottweilers. After two groups of wizard tourists recognized Harry, he pulled his orange cap out of his day pack and donned it even though the clouds gave no hint of letting any sun through.

"You should get back to the station," Hermione said as they stood outside a crooked and sagging half-timbered pub. The whole town looked as though it might have been constructed over a swamp, the way everything leaned in different directions. They turned around and headed back to the gate, where they split up, Hermione giving Harry a nice hug and telling him to behave.

"Sure, Hermione," Harry laughed at her serious attitude.

Ron gave him a slap on the shoulder and told him to have fun *instead* of behaving. At the station Snape and Harry transformed their luggage back to normal when no one was looking and waited for the next train.

The ride to the coast took longer than Harry thought it would, and the train rocked a lot as it clattered along, much more than the Hogwarts Express. He watched the rolling landscape and could not help imaging instead the steep Alps from the travel brochure.

The ferry ride across the Channel left Harry believing that no Muggle child knew how to behave. The total journey felt impossibly long as he stared out the scratched window at the rain beating on the grey choppy water.

In Brugge they stopped for tea after a bus ride from the port dropped them in old town. Harry stared into his cup and thought the day had gone on a little long already, but at least the sun was shining part of the time and it was not actively raining. They sat outside on a cobblestone street beside a railing overlooking a canal lined with very old stone buildings. Harry kept forgetting where he was and had to remind himself this was not just some unusual part of Shrewsthorpe, Hogsmeade, or London.

"We should find the Floo network or local equivalent," Snape commented. "Muggle transport is proving more . . . annoying than anticipated.

"The travel agent wasn't exactly clear about getting across Belgium," Harry complained "She seemed to think it was small enough that any manner of travel would suffice." A tour boat went by, repeating the same historic point in seven languages. Harry could smell something wonderful cooking. "Do we have time for lunch?" he asked hopefully, even though it was only just after eleven.

"If they will serve it to you this early."

Harry flagged the waiter, who pretended that he didn't speak any English, forcing Harry to settle for the recommended dish. What arrived was an alarmingly large canister, steaming with a wonderful seashore and onion aroma. Inside it were more black mussels than Harry could imagine in one place.

After a minute of slow eating, the waiter came over and demonstrated with copious rambling French on the side, how to use an empty shell as a pincer to get the meat out of another shell. Harry thanked him and began eating with gusto. In the end he sat back and Snape finished the rest, including the curry and mustard mayonnaise, which hadn't appealed to Harry at all. As he had more tea and rubbed his full stomach, Harry decided traveling was all right after all.

It took only a quarter hour of wandering the alleys of Brugge for Snape to locate a wizard-run shop to ask how best to get to Cologne. The man told them to use the Booth network to go to Aachen where they could catch a train to Cologne. After a series of confusing questions, they were made to understand that the booth network was intended for wizard tourists and that it only went to a few cities in the Benelux region, since the Ministry had never finished building the network. He shrugged as if to say that its incompletion was expected. He sent them off to hunt for a Muggle photo booth.

They located one off the main square. Snape pointed to the sample photo on the side, of a slightly cross-eyed man, the signal that the booth was also a portal. They fed two Galleons into the coin slot, magically shrunk their trunks so they would fit beside their feet inside the booth, and slipped onto the seat. Harry pulled the curtain closed at the edges as Snape addressed the screen. *"Please select your destination,"* the screen read in flowing script. A list appeared beside a row of large red buttons down the side of the screen normally used for selecting photographic options. Snape pushed the one corresponding to Aix la Chappelle. *"Please wait for your turn on the network."*

"I thought computers broke around magic," Harry commented.

"Not always," Snape said as he sat back on the narrow bench. Falling into lecture mode, he explained, "It is easy to cast a spell to disrupt Muggle technology and many spells will do so, but it is possible to cast ones that will not, although it requires some skill."

Their turn on the network finally came up and after a flap of the curtain and a vibration of the floor, the screen informed them that they had arrived. Harry doubtfully peeked out, but indeed, they were now in a strange bus station. He slipped out and looked back into the booth, only to realize it lacked their trunks.

"That's not good," Harry said, peering back inside and under the metal seat. They both looked all around the outside of the booth and the surrounding area full of people. Losing his luggage made Harry feel very uneasy, as though he might not find his way home again without it.

"We will wait a few minutes before returning to see if it was merely left behind," Snape said.

After what felt like a half an hour but was probably only five minutes, the trunks materialized behind the booth, full size. Harry breathed out loudly in relief. "I will second that," Snape said as he pulled his trunk off the top of Harry's.

Since they were at the bus station, they caught a bus to Cologne. Harry expected to have to wait for one, but for once their timing was dead on and within minutes they were roaring down the autobahn at a good clip and the bus was mercifully quiet with almost no children.

Snape pulled out a French dictionary and began studying it. Harry wondered if he should have learned a few words of German before leaving or learned a polylingual spell. He decided to not worry since Penelope could take care of translations when needed. He watched the landscape go by as well as the occasional very fast German sports car, passing on his side of the bus, the left side, which felt odd.

Outside the Cologne train station, the blackened cathedral towered over them as they stepped off the bus. The sun shined brightly here, making Harry squint and pull his cap down farther over his eyes. They towed their trunks--Harry surreptitiously had put a Featherlight charm on his--up around the cathedral and down a side street into the old town.

It was busy here. Many people sat outside pubs at small, high tables drinking diminutive glasses of beer. Their trunk pulling garnered some strange looks from the well-dressed drinkers. At a corner, Snape pulled a parchment from his pocket and looked around at the addresses. It required three passes down the block but finally they found the pub, sandwiched between a violin store and a pizza shop. Harry was sure it had not been there on previous passes, and frankly, maybe it hadn't.

Inside, the Dom Brauhaus was crowded and smokey from many pipes. Harry followed behind Snape as he made his way around to the blonde, braid-sporting barmaid pouring drinks from a tap at a rapid pace. "We want to take the Floo to the south," Snape said to her.

"Ein minute," she growled and carried the tray of little glasses away. Harry watched her swoop around the room, replacing empty glasses with full ones before returning to repeat the process. "Talk to Guido," she said, nodding at a rotund gentleman in a cap with a feather and a very long pipe, sitting on a stool by a tall clock. "Haf a dreenk," she said, handing a glass to Harry. Since it was small, he accepted it and sipped it as they found a path through the tall hats and cloaks to the far wall. Harry didn't see any hearths in the place, even in the side rooms off the main one. The beer was refreshing, making him realize he was very thirsty.

"Good?" Snape asked, as Harry gulped half the glass down. Harry nodded, then held the glass at his side rather than swig the rest of it as he was tempted to. He adjusted his cap to distract himself. Snape took Guido's attention away from the unsavory gentlemen he was speaking with and began a crude conversation in pidgin-English about how to take the Floo.

"Ees four galleons each," the man explained. The man beside him snorted. Snape's eyes narrowed. "Ya, for you, tree then. Und, uh, two and ten for the yung man mit you. Dat includes enough powder to get to Vienna if you vish." He made it sound as though he were being generous.

"We wish to go to Lake Constantz," Snape explained, fingering his coin purse. "Or Basel if you think that is better for getting to Switzerland.

"No, no connection at Basel, or it ees a difficult one. You would have to take a Muggle taxi for a . . ." He waved his chubby hand in the air. ". . . tirty kilometers, forty. At Kreuzlingen, is only half a block to de train. Unless you have been before and can Apparate."

Snape shook his head and counted out the coins. "And the drinks are included, right?" he said. It sounded vaguely like a threat.

"Uh, ya. Fraulein Volf," he shouted to the barmaid and pointed at the two of them when she stood on tiptoe to look their way. The man put the coins away and pulled another coin purse out of his other pocket. He removed two large brass coins and handed them to Harry. "You are number fifty-three." He pointed at the tall clock beside him which Harry realized wasn't a clock at all but a big dial of numbers with three hands, one rusty steel, one brass, and one green copper. The brass hand was pointing at eighteen. The man said, "You wait for your turn, ya? Ven your number here, go up to stairs dere." They followed his gesture around behind him where the bottom of an old red-carpeted staircase could be seen through a doorway at the end, back dropped by a grimy stained-glass window. He waved them away and fell back into his low conversation with the seedy fellow who had slunk back against the wall. Harry had forgotten he was there.

The room was wall to wall with long tables pushed so close together that the benches touched. The end of table had just space for two across from each other. Snape strode over there and pointed at the two seats. One of the middle-aged men sitting there wearing a dark green linen coat said something in German, and when Snape didn't reply, he switched to English. "Dis is free."

Harry gratefully sat down, although he felt strange backed up against a wide witch behind him and forced to press against the man beside him to have enough space on the bench. The barmaid arrived with a faint smile and gave them each fresh glasses, taking Harry's warm one away. In the smoky warmth of the room the cold beverage was a relief. The rusty pointer on the dial moved two places. When the German wizards' conversation faded, the man beside Harry said something to him in German. The man across the table in the green coat said something with the word 'Englander' while gesturing at Harry. He then froze and looked a little surprised. "Solche grüne Augen," the man said and nodded at his fellow. Puzzled, the other turned to Harry, ducking to look under his orange hat brim. Across from him Harry could see Snape's alert gaze moving between them, even though he still casually sipped his beer.

The man beside Harry leaned close and said, "Dere is very famous English wizard with zuch eyes. He might wear a hat like this to hide his-" the man gestured shakily at his own forehead with a worn finger.

"Might he?" Harry asked, sipping from his glass.

The men exchanged an uneasy look and the one leaned over again and said conspiratorially, "Dere are no dark vizards here. None."

Confused by this proclamation, Harry replied agreeably if a bit doubtfully, "All right."

Seeming a little more nervous, the man said after glancing around, "You are hunting dark vizards, no?"

Harry laughed, which only apparently unnerved the man more. "No. Well, not yet anyway," he quipped.

The man in the green coat said, "You varn us, you start. Ve get out of the way."

Harry checked that the man looked serious and sat straight. "Do I look that dangerous?" Harry honestly asked the man before turning to Snape.

"Your reputation precedes you," Snape commented dryly.

"Do I really look more dangerous than *him*?" Harry asked the men disbelievingly, indicating Snape.

They appeared to give this due consideration before shrugging. "You are der junge der ablehnte zu sterben, ja? Uh, der boy who refused to die?" the man restated upon seeing Harry's blank expression.

Harry gave in, took off his cap and fluffed his hair back and forth to get it off his head. Wearing a hat all day was the only way his hair did not stick up in many directions automatically.

The man's intent bloodshot eyes went over Harry's face and scar. "You destroy the Mitternachtlord," he went on forcefully, darkly. "You can defeat anyone."

"Oh, I don't think so," Harry said, grinning at the man's insistence for lack of a reasonable response. A fresh beer replaced his glass, which he had not realized he had emptied. A glance at Snape didn't reveal that he cared if Harry had another. The brass dial was now on twenty-three.

"You let us know," the man repeated with a nod before returning to the conversation with his companion.

"I will," Harry reassured him. Seeing Snape's serious expression, Harry asked, "You want a warning too?"

"I expect at this point I will see it coming in time," Snape replied easily. When Harry frowned lightly at him, he continued, "Trouble does seem to follow you."

After another half hour, the dial finally approached their numbers. They stood and collected their bags from the floor. The men gave them nods and one gave Harry a sloppy salute as he moved to where their trunks were stacked by the wall. On the stairs to the first floor, Harry said, "I was sort of hoping no one here would recognize me." Snape responded with a doubtful tilt of the head.

The room above was also covered in old, worn, red carpet. A pair of witches, speaking gaily in German, were pulling their trunks out of the very large pink marble hearth. A man in a Muggle business suit was waiting impatiently for them to move on, tossing his brass coin in the air and catching it. As soon as there was space to do so he rushed forward, dropped the coin into a decorative stein on the mantle and tossed down a great deal of Floo powder after announcing Berlin.

Harry was glad there was no one waiting behind them as they struggled a bit to arrange their trunks inside the firebox. Harry remembered just in time to toss the coins into the mug and duck back inside before Snape tossed the Floo powder.

With a surge the red carpet was gone and they were spinning past fires and walls of stone and brick. Eventually they landed, unexpectedly on a nice carpet.

The hearth at this end was modern and almost Muggle looking with white paint and brushed steel on the hearth. A few wizards in steely grey cloaks stood chatting near a row of square windows on the far side of the room, but they paid no mind to the new arrivals. Bright engraved metal plaques pointed the way out and they followed the one which indicated it led to the Bahnhof. They charmed the trunks and carried them down a modern staircase, along a well-lit corridor and through a plain door into the middle of the train station. Minutes later they had tickets and were on the train, their trunks taking up most of the luggage space at the end of the car. Harry reclined his seat and let himself relax.

"Is it me or was that last part too easy?" Harry asked.

"They don't manufacture watches here for no reason," Snape commented as he pulled out his dictionary again and began reading. The train pulled away right on the minute printed on the ticket.

The low hills spread out beyond the windows, the sun glowing blindingly bright from patches of snow in the distance. Harry's eyes slipped closed with the methodic rocking of the train.

"You are missing the scenery," Snape said, tapping him on the shoulder.

Harry snapped awake as the train pulled into Winterthur and announcements blared incomprehensibly on the platform. As they pulled out again, Harry tried to keep his eyes open and watch the neatly farmed hillsides with their unusual-looking farmhouses. Little towns clung to high hillsides of green with roads snaking up and through them. Harry found himself unable to accept that this was still the same day they had departed Shrewsthorpe.

The world blinked out as they passed through a tunnel and out over a bridge as though the train had taken flight. Harry's eyes felt too heavy even for such a pastoral scene of fields backed by snow capped peaks, and hanging valleys and he fell asleep again.

Something chittered at Harry, something hard to catch a clear sense of beyond the spindly limbs, long fingers of unbreakable grip, and jagged teeth of grey stone. Harry opened his eyes and was disoriented by the black window, the tiny overhead lights brightening the blue fabric of the back of the modern seat before him with its empty black net. Two breaths later he remembered where he was. Snape leaned forward and turned to him questioningly.

Harry muttered, "Strange dream," as daylight returned out the window. Harry looked out over the landscape, at the clouds floated low just beyond the immediate hills, giving one the feeling of being on the top of the world. They paced a motorway for a short distance, bent around a hill and entered another tunnel. The sides of the car seemed to shift outward with a pop as they did so. The muscles in the back of Harry's neck twinged as he sensed the same scuttling dark creatures as before, only this time he was wide awake. The tunnel went on much longer than Harry hoped, considering his growing sense that, whatever they were, they were aware of his own awareness and were quieting to pay attention. Harry touched his wand pocket with a casual movement as he imagined that they might be clinging to the train despite its speed.

Snape leaned farther over their common armrest and studied him closely. "Something the matter?" he asked quietly.

Harry's sensed a shifting of the odd attention as though it were solidifying into malevolence. He balled his fist near his wand and asked, "You don't notice anything?" When Snape shook his head a little perplexedly, Harry hurriedly tried to explain. "Something's out there. What lives in mountains?"

"Many things," Snape replied, sounding like a lecture already. "Trolls for example."

Harry swallowed, thinking he could see daylight casting itself obliquely on the rock face beside him. "Not trolls. Small, nasty, sharp stone teeth, chatter a lot."

Snape's expression made Harry wish that he had not said anything, especially since the blast of full sunlight made the clawing sense dissipate completely.

"Not in your mind?" Snape asked carefully. Harry shook his head, dropped his hand to the armrest and forced himself to relax. Snape went on, "Your description resembles a Shetani, but they are usually only in Africa. They are quite nasty, though. Strongly attracted to magic, especially certain kinds."

Harry set his head right against the window and tried to look ahead for more tunnels. Only green slopes could be seen. "What kinds?" he asked, feeling like knowledge was his best hope for making it across this land of hills and tunnels.

Snape's lips twitched reluctantly. "I do not think you will have difficulty with them at this speed. Although they have been known to set traps," he added thoughtfully, then seemed to realize he should have left off the last. "Do not concern yourself," he insisted quickly, but since empty platitudes were not among Snape's best abilities, it did not come out well.

Another tunnel and the chattering made it difficult to sense the seat and the lights, as though the creatures meant to distract him to death. Then they were through again. Snape had a grip on Harry's upper arm, making Harry flush and shake himself back to embarrassed reality. "What kinds of magic?" Harry demanded to cover his lapse.

Again the reluctance. "The darker kinds," Snape finally divulged.

Harry's brow furrowed and he wondered what these things saw in him of such interest. As a narrow pure blue lake slid into view, he wondered perhaps if the trailings of Voldemort he still possessed carried the scent of darkness to these creatures. He didn't like that thought.

Open sunlight continued for a long time after that, almost long enough to forget. At the next tunnel he closed his eyes and Occluded his mind to no avail, but fortunately there seemed to be only a handful of the creatures making them much less bold.

"We will take a different route home," stated Snape, when daylight again filled the carriage.

Harry nodded. "Maybe I'll read up on them," he suggested a little glumly, thinking that knowing for certain they hungered after dark magic would not make him feel any better. Usually, he didn't think about his Voldemort inherited abilities, but at the moment, he dearly wished that he could exorcise them.

The trolley came by. Snape purchased tea and forced it on Harry with uncharacteristic urging. Harry gave in and sipped it. At the next tunnel, the warmth radiating on his hand seemed to keep him anchored and he did not sense anything. "They're gone," Harry said and took a scalding gulp. "You're right, trouble does follow me."

A half hour later, they pulled into Solothurn where Snape was visiting an old colleague before going on to the archie. He moved to stand, but hesitated. "I can skip my visit here and continue on with-

"No," Harry said firmly. "Go on." But he bit his lip as Snape collected his shoulder bag from above them.

"I'll see you in four days," Snape said. "Do behave."

Harry shook his head lightly. "Yes, of course."

As they pulled out, Harry espied Snape pulling his trunk along the platform. Harry gave a wave that went unnoticed and he remembered that the train windows were heavily tinted. With a small smile at how out of place his guardian looked among the nicely dressed Muggles, Harry sat back and thought ahead to seeing Penelope.

The train pulled into the Bern Bahnhof precisely at the scheduled time. Harry had already collected his trunk and day pack and was standing at the doors when they opened. Down on the platform, where he pretended his trunk was heavier than it felt, charmed as it was, he looked around and spotted Penelope coming the other way against the crowd, a broad smile lighting her face. She looked better than he had remembered, or perhaps it was just the stress of examinations being over which made her face seem to glow.

"Harry," she greeted him happily and gave him a hug. Harry returned the hug and didn't see anyone with her. "Did you haf a goot trip?" she asked, her accent thicker than he expected.

"Uh . . . yeah. Not bad. I need to read more about this area, maybe you have a book?" he suggested, the hair on his arms bristling in memory.

They started along the warning track toward the exit. "Not in English, but there is a bookstore." She hooked her arm in his. Harry gave her a smile, glad to see a familiar face among so many foreign ones.

She led him out faster than he could attempt to interpret the signs they passed giving directions around the station. "I live just down the hill into old town, on Rathausgasse, so we can walk."

"Rat house?" Harry echoed quietly.

"Rathaus, where the mayor works; I forget vat you call it."

Outside, the sun was still shining with the unnatural glare Harry associated with winter. They strolled along the covered pavement beside a brick street. Many people were out, walking quickly towing their shopping or pushing prams. Several blocks later, she stopped at a door beside one to a pastry shop and unspelled it. Inside, Harry hovered his trunk up the staircase and through another spell-neutralized door. Harry wondered at so much security, but didn't comment. Inside was a bright, high-ceilinged, sitting room with a kitchen off to the side.

With an apologetic grin she patted the couch. "Dis is the guest room, so you can put your trunk here." Harry did as she suggested, glad the trunk didn't look too imposing there. She grabbed his hand, "Come, I vill show you around de old town." On the way out down the steps, Harry wondered at her accent before deciding she must not use English much here.

They headed down a side alley to a wide street with a statue in the middle. Many other tourists were wandering here, pointing at things. The sun was finally low in the sky, lighting the stone with an orange glow. They walked downhill along the pavement, Penelope explaining about the bears they kept in the moat, about Albert Einstein. Harry, worn down from the very long day, was not taking much of it in. People here seemed to walk very fast and he felt it took all his attention to stay out of their way.

"Ah, my favorite shop," Penelope said energetically. Harry peered through the glass at a grand array of perfectly spaced, dainty chocolates. Inside, he let Penelope pick out a boxful. On the way out she hooked her arm through his. "I think you haf need of coffee," she said with a laugh in her voice. Harry was glad she wasn't unhappy that he was so worn out.

As they found seats in an airy, tall-windowed shop with a big brass espresso machine dominating the marble counter, Harry said, "I'm sorry I'm not very good company right now."

"You had long travels," she said easily, opening the elaborately packaged and wrapped box of chocolates and pushing it over before him. Harry selected a black and white swirled one; it tasted strongly of vanilla. "Good?" she asked eagerly. When Harry nodded, she said authoritatively, "Much better than Honeydukes," as though she had been suffering all this time.

Harry hesitated at that, but didn't argue the point. Despite sitting for most of the day, Harry wished only to continue doing so, although the coffee was making him more aware of the world around him. A couple in nice clothes sat at a table by the wall leaning in closely to talk. A woman near the window was reading a small book while pushing the stroller beside her to and fro.

"Ve can walk around tomorrow; the flower market will be in the platz in the morning. And my parents will be home by now."

Harry stared into his cup to gauge how much more he had to drink and was startled to find it empty. "Yeah, let's go," he said, glad not much was expected of him right now.

The door at the top of the stairs was open when they returned. Harry braced himself as they entered. "Mama," Penelope said to catch the attention of the couple opening the post at the table beside the window. "This is Harry," she said, sounding nervously proud.

They halted what they were doing and came over. Through the coffee static in his brain, Harry had the fleeting impression that they had only half-believed he existed. Penelope's mother, an oval-faced woman with dark hair, held out her hand, "Madeleine Toffen, Mr. Potter," she said, sounding very formal.

"Just Harry, please," he insisted, shaking hands next with Penelope's father, a balding man who squinted when he smiled. He seemed to have a hard time taking his eyes off Harry's scar.

Madeleine was saying, "We planned to go for a nice dinner, if you are up to it." Harry nodded, although he worried that when the coffee wore off, he might fall unconscious.

Cleaned up and changed into the nicest clothes he had brought, Harry sat on the couch waiting with Penelope's parents for Penelope to finish getting ready. Beside him on the end table was a white lacquer framed photograph of Penelope and a boy just a little younger, presumably her brother Robert, given the resemblance. Harry looked away from it and tried not to frown obviously. Penelope's mum tapped her fingertips together nervously. "Rather amazing to haf you here, Mr.-- Harry," Mr. Tideweather said, breaking a long silence.

"I've never been to the Continent," Harry said. "The mountains are very beautiful."

"It is much easier to travel now," Madeleine said, "Everyone is abroad now, it zeems, even so early in the zummer. But you should go to Paris, a young man like yourself, as zoon as you can."

Harry considered that they *had* planned on taking a different route home. "I don't have much time right now. I have testing for the Auror's program with the Ministry coming up next week."

Mr. Tideweather said, "Ah, yes," leaning forward and clasping his hands. "Peni said as much."

Another silence settled on the room. Harry was just figuring out how he might ask about dark-magic-hungry creatures in the mountains when Penelope came out, apologizing for taking so long. She looked pretty smart though in a short grey dress with a sweater over it.

They walked uphill many blocks with much turning left and right. Harry didn't think he could make it back on his own if he had to without having set a direction charm on his wand. His hosts didn't seem to think the walk excessively long, even though his feet were feeling sore when they finally arrived at the restaurant. The scents inside made Harry's stomach rumble.

Dinner passed sedately. Harry tuned out the conversations around their table which he could not understand anyway, turning it into a dull roar in his ears. Penelope's father talked about Penelope's plans for becoming an archivist, at the very library Snape was going to visit. Harry had not realized her plans were so well formed. When the topic had come up before, she made it sound like ideas rather than contracts. He wondered at that discrepancy and watched her attending to her plate closely. "But I'm sure you would find that boring," Mr. Tideweather was saying.

"Sounds interesting, actually," Harry insisted, thinking of midnight forays into the restricted section of the Hogwarts library.

"You should take Harry to Geneva, Peni," Madeleine said, shifting topics. "You have not been, correct?" she asked Harry, who shook his head. "You could stay with my sister," she said, then frowned lightly as though rethinking that.

Penelope looked up from her plate, looking slightly amused. "Aunt Vreni is fun to visit. Do you want to see Geneva?" she asked of Harry. Harry nodded, thinking they would be having a little more fun, if not around overseen by parents.

The next morning, a car horn woke Harry. The sound of the vertical blind clacking followed. "It is a taxi driver. They are not supposed to do that," Mr. Tidewater said from beside the window. Harry blinked and sat up on the flattened couch. "Did you sleep well?" his host asked. Harry nodded while rubbing grit from his eyes; he had had some very strange dream about flying his broom around the mountains looking for something, but it was fading fast as the morning sun poured into the room.

Right after breakfast, Penelope led Harry around the city, starting with the market and moving to the parliament. The city still looked very foreign this morning; yesterday's walk had not accustomed him to the look of the buildings and streets.

Harry's feet were very grateful when they stopped for lunch at a pizza shop on the main street. They sat at a small corner table, Harry stretching his toes inside his shoes. Cars rumbled by on the brick street and many pedestrians walked past the tall windows.

Harry took off his hat and fluffed his hair. A metal pizza tray clattered to the floor beside the next table and the waitress scurried to collect it up, glancing up at Harry in alarm. Harry frowned and listened to her apologize, he assumed, in rapid speech.

Penelope, who was reading from a ragged tour book of the city, did not seem to notice. "What would you like to do next? History museum or Art?" she asked.

Behind her, Harry watched the waitress explaining to the chef over the stainless steel counter that ran along the far wall. The chef seemed unsympathetic. "Art sounds better," Harry replied. Eventually the waitress came back, holding a small notebook very tightly while smoothing the page down with the other as she said something he couldn't understand. Penelope ordered and the waitress took the menus then hesitated before asking something.

Penelope said, sounding a little testy, "She wants to know if it is really you."

"It is really me," Harry said to the waitress, almost making Penelope giggle. The woman seemed confused by this, but went to the counter. "I didn't expect to be recognized here," Harry said, feeling like he had been cheated out of something.

Penelope looked disbelieving. "More Muggles here would know who you are than in Britain. It is not so . . . separate here, such news anyway."

By that evening Harry was certain this had been the longest day of his life. As they sat down back at Penelope's flat, he wished he knew a charm for sore feet, because sitting was not making them feel any better. Penelope didn't show any effects of the day at all. With eagerness she said, "We have seen most every major thing, so tomorrow we will go to Geneva." Harry's spirits, which rose at the first part, flagged significantly on the second. She went on, "Very famous city. Great shopping."

Harry who had taken out a significant part of what remained in his vault for spending money, felt a panicky twinge at that, but Penelope, who was making coffee, did not notice this. She brought back very small cups of coffee. "You are having fun, no?"

"It's, uh, *yes*," Harry replied. His feet complained at that answer. "I'm not used to so much walking, I think."

"Ah," she said and sipped her coffee. "No hike then to Kleine Scheidegg. It is my favorite."

"Uh," Harry began, but then realized that she was grinning too much.

"You can take the rail most the way, you know," she added, sounding chastising. Harry took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind; he was not keeping up well.

The first train of the morning dropped them in Geneva in time for an early breakfast. Harry bolstered himself with a big meal at a little cafe on the street. The city's narrow streets curved away, promising more exploring than could possibly be done in a day.

"We will not walk so much," Penelope assured him. "I am thinking of a short walk, then a long picnic by the water, then a boat ride."

"Sounds brilliant," Harry said agreeably as he put down his fork and drank his coffee. He had to admit, the coffee was like the chocolate, thicker and richer than he had ever had it. They wandered along the narrow streets, every one of which seemed to have cafes along them. Penelope turned down a quiet street and stopped before a wooden door and knocked three times and then three times again. The door, despite looking like it might swing inward, probably with a loud squeaking sound, parted quietly in the middle. Penelope stepped through and glanced back as Harry followed.

Inside was a small wizard museum, really the town house of an old wealthy witch who had lived in the 1800s. Every available wall had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and some doorways were half-blocked by freestanding cases. Every shelf was crammed with every imaginable magical item, some really useful like handmade never-out quills with gaudy silver decoration, and some really strange such as a self-stirring make-up tin. The whole place was musty, tickling Harry's nose.

On the first floor, Penelope beckoned to Harry to join her in the drawing room. "Dame Vera," she said, indicating the large painting of a woman in a shocking violet lace dress. Dame Vera straightened her skirts, then smoothed them before giving them a smile.

"Looks a bit like you," Harry observed.

"Very distant relative, actually," Penelope said. "I don't think I'll look that good at a hundred and thirty though." Vera primped her hair and smiled more.

The tall clock chimed and a real blackbird flew out of the little door at the top, cawed harshly eleven times as it circled the room before diving back inside. The clock resumed ticking.

A small middle-aged man with tiny glasses came into the room. "Thought I heard ze door," the man said, squinting at Penelope. "Do I know you?"

"I haf visited before. Penelope Tideweather, fifth cousin to the lady here," she explained, waving at the painting, who blew a kiss at Harry.

"Don' be such a tease, Vera," the man said to the painting. "Please, excuse her," he said. After looking Harry over, took off his glasses and cleaned them thoroughly before replacing them on his nose and frowning more. "Vell, if you have any questions, let me know." He disappeared again.

After the museum, the sun was intense and the shadows of the buildings starker than normal. Penelope led the way to a shop where they bought an array of cheeses, dried sausages, bread sticks, dried fruits and a bottle of wine. Most of it fit in Harry's daypack and Penelope insisted on carrying the rest, even though the overnight bag on her shoulder could not hold it. They walked down to the lake and along the tree-lined waterfront to a large park with rolling slopes leading to large circles of flowers. They found a relatively level spot still in view of the water and dropped onto the grass. For once Penelope seemed a little tired.

They spoke of minor things, such as how different Hogwarts was than Penelope had expected and how glad her parents were that she was home safe, even though they should not have worried so much. Harry wanted to ask what her plans were now, but found he didn't have the will to risk spoiling the lovely moment. Eventually, they ate their picnic, or part of it, and after the wine, Harry was very sleepy so he spread his cloak out and put his head down.

Harry woke later, when some seagulls cried out noisily overhead. Penelope's head was resting on his chest as she stared up at the clouds which had formed over the lake.

"You want to be an Auror?" she asked, apparently noticing that he was awake.

"Yes."

"It sounds dangerous," she said evenly.

Harry thought being an Auror sounded challenging and like something that would satisfy his hunger to be involved while also knowing what was going on. He didn't voice these things. When he sat up, he felt lightheaded. Penelope opened the sparkling water, poured some into a plastic cup, and handed it to him. Drinking it made him feel much better.

"Ready to go?" she asked.

Harry stood with a grunt at his aches from the hard ground. "Certainly. Where to?"

They wandered some more along the waterfront, took a Ferry down the lake to the next port, Nyon, where they disembarked. Harry noted as he turned back to look over the boat, that the long list of destinations on the sign beside the dock also read *Montreux* in all capital letters, making him wonder how Snape was faring at the library. He squinted across the slightly hazy lake and imagined one of the towns in the distance contained his guardian.

They wandered through the many pedestrians up to the main square before a turreted castle. "The Château," Penelope explained taking a seat at a cafe, whose tables were arranged in neat rows. A few seagulls hunted under the tables and chairs, quick to get out of the way. "It needs renovations. Soon they say." She ordered coffee for them both when the waiter appeared. Harry thought she sounded pretty good when she spoke French. She took out an old tour book. "It says the view from the Roman columns over the lake is nice and the museum very good. But it is such a nice day to be inside." She put the book away. "We'll walk over to the ruin."

They caught the ferry back as darkness fell quickly, rendering the apparent distance to the shore longer and the one to the mountains closer. They bought food from the little counter on the boat and ate that with the leftovers in Harry's day-pack. The ride went quickly in this direction even though there wasn't much to see out the darkened windows.

Penelope, taking Harry's hand as they stepped onto the quay, said, "We should find my aunt." They walked along a different part of the waterfront than they had earlier, the lights across the dark lake, glinting romantically on the ripples. Rising from the water the hills were visible as clusters of dwindling lights. Behind them, the ferry was plying its way back down the lake, its many windows brighter than the lights beyond it.

They walked along a big, dark, open expanse of concrete along the water that did not seem to have much purpose. Music drifted on the air from somewhere. Penelope stopped beside a grungy boat dock where two open motorboats were bobbing in the algae-filled water beside the quay. A rusty metal sign like a gate led to steps directly into the water. The air was swampy smelling here. Penelope urged Harry down one step, took out her wand, and tapped each pole. The air rippled and revealed a waterfront full of people sitting at an outdoor bar. The music was loud now. They stepped through and along to the last establishment where plants framed a stage where a band played and colored lanterns swung on cables in the faint breeze around the tall tables.

They had to wait for a table to open up outside, but eventually a couple left and Harry and Penelope took their seats. "Your aunt works here?" Harry asked as the waitress came by and Penelope ordered something in French.

Penelope pointed at the stage. "She plays bass."

Harry looked at the band for the first time and located the woman with bright red hair and black leather trousers playing an almost equally bright red, large, stringed instrument in the center back of the group. The song ended and another immediately started up. Penelope's aunt looked intent on her playing and not aware of them in the audience.

"American blues, you know?" Harry shook his head. Penelope went on, "Aunt Vreni is kind of the black sheep as you say."

"She seems to like playing music," Harry said as the drinks arrived. They were short glasses with ice, little straws, and slices of lemon, sweet and alcoholic. Snape's admonitions were trying to intrude in his mind even over the thrum of the music.

Many long songs and two drinks later, Harry excused himself to use the toilet. On the way back out, he found the side door first and took it, rather than work his way back through the crowded restaurant. It was quiet over here on the city side. Cars went by infrequently and the shop gates were all pulled down. He walked around the building to where their table was on the outside edge. As Harry came around the potted ferns, he noticed others were gathered around the table. Penelope, lit by the yellow and blue lanterns hanging overhead, gestured in an unfriendly way at one of the people. Curious, Harry slowed in the shadows to observe. He could almost hear them, but he couldn't understand what must be French, although it did not lilt, it sounded guttural spoken so low.

Harry stepped over quickly. "Friends of yours?" he asked.

The three young men backed off just a little, apparently not expecting him. One of them, with close-cut brown hair and a beard neatly trimmed around his jaw, said snidely, "You brought an Englishman back with you?"

"Not friends. Former fellow students," Penelope darkly explained to Harry. "They were just leaving." Harry watched in amazement as she reached into her coat pocket and pulled her wand into her loose sleeve. It was not a motion she tried to conceal although the wand was now hidden from casual view. Harry looked at each of the young men in turn; they looked cocky and sneering, though a little wary now. Penelope said something in French and received what sounded like a threat in return, though they were all speaking too low to really discern.

Harry stepped closer to Penelope so their shoulders were touching. "Why don't you leave now?" he said firmly, threateningly.

"Or vat?" One of them mocked. "You vill use a little British spell on us?"

"No. All I have to do is let go of her hand," Harry explained, showing them the grip he had taken of Penelope's vibrating wrist. Penelope looked about as furious as he could imagine her being. Murderous even.

One of them backed up but the other two just laughed. "She does not scare us. Nor do you. The English are as wimps at Quidditch and wimps at magic."

Another song had started up and the nearby tables which had glanced their way once were not paying them any attention. Harry narrowed his eyes at the boldest of them, the one with short brown hair and a long fringe. In a low voice, he said, "I destroyed Voldemort; I can certainly take on you."

The pair straightened at this news but did not budge. The third stepped back close and asked, "Vat did he say?"

"He . . ." one of them began dubiously.

"What?" Harry asked with a hint of mockery that felt much too good, "Don't recognize the scar?" The three looked more surprised and glanced at Penelope indecisively. Penelope still looked rather murderous. "Get lost," Harry said. "Or I'll finish off what she leaves behind." He released her wrist which she held stiffly at her side, wand not hidden anymore. Harry went on, "And you know, when we explain to your authorities, I bet they believe Harry Potter over you, so please, do try us."

The wariest of them urged the others to move on and they all left with repeated backward glances. Penelope was shaking as she put her wand away and flattened her hands on the tabletop. Harry pushed the rest of his drink over to her. She swallowed it and put it down hard.

"Dey vere insinuating tings about Robbie; like they knew vat happened but would not tell," she explained in a distressed voice. "Dey never proved what happened," she went on in general explanation.

"I'm sorry, Peni," Harry said, retaking his seat and squeezing her arm in his hand.

"Dese ones who ver bad but not so bad to get caught, vere zo cocky dis last year," she went on angrily, her accent thickening alarmingly. "I could kill them."

Harry picked up and twisted a napkin between his fingers. "Well, I have to say I know exactly how you feel."

Sadly, she went on, "I vas supposed to protect him, but I did not know how to do dis."

Harry closed his eyes on the lights inside the restaurant, the swinging lanterns. All kinds of old pain was washing through him. "I should have just let you have at them. Sorry."

"My parents vould be very disappointed if I did this," she said with a sad chuckle.

"I could have taken the blame without much trouble," Harry said. "I can't imagine they would do much to me, even here." He watched the band playing, unconcerned with anything but music. "When does your aunt finish?" he asked hopefully.

Penelope sniffled and dabbed carefully at her eyes. "Not 'til late, I don't tink. But, the zet, it should end."

"We'll go at the end of the set, then, when we can get the key," Harry said reassuringly. Penelope nodded, looking bleak.

The music finally wound down and the singer made some announcement in French before the lights on the stage went to half. Harry took Penelope's hand as they walked around to the back of the stage, and kept a close eye on everyone around, especially checking the shadows by the building.

"Aunt Vreni," Penelope called as the woman was setting her bass on a metal stand.

"Penelope!" the woman exclaimed in surprise. She jumped off the back of the stage and gave her niece a tight hug. "And who vould this be?" she asked of Harry.

"Didn't you get my owl?" Penelope asked, concerned.

Vreni waved her hand dismissively. "Ah. I haven't been to my flat since, uh, Wednesday. But if you need a place tonight, please." She fished in her pockets, then went thoughtful a moment before digging around in the pile off the corner of the stage to find a leather jacket from which she finally produced a key. She presented this to Penelope as one might a treat.

"Zo," Vreni said, putting an arm around Harry. This close he could see she showed her age much more than Penelope's mother. "This is your mensch? The one you told me of in your letters?"

Penelope bit her lip. "Yes. But, I, uh, might not have meant everything I wrote."

Harry smiled and straightened, lifting very thin Aunt Vreni to her toes, she was hanging so hard on his neck. Vreni let go but she pounded him on the back. "He is big strong boy, it seems," she opined approvingly. "You take good care of Peni, she write to me," she said to Harry.

"It was easy," Harry insisted.

"Ah, tha's good. Well," she said, patting his shoulder. Her gaze fixed on his forehead. "Interesting scar; you vill have to explain how you got it sometime. Over breakfast. Right now I have an appointment with the barman during my break." She stepped away, turned back and said, "I'll zee you in the morning." She gave a little wave and a smile.

"Was she serious?" Harry asked, grinning.

"She is renown for having no sense of current events, but I would not have thought she was that far out of things."

"I like her already," Harry said and offered Penelope an arm to lead her away toward the boat launch.

Vreni's flat was not as chaotic as Harry feared it would be. There wasn't enough stuff in it to be anything but neat. Just beside the door was an odd assortment of things like boots, documents, a book, a key, all in a random pile. Penelope straightened the few things in the room and went off to find bedding for the futon. The bedroom was more chaotic Harry saw, when Penelope opened the door to go in. Harry decided to survey the kitchen and amazingly found the refrigerator had enough food for breakfast, although it also contained many things that didn't need to be there, such as salt, sugar and bread. He poured himself a glass of water and refilled it for Penelope who was straightening the duvet.

She drank the water and went into the kitchenette. Harry looked over the small bookshelf of photography books, of all things. Penelope came back with two steaming mugs of cocoa, which he would not have imagined could be put together by what he had seen in there. Maybe the milk had been in the cabinet.

It was almost midnight when Penelope declared herself too tired stay up any longer and took her large shoulder bag to the toilet. She returned in a fuzzy night gown, scented with something flowery. Harry did the same, washing up and putting on his pyjamas. When he came back, Penelope was already curled up on the futon. He laid down beside her, hooked an arm around her, and tried to put the evening out of his mind. She turned toward and under him, and Harry decided that there were better ways to forget the evening.

The next morning, Harry was woken by noises from the area of the stove. Penelope and her aunt were cooking breakfast. Harry now realized the problem with not getting redressed the night before; he really should know better, he considered. He scooped his pyjama bottoms off the floor and put them on under the duvet, to Penelope's amusement from where she stood cutting bread at the counter facing him.

As they ate eggs and stale bread toasted to a crisp in thin slices, Penelope tried to explain things to her aunt. "Yes, I hear of this wizard," Vreni insisted, pointing at the table with her index finger. "Very bad wizard. But I do not understand," she said to Harry, "why you fight him zo many times?"

Harry sighed and put marmalade on his toast to have with his refilled coffee. "Took me a while to figure out how to finish him off."

"Oh," Vreni said, sounding unimpressed.

Harry shook his head and had to grin, as this certainly was a first. Penelope shrugged at Harry apologetically.

After breakfast, Penelope said, "We should check the train schedule, leave sometime this morning."

Harry nodded that he agreed. He and Snape were leaving early tomorrow, he realized in surprise. "Time went fast," Harry observed.

Penelope nodded with a sad smile.

* * *

The next morning, Snape was waiting on the platform when they arrived, wearing his cloak, his trunk beside him. Harry felt a rush at recognizing him there in the crowd. He placed his trunk beside Snape's and greeted him before pulling Penelope aside quickly, since their train was already beside the platform, doors open.

"No thoughts of revenge, all right?" Harry said, firmly to her.

She glanced away. "Okay," she said a little unwillingly.

Harry frowned but had no time to say anything more as Snape was putting their trunks aboard without help.

"You are Harry's guardian?" Mr. Tidewater asked when Snape stepped down from the carriage.

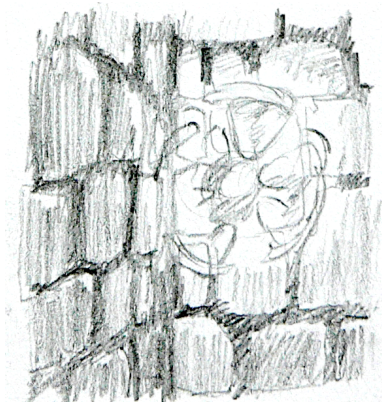
"Yes," Snape replied and shook the man's hand.

"He is a very nice young man. It was a pleasure to have him," Mr. Tidewater said in a very complimentary way.

With a sideways glance at Harry, Snape said, "He must have been behaving himself." He glanced at the platform clock and gestured that they should board.

Harry shook his head and Mr. Tidewater's hand. Madeleine kissed his cheeks before Snape tugged him to the imminently departing train. Harry waved to Penelope and shouted that he would write as he pulled himself up the high steps. The automatic doors hissed closed behind him as he cleared them, and the train lurched forward.

Author note: Mensch carries the Yiddish meaning.



Chapter 49 -- Silent, Steadfast, and Forebearing

Harry stepped rapidly across the Ministry atrium and stopped before the lifts. Everyone else waiting turned to stare at him. He gave them all an uncomfortable smile and tried to stay focused on the day ahead. His nerves were bothering him much more than he had expected. Last night's confidence seemed to have deserted him.

After one wrong turn, he found the correct room in the department of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry had been here before with Mr. Weasley and recognized some of the corridors. Desks had been arranged in a corner of a large room that looked as though it may be used for athletic workouts and given the scorch marks on the walls and ceiling, spell practice. The desks were nearly all full which meant there were fifteen applicants. Tonks had said there were rarely more than six. Eyes found his and went wide. He ignored them and took one of the remaining seats on the far side in the second-to-last row.

The young man next to him was Indian with shiny black hair that covered his collar. His gaze at Harry didn't waver.

"You are Harry Potter," the man stated in a heavy accent.

After a glance to confirm that the middle-aged wizard at the front was still waiting for something before starting, Harry held out his hand. With deliberate movement the man shook it. "Vineet Abhayananda," he said.

"Pleased to meet you," Harry said automatically. He pulled a quill and inkwell from his bag and set them out, noting that Vineet's dark eyes tracked him doing this.

"You and I are the only two not availing ourselves of a never-quill," Vineet said.

It took Harry a moment to get that. He glanced around. Everyone else did have a never-out quill. Harry preferred a normal one--dipping in the inkwell forced him to take time to think.

The middle-aged wizard at the front introduced himself as Reginald Rodgers, Senior Trainer, and handed out the examination parchments by walking the narrow aisles. He touched each quill with his wand as he passed--Harry presumed with an anti-cheating spell. The exam roll was thick and heavy. Rodgers stepped back to the front of the room and said, "Time." Harry unwrapped a foot of the roll and glanced at the first three questions. The fourth one looked easier, so he tackled that one first.

By the time he had answered the question at the end of the parchment, hours later, Harry was stretching his neck frequently. Vineet beside him sat in the same straight-backed pose, calmly dipping and writing. A glance at the clock showed that there was still half an hour of the four hours remaining. Harry went backward through the questions, editing his answers and trying to write something for the ones he had left blank. Of the row in front of him, one test taker had left early, one with very short hair had her head on her arm for a nap, and the other two slouched low in their seats, tiredly perusing their parchments.

Harry closed his eyes and thought about the first question. It asked what seven spells Marvin the Magnificent had used to destroy the Breakwater Banshee. Harry had heard of Marvin--a statue of him as a stooped old man graced the fifth floor corridor at Hogwarts--but he didn't know anything about Marvin fighting a banshee. The second question was a Potions one. It gave a formula and six variations and asked what effect the original potion and the variants would have. It wasn't a recipe he had ever encountered. Rather than leave the space blank, he made notes about each step and what the result would be. At the end it seemed like the whole thing would be inert. He wrote that the potion would do nothing, even though he strongly resisted that answer. Only the fifth variant would leave anything active. He wrote that down and thought that it would be a long complicated way to end up with a mild oxidizer. He noted this conclusion too and hoped it was not too flippant.

Five minutes left, and only the first question was blank. Harry imagined facing a banshee. He would definitely start with a Silencing Charm. He wrote down that he did not know what Marvin had done, but that he may have begun with that. Since Banshees have poisonous teeth, he wrote down two suggestions for that, then added three more ideas to disable the claws, including a Treacle Trap. That was only six. He mulled over what a seventh might have been until Rodgers called for a halt. Harry wished he had just known the answer. With a sigh he rolled it up and handed it to the head trainer as he came by for them.

Everyone was standing to stretch and Harry did as well. Vineet sat staring ahead, looking relaxed and out of place as a result.

"There will be a break for forty-five minutes and then the physical testing will begin," stated Rodgers. It was one o'clock. Some of the test-takers took lunches from their bags. Harry's stomach gurgled. Mr. Weasley had suggested Harry join him. Thinking that he would like that, Harry took his leave.

"Mr. Weasley?" Harry said, sticking his head inside the office door after a fast walk through the burrowish Ministry corridors.

"Harry! How did it go?"

Harry shrugged. "I probably got some of the questions right. More than that . . ." he finished with another shrug. "You said there was a tearoom? I only have a short break and I'm famished."

"Of course, of course." Arthur stood up and hustled him down to the end of the hallway. A cart with sandwiches sat in the break room with a can for money. Harry took a cheese sandwich and put in four sickles for it. He spotted a jar of pumpkin juice on the second shelf and paid a sickle for that. The tearoom was empty so they took the middle table.

Halfway through a quiet meal, Mr. Weasley said, "They didn't just give you a free ride on the entrance exams?"

"I didn't want one," Harry said in a difficult tone.

"Ah. I see. You are too honorable, my boy," Arthur stated sagely. "You make the rest of us look bad."

Harry gave him a doubtful face then jumped up as he saw the clock. "Gotta run. Thanks for lunch, Mr. Weasley."

"Anytime, Harry," he said with affection.

Back in the testing room, the desks were gone and the applicants, fourteen of them now, were pairing up on mats in rows on the floor. Harry spotted Vineet standing alone and stepped over to him. "Do you mind?" Harry asked.

"By no imagination could I," the man responded.

Many of the other applicants were doing warm ups. Harry stretched his legs the way Neville had taught him for running, just to do something. Vineet did a series of moves, kicked out and turned gracefully. Harry stepped back automatically to get clear. "What is that?" he asked.

"It is an Eastern Art of defense. I will demonstrate?"

Harry shrugged and stepped onto the mat as indicated. Vineet bowed and Harry watched his hands, which was a mistake, as a dark skinned foot kicked around and took his legs out from under him. Surprised more than anything, Harry got back to his feet. The landing on the mat had not even jarred him. The whole room stopped to look at them.

"Can you show me that?" Harry asked.

Vineet grinned, which Harry had not yet seen him do. He patiently explained and demonstrated the kick. Harry tried it a few times in the air--he needed his arms to counterbalance a lot more than Vineet appeared to.

"You may try it," Vineet said, stepping on the mat before him.

"Sure," Harry said. He gauged the distance to the other man's legs and rehearsed the move in his mind then twisted and swung his foot. His foot did not connect. Instead, Harry was airborne, rolling over Vineet back-to-back. He landed on the other side of the mat. With a challenging look at the Indian, Harry stood up again and hoped Eastern Arts were not a requirement of the Auror's program. "Should I have expected that?" Harry asked him, while trying to gauge the man's intent through his calm visage. The entrance of the training wizard cut off any reply Harry may have received.

Harry made it through the timed laps, the push-ups, the weights. None of it was really hard, although several of the applicants were like Vineet, in very good condition.

A set of basic spell drills came next. Harry breezed through his set and Vineet stepped up to follow. With great concentration the Indian completed his set as well. When he stepped beside Harry, Vineet's face was sparkling with sweat as though he had exerted himself greatly. Harry wondered at that. The other applicants all finished with varying degrees of ease.

Rodgers called them to order when the last applicant completed her drills. "Each of you, step up into the marked area in front of me. You will receive five spells, Radian, Figuresempre, Dragonian, Quiotidus, and Polaria Diarama. The spells will be in a random order. You are to block each one. Potter, why don't you go first?"

Harry regripped his wand and stepped into the area marked with yellow paint.

Rodgers said, "You are expected to stay in that painted area." He paused as though to be sure that was understood. "Ready?"

Harry nodded, mentally flipping through the blocks he would need. Rodgers spelled him with a Dragonian first. Harry managed a basic dome block to meet it, but the force of it made him step back anyway. He resisted glancing down after the spell faded, just stepped forward to approximately where he had started as the second spell came at him. A Chrysanthemum block handled the Radian and the Quiotidus that followed immediately after. Harry was breathing hard; Rodgers put more power into his spells than he was used to. The air was staticky with magic afterward.

Rodgers paused before the last one. "Ready? Since you know what it is, it is going to be loaded."

Harry blinked at that, wondering what the man thought the previous ones were. The Figuresempre that hit his Titan block almost collapsed it. Rodgers, seeing this, re-incanted it. Harry, adrenaline pumping, poured more into the block to counter it. The orange field around him solidified, thankfully, and Rodgers canceled the attacking spell.

Harry let out a breath as his arms dropped limp. Rodgers tipped his head to the side to indicate he could step out. Harry, relieved, did so. The rest of the applicants looked wary now as Harry stepped over to them, clustered in the middle of the room. Glad that was out of the way, he watched, relaxed, while one-by-one the others were tested. Eight were not able to stay in the box. One needed to be hovered out of the room to the Healer. Vineet, despite what seemed to be poor spell power, kept himself upright and in the box by sheer will and physical strength. He bowed deeply to Rodgers after the fifth spell was finished and stepped over to Harry.

"You made it look too easy, I think," he said, sweating hard again.

"Didn't mean to," Harry said in an apologetic tone.

After the testing Harry used the stairs down to the atrium. It was mid-afternoon and he felt as though it should be ten at night. This morning, he had planned for this afternoon to make a trip to Diagon Alley for a few things, but they seemed much less important now. He took his time walking across the large open space as he tried to decide what to do. He was down to his last handful of Floo powder, so if he did go shopping, he would have to remember to get more.

Deciding he would later regret not taking care of things, Harry shucked his robe by the lift and stuffed it into his bag. Up on the surface of Muggle London, he started walking. He came upon Vineet standing at a bus stop at the end of the first block. Happy just to see a familiar face where he least expected it, Harry gave him a nod and a smile. The Indian stepped smoothly out of the crowd and came aside.

"May I ask you something?" he said.

Harry stopped and shrugged.

The man hesitated as a group of Muggles went by, then hesitated further. Finally he said, "I have read everything I could find about what you did to the Unnamed One. It is mostly supposition, however." Harry looked away from the man's dark brown eyes and watched a red bus trundle slowly away from the stop. Vineet went on, "I am not wishing to impose, just very curious. I do not expect to make it to the apprenticeship, and I am thinking this is my only chance to talk to you. Kismet if you will." He smiled uncertainly.

"Why don't you think you're going to make it?" Harry asked.

"Ah." Vineet sighed. "My magic is not so strong. That is why I am working so hard on my martial skills in vain hope it will be a difference. You were convenient for a demonstration, I am forced to be confessing."

"Ah, I get it now," Harry said. "But I asked you to partner."

Vineet bowed slightly at that. "Kismet, my grandfather would say. His mother was a witch--it is my only inheritance of magic."

Harry looked him over. He thought that if he had even half this man's poise, he would be all set in everything.

Vineet went on, "But you have not shared with others, so I cannot hope to have you share with me. It seemed to me from the vague retellings that you used very little magic. I have taken much from that; it is what has led me here."

Harry stared at him in surprise. Relenting in the face of that, he said, "I was told I was using old magic, but I think my headmaster was using the term 'magic' a little broadly." Vineet's eyes became very interested as Harry spoke. Harry could not help but give in farther; a year was a long time and the story felt much less weighty. "I forced Voldemort to feel everything he was incapable of feeling. He couldn't handle that."

"How did you reach him to do this?"

Harry frowned. "I didn't have to reach him. I'd got part of him when he marked me." He gestured vaguely at his scar. "It got worse after he used my blood to give himself human form again."

Vineet's eyes were more intense. "I am not hearing that story."

"It was published in a pretty obscure place."

Vineet thought a moment. "Can you give an example, give me an example of what you made him feel? I am not understanding."

Harry waited for more Muggles to pass. "Voldemort never felt anything good. Love, for example. Need for . . ." Harry paused to try to name the emotion he had felt at the abandoned manor. "Need for caring, I guess."

"That is all that was required?"

Harry thought about that. "I suppose. I did have to catch him off guard to really win, which is too complicated to explain. Then I had to manage an Avada Kedavra with no hate in it after only reading a description in a book. Funny, they don't teach that one at my school," he added, attempting lightness. Thinking he should give Vineet some encouragement, he went on, "You are right that I didn't use much magic. I relied on my friends' magic, which was better than mine in some cases. Voldemort had most of his followers with him and they were not in a very good mood."

Vineet gave him a weak smile in apparent acknowledgment of his joke.

Harry continued, "You have to understand, and maybe this is something you will, that I was destined to destroy him, so some things just happened."

Vineet nodded at this thoughtfully. After a moment, he said, "My number of bus is approaching." He held out his hand and Harry shook it. "I am hopeful for seeing you again," he said calmly without any hint of hopefulness.

"Good luck," Harry said sincerely.

"Worth a thousand blessings of Shiva, I think," he said with a hint of amiability. Harry watched him step on the bus just before as it pulled away with a smoggy roar.

* * *

Harry gratefully stepped out of the Floo at home and found Snape in the drawing room. "How did it go?" his guardian asked.

Harry tilted his head to the side. "I have no idea." He told him the formula of the second question.

"You would get mud if you mixed those things together under those conditions, unless you are reciting it incorrectly."

"I think I got that one right then. The first three questions were really odd."

"To make the test takers panic, I should think. Did you?"

"I skipped them and tried to fill something in when I was done with the rest." He shrugged. "They are going to owl if I made the first cut with the schedule for my second day of testing." Snape gave him an odd look, forcing Harry to comment, "You don't think I won't get in. I shouldn't be in it if I don't deserve to be." Snape's expression did not change. Harry huffed and walked away.

* * *

Feeling like he deserved to, Harry relaxed over the next few days. He sat in the dining room before lunch, rereading Penelope's last letter and writing out a reply. He found himself expressing more of his hopes for this apprenticeship than he suspected she wanted to hear, but could not think of anything else to write about since it was all that was on his mind. Snape came down as Harry released her owl out the window.

While they ate, an owl with an official leg band from the Auror's office arrived. Harry tore open the envelope with some impatience and read the message quickly. "I am scheduled to go back in on Thursday, 8:00 a.m."

"Congratulations, Harry," Snape intoned as he buttered a second slice of bread and began making a sandwich out of the cold joint on the platter in the middle of the table. "Still feel you have been passed through unfairly?" he asked levelly.

"Um, no. It says I got the second highest score on the written examination. And the highest on the spell drills."

"I am glad that leaves no question in your mind. Or anyone else's, for that matter." He ate a bite. "It also bodes well for your N.E.W.T. results, which should be coming soon as well."

"Oh yeah, those," Harry said, as though he were trying to think about too many things at once.

"Worrying about Thursday already?"

Harry rearranged his sandwich which kept falling apart. "Guess so. They said that it's a kind of personality and character test. They want to make sure you won't crumple when faced with danger."

Snape put down his silverware a little loudly and looked at him. "You certainly have been well-prepared for that," he said dryly. "You would do best to worry less, I should think."

* * *

On Sunday, Harry stepped into the drawing room where Snape was buried again in parchments. They looked a bit like Hogwarts acceptance letters, which made Harry curious, so he approached and tried to read one of them upside-down. It was the familiar form letter all right. Snape looked up, prompting Harry to say, "Mr. Weasley said he would give Ron and myself Apparition lessons today, so I'm going to the Burrow."

Snape sat back and surveyed the piles before him. "I have not had much time, have I?"

Harry shook his head. "It's all right; Ron said his dad wanted to do it. And you need a break from teaching."

"Do be careful," Snape muttered, returning to the pile before him. To Harry's eye it looked as though he was signing the letters in McGonagall's name. He supposed it didn't matter, really, since the new students would not know the difference.

Harry stepped out of the Weasley hearth a few minutes later. Ron and Ginny were playing wizard chess on the couch with Ron leaning far forward looking more intent on the game than expected, making Harry wonder if he were losing. "Hi, Harry," Ron greeted him without looking up.

Grinning, Ginny said, "Did you hear?" When Harry shrugged, she went on, "Draco's hearing was on Friday."

Harry paused, he had not heard that it had been scheduled, despite being at the Ministry last week. He felt a twinge at the realization that people still didn't tell him things. Trying not to appear angry, he sat down beside Ron and said casually, "So what happened?"

Ginny hesitated, gauging him, before she replied, "He got eight months counselling."

Harry frowned. "He could use it, I suppose." He thought a little more as Ron aborted ordering one of his pieces to move. "He'd probably be killed in Azakaban."

Quietly, Ginny said, "That's what Dad said. The stated reason was for extenuating circumstances, given that he participated at his father's urging . . . that he wouldn't have for anyone else."

Harry felt that was probably true and as well that if Malfoy the younger stepped out of line again Harry himself might be in a position to haul him back into it, which he would enjoy doing. They waited for Ron as he looked over the board with a frown. Ginny glanced into the kitchen before saying quietly, "Dad was really angry at Percy because he argued at the hearing that if Malfoy or one of the other Death Eaters did something to Draco in prison, that he'd deserve it."

Ron finally made a move, then hit himself on the head. "I didn't see that; dang."

"Check again," Ginny said, clearly enjoying every syllable of it.

"Ron," Harry prodded. "I can't believe you are losing."

"Neither can I."

Mr. Weasley came down the rickety staircase. "Well, Harry, how are you? Ready for some Apparating?"

"Yes, sir."

"We HAVE to finish this game, Dad," Ginny insisted.

"Later," Ron said, standing up. "We don't want to make Harry wait."

Pointing at her brother accusingly, Ginny said, "Your chess set rearranges the board if left alone. Finish or concede. I'm not giving in on my best game ever."

Ron glared at his sister. "All right, I'll give it to you," he huffed, disgusted.

On the lawn outside the ever-sagging Weasley house, Mr. Weasley gave them a long lecture about Apparition safety. "No Apparating or Disapparating in view of a Muggle. No Apparating or Disapparating within the hearing of a Muggle, unless it is an emergency."

Ron grabbed a biscuit from a chipped, gaudily flower-patterned plate Ginny had brought out. It sat on the heavy wooden table beside them where Ginny sat munching and listening in.

Mr. Weasley continued, "No Apparating after alcohol until you have had at least a year of practice at it and then only if it is an emergency." Ron nudged Harry with his elbow, prompting Mr. Weasley to huff at them. "Now," Mr. Weasley went on, "The first thing you need to learn—"

"Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley's voice rang out from kitchen window. "I need you to help get the gnome traps down from the hall cupboard."

"Back in a flash," Mr. Weasley said and headed around the house to the door.

"So, Harry," Ginny said, chopping through a tiny red apple with a rusty knife. "Where's *your* dad today?"

"Busy."

When Ginny popped a small slice of apple in her mouth, Ron said, "You'll get sick eating those."

"What are they?" Harry asked.

Ginny pointed at a scraggly apple tree at the edge of the lawn. "I used a spell to ripen them."

"They're going to make you sick," Ron repeated.

"They're going to make you sick," Ginny mocked. "Not if you do the spell right," she countered and ate another piece. "What's Professor Snape do during the summer?"

"Today he's preparing the Hogwarts acceptance letters," Harry explained, helping himself to a biscuit.

"This year's letters will be signed by Professor Snape?" Ron asked, sounding dismayed.

"He's signing McGonagall's name to them."

"Oy, I still treasure my letter from Dumbledore," Ron commented bleakly. "Wonder who signed it?"

They fell silent in thought until Harry asked, "Where's Hermione?"

"Said she was busy," Ron said.

Ginny said, "She's getting private Apparition lessons next week. At the end they get a test and a license all in one day."

"Sounds expensive," Harry commented.

"It was her end-of-school present," Ginny explained.

Mr. Weasley came back out, brushing off his hands. "All right, where were we?"

"No putting radishes in your ears while Apparating," Ron supplied sounding bored.

Mr. Weasley put his hands on his hips. "I don't have to take time off on my free day to do this, Ronald."

"Sorry, Mr. Weasley," Harry said and hit Ron on the arm. Even though he didn't hit it hard, Ron rubbed that spot anyway. Harry was not keen on showing up for his apprenticeship, should he get in, unable to Apparate. He was hoping to at least be able to say he had applied for his license. They should have done this last summer, but with spending most of the holiday stuck at school where it was impossible, there had not been a good opportunity. He suspected his friends of holding off until Harry could also learn, but didn't really want to know if that were true because Harry might feel the need to yell at them for it.

"Now, most important," Mr. Weasley was saying, "is to concentrate completely on the spell. It is the best way to avoid Splinching yourself. Don't be distracted by anything while you're doing it. Stop, center yourself and . . ." He reappeared ten feet away with a *pop*! "It is that easy. Ron you first," he commanded.

Ron stepped over to his father and turned to face Harry with a bit of a slouch. Mr. Weasley became serious. "Imagine yourself shrinking away into something the size of a marble. . ."

Ginny interrupted, "Mum says imagine yourself folding up like a paper airplane."

"If the marble doesn't work, we'll go with that next," Mr. Weasley. "Now, close your eyes and give it a try."

"Do I always have to have them closed?" Ron asked in concern. "I want see where I'm going."

"Not always, but it helps when you're learning," Mr. Weasley said impatiently. "Cuts the distraction."

"I could plug my ears, then I wouldn't have to listen to Ginny," Ron volunteered.

"I've seen people learn that way," Mr. Weasley said. "All bundled up like a mummy and starting from a dark cupboard. Bad way to learn, really. Your cousin used to have to Apparate into the attic when she came to visit because she never learned better. Scared the bats. Anyway, we are getting distracted ourselves. Close your eyes." Ron did so. "Imagine yourself shrinking up into a marble-sized ball."

Ron opened his eyes, looked around doubtfully, then closed them again and silence descended. Nothing happened. Harry thought of eating another biscuit but didn't want to distract his friend with the noise of it. "Paper airplane," Ginny said.

"Can I try that?" Ron asked without opening his eyes.

"Go ahead," said Mr. Weasley.

After another half minute, Ron's arms disappeared, then reappeared as he made a noise of surprise. He patted his arms in a panic. "Oh. Good. For a moment there I thought I'd lost them." When Ginny giggled into her hand, Ron angrily said, "Let's see you try it."

Ginny immediately disappeared and reappeared just to his right.

"You've been practicing. Dad, she's not old enough," he complained.

"Just another month," Ginny said, strutting back to the table and starting to chop up another tiny apple. She gave Harry a cocky look.

"I think the twins taught her, although we never caught them at it. Now back to you and your wayward arms."

It took an hour for Ron to get through getting all of himself to go ten feet, then came the problem of explaining exactly how one knew where one was going. By the time Mr. Weasley did a roundabout explanation of how to imagine where you wanted to end up, it was time for dinner. As they went inside, Mr. Weasley said, just realizing, "We didn't get to you, Harry."

"That's all right, Mr. Weasley. I appreciate the lesson."

* * *

Harry woke early for his second examination. He had cheated a little: he had gone to bed very early and used a sip of potion to sleep soundly. After a reasonable breakfast he bade goodbye to his guardian and took the Floo back to the Ministry. Fewer people were around this morning, both in the atrium and down in the Auror offices.

Rodgers came out of a doorway as Harry stood in the corridor, wondering which door to knock on. "Ready?" he asked.

"Sure," Harry said, trying to sound confident. The other applicants had whispered odd things to each other about this test during the previous session. Harry wished he had listened more closely.

"Give me your wand." Harry handed it over and the wizard said, "Follow me."

Rodgers led the way down to the end and around the corner. He pulled a black silk scarf out of his pocket casually and told Harry to turn around. He put it over Harry's eyes and guided him, so blinded, down the corridor and into a room. Harry knew this because could hear his footsteps echoing. "Count to ten and remove the blindfold after I have gone. I will give you one piece of advice that a trainer gave me when I had this test." He sounded as though he repeated this frequently and that it was not something he was doing just for Harry. "Nothing in here will harm you. If anything will defeat you, it will be your own demons."

Harry stood blinded and didn't hear anything at all after that, not even a scuff of a shoe on stone. After a minute he supposed that Rodgers must be gone. He counted to ten anyway and pulled the blindfold off. The room was only fifteen feet square with rough stone walls and floor. The one fairy light did not add much illumination. He could not make out the ceiling in the paltry light, so he supposed that it was quite high.

Time passed. Harry lost complete track of it. Bored, he took a seat in the center of the floor with his legs crossed. After another long gap of silence, the fairy light went out. Despite believing he had been starting to anxiously hope for anything to break the monotony, the sudden darkness still startled him.

Feeling too vulnerable where he was, Harry got to his feet and felt his way to one of the walls. The darkness was absolute. Harry ran his hand over the stones and mortar just to sense something of his environment. He heard something then, like a small door opening, then a sliding sound resembling a cape being drawn across the floor. Another similar sound joined with it and Harry realized what it sounded like.

Harry imagined himself before the cage at the zoo and said, "*Are you here?*"

The sliding paused and a long silence ensued. The fairy light reappeared, brighter this time. A very large snake faced Harry, positioned for maximum effect when the lights came back.

"*Nagini?*"

"*Master?*"

"*I am not your master,*" Harry said. Nagini lowered her head and slowly coiled up. Harry stepped away from the wall and took a look around for the door she must have used. There was no sign of it. "*Been busy?*" Harry asked her.

"*Many scared humans these last days.*"

Harry laughed lightly.

Back in the Auror's meeting room, Rodgers commented wryly, "We don't ask on the application about Parseltongue, do we?" He sat at a small table where five other Aurors and older apprentices also sat watching the large crystal ball on the table. In it, Harry was taking a seat in the center of the floor, making odd hissing noises.

Tonks entered. "Harry's in?" She leaned over one of the other women and stared at the ball. "Why did you bother with Nagini? He captured her." She shook her head.

"They said no exceptions for him," Rodgers supplied.

The snake coiled beside Harry, it seemed to be showing him her teeth.

"*My poison has been taken,*" she said.

Harry peered into her mouth. "*Your new fangs actually look longer.*"

"*They are.*"

They chatted for a while, until the fairy light went out again. A bell sounded. "*I must go,*" she hissed. Harry heard the sliding fade and the small door close. He imagined that if one didn't know Nagini, that spending that much time with her might be unnerving.

The fairy light brightened again slowly. Harry remained on the floor, waiting. Expecting another long pause, he relaxed. After a few minutes, something shiny in the mortar of the floor caught his eye. He turned and saw that liquid was running in across the floor. Standing quickly, he stepped over to where it poured in from the join of the floor to the wall. It was dark and a little thick. Soon, it was lapping at his trainers as though the room itself were being submerged. He stepped back with a jerk when it coated his shoe in red. There was no place to go, though, and soon blood had filled his shoes and lapped at the hem of his robe.

Harry had never imagined that much blood. It kept rising. When it reached his knees, he started looking above him for anything to grab, or to test if the gaps in the mortar would allow him to climb the walls, but it wasn't possible. He leaned into the corner and forced himself to stay calm.

When it reached mid-thigh it halted, to Harry's relief. Then it drained quickly, leaving him soaked in it. He thought about taking off his robe, but as he shook it out, the remaining blood disappeared, leaving his robe light and normal. Even his shoes dried instantly.

The next break had to go on a long time again before Harry thought sitting on the floor to be a good idea. Eventually, when his legs ached, he relented and again sat in the center of the room. When a deep grinding sound started, Harry came alert again. Stone ran on stone mysteriously until Harry realized the walls were tightening in. The ceiling came down in a surge, making him duck to lie on the floor. Then the walls came in and Harry curled up as they pressed close.

The fairy light stayed with him, which at first he was glad for, but when it showed him only his feet, shoulders and knees pressed against unyielding square flint, he realized it was making it worse. Everything stopped for several minutes. Harry squirmed a little to get in a better position to breath. Then he waited. When the wall at his feet moved in suddenly another inch, he jumped severely, bruising his knees. He again calmed himself. It moved in again, and again he successfully fought instinctive panic.

Five shallow breaths later, the walls pulled away. Harry's hand shook a little as he put in on the floor to keep from falling over. He let out a few full breaths and returned to waiting, thinking that those three tests were about as unrelated as he could imagine and left him uncertain what to expect next.

The wait was shorter this time. A clang sounded. Harry spun around and scrambled to his feet to face an ogre that had appeared behind him. After reaching for his empty wand pocket, he forced his hands to his sides. The ogre clomped over to him. It wore only a wrap around its green belly. Muscles rippled on its hefty arms. Harry had not realized he was backing up until his spine met the wall. He chastised himself, thinking that Vineet would have stood his ground.

The ogre pulled metal rings from his belt. With immovable force he took Harry's wrist and locked the ring around it, then did the same to the other. He then grabbed the chain running between them and yanked Harry into the center of the room. Harry, knocked off balance, fell. He got back to his knees and watched as the ogre pulled something else from his belt. It was a whip. Harry could not prevent himself from jumping nervously at the first loud crack of it within a foot of him.

Harry stared at the ogre as calmly as possible as the whip snapped closer and closer. The whip was finally stashed away and Harry could not avoid releasing his next breath audibly; the last strike had touched his hair.

The ogre shuffled his warty, oversized feet closer and grabbed the chain again and locked it to a ring that had appeared in the center of the floor. Rings were added to Harry's ankles, but not without a struggle that he just could not hold back on. The chain between his feet was fed through a large ring to the chain between his hands. The ogre gave it a tug, pulling Harry into a curled position. With a grunt the ogre stood straight and the lights went out.

Harry, surrounded by total darkness, forced the chain to yield its slack so he could sit more comfortably. This he could think of as some kind of game, though he imagined that someone who had previously been a prisoner would find this difficult to endure.

The small door opened again and Harry scooted around on the floor to face the direction of the sound of it. The fairy lights came up to reveal a dozen or so perfectly ordinary-sized tarantulas. Harry relaxed. They scuttled around him, one taking a shortcut over his exposed shin. The feel of its pointed legs made him shiver. After a minute or so they stepped away and the small door closed.

Some time later. Harry blinked to clear his eyes and with a loud shuffle of chain, rubbed them under his glasses. The room was filling with an aqua fog. Tendrils of it curled out across the floor, issuing forth a disturbing light. When Harry smelled its sickly sweet scent, he tried to stand, but the chains were ungainly. He passed out, forced by the exertion to take a gasp of tainted air.

When Harry next awoke, his first thought was that his arm was cold and the floor was too rough. He blinked and sat up part way. His clothes were gone and he was still chained. He huffed in annoyance and sat up the rest of the way. There were three fairy lights now. Harry looked around at them and realized with a bad start that someone stood in the corner of the room.

Harry composed himself, put his knees up to rest his arms on and considered the dark form as it stirred and moved into the light. The blue lights revealed a wizard with severely styled, grey-streaked dark hair, wearing a cloak with a turned-

up collar edged in scarlet. He walked with a gold-tipped cane that reminded Harry too much of Malfoy's silver one. Malfoy, however, never had the opportunity to push Harry over with it, which is what this man did as he passed. Rubbing the spot on his chest where the cane had pressed, Harry sat back up, feeling slightly woozy as he did so. He shook off his unbalance and looked the wizard over as he circled, cane tapping on the stones. He did not recognize him at all. He supposed that he represented the ideal of a dark wizard. Harry tried not to scoff internally. Fake dark wizard or not, he really wished he weren't naked.

The wizard finally spoke. "Presumptuous one, aren't you?" he asked in a sneering tone.

"I don't think so," Harry replied easily.

The wizard gave him a derisive look. He circled some more. Harry stopped watching him since turning his head was making him dizzy. He looked up when the cane tapped him on the shoulder. "What would your mother think of seeing you like this?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "I never knew her."

"She would be appalled." The wizard caught the chain with his cane and jerked it, pulling Harry to his side. Harry was starting to really hate being restrained so. "She would wail and wonder where your pride was," the stranger went on mockingly.

"I doubt that."

"Do you miss her?" The wizard asked suddenly, leaning in close.

"Yes," Harry replied instantly, then wondered why he had catered to this bloke.

"How can you miss someone you do not remember?" the wizard sneered.

"I just miss having a mum. I see other mothers--I know what they do," Harry heard his voice coming out sounding hurt and thought he should rein in his answers.

The wizard circled more. Harry tried to hunch over to prevent access to his chain. The man laughed. "I can do anything to you that I like. How does that make you feel?"

"I don't like it," Harry answered. "Though it is somewhat more interesting than being in here alone."

The cane lifted his chin. "How touching," the wizard sneered. He circled some more. "Did you enjoy taking revenge on Voldemort?"

"Revenge would have killed me," Harry said, listening to himself prattle on with some alarm. "Any negative emotion and he would have taken me over. I didn't want to show him everything, but I had to--he had control of me. He used my hate against me."

"Have you ever taken revenge?"

"I tried to take it against Pettigrew. Wormtail, what an appropriate name . . . he *was* a rat and I didn't see anything wrong with him dying like one. Severus stopped me before I could go after him, pleaded with me not to do it." Again Harry was startled by how much he was saying. He wondered if being naked and chained had brought his sense of self down that far.

"Was fighting Voldemort the worst moment of your life?"

Harry immediately shook his head.

"What was?"

Harry thought about that, feeling strangely desperate for a good answer. "Maybe one of the times I thought I was being expelled or . . ." Harry stopped for a long time, not wanting to think about an answer.

Turning suddenly the man shouted, "Tell me!" in his face.

"I don't know!" Harry shouted back. "I have to think about it," he pleaded with him, frightened irrationally by the disapproval. "When Voldemort took me over, in the atrium upstairs, and taunted Dumbledore to kill us both. It was awful beyond words. I was pleading in my mind for him to kill me too, I so badly wanted it to stop." Harry breathed heavily in the wake of this.

"Name another time," the man demanded.

Harry's mind was racing. "What was in that vapor?" he asked, heart thumping as he considered that something was wrong with him.

"It was merely sleeping gas," the wizard stated reassuringly. "Tell me another time."

Harry face immediately crumpled. "Finding the mirror," he whispered and shook his head in remorse.

Sharply he was asked, "What mirror?"

"The mirror Sirius gave me. I would have known where he was," Harry's voice cracked as he spoke this. "I was such a fool. I believed Voldemort when he gave me visions that he had Sirius captive. So stupid. There wasn't anyone to help. I didn't trust Professor Snape. Sirius came to my rescue instead and died for it." A tear traced out of Harry's eye at this. His chains rattled as he put his hands up to dab at his eye.

Harry pulled off his glasses when the tears didn't stop. "He wanted me to live with him," he felt compelled to explain in an empty voice. He sniffled as he pressed his forearm against his eyes.

"Tell me another," the voice said after a few more circling steps.

Harry shook his head as he felt a liberating surge of defiance. "No," he said firmly. The wizard scuffed to a halt before him. A crystal goblet appeared in his hand and he poured something into it from a silver flask in his pocket. He held this out to Harry.

"Drink it."

"What is it?" Harry asked, suspicious.

"Veritaserum and two other complementary potions."

Harry glared at the man. Heat filled his face with blood. "You've already given me some," he accused.

The man nodded once and continued to hold the goblet out. "You have two clear choices: leave, or drink it."

Harry closed his eyes to force control through himself. He opened them and accepted the cold goblet. The liquid in it shimmered in the fairy lights. He asked himself if he wanted this badly enough as he stared into it. After a long hesitation, he drank it down. It was almost tasteless. The goblet disappeared when he tried to hand it back. The wizard resumed circling. Harry wanted to shout at him to stop but clamped his mouth down on it.

Tonks exhaled audibly. Everyone around the table leaned in close to the crystal ball now.

"Was he talking about Sirius Black?" One asked in disbelief.

"Yes," Tonks said. "His godfather."

"He's still going," another commented, impressed, while the first shook his head in confusion.

After a few minutes of circling hypnotically around Harry, the dark wizard said levelly, as though he were in total control, "Tell me another."

Harry tiredly thought about it. "The Dementors maybe. No." He could feel the potion changing his control, loosening his will. That alone made his eyes burn again. "The tea--the bark tea Snape blew across to cool." In his mind he saw the fire-light, felt Snape's arm around him, felt that queer resonance to some deep memory. "It was like it was my mother," Harry heard himself try to explain. He shook his head and felt that awful yearning again, although it was vastly muted by time.

"Doesn't sound very bad," the wizard mocked him.

Harry felt his shoulders relaxing. "He adopted me," he explained, relieved to find so little pain attached to the memory. "Took me home."

Tonks rubbed the back of her neck, uncomfortable with hearing this.

"They always get incomprehensible after the second dose," one of the apprentices complained.

Tonks stood straight and walked out. She stretched her legs by walking the length of the corridor. "Severus," she said upon finding him loitering near the lifts. She had owled him that morning when Harry had arrived to be certain he came to get him.

"They said he wasn't finished," Snape explained.

"He is still in," she confirmed, trying to sound as calm about that as possible. This was the first time she had understood why he and Harry had ended up in the arrangement they did and she felt like an interloper.

"It has been three hours," Snape observed. "More."

"He's most of the way. It is good you came--he's going to be wiped out when he's done."

This news made Snape look at her sharply. "Severus," she admonished his attempt to Legilimize her.

"My apologies. I am . . . concerned about him."

Tonks gave him a teasing smile. "I see that."

After a space, Snape said, "It is strange. I had considered parental instinct to be purely genetic. I have found it to be circumstantial instead."

She gave him a more reassuring smile than she felt. "The first task was a bit of a joke for him. We utilized Nagini to test for fear of snakes. We've lost two applicants to her already." She laughed lightly. "This, without announcing she was Voldemort's. Imagine if we had. Harry had a nice ten minute conversation with her." She threw up her hands. "No one has the slightest clue what they talked about." At Snape's relaxed and almost amused look, she said, "I'll bring him out here as soon as he's finished," before she took her leave.

Back in the room, the dark wizard demanded, "What else do you regret?"

Fishing for an answer, Harry replied, "I regret losing my parents."

"That wasn't your fault, was it?" his tormenter asked sarcastically.

"They were trying to protect me." Harry fell silent. "Born as the seventh month dies," he finally murmured.

"What?"

"Born to those who thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. They had to run, to hide, because of the prophecy," Harry said sadly. "Either must die at the hands of the other for neither shall live while the other survives. They died because of me." The weight of that felt much heavier than any of the others and was the least expected.

The meeting room had fallen silent again. "Shit, he knows more of it. It was supposedly lost," Rodgers said.

"Dumbledore knew it," Tonks explained. "I expect he told Harry."

Bleakly, Harry said, "I always said it the other way 'round for some reason. That they died *for* me."

The crawling aqua mist had returned. Harry glanced around for the dark wizard, not finding him. The first whiff of the gas knocked him out again.

When he next awoke he was clothed and the chains were gone. With relief he sat up and rubbed the grit out of his eyes. He hoped the whole thing would be over soon; he felt as raw as he had after defeating Voldemort--a state he had hoped to never descend to again.

The room went dark again. Gradually light returned but the room was gone. Instead, Harry sat upon a small pedestal overlooking infinity. Wisps like clouds or space dust drifted slowly past. He glanced down over the edge and found his spindly pedestal stretching downward into the mist like a needle. It made him a little dizzy, so he sat back straight and peered at what looked like a pterodactyl flying in the distance. He supposed that if he fell over the edge of the pedestal that there really wasn't any place to go except the testing room floor beside him.

Eventually the scene faded and darkness returned. Time passed. Harry grew eager to go. He stood up and discovered his wand was back in his pocket. He took it out and cast a Lumos charm. With more light the room looked smaller. Harry paced around it once. He was familiar enough with the stones making up the floor to remember that when the ogre had appeared, it had come from that direction there, while his back was turned.

Feeling re-energized, Harry stepped over to that wall and looked at it closely, but it didn't seem to have any opening. He stepped back and said, "*Alohomora*," to no effect. He then ran through all the unlock spells he knew. The eleventh one made a jagged crack of light, corresponding to the mortar joins, form in the wall. Harry grabbed it with his fingertips and tugged on it.

Rodgers stood in the corridor. "I actually was going to come get you. The last quiet time is to give you a chance to recover."

"Oh, sorry."

"No problem. You know a lot of unlock spells . . . two I've never heard. Follow me." He led Harry into the meeting room. Five people were collected there now. Rogers explained the setup.

Harry flushed. "Everyone was watching?" he asked, dismayed.

"All current Aurors and apprentices are allowed input on applicants," he explained. "Eventually everyone needs to know everyone else's weaknesses. We find this speeds up that process."

Harry dropped his eyes and tried unsuccessfully to accept that.

"You made it all the way through. You should be proud of that, whatever else happens." He urged Harry out of the room. "The afternoon applicant will be here soon," he explained as he gestured for him to follow. Tonks met them in the corridor and led him away.

The first thing Snape thought when he saw Harry turn the corner was that his eyes looked far too much like they did on the chocolate frog card. Harry's gaze found him waiting there and the strained look faded considerably, startling Snape.

"How did it go?" he asked when Harry reached him and received a shrug in reply.

Tonks replied instead, "He made it all the way through; that is most of the way to being accepted to the program." She patted Harry on the back. "Go have a nice quiet evening, maybe a glass of mead, or two."

"Thanks, Tonks," Harry said tiredly and felt a surge of affection for her attention.

They rode in silence in the lift. The atrium was bustling now, grating on Harry's nerves. Snape put a hand around Harry's arm to get him to step out of the lift and into the atrium. They waited in line at the first hearth. When their turn arrived, Snape held out the Floo powder and gestured for Harry to lead.

Harry couldn't remember being so happy to be anywhere as when he stepped out into the dining room. In a flash of green flame, Snape appeared behind him. "Perhaps I should inform Winky to prepare an early dinner."

"That sounds good. I could use some tea too. . . ."

Winky appeared in the doorway right then with a tray. Atop the tray was a steaming pot and a bowl of chocolates. Harry smiled at the elf and sat at the table, Snape across from him, after hanging his cloak up.

"An early dinner, if you will, Winky," Snape said.

"Yes, Master." She finished pouring tea, arranged things, then left.

Snape sipped his tea. The haunted look appeared and faded from Harry's eyes several times.

"Are you allowed to tell me what happened?" Snape asked conversationally.

"Only in general." He ate a chocolate. "They make sure you don't have any common phobias for one, by making you face them all. Then they make you face some other things that probably occur in the course of being an Auror."

"Such as?"

"Such as being interrogated with Veritaserum." At Snape's dismay Harry pointed out, "I seem to recall you threatening me with that at one point."

"I do apologize," Snape breathed in pained sincerity.

Harry thought of saying that he had not been naked and chained to the floor that time so it was okay, then he decided that he did not want Snape to know about that. He stared into his tea and Occluded his mind, just in case.

After a long while Snape asked, "Worth it?"

"I hope so," Harry replied wryly.

They sat in quiet conversation until dinner appeared. A large bowl of spaghetti with a cream and seafood sauce surprised them both. It smelled wonderful, so Harry served himself a large pile.

Snape stood and returned with a bottle of honey-colored wine, which he opened. He poured a large glass and placed it beside Harry's plate. "I am assuming Ms. Tonks knows of which she speaks."

By the time Harry finished his plate and half of the glass of wine, his eyes were failing to stay open. Snape stood and came around to pull Harry's chair out as he stood up with the help of the table and then made his way upstairs.

"I'm all right," Harry insisted as he sat on the edge of his bed after being followed up to his room. "Just really tired all of a sudden."

Snape backed off. "If you need anything, Harry. Even if it is just someone to talk to. Please fetch me . . . no matter the time."

Harry closed his eyes. The twisted up feelings inside him were pulling at the past, when he always felt this way. Painfully grateful that things had changed so much, he said, "Thank you, Severus," as he opened his eyes.

Snape considered him before nodding sideways and leaving him alone. Harry changed clumsily into his pyjamas and fell asleep even as he adjusted the covers over himself.

Harry awoke from an agitated dream about being chained, perhaps because that had been something new, rather than because it had bothered him. He fell easily back to sleep.

The next time he awoke, with a dream of revealing too much to McGonagall about some rule his friends kept breaking, a shadow was beside the bed. Harry turned his head to look at his guardian and realized that, in the darkness of the room, he could see Snape better in his mind.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Snape intoned. The edge of the bed shifted as he sat down.

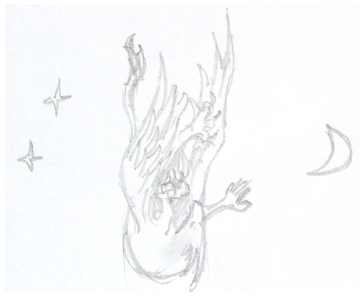
"I was having a bad dream anyway."

"Is there anything you need?"

"No. The dreams aren't really so bad," Harry mumbled and rolled onto his stomach.

As Harry drifted back off to sleep, he could see Snape moving away, closing the door, and stepping along the balcony.

Harry dreamed vividly of a cold stone floor, unyielding and cruelly bruising. Without the strength to lift himself, he lay upon it for a very long time, until his bare shoulder hardened to it with numbness. Having no strength to free himself, he might have lain there forever, aching and exposed to the damp draft and gritty rock. But he did not. Someone approached on silent feet and bent to lift him up. Standing was possible then and he could even sustain the heavy cloak that had been draped around him as he departed that cruel place.



Chapter 50 -- Tangled Up in Blues

The next morning, Harry felt a little empty as he stared at the ceiling. It was very early, barely five. Thoughts of yesterday's test made his shoulder twitch in embarrassment. The soft warm bed was a nice contrast from the floor of the testing room, so he closed his eyes and drifted there for another hour before finally getting up.

Tea was already set out in the library along with more chocolates. A half hour later, Snape came in and poured himself a cup before settling down with some correspondence. The morning passed in near silence. Harry wrote to his friends about his application being completed with sketchy observations about the examinations. At lunch the post arrived with a formal looking envelope he could only assume contained his N.E.W.T.s. Harry, with a little trepidation, tore it open. It felt like too much reckoning in too short a time. He flipped past the official documents and request forms for sealed copies to the results themselves, and was relieved to see that there was nothing below an E, which meant his Auror's application was still alive.

"Five Os and three Es," Harry said to Snape, who held out his hand to see it. Harry gave it over, heart beating fast.

"An 'O' on Potions. Nicely done," Snape commented. "I saw how hard you worked last year. It is good to see it pay off."

"Thank you."

After a pause Snape said, "It is good to see you doing well."

Harry, a little flushed, said, "You've made things much easier."

"If it is the least I can accomplish . . ." Snape said with a hint of his old snideness.

Harry grinned at it. "I'm sure you've done more, but at the moment I'm not in the right mind for making a list."

"And by no means do you need to come up with one."

After lunch Harry reread Penelope's last letter. The tone sounded a little pleading, making him anxious. She wanted to come for a visit, which he would like, but he had held her off until after his testing was over, which she had not seemed to understand the need for. Harry had wanted to talk to Ron about his situation with Penelope, about her living so far away. Ron was going to encounter a similar situation with Hermione, unless he could talk his parents into letting him live in London, which seemed very unlikely. Trouble was, last time he was at the Burrow, Ginny had been around and he didn't feel he could broach either topic. He should have Ron over, even though every time he suggested it, Ron suggested somewhere else. Harry was thinking he should insist.

He owled both his friends and invited them over for the next evening. Only after the owls had left, did he think to mention the invitation to Snape, who shrugged that he did not care. The parchment piles seemed smaller now, so perhaps Snape would be caught up soon. Harry hoped so; he wanted to ask him for an Apparition lesson.

Harry read the only chapter in the house he could find on Apparition. He even practiced a little in his room, but didn't manage much; at least, he didn't seem to have moved when he gave it a go. Worried he might get Splinched and have to be rescued--with all the chastisement that would entail--he put it aside until he could get some of Snape's time.

Ron and Hermione came the next evening for dinner. Snape ate early without saying he was going to do this and disappeared into the drawing room. Harry was just following him inside the makeshift office to ask if there was a problem, when the hearth flared from the dining room.

"Your guests are here," Snape said, his large nose buried in one of those large decorative policy documents.

Harry left it at that and went to greet them. Rather than waste the nice day, they sat outside in the garden while the sun set. "How are things with Penelope?" Hermione asked, leaning back into the ivy growing up the house. She and Ron sat on the stone bench, while Harry sat on a chair pulled out from the library.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. He missed her, but perhaps less than he expected after seeing her every day. On the other hand, a lot had been going on the last few weeks. "She doesn't want me to become an Auror," he said, pulling that out for something to say.

"I wouldn't either if it were me," Hermione pointed out. Ron bumped her arm. "Well, I wouldn't," Hermione insisted.

"And she lives too far away. No matter how good I get at Apparition I couldn't get all the way to Switzerland. She wants to come for a visit now that my testing is over. How are your lessons, Ron, got any farther?"

"Dad hasn't had time. Said tomorrow, maybe, if you want to come over again."

"I'd like that. Severus is still really busy." Harry tried not to wish Snape hadn't been promoted to Deputy Headmaster, but he kind of wished he hadn't.

Hermione sipped her mead and teased, "Harry, discovering parents aren't all they're promised to be . . ."

A tad defensive, Harry said, "He put everything down to take me to Switzerland."

Stars were starting to twinkle in the east. Ron rubbed his stomach. "Are we eating here? Not that I'm complaining or anything."

Harry stood and picked up his chair. "Yeah. Come on inside."

When they reached the table and sat down, dishes appeared. "Wow," Ron murmured. "What I wouldn't give to have an elf."

Hermione gave him such a disgusted look, Harry wondered why she never criticized him. She looked over and seeing his face said. "Winky is different. She really *needed* a home."

"Oh, of course," Ron said in a patronizing manner, then smiled, apparently to buffer it.

They talked until almost midnight. Yawning, Hermione suggested they should call it a night. Harry watched them depart in the hearth, before heading for the main hall. The lights were all out in the doorways on the ground floor. Upstairs he found Snape awake in his room.

"Your friends are gone?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded. "Yes. Good night, sir."

"Good night, Harry."

* * *

Harry came home from the Burrow after dinner the next day. The Apparition lessons had gone chaotically with the twins there teasing constantly, and eventually it had broken down into an impromptu Quidditch match with just one side attacking Ron at Keeper and Hermione, who played Beater magically from a comfortable seat on the ground, using her wand to hover and throw the Bludgers around.

Harry picked up the letter for him from Penelope and carried it to his room with a stop at the drawing room to say hello to his guardian. He almost asked when Snape might have time for lessons, but held back seeing the wild-haired look Snape had as he carefully filled out some strange form in red ink. Arrayed before him were jars of yellow and orange ink as well and apparently the lamp had run out of fuel because two large gutted candles were lined up beside the inkwells.

Harry swallowed a sigh and went up to his room. He took off his shoes and opened the letter. Each letter reinforced his sense that Penelope was feeling anxious and this one made it clearer. The letter was written in two parts, he could tell because of the angle of the writing. In the last, shorter, part she said she would visit that week and looked forward to seeing him. He folded up the letter and put it in the night stand drawer with her other ones. He feared she would find Shrewsthorpe a bit quiet in comparison to Bern. They would have to tour London, perhaps, for a day. He had a bad sense that he was missing something with Penelope. With a sigh he collected his pyjamas from the wardrobe and changed for the night, even though it was early. The skin on his arms was red, he noticed, having got too much sun playing Quidditch at the Burrow. As he pulled the covers up he felt anxious about her coming; maybe that was part of the reason he had told her to postpone coming.

* * *

Penelope arrived Tuesday afternoon and Harry went into London to meet her at Waterloo. In the crowded noise station he did not see her right away, not until she tugged on his sleeve from behind. She greeted him with a forceful hug and he took over steering her small trunk off the platform.

"We'll take the underground to the Leaky Cauldron and take the Floo Network from there--much faster," Harry informed her.

On the way, after talking about Harry's tests in more detail, they fell silent until reaching the wizard pub. Everyone greeted Harry warmly with a wave and a few handshakes. Tom came around the bar and introduced himself to Penelope who returned his handshake politely, but stiffly. Harry, not wishing to encounter the likes of Rita Skeeter with Penelope in tow, headed straight for the hearth.

Dinner was quiet. Harry at the beginning thought he caught Snape considering his guest a little more closely than Harry was comfortable with. But after the dinner dishes vanished, Snape sat back with a glass of sherry and appeared relaxed. Harry found himself short of topics, which he had not expected. He considered topics one at a time and discarded them during long silences.

Snape finished his little glass and set it down loudly. "It is a warm evening, perhaps you should go for a nice walk," he suggested.

Harry jumped at that suggestion. Outside, the air was sultry, and once their eyes adjusted, it was quite pleasant to be out. They turned at the first corner and walked through pools of light cast by the overhead street lights. A dog barked and ran up to the side fence to look at them through the slats, startling them both.

At one corner Penelope announced into the quiet, "I am thinking of looking for a position in London."

Harry stopped. "You are?" He considered that. "You don't want to work at the archives in Montreux?" he asked, confused.

"Vell, yes, but . . ." she began.

Harry felt his anxiety returning from the other night. He started walking again and pieced a question together. "Are you finding anything?"

She reluctantly answered, "Not yet. My training is not so appropriate here."

"Uh," Harry began, then said, "I don't want you to move for my sake."

She stopped this time. "Why not?" she asked, voice whip-like.

Harry swallowed. Instinct had made him say that, he decided. "Because . . ." Harry started to say, then decided this required some careful wording.

"I thought you loved me," Penelope queried flatly.

Harry stiffened at that word, and studied her distressed gaze. Something, a bat or a swift, dodged through the light above them, chasing insects. He took her shoulders in his hands. "I like you a lot--more than I've ever liked anyone before, but . . . I don't want you to change your whole life around for me." Harry felt good about that; it was exactly what he wanted to say.

Penelope frowned. "I thought you would want me around, no matter what."

"I like having you around. I like being with you," Harry tried to explain. He rubbed his forehead, feeling a headache teasing at him. In the odd light she looked exceptionally saddened. "Let's talk this over tomorrow, all right? You've had a long journey," he added, remembering his own condition when he had arrived in Bern.

In a brooding silence she followed him back to the house. She was friendly to Snape when they crossed in the hall on the way upstairs to see her settled into the guest room, but she fell silent again when they were alone. She unpacked a bit sloppily as though uncaring of things.

Quietly, Harry said, "I don't know what to tell you but how I feel."

"Tomorrow, like you said," she said bluntly.

Harry backed out and left her alone. In his own room, he dug out a book on dragon lore that Hagrid had given him last term, apparently having no idea that Harry would have no time to read leading up to his N.E.W.T.s, and tried to distract himself with it. It was fortunately an amusing book full of unwise Muggles and wizards and their bad encounters with dragons, like Marvin Murgatroid who believed so faithfully in the dragon repellent he had purchased from a vendor at the harvest fair that he walked straight into the karst caves of Slovenia and got by three stunned dragons before stumbling off an underground cliff when his torch ran out of pitch, just a hundred feet from the horde of gems he was seeking. Fortunately for Marvin he fell into the underground river and was swept out to safety, only singed on the top of his head.

Harry read halfway into the night, then lay awake for the rest. Achy and tired, he rose the next morning and found Penelope, talking pleasantly with Snape over toast. "Shall we go into London today?" Harry asked, assuming she would answer.

"Sure," she replied.

Snape departed for Hogwarts ahead of them, giving Harry an odd look on his way out. But Harry wasn't in a position to ask what it meant with Penelope reading the newspaper right across from him.

The day went well enough, albeit quietly. Penelope didn't speak much, but would answer questions. On the underground on the way to the riverfront and London Bridge, Harry asked, "Are those boys from your school bothering you still?"

"I don't see them normally. I rarely visit Geneva and they are actually from Strasbourg."

That made Harry feel a bit better. They visited the theatre and an old gaol and walked on the bridge which made Harry wish he had worn his cloak as the wind was brisk along the river. Penelope didn't seem to notice the chill in her nice woolen coat.

It was getting late when they reached the Tower of London. Harry suggested they find someplace for dinner before heading back. Her reply was a shrug, which almost made him say something in anger, but he held back. They had to walk a distance to find a place that looked casual enough, but they found a pub finally and had pies, which Penelope looked a bit dubious about. Harry kept waiting for some kind of comment, but none was forthcoming, nor was much conversation.

When they arrived back at the house in Shrewsthorpe, Harry felt a bit strung thin. Fortunately or unfortunately, Snape was not back from Hogwarts, even though it was rather late for him to be gone still. In the main hall, Harry said, "I don't know what you want me to say."

"Maybe dere isn't anything to say," she stated flatly, looking over the Celtic-framed mirror mounted under the stairs beside the door to the drawing room. The silvering was giving out along the edges where she drew her finger as she looked it over rather than face him.

"I don't want you to rearrange your life for me," Harry repeated. He thought that was pretty straightforward, really.

She spun on him. "Vell, thank you very much," she said sarcastically. "I just thought I meant more to you than that."

Harry had no answer to that since he was pretty certain he had not said anything in that regard, or even implied it. "I do like you," he insisted, then fell silent since he didn't want to get too argumentative. She stepped by him with an exasperated huff and went upstairs. Harry followed slowly, feeling his pride complaining along the way. At the door to the guest room he was surprised to find her packing "You aren't leaving now, are you?" Harry asked.

"Might as vell," she said through clenched teeth.

"That's silly. Leave in the morning at least."

"Silly vas thinking you cared."

"Aye," Harry said and hit himself on the forehead. The urge to shout at her almost overtook him, but he forced it down. Calmly, he said, "Leave in the morning, Penelope, please."

"Dere is an overnight train. I vill take that."

"All right, but you have to find your way from the Leaky Cauldron to Waterloo," Harry said. "And it's getting late."

"I'll take a taxi. I am not a clueless witch who cannot manage dis."

Harry listened to the hardened anger under the words. "I'm sorry," he said on automatic, then said, "I don't know why I'm apologizing, since I haven't done anything that requires it."

She had her trunk in her hand as she stepped over to him in the doorway. "No," she said with more than a hint of sarcasm. "Of course not."

He followed her down to the entryway where she collected her cloak, then to the dining room where she shoved her trunk into the hearth rather forcefully. Harry held out the Floo powder and took a handful himself.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'll take you to the station," he said.

"I can manage," she replied coldly.

He almost said, don't be silly, again, but stopped himself in time to say, "I *want* to see you off."

She pulled out her wand, wielded it with a wave, and stashed it away again. "I can manage on my own."

"Look . . ." Harry began.

"You look," she said, cutting him off. "You hurt me. If you do not want me here, then there is no point in anything." Her voice broke at the end but she covered with a dark look. "Certainly, I do not need your chivalrous help to merely catch a train home."

Harry poured the Floo powder out of his hand back into the canister. It was damp and sticky from his holding it so tightly. He set the canister on the table, held up his empty hand for her to see, again resisting expressing deeper anger by just a hair.

"Goodbye, Harry," she said and tossed her handful of powder down. With a whoosh she was gone. Harry dropped his hands to his sides and replayed the last few minutes in his mind. He couldn't figure out what else he should have said or done. He stalked out of the room, kicking the chair out of his path on the way. He dreaded having to explain what had happened when Snape came home.

He couldn't have told her to find a prospect in London, could he? That sounded monumentally unfair to her since she had something in Switzerland that she *wanted* to be doing. Harry certainly wouldn't have dropped his Auror application to move to Switzerland. With a groan he paced the hall once, looking for something to vent his frustration on. There was little here but a rug and a floor lamp that looked antique, although ugly. He turned from it before being tempted to smash it.

The Floo flared in the dining room. Harry stood in the middle of the hall, resisting hoping that Penelope had returned. He stood transfixed until Snape stepped out, looking over a stack of post. He glanced up at Harry, then down, then back up again.

"Something the matter?" Snape asked.

Harry frowned. "Penelope left," he said simply.

"Ah."

"Ah? What do you mean, ah?" Harry demanded, finding an outlet for his annoyance and anger.

"Only that. McGonagall and I just had a very, very difficult meeting with two members of the board and so I am going to stop at that."

Harry watched Snape walk into the drawing room, annoyed that he had not given Harry a better excuse to vent at him. Anger washed over him but he resisted the lamp and growled instead. He wished he knew what he should have done, while at the same time he had no desire to change his mind about what he had said. He stalked to the wall and slapped the unyielding stones with his palm. Snape came back out and stood in the doorway to the drawing room.

"You are going to say you saw this coming," Harry accused him sharply.

"No. I was not going to say anything," Snape replied in studious calm.

Snape's calm aggravated Harry more. "What was I supposed to do?" he demanded loudly. "Argh," he growled and again slapped his hand on the wall, this time producing a burst of pain. Snape's steady gaze didn't waver when Harry turned to him. Harry desperately sought someplace to channel his frustration. The world twisted and untwisted as though he were

transforming Animagically without will. Needing to escape the suddenly cramped hall and breathe, he charged through the entryway and out into the garden.

The road beyond the garden wall was quiet except for a few crickets. Harry stood looking over it, breathing heavily, trying to dampen his burning emotions. The world twisted again and suddenly he was completely free. Anger beat out of him, lifting him from the earth. He gave it free rein then and, without thought to direction, leaned forward into the wind and flew harder.

The dark earth rolled beneath Harry as he soared over it. He flew high, then dipped low. Hills were joyous when he flew low; he couldn't see beyond them until he pulled up over their crests at the very last moment, making his heart leap. He veered away from pockets of light that indicated towns, strings of sliding paired diamonds that marked roads. He flew toward the blackness of wild countryside, where starlight and the slivered moon provided the only glow. Harry forgot everything except steering away from light and beating his wings in long strokes and coasting on the buffeting air.

Harry flew over countless hills, rose exhilaratingly in the updrafts rising from the edge of as many valleys, flapped until his wings felt leaden and he couldn't draw enough breath to fill his lungs. He could no longer hold the Animagus spell reliably and the world kept twisting, the ground rearing up as though to strike him. In a square of lighter pasture, just angled to catch the moonlight, Harry made a desperate bid to land. It was too difficult in the steeply-shadowed moonlight to properly judge the distance to the ground, nor did he have enough strength left to brake his descent. Dark clover swallowed him up as he struck earth and rolled.

Harry came to himself some time later and moved slowly to check that each of his limbs worked. His side ached horribly when he lifted his shoulder off the damp ground to see above the thick plants surrounding him. A low, collapsing stone wall marked the boundary of the field he lay in. Over the top of a grey rise he could see the darker angled roof of a barn. He forced a deep breath into his lungs and staggered to his feet. Things did not look much better once he was upright. He made his way gingerly to the wall and sat down on a large, flat stone that only shifted a little when he did so.

Harry looked 'round as a night bird resumed chirping. He felt a little better in one way, having given himself something more pressing to worry about than Penelope. He forced in another deep breath and considered the dark landscape. The stars glowed thick overhead, as dense as he had ever seen them. The constellations were unidentifiable in the mélange of the sky and the Milky Way, a river of light, wound across with its own strange hue. He felt for his wand and with relief, found it in his pocket where it belonged. He wondered what he should do. He pondered his predicament for a while in an almost pleasant, semiconscious stupor, until he grew chilled with dewy cold. There wasn't a chance, given his state, of regaining his Animagus form and flying home, even if he knew the right direction. If he could Apparate, he would probably be back home now, he thought with annoyed regret.

Far down the undulating hillside there was a light. Harry could not see from here if it was a street light or a house light. The thought of making his painful way over there just to face the disappointment were it to be a street light held him in place. He could, he considered, try to flag the Knight Bus. He had no idea if it traveled such remote routes or only city streets. Wrapping his arms around himself for warmth, he imagined that he may have no choice but to try. Or to walk until he found a house and could use a telephone. This brought up the question of whom he would call. Hermione's disapproving face loomed up in his mind and he considered that maybe Dean would be a better choice, if Harry had had his number memorized. He could probably manage Hermione's number with some guessing.

Time passed. Harry knew this because the moon was now touched by the treetops of a small copse, which meant it was only going to get darker. Feeling a little lightheaded, he shifted down to lean back against the stone pile, rather than upon it. Relaxing, however, required giving in to the sharp pain in his side, so he sat tense, though warmer out of the wind. Memories came back as he sat there. One in particular stung hard: the night Remus interrupted their returning Pettigrew to the school by transforming into a werewolf. The memory seemed starker in this near darkness. So close they had been to saving Sirius. Regret rose at that, joining with his regret over Penelope, rendering him rather miserable.

After a time Harry felt more lightheaded, despite resting. He should have tried sooner for the one close light, he realized with some alarm. Standing was difficult now; his knees, which he had not considered injured, felt wholly bruised now and complained about taking his weight. Sitting higher on the stone again, he gathered his will to make his way across the field, plotting in his mind the exact path through the clover that he would take to get there. Like a countdown before a

Quidditch match he willed himself to stand up and go on one, two, three. Harry stumbled across the field which turned out to be much larger than it looked in the poor light. At the far wall he stopped and caught his breath, his side now felt like it actively had something stuck in it, something sharp and pointed. Holding his ribs, he lowered himself to this side of the wall and fought panic at his predicament.

The tantalizing light didn't look any closer. Harry closed his eyes and tried to will his body to obey and continue on anyway. Despairing now, at the cold and pain, Harry opened his eyes and rubbed his knees one at a time just to do something vaguely productive. He rubbed his eyes as his vision was disturbed. A strange red glow had formed around him, around his fingers and face, making it hard to see. Harry reached for his wand and the red disappeared.

Alert now, Harry held his wand at ready and looked around himself, at the amorphous dark stands of trees nearby, at the hill tops. Many minutes later, the glow returned, shorter this time but Harry couldn't detect anything nearby, friendly or not. The next time the glow came and went, a figure landed in the field at a bit of a run. Harry held his wand out and tried to stand. His next thought was that the cold must have penetrated his brain and he was seeing things. "Severus?" Harry asked in surprise, recognizing Snape in the red glow from his wand.

Snape stepped over to him, carrying two brooms. "You made it much farther than I imagined," he stated almost apologetically, transferring Harry's balance from the wall to himself. Harry leaned on him gratefully. "Hurt bad?" Snape asked evenly.

"No," Harry said, enjoying the quick warmth of his support and letting himself lean into it more.

Snape raised his red-tipped wand and looked Harry in the face. "Crash landing?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"A bit of one," Harry admitted. "How did you find me?"

Snape huffed and said, "Rather complicated spell that I did not have much faith would actually work. McGonagall owled it when I asked her for ideas. Harry flushed at the thought that McGonagall knew he had run off. Snape changed the spell on his wand with a shake to make it white instead with a Lumos charm. "You look as though you could use a visit to St. Mungo's."

"No," Harry pleaded. "I just want to go home."

Snape hovered Harry's broom and spelled it with a Sticking charm before helping him onto it. "You should not have left in that case," Snape stated with just a touch of snideness. "We will fly until we are within Apparition distance then Apparate from there. You came a very long way, Harry," Snape repeated, sounding astounded.

In the main hall of the house where they reappeared, Snape held Harry upright. "I should not have listened to you," Snape said. "You are injured. It is very dangerous to be injured in an Animagus form; the injuries do not necessarily translate safely to your human form."

"I think I landed as myself, if that helps. I don't want to go to St. Mungo's," Harry insisted, imagining the miserable stay in the crowded waiting room with everyone looking at him and wondering.

Snape held him there in the quiet hall, considering that. "To your room then. I'll contact a Healer." Snape then helped him upstairs.

"Thank you for coming for me," Harry said as he sat crookedly on his bed, favoring his side. When he rubbed his hair back, he was dismayed to find drooping clover caught there, tangled rather thoroughly.

Snape bent close and touched his shoulder. "You will be all right while I use the Floo?"

"Yeah," Harry assured him a little sharply, checking his hair for more debris. "I think I'll be fine if you *don't* call a Healer."

"You look as though you have broken a few ribs, at least," Snape observed. When Harry just shrugged, Snape stood straight and said, "Feeling better?"

"A bit," Harry replied quietly.

"Hm," Snape murmured before he turned to leave.

"She wanted to move here. With no prospects," Harry complained. "I couldn't let her do that." Snape turned back before the door and considered him. Harry went on, "I . . . It wouldn't be fair to her . . . I'm not sure I like her *that* well. I can't just suddenly start liking her enough to want her around enough to have her do that." He frowned, everything coming back again except muted by the pain.

They looked at each other. Harry finally asked, pleading, "What was I supposed to do?"

"I don't have an answer to that. Perhaps there isn't one."

"It wasn't good either way," Harry said. "Was I supposed to want her here no matter what?"

"You may have." When Harry opened his mouth then closed it without speaking, Snape added, "If you didn't, then I believe you did the right thing. It is worse to lead someone on. I'll be right back."

Harry listened to him go down the stairs. The ticking of the downstairs clock was louder after the footsteps faded. The pain was numbing now and he cared less at this moment about the world than he ever had. The footsteps returned. Snape stepped in and at Harry's request, brought him his pyjamas. Harry tossed aside his dewy clothes and put on his bottoms before pulling the duvet around himself against his chilled skin. Snape stood by the door, arms crossed as he considered him.

"I thought you'd be angry," Harry said.

"I was, briefly," Snape replied, eyes narrowing. "Then enough time passed that I asked Winky to fetch you and she informed me you were far out of reach." Speaking slowly, he went on, "It is not magic she is especially gifted with so it was difficult to ascertain just how far that was. It also seemed to be as much a matter of distance as a mood for her. In any event, failing her assistance, it was not exactly clear how to find you and the longer you were gone, the more likely it seemed that you were unable to return."

Harry frowned and shifted with a grunt to take the strain off his side. The door knocker sounded from downstairs, drawing Snape down to answer it. He reappeared with the Healer in tow.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, we meet again," the wizard said, removing his pointed hat and folding it into his pocket.

"We do?" Harry asked, squinting in the lamplight at the unfamiliar wizard with his thinning hair.

"Healer Redletting," the wizard said pleasantly as he set his worn case down before the night stand. "I was here last summer. You had a wizard influenza, bad case, so you may not remember."

"I remember not feeling well," Harry admitted.

"Well, at any rate, looks as though you've had a bit of an accident, young man." He bent over his case and pulled out a long wand of cherry wood. "So, what happened?"

Harry explained, "I fell. I was flying and I got too tired and I fell." The Healer was spelling Harry on the top of the head as he spoke.

"On a broomstick, then?"

Harry's wrist was lifted, pulse taken, a spell put on it that made it tingle, then the same with the other. "No." The Healer ceased and looked at him. "I'm an Animagus," Harry explained, wishing he could just lie down, that the man would finish quickly. Harry lifted his arm over his head on command, requiring a great deal of will against the pain, but his ribs were healed with a series of spells. The release from the pain was enough to make his eyes water. The Healer stepped back and appraised him before leaning in and prodding a spot on Harry's forehead where he hadn't realized he had been injured.

"Drink these," the healer commanded after rummaging in his bag for a handful of chipped old bottles. Harry obeyed, taking each sour potion in turn. He glanced at Snape then, who stood at the end of the bed, gaze inscrutable.

The wizard packed up his things, saying, "If he is lightheaded tomorrow, call me again or bring him in right away." He handed Snape a bill, which he paid in silence. And after an admonishment to not fly for a week or even transform, he said, "Good to see you again, Mr. Potter. Do be more careful." Then he put his hat back on, tipped it and left.

Harry shifted back on the bed, very pleased to be breathing easily. "I really thought you'd be angry," Harry said tiredly.

Snape's lips twitched but it was hard to tell if it was into a smile or a scowl. He stepped a little closer and said, "At the moment I am merely grateful to have retrieved you."

Harry, reminded all over again that it was good to have someone to rely on, said, "Thanks for that,"

Another twitch of the lips that this time resembled a wry smile. "It is nearly morning and you should rest."

Harry settled back on his bed and adjusted the covers. Trying to piece things together, he asked, "What was the spell you used to find me?"

Snape, who had turned to depart, turned back slowly. "It was a blood spell," he admitted. "One I did not expect to work. It made you a beacon I could follow at any distance."

"Aren't blood spells all dark magic?" Harry asked.

"Almost exclusively."

"I'm surprised you did that," Harry said, feeling uneasy.

Snape explained, "I was not going to try it, despite Minerva's suggesting it, until I found Kali frantic and had to assume you had met with something unpleasant. Fortunately, it was merely the ground."

Harry glanced at the Chimrian, or what he could see of her bundled asleep in the rags at the bottom of her cage. He then stared at the lamplight flickering on the ceiling. He still felt rather uncaring in general, but curious about this. "You didn't have any of my blood to work with," he pointed out.

"True. Nor was it convenient to obtain some from a living relative, a requirement of the spell," Snape said, sounding dry and teacherish.

The sky beyond the window was turning grey, making Harry's eyes heavy with the prospect of the long, exhaustive day ahead. "So what did you do?"

Snape stepped to the door, prepared to pull it closed behind him. "The only thing I could. Good night, Harry."

Harry's brow furrowed at the ceiling, now lit by the dawn. "You couldn't have used yours, we're not related," Harry said.

"No we are not," he agreed. "Good night." He closed the door.

Harry's brow failed to unfurrow as he fell asleep.

At a late breakfast Harry, feeling the clarity of a new day, said, "Sorry about last night." Snape tilted his head without comment. Harry regretfully went on, "You had to call a Healer, even."

"Feeling better this morning about the girl?"

"No, just embarrassed." Harry buttered his toast and crunched it down quickly to satisfy his famished stomach. "Do you think you could find the time to teach me to Apparate?"

"I thought you were under Arthur's tutelage."

Harry sighed and buttered another slice. "He isn't . . . he doesn't know how to teach, really. And Ron gets most of his time . . . not that he shouldn't," Harry added quickly. "Should have done it last summer."

"It did not come up, did it?" he said in an odd tone. When Harry looked up questioningly, Snape said, "It was much easier to keep track of you that way."

"Oh."

"Easter break, I considered it, but you seemed to need a break from learning. I will make time this afternoon. I expect you will catch on quickly, so it should not take long. You would have become out of practice during your time at school, in any event, so it is just as well."

Snape refilled his quickly consumed coffee, and Harry noticed the bandage wound around his left hand. "You did you use your blood," Harry said a little accusingly.

"There was no choice. Or there was, but it was to leave you to your own devices." Snape put his left hand back in his lap and sipped his coffee thirstily. "I tried using Kali's, as you and she must be bound by blood as that is the only way to create a Chimrian with that much empathy. That is actually how I received this wound." He held up his hand again momentarily, showing the stained bandage at the base of his thumb. "It did alter the spell, I believe, but since it worked, I did not take the time to investigate the intricacies."

Harry grinned then fell serious. "Dark magic always takes its toll, though. That's what everyone at Hogwarts always says."

"I do not plan to make a habit of it," Snape commented with forced ease. "Nor do I plan to care for your pets any time in the near future."

That afternoon, Harry stood in the main hall before Snape, who looked about to launch into a lecture when he stopped and said, "Doesn't that hurt?" indicating the large purple bruise above Harry's left eye.

"A bit."

"Certain you are up for this? It requires rather a lot of concentration in the beginning."

"Yes," Harry stated firmly, then wished he had not sounded so exasperated.

Snape put his hands behind his back casually and began. "Apparition is a form of relocation magic. But since it involves the caster himself or herself, it is quite different from other kinds. More hazardous, obviously because one is not working with an object or an animal that can be recovered easily or disposed of if necessary." He paced a few steps and continued with Harry's full attention. "Given that the caster is also the castee, some interesting magical capabilities become available, such as self awareness of the transformation at hand. When one is, say, hovering a book, one can only see what the impact is as the book moves or fails to move, or falls. In this case one *feels* what is happening instantly, making it possible to adjust instantly. With practice, Apparition truly becomes second nature as a result, unlike most magicks."

He stepped away a few strides. The silence made Harry realize that he had gone for weeks without a lecture, which made it very easy to follow every word closely. Snape said, "One could teleport without collapsing, the two stages of the spell, but it would require enormous power. Collapsing is modeled many ways by Apparators as everything from crunching down a sheet of parchment into a ball to letting the air out of a balloon."

"Fred and George imagine being folded into a paper airplane," Harry commented.

Still lecturing, Snape said, "It does not, in the end, matter what model one uses, just that it involve shrinkage of some kind. Is there a model you prefer?"

Harry wished he knew what his mum and dad had used; the paper airplane sounded odd to Harry although it had worked for Ron. "I'll try the ball of paper."

"Close your eyes then. Realize that you are not trying to go *anywhere*, just remain where you are. That is important at this stage in order to remain in one piece."

Harry did as he was told and stared at the insides of his eyelids. He imagined balls of paper, then paper airplanes, again tried hard to imagine himself as the ball of paper. He felt like he was missing something. He shifted his feet on the hard floor from standing too long and tried again, more determined this time. A *crack!* sounded and Harry jumped, only to realize he didn't have any feet. He fell on his backside as they reappeared.

"Do try not to panic," Snape said.

Harry wished he had not laughed at Ron and his arms as he stood back up and rubbed his sore bum, aggravated badly from previous injury, he realized.

"Again," Snape commanded.

Harry tried again. It took less time for the *crack!* to sound this time and when he opened his eyes he was whole. "How do I not make so much noise?" Harry asked.

"One thing at a time."

After three hours Harry could, for the most part, reliably get from one end of the room to the other and was feeling pretty happy about that. Snape rubbed his brow yet again. "I do not mean to put you off, but after the late night, I am inclined to stop for now."

Harry, feeling tired as well but still eager, agreed anyway because Snape looked rather worn down and that *was* Harry's fault.

* * *

Late the next day after a follow up lesson where Harry practiced Apparating in from the back garden, successfully avoiding all walls though with one close call near the lamp, Penelope's owl arrived with a letter. The owl was so tired that Harry carried it up to his room and gave it Hedwig's cage. It gratefully ate the cold meat he fed her and put her head under her wing. Hedwig, sitting on Kali's cage, fluffed herself in annoyance. She had to peck at Kali to stop the Chimrian sniffing at her feet.

"Behave yourselves," Harry chastised them all, taking Kali out while holding the letter. He sat down on the bed, Chimrian climbing around his shoulders as he read.

Penelope started her letter by apologizing for getting so upset but by the end, essentially said she felt it was warranted. Harry took out a quill and parchment and wrote out a reply. Remembering Snape's words of the night before, Harry explained that he could only be honest about how he felt. He tried to explain that her moving specifically to be near him

would not be fair to either of them. Also that his training was reputed to be very difficult and time-consuming and he would not have much time for anyone else for a long while and that this was very important to him even though he liked her very much.

He reread the letter with a kind of sadness at the cruelty of making choices, but didn't alter it. He folded it up, added a note to the back about sending her owl along when it had recovered, and gave it to Hedwig, who seemed happy to go. For practice, he Apparated down to the hall and found himself without Kali, who squawking, flew down to meet him. "Sorry," he said to her as she regained his shoulder.

Harry strode to the doorway of the drawing room where Snape had returned to his parchments. He stood, lost in thought until Snape asked, "Everything all right?" Harry shrugged. "Recovering?" Snape then asked.

"In what way?"

"In any way, but I can only assist with the physical. The other you must work out for yourself," he commented, dipping his quill and pulling his sleeve aside as he returned to writing.

Harry watched Snape's precise writing, lit by the sunlight from the window behind, the nib making a low hollow noise as it moved. Kali chewing on his collar broke him out of circling thoughts this time. He sighed as he turned to go out to work on the garden, just for something to do.