



## Chapter 61 -- Enemies and Friends, Part II

Draco arrived home by Apparating into his own foyer. He felt disgusted, both by Rothschild's simpering highbrow attitude, unearned, in Draco's mind, but also by the state Potter had been reduced to. It was one thing to plot and attack a rival regularly, but to capture and work upon them with no chance for their recovery lacked all sport.

"Hello, dear," Pansy said as she crossed through the hall in a flowery Japanese-inspired dressing gown. Draco's mother had insisted Pansy move in as a companion for her with the expectation that her son would marry her in due time. Draco himself remained undecided, although the situation had grown on him far faster than he would have imagined, perhaps because not only did he have regular companionship, but he now lacked most of his mother's.

"Interesting errand?" Pansy asked from the door to the sitting room where she had paused, posing slightly. Draco had apparently spent the last three minutes simply standing there, deeply in thought.

"Yes. And I have another I must run before lunching."

"Must you?" she asked in an almost simpering disappointment.

He nodded distractedly and Disapparated on the spot.

The doorknocker sounded at the house in Shrewsthorpe. Snape, assuming Harry's friends were again congregating for the day, was surprised to find his former Slytherin student in the garden instead.

"Professor," Draco muttered, seeming in a bad mood.

"Mr. Malfoy."

"You look like hell, sir, if I may say so," Draco commented after looking him up and down.

Snidely, Snape asked, "Something I can do for you?"

"Most likely not," Draco muttered. "But you look in need of assistance. . . aren't you going to invite me in?" he asked, very put-upon. Snape stepped back and let the haughty blonde boy into the entryway and then the hall. Draco looked around. "Humble but acceptable."

Snape rolled his eyes. "If you are here to insult me, I do hope you can manage better than that."

"Potter means that much to you then?" Draco asked, sounding honestly mystified, if not a little nauseated.

Snape didn't reply, just stared down his nose at the young man.

"I have to say, it's a struggle, but pathetic wizardry steeped in Muggle money rather than grand magical tradition galls me more than wrongheaded, raw magical power."

"What are you on about?" Snape snapped impatiently.

Draco sighed. "I know where Potter is."

"You what?" Snape asked sharply.

Speaking slowly and clearly, Draco said, "I don't intend to be involved beyond telling you what I know. Suffice to say, I wasn't involved. I may hate the sniveling little *hero* but I would express it by flattening him with a well-timed spell and letting someone scrap him up to haul to St. Mungo's, not the continuous beating down he is presently receiving. Pathetic, really."

With a voice of deep, dark danger Snape asked, "Where is he?"

Draco explained about his odd morning, the invitation by owl, his visit to an outlying area of London. As he turned to leave, he added, "Oh, and the Torq is a fatal one. I suggest you approach very carefully if you wish to have anything to take to St. Mungo's."

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Four Aurors and one very insistent Snape Apparated onto the property beside the Rothschild house. Rodgers had only grudgingly spoken to Snape during their hurried meeting at the Ministry, and was shooting him vaguely baleful looks as they assembled. Their little assault group was hidden from the view of the elderly witch who lived there by two massive, untrimmed willows. Moody hobbled up to the tall hedge separating the lawns and stuck his head through a gap.

Snape stood with his wand out, ready to rush the place, held back only tenuously by a fast-weakening will. Rodgers stepped sideways up beside him, severely testing Snape's limits, although Snape didn't give any indication of this. Moody was taking his time, it seemed. Quietly, Rodgers said, "I suppose you think you could train Harry better."

"Reggie," Tonks hissed.

As though speaking to a simpleton, Snape stated in an even more hushed voice, "If I believed I could better train Harry, I would be training Harry."

"Hmf." Rodgers' eyes narrowed as though looking for the trap in that. Moody continued to show them his cloaked backside.

Still quiet and a tad malevolent, Snape said, "I could have turned you in. I had no reason not to. Lestrangle would have used you for torture practice . . . if you were lucky."

Tonks glared at Snape. Shacklebolt whispered, "I know a really good muting charm."

"We may need it," Tonks threatened, hands on hips as she looked sharply between the two of them.

Fortunately, Moody returned at that moment. "Loaded all right that house is. Layered alarms and traps. Looks like the work of at least four skilled wizards, some of whom didn't like each other, I'd guess by the looks of it. The charms are almost at odds. Kind of like these two," he added with his usual distorted grin.

Snape held out as the Aurors argued about the best approach, aggravating him into a kind of madness of inaction. Moody said, "No one is getting close without setting off the spell alarms. They'd catch a warlock, a babe even they are so sensitive. Any person."

"Any *person*?" Snape interrupted.

With his finger Harry traced and retraced the bright, gemlike quartz vein in the stone beneath his hand. His utterly bored mind seemed capable of latching fiercely onto anything of even vague interest. The cellar was dank again; the candles had gutted from that morning, leaving the air without their warm honey scent. Achy beyond memory, Harry shifted yet again to find a comfortable position to sit in.

Across the room something fell to the floor, slapping lightly. Harry blinked and tried to look into the dim corner beyond the dusty air flowing in the ray of light from the high window. A held breath later, a faint scuffing sound emanated from the left of the stairs and a sleek black serpent slithered into view. It moved with purpose, straight for Harry, who gaped at it in shock. It passed between the bars and stopped. They eyed each other, black eyes on green. "Severus?" Harry managed to whisper.

The snake cruised effortlessly over to him, lifting its head to eye level, revealing a tan throat, tongue flicking out. "*Good to ssssee you,*" the snake hissed. Harry reached out to brush the smooth scales by the second band, unsure if he were hallucinating. The snake bumped his arm awkwardly.

After checking that there was no immediate sign of Rick, Harry said, "I'm so glad you're here."

The snake hissed like a laugh, "*Sssstrange to understand you this way. I assssume you would like to go home?*"

Harry's eyes burned at the very notion and he only risked nodding. His mind was working again, though, despite the pounding headache that had only come on strong since morning. He stood and scooped the weighty snake up in his hands. "Hide beside the steps over there. I'll lure him down." Released, snake slithered over to the shadow of the staircase.

"Hey, Ricky Rothy!" Harry taunted at the darkened steps.

After a pause a voice from the doorway at the top said, "God I hate that name. What do you want, Potter?"

Harry studied the dark outline of the snake turning and curling in the shadows. "I've been thinking about what you've been saying about family."

Slow footsteps descended into the cellar. "Have you now?" Rick drawled in a toying manner. He walked right up to the bars, smirk firmly intact. "And?"

"I'd like you to meet someone."

Rick glanced around the cellar, almost startled. Not seeing anyone, he scoffed. "Who?"

"My adoptive father." Harry gestured with his chin for Rick to turn around again.

With another scoff Rick did so, but then leapt backward into the cage bars at the sight of an eight-foot, banded Egyptian cobra, hood wide and mouth hissing. "Yah!" he exclaimed and tried to scramble away, but like a shot, the snake lashed out. Harry, who had not imagine Snape would actually do that, had to replay the lightening-fast strike in his mind. Rick grabbed his wounded thigh and fell, writhing, onto the floor. An instant later Snape had morphed above him, wand extended. Harry considered he should definitely ask later how he had managed that.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rothschild," Snape sneered. "You have fifteen minutes to live, give or take." It was not clear whether Rick had heard any of this over his piteous groaning. Snape felt around in Rick's pockets, taking his wand. Louder, Snape demanded, "Where is the key to the cage?"

Rick actually sobbed once in extreme pain and gestured up the stairs. "Mantel, in the silver chest . . . please . . ." he pleaded as Snape dashed away. He put his head down on the stones in abject agony to wait. Snape returned in less than a

minute with a miniature set of silver rods set on a crosspiece. He tapped this against one of the bars, setting up a musical vibration in the key. A section of bars swung loose.

Snape immediately returned to his victim. Harry started to come around to assist. "Don't!" Snape ordered him frantically, holding up his hand, palm out. Startled, Harry stopped just inside the door. "Release the protective spells on the property," Snape demanded. When Rick ignored him in favor of harsh gasping, Snape impatiently fished a tiny bottle from his pocket and forced a droplet between Rick's lips. The effect was immediate. Snape handed him his wand, while pressing his own to aim at Rick's heart. Snape said, "You haven't been given enough remedy to survive more than an extra ten minutes, or worse, a whole extra hour of flesh consuming misery."

Rick, appearing defeated and angry, waved and muttered a series of cancellations. From upstairs came the sound of the front door opening and many footsteps scurrying. Snape grabbed Rick's wand back away and gave him the bottle of remedy, which the man frantically tipped into his mouth while uttering whining noises.

"Harry!" Tonks greeted him and rushed forward to restrain Harry from stepping up to meet her. "Stay there, kiddo," she said with worrisome uneasiness. "Whegh, you need a bath."

"Sorry," Harry apologized tiredly and got a pat on the arm from Tonks.

The other Aurors were taking things out of a small trunk they had brought down. "Get him a chair," Moody growled and Rodgers went to fetch one. When he returned with an exotically carved one, Harry was made to sit, just inside the cage. Moody leaned his scarred face close to examine the chain with his roving glass eye. "Hmf," he muttered. "Burning it's the best, I think."

"What?" Harry asked in alarm.

"Get the dragon-proof collar out," Moody ordered, ignoring his question. Too many people were moving around Harry for him to keep track of, and they were all talking about him in the third person. Someone held out a padded flame-proof collar from a dragon training suit which was slipped under the chain and fastened around his neck.

"Just peachy, Harry," Tonks said reassuringly. "What do you think?" she asked Moody, "Just cut it?" Murmurs of debate went around.

"That will take care of it," Moody said with a grunt that spoke of inherent undesirability.

"Better idea anyone?" Someone asked. Harry just wanted to go home. To be stuck at the threshold to freedom like this strained his fragile nerves. "This might hurt a bit," Tonks said. "Hold yourself."

Fingers touched Harry's left hand and he moved his eyes--all he could move--to see that Snape had crouched down to reach him through the mob. Harry gripped his hand as everyone braced for the chain's reaction to being attacked. The ignition was rather spectacular for something so small. A blinding light and heat flared against Harry's face and the collar jumped chokingly tight for an instant before the chain broke into pieces.

The remainder of the chain floundered on the floor, sizzling like a firework until Tonks stamped it out and hovered it into an evidence sack.

"Would've taken him out for certain," Moody stated darkly and gave Rick, who was bound against the wall, a look of utter disdain.

Tonks handed the sack to Rodgers and stalked over to her former boyfriend. "Well, this about tops it," she growled at him disgustedly. Harry did not care one ounce for the man at this point, perhaps because Snape had gotten even for him, at least partially. "Can you take him in?" Tonks asked Moody. "I might kill him just for the heck of it." Moody hesitated in case she might change her mind before hauling Rick to his feet and growling at him.

Harry had to hold back a grin at Rick's alarm as he took a proper look at the old Auror. "What makes you think I won't?" Moody asked.

"We need a debriefing, Harry," Tonks began, "down at the Ministry."

"He needs a Healer . . ." Snape began.

Harry held up a hand to stop him. "It's all right. I'm okay," He insisted, although his head was still pounding from the hallucinogenic potion and lack of water. He felt obliged to give it a good show in front of his future colleagues and stood unsteadily with his guardian's hand on his arm.

"We'll keep it quick," Tonks assured him.

Even though giving his version of events should have been easy, it felt like a kind of torture to the utterly exhausted Harry. Snape hovered in the background in the Auror meeting room, looking ready to pounce on anyone, even Harry himself. Moody frequently grunted in doubt as Harry tried to explain what had happened.

"I was thinking about other things. I think I heard a boot scuff on the pavement and I was starting to turn and pull out my wand, and then I couldn't move. Or it hurt to move and something was around my neck."

Harry considered that Vineet for all his meager spell power, would not have bothered with the wand, and would have left Rick as a heap on the ground without even breaking a sweat. Tonks lifted the evidence sack and dropped it on the table. Harry hadn't managed much of a look at the necklace when it was on him; it hadn't been long enough to pull into view. The few remaining tiny blackened links were odd hoops with a crosspiece fitting into the next hoop.

"I don't want to go around . . ." He was going to say that he didn't want to go around as paranoid as Moody himself, but he changed his mind and closed with, ". . . always worried I'll be attacked. It was Muggle London."

Moody grunted again disapprovingly. Harry bolstered his pride as best he could and listed what had transpired during his four days of captivity. It worked best to isolate himself from the memories as though speaking of someone else's experience. He skipped his experimentations with pentagrams and found himself downplaying the horror of the hallucinogens to save face. He finally arrived in his telling at the moment Snape had appeared, and gave his guardian, who was still hovering impatiently behind Tonks, a grateful look.

"You are a mess, Harry," Tonks finally said. "We have enough for now and you *really* need a bath," she complained.

"I can't help it," Harry retorted.

"Ah, there's that temper," Tonks playfully pointed out. "Severus, why don't you take him home."

Those words could not have been more welcome. After repeated reinforcement from everyone about how good it was to have him back, Snape led him to the lifts and up to the quiet atrium. The few people they met along the way gave him extensive greetings and asked where he had been. He waved them off and waited for Snape to disappear in the Floo.

Snape appeared in his dining room, which was again full to the brim with all manner of guests. They all looked up with sad hopefulness at his appearance. Snape did not speak, just reached back when the hearth flared again to offer Harry a hand into the room. He took it gratefully as he was feeling dizzy from the journey. When he straightened up, he gaped at the room, filled with his former housemates, some neighbors, many Weasleys, and Hagrid, who was using a large trunk as a seat.

"Harry!" the room erupted, setting his frayed nerves on edge. Hermione ran around the crowded table and gave him a hug. "Sheew!" she exclaimed with a wrinkled face.

"Let me get a bath," Harry insisted, fending off the others who descended on him. Snape cleared a path to the hall for him and he gratefully followed.

Safely in the toilet, he peeled off his clothes, kicked them into a corner, and suggested that they be burned. Snape was adjusting the taps and when he turned, noticed the blistering burn below Harry's collarbone. "I'll get you a poultice for that or the water will be quite painful."

Harry lowered himself into the blessed bath while Snape pawed through the cabinet and began quickly putting something together at the sink. Harry added copious bubble bath to the water and started to wash up. "It's all right, Severus," Harry said, although as he did, a wave of water splashed the flaming line and he changed his mind. "Thank you for coming to get me, yet again," Harry said with crushing gratitude. Snape glanced back with a pained expression and Harry went on, "I didn't know you'd managed to become an Animagus; you didn't let on at all. I would have helped you with it, though you apparently didn't need any. It's a useful form," Harry added into the silence, blathering, perhaps for lack of having anyone to talk to for days.

Snape finally spoke in a lecturing voice, "We needed to get through the spell barriers, which were extensive." He came over with a shallow bowl full of a green paste. Harry leaned back and let it be dabbed onto the stinging red line that wrapped around his shoulder. "Let that set before getting it wet," Snape instructed him and placed the remaining portion in easy reach. "Need anything else?"

"Dinner. Water. Lots of water."

Snape went to the door just as it opened and Winky stepped in, delivering a tray. Harry drank thirstily from the glass even though he had had two at the Ministry. Dinner was a thin chicken stew, the scent of which made his stomach grumble fiercely. Snape still hovered after Winky departed. Harry hungrily spooned stew into his mouth before halting before his stomach rebelled. He noticed Snape's furrowed brow. "What's wrong?" Harry asked.

Snape snorted softly. "I did not do well by you, Harry."

"Seems like you did to me," Harry countered, setting the soup aside to let his stomach settle. He picked up the cloth and washed his arms again.

"When you did not come home in the late afternoon, I assumed you were being difficult. The search for you should have started twelve hours before it actually did."

Harry squeezed out the washcloth and re-soaped it to stall. "I shouldn't have been behaving so badly last week. I'm sorry for that. I had a lot of time to think during the last four days. A lot of time." He rinsed the cloth out again without using it and again rubbed soap into it before holding it between his hands. Staring at the quickly dissolving bath bubbles and the bright pink of his knees showing through, Harry said, "You're a wonderful guardian, Severus. Having met *your* dad, I'm guessing that's why you need to hear that."

Snape's frown didn't disappear but he did straighten from his deep slouch.

Harry went on with deliberate calm, "I've got so much out of being with you, beyond even your willingness to bail my bum out of the bad situations I seem to get into."

Snape's dark eyes considered that before his lips twitched slightly and he moved to the door, opening it a crack. "I will let you finish."

Harry peered up at him, finally taking the time to really look at him. "You look like hell, Severus."

"Fell completely apart," Tonks said, as came through the bathroom door, taking the handle right out of Snape's hand. "Hasn't slept. Hasn't eaten. Not a thing. Go on," she ordered him, pointing around toward the kitchen. Bowing his head, Snape quickly strode away.

Harry cut himself off from watching Snape depart with concern and instead fumbled with covering himself as the bubbles had faded to the tub edge. "Tonks!" he complained, reaching for and knocking the bubble bath bottle into the tub with him. She fished it out and added a copious amount before running the water again. It foamed nicely and he relaxed.

Quietly, she teased, "Not like I haven't seen it before. . . "

Harry, blushing until his face felt hotter than the tub water, snapped, "Still."

She chuckled. "I just wanted to talk to you a bit before heading home for a long sleep," she said with affection. Harry relaxed as the bubbles had reached chest height now. He dunked his head and began washing his greasy, gritty hair. Tonks said, "You weren't stuck there real long, but I want to make sure you understand what can happen to someone held captive like that." Harry stretched his neck to one side. He didn't want to think about it, really, but Tonks plowed on, "Mostly I want to make sure you don't withdraw, which is a common reaction."

Harry sank down into the suds until only his head was exposed. "Is that why I feel like curling up into bed about a hundred times more than I want to go back and see my crowd of friends who are waiting?"

"Yes. Resist it. Visit with your friends for as long as you can stand. Everyone's been deucedly worried about you, Harry," she added somberly.

"I've been bloody worried as well. Rick is a lunatic."

Tonks rubbed her long pink fluffy hair back. "I'm really sorry about that, Harry." They both fell silent and Harry started washing his feet with great fastidiousness, just because he could. "Tara is here by the way. Just found out what happened to you, although no one knows the connection."

Harry froze with the cloth between two toes. "I'll have to talk to her," he breathed.

"One thing at a time," Tonks said. "Maybe I *will* wait for you. I'll see you upstairs," she said as she departed. *Checking up on him*, Harry thought with a little annoyance.

The door opened again as he bundled himself in soft, lovely, clean towels, but it was Snape this time, simultaneously eating a biscuit and carrying fresh clothes. "Thanks," Harry said, "forgot to ask Winky." He accepted the t-shirt off the top of the stack and slipped it on.

"Are you certain you do not require a Healer?"

Harry nodded. "I'm fine," he insisted, glad to be able to say that. A little food had rendered him almost normal feeling and the hot water had eased his aches. Just some sleep and he would be back to himself, he was certain.

Fully dressed in marvelously clean clothes and in his favorite maroon dressing gown, Harry let Snape lead him out with an arm around his shoulder. "You should say hello to your friends," Snape commanded as they made the steps to the hall.

The hall was a welcome sight with all the lamps lit, the center of what he considered home, and he was finally warm from the bath all the way to his stiff joints. "You're taking orders from Tonks," Harry accused him. "There shouldn't be two of us doing that." Snape's lips twitched every so slightly upward. Flush with gratitude for being home and with affection for the steady hold around his shoulder, Harry quietly said, "I love you, Severus."

Their footsteps stuttered to a halt halfway across the hall floor. Hermione came to the doorway of the dining room, face flush with a smile. She must have sensed something because she hung there, hesitating, with her hands on either door-frame. Distress flickered over Snape's features before they relaxed. Softly, he said, "Come, Harry, your friends have been most worried about you." His easy tone was in contrast to the fiercely tight hold he had on Harry's shoulder as he steered him toward Hermione.

His much shorter friend stood on her toes to give him a hug. Behind her, others came to their feet to greet him as well. "How did they find you? Tonks wouldn't say," Hermione complained.

Harry looked to his guardian and Snape didn't reply. "Severus, you didn't-" Harry began with concern, but was interrupted by all the others coming over to welcome him back.

The bunching around him finally eased when the Weasley twins gave up congratulating him gregariously and repeatedly. Beyond them stood Tara, and beside her, Elizabeth. Harry blinked, recovered his poise, and said, "Hi," to both of them before pulling a rather pained looking Tara aside.

"Look, I-" she started to say before Harry cut her off with a whispered, "Don't worry about. It wasn't your doing."

"Are you all right?" she asked. "He didn't hurt you or anything, did he?"

Harry, very aware of the attention the full room was giving them, said lightly, "No. Not really."

Winky came in with trays of small sandwiches and squares of cheese. "Wow," Ron whispered. "How'd she know I was hungry?" He grabbed Harry and sat him down at the table, before the tray and beside Ginny. "You look like you haven't eaten. First dibs."

Harry took a sausage sandwich and looked around the room. "When I'm an Auror and out. . . doing something dangerous, you aren't all going to sitting here like this worrying, are you?" he accused them all.

Tonks stepped over beside him and took up a stack of three little sandwich triangles filled with marmalade. "Yes, Harry, I think they are," she said sympathetically, patting his shoulder. "This just came for you, by the way." She held out a letter.

Harry handed it to his right, to Tara, to have it opened, since he had a sandwich in his hand and eating seemed more important. Elizabeth leaned over to look at it curiously. It was then that Harry realized how very surrounded he was by girl-friends past and potential, and he dearly hoped they didn't get to talking together too much.

"It's from the Minister of Magic," she said. "You want me to read it?"

Harry thought that over, but before he could answer, Ron grabbed the letter away and began reading aloud. "*Dear Harry*. . . Wow, the Minister refers to you as 'dear?'" Ron marveled before going on to the generally grinning room. "*So very glad to learn that you have returned home safely.* Awwwww. . ."

Harry grabbed the letter away and stashed it in his pocket. "I wanted to hear that," Hermione complained.

After eating enough to feel unwell from it, Harry listened dully to his friends' low chatter and fell into a pleasant stupor. He was bone tired though, and soon rested his head on his folded hands on the table.

"Is he asleep?" someone asked.

"Might be," Hermione whispered.

The entire room grew silent as Snape stepped around the table and lifted Harry's arm over his shoulder. "Come on, Harry. Time to go to your room."

Harry's eyes fluttered open and immediately closed again, heavy as lead. "G'night," he muttered at the doorway and it was echoed by his friends who were now gathering themselves to depart.

In his room, Harry sat on his bed and watched through a veil of half-sleep as Snape brought his pyjamas over to him. Harry stared at them, wondering where the energy to don them might come from.

"Do you need anything else?" Snape asked.



"You repeated that spell; didn't you?" Harry said a bit accusingly. "I didn't want you to do that." He frowned deeply, feeling guilt like a serpent in his chest.

Quietly, Snape said, "I didn't, although I also wished I had, seeing your condition. I used that explanation with Ms. Tonks, but she did not believe me, I think, partially because I knew more than your location. Nor did she insist on the truth since she was far more interested in locating you."

Sitting straighter on the edge of his bed, Harry thought that over with his slow brain. "So . . . wait, don't tell me . . . Malfoy?"

Smiling faintly, Snape nodded. "But at his request, no one is to know that."

"Oh. All right then." Remembering his rival's dropped hint, Harry decided he should have been confident that Draco would go for help. He hoped though that he didn't feel Harry owed him too much; he couldn't bear that. While getting changed into his soft pyjamas, his tired mind conjured some dates. "Tomorrow's the first," he realized aloud. "You shouldn't be here," he insisted in some alarm.

Snape grinned inwardly. "I do need to leave tomorrow but the students won't arrive until evening on the Express. It will be fine."

Finally changed with his clumsy hands, Harry clambered under the covers, deeply anticipating a night in his warm bed. Before he lay back though, he said, "You can go tonight. I'll be all right."

Snape balked and approached to stand directly beside the bed. "As welcome as this sudden streak of independence is, I will depart after breakfast."

"If that'll work out." Harry straightened the duvet, relishing its soft cover and plump warmth. "I realize . . ." he began, keeping his head down. After a hesitation he continued, "I realize now that it doesn't matter if you're at school; you'll come for me if I need you."

"Of course," Snape softly said.

A tad sheepishly, Harry said, "I guess I knew that before, but now I really do. I thought maybe you'd already left for school and didn't know I was missing."

"What? Harry . . ." Snape scolded.

Explaining quickly, Harry said, "You said you were leaving, I didn't know you would worry enough to think something bad had happened. I figured by Monday the Ministry would notice."

Snape appeared disappointed and dismayed even, as he sat on the edge of the bed. "I worry about you constantly," he admitted quietly.

Harry's face wrinkled up and he said, "That's a tough job."

"Yes. And I wonder sometimes how Albus managed to retain such an appearance of aloofness from his concerns for you. I do not even have Voldemort to worry about," he added in chagrin.

Harry, feeling a burst of honesty, stated darkly, "I want to get Avery."

Snape fell thoughtful before saying, "Do work though the Ministry on that. Please don't go it alone."

"I also want to clear Sirius' name."

"You may have an easier time with the first." At Harry's confused expression, Snape explained, "The first the Ministry can trumpet; the second will only cause controversy. NOT . . ." Snape went on quickly when Harry started to complain fiercely. " . . . that I don't agree that it should be done. I am simply explaining the reality to you." He brushed his unkempt hair back and said, "You know I had thought that you and I had grown to know each other, but I am discovering many things, including a girlfriend, that I did not know about." He didn't sound angry, only mystified. "Do try to keep me somewhat informed by owl if you will."

"I'll try."

Snape stood. "And if you have difficulty sleeping tonight, do come fetch me."

"I don't think that will be a problem." Harry punched the soft, goose-down pillow behind him. "I've been fantasizing about my bed for four days running." He plopped back on it with a sigh.

"Sleep well, Harry."

"You too."

Harry slept so soundly that he didn't stir even a breath any of the three times Snape came to check on him. The third time, at just before 4:00, Snape hovered longer, taking advantage of the exhausted sleep that kept Harry from rousing to the dark inner vision he must be having of him so close. Snape was not one for flights of fancy but, standing there, he wished dearly that his charge no longer saw him that way, that somehow his shadow could be torn from that green world. He fretted also about the future, when Avery had finally been captured and only he himself was the very last free, former Death Eater. Would Harry's grace about this remain the same?

Unaware of his guardian's musings, Harry slept deeply on as though anchored to it, if one could be so, by plush bedding. Snape stood straight and considered that if Harry chose to withdraw his forgiveness, then that was certainly his right. But as long as he needed his guardianship, it seemed unlikely.

\* \* \*

The morning began bright and sunny. Harry, though loath to leave his wonderful bed early, did so to have a long breakfast with Snape.

"Owl to tell me about the new students, all right?" Harry said as they discussed Hogwarts during hash on toast. At Snape's nod, Harry added, "I want to make sure the Gryffindors are making enough trouble for you."

Appropriately grim, Snape stated, "No fear of that."

Reveling in ordinary, future plans, Harry said brightly, "I'm going to go to the Quidditch matches with Aaron, so I'll see you at the first one if not sooner."

"Minerva would almost certainly want you to stay for dinner in that case. I expect to return for a weekend before that."

Finally, Snape was ready, his small trunk beside the hearth. Harry gave him a quick hug. "Have a good school year. Don't sneak around the castle as a cobra too much; it's an unfair advantage over the students." Snape smiled with his eyes, but refrained from comment. Harry added, "Unless you're going to scare Filch, then it's all right." Harry realized that he was stalling and stepped back, forcing his ongoing comments to cease.

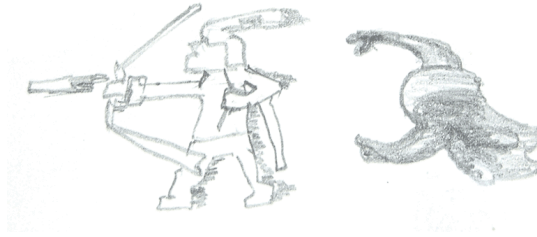
"Do behave, Harry, and owl every day for the next few days, if you would."

Harry nodded only and watched Snape take up his trunk and depart, accompanied by a *whoosh* of flame.

After breakfast the owls began arriving, as well as a scattering of friends from the night before, the ones who could get away from their other responsibilities. Winky gave them breakfast and most had to depart soon after. Harry wandered to

the sideboard where the owls had been dropping the post. A few packages were there, including one from Candide. Harry unsealed the box from Honeydukes and ate a few. Everything seemed to taste a lot better than he remembered. He penned a quick thanks to her along with reassurances as to his state of mind and sent Hedwig off with it.

When he was washing up, Harry noticed that his burn had begun to sting again. Most of the blistering streak on his chest had turned white, but two sections of it were still a flaming pink. The wound looked angry, as though it would leave a scar. The leftover poultice beside the bath had dried up, but ten minutes of hunting in the library produced the instructions for *Creamed Barbadosis Hydrating Plaster*. Ten additional minutes later Harry had it mixed from the ingredients in the bath cabinet. The relief was instantaneous and, satisfied that he could continue to do without further help, Harry confidently continued getting dressed.



## Chapter 62 -- Field Work

The house was silent. Harry tried to get used to the routine of the silence and at first found that it allowed him more opportunity to think, but later in the day, the stillness itself became a distraction. He propped Kali's cage open so that she could follow him when she wished and return to it when she didn't. Her occasional interruptions worked well to keep the empty house at bay. His impromptu time off was only one day; hopefully his pet would go back into her cage tomorrow when he needed to leave.

Mid-afternoon, Harry headed outside to work in the garden, since the sun was intermittent and he yearned to get some on his skin. A few residual aches in his back made bending repeatedly a bit unpleasant so he pulled out his wand and thought a bit. A Scourgify took care of the leaves that had collected between the plants and the wall. He didn't know a spell for weeding though, so gritting his teeth lightly, he crouched to pull the worst of them up by the roots.

"Hello," a pleasant greeting came from the road. It was Elizabeth.

Harry returned the greeting, stood and brushed off his hands.

"How are you doing?" she asked, sounding as though she very much cared about the answer.

"Not bad. My pride hurts more than anything else."

She grinned. "The *Prophet* has been pretty easy on you. Have you read it?"

"Merlin, no," Harry breathed miserably, making her laugh lightly.

"They have taken an offended stance aimed at Rothschild not respecting Wizardry's indebtedness to you."

Harry scratched his head. "Have you been studying a bit?" he asked carefully.

With a blush she admitted, "A bit. Michalmas term starts in a month."

"Ah." Harry glanced around the garden and put his wand away.

"Hopefully your pride can recover," she said helpfully. Harry wasn't certain if she were teasing. She went on, "The *Prophet* didn't say where the Torq had come from. I was curious, so pulled out one of my old magical history books and found a chapter on them."

Without thinking ahead Harry asked, "Your dad let you read books about the history of magic?"

She laughed, "Are you kidding? He encouraged it once he realized how miserable most of the history is."

"Goblin wars," Harry stated sagely, making her laugh again.

"Giant wars. Don't forget those," she contributed. After a pause she fell serious. "Don't feel too bad. Torqs were used to keep magician slaves you know. They use your power against you, so it doesn't matter how powerful you are." At Harry's interested look she asked, "Do you want me to bring the book over?"

Harry thought he would prefer to forget about it for the time being. "Maybe some other time."

She gave him a chastising tilt of the head. "What did the Torq look like?"

Harry shrugged. "I only saw it after it had burned up. But it did look a little odd."

A tad impatient sounding, she asked, "Well, what ward was it composed of? You know, was it made up of ankhs or five pointed stars-"

"It was an ankh shape," Harry interrupted, realizing now what the links had looked like.

"Nile Valley. They made the best wards," she stated knowledgeably. "When I was young, I was fascinated by Egyptian Wizardry: whole tombs protected by a few powerful carvings, so many mysterious objects they've dug up and they don't know what they do, or how to recreate the ones they've figured out."

"Rick said he had the Torq made for me," Harry stated thoughtfully.

"Huh. That must have cost him."

Harry brushed the drying dust off his hands again. "It did."

\* \* \*

The next morning Harry rose early and sat at the table perusing the *Prophet* until breakfast appeared. He had been away from training long enough that he felt excited at the prospect of it and arrived at the Ministry early. He strode across the atrium, returning a rash of greetings from everyone in his vicinity. He was feeling good, relaxed and strong, not to mention blissfully free to walk around where he wished. Just before the lifts, a saccharine sweet, though somehow harsh, voice brought him to a scuffling halt. Harry turned slowly, drawing confidence into his posture as a shield against the prospect of facing Rita Skeeter.

"Mr. Potter," she said again. A flash went off; he held himself from blinking repeatedly in its wake.

"What do you want?" Harry asked with his own false sweetness.

"An interview, of course." She blinked her long lashes coyly, although from her the effect was counterproductive.

"I'm due in the Auror's office in two minutes. I'm terribly afraid I haven't the time."

"Two quick questions in that case," she insisted while looking in her robe pockets. She swore lightly when she pulled out her cigarette case first, and then her notepad. "How did they find you?"

"A complicated spell," Harry replied. Given the work he had had to do on Draco, it certainly seemed like a magical spell.

"Which one?"

Harry put his hand over her notepad and pushed it down away from the quill. "Telling you brings up difficult questions for people I'd prefer to protect."

"So, I won't bring it up if you give me a longer interview."

Harry tilted his head and looked at her. "Is it worth that?" he asked plainly.

She frowned at her notes. "Probably not. Second question, when is the hearing?"

"I haven't gotten a notice yet."

"You're ruddy helpful. One more then. Were you injured?" She waited expectantly, short, sharp quill poised.

"I got burned. Here." He drew a line over his robes with his finger. Giving in with a sigh, he added, mostly because he really didn't want her mucking around finding out about Draco, "And he slipped me a hallucinogenic potion. That was ghastly." He jostled his head at the memory of the transformed world attacking him. "I have to go," he begged off.

Before he could reach for a lift button, she said, "Good to have you back, Harry," with something approaching sincerity.

Harry turned his head and said, "Thanks. The horror! You'd have to find something else to write about."

She laughed lightly and stepped away, photographer trailing obediently.

After everyone had assembled in the workout room and Harry lived down his fellows' ribbing, Tonks said, "I have your examination results . . ." and proceeded to pull out a long sheet.

Harry made a noise of dismay and when Tonks turned to him, he asked, "You gave the first examination?" When he received a nod, he quickly challenged, "Was it yesterday?"

"Yes. You seem to have missed it," she said, writing the results on the board for the other three. Vineet seemed to have done the best on the written by a wide margin.

"Can I take it now?"

"No." She went on writing.

Stung by this, Harry complained with vehemence, "What am I to do then?" This seemed grossly unfair.

Tonks turned and considered him. "I think you need another day off, Harry." Harry banked his anger and denied that. "You're certain?" Tonks asked kindly. At Harry's vigorous nod she appeared doubtful. "You were waived through the exams. Complaints?" she challenged.

Harry shook his head and noticed that Kerry Ann appeared to have just beaten out Aaron in blocking, making him suspect that she was holding back during drills.

Tonks departed and as they waited for Rodgers, Aaron said, "You would have failed in the escape test anyway, Potter."

"Was there one?" Harry asked, honestly curious.

"NO," Kerry Ann snapped sharply, her anger aimed at Aaron.

Vineet who had sat silent until then, his intricately painted wand sitting before him on his small desk, said reassuringly to Harry, "Mr. Moody did not believe your situation to be escapable."

Moody, off all people, believing that did make Harry feel better. Turned out it was just as well he hadn't gotten out, since the necklace would have killed him. Sighing a bit, Harry sat back and they all waited for Rodgers to appear. Harry found an unexpected new capacity in himself for waiting, as one quiet minute stretched into the next. He considered that he certainly wouldn't be waiting four days, probably four minutes, which wasn't really very long and relaxing would make it seem to go by quickly. Aaron and Kerry Ann whispered gossip about various Ministry officials, trying to top each other with inside knowledge.

Rodgers finally hurried in, set them to doing drills, and disappeared again. Harry paired with Kerry Ann for counter-curse practice. This was growing a rather dull, frankly, since they hadn't added any new ones lately. Rodgers didn't reappear after they were finished and Harry suggested they move onto offensive spells.

"Harry's favorite," Aaron teased.

"No, they aren't," Harry retorted as Aaron pulled out the hard rubber dummy which hung from a metal hoop on top of its head. It was faceless with no hands or feet and with worn maroon paint covering it.

"Sure seems like it," Aaron countered. The dummy swung to and fro as its platform was positioned. "Ol' Stubby here thinks so too."

When the platform was locked to its bolts in the floor, Harry aimed and hit it with a moderately hard blasting curse. It blew straight out, and rocked hard against the bolts when the dummy swung back.

"Well, maybe," Harry conceded, finding pent up violence within himself, most likely from his imprisonment. He proceeded to take it out on the dummy, and the others allowed him longer turns at it without comment.

Rodgers returned, apologizing for the delay in a rare display of contrition. "We really need to get you through this so the rest of us can catch a break." He stepped over to Harry and handed him an official looking envelope. Before he returned to the front of the room, he was already lecturing from the readings. Harry slipped open the spell-sealed envelope and found what he expected: a hearing notice for a week from then. He quickly folded it back away and listened more closely to the discussion of layered illusions.

During lunch, Harry begged off eating with his fellows, saying that he wanted to run an errand. The others headed off to the exit and Harry, notebook in hand this time, returned to the file room, intent on taking better notes from Avery's records. He didn't have an excuse to be looking about, so he snuck down quickly and shut the door behind him. It was unoccupied, the only movement from the Knight Bus orb.

Harry found the correct file and opened it on top of the lowest cabinet. Thinking again, he closed it and took it up, tucked under his arm back to the empty Aurors' office. He sat on the floor, out of sight behind the last desk and borrowed a never-out quill from the absent Shacklebolt.

Not five minutes passed before footsteps and voices approached. Harry rolled his eyes at his poor luck. They had all left for lunch not ten minutes before. The voices stopped in the corridor, speaking low. This in itself caught Harry's attention. Without trying he listened in as Tonk's said, "I know. I agreed with his acceptance. He is exceptional on nearly every other factor."

Rodgers followed with, "I was overconfident. I thought it was a detriment we could fix, but it's clear he is already compensating more than I would have thought possible."

Harry sat in complete stillness, wondering, with a bit of trepidation, who they were discussing. He should have finished all of the reading last night, a voice in his head chastised him. Tonks sighed, a long one. "I'd feel rather sorry if we had to send him off. He has such, I don't know, faith in his own destiny."

Harry felt a tingle in his chest as though it might refuse to breath should he try to. All kinds of minor difficulties he had been having lately now loomed large as he sat there, staring at what looked like a mouse hole under the desk, against the opposing wall. He swallowed hard.

"Destiny as a Muggle perhaps. He doesn't have much more magical power than one," Rodgers commented.

Harry's chest didn't feel much better upon realizing that they were discussing Vineet.

Tonks said, "Let's wait until the six-month review. Give him a little more time."

Their voices moved away. "It isn't going to make any difference," Rodgers pessimistically stated before they were out of range.

Harry stood up off the floor, expecting to be stiff from the hard surface, but found that he wasn't too bad. When the path was clear, he slipped back down to the file room.

\* \* \*

On the third of the month an owl arrived, one of the brown school ones. Snape had sent a long letter, although the small angular hand indicated it had been written rapidly. He mentioned that Minerva hoped Harry was recovering well from his ordeal. He summarized the new students, good, bad and indifferent. Harry smiled at the vision of intimidated first-years huddled in the Defense classroom, in awe of the simplest demonstration. Snape also discussed the new Transfiguration teacher, Mr. Cawley, brought in because McGonagall had decided to only teach sixth- and seventh-years. Harry started to write out a reply but had to stop because he was late leaving for the Ministry.

"Next Friday will be the first field training for two of you," Rodgers explained when they settled in at the Ministry. He pointed at Harry and Kerry Ann. "And that Saturday, the other two of you. Now, don't get too enthralled, this is just routine patrol you will be shadowing. Rare is the evening when anything happens and your Auror won't be called to anything dangerous unless it is absolutely necessary and you may be taken to a safe house or sent back here instead of being allowed to follow to anything significant."

Despite their trainer's playing it down, Harry was very much looking forward to Friday. So much so that he goofed up his invisible ink mixture that afternoon and it came out sparkling like a Muggle electric marquee. Well, Harry considered, his fellows seemed like they needed a good laugh.

\* \* \*

That Saturday Harry had Tara over for dinner. He had picked her up outside the Leaky Cauldron and brought her home in the Floo. She was quiet all through eating and no amount of cajoling, joking, or blame-taking would draw her out more than an inch. Winky even made duck for the occasion.

When he escorted Tara back and they stood in the dim crowded wizard pub, Harry said, "Every thing's all right, really."

"I feel really bad about what happened . . ."

"I'm used to it," Harry insisted. People were taking an interest in them, so he stepped toward the back alley where it would be quieter. She resisted, tugging toward the front door instead.

"I'm not supposed to be in here," she breathed. At his questioning look she explained, "When I was a child and with my parents, it was okay."

"You're with me, no one will bother us about it." But he glanced around at the people eyeing them, including the barman, and led her out the door to the pavement.

Outside she said, "You shouldn't have been put through more on my account." When he tried again, she said, "Look, I'll owl you." She gave him a light push back toward the grimy pub door.

That didn't sound so good, but Harry had already argued himself out. "Good night then," he said wearily before ducking back inside the obscure wooden entryway.

\* \* \*

Harry stood outside the door of Courtroom Ten, idly studying the soot-coated dungeon walls. Tonks had sent him off early to Rick's hearing and now he waited, getting annoyingly nervous as the minutes passed. He reached for his pocket watch, despite promising himself that he would not pull it out yet again. Wear had dulled the edges of the golden wings to a mat finish. He fingered it without opening it, thinking how very perfect a gift it had been at exactly the right moment, a pleasant thought that took him nicely away from the here and now.



The large iron bolt on the door clunked over, pushed from the other side. Harry stashed the watch away, stood with his hands at his sides, and tried to relax. An elderly witch in fancy black robes gestured for him to enter and Harry did so. The tiered seats on the sides were three-quarters full and the benches on the end where the Wizengamot lorded even more so. The scuffling and murmuring stopped as Harry stepped across the floor, following the witch who had let him in. Rick sat in the hard-edged wooden chair in the middle of the floor. He appeared to want to cross his arms but the chains wouldn't allow it. He could just interlock his fingers over his lap and they hung in the air, clenched and wiry. He ignored Harry's entrance and continued to stare at the floor beyond his knees. A nicely dressed, portly man with a ferret-like expression stood near him--a barrister, Harry assumed.

The witch took up a seat at floor level, where she apparently was monitoring a dictation quill. The long transcription parchment already had many feet of roll filled up. Harry stopped short of the little table there and looked up at the benches. In the front was Minister Bones and her assistants with stacks of files and notes. Harry also recognized Marchbanks and a few others. On the bench above the Minister's sat McGonagall. She gave Harry the smallest of smiles but didn't lose her standard serious disposition.

"Mr. Potter," Madam Bones began, sounding slightly pompous. "Thank you for coming. Let it be recorded that Harry James Potter of 23 Tottlywold Road, Shrewsthorpe was present to give testimony. Mr. Potter, the court would appreciate you recounting the events of August the twenty seventh through August the thirtieth of this year, if you would please."

She sounded dismissive almost, as though asking him to recall what he had had for breakfast. Harry dove in though. He had been thinking through everything since last night, cutting into his sleep in an effort to recall details as well as plot out how best to gloss over Malfoy's involvement. No one interrupted him as he summarized getting taken by surprise in Knightsbridge nor his initial observations of his cage, and he held the blush of embarrassment at bay during the worst of his story, when he had drunk the hallucinogenic water.

"Just a moment, if you will, Harry," Bones interrupted him. She sounded normal now, almost sympathetic. "We don't have a charge for deceptive administration of a psychotropic potion on the sheet, do we?" she asked her assistant.

The witch beside Bones found the right parchment as the dictationwitch unrolled her own to look back to where the charges had originally been read. Harry leaned slightly over to see it better, trying to determine if Rick had already mentioned Draco in his own testimony, as Harry was not keen on getting into a conflict of facts. He had believed he would be present for the whole proceedings, but it turned out he was only called down for his own part. Uncertain, but hiding it as best he could, Harry waited while they sorted out the exact charge to add.

"All right then. Please continue, Mr. Potter."

"Well, the next day was pretty much the same as the previous ones, except I was afraid to drink the water provided and the wash basin had been taken away so there wasn't any other. I don't know how much later it was, because it was hard to keep track of the time, except in general by the sunlight coming in the window. But in late afternoon, rescue arrived. Um, my guardian, Severus Snape came past the property spell barriers in the form of a cobra."

Rick's eyes came slowly over to Harry, his brow furrowed in faint confusion. Harry was certain he was wondering why Harry had skipped over part of the story.

A middle-aged wizard with a large birthmark on his balding head asked, "Is he a registered Animagus? I don't remember that we have anyone currently living who takes the form of a serpent."

Harry hesitated, "I don't know. He only mastered it in the last few weeks." Harry had been so concerned about Draco that he completely failed to consider that he might end up telling the full Wizengamot that his guardian had acted illegally. He pretended that nothing was amiss, but inside his thoughts had picked up speed. The barrister beside Rick was jotting something down on a small notepad in his hand. Rick still looked calculating. Harry quickly tried to gauge if leaving Draco out was to Rick's advantage and whether he could be expected to leave it be if it weren't already too late.

"And then what happened?" Madam Bones prompted.

"Severus, my guardian, bit Mr. Rothschild and then forced him to bring down the barriers . . . in exchange for the antidote to the venom." Some shuffling occurred at that. Harry looked around the benches and was very surprised to find McGonagall fighting a grin. Harry himself tried to smile at the sight of it. He cleared his throat into his fist to cover. "Then the Aurors came in--took the Torq off of me--cut it off with a dragon-proof collar to protect me when it burned." Harry sighed in relief at finishing.

Bones went over the pile of notes with a furrowed brow, stopping at a sheet occasionally before moving on. She appeared to be looking for something in particular. "Mr. Rothschild in his questioning by the Aurors, not under any coercive potion, I'll add for the record, mentioned something about 'showing off to Potter's enemies,' or something of that nature, the notes are not clear. What does that mean to you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry felt he owed Draco a good try at loyalty, even though Harry himself believed it was in the other's best interest that everyone know what he had done. Perhaps in his own circles it would get him expelled, and for Draco, the right circles were probably rather important. With a hint of sheepishness Harry asked, "May I have a quick word with the Minister?"

Bones appeared taken aback, but recovered quickly. She stared at him with her widely spaced eyes as she considered that. "Take us off the record Madam Scribner, if you will."

The official quill was plucked from the air and held, twitching. Harry stepped around and up before the first row of raised benches. It probably wasn't a normal place to be walking, given that it was only a half a shoe wide. Bones looked up at him with an expectant expression. Harry leaned over and whispered, "The person who is actually responsible for my rescue does not want it known that he is involved, and I feel obliged to honor that." He straightened slightly to better see her expression. She appeared dubious but it quickly dissipated. McGonagall just before him, looked ready to give him detention.

"Who?" Madam Bones mouthed.

Harry leaned forward, much closer, and whispered, "Draco Malfoy."

"You are quite serious?" she asked, befuddled. Harry nodded soberly. Quietly she breathed, "Who knows what goes through that boy's head. All right, then."

Harry turned and saw that Rick and his counsel were conferring. Walking carefully back along the ledge, Harry went back to the steps and returned to the floor. He looked around at the side tiers and found some familiar redheads, who waved, as well as Skeeter, quill moving busily. The dictation quill was returned to the parchment.

"I withdraw my question from the witness," Madam Bones announced when the quill was in place. It scratched that out. The audience murmured for a few seconds before falling quiet again, but the room now felt tense in a new way. "Does any other member of the court have a question for this witness?"

The barrister stepped forward a half stride. "I do." He had a deep rolling voice that oozed confidence. Sounding a tad patronizing, he said, "Mr. Potter, during your stay in my client's cellar, did you at any time feel that your life was in danger?"

"No," Harry admitted. "Not until later when I found out the Torq would have killed me had I managed to escape."

The man shuffled his broad feet as though dusting the floor. "My client did not fully comprehend the power of the magical object he had procured from North Africa. He couldn't even comprehend the language on the packaging."

"W-" Harry began. He had been about to ask the smug man why it was that Rick had told Draco that it *would* kill him. He closed his mouth. Angry now, partially at himself, Harry stated firmly, "He let that thing torture me. Many times. Bragged about how he had bought it just for me. And when I did start to fight it significantly, he used a flame spell to knock me back."

The man's mouth twitched every so slightly. "Precisely my point; my client didn't believe himself safe should you have broken through the bars."

Harry gave them man a disgusted look and stared him down, truly tempted to try a little delving into his beady eyes. Harry regrouped and tried for something incontestable. "He wasn't very concerned with my well-being."

"So, after this dire affair you must have required treatment then? St. Mungo's perhaps? Or at least a Healer house call?" The barrister didn't look anything like a snake, but his mind sure moved like one, Harry thought.

"No." In the man's gleaming gaze, Harry added, "My guardian was the Hogwarts Potions master for twenty years. He made up a poultice for my burns. Otherwise, yes, I would have required a Healer."

The barrister paced with that floor-dusting motion of his feet. "Mr. Potter, how many of my client's girlfriends have you dated?"

Harry crossed his arms. "Former girlfriends. And two."

"And how many did you sleep with?"

"Is that relevant?" Harry retorted.

The barrister turned his wide brown suit to the benches. "I intend to demonstrate that Mr. Rothschild was driven mad with jealousy by having to compete with so esteemed a suitor. So I request that the witness be forced to respond."

"Mr. Potter?" Madam Bones prompted.

Harry's stomach dropped a few inches. "One." Harry dearly hoped anyone present from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement believed that he were referring to Tara. Out of the corner of his vision, he thought he could see a few of the assembled smiling at his discomfort. He felt he had been exposed and pushed back with, "If Rick were mad with anything, it was loss of control over those he was accustomed to keeping under his thumb. He is not a very nice boyfriend."

"That is hearsay, Mr. Potter," the barrister chided him. "Unless you are asserting that you have also dated my client?"

"No, I haven't." Some small chuckles echoed off the old stones. Harry wished he were better at this, wished it were a duel of spells rather than words.

"Other questions?" Madam Bones asked after a pause."

The room remained blissfully quiet.

When he returned to the Auror's office, Harry found, upon quickly pulling out a quill and scrap of parchment, that his hands were not entirely steady. No one was around in the office and he could here banging and sizzling in the workout room. He jotted out a quick note to Snape warning him that he had revealed his Animagus status. Maybe he had registered already, or sent in something, Harry hoped, as he folded the note while heading down the corridor where the two staff owls were caged. Neither were there. Harry headed around the corner and much farther along until he came to the Muggle Artifacts office, his fingers mentally crossed.

"Harry!" Mr. Weasley greeted him happily, even though he appeared to be literally buried in paperwork. "How'd it go then? Out already?"

"I'm finished, the hearing is still going on. I need to borrow an owl. Kind of an emergency, although a personal one. The department ones are out."

Mr. Weasley jumped up and squeezed Harry's arm as he passed and led the way down to the narrow cupboard beside the file room where the supplies were kept. "Here, let's see," he muttered while looking through stacks of yellowed old envelopes. "Ah, here we are." He held out an envelope that bore the label *Official Use Only by Reg. 453 Subsec. C Para. 2*. "Put 'er in there and airplane it up to the mailroom and they'll send it along."

Harry stared at the staid envelope. "Er, the issue is already one of getting in a bit of trouble with the Ministry."

"It'll be all right. Send it on." When he saw Harry's hesitation, he asked, "What's the matter? It didn't come out that you're bunking with the Minister's niece did it?" he teased and hit him on the arm.

"No, thank goodness," Harry breathed in relief, thinking of Tonks.

"Harry?" Mr. Weasley blurted, sounding quite concerned in contrast to his jesting seconds before.

Harry waved him off. "It's about Severus." He stared at the envelope. "Maybe Minerva will warn him," he thought aloud.

Soberly, Mr. Weasley asked, "Warn him about what?"

"When they came to get me away from Rothschild, Severus and the Aurors, Severus slipped through the spell barriers as a snake. He just worked it out and I don't think he's registered." Harry waved his arm in the direction of the lifts. "I just told the entire, full . . . assembled . . . purpled, Wizengamot that!" Harry rubbed his brow, hard. "I didn't see it coming. I am not very good at that sort of thing . . . talking to the assemblage without digging myself in deeper."

Mr. Weasley took the envelope away and began addressing it. "That, my boy, unlike magic, requires a lot of practice."

"Magic requires practice," Harry countered, not sure if he had heard him right.

Mr. Weasley took the note to Snape put it in another smaller envelope, addressed it *Prof. Snape*, hesitated, then added *only* with several underlines. "Not for you I hear," he teased. He put this envelope in the other, sealed it and handed it to Harry.

It was addressed to *Ginny Weasley, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry, Hogsmeade*.

\* \* \*

When Harry arrived home, feeling as though two full days had passed rather than one, he found a sizable pile of post waiting. He set the letter from Penelope aside, feeling that was too much to take in on top of the rest of the day. The others looked to be from the tail end of well-wishers, probably spurred by notices of the hearing that were in the *Prophet*. He stacked those neatly as well and left them on the sideboard. The box of half-eaten Honeydukes still rested there as well. He carried it to the table and proceeded to eat all but two of them.

In the evening a barn owl arrived with a letter from Snape. It was short. *Assumed that was going to come up. Registration paperwork at Ministry already.*

"Could've told me," Harry complained to no one, but he felt acutely relieved.

An hour later another arrived--a long-eared owl with an orange face. It insisted on handing the letter directly to his hand personally before flapping back out the window. The letter was from Shacklebolt. It read: *Tonks has been out in the field all afternoon, but she told me to be sure to tell you the verdict. The full Wizengamot found Rothschild guilty on most of the charges and sentenced him to seven and a half. --Kingsley.* Harry frowned lightly and wondered what the result would have been if he hadn't been protecting Draco. Seven and a half years was a long time, though, and Harry would be a well-practiced Auror by then. Harry considered with twisted relish the notion that Rick might come back and try something.

\* \* \*

Friday was slow arriving, but it finally did, and Harry reported to the Ministry twenty minutes early, since he could not just sit at home waiting for the clock hands to move. Kali had picked up his anxiety and bounded about his room in a maddening manner as he wrote a quick note explaining his upcoming day to Snape. Harry, rather than cage her for the

afternoon, had simply shut the door to his room. That may turn out to have been a huge mistake, but as he stood in the corridor waiting to find out his assignment, he didn't care.

Kerry Ann arrived five minutes later, looking equally eager and decked out in very stylish Muggle clothes. Between the parties and being out on patrol, Harry was thinking he should save his allowance and start buying some nicer things to wear.

"The moment we've all been waiting for," Kerry Ann announced when she stepped up beside him.

"Definitely."

"Potter, what are you on about? Haven't you been involved in just about everything up 'til now?"

"Not really," countered Harry, who was just checking that he indeed had his wand and observing that he still had not gotten the damage on it repaired from his fight with Malfoy senior at Hogwarts. He polished it up a bit on the corner of his cloak before stashing it away.

"Not really," she echoed mockingly. She shook her head as if to clear it and came to a kind of attention as the office door opened before them.

Tonks and Shacklebolt seemed a little surprised to find them there. Shacklebolt chuckled and said, "Well, not lacking in eagerness; that's good. Kerry Ann, you're with me."

Harry broke out in a grin, then bit his lip to quell it. "Come on then, Champ," Tonks said, tugging him down the corridor by his sleeve. The unexpected thrill of getting to shadow Tonks was piling onto his excitement, leaving him exuberant and very aware of her fingers on his arm. By the lifts, Tonks paused and said, "Okay, some ground rules. . . are you listening?"

Harry, taken aback, said, "Yes. Don't I look like I am?"

"You look a little far away, frankly."

"No, I'm listening," Harry insisted as he checked yet again that he had his wand in his pocket. "I'm really happy to have drawn you to shadow," he explained a little shyly.

Tonks put her fists on her hips and stared at him. "Harry," she began in a disbelieving voice. "I drew *you*. Everyone wanted *you* as their shadow. There are old, semi-retired Auror's here like Mad-eye, who don't have to take any apprentices out, who joined the draw for you."

"Oh."

Tonks tugged on her ear and, shifting to an official tone, said, "Rules for tonight: first off, no taking action without my *specific* instruction. Got that?" At Harry's nod, she went on, "Now, obviously if things got very bad and I was out of action, then you'd be *expected* to act on your own, but that isn't going to happen. Second, I do *all* the talking. Third, I want you always just behind my left shoulder--so I know where you are without looking--at all times, keeping it zipped."

Harry's brow lowered but he nodded to that as well and, just in case, didn't comment.

"Let's see. Those are the most important. Well, let's stick with three rules for now. Any questions before we head out?" When Harry hesitated in thought, Tonks chided, "You can talk right now, Harry."

"Where are we going tonight?"

"Liverpool. We're just going to circulate and ask a few questions of some people I haven't followed up with lately."

Harry nodded and as they rode up in the lift, regretted that it wasn't Devon where he might hear something about Avery. After arriving by Floo powder in the hearth of an unused room at a place called the Black Horse, Tonks took something out of her pocket and made a note on it. Harry wanted to know what it was, but didn't want to demonstrate that he couldn't be silent for all of two minutes. Tonks then Apparated both of them to an alleyway where she lightly kicked the sole of a homeless man sleeping there.

"Shafer, hey there," she shouted. Harry quickly moved to stand just off her left shoulder, which was the best place anyway, as it was upwind.

The man raised blood stained eyes to squint suspiciously at the two of them. There was an empty bottle clutched in his left hand, partially covered by a heavily wrinkled paper bag.

"Whatcha wan'?"

"Seen anything bad in the last week?"

"Las' week?" he guffawed. "You think I remem'r the las' week?"

"Seen anything bad?" she repeated plainly.

"Huh, le's see . . ." he gave this due consideration. "Freddie was complain'n abou' gettin' hovered without 'is consent. You know how they is."

"Okay, we'll check that out. Thanks." She strode purposefully away, Harry following quickly behind.

"Can I ask a question?" Harry prompted when they were a distance away but not yet to the street.

Tonks stopped so fast, Harry ran into her. "Sure."

"So, what about Freddie?"

"Harry, there isn't anyone named Freddie."

"Oh." Harry considered that while looking over a stack of broken pallets beside a wide door. "So, why were you trying to get anything out of him?"

"Because no one assumes he sees anything, but he has eyes."

"Why didn't you just Legilimize him then rather than . . ."

"I did."

"Oh."

"Rule four, no make that rule twenty-five--I'll fill in four through twenty-four later--if I go all glaze-eyed while talking with someone like him, just carry me off and get a shot of something; I'll come right around."

Harry blinked at that. "All right," he answered uncertainly.

"Any more questions?" she asked, hands on hips, although she didn't seem impatient otherwise.

Harry shook his head and followed when she turned to exit the alley. He was thinking that Tonks had not previously seemed like the rules sort. This kept him from having to wonder how he could have been so confused about what Aurors did.

They circled downtown, talking to various witches and wizards slouched in tucked-away smoky pubs or living above hidden little shops all around the city. Hours later when they returned to the Ministry, Harry with a serious yawn upon stepping into the quiet atrium, it felt like a wasted evening.

"Did we learn anything?" Harry had to ask as they took the lift down to the offices.

"Nothing specific. It's all patterns, Harry. Sometimes, someone will say something, usually in normal conversation, that will make some ongoing mystery fall into place, or sometimes we'll be having a meeting here and I'll remember some otherwise meaningless observation that helps someone else's investigation. You have to keep your ear to the ground. Otherwise, every investigation would have to start from scratch."

She yawned as well as she dropped into her desk chair. With her head tilted way back to look at the ceiling, she said, "Go get us coffees. I have to show you how to fill out reports."

It was late, nearly one in the morning, when Harry finally made it home. Winky came up from the kitchen to ask if he wanted dinner. Harry's stomach, which had only received a random bite or two of poor pub food all evening, readily agreed to a real meal. Before eating, though, he desperately needed to shower off the city grim. He then fetched Kali who, other than taking a liking to clawing the old curtains, had not done any real damage while left to herself.

As he ate, Harry hoped that field work got a little more interesting, otherwise being an Auror might bore him to death--if it didn't wear his feet to the bone first. Kali curled up on the next chair and slept, bored by these thoughts as well.

\* \* \*

Harry began living life through letters. That weekend they poured in, including a Muggle post one from his Polly Evans. The letter was full of standard hopes that he was faring well and it closed with an invitation to visit anytime. Harry folded that one and put it in the photo album, folded between the last two pages.

Ginny's letter was full of excitement over the new school year, for which Harry was glad; he didn't think she should waste it, academically or otherwise.

Tara wrote a short note saying she was taking a trip to Brussels for her job and expected to be gone a few weeks, at least. Harry sighed aloud, making Kali raise her head curiously; Tara had said she was planning to avoid that assignment. A few angry retorts came to mind and he was tempted to send them off in a letter, but resisted. He really should be more patient, after all, they had only been out a few times, and unlike his school days when that was quite significant, he was learning that it no longer necessarily was.

Penelope wrote as well, a letter that read like a lighthearted diary entry about her job and her family. Harry found himself again pulling out parchment and explaining his dating predicaments to her. Doing so made him feel hopeful that something could be resolved.

Alone now, Harry became diligent about things he noticed needing to be done around the house. That weekend he weeded the front garden and actually went clothes shopping. Since he had to go into London to exchange Galleons for pounds, Harry went to Marks and Sparks. Although the mannequins looked fashionable, Harry found that the racks of those particular clothes put him off. He ended up with three white shirts and two brown trousers--brown because otherwise he had headed all the way into London to buy Hogwarts uniforms.

He met Ron and Hermione at Hermione's flat for dinner. Hermione had apparently taken past critiques of boxed pasta to heart, because she had attempted a roast this time. Ron sawed away gamely at his piece and declared that it tasted great as he jawed away at a bite.

Hermione frowned at her plate. "I didn't imagine it would turn out so tough. How does your mum do it?"

"Slow roasting," Ron said, still chewing.

"Is that it?" Hermione asked. "I didn't have time. I thought if I turned the oven up a bit I could quicken things."

Harry cut a very small piece to avoid chewing. The potatoes were good and he said so. Hermione sighed. "At least we'll be eating out in Spain."

"Spain?" Harry prompted.

"Mione and I are going on holiday, you didn't hear?" Ron said in excitement. When Harry shook his head, Ron said, "I've always wanted to go to Spain. We're leaving next weekend."

"Sounds great," Harry said, finding odd bits of jealousy rising up, but he forced them down.

Hermione said, "It will be good to escape the parents."

"Haven't you?" Harry asked.

"Somehow, no," Hermione replied, sounding mystified. "So, how are things with you, Harry? Getting by on your own?"

Happy to have a chance to explain his multiple friends-who-were-girls dilemma, Harry went on in a rambling manner about Tara and Elizabeth, ending with, "Tara has been really hard to get through to since the Rick incident. She says she feels bad."

After a pause Ron said, as though stating the obvious, "She feels guilty."

"Apparently," Harry agreed. Ron and Hermione shared a look. "What?" Harry demanded.

His friends proceeded to have an eye-to-eye, silent argument about who would explain. Finally, Ron said, "Harry, you remember after Sirius fell through the veil?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, not sure where this was going and a little wary of the direction.

"Do you remember how guiltily you felt? You let it overwhelm everything. Well," he thought farther, "that's when you weren't blaming Snape. But anyway, you . . . were *really* hard to get through to."

"What Ron is trying to say," Hermione stated in her factual voice, "is that you have to be patient. Some things people have to work out for themselves."

"Oh," Harry said. He didn't feel like reliving those memories all that closely, even to glean anything helpful for dealing with Tara. "You'd think she'd get over it. None of it is her fault."

"Yeah, exactly," Ron said. "Like that."

Harry gave him a disturbed look and Ron returned to sawing his meat into too-large bites.

\* \* \*

Harry spent most of his evenings studying in the library, his books and papers slowly taking over the room. As he was trying to organize things, he found the purple book still on the desk where he himself had placed it with the intent of reading it the next chance he got. He was beginning to wonder if it didn't have some kind of repelling charm, because he never went near it. That thought alone made him to pick it up and flip through it while taking a seat on the lounge.

He almost immediately knew why he hadn't read it earlier; it made him feel a bit queasy and not particularly better-prepared. Phrases like *emotive cleaved pathways to the dark plane* and *mentally distressed visions of land crustacea and amphibia hybrid animates* left him little desire to read on. He pressed on for ten pages in any event, his mind wandering to other things



constantly as he did so. The text was full of strong warnings and admitted guesses about what it called Interstitial Magical Forces. With a heavy sigh, Harry closed the book and put it back on the small desk with a dull thud.

He clasped his hands behind his head and stared at the over-full bookcases on the other side of the room. He wished Snape were there. In his last owl his guardian had mentioned that he would be home in two weeks time. The clock ticked loudly in the hall, reminding him how very quiet it was.

\* \* \*

At the Ministry, Harry and Vineet sat on one side of the workout room behind a temporary floating curtain while Aaron and Kerry Ann worked on the other. They had a crate of discarded objects from around the Ministry, including old dented or even melted tea kettles, broken quills, and something that looked suspiciously like shackles, but they would have to go on a Troll they were so large.

"How about a yellow teapot?" Harry suggested. Vineet nodded and tapped the kettle with his wand to add that illusion. "And the shackles?"

Talking low also, he said, "Perhaps change the size down to human?" When Harry shrugged, Vineet tapped the heavy rings with his wand but they only shrank marginally. The Indian frowned and stiffened. Harry added the illusion himself, brushing off his fellow's failure to do so. He felt bad, but didn't let it show at all.

"Let's leave half of them normal to confuse them," Harry suggested. "We're finished," he announced to the room.

They tested each other's skill at illusion negation by exchanging crates. Aaron and Kerry Ann watched in amusement as they removed each item. Harry pulled out a hot pink, drastically oversized tea cozy and complained, "No double illusions."

"It isn't," Kerry Ann countered.

"Oh." He held it up to Vineet. "What do you think?"

Vineet held it at arm's length and considered the quilted, floppy thing. He tapped it with his wand once and it turned into a standard chair pad, albeit a hot pink one.

"Brilliant," Harry happily said. "That's one for us."

"Darn," Aaron complained.

In the end he and Vineet won handily. "It's not fair," Kerry Ann complained, "they left most of theirs untransformed."

"Nothing wrong with that," Rodgers stated. "Clever of them, I'd have said."

Harry grinned and gave his partner a wink, but Vineet still sported a faint frown. He had to know, Harry thought, that he wasn't meeting the trainer's expectations. Harry's smile faded as he took out a blank parchment and quill for their review session. He liked Vineet and didn't want to see him go, but didn't know how to prevent that.

\* \* \*

Friday arrived with no field training scheduled and with his friends on holiday. Harry considered looking up some other friends. He went up to his room and opened his notebook. As he flipped to the pages of addresses, he passed his old notes about Avery.

Friends forgotten, he went and grabbed his broom, stood in the hallway a long time deep in thought, then instead put it away and went out back to the motorbike. With its cover removed it gleamed in the low morning light. Harry packed up a lunch, put on his warmest cloak and rabbit-lined gloves, and skillfully took off from the small, back garden.

Harry ran the machine flat out so that it only required three hours to arrive on the cliffs above Torquay. He parked the bike and looked down at the lush trees and grey sand of the beach. The wind was cold off the sea and Harry thought it just as well Ron and Hermione were in Spain rather than one of the blanket-wrapped, picnicking couples on the shore.

He rolled into town with the roar knob out just enough to be convincing. As he parked it beside the railing of the quay itself, he realized he hadn't thought this through. Well, he would just have to do as Tonks showed him--wander around and talk to people.

Within an hour Harry discovered that nearly everyone there was from somewhere else and many asked him questions about his motorbike that he couldn't answer. The explanation that he had inherited it seemed to satisfy even the most ardent admirers and further explanation that the departed godfather who had left it to him was too dear to sell the bike took care of the few who seemed ready on the spot to purchase it.

Parking the bike back where he started, Harry wandered into a game room where a few otherwise difficult looking teens were playing. Two younger ones, who were dressed less nicely than the others around town, were playing together on a machine that had four colored sets of knobs and buttons. The little blips of light on the screen took a minute to resolve into a little green figure shooting arrows like Robin the Hood and a brown Norseman throwing tiny axes. Large numbers of small trolls were pouring into a corridor on the screen and at the same rate being killed and disappearing. This equilibrium continued rather a long time.

"Behind you!" the boy shouted, startling Harry, who just resisted turning around as the warning was for the girl whose figure spun to shoot arrows of light at two trolls sneaking up from the other side. Eventually the trolls were overcome and the screen scrolled as the figures ran through a doorway. The boy wiped his hands on his pants during the pause.

"Do you live here?" Harry asked.

"Got a pound coin?" the boy asked.

The girl didn't answer so Harry assumed he himself was being addressed. "Yep."

"Put it in then," the boy insisted. The slot that ate coins was lit and Harry slipped in the pound. The machine made an electronic swallowing noise. The boy asked, "Want to join? You can be the knight."

"I'll watch." After a pause he said, "You get a lot of tourists here."

Some grumbling. "That's all we get here. Including you," the boy pointed out.

"No natives you'd rather not have around?" Harry teased, fishing.

"Sure, loads," the girl finally piped in. The figures were opening a treasure on the screen and distributing weapons including something labeled *Magic Potion*. Harry thought maybe this game looked like fun after all. More trolls died in vast numbers. The electronic sounds became urgent and the boy swore. He then said, "Got another pound?" Having not found anyone else to ask questions of, Harry fished in his pocket found another Muggle coin amongst the Sickles.

"Thanks," the boy said. The music became happier. "You looking to move here or something?"

"Something," Harry said. Even after following Tonks around for uncountable hours, he found himself uncertain how to make requests that didn't give away his motive. By no means did he want to warn Avery that he was looking for him. In the end he spent half of an hour and two more pounds, making small talk and bantering with the rather fowl-mouthed youngsters.

The electronic quest was still going strong as Harry made ready to depart. "Is there an evil wizard at the end?" he asked.

"There is no end," the girl replied flatly, hands never ceasing on the colorful plastic knob and buttons.

That evening, tired from his long journey, Harry heard a knock and glanced at the clock, surprised that anyone would call so late. He went down and found Candide at the door. "Hi," Harry said. "Come on in." As she stepped into the entryway and removed her heavy cloak, Harry pointed out, "You can use the Floo if you wish."

"I didn't know if you'd mind."

"I don't mind, but Severus isn't here this weekend, you know," Harry informed her.

"I know. I wanted to talk to you." Her voice had an unusual flatness to it.

Harry led her inside to the dining room and stoked up the fire to warm the room. "I'll tell Winky to bring some tea?"

"Thank you," she said as she settled at the table.

Harry returned from the kitchen and sat across from her. The fire felt good on his legs as it roared in the hearth. "What do you want to talk about?"

She frowned and hesitated. "Has Severus said anything to you . . . about, uh, me and . . . the future?"

Harry thought a moment to be certain, but then shook his head. With a sigh she sat back and clasped her hands. Harry said, "That doesn't mean much. He rarely says much of anything personal, really."

"No, he doesn't," she agreed with a dismayed laugh.

Winky came in with tea and a bowl of bonbons, bowed and departed. Harry poured for both Candide and himself. "What do you want to know?" he prompted, wondering about the mega-chocolate treats and the expected need for them.

She laughed lightly again, but it sounded defeatist. "I've been sort of expecting . . . hoping perhaps, that he's thinking . . . you know." Harry blinked at her before shaking his head that he still didn't understand. She clarified, "That perhaps he was thinking soon of asking me to marry him."

"Oh." Harry stirred more sugar into his teacup. "He hasn't said anything about that."

Yet again, she sighed. Harry asked, "Is there a reason you don't just ask him?"

"If you ask a man too soon. . ." She waved her hand dismissively and added knowledgeably, "It isn't good. Can derail everything. Even if it might have worked out in the end."

"Oh." Harry ate a bonbon.

Long moments of silence later, she confided, "My real problem is I don't know how to answer anyway."

"Er, why not?" Harry managed to return, feeling well out of his depth but having to stick with it.

She looked a little sad then. "This woman I work with, Roberta, she says the most horrid things about Severus." Candide winced and went on, "Started bringing in old *Prophet* clippings when I didn't believe her. Not that the *Prophet* is the most stellarly factual publication."

Harry straightened in his chair and added yet more sugar to his tea, sipped it, then added more tea, just for something to do. He was leaving her hanging, but he didn't know what to say.

Finally, she went on, looking pained, "I'm trusting you, Harry. You, of all people, have entrusted Severus with your well-being. I can't put that together with what Roberta insists . . . "

A little sharp, Harry asked, "So what does Roberta insist?"

Candide hesitated, "That at Hogwarts, he . . . practiced dark wizardry. That he was friends with known servants of Voldemort--wizards who in fact died battling Aurors or in the final battle." Her eyes were searching Harry's face, although he wasn't giving anything up, his flat look may have been sufficient.

"Harry?" she prompted, pleading.

Harry placed his cup and saucer back on the tray. "You have to speak with Severus about this."

"Why won't you talk to me?" she demanded.

Harry exhaled hard, fishing for a good reason. "Because everything I have is hearsay." This was a bit of a lie, but it sounded good; it was a word the legal books used a lot. "You need to talk to him."

Looking downcast, she said, "So you're saying it *is* true. I don't get this."

Harry stood and repeated firmly, "I'm saying, you need to talk to him, not to me."

She grimaced lightly and stood as well, cueing Harry to go and fetch her cloak. "Take the Floo from here," he suggested.

After hooking her cloak around her neck, she dropped her arms heavily and gazed at him. "I trusted you, Harry," she said accusingly.

"I didn't tell you to do that," Harry retorted, feeling anger now, at the way things were, more than her insinuations specifically. Harry went on, "Severus is very important to me, but I can't be his proxy when you have accusations to level. I'll defend him as an adoptive father all day, but I wasn't at Hogwarts when your friend and my father were and my father died before I could possibly ask him any questions about Severus." An unwelcome desperation was trying to take hold of Harry. He fought it off as she considered that.

"He'll be around next weekend, right?" she asked, sounding unhappy.

"Yes. That's what he told me."

"I'll come back then," she stated and, moments later, she was gone.

\* \* \*

Hunting Avery lost its appeal for Harry that week. He had been plotting how to get to Devon for a few hours and now when he thought about it, it seemed likely to be fruitless. He threw himself instead into working on Sirius' case. During a long lunch break one day, he pulled all of the related files and borrowed a desk in the Auror's office to spread them out and compose a summary as Tonks has suggested when Harry had pressed her about how he should start.

Staring at the old files, clippings, interviews, evidence photos, and wanted posters, Harry felt that this was the most important thing he should be doing. It wasn't right that his godfather, of all people, was still officially considered Voldemort's associate.

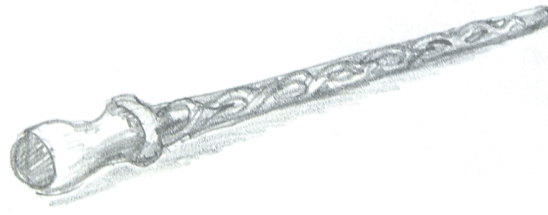
Harry was just starting to jot down a few notes when the owner of the desk returned. Shacklebolt looked over Harry's shoulder with interest. "What are you up to?"

"I want to clear Sirius' name. You knew him. Don't you think he should be?"

"I have to admit I hadn't thought about it before. But as I do so now, I certainly think it should."

Harry collected up the files and moved to Tonks' desk. By the end of lunch, if nothing else, he felt he had a much better feel for how to read case files as well as how to read various Aurors' handwriting. Moody's was definitely the worst, a shaky bit of work that was always crooked at a thirty-degree angle, even when horizontal lines were available as a guide.

In the file room, with Moody's handwriting on his mind, Harry quickly restowed the documents in their proper drawers, and even quicker, headed down to *Portnoy-Pterido* and pulled his own file. It wasn't the right file though, not the one Rodgers had with his apprenticeship paperwork. The one in the drawer here was from his hearing for underage wizardry and misusing magic in the presence of a Muggle. It looked just like one of the other case files: coversheet with basic description; notes from investigators, including Umbridge. It was a thin file at least, he considered as he put it away. Unlike all the others, which were heavy and thick with repeated investigations.



## Chapter 63 -- Haunted by the Past

That Friday, Harry and Kerry Ann again waited in the corridor outside the Aurors' office. They were both a little more confident today, their eagerness tempered. Tonks and Shacklebolt came and collected each of them.

Shacklebolt said, "You want this one?" to Tonks as he held out a parchment.

"Either one," Tonks waved the sheet she had. "Harry's familiar with Mungo's, right Harry?"

"I've been there," Harry replied, mystified by the question.

"I'll take the hexing report then," Shacklebolt said. "Come along, Ms. Kerry Ann, we have a real assignment this afternoon." They stepped down to a lift.

"Do *we* have a real assignment?" Harry asked hopefully.

Tonks nodded. "We do, an easy one. Can you Apparate to St. Mungo's?"

Harry nodded and a moment later they were in the incoming area in the cellar. Harry followed Tonks, careful to stay just to the left of her back all the way, even up the lift to the fourth floor. He began to recognize where he was when they reached Ward 49.

"I'm looking for Healer Strout," Tonks said to the first official-looking person they encountered. The small old witch with a volunteer's badge on her robes gestured that they follow her and at the end of the long corridor she knocked on an office door.

When the door opened, a witch working at a desk immediately looked up and said, "Ah, they did send someone. Come in. Come in. Have a seat." Tonks led the way in and closed the door. Harry took one of the old straight-backed chairs before the desk, looking around at the colorfully painted office. The shelves beside him held a collection of strangely and even impossibly shaped glass vials and bottles, some that turned in on themselves so that one could never pour anything into them. When he looked back to Healer Strout, she was gazing at him, befuddled. "The situation doesn't warrant such, uh, attention does it?" she asked, looking between him and Tonks.

Tonks, who had toned herself down to grey-blue hair and blue robes, said dismissively, "Mr. Potter here is just following me around, pay him no mind."

Strout thought that a very odd suggestion, based on her glazed look. "All right," she agreed anyway, sounding confused.

Tonks had a little notebook out. "So, tell us what happened."

Strout clasped her hands before her and said, "Well, at around five this morning Mr. Lockhart simply walked out."

"What?" Harry blurted, suddenly very alert. "Sorry," he immediately apologized to Tonks.

"Familiar with Mr. Lockhart, are you?" Tonks asked him.

"Just a bit," Harry returned darkly.

Strout spoke into the gap after that. "Note, that we normally don't allow our patients to just walk out. There are spells to keep them in and a night nurse. The night guard downstairs, as well as the greetingwitch on duty at the time, said he seemed to be a perfectly normal late visitor who just needed directions out."

Harry thought of commenting about how odd that was, but kept quiet. Tonks scratched out some notes. "Can I see his records?" The Healer handed over a file that was lying out on her desk. "Did he have any visitors in the last week, last month?" Tonks asked as she flipped through the thick folder.

"The staff said he hasn't had any visitors for months. *Witch Weekly* sent a reporter for some sort of *Where are they now?* article in June. That is the last anyone remembers."

Tonks handed the file back. "You deemed it suspicious?"

"This kind of sudden recovery after this much time is very unusual, and the hospital director remembered him as having an unsavory past. Although I've always considered him charmingly harmless."

Tonks stood. "Let's take a look at where he's been staying."

They followed Healer Strout down to the ward. Inside, the faint scent of deteriorating lethargy made Harry breath shallowly. Tonks looked around and under the one empty bed. Posters of Lockhart, yellowed at the edges, waved from the wall behind it. Harry watched Tonks look around, crouching to look under the bed when she did. Tonks then attempted to interview the occupant of the next bed, who apparently believed he was a broomstick, because he would suddenly stiffen, put his arm up, go completely deaf and would make a noise like rushing air, which Harry assumed meant he was flying somewhere.

While Tonks worked at this, Harry looked down to the end of the ward where the Longbottoms had been last time. Mrs. Longbottom, looking far older than Harry remembered, was sitting on her same bed, holding something tan and fuzzy, stroking it methodically. The bed beside hers held a curled-up figure who didn't stir. Harry wanted to go down there and say hello but he remained where he was, diligent for the moment, just off Tonk's left shoulder.

Tonks finally gave up and seeing the blank gaze of the other nearby bed's occupant, sighed. She jotted down a few notes and then stared at the notebook in thought.

Harry asked, "Do you mind if I go down to the end?"

Tonks' gaze turned to the last bed's occupant, who appeared to be gazing at them, or perhaps just through them. "Think she can answer questions?"

"No," Harry admitted. When Tonks shrugged, he went and stood at the foot of the last bed. Mrs. Longbottom didn't look up at him. "Hello," Harry tried, feeling pained by the scene. He could see now that she held a small stuffed lion and, without looking at it, was brushing its fuzzy mane back.

Tonks came quietly up beside him and they shared a sad look. When Harry turned back, Mrs. Longbottom was holding the lion out to him. "No, you keep it. Thank you, though." She held it out another moment before tucking it close, gaze still very distant.

On the way out, Harry tried to shake his glum mood. Tonks was quiet as well.

Back in the offices Tonks pulled out a fresh parchment and asked Harry to go check for an existing file. Harry went down the quiet corridor to the file room. The lights were down so he took up a lamp from beside the door and pulled out the drawer *Liechtenstein-Lovey*. Sure enough, there was a *Lockhart*, *Gilderoy* there, a relatively thin one. Harry perused it on the way back. It held an identity sheet, a letter from Dumbledore, and a mental health assessment that ran five pages. The letter from Dumbledore was in pretty couched language.

*Mr. Lockhart, it seems, has been deceiving the public about his skills as a dark arts defender. He is reported by two of our students to have made threats of the most heinous kind in an attempt to perpetuate this deception. I expect that his current state renders his previous actions null and void.*

Tonks read over the pages. "Who were the two students, do you know?" she asked, sounding strangely like she did not expect him to know.

"Ron and I," Harry replied.

She sat back and perkily asked, "Oh, well, do tell."

"You don't know what happened when the Chamber of Secrets was opened?" Harry asked, surprised.

She glanced at the report. "Ninety three is before my time, although this is sounding familiar from stories people in the Order used to tell about Malfoy. Something about a cursed diary, right?"

Harry proceeded to explain what had happened and how Lockhart was going to let Ginny die and wipe his and Ron's memories. The memory made Harry more angry now than he remembered being at the time.

"Well, no wonder you don't like the guy," she commented, making more notes. She flipped her battered quill back and forth over her chin thoughtfully. "I don't know what to think of his disappearance. It doesn't seem dastardly, just odd." She proceeded to write up a report for their visit to St. Mungo's and when she finished that started another one on the events at Hogwarts. Harry felt very odd being formally interviewed after all this time. The memories of it came back clearly, though, after he started in on them.

When she ran out of questions she finished filling out the forms, dating, spelling, and organizing them into their folders, which she handed to Harry to file.

When he returned he said, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"What is that thing you have in your pocket? You write on it when we arrive somewhere it seems."

"Oh. Just this." She pulled out a small battered slate tablet framed with wood. After more fishing around in her pocket, she pulled out a white stick. "I use it to check in. I'm pretty bad about that but if I say when I arrive in a new city, they lay off me about it. I can also use it to sound an alarm by drawing a star on it followed by a message." Quieter, she leaned closer and said, "Usually when I have an emergency, I don't have two hands free to write out a message about it."

It was six; too late, Tonks thought to head out again on patrol. Harry was a little reluctant to go home, but he said good-night rather than ask what she was doing that night, as he was sorely tempted to, and collected his things.

At home it was raining hard. Harry stared at the streetlight-highlighted droplets on the window and wondered exactly when Candide planned to visit. Snape hadn't returned yet, his owl indicated it would be long after dinner, but not exactly when. Harry now thought he should have stayed in London, it would be better than sitting here in his room feeling doom settling around the house. His mood was topped off by Snape's note that morning saying that he hoped Harry was free to visit his mum's coven on Sunday.

The rushing sound of the Floo emanated from downstairs. Harry methodically put his things away and stepped down. Snape was in the drawing room, exchanging some files from a small trunk. His cloak was tossed over the chair and Harry caught a whiff of Hogwarts castle on it.

"Good evening, Harry," Snape greeted him.



The door knocker sounded. "I'll get that," Harry said.

Candide was at the door, very wet. "Come in." He didn't repeat that she could use the hearth. He led her into the dining room where the fire was already burning high. "Wait here, let me break him into this."

This startled her. "Thanks. But don't ruin it for me, if you can help it," she pleaded lightly.

Harry rubbed his hair as he walked back to the drawing room. "Uh, Severus . . ." he started, but then stalled. Snape's brow furrowed as he turned, gazing at his charge through his hair. "What is it? Who is at the door?"

"Candide." Snape stepped toward the hall, but Harry restrained him. "She stopped by last weekend," Harry explained quietly before he closed the door and silenced it. "She had a lot of questions that Roberta brought up. Ones I told her she should ask you." Harry regretted now not having owed Snape with at least a warning. Snape moved slowly as he took that in. His hand dropped to the chair back beside him by measure and eventually gripped it. Harry went on, "She thinks you may be considering marriage—"

"What?"

Harry flinched at the tone and realized he had blundered in where he had been specifically warned not to go. "She just wanted to know if that might be true," he attempted to recover. Snape looked essentially appalled. "That's what brought up the other questions," Harry went on quickly, mentally chiding himself.

Snape's eyes dropped to the floor before he straightened and said, "Well, let's see what they are."

"Do you want me to talk to her?" Harry asked before Snape reached the door.

"No. I'll do it." He sounded fatalistic.

Harry trailed a distance behind Snape. He felt he should follow because he couldn't simply go up to his room and hope for the best. In the dining room Candide sat with hot cocoa, which she put down when they appeared. "Severus," she greeted him.

Snape stepped in and leaned on the back of the chair across from her. "Harry informs me that you have questions you wish to have answered." Harry frowned at the tone that sounded similar to one used with his House students.

She looked as though she regretted being there and Harry wondered if he should have just tried to explain, but he hadn't wanted to have a hand in convincing her to break up with Snape. Candide asked, "You remember me mentioning Roberta before?"

"Yes," Snape replied. Harry marveled that he could put that much derision into a single, small word.

Candide rubbed her hands together, glanced at Harry, who managed a look of sympathy, and finally said, "I need to hear you say a few things aren't true."

"Such as?" queried Snape after a delay. The two of them appeared to be opponents suddenly, rather than lovers. A painful transition to observe, making Harry drop his gaze to his toes and just listen.

With feeling Candide said, "I'm trying to preserve something here; at least help a little, Severus."

Coldly, Snape returned, "You've already made up your mind."

"I don't want to believe these things, but why would the *Prophet* print . . ." She winced. With more certainty, she asked, "Were you friends with someone named Nott when you were in school?"

"Yes."

"You were friends with wizards who ended up serving Voldemort? Including one who killed himself rather than be captured during the final battle?"

"Yes."

"Is there ANYTHING that isn't true?" she demanded, distraught. More quietly, she said, "I've spent months defending you." Gesturing, she said, "You have Harry Potter, of all people, with you . . . how can . . . ?" She frowned and challenged, "How?"

Snape held completely still for a long time, staring her down. Finally, he said, "Potter, you've been taught a Protean Charm correct, and the Indiceffector?"

Harry froze, skin chilling. They had covered that spell but had only practiced it very briefly on pre-charmed ink blotters with hidden messages. He didn't respond.

Snape turned his dark, hooded gaze back over his shoulder at him. "Potter?"

"I won't use it."

"Are you an Auror or not?" Snape snarled at him, as nasty as Harry had ever heard him.

With a hard swallow Harry shook his head. "Not if you ask that of me." When Snape huffed in disgust, Harry insisted, "It isn't who you are."

"What do you know about who I am?" Snape demanded, although he sounded like he really didn't want to be arguing.

Harry stepped over beside him, desperately searching for the right thing to say. Across the table, Candide stood transfixed with faint horror. Snape rubbed his left arm inside his sleeve where his mark would be if it were revealed with the spell he was demanding of Harry.

"I don't get it," Candide muttered, pained.

"Don't get what?" Snape taunted her. "You've been in denial," he pointed accusingly. "You have wanted to be."

Her mouth worked before she said, "You weren't . . . aren't really . . . ?"

"Really what?" Snape demanded. Candide appeared very sad then. Her eyes took in Harry without reaction. In a low voice Snape mocked, "You can't even say it."

Her jaw ground then before she angrily asked, "All right, then. Were you really a Death Eater?"

"Yes," Snape returned, sounding cruel.

Her fiery anger vanished again, "How could you?" she whispered in pain. "How could *you*?" she demanded of Harry.

Snape appeared to take more of an affront at the second. "Let me talk to her alone, Severus." Harry urged, taking him by the arm and tugging in the direction of the door. "Please," Harry pleaded.

Snape tugged his arm away and stalked off. In the distance a door slammed.

"I trusted you," Candide whispered accusingly.

"So keep trusting me or make up your own mind in the first place," Harry countered angrily. "I don't appreciate you hurting him," he went on, pointing at her to emphasize.

"Hurting him?" she mocked. "What could hurt a Death Eater?" she asked, mouth twisting at the words. "Merlin, to think I was hoping he'd want to marry . . ." She cut herself off and appeared rather sad.

Harry leaned over the table and stared her down. "You don't understand anything," he spat at her. "About him or me."

"Clearly," she returned, eyes bright with unshed tears. "Bloody Merlin," she whispered, grabbed up her wet cloak in a bundle, and brushed past him.

Harry couldn't let it go at that. He followed her out to the garden and into the rain, which pounded straight down in grey-brown sheets. In the road he grabbed her sleeve and pulled her around. Following her, he had prepped his story about Snape healing him because he understood, but in the wet road, reflecting the headlights of the passing cars, what he said was, "I thought you cared about him. What, were you just pretending?" He was furious, he realized, perhaps dangerously so, because the reflected headlights looked green now, rather than blue-white.

"I can't keep caring for someone like that," she said retorted. "I don't know what kind of spell he has you under."

"None!" Harry snapped angrily. "If you only knew," he muttered, forced to stop by what might have been a chittering sound, although over the torrential rain it was hard to tell. The swirling water in the road appeared to hold eel-like shadows that moved against the reflections on the surface.

"Harry!" she shouted in alarm. He had stepped backward into the road as a car approached and had to leap back to the relative safety of the gravel at the same time the headlights swerved.

"Go," he ordered in fear, not sure what was real around him and what was rain, not sure what might find passage through his anger from the dark plane as the purple book implied could happen. "Go!" He insisted, and she hurried off with a worried glance back. In it, Harry saw great concern and it made him feel rather badly about how messed up things had gotten.

Back inside, Harry realized how very wet he was. Snape stood silhouetted at the end of the entryway, face in shadow. "Sorry," Harry muttered as he peeled off his dripping jumper and hung it up without bothering to ring it out. Control came only with putting the last few minutes aside and he did that, with effort. With nothing else to say, he stalked by Snape, leaving puddles of rain in his wake on the stone floor.

\* \* \*

Breakfast was the quietest Harry could remember. Snape ate sparingly. Candles lit the table because of the heavy grey sky outside. Harry's circling thoughts kept generating arguments he should have used with Candide. Perhaps he would owl her after Snape departed. On the other hand she seemed to have ruined his weekend with Snape and that made him think it not worth the bother.

Around noon Harry carried the wizard chess set into the drawing room where Snape sat working his way through a pile of post. "Would you like a game?"

Snape looked only at the board in Harry's hands, already set for play. "Perhaps. When I have finished with this."

"All right." Harry hesitated as he searched for words that were out of reach. Earlier in the week he had had all kinds: about his first field experience, about the purple book, but they didn't fit in now. He had hovered too long and forced himself to turn. Snape's voice caught him just outside the doorway, "It is all right, Harry."

Hurt anger flowed into Harry as he turned. "No, it's not. It isn't fair to you."

Snape sat silently before sighing and saying, "As you yourself have pointed out, it is impossible to make someone understand difficult events for which they were not present, no matter how familiar one is with that person otherwise." He shuffled the parchments before him with a dismissive air although it didn't look entirely convincing.

"Don't you like her?" Harry pressed, thinking of all the times, although infrequent, she had been over or Snape had gone out to meet her. "Seems like you must."

"It is no matter," Snape replied. Then after another pause, "Give me half of an hour and we can play a game."

\* \* \*

It was with a kind of dread that Harry came downstairs early the next morning. Facing the duel drag of the memory of Friday night and the prospect of a visit to Snape's mum left him unenthusiastic about the day. Snape sat at the table, however, looking pretty much himself. Harry wondered at his taking something like that in stride, or perhaps he was just too used to being treated that way.

"Still want to take the motorbike?" Harry asked, since a light drizzle was falling.

Snape stood and snidely asked, "Don't know any repelling charms, Potter?"

"I know several now, thank you very much, and I think you are reverting to speaking to me like I'm one of your students."

Snape straightened and patted Harry's arm. In a concessionary tone he said, "You can provide the charm then, and we'll take the bike."

The flight took less than an hour, even at a speed slow enough to let the charm work effectively against the oncoming mist. Harry, feeling ungenerous, put the *Roar* knob at halfway, which, in the quiet of the countryside, was rather loud. An entire contingent of the curious waited around the rose gate when they landed in a burst of damp dust and a loud thunk and clatter. Pretending that there was nothing out of the ordinary, Harry put down the stand and dismounted after Snape.

Ratta and Princess, a little taller but still rail-thin, gaped at the bike from either side of their mother. Beside her, Anita, Snape's mum, appeared more appalled than the rest, who wore wide varieties of expression. The Covenelder's voice cut through the silence. "Welcome back," she said graciously, giving Harry a wink as she towed him inside by the hand.

The furniture in the community building had been rearranged to support a group luncheon because of the rain. Fruits, most not normally in season, were already set out in bowls. Harry tried to say hello to the young girls but they were stiff and formal with him, and he suspected it wasn't his entrance. He tried crouching to talk to them, to be closer to their size, but he couldn't get more than one word answers out of them and lots of fidgety shyness, no matter the question. Their large eyes appeared almost disappointed as they took him in.

Introductions went around as everyone took a seat. Harry sat beside his guardian and across from Anita. After general small talk, Anita said, "So, Harry, rumor has it you were kidnapped."

Nearby heads snapped up at that. "You've been following the news a bit," Snape offered. "Just for our visit?"

In an unfathomable tone, Anita replied, "I was thinking it would be nice to have something to talk about with visitors for once."

"Not a rumor," Harry replied easily. "Girlfriend's former boyfriend."

Caroline quipped, "One reason not to have any men around."

"Women can be just as bad," Anita countered, making Harry wonder whether she always took opposing sides, and as well, just whom she was referring to. Harry took a deep breath and served himself more mashed potatoes, working to avoid being baited. He fervently hoped Snape did the same. Anita sighed. "Four days though. No one could find you?"

Harry tried to decide if he were just reading things in where they weren't. After further reflection he decided her tone was just a little wrong. He met her dark brown gaze levelly. In a voice that came out with far more depth than he ex-

pected to hear from himself, Harry said, "There is so much to what happened that you cannot know, especially not from reading the *Daily Prophet*, that I have to warn you that treading suggestively into it, isn't going to gain you anything but the reverse of what you are hoping for."

Beside Harry, Snape calmly put his utensils down and wiped his hands. "You need not defend me, Harry," he stated softly.

"I sat in that cold cellar hoping you would not attempt to find me, because I knew what it would take for you to do so." Harry caught Anita's shifting gaze, and clarified, "The blood spell it would take to do so."

Her gaze flickered and she started paying more attention to her plate. Beside her, the covenelder asked, "So the business of hunting dark wizards is still profitable . . . that's good," she stated cheerily as she topped up his tea with her shaky hand. "Gives you something to keep busy," she added as though discussing stamp collecting. Harry found his lips curling into a reluctant smile.

After the meal Harry tried again to draw out the two girls. He sat with them in the corner of the room while they worked at drawing with chalk on the tan tile floor. "What's that?" Harry asked Ratta.

"It's a witch on broom stick, silly," she replied. Harry cocked his head and finally saw that, glad he hadn't guessed that it was a tree and a lake.

"Do you talk to snakes much?" Princess asked, drawing one in white chalk.

"Not much call for that, really," Harry admitted. Explaining that he had last talked to Snape that way, didn't seem wise since Anita would shortly hear about it.

Princess kept up the questions. "Do you do lots of magic?"

"All the time. We practice at the Ministry nearly every day . . . hours at a time."

"Show us something," Ratta cajoled.

In another part of the room, someone had taken out some sort of homemade stringed box instrument and was apparently tuning it. The first few sounds didn't bode well. "What would you like to see?"

"Well, obliterate this, so I can try again."

"Not my snake," Princess snapped, leaning over to guard her drawing with her arms.

Harry took out his wand and carefully cleared away the purported witch. Ratta blew a few times to clear the remaining dust before starting again on a remarkably similar drawing. "Teach us a spell. A Hover spell," Ratta suggested.

"Sure," Harry said, happy to comply, happy also that they were losing their stiffness around him and being their cheerful, demanding selves. A crude wooden ruler sat on the floor. Harry moved it and demonstrated the spell a few times, showing them the flick at the end in particular that made it work. "Want to try?" He offered his wand.

"Harry!" the sharp voice of Snape came from over by the bookshelves where he stood chatting with Caroline, Anita and a few others. Snape shook his head once, very sharply. Harry, confused, withdrew his wand from Ratta's approaching grasp and with his eyes, asked for clarification from his guardian. Snape didn't respond.

"Just a second," Harry said to the girls. He stood and went over to the group. The various expressions didn't make much sense. "What's wrong?"

Softly, if not a touch stridently, Snape explained. "They do not want either of children touching that wand . . . or, more specifically, one which has been used to cast an Unforgivable curse."

Harry stared at Snape as he took that in, then looked down at the dull finish of his wand, at the gouge still marring the handle. He shrugged and stashed it in his pocket, although something inside him rebelled. "All right," he muttered, feeling strangely betrayed as well as confused.

He returned to the two girls who were adding wings to the snake to make it into a dragon. "No spells," he explained when Ratta looked at him questioningly.

"We learn them all the time," she countered, sounding confused as well.

Harry exhaled, "Not from crazed Aurors," he said, very quietly.

Ratta had good ears though. She looked up at her mother in a way that indicated she knew boundaries were being laid down and that she might chose to push them. Changing to grey chalk, she went back to adding puffball clouds around her witch and the dragon and didn't say anything for a while.

Harry was still feeling rather ambivalent when they departed. The mist had lightened, so he ran the bike flat out after making altitude; until Snape tapped him on the arm. Harry throttled back to the pace they had used outbound, but Snape tapped him again. Harry slowed farther yet, until the wind was low enough to hear over.

"What's wrong?" his guardian asked, his hand gripping Harry's shoulder harder when a gust of wind struck.

Harry stared off across the rich green quilted landscape. Cars snaked along on a major road below them. In the far distance a slice of sunlight hit a lush hillside that was free of the usual stone walls that cut up most of the landscape. Anger rose as he found words. "They think I'm stained," he said over his shoulder.

"They think your wand is," Snape countered.

"There isn't any difference. You believe it too," Harry accused, pinning down the feeling of betrayal.

Snape leaned closer and spoke normally since he was just beside Harry's ear. "By no means do I think that. I simply understand their concern and did not consider it something worth debating, unlike many other of their narrow-minded assumptions."

"It bothers me," Harry turned his head to say.

He felt rather than heard Snape sigh. Snape's free arm tightened around him reassuringly. "I don't want you to think I am not on your side, because I am. We should discuss this when it is easier to do so."

Harry throttled the bike up, forcing Snape to tighten his hold severely. His voice rang in his ear against the wind, "Do not nurse this anger all the way home, if you would."

By the time they landed and parked in the back garden, Harry felt numbly angry and still vaguely betrayed, although not by Snape, which was just as well, because his guardian was blocking the path to the back entry. "Look at me," Snape ordered. Harry grudgingly raised his gaze. "I was sharp with you--don't look away--because I have read a bit about covens of that sort and the purification rites they might have considered using had they deemed the girls in need of it."

Harry backed off on his anger and let it flow out of him as though it were water. "Oh."

"You are not soiled. Your wand, however, does have a shaded history--"

"Yeah, I just shared minds with Voldemort and see the dark plane on occasion," he snapped sarcastically.

"That . . . has nothing to do with it," Snape retorted.

Harry laughed darkly. "No?"

"It doesn't and you know it," Snape argued. He shook his head, pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. "Potter, you have me wishing I knew what Albus would say about now. That . . . is a first."

Harry laughed despite himself.

"Harry, you are so far from evil you wouldn't even cheat at a game of chess." Snape grasped Harry's upper arm and urged him inside since it had started raining again.

Frowning, Harry asked in true curiosity, "Why would anyone bother playing chess if they were just going to cheat at it?"

"Precisely," Snape returned. Inside the hall, he turned back to his charge and said with unusual feeling. "Please do not let it wear at you. You are the very epitome of good wizardry."

"Why would it matter then?" Harry asked, still finding annoyance at the whole episode. "And besides, what did they want? *Someone* had to destroy Voldemort. What, they want that bad wizards should stick around until some other bad wizard and they happen to kill each other at the same time?"

Snape took Harry's shoulders firmly in hand. "Stop it." Harry looked away, still discovering twisted emotions rising up in himself. "You are so far from being dark, you don't even qualify as off-white. Let it go. There is a reason they live in a coven . . . it is to escape the real world and the real choices and sacrifices it presents. You, of all people, have sacrificed too much to let them get to you."

Harry's shoulders relaxed in Snape's grip and he let go. "Much better," Snape uttered before stalking away.

Harry took out his wand, the twin to Voldemort's, and studied its worn and marred surface as he rotated it around before stashing it back away in his pocket.

That evening in his room, Harry took out the last Muggle letter he had received from Polly Evans, the widow of his mother's cousin. It occurred to him now that he could have dropped in for a visit on his way to Torquay, had he thought of it. Since the trip had not been useful otherwise, he now regretted the oversight. He sat down and penned a letter back to her, warning that he may take her up on her offer that he call anytime. After the day's visit to the coven Harry felt in need of reassuring relatives, and the memory of his last visit to Godric's Hollow still made him feel warm inside.

He stashed the letter in his bag to post from London the next day, but then wondered if that were the best idea. Pamela and Patricia might wonder why the letter came from nowhere near where Harry lived. He would have to step out in the morning and post it from the box outside the train station.

Snape departed that evening, seemingly in a vaguely dark mood. He gave Harry a pat on the shoulder before taking down the tin of Floo powder. Harry watched him flare away, not sure who to be angry with but wanting to pin it on someone, otherwise he would feel helpless. Candide seemed a good candidate, but by the end of a long evening of finishing all of his readings, Harry found Anita to be a better reason for his dismay. When he finally did crawl into bed, he fell immediately into a hazy, dream-filled sleep.

\* \* \*

During morning drills the door opened and one of the senior apprentices, a small man by the name of Augustus Munz, slipped inside the workout room followed by Rogan and Shacklebolt. Rodgers turned curiously their way. "We're just watching," Shacklebolt insisted.

This morning they were practicing the nine standard physical counter-curses for heating, freezing, overwhelming olfaction, disorientation, static charge, muscle weakening, blinding, deafening, and short term memory loss. Given the number of spells to choose from, one had to pay careful attention to one's partner. Initial wand motion gave most of them away,

but Kerry Ann was getting clever and changing spells part way through her cast. Harry had already suffered quivers and the gagging stench of sulfur so he was concentrating pretty hard.

Rodgers eventually called a halt after they had been at it long enough to get bored with the drill. "Something up, Gussie?" he asked the older apprentice.

"They wanted to, uh, see how things were going," Munz replied with a shrug and a crooked smile that dominated his small face.

"They're looking for a duel," Harry supplied. When Rodgers gave Harry a disapproving look, Harry added, "Ask them."

Rogan was smirking and Shacklebolt had crossed his arms as he leaned back against the wall with easy confidence.

"Are they, then?" Rodgers said. "Trouble is, I don't want to have to explain later to Madam Bones what happened to our fine, young apprentices."

"Just apprentice. Just Harry," Rogan explained.

Kerry Ann crossed her arms, wand angled out. "Yup, we're chopped liver."

Rogan went on, "It is tormenting to hear the sizzle and crack of spells at one's desk all day long without getting a chance to play a little as well."

Rodgers rubbed his eyes before saying, "Tristan, really, I can't risk a real duel. You want to come help with drills a few minutes--that's fine."

Shacklebolt used his broad shoulders to push away from the wall. "Drills then. Well Miss Kerry Ann of the chopped liver, let's see what you have."

The two of them moved into opposing positions and the rest stood aside to watch. Kerry Ann gave a snort of confidence as she raised her wand. After Shacklebolt counted down from three, Kerry Ann ran her usual trick, starting with an ice curse and changing to a stench one at the end of the motion. Shacklebolt turned his head as though he could escape the odor and had to regroup to finish a fire curse which Kerry Ann had plenty of time to counter.

"Hm," Shacklebolt muttered but another curse was flying his way already and all he could do was block, but he was fast on the rebound, faster than his opponent expected and ice crystals crackled into existence on Kerry Ann's sleeves and the tips of her hair as she barely used a heating charm on herself in time.

"Drills, Kingsley," Rodgers criticized. "A little less power if you would."

Kerry Ann was snapping the ice out of her hair and looking dangerous. After another countdown she simply fired a blasting curse, which was easily blocked although the floorboards rumbled with the aftershock.

In a teasing voice Shacklebolt said, "Remind me to stay on your good side." He let her use him for target practice for three more rounds before holding up his hand to call a halt. Kerry Ann looked annoyed that she hadn't gotten through.

"Potter next?" Shacklebolt asked hopefully.

"Potter last," Rodgers said, and gestured for Vineet next.

Harry tried not to bite his lip as the Indian, stepping with his usual light muscular power, changed places with Kerry Ann. He and Shacklebolt exchanged a few sensory curses which even if they had hit Vineet, he would not have let on. When Shacklebolt said, "Something with a higher hazard quotient then?" Harry stiffened. A flashing barrage flew between them, until Vineet's wand, struck by a Snaking Wind charm, flew out of his hand and skidded across the floor. Harry picked it up, noticing the worn, onion-shaped gold filigree that decorated it. He pretended to look it over to give his fel-



low apprentice a chance to catch his breath. From the look of the faded red and green and perhaps yellow paint, he realized that it must have been completely painted originally, as opposed to just highlighted as he had assumed.

"This is really old," Harry observed as he handed it back.

Vineet accepted it and said diffidently, "It was my great grandmother's who got it from her grandmother who told her it was from the most famous Bengali wand maker." His face had the usual sheen of sweat from exerting himself and he seemed willing to take advantage of the break.

"It must have been really beautiful when it was new. British wands don't look anything like that."

Exhaling as though he had finally caught his breath, Vineet said, sounding a little difficult, "They aren't anything like this one. A British wand barely works for me at all."

After a few more rounds, Rodgers called a halt this time. Vineet stepped to the wall beside Aaron, who gave him a light punch on the arm as a gesture of solidarity.

"My turn," Rogan insisted. Aaron stepped up and faced him, looking determined. Rogan began to count down from three but Aaron cast at him somewhere around one and a half. Rogan just managed a block with a few backward steps to catch himself.

"You want to play it that way?" Rogan complained.

Harry had always thought jumping the count a Slytherin dirty trick, but when it was his cohort pulling it, it seemed less so and he grinned as Rogan shook his head disgustedly before counting again. This time he matched Aaron at the two with a shiver curse that made Aaron drop his wand. "Happens to everyone," he excused himself as he picked it up. He didn't even look as though he had done it on purpose.

Harry's turn finally arrived, along with a brief argument between Rogan and Shacklebolt.

"You drilled with two already," Rogan complained.

"I have seniority," Shacklebolt countered.

"I'll duel both of you," Harry offered.

"No, you won't," Rodgers snapped.

Harry shrugged. He stood in position and waited, holding his wand lightly at his side with just his fingertips--ready to aim and gesture a number of spells that tugged at him like leashed animals eager to be released. Rogan finally won out and Shacklebolt scuffled over to the others and leaned back against the wall beside Vineet.

Rogan counted down and Harry let his instincts battle for him. It was easy that way, his hand and mind working together to throw a blinding curse, strong enough to make his opponent blink, even though his counter was on time, followed by a modulated block for a shiver curse. With real danger not a concern he let himself fall into an almost meditative rhythm of block, cast, block, cast. He jolted himself out of it when he saw something different flicker across the Auror's brown eyes. Rather than wait for the beginning of the oncoming spell, Harry put up a modulated Chrysanthemum block and immediately reinforced it. Something resembling sideways driving rain streaked like comets of light through the air and hammered at his block, which began to dissolve and clearly wasn't going to hold through the end of the barrage. Desperate, Harry cancelled that block and immediately cast a Titan, all forward, with as much power as he could put behind it. In the gap, balls of energy sizzled through and struck him, stinging his arm, shoulder, and a dozen other places, although the pain faded quickly. The Titan rushed forward as a wall and exploded, taking the rest of the onslaught with it. The room was silent in their wake.

Harry didn't even take a breath before he aimed and shouted, "*Rbuumitai!*" One of the spells Fred had used on him at his birthday party. In that instant Harry was aware of his trainer opening his mouth as though to chastise Rogan, who looked puzzled by Harry's incantation. The next instant all of it was blotted out.

Fred had not put this much behind the spell. The light in the room dipped to a coal red and a column of one-foot-long, red, green and gold dragons streamed out of Harry's wand. Still on instinct, Harry cancelled the spell with a jerk of fear that he didn't actually know what the dragons would do, as they had not reached him the only other time he had seen this spell. Rogan tried an icing counter, but it didn't slow the creatures down and they swarmed over him as though they were actually liquid and wanted to encase him. Rogan fell, struggling, and Harry started forward, panicked now as he had no idea how to counter the spell's causetum. Fortunately, he didn't get two steps before the effect vanished.

Coughing, Rogan sat up straight and felt about himself as though to verify he was whole. Both Shackbolt and Rodgers had reached his side. "Well, you deserved that," Rodgers said, "for using a Flamesickle on an apprentice."

"Sorry," Harry said as Rogan was helped to his feet.

"What?" Rogan asked, confused.

Harry didn't want to explain that he had not only unwisely used a spell he couldn't cancel completely, but whose effect he didn't even know. He shrugged as though he were gamely apologizing. Rogan brushed himself off and accepted his wand from Rodgers who had picked it up for him. "Should have let Kingsley have him," he grumbled as though through wounded pride. At the door he turned and asked Rodgers, "When do we change shadow assignments?" while sending a calculating glance back at Harry. Just before the door close, he conceded, "Fair win, Potter."

Harry didn't think so; he thought he should be more careful.

\* \* \*

The next day they were off an hour early again. Aaron, with his usual spirit, organized another Diagon outing after they had finished all their drills without supervision. He insisted with a chuckle that they leave a note on Rodgers desk promising that they would use the extra time for readings. This seemed to amuse him no end, enough that Harry was amused by Aaron himself. Kerry Ann headed off her own way saying this was a good time to catch her mum before she left for work.

The remaining three of them stepped through the wall after Apparating into the Leaky Cauldron and into the clear sunlight, which only seemed to show the grime better. Aaron stopped before the owl emporium and peered in the window. "I need a new cage," he said. "I want something a little nicer than these though. I should just find a Muggle bird catalog, I guess."

Harry looked in as well and was about to suggest going inside to look, when he turned and found himself facing Draco Malfoy, cloaked to his ankles even in the heat.

Aaron said, "Well, look who it is," in a less than welcoming tone.

Draco turned a haughty expression to him before his light eyes returned to looking beyond Harry. "Leave us alone a second," Harry said to Aaron.

"You sure? You and a Slytherin?"

"Aaron, you are looking at the Wizarding world's only honorary Slytherin. It's all right."

Aaron stepped away, taking Vineet with him. Harry could see them both glancing back as they sauntered to the next store and stopped before an outdoor rack of marked-down, dented cauldrons.

"Thanks," said Harry quietly to his former nemesis.

Draco snorted a little laugh. "I don't want you owing me, Potter."

"Oh, good," Harry quipped, trying for brightness. "I'd prefer that."

Draco half looked behind him in the direction of the cauldrons. "Those your little Auror friends?"

"Yep."

"The Ministry must be desperate." Draco smirked. "As usual."

With his own snide expression Harry countered, "They only need to be better than you, Draco."

Draco smiled strangely before he dropped into seriousness, exhibiting that fast mood shift of his father's. "Grateful, Potter?" he asked in a keen hush.

Evenly, Harry replied, "Yes, I am."

"Hm." Draco moved as though to depart, but stopped to say, "Don't expect me to bail you out every time."

Almost laughing, Harry replied, "I won't. Believe me."

Brow raised in a vaguely disgusted manner, Draco stepped away.

Harry released his pent up breath and joined his friends. "How is Mr. Malfoy?" Aaron asked sarcastically.

"I get the sense you don't like him," Harry teased.

"Hm," Aaron murmured, still watching Draco weaving his way down the crowded alley as though to make sure he didn't try anything.

Harry fingered his wand inside his pocket and had a sudden thought. "You know I need to make a visit to Ollivander's. Come along with me," he urged his friends.

Aaron seemed far away still. "I think I *will* try Eeylops," he said and headed that way.

"Want to come along, Vineet?" Harry asked, trying for innocent. Vineet didn't reply right away, and had he been Snape, Harry would have reinforced his Occlumency. Before the other could ask anything, Harry took out his wand and held it up to show the gouge, now worn and well-soiled along the bare, unvarnished cut. "Draco's father did that," Harry explained, remembering. "I keep meaning to get it repaired." He tilted his head invitingly, "Come on."

Vineet followed in silence with a shuttered expression. Harry, if pressed, would have guessed he was actually angry. Harry, for his part, was determined to test his inkling.

The bell on the door rang musically as they entered the dim shop. Harry had forgotten just how high the full shelves were, and just how many wands they held. Vineet even seemed to be distracted as he looked around.

"Ah . . . my dear Mr. Potter," Ollivander said with feeling as he approached the counter from the back. His light eyes considered Harry in detail as he almost methodically placed his hands on the counter and leaned toward him. "Wand still treating you well, I hope?"

"The magic is fine, but I need a bit of a repair."

Ollivander accepted the wand and, handling it with a delicate touch, turned it this way and that, peered down the length of it, appeared to stare through it even. "So much power from such a simple thing," he observed softly. After a slightly

longer examination of the damage, he smiled and took it aside to a crowded little work area with a large lamp and lots of tools and bottles and rags.

Harry waited with poor patience while Ollivander worked. He had to force himself not to stand on tiptoe to try to see better what the sparkling spells in yellow were all about. A small crate of fine wood chunks in various odd shapes was perused and a sample selected and more sparkling spells ensued. Ollivander stopped and bending down, blew on the wand, as though to hurry the drying of glue. Bottles were opened and various vapors assaulted them in an eye-watering succession.

Presently, the shopkeeper straightened in the midst of fine polishing. When he finished, he presented Harry's wand back to him from the depth of a red velvet polishing cloth. Harry blinked at it in surprise; it was so clean and shiny he barely recognized it.

"Thank you," Harry said honestly and, after turning the like-new wand over yet again in his fingers, pulled out his coin purse.

"Four Sickles," Ollivander said, as though pained at the notion of charging him.

Harry plunked the proper coinage down on the counter.

Ollivander slid the coins to his edge of the counter and held them there with his long, boney fingers. "And your friend here?" he prompted.

"I have a wand," Vineet stated dismissively.

"He has a really interesting one," Harry quickly said. "A really old one."

Ollivander tilted his head almost birdlike and considered Vineet. He clasped his hands at his chin, making his sleeves fall away from his pale, age-spotted arms. "Yes, you would have a Jaina wand then, no?"

Vineet shook his head before relenting and handing it over from his pocket. "It was my great-grandmother's."

"Of course, of course," Ollivander said, oddly reassuring, as he studied the wand. "Kshatriya then," the shopkeeper murmured thoughtfully. "A Jaina wand makes very little sense, in British context."

"I agree," Vineet said. He had lost his cold edge and now seemed interested in the shopkeeper.

Ollivander held the wand before himself, in both hands, pinkies outward. "Are you in the market for a replacement?" he asked neutrally.

"No," Vineet replied stiffly. "It would dishonor my family to consider such a thing."

"Ah," Ollivander uttered, as though that were something he didn't know. "You do realize that it has been altered from its original . . . incarnation, shall we say?"

This was clearly news to the Indian. "How is that?"

Ollivander held up the end of it. "It has been re-cored, I am quite certain. Mixing budrose and unicorn mane is most unusual." He said this in a way that implied it was to be avoided. "I suspect it originally was cored with something more appropriate."

"Such as?" Vineet asked, truly curious apparently, and as Harry had hoped, completely pulled in by Ollivander.

"Dragon spine, perhaps. Let's see," Ollivander said, glancing up at the high shelves. He placed Vineet's wand reverently on the counter before the Indian and hopped up on his sliding ladder and, with surprising ease for one his age, climbed up

to the far corner above the door and, after some searching of labels, withdrew two long boxes from the very bottom of a very tall stack. He returned with them and spent some time deciding between them without opening either one.

"Manticore heartstring," he announced and paused to evaluate that statement with Vineet.

Vineet didn't take his eyes off the slim, dusty box.

Ollivander opened it. "Thirteen and three quarters inches . . . approximately. Sandalwood." Harry's eyes went wide. The wand Ollivander held was brightly painted red and yellow with gold filigree. Ollivander glanced at Harry and explained, "Years ago, I had a flying carpet salesman who used to supply me with these. Not much call anymore. Immigrant Bengali children want British wands, and since they seem to work well enough for them . . ." he shrugged his boney shoulders and held out the wand to Vineet. "Care to try it?"

Vineet started slightly as though he had just arrived via Apparation. He reached out for the wand and appeared quite surprised as he grasped it, although there wasn't an outward reason for it. His eyes roamed over it, still surprised.

"Give it a go," Ollivander suggested casually. "Give it a wave, or hover that old chair in the corner or something."

Vineet, with a long glance at the old worn wand on the counter, aimed, swished, and flicked. The chair smashed into the high ceiling and wood chips rained down. Harry put his arm over his head to protect himself.

"That seems to be your wand, young man," Ollivander stated dreamily.

Vineet was in shock and didn't move. "How much?" Harry finally asked.

Ollivander didn't take his eyes off Vineet. "Eh, ten Galleons."

"That's all?" Harry, with a glance at his immobile companion, took out his own purse and handed over the gold coins.

"I am more pleased to have found it a good owner after all this time," the shopkeeper said, pocketing those coins along with the previous Sickles. He turned to Harry and asked with a gesture at the counter, "Do you think he would like this one, uh, tuned and re-cored?"

"I don't know. I'll ask him later," Harry said dismissively and took up the wand himself. "Thank you, Mr. Ollivander."

"Anytime, my dear man. Anytime." With a last concerned glance at Vineet, he disappeared into the back of the shop.

"Vineet?" Harry prompted, in serious concern.

Vineet blinked slowly and said quietly, "I would have refused. For anyone but you, I would have refused. I knew what you intended." With a long sigh, he lowered his forehead into his hand. "I have worked so hard . . ."

Harry was very grateful that they were alone in a quiet shop because Vineet looked ready to break down.

"It's all right," Harry tried.

Vineet, head still bowed, looked the wand in his hand over again. In an almost empty voice, he said, "It was a ruse . . . always overcompensating some other way. I have been loyal to my ancestors, why have they no reward for that?" He wasn't asking Harry; it wasn't clear if he expected an answer, but he fell silent as though waiting for one.

Harry resorted to shaking his friend. "Hey," he said sharply. This finally brought Vineet around.

In an unsteady voice Vineet said to him, "I am humbled by your-"

"Stop that," Harry ordered him. "You're standing there, telling me about high expectations you can't imagine living up to, a dead family legacy you can't argue against . . . you're telling *me* that?"

Vineet straightened up as he considered those words. Harry held out the other wand for him. Vineet put them side by side in his hand and pocketed them. After a soft exhale he said, "I am looking forward to tomorrow's training . . . more so than usual."

Harry laughed. "Just be careful not to kill anyone or take out any large blocks of London between now and then all right?" He led him to the door. "You've been forcing your power through that mismatched wand all this time. Goodness knows what you've boosted it up to."

"I have never had a spell with too much power."

"You did just now," Harry said, as they were stepping out, indicating the remains of the chair.

"I should be paying for the chair," Vineet said, turning back.

"It was an old chair," Harry assured him as he took him by the arm and steered him into the now, too-bright alleyway. They didn't find Aaron, which disappointed Harry. "Should we take you back to the Ministry now?" Harry suggested.

"I will wait until morning," Vineet said, much closer to his usual calm.

Harry, buoyant with the knowledge that Vineet would easily pass his six month review--as long as he left the Ministry intact in the meantime--grinned and suggested an ice cream to celebrate.

As they ate--Harry double chocolate, Vineet boysenberry--Vineet fell into a deep, inward silence. Harry didn't interrupt it, just watched the shoppers as he spooned cold goodness onto his tongue. He was enjoying the fact that fewer people became startled upon seeing him there. Only one child squealed and pointed until shushed by an apologetic parent.

Vineet pushed his empty bowl aside. "You have been most patient with me."

"You *are* a slow eater," Harry stated, deliberately misunderstanding.

Vineet shook his head but a faint smile played at his lips. "There are many more possibilities now."

"I'm glad for that, Vineet. I like having you around." Harry wiped his fingers again and tossed the serviette into the pool of brown milk in his bowl. "You are really good at illusion detection."

"Such things are no effort. I was hoping that we would cover barriers as well before the next review. They are also being easy for me. Although I do not think it would have made enough of a difference, no matter how rare a skill it is."

Harry fought a frown but pushed it away with thoughts of tomorrow morning. Thinking of the note Aaron left their trainer, he stood and made his goodbyes with a last admonishment, "Be careful heating your tea."

Vineet replied before they parted, "I generally use the stove anyway."

\* \* \*

Harry arrived very early for training the next morning, but he still found already Vineet in the workout room when he arrived. The Ministry was still quiet and the department corridors empty. Harry yawned and put his bag aside.

"Let's see what you've got," Harry challenged.

The dummy was still set up from the previous afternoon. Vineet stretched his shoulders back and aimed a blasting curse at it. The stout metal beam of the stand bent a few degrees with an animal-like squeal and, rather than rock up, the dummy snapped out straight as though it were hollow and light before crashing back on its hook and shuddering.

Harry twisted his mouth and reluctantly asked, "That was the lightest you could manage, wasn't it?"

Vineet stood thoughtful, brow low, and didn't respond. The door opened into the silence and Rodgers stepped in before looking up at them in surprise. "You are both rather early."

Harry, who had been anticipating this previous to that last spell, now felt a little uneasy about the forthcoming revelation. "We've, uh, been working on Vineet's spell power."

"Oh," Rodgers said as he arranged some books on one of the desks. "That's good. Any progress?" he asked in an informational tone.

"Uh, a bit too much, in fact," Harry admitted. Vineet seemed content to let Harry do the explaining.

Rodgers shifted his attention to them and closed the book he had opened. "Too much?" he confirmed doubtfully. He left the books and stepped over to them, almost immediately noticing Vineet's wand. Rodgers' face went a little dark. "I do remember suggesting that."

Vineet held up the blond wand with its yellow and red rounded diamonds outlined in gold. Harry supplied, "He took a little convincing."

Very quietly, Vineet admitted, "I have difficulty saying no to . . ." He nodded at Harry. ". . . the destroyer of the Un-Voldemort."

"Ah," Rodgers muttered. "Well, let's see something. Try a freezing spell on the dummy."

Vineet lifted his arm and aimed his pale wand, but held back on the spell. Rodgers was patient through the long seconds the Indian hesitated. Finally, Vineet cast the requested spell. With a crackling roar, ice grew in a wave to encase the dummy, stand, the floor leading away to the wall. A frozen waterfall formed up the wall behind the dummy and even spread out onto the ceiling. The air felt a little chilled as the ice crackled quietly to itself.

"Ah," Rodgers muttered again. "Some kind of power attenuation is definitely in order." His eyes traced the mass of ice before them. "No drills for you for a while." Without another word, he went out.

Vineet held his wand at arm's length and stared at it. "It is odd to realize that one is not who one believed one was."

"What?" Harry asked. Vineet shook his head rather than elaborate.

Rodgers returned with a box of feathers. He pulled one of the desks aside, sat Vineet down, placed a feather before him and told him to practice hovering it. The first feather shot to the ceiling and fell in a crumpled ball back to the floor. Rodgers said, "Working on that is your assignment for today." Then as though to soften that, he added, "I'm sure I don't need to ask if you've memorized the readings . . ."

"Congratulations, Vineet," Aaron said when the others arrived and everything was explained. Vineet was concentrating on a less-than-average abused feather and didn't react to being slapped on the back. When this one kamakazied into the ceiling, Aaron jested, "Maybe you should get a half-working wand."

Rodgers, arranging things on the front table said, "That will probably only prolong his learning to control his power. But . . . if it comes to that."

The other three of them went through their usual discussion and drills. Vineet worked on feathers through the day until their afternoon preview of the next week's training.

"Any luck?" Rodgers asked as Vineet moved his desk back into the group. When Vineet shook his head and kept his eyes far away, Rodgers said, "Give it time. It's something most people learn naturally as their power grows."

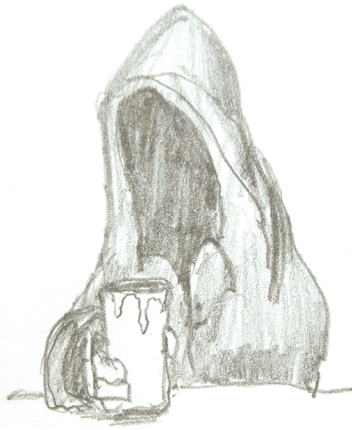
They broke for the day. Aaron departed with a reminder to Harry that the first Hogwarts Quidditch match was that weekend. Harry insisted he couldn't forget that. He was slow packing away his things into his bookbag and eventually only he and a rather somber Vineet remained.

"There is a saying . . ." Vineet began. Harry hoisted his bag and waited for him to continue. "I believe it is something about careful wishes."

"Be careful what you wish for," Harry supplied.

Vineet's shoulders fell a little. "That is the one."





## Chapter 64 -- Just Visiting

Harry met Aaron in the Hog's Head. He had suggested meeting there mostly because he expected that it would be less busy on a Quidditch weekend. Harry found Aaron at the bar, talking gregariously to a stranger shrouded in a brown hooded cloak. Harry, a little alarmed by this, stepped quickly over.

"Hey, Aaron," Harry said casually, looking over the other figure, or what little he could see of him or her. "Who's your friend?"

"Oh, uh, I don't know his name," Aaron admitted. "I didn't catch your name," Aaron said to the figure. The figure simply shook its head.

"Aaron," Harry said, hitting the other man on the arm, hard enough to be noticed. "You haven't traded anything with this man, or played any games of chance, have you?" The figure turned its head as though to listen better but didn't raise it enough for Harry to see any of the face.

"He did suggest that for later," Aaron replied easily.

Harry stood dumb an instant. "Aaron, you cannot be this naïve. Please tell me you aren't."

"What's the harm in a game of cards?" he asked, sounding defensive.

"I don't even know where to begin," Harry groaned, half to himself. "Come on, let's get seats a little early."

"You don't want a butterbeer? I want to finish mine." He resisted Harry's pulling him away from the stained and greasy bar.

"Take it with you," Harry insisted, hauling hard enough to get the other to move off his seat and into the midst of the tables. He left him there and returned to the obscured figure still slouched at the bar. Leaning close to the hooded ear he said, "No gambling with Aurors."

The figure turned enough that Harry could see a pointed chin with a light brown, scruffy beard. "Who are you to order me around?" the man mocked in an oily voice.

"Harry Potter," Harry snapped. A glass smashed to the floor at the corner table.

After a pause the figure said, "Oh. All right then." Then after a pause: "He didn't have anything worth taking anyway." He held out his hand with something in it. Harry cupped his hands and caught the leather pouch that dropped into it.

At the door Aaron asked, "What did he give you?"

Harry held the pouch out. "Your wallet."

"Oh." Aaron accepted it, peeked inside, then pocketed it. At the gate by the lake he said, "That is really quite embarrassing. Why did you suggest meeting there?"

"Haven't you been there before? That place is always quiet and I didn't want to cause a stir."

"Well, you did that anyway," Aaron observed, sounding moody.

A few ducks swam in the shallows of the lake as they walked by, a long tentacle following stealthily. "You were a Slytherin," Harry said. "I assumed you could take care of yourself."

The stadium came into view over the lawn, banners alight in a stream of sunlight piercing the clouds. Other visitors were walking alongside now. Aaron quietly said, "Contrary to you, Potter, I've led a pretty protected existence. Not by choice." He took out his wallet again and looked through it before putting it back away.

Harry relented on his chastising tone. "Well, don't trust anyone who hides their face. That's a pretty straightforward rule."

"I thought he had a deformity or something," Aaron defended himself.

"That's awfully sweet of you to believe, but that usually isn't the case."

They reached the arch that led into the arena. Harry followed up to the visitors' section which was only sparsely populated this early. Aaron went right to the very front row and took a seat; Harry followed, enjoying the breeze, the sound of the banners snapping, the scent of the lake and freshly cut grass.

"Missing Hogwarts?" Aaron asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied, surprised by his companion's observation.

"I recognize that look." Aaron sat back and breathed in deep. "I considered flunking seventh year, just stay longer. Often later wished I had."

Grinning broadly, Harry teased, "Severus must have been glad to see you go."

Aaron sighed. "His threatening me was probably the reason I didn't repeat a year, just for fun. I'll never forget him telling me I should have more pride. I had barrels-full of pride, I just didn't care about some things."

"Grades."

"For example."

The game began soon after the teachers filed into their stands. Harry resisted waving until he saw Snape's eyes searching the stands in their direction. Snape nodded in return and beside him McGonagall waved as well. The teachers made for a motley assortment in their section with Flitwick about one fifth the size of Hagrid two down from him. Sinistra wore some kind of glittery gold band around her forehead and Trelawney's diaphanous cloak kept trying to float over the edge of the stands beside her.

Finally the teams came out. The match was Slytherin against Hufflepuff, leaving Harry little dilemma about who to cheer for. Suze looked good. Only slightly taller than last year and just as thin, she moved like a razor around the pitch. The game went on a long time, making Harry wonder if they hadn't gotten a better Snitch just for the match. Harry didn't catch sight of it until Suze did and then only because she veered towards it. The final score of 220 to 20 left the Hufflepuffs slumped as they made their way off the grass.

"Should have held them scoreless," Aaron criticized sagely as they stood to depart. "The Keeper better improve that sloppy sideways block before the next match."

Down on the grass Harry walked away from the departing crowds and into the arena, where the green-clad Slytherins were congratulating each other. Snape, towering over Suze, put a hand on her shoulder and leaned down to speak to her. Her eyes shifted to far away, bright with victory. Harry forced down a twinge of complicated jealousy just as Snape's eyes came up at their approach; at least, Harry hoped he had managed in time.

Snape's look did soften just a micron as he said, "Hello, Harry. Ah, Mr. Wickem," he greeted the other in flat, doubtful tones. To Harry he said, "Minerva is expecting you for dinner."

"All right, I'll meet you there." He congratulated an ecstatic Suze before the Slytherin team moved to the changing room and Snape joined the teachers congregating near the base of the tallest arena tower. Harry walked with his fellow Auror apprentice. When they were on the lawn and apart from the others, Aaron asked, "Do you get to sit at the head table?"

"I don't know," Harry replied uncaringly, because Aaron sounded jealous.

"Hogwarts dinner sounds nice. I have to go to dinner at my mum's."

"Again?"

"Every weekend," he grumbled.

Harry didn't think that so bad. "That's nice." Aaron gave him a vague look of disgust. Harry said, "I wish I had a mum to visit for dinners."

"Potter, are you trying to make me feel guilty for wishing the hedge-hags my Mum imagines in the shrubbery were actually after her?"

"No," Harry immediately denied, then thought again, "What?"

Putting on a falsetto voice, Aaron said, "So nice to have an Auror in the family, then I can call someone to clear the ferocious nymphs out of the hollyhocks." He quit the voice. "Honestly." They stopped where they needed to split up for Aaron to return to Hogsmeade.

"Do you want me to come to dinner with you next weekend?" Harry offered.

Aaron fell thoughtful for a long time. "She would leave me alone about that then--just won't give it up. I'll let you know, I suppose. Give into that, who knows what she'll ask for next." Aaron headed off over the freshly mown green, looking glum. He turned and said, "See you on Monday, Potter. Have fun."

The teachers exited the arena, keeping a stately pace. When they came upon Harry, who stood waiting for them, McGonagall greeted him with, "Good to see you, Mr. Potter."

Harry glanced over the familiar faces, encountering one new one, an ordinary looking wizard with short brown hair. Harry's scrutiny drew him forward just as McGonagall introduced him. "This is our new Transfiguration instructor, Cathal Cawley."

Cawley eagerly shook Harry's hand. "Honored to meet you, Mr. Potter," he said breathily, reminding Harry suddenly of Quirrell; although, the man didn't stutter at all.

"Likewise," Harry returned, trying to shake old memories.

During the walk to the castle, Harry found himself eyeing the new teacher as though trying to see through his disguise of normalcy. Snape interrupted Harry's visual interrogation. "Did you enjoy the match?"

"Yes," Harry replied, then in a low voice, he asked, "Did the headmistress approve you using a professional Snitch?"

Snape's eyes glittered. "She did authorize a slight upgrade in school equipment, yes." He walked with his hands clasped behind his back, looking almost relaxed.

"Making sure Suze gets her shot at going professional?" Harry teased.

Snape didn't reply, just kept walking, a smug look upon his face. Harry turned away with a grin and found Cawley disquietingly close at his shoulder.

"Mr. Potter, so very good of you to visit. The staff do so speak of you in such fondness."

"Do they?" Harry asked in disbelief. Glancing around, he found the teachers otherwise occupied in conversation, with Greer pointedly ignoring him, and Snape still looking straight ahead.

Cawley almost sounded hurt, "You sound surprised."

Harry considered all the times he had been caught, and not caught, at things that he had previously been assured would get him sent home. A little loudly he proclaimed, "Their memories must be failing." This perplexed Cawley more. Harry took the opportunity to ask, "So how long have you been teaching?"

"Just started," he proclaimed in excitement. "I studied for three years under a Yoruba witch in Brazil and I thought I was ready to move on, even though I rather fell in love with the country. Ever have a capiriñas?"

"No, can't say that I have," Harry replied, uncertain what that might be.

"Ah," Cawley sighed, apparently remembering one just then.

They had reached the Entrance Hall, but it was still an hour before dinner. Harry followed Snape to his office where he said he needed to do some work. As Harry closed the door behind him, he said, "I hope I'm not bothering you."

"Of course not . . . have a seat," Snape said in a welcoming tone he never used with students. Harry did so, clasping his hands over his stomach, relaxed. He wanted to ask if Snape had talked to Candide at all, but decided against it.

As Snape marked assignments he asked, "So, what did you do in training this week?"

"We started on illusion negation."

Snape paused to look up. "Interesting. Are you learning to see through an invisibility cloak?"

"That's one of the last things. But few manage that, we've been warned. Right now we are working on detecting basic changes like color, size, or shape." Harry rethought that and asked, "Why, hoping I'll teach you?"

"Hm." Still marking with his green quill and flipping rapidly, Snape asked, "And is the topic presenting any challenge for you?"

"No, it's easy."

"That's good," Snape opined, although there was something odd in his tone.

"So what about this new teacher?" Harry asked.

"He seems acceptable, but I have not delved into that in any depth. I will have to at the end of the first term when he has a performance review."

Harry stared out the window. "He seems suspicious."

Snape lifted his quill and looked up with brows low. Very doubtfully he asked, "How so?"

Harry shrugged. Thinking aloud he said, "He seems too normal." Then he added after further thought, "No new Hogwarts teachers are ever what they seem."

"Few of the old ones are either," Snape pointed out. "Except perhaps Binns."

Harry chuckled.

They arrived early in the Great Hall. McGonagall insisted that Harry sit beside her with Snape on the other side of him. As they took their seats, she said affectionately, "It is very good to see you, Harry."

"Thank you for the invitation, Professor."

She leaned close. "Please, do call me Minerva. And how is your apprenticeship?"

They talked until the hall filled with boisterous students. McGonagall asked, "Shall I publicly welcome you?" she asked.

"Oh. That isn't necessary," Harry said. "I know everyone."

She smiled and a moment later platters of food appeared on the tables. Harry hadn't caught the signal and his stomach rumbling distracted him from wondering what it had been. The meal went quickly and soon the empty, soiled plates vanished. As things wound down, more students looked up at the head table, eyeing *him* he assumed, since McGonagall was always there.

As they waited for pudding to appear, a small student in a blue uniform hesitantly approached their table. He had a bushy head of curly brown hair that dwarfed his small face, although even its bulk couldn't compete with his wide eyes. The head table sat on a raised platform, forcing the boy to rock up on tip-toes to peer up at Harry.

"Come on up, Mr. Van Eschelon," McGonagall invited.

The boy was so small he had to climb rather than take a large step up. Harry wondered that children started Hogwarts so young.

"M- Mister Potter," the boy managed as he clutched his hands together. He glanced back at the Ravenclaw table as though for advice. More wide eyes there and the smaller students made motions to urge the boy on. Harry tried hard to find a friendly feeling face to calm the boy's obvious fear.

McGonagall cut in smoothly. "Harry, this is Erasmus Van Eschelon, a first-year, if you had not recognized that."

"Hello, Erasmus," Harry said in the lightest voice he could manage.

Erasmus shot worried glances at Snape and the headmistress before saying, "We . . . uh, hi, uh, we wanted to welcome you to Hogwarts . . ."

*Welcome?* Harry almost echoed in disbelief.

" . . . and, uh . . . " Another glance back at the end of the Ravenclaw table where many small faces wore pained expressions. " . . . and we are really, really honored to have you here . . . "

Harry now realized that he should have allowed McGonagall to make a little speech at the beginning of the meal. The gap between himself and this dear place took a bounding spread as the student went on, leaving him less homesick and more adrift.

Erasmus' eyes dropped to where his feet fidgeted fiercely. Harry didn't dare interrupt and lengthen the boy's torment. " . . . and we think you are a really great wizard." He was speaking to the platform now, but utterly unaware of it. "Well, and we all owe you a lot." His head finally lifted. "Well, that's what I . . . we wanted to say."

Harry wasn't ready for his turn in this. "Well, thanks. I appreciate that."

Released, a relieved and flushed Erasmus ran back to his table looking strung out, as though he had faced . . . well, Voldemort. Harry turned to his left. McGonagall picked up her chalice of mead and said, "In just over a month you have reached legend status around here."

Harry said, "At least the teachers-"

"I was referring to the staff," McGonagall interrupted him. "The students are yet another matter."

A bread pudding had appeared before Harry and he pulled it closer and picked up his fork. He didn't want to be a legend; he wanted to have this place, this first home, as a kind of refuge. He had forgotten that it wasn't static; that it had a life all its own. Beside him, Snape patted his arm. Harry turned to him and he said, "I do try to point out to them how truly awful you were at Potions, but they just get angry with me."

"I appreciate that," Harry said. The gulf between himself and the room full of school chums had yawned too wide. He swallowed his first bite hard and pushed his plate away.

"All right there, Harry?" Snape asked softly.

Harry nodded. Very quietly, so that McGonagall couldn't hear, he said, "I didn't come here to terrorize first-years." After further thought, he added, "I didn't realize how small they were now."

"Same size as always. Some come smaller . . . such as you."

"I was smaller than him?"

"Yes."

Grinning, Harry said, "And you were still cruel to me."

Snape crossed his arms and leaned back haughtily. "You should not have taken it so personally."

Harry pushed his chair back and shook his head. "Think I'll go visit with some friends," he said eagerly. He stepped along the staff table and around down to the Gryffindor table. Overhead, above the thousands of floating candles, the ceiling raged in darkening blue without a single cloud. At his approach Ginny brightened and made space beside her. Harry quickly fell into conversation with her, the Creevey brothers, and the others he knew well. He was greatly relieved to find them the same as before, if not a touch taller and bolder.

\* \* \*

Harry's training the next week was difficult and wearing. They learned countless illusion charms, some for things as large as a building that required many witches or wizards work together by combining their magic. Harry had assumed that this would make a spell easier, the way having someone to help carry a couch made that easier, but it didn't. In actuality it made the spell much harder because the other person's magic was much more likely to disrupt your own. Getting the spells to combine rather than interact required intense concentration.

Vineet participated only marginally, since he was still working on control. But he was surprisingly good at adapting his own magic to another's. Most of the time during training, he had a variety of Hogwarts first-year tasks before him, some transfiguration, some charms. His patience with himself seemed to be growing thin finally. While the others packed up for the day, Harry went over to Vineet's corner to try and cheer him up a bit. Unfortunately Rodgers followed suit, so Harry toned down his own reassurances. "You look frustrated, Vishnu," Rodgers observed. He gave Vineet space to respond which went unused. "Do realize that we will give you a lot of time and help to work this out." He sounded unusually concessionary.

Vineet frowned as he stood and collected the various half destroyed little objects into a box. "I am not accustomed to lacking discipline," he explained unhappily.

Rodgers turned to Harry. "Anyone at Hogwarts specialize in teaching attenuation that you know of?"

"I can ask," Harry said eagerly. "I'll owl right now, in fact."

Rodgers nodded, looking displeased about having to ask, which Harry attributed to the communication going through Snape. When they were alone, Harry said, "Vineet, go a little easier on yourself." When Vineet appeared surprised, Harry explained, "I read you like a book, you know."

"The possibilities seem to have closed as fast as they have opened," Vineet observed.

"Everyone's going to help," Harry insisted. "It will work out. Someone at Hogwarts will be able to help, or Headmistress McGonagall will know someone who can." Harry wished a bit that Dumbledore were still there to help, but squashed it immediately.

Vineet picked up his things to depart. "You are all being very kind."

In the corridor Harry went down to the end and around to where the large Department owl cage sat. He dropped his bag, and examined the quill provided in the tin beside a pile of scrap parchment. It felt cold and strangely slippery and he knew from that feel of it that the bird that had given it was dead. Wondering at such a pointless skill, he opened his bag and took out his own quill. After brushing some scattered downy feathers aside, he leaned over to write to Snape in the small space before the cages.

When the short letter was finished he put it in an official envelope. As he penned the address, an unfamiliar voice approached down the next corridor. He slowed to listen to what sounded like someone speaking to themselves.

"Ay, the Ministry wouldna made the Bludger rule change if it hadna been for that incident in Yorkshire." "Overreacting, I'd say." "As usual." "Hey, can we see the Department of Magical Games and Sports?"

"That's down a few levels." That voice Harry recognized: Mr. Weasley. "We'll get to it if you wish. Not really much to see . . . although the trophy room is nice, except uh, last year, when the trophies all went invisible in protest over not getting polished up for a while. They're all there now though . . . we're pretty sure."

Harry fanned the envelope to dry the ink and grinned at that

"Eh, what's the male squad then?" The strange voice asked and the footsteps stopped.

"What? Oh, that's Ms. Tonks. Uh, I mean, she changed the sign again. It is supposed to read *Magical Law Enforcement Squad*." Harry hadn't noticed that vandalism and grinned more as he opened the cage to hand over his letter to whichever owl seemed more eager to take it.

"Eh, the Auror's office must be here as well, then?" "Oh, dark wizard hunters." The voice said, still sounding a bit double on the personality.

"Yes, just around the corner," Mr. Weasley explained, sounding the tour guide again.

The other voice dropped lower. "Oh, does that mean . . . Harry Potter is here?"

Harry's eyes went to the ceiling. The footsteps were moving again. "Well, yes," Mr. Weasley was saying, sounding confused. "He's in training with us." Harry glanced at the distance back to his own corridor, then thought he should say hello to Mr. Weasley and his guest. Torn, he shut the cage door and the remaining owl tried to peck him before he got his hand clear. The other owl had gone out the other side of the cage and into the darkness of the ventilator shaft leading to the roof.

"Ooh, what's 'e like then?" "Dangerous, eh?"

Harry shook his head, still hoping that someone at Hogwarts knew something about teaching attenuation. Everyone here at the Ministry returned a strange stare when asked as though the notion of *reducing* one's magic had never before occurred to them.

"He's very nice. Really," Mr. Weasley insisted. They were about to turn the corner. Harry toyed with the notion of taking his wand out, then decided that would be childish, although potentially amusing.

"Oh," Mr. Weasley said, coming to a halt. "Ah, hello, Harry."

"Oh, you're funnin' us-" A very redheaded, freckle-faced man of about thirty stopped and let his mouth fall open. He stood beside another identical man who looked equally surprised. An older, rotund woman in a pink coat with a huge flowery purse in her arms stood beside them.

"Hello, Mr. Weasley," Harry said.

"How are you, my boy? This is my, uh, Great Aunt Milli and her grandsons Vincent and Cuthbert."

"More Weasley twins?" Harry couldn't help asking. The very notion unseated him.

Mr. Weasley smiled. "Well, yes, but . . . much better behaved than, uh, Fred and George."

"I would say," came the haughty proclamation from Milli.

The stunned and perhaps fearful expressions hadn't relaxed on the twins.

"Just sending an owl, then?" Mr. Weasley asked, clearly to change the topic.

"Yep." Harry was tempted to add, *thought I'd drop my Death-Eater father a note*, just to rattle the highly rattleable a bit more. "Nice to meet you all," he said automatically. "I should get going home."

"Course, my boy. Family picnic this weekend if you'd like to come." While Harry tried to formulate a reply, Mr. Weasley added, "There'll be a Quidditch match or two, of course."

"Oh," Harry said, solidifying his decision at that prospect. "Great. I'll try to make it."

One of the twins found their voice. "You're . . . you're coming to Arthur's house?"

Feeling cruel, Harry said reassuringly, "I promise to only invite one Death Eater along."

"Oh, can Se- . . . I mean, uh . . . " Mr. Weasley struggled, while his relatives gaped for real now at both of them.

"I doubt he's available, but I'll owl him," Harry stated easily.



Mr. Weasley recovered himself. "All right, then. Love to have him." He gestured for the aunt and twins to follow. "Still lots to see." The troupe followed slowly, eyeing Harry as they passed. Mr. Weasley said, "And here are the Auror offices, right here." As they made it to the lifts his voice carried back, "Goodness, with our luck we may even get to meet Madam Bones." Harry put his quill away into his bag and shouldered it, waiting for sound of the lift to descend and take the whispering away.

Harry arrived home exhausted; he had diverted to do some much needed shopping, and even though he was rather beat, he wandered outside in the low evening sunlight to check the front garden. The roses, small and wildish, were blooming yellow and faint pink. Rather than weed or trim, he sat down on the rarely used stone bench and leaned back against the ivy-covered wall of the house. After the last few days training, just staring at the tree limbs rocking in the breeze, the birds flittering about, the cars going by, seemed a worthwhile way to spend some time.

Harry thought he heard something by the side wall, a high-pitched kind of chattering. He sat straight and looked that way in concern. A few leaves shifted as though something passed under them and then stilled. A bit alarmed by the thought that, in his exhaustion, he had let something through from the dark plane, even though he didn't sense it otherwise, Harry took out his wand and watched the shadowed areas of mulch between the plants for any signs of movement.

"Hey, Harry," Elizabeth greeted him. "I was thinking you might be out on a nice day like this."

"Huh?" Harry asked, startled and worried about her safety.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Harry leaned forward to look around the plants better, wand still at ready. "I thought I saw something."

"Probably just a gnome."

Harry stood and stalked over to the corner of the stone wall. "A gnome? This garden doesn't have any." Harry thought he saw another leaf move so he issued a narrow blasting curse at it. A squeal sounded and a tiny figure, like a mutated potato, came barreling out, shaking its fist at him before stalking off. Embarrassed, Harry dropped his wand hand to his side. "That's the first one I've seen."

"My mum has a heck of a time with them. That and fire salamanders and iridescent bottle beetles. But that's because she insists on using magic to garden. Since you don't, I'm surprised they come around."

"What?" Harry asked in surprise.

"They aren't attracted to gardens where no magic is used. Didn't you know that?"

Harry put his wand away. "I didn't know that. I used a little the other day."

Sounding overly knowledgeable, she said, "If you stop, the magic will fade and they'll lose interest again."

Harry watched the leaves of ivy move in series as something crawled around under it. "Maybe I'll do that. It was just one Scourgify." He turned to her finally with his full attention. She was wearing all pink today, jumper and long pleated skirt; it was a bit much on the eyes. "How are you doing?"

"Good. Just one more piano lesson before term starts. How are you doing?"

Harry shrugged. "It's too quiet," he admitted. "I'm not used to being alone, I guess."

"I don't like being alone either," she volunteered.

"Sorry," he said, shaking himself. "I'm behind on my reading and really need to catch up, so I should get back to that."

"Cheers then," she said, "All right if I write you from school?"

"Of course. I'd like that."

She smiled and put her hands in her skirt pockets and walked away.

\* \* \*

"You're in luck, Harry," Tonks said when he arrived for his field shadowing on Friday. "It is so busy today, we have to go out on a call. Here," She handed him a little wood-framed piece of slate; a thin white stick adhered to the frame by a charm. "You should have one of those in case we get into trouble."

Harry barely got it pocketed before she grasped his arm and the Ministry flickered away. They stood in a field, a few sheep grazed near the far fence, considering them curiously. Harry waited to be told where they were but knew not to ask. Tonks was too distracted to give details and led them quickly away after glancing at a crumpled parchment. She pulled her wand out and unfolded her sleeve down to hide it. Harry followed suit, glad to have worn long sleeves. His heart beat faster, just holding his wand in the middle of the unknown.

She stepped on the electrified fence and gestured for Harry to step over. He turned and did the same for her. They walked along a path beside the field until they came to a round stone house. A brooding old village was visible over the crest of a green hill. The front door of the house was ajar. Tonks circled the structure once before pushing the door open and stepping inside. Harry followed behind and felt as though he moved through an invisible curtain. The air felt strangely oily and clingy. He breathed in, expecting to smell it, but all he smelled was yesterday's stew and old candle smoke.

Tonks stepped through the first arched doorway on the left and stopped. When she moved aside, Harry saw what had attracted her in that direction. A witch lay on the floor, grey robes spread behind her as though she had fallen in the middle of dancing. Her black hair obscured most of her pale face.

"Is she . . .?"

"Dead? Yes." Tonks stalked around the room like a bloodhound, looking at everything without touching anything. As she roamed, she went on, "You can tell when you walk in. That oily feel to the place. Look for a wand in the other rooms. Don't touch anything."

Harry recovered from the surprise of Tonks stating exactly what he was sensing. As he turned away, Tonks cast a few spells, one of which made the floor glow white with ghostly dark footprints, hundreds of them. Harry longed to stand and watch spells that they had not yet learned, but he did as he was told and hunted around the main room for a wand. There were a lot of figurines around the place, of cats, bats, rats and a few birds. All of them tall and elongated; some functioned as candlesticks and had old wax adhering to them. He didn't find a wand.

Voices sounded outside the front door. Harry rushed that way and found two children before the front step. Their conversation abruptly stopped at his appearance. They were dressed as Muggles but Harry was certain they recognized him or something about them gave them away. Thinking quickly, Harry asked, "Were you here earlier?" They immediately became evasive, eyes shifting. "Did you see someone here?" Harry then asked.

The boy and girl looked at each other. The boy reluctantly said, "We didn't see anyone today. But the witch who lives in the forest there . . ." He pointed to a dark range of trees in the distance. "She was here yesterday and there was a big fight."

"What are your names?" Harry asked. After a hesitation they gave these up and Harry forced them into memory. "Go on home," he said. "We may have questions for you later." He waited and watched them depart with many curious glances back.

Inside Tonks was still at work. "What'd you find out?" Harry relayed what he had learned and she commented, "Kids often have the best memories and they notice everything. Wand?" Harry shook his head. She put her hands on her hips and surveyed the body. "Could be a good thing. The person who killed her may have taken it. Ollivander always remembers and it makes for good evidence, although circumstantial. Let's seal the house and check out this lead before taking her in. She isn't going anywhere."

In silence Harry followed her outside where she put a strong, but short-lived, barrier on the small house. "Have to love stone," she commented. "Holds spells so nicely once you find its resonance."

Harry almost asked when they would be learning barriers, but swallowed it for later. They walked down the road a quarter of a mile to the copse at the end of the sheep fields. It was a nice day for a walk, but Tonks was spending it watching the ground around the way, casting the occasional spell to reveal footprints.

A small path led into the trees just beyond a stone wall. Darkness enveloped them as they entered. Within the trees it was starkly quiet and the air ripe with leaf decay. It wasn't far to the shack, which looked all the size of a large privy on the outside, but inside went on for room after room of dusty clutter. The sliver-shaped hole in the shack door was replicated hundreds of times around the walls, letting in curved shafts of dusty light.

Tonks circled around and came back a while later and huffed, "Nothing."

On a table, a box had been knocked over and some gaudy jewelry had tumbled out. Harry reached for a bracelet that, unlike the other silver things, wasn't tarnished. He tilted it to see the diamond cut pattern on its surface.

"Harry, are you touching things?" Tonks asked, part surprise, part chastisement.

"She's dead," Harry said, feeling a slipperiness on the metal that seemed to vibrate with something of its recent and frequent wearer.

"What?" she asked, stepping over to him across the crowded floor.

Harry held up the bracelet as though that might clarify. "The owner of this is dead." Tonks didn't reply right away, just studied him. "You don't believe me?" he asked.

"No, I believe you. I didn't know you could tell that."

Harry turned the bracelet in the light. It had a row of little blue stones along the median, one missing. "I didn't know regular objects could be Radiant," he said distracted by that new knowledge.

Tonks put her hands on her hips and looked around the room again. She pulled out her little slate and jotted something on it with annoyed motions before stashing it back in her pocket. "Well, where is she?"

Harry, forgetting to be silent, and thinking aloud said, "Maybe that was her at the cottage."

Tonk's face twisted in an intrigued manner. "You're right. We don't know who that is." She glanced around the cluttered room. "Wonder if there's a photo around here."

"Who would keep a picture of themselves around?"

"Maybe if someone else were in it. Someone handsome," she said suggestively. With the both of them looking, it only took a few minutes to find a small silver frame with a very old photograph of three people in it: a woman and an older couple, posed like parents behind a woman. "It will have to do." She grasped his arm and they reappeared outside the cottage. A man paced before it, agitated. A few others, including the boy and girl who had come to the door were also standing in the middle of the lane, looking skittish. They all stared at Harry as he and Tonks approached the house.

"Do you live here?" Tonks asked the man.

"Yes, but I can't seem to get in." He sounded annoyed.

"That's because we sealed it. You didn't contact the Ministry?"

The man shook his head, looking mystified. Tonks pulled out her sheet and frowned at it. The man took Harry in for the first time. "Are you really Harry?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

"What's going on?" the man asked.

Harry silently waited for Tonks to reply.

After hours of questioning and evidence collection they left the Reversal crew in charge of clean up and returned to the Ministry. Harry wrote out reports while Tonks dictated because she insisted his handwriting was better than her dictation quill and besides he could amend as he saw fit while writing. Indeed, Harry discovered when she reviewed the first report, she didn't really care what he wrote, nor that he left off his observations about the bracelet.

It was eleven by the time they had finished and Tonks was yawning an average of once a minute. She took the parchments from him and stuffed them into folders. "So, what do you think?"

"About . . . what happened?" Harry asked.

She sounded deceptively casual, as though she may be testing him. "Yeah. Bit of a conundrum. Tell me what you think happened."

"I thought we weren't supposed to guess," Harry hedged.

"Hypothesizing, as long as you are willing to throw it away at the first sign it is in error, is all right." She waited.

Harry rubbed his brow and said, "Uh, there were different versions of what the fight was about, but maybe the witch, Bernice, set Mr. Doormouse up by going into his house and killing herself there." After he had said it, he wished he hadn't.

Tonks appeared thoughtful, however. "Fits the facts, as unlikely as it seems. Any other theories?"

Harry shrugged. "Someone else who knew they were fighting yesterday set Doormouse up and killed Bernice there to set him up. He seemed honestly confused although I didn't particularly like him."

She took her feet down off the desk and rubbed her eyes. "And he didn't seem like he had had a Memory Charm, which is one way to show up at a scene of your own crime." She yawned. "I remember back when I thought this was the start of the evening around this time. Must be grown up when you look forward to going to bed."

Harry blamed the long day for his finding the insinuation in that. The thoughts that followed were not conducive to criminal reports. He rubbed his eyes too.

"Harry?" she prompted, voice lower than her professional one. Harry froze on the cusp of even more distracting thoughts until she went on, "Any other strange skills you're hiding from us?"

With a glance around her desk and the nearby ones Harry pointed at her blotter, "That's cursed. The door is cursed. Rogan's tread cleaner is cursed. Your earrings are cursed. . . why are you wearing cursed earrings?" he asked in confusion.

She fingered the left one. "They're charmed for beauty," she countered.

Harry examined each of them again. "No, they're cursed."

She plucked one of them off and held it up. "No wonder I look so bad in them. How can you tell that so easily?"

"Things just feel wrong, slippery and unclean and I'd like to get away from them or get them away from me."

"Hm. Good skill to have." She tossed the earrings with a musical clinking into the rubbish bin. "Others?" She asked in a tone that implied she expected he would hold back if given the chance.

She knew him too well. "Can we talk about the other over a drink?" Harry asked. "A Hagrid-sized bucket of mead sounds really very good."

"No," she replied.

"Damn." He swallowed. "Promise you won't kick me out of the program?"

Her face shifted to half-amused and she propped one foot back up on her desk. "What? You're still seeing Voldemort in the afterlife?"

"Not exactly."

Her propped up foot hit the floor. "Not. Exactly? What *are* you seeing?"

Harry, reluctant, but feeling obedient, said, "I see the Dark Plane. And once I time-travelled with my mind I think . . . " He trailed off because her expression of shock was too much to talk through.

"What exactly is the Dark Plane? It's been awhile since I've heard that term." She sounded befuddled and it hurt to have her of all people be so about him.

Harry quoted the book for lack of a better description, although he found the description lacking, "It is the alternative existence for the most evil subset of creatures. You know, like Lethifolds, or the Shetani, or Black Skanks. Things that crawl out of the cracks in the wall but you don't know how they do that. They do it by entering our world, our plane, at that point."

She stared at him thoughtfully. "You see these things? Is this because of the Dementors--because you were part of them?"

"I don't see the Dementors in the Dark Plane. Mostly I see Shetani, which are African demons and apparently plentiful." To assuage her odd look, he quickly added, "But I only see them when I'm very angry or I'm in an expertly-diagrammed node." He left off about fearing that they could enter this world through him; he couldn't bring himself to say it.

She put the files together on the desk and handed them to him. "If it gets out of control, tell someone, all right?"

Harry straightened the files a bit more before carrying them away. "Yes. Of course," he agreed.

Being in the file room reminded him of past filings, so when he returned to the office he asked, "What's happened with Lockhart?"

She was chewing on a sweet from her desk and held one out to him. "No one's seen him," she replied around the chewy stuff in her mouth. "Surprising really, given his mental status before." She pushed the drawer closed with her knee and hooked her cloak around her neck and made it turn hot pink to match her hair. "Some posters are up, no owls yet that have led anywhere. I'll let you know if anything comes up, since you have a personal interest."

"Thanks," Harry replied, wishing he could be a little more involved and did not have to wait to be told things.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Harry rose very early, just after dawn, ate a bite and dropped a quick note to the Weasleys saying he wouldn't make the picnic, dressed warmly, and went immediately out to the back garden to uncover the bike. A narrow-minded determination had overcome him from the day before and he had to take action. He pulled the map out of the pannier and flipped through it. County Devon was easy to locate, and Godric's Hollow was just off the best route. Devon was also dauntingly large. More determined than dissuaded by the size of the task he had set himself to, Harry stashed the map into his jacket pocket and stood the bike up off of its stand.

The flight gave Harry a lot of time to think as he skirted along just below the low clouds. He grew short of breath up here, but it didn't make him dizzy as flying higher could. Below him the hills stretched out in a mutely colorful patchwork with the occasional spot of glowing green where the sun managed to cut through. Flying silent and fast, Harry arrived over his first stop in just an hour and a half. Using a broom compass, he had kept his path straight and direct and that helped the time rather a lot. He landed hard on a remote two-track, that from the air he could see connected to a narrow blacktop road that led into the village. Even as he rode along the ground, he kept the bike silent, not willing to destroy the peace of the place. It was a rather nice day, he considered as he parked at the end of the street that led to Polly Evan's property. Just enough breeze moved the leaves in the alcove of shrubbery where he left the bike. Before going along the grassy path, though, he walked back down the narrow lane and knocked on Pamela's door. No one answered and the gardens felt quiet as though the next door neighbors were out as well.

At Mrs. Evans' house the door was answered promptly. "Harry dear. I did so hope you would drop in," she welcomed him. "Come in, come in." Big pots were boiling on the stove and a metal loop of cage with hinges sat on the small counter beside it filled with steaming empty glass jars. "Just putting up a bit of jam, don't mind me." Her beefy arms raised another cage out of the boiling water and she set these on the small, stained table across from the stove. "And how are you?" she asked as she worked.

Harry shrugged but then realized she wasn't looking. "All right. Rough day yesterday," he confessed.

"Girl troubles?"

"Murder," Harry returned.

"Oh my. What exactly do you do, young man?"

"Do you know what an Auror is?" he asked, very happy to be free to explain. She shook her head and shifted a pot full of bright red soupy strawberries to a different burner. "It is a dark wizard hunter. A magical law enforcer."

"Is that what you do?" she asked in surprise, pausing to retie her apron.

"I'm in training to do that. Takes three years. But we have field work days where we follow a full Auror on duty and sometimes, even though they try to keep their assignments easy while an apprentice is with them, they can't always manage." Harry remembered that oily feel of the house and rubbed his cheek as though to clean it off. "After battling Voldemort all those years, they're short of Aurors at the Ministry."

He watched her use a metal funnel to pour some preserves into each of the many, many jars. She was efficient at it, as though well practiced, and her arms, while they looked soft and fleshy, were apparently quite strong because she didn't rest them until the pan was empty. Using the same cage contraption, she lowered little metal lids into the boiling pot and shook it. While she waited for these, she considered him thoughtfully. "Surprising occupation for you to have. I don't remember your father nearly as well as your mother. I suspect he would approve. I don't know about Lily though."

"They aren't here to complain," Harry pointed out.

"No. Tragically, they are not." She raised the cage and using a clean, though worn, white towel, placed each sterilized lid on a filled jar, adjusting them so the seals were perfectly aligned. "So what did happen that night we lost James and Lily?"

"Voldemort came."

"That the one whose name some wouldn't say? I remember your father complaining about something like that."

"Yes."

She dipped screw top rings into the boiling water next, then stirred the other pan filled with what appeared to be blueberries, presumably destined for the remaining empty jars. Harry's mouth watered at the thought. "What did this Voldemort want with Lily and James anyway? What could they possibly have done or had that would have driven this . . . wizard to such destruction?"

"He didn't want them. He wanted me."

She looked doubtful. "A baby?"

Harry laughed lightly. "There was a prophecy that said I would destroy him. Well, actually that someone born at the end of July of parents who kept defying him would destroy him. It could have been another boy that I know, but it wasn't."

"And you did destroy him?"

Harry nodded.

She used a towel to pick up each jar and tighten down the lid and then set them on the far end of the counter in a little warm, bright red line. "And rather than settle down into some well-deserved peace and quiet you are out chasing murderers."

"Essentially. Peace and quiet makes me nervous."

She laughed this time. "Ever since you visited, I've been going back over those days. At my age memory makes for pretty good company, even ones that ended up tragic. I remember your mother as so full of life. Headstrong. Wouldn't take no from anyone when she wanted her own way, brought everyone around to her thinking instead so they forgot they had disagreed in the beginning. She and Ed, my husband, were playmates on and off as children. Ed knew she was a witch and when we met and he was writing to her at that school, he told me. I'd never been so surprised." She chuckled. "I was jealous of her, I think, I remember it made me feel better to believe her beauty and ability to get her own way was some kind of magical trick. Thinking back, I don't think it was, actually."

Harry stood silent, watching her finish up the blueberries. He had been drawn into her memories and didn't want to return to the present until he had to. Eventually all the jars were sealed and lined up, except one that was only a quarter full. She set that one on the table. "We'll just have to eat that now."

Over toast, heavy with butter and runny blueberry topping, she asked, "So you are out from under that terrible prophecy now, right?"

"Yes, thank Merlin."

She chuckled and shook her head. "Well, I'm sorry you missed the girls. They went on a shopping expedition for the day."

Harry wiped his hopelessly sticky mouth and fingers. "I'm glad we got a chance to talk, though." He glanced at the time. "I should get going, I have to go to Devon."

"On broomstick," she asked, sounding half teasing.

"On motorbike . . . a flying motorbike. Did you ever meet my godfather, Sirius?"

She thought a long time before shaking her head.

"A friend of my father's from school. Anyway, he died a few years ago and left me this wonderful bike for my eighteenth birthday." He stood up and tried to collect up the dishes before being waved off.

"Sounds like just the right toy for a boy like you," she teased and followed him to the door. "Come again soon, Harry. And bring that guardian of yours."

"You're certain?" Harry asked.

"Yes, of course. Come for dinner when everyone is here."

Harry tried to imagine Snape in that environment, then shrugged. "Owl . . . or write and let me know when," he corrected himself.

"No pet owls here," she teased and waved goodbye as though he were already at the end of the property.

The remaining flight to Devon went by very fast and again he landed on a deserted narrow lane, this one surrounded by trees. After canceling the Disillusion charm, he pulled out the map again and studied the road network into Exeter. He memorized his route and pulled away, remembering at the first turn that he had better adjust the *Roar* knob for realism.

Harry rode in the thickening morning traffic, feeling confident about his riding as he steered between two cars slowing for a stoplight. More people were rising and getting on the roads as he journeyed toward the city center. So many of them. Feeling daunted, Harry pulled into the car park for one of those chain restaurants Dudley had always begged to be taken to. He parked in the corner and closed his eyes, trying to let the fatigue from rising early pull him into a doze.

"You all right there?" A voice very close asked.

Harry jerked straight and looked at the scruffy man in faded coveralls getting into the car two spots down.

"Oh yes. Thanks. Just, uh, resting my eyes. Late night."

"Yeah, I know 'bout that. Nice bike."

"Thanks."

The car pulled away. Harry pulled out the map and held it open in his lap before dropping his head and trying again. No one bothered him this time as the familiar haze of green pulsed into his mind. A light wind tickled past in the vision in a different direction than the real one tugged his jacket. Harry woke up completely, stretched his neck and tried again. That in-between state was hard to maintain, but he wasn't going to give up. This time he got a glimpse of something dark and ephemeral in that world, off to his left, a little distance away. Uncertain if direction meant anything, he started the motor-bike up again and rode northeast, intent on finding out.

Harry repeated this for many dogged hours before being forced to stop for an early dinner. His neglected stomach complained bitterly as he waited at the counter of a snack shop for his order to be assembled. He took it over to a table beside a forlorn city tree at the corner of a quiet side street. A group of children in rough clothes were playing football with great enthusiasm and much shouting. A car approached and they quickly collected their ball and stood as an honor guard might while the vehicle rolled past before returning to their game as though uninterrupted.

Harry closed his eyes and let himself doze. The shadow, which he found more easily this time, didn't seem any closer. Sighing, Harry bundled up the paper from his meal, tossed it in the rubbish bin, and decided on a walk down the shop-filled street he could see across the nearby large intersection.

Putting Avery out of his mind for a while, Harry wandered along, looking for things his friends might like, or that even he might like. Most of the shops were full of discounted and disarrayed things, but at the corner a display rack of fingerprint-marred sunglasses caught his attention. Excited by a sudden notion, he hunted through the rack for the nicest pair with mirrored lenses and found a very stylish pair with bright mirroring and a nice aerodynamic shape. He paid for



them plus a hard-sided case in which to store them. Humming happily to himself, he walked on, determined now to have a good look around.

The beginnings of sunset were showing themselves on the sky when Harry finally returned to his motorbike. The long flight home seemed too much at that point. It occurred to him that London was closer. Hermione had offered to let him stay at her flat on many previous late evenings. In his mind Harry took her up on the offer as he rode the bike out to a deserted narrow lane lined with stone walls and twisted the altitude throttle.

As he approached the lights of London, Harry strengthened the Obsfucation charm upon him and considered that he also knew where Tara's place was. After circling down over the right area, he had to find the underground stop and then follow along above the rooftops to her street. Buildings were odd things from above, covered in looming metal structures of unfathomable purpose and great hazard to someone flying low. He carefully circled her building and decided which windows must be hers. Orange light filled the curtains inside. Harry carefully lowered the bike to window height and pulled out the *Roar* knob just a tad. This wasn't sufficient to generate any movement of the curtains and it attracted glances from below that looked puzzled before looking away. Harry pulled out his wand to make the Obsfucation charm on the bike itself as strong as possible while allowing her to see him. "Tara!" Harry shouted.

After a long pause the curtains moved and then moved aside. She looked down through the glass, so he shouted again. Her eyes came up and went wide. She worked the window open and demanded in shock, "What the devil are you doing?"

"I wanted to see you," Harry explained. "Want to go for a ride?"

She looked down and back up at him, gauging the distance to the ground. "Um. Why don't you park that and come up instead?"

"Okay," Harry agreed amiably.

"Harry you are crazed," she said as she let him in the building door.

"Why?"

"Why? What if someone saw you?" she demanded.

"No one but you could," Harry said.

At the door to her place, she said, "No? You can do that?"

"Yep, Aurors need to do it all the time so they can see each other but no one else can easily."

She sounded satisfied as she said, "Oh." Her place was three rooms. She gestured that he should take a seat at the table. "I was just making tea; do you want some?"

Harry felt sleepy from the long ride. "Sure. Thanks."

She pulled her hair back before she checked the flame under a kettle already heating on the stove. "You startled me."

"I didn't mean to," Harry said, just thinking that if he didn't return home tonight that no one would know.

She pulled out cups and milk. "You know, Harry, I wouldn't have thought of myself as old at twenty-two, but I think I'm too old for you."

"Why?"

"Because you should date someone who wants to go for a midnight ride on a flying motorcycle. I think I'd have to work myself up to that."

Harry watched her rinse the cups with tap water and considered that Ginny probably would go with him. He could fly up to Hogwarts and even if McGonagall were standing there ready to give her a month of detention, she would hop right on. Tara took out a box of tea bags, revealing a row of boxed pasta, one of which tried to fall out when the cabinet door was opened. Harry said, "People without house-elves eat a lot of that."

She smiled as she poured kettle water into the cups to heat them before shaking them out into the sink. "Yes, we do."

As he sipped his tea, Harry considered what his friends had said about dealing with someone else's guilt. He wasn't sure he could wait it out, nor did he know what to say. "I like you a lot," he tried. Her eyes dropped. Wrong thing to say, but that meant there might not be a right thing.

Harry tried to take the roads to Hermione's flat, but it was far too tedious to wait for even the light nighttime traffic and streetlights. He pulled into an alleyway, did a quick spell to check for lurkers, applied several layers of Obscuration and Illusion charms to himself and the motorbike, and took off straight into the air. At nearly roof level and accelerating, he clipped the right handle on the metal bar of a curved guard for the permanent ladder that led to one of those metal monstrosities so many roofs had. The loud clang echoed up out of the alley and the bike tilted crazily when the handlebars twisted with the blow's force. Fortunately for Harry his excessive acceleration upward bought him enough time to right things and only the rubber wheel squealed eerily against the sheet metal of a large exhaust hood as he managed to get level.

Breathing heavily, he hovered just above the dark roof until he recovered himself and his heart slowed down. Probable headlines in the Muggle paper flashed before him *Mystery Flying Motorbike Crashes in Central London* or more hopefully *Foolish Hotroder Rides off of Five-Story Building*. Flying now with paranoid and meticulous care, Harry steered his way eastward, very grateful the bike was behaving normally despite the mishap. When he arrived near his friend's flat, he patted the empty front tank to express his appreciation for its hardiness and dipped lower to land where the light was least concentrated.

Hermione greeted him at the door, very pleased to see him.

"Gotta beer?" Harry immediately asked, forgetting to say much more than hello.

She laughed. "Sure. I think so. I shopped just yesterday. Good thing you didn't drop in before then; even the mice have been complaining about the empty kitchen."

Crookshanks winked his glowing eyes from his usual perch atop the bookcase. Harry closed the door behind him and toed his shoes off. "Thanks," he said, accepting the cold bottle she handed him. After a refreshing swallow he asked, "Doesn't your cat get them?"

She was quickly straightening the room. "You mean the mice? No. Turns out he makes friends with them, pushes cat food under the counter for them if you don't watch him. It was only Pettigrew he thought worth hunting."

"Good Crookshanks," Harry praised the furry thing as he passed under its watchful gaze. He dropped into a worn squishy chair and tried to relax. Hermione watched him take another sip of beer before giving in and getting herself one as well.

Harry leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling a long minute before remembering that he was a guest and should probably not fall asleep. "So where's Ron tonight?" Harry asked. Hermione made a small face in reply. "Something going on?" Harry then asked, looking for more subtle clues this time.

"Nothing new." She scoffed and looked unhappy and tapped the bottle with her fingers. "It's just that he won't consider moving out of the Burrow. We have little . . . ongoing arguments over that, and since we had one after the picnic, he didn't want to come over."

"Oh." Harry considered that sounded likely of Ron all right. "I wouldn't want to move out either, even to live closer to the Ministry. The ride in the Floo can be a little long and sometimes I swear I get diverted past some strange area where the fireplaces all smell like they have burnt offal in them, but I like living at home."

"That isn't the same, Harry." She sat back and looked at him, straight in the eyes, which Harry found disconcerting, or maybe he just wasn't used to it. "You just got a family. It'd be odd if you gave it up already. And besides you're alone now anyway."

Harry bounced his feet before crossing them at the ankles to stop it. "Yeah."

"Not liking it?"

"Takes some getting used to."

"I like it," she stated with relish. "I spent all evening just reading." With a wave, she indicated the stack of books on the cardboard box beside the couch which still served as a side table.

Silence descended again. Harry eventually said, "I could Floo home from here and come back for the bike tomorrow," although he didn't feel like getting rocketed and spun around for long minutes as tired as he was.

"You can sleep on the couch. 'Course it isn't the most comfortable."

"I can transfigure it into a bed." He eyed the space. "There's room, if you don't mind."

"I want to see you do that," Hermione challenged. She stood up and gestured for him to go ahead.

Harry didn't move. "What?" he asked, confused.

"I want to see you do that--a bed that lasts more than five minutes."

Harry shrugged, stood, and pushed the short squishy chair he had been sitting on out of the way. He pulled his wand out of his enlarged inside jacket pocket and incanted, "*Dormilanequoris*," while gesturing in wide wand sweeps. The couch stretched, shifted and flattened into an ordinary bed. It even had sheets, all tucked in with sharp corners. "Hey," Harry said, "I could use that spell to pretend my bed was made. Are there any bad magical side-effects to turning a bed into a bed?"

"Uh, I don't know. Where did you learn this spell?"

"Oh, Aaron, one of the other apprentices. We sometimes get left to ourselves when things are really busy and last week, we took turns showing off our favorite spells."

Hermione bounced her hand on the bed. "You've never done this spell before? This is the first time?"

"Well, I have a bed at home. The need hasn't arisen." He sat down hard, testing it. "Not bad. He said it would last six hours at least. 'Course he sometimes makes things up and says the opposite of the truth to suck people in, but, we'll see," he stated pleasantly, simply glad the spell had worked when challenged by his old friend.

Hermione was giving him a strong glare. "Harry, I can't believe you just did this spell for the first time!"

"Oh, come on," Harry retorted. "You who always got everything in class before everyone else."

"Well . . ." she hemmed.

"Now, for example, Flitwick never showed us how to detect illusions and you have a big charm to hide the four boxes stacked beside the bookcase."

Hermione rolled her eyes and picked up her wand off of the brown-board side table. She waved it. Tried again. And then finally got up to tap the invisible boxes directly, making them flicker into view. "Hm," she muttered, looking at her wand. "I was pretty proud of that. Took me an hour to get it right before my parents visited. I didn't want them to see I hadn't found space for everything I'd insisted on moving out. I didn't want to leave anything behind; it didn't seem like moving out if I did that."

She sat on the end of the bed. "What else have you learned?" she asked, sounding vaguely melancholy.

Harry, happy to show off a bit, crossed his legs on the bed and said. "Okay, this might not come out quite right, but watch this." Harry closed his eyes to concentrate, and tapped his chin while muttering, "*Aspecticeḏo*." He then rubbed his chin to feel if it had worked. A grizzly beard now indeed sprouted there.

"Hey, you look good like that," Hermione said. "Did Tonks teach you that?"

Harry scratched at the beard as though it were a rash. "Yeah, but she is too good at it to be really good at teaching it. Don't tell her I said that though."

She stared at her wand before stashing it away. "I haven't learned anything new in months. No, I learned a how to control a note-taking quill." More quietly, she added, "It's not really a spell though." She sighed lightly. "So what are you doing in London?"

Harry frowned and adjusted himself on the bed. "I stopped in at Tara's flat. She . . . wasn't really in the mood for my company."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said in sympathy.

"No. It's all right. I don't really know her all that well." He shrugged. "I still kind of like her though."

Even more sympathetically, Hermione said, "You flew all the way to London to see her?"

"No," he admitted, and only because this was one of his oldest friends did he add, "I was in Devon . . . hunting Avery."

Hermione gave him a level look. "Does the Ministry know you're doing that?" When Harry shook his head, she huffed. "Why don't you at least tell them?"

"I'm only a trainee. I'm not allowed to do anything."

She crossed her arms and appeared to be considering chastising him. "So, find out anything?"

"No." Harry tossed his wand in the air and caught it again. "I got my wand fixed and cleaned by Ollivander." He held it out. "Looks like new, doesn't it?"

"You're changing the subject."

"No, I didn't find out anything. I even went around trying to fall half asleep to sense him, but I couldn't zero in at all on him."

She picked at her nails a little nervously. "You . . . can *see* him though?"

"I think so."

A silent moment passed. "Does Severus know you are doing this?"

"I told him I wanted to." Harry put his wand aside on the cardboard box. "He told me to work through the Ministry."

"Which you aren't doing . . . "

Harry shrugged. "I'm useless at looking for him--even though I can sense him sometimes. Maybe he is still lying low."

Hermione looked vaguely uneasy as she considered that. She finally uncrossed her arms and stood up. "Well, I have to do some things in the morning. If you don't mind . . . it *is* a little late."

"No, that's fine," Harry said agreeably. "Thanks for letting me stay."

She shrugged and smiled, looking like her old self, which made Harry realize that for the most part, she didn't. With more emotion than it warranted, she added, "You're welcome anytime, you know. Why don't you use the toilet first?"

Later, when she went into the bedroom and closed the door, Harry slipped off his shirt, belt, and socks and got into bed. The transfigured bed felt very solid, not at all like it might change back at any moment. Deciding it was best to assume it wouldn't, Harry closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

The traffic noises outside kept Harry awake for a while before exhaustion took over. As soon as it did, Harry snapped back awake with a start. Footsteps sounded and Hermione opened her bedroom door. "Harry?"

"It's all right," he assured her. He rubbed his hair back a few times and felt it bounce back up in all directions. Remembering the sense of a shadow hovering, Harry said, "Avery is in London. He's much closer to here than I sensed him in Devon." He sniffled and lay back down. "Sorry to bother you."

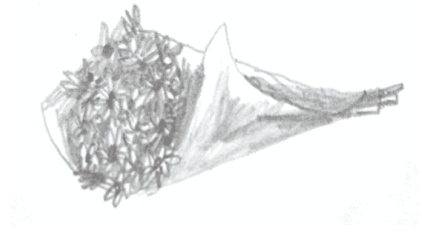
She stood there in her frilly nightgown, the sound of her breathing eventually slowing to normal and falling silent. "Don't apologize, but please don't go after him alone."

"I'll come fetch you then . . . when I find him," Harry sleepily offered.

She snorted. "I don't think I'd be much use to you."

"Sure you would." Harry rolled over and curled up slightly. "You'd say, 'Harry don't be stupid--owl for someone else to help'."

Her laughter filled the darkness. A car went by and its lights traced over the ceiling and wall as it turned. "Good night, Harry," she finally said, and went back to bed, leaving the door open this time, making Harry wonder that everyone he knew thought he needed looking over while he slept.



## Chapter 65 -- Mum Galore, Part I

Sunday, Harry put on the nicest non-dressy clothes he owned. He had first tried on his Muggle suit, but that looked inappropriate for Sunday dinner at a friend's mum's house. He wondered how it was that no matter how many clothes he bought, nothing in his cupboard ever seemed quite appropriate.

He met Aaron at the underground stop, the last one on the line. His fellow Auror trainee looked a little nervous. "Thanks for coming. I told my mum I'd invited you but didn't tell her you'd agreed. I didn't know if you'd come to your senses at the last and back out."

"I really don't mind," Harry insisted, still not understanding how anyone could not appreciate Sunday dinners with his mum. Aaron carried a narrow sack which might contain a wine bottle and his other hand held a bundle of bright yellow flowers. Concerned, Harry asked, "Should I have brought something?"

Aaron held out the flowers. "You *did* bring these," he said.

"Cheers then," Harry thanked him, taking them.

They walked nine blocks before reaching a nice house at the edge of the village. A white enamel cast iron fence ran around the property and one very old tree shaded things nicely. On the broad porch Aaron used the doorknocker, looking pensive. Harry, not used to holding bunches of flowers, held them behind his back because he felt like a bride holding them in front of himself.

The door swung open quickly and a plump, dark haired woman in a flowered muumuu greeted them with a broad smile. "Oh, my! Look who it is." She tore her gaze from Harry over to her son. "Aaron, my dear boy, good to see you, and in such esteemed company, no less." She held out a hand, not so much to be shaken but palm down, fingers half-curved. Unsure what that meant, Harry freed a hand from the flowers and managed a strange handshake. Her gaze was affectionately intent, and she smiled as though nearly crying.

"Where are my manners?" she proclaimed loudly. "Come in. Come in. Please!"

She hadn't let go of Harry's hand, so he had no choice but to follow. In the beautiful front hall with its glowing marble floor and bright rugs she stopped and said, "You are much taller than I imagined, Mr. Potter. You don't mind if I call you Harry do you?"

"Not at all," Harry replied, getting a hand squeeze and an extra affectionate smile in return. "These are for you," Harry remembered the flowers in his other hand.

Surprisingly, this didn't get his hand freed when she accepted them. "Oh, my dear boy, how sweet. Mr. Plumley!" she called out.

A dour man in a tuxedo with a pointed nose and disproportionately heavy face stepped in as though just waiting to be summoned and accepted the flowers with a very small bow. In a formal tone he said, "I shall retire these to nice vase for you, madam."

Mrs. Wickem turned Harry toward her for further inspection, apparently, and patted his captive hand with her now free one. "Well, you have turned out rather handsomely, haven't you?" she asked, looking him over with an appraising eye. To

Harry's utter amazement, she reached up and patted him on the cheek as she said, "But you certainly look like you need a good meal, you poor thing. Come. Come." She finally released him but this was only to better wrap him up bodily and lead him away to the next room as one might an invalid. They entered a parlor with high windows and a marble and iron table set with a staggering array of glass and tableware, like nothing Harry had seen before. The yellow flowers were already in a blue and gold Asian vase in the center.

Harry turned back to shoot a teasing look at Aaron and found that his companion appeared pale and horrified. Harry gave him a questioning look to no avail. The parlor was huge and it was a long walk to the table in the center. Mrs. Wickem took it with a slow stride, soft, broad arm firmly around Harry.

"You know, Harry," she said in a soft voice. "I so clearly remember that fateful day seventeen years ago when the papers declared that evil had been banished. They seemed quite unable to explain exactly how that had come to be. The only possible explanation was that an infant somehow defeated him." She paused and *hmmmed* in memory. They had reached the table. Harry was beginning to anticipate manipulation, so when she turned him to face her, her soft cheeks reminding him only vaguely of Aunt Marge, he didn't resist. She went on, "I thought to myself, that must be one strange boy. And one so simultaneously fortunate and unfortunate."

She gestured at a chair and graciously said, "Please have a seat, and I will see what the progress is on lunch."

Harry thanked her and pulled out a surprisingly heavy iron chair. Aaron took a seat beside him, adjusting the beaded cushion a little impatiently. He still looked mortified. When they were alone, he put his head in his hand and said, "Ugh. She's worse than I could have imagined--and I thought I could imagine a lot."

"What's wrong?" Harry asked.

Aaron gaped at him. "What's wrong? You just went through that, and you ask what's wrong?"

"I don't mind," Harry laughed. Which was the truth, though more than an afternoon of it would be a different thing. At Aaron's utter shock, Harry tried to explain. "I can take being doted on. Really. I had a dearth of doting as a child." Aaron seemed to accept that, but he still looked strained. Harry, wanting to reassure him more, went on, "My Aunt Petunia used to dote on my cousin Dudley all the time when we were little. Kind of like that," he said, gesturing at the door Aaron's mum had disappeared through. "Made more of a point of it in front of me, in fact. All the while telling me how useless I was, and not feeding me enough, and pretending I didn't exist whenever they could. So really, I don't mind a little make-up doting," he finished with a grin.

Aaron sat back, looking vaguely sympathetic. "I still need a bracer," he said and reached for a crystal decanter full of a dark red liquid that was just one of a veritable forest of fancy containers taking up the fourth place setting at the table. "Want some?"

"No. Thanks though."

"Pour out the Sauternes instead, my dear boy," Mrs. Wickem chided brightly as she swept back into the room followed closely by Plumley carrying plates.

"Mmm," Aaron murmured, as a plate was placed before Harry. "Goose liver paté. My favorite. You've outdone yourself, my man."

The butler opened a bottle of peach-colored wine and poured a splash out for each of them. Before he could turn completely away, Mrs. Wickem said, "Plumley, did you see whom dearest Aaron has brought for luncheon?"

Plumley, looking bored, glanced around the table as though noticing for the first time that people were actually sitting at it. He blinked several times at Harry. Mrs. Wickem prodded, "Surely you recognize Mr. Potter?"

Plumley's face underwent some sort of distorted metamorphosis, or perhaps it simply was too unaccustomed to holding any expression. Stunned, he held out his hand and Harry shook it. "Most . . . thrilled to meet you, sir," Plumley breathed.

He clasped his hands before him formally and stood straight, gazing around the table as though he had just woken up. A bit unsteadily he announced, "Yes. Perhaps, I shall go prepare the next course, then."

When the door had swung itself closed, Aaron said in awed tones, "That's a first. I don't think he's ever been thrilled about anything." He and his mother shared a shocked look before they started eating, and Harry followed suit, immediately thinking that he could put up with lots more doting for food like this. Winky cooked well but this was something else. There were soft warm onions draped over the cold paté and a streak of something fruity and red beside it for dipping and the wine, while almost sickly sweet, went down very well between bites. He must have been making unconscious noises of appreciation because Aaron broke out laughing. "Enjoying it?" he asked.

"It's really good," Harry insisted, wishing the plate were a little fuller. He ate slowly to savor it.

Harry soon learned why the first plate had seemed sparse. Uncountable courses followed that first one and he fast filled up. During a pause, Mrs. Wickem asked with great feeling, "Harry, I am curious about something and perhaps you will be able to answer this for me."

Harry adjusted the napkin in his lap and gave her his attention. Sunlight was now slicing in through the top of the window and sending shattered beams of itself off the crystal on the table. "Of course," he replied, expecting some difficult question about Voldemort or Ministry politics.

She put a broad hand on Harry's arm and asked, "How is my dear Aaron doing in his apprenticeship?"

Harry smiled and suppressed a laugh. "He's doing fine. Why do you ask?" He looked between them. Aaron had sunk back into mortification with a frown.

She replied, "I can never know what his answers mean. In school, he always said he was doing fine, always seemed happy, but he was not, in fact, doing so well."

"He *is* doing fine," Harry repeated, feeling odd assessing someone five years older than himself. Somehow it seemed Aaron did not agree with his marks and began fiddling with one of the oddly shaped spoons above his plate whose function Harry had no clue about. Aaron was biting his lip awfully hard too.

"Well, that is good to know." She gave her son a soft look before standing with unexpected lightness. "I'll just see to the pastries."

The door swung closed behind her. Aaron was still biting his lip and slouching as though to examine the spoon better. Harry asked, "What's the matter?"

"I'm not doing that well," he pointed out, sounding peevish.

"What makes you say that?" Harry thought over their training. "You do fine on all the spells. You did fine on the review examination."

"I stink on readings. You always know the answers."

"No, I don't. Vineet always does, and then Kerry Ann. You and I are in the bottom half of that."

Aaron huffed and confessed, "It is so hard for me to do the readings. Ten minutes into it and I'm totally bored and going nutters. It's like torture. No, actually, I would take a Crucio most days rather than finish the readings."

"Well, why don't you have someone read them out to you. A girlfriend or something."

Aaron's face twisted in thought. Harry considered that he was like Ron in that his mental impressions went right to his features. "That's a thought," he said, sounding upbeat. He arranged his silver more neatly and said, "How did you get



through everything you've faced being so damn nice, Potter? I would spit spells in every direction I'd have been so angry."

"I had moments like that, believe me."

With a half grin Aaron asked, "Similar to the time you took Rodgers down a few?"

"A bit like that. Not as articulate. I trashed Dumbledore's office, for example." Harry's heart picked up a bit; he had never told anyone that.

"You what?" Aaron was stunned, and impressed, most likely.

"All those little machines and balanced globes and things? Threw 'em everywhere." The memory made Harry hands clammy.

Aaron made a noise of surprise and put his hands on his head. "I so haven't sussed you, Potter. I can't even picture it. What did he do?"

More quietly, Harry said, "Nothing. He just sat there, said he didn't care about any of the things."

"Wow."

"I'd had a very bad day. The worst day of my life, I think. Or close to it."

A long pause ensued where the sound of organizing small plates could be heard just outside the door. Aaron said, "If you're trying to make me feel better, Potter, you're succeeding."

Their hostess returned with the butler, carrying stacks of pastries that made Harry's stomach feel like it might split just from looking at them.

An hour and numerous bear hugs later, Harry was allowed to depart. Aaron walked him back to the station. "Thanks. You really made her day," he said, rocking on his toes with his hands in his pockets, looking oddly shy.

"It was nice. And the food was great. I'll see you tomorrow."

Aaron gave him a wave before walking away.

At home, Harry settled in to read but ended up napping on the library lounge instead. He hadn't eaten so much since the last Halloween feast at Hogwarts. Later, as he settled in with a pot of tea to try his readings, Harry wished his guardian were there, but Snape wouldn't be visiting for at least two weeks, he had said. Harry pulled a sheet of parchment across his book and wrote out a note asking Snape if he thought there were only two revelation spells for charmed animals, like his text said, because it seemed like there ought to be more. It was a silly question, but Harry needed an excuse to write yet again. At the bottom he almost added that he missed him, but didn't.

\* \* \*

Harry brought one of Snape's letters with him to training on Monday. In it, he stated that Sinistra had in the past taught attenuation and was more than willing to assist Vineet. Since her classes were in the evening, she suggested that afternoons were better.

Rodgers perused the note and said, "Ask if you can bring him up sometime this week, then. Tomorrow, if possible."

Harry wrote two letters at lunch, one to Professor Sinistra about Vineet and one to Snape about arranging a visit for dinner at his relatives. Even though he himself had reservations about the plan, he presented it as something foregone. Upon rereading it, he wondered if Snape would see through that, even though his words covered his uneasiness pretty well.

When he arrived home, Harry had two replies waiting in the window box. Sinistra was indeed willing to begin tutoring Vineet tomorrow, making Harry think his description of the Indian's current magic must have alarmed her. The other was from Snape, in it he said, *After dragging you to the coven enough times, it cannot be within my rights to decline.* Harry wrote to Polly right then and even stepped out into the fast-cooling evening with Kali on his shoulder to post it at the train station. He dropped it into the cold steel mouth of the post box and looked around the quiet village. As awkward as he imagined it would be to have Snape and himself at dinner with Pamela, Polly, Patricia and family, he found he really wanted it to happen, ached a little for it even.

Kali sniffed the air when the breeze came up. Harry, with no cloak, found it chilling and quickly walked home. In the garden he paused and listened but no unnatural sounds emanated from amongst the last of the flowers.

\* \* \*

After lunch the next day, Harry took Vineet by Floo into Hogsmeade. "Britain's only all-Wizarding village," Harry announced as they stepped into the street, which unfortunately had a row of thick clouds hanging just above it. Harry pulled his cloak over his shoulders for warmth against a sudden wind.

"Hello, Harry!" Someone said as they passed. Harry recognized the shop clerk from Glad Rags and greeted her back. The next person they passed greeted him as well.

"You have many friends," Vineet observed as they walked out of town.

"I guess," Harry admitted. The castle came into full view almost immediately. "Hogwarts Castle," he announced, hoping he didn't sound the way Mr. Weasley did the other day.

They walked up the lawn, which Harry had remembered as being smaller than it was today, and up the front steps. Since it was during class, the Entrance Hall was deserted. Harry wondered if this place would ever feel unfamiliar. "Professor Sinistra's letter said to come up to her office," Harry explained as he headed for the staircase. "Oh, but you have to see this," he said, diverting to the Great Hall. Just inside the doors he gestured at the ceiling. "Charmed to show the sky outside," Harry explained. Some older students looked up at them curiously from the other end of the long tables.

"Ah, I thought you would be showing me something else."

Harry let the door close. "What do you want to see?" he asked.

"The place where the Unnamed One fell."

"You're standing on it," Harry pointed out and then added a grin.

Unusually startled, Vineet looked down and stepped quickly off the spot he had been on. "Here?" he asked, looking around for some sign. "Not there?" he asked in confusion.

Harry followed where he pointed and saw that a brass plaque had replaced one of the stones. He bent over to read it. "*Here Voldemort perished,*" he read. The date was printed around the edge in flowing longhand. "Hm." Harry backed up and surveyed the scene. "No, definitely where you are standing," he said to Vineet.

"Such few feet hold little meaning," Vineet intoned, also bowing to read the plaque. When his eyes came up they held that reverence that they had lost of late.

"Sinistra's waiting," Harry said to get them moving on.

Professor Sinistra walked them down to the Defense classroom for tutoring. "Professor Snape has taken his class outside today. Wanted to show them a few nasty creatures Hagrid collected from the forest." She pushed a few desks aside with a

wave of her wand and clasped her hands before her. Her complicated earrings caught the light as she looked Vineet over. "Well, Mr. Abhayananda, I have been given some background details. You have been using a mismatched wand, correct?"

"I have been using my family wand," he conceded.

"That is the usual way one ends up requiring such tutoring. Let me see your old and new wands."

Harry sat in one of the front desks and observed. He had been given loose instructions about escorting Vineet here, so he used the lack of clear orders to return as an excuse to stay.

"There are many ways of reducing magic when one is too old to learn by instinct. One is by narrowing." She moved a stout granite monolith away from the wall into the middle of the floor. "But," she held up a finger, "one must do so *without* focusing one's power. Otherwise even harmless spells can become dangerous." She demonstrated a simple torch spell, then a narrow unfocused casting of it that produced a very useless little spot of light on the granite, and then a narrow focused version that left a waft of smoke and a small dark spot on the stone. "Give it a try."

Vineet produced far more than a waft of smoke on his first attempt, and his second. After many attempts and a little progress on reducing his power, he said in frustration, "That is harder than one expects."

Lecturing now, she said firmly, "Everything we are going to work on requires practice."

Vineet nodded and concentrated harder. After another long round of attempts the air had grown hazy with smoke. His shoulders slumped in defeat. Harry was about to get up and offer encouragement but Sinistra stepped in before he had the chance and put her hands on the Indian's upper arms. "Mr. Abhayananda . . . we have many, many, techniques we can try. We are just getting started." Her tone was compassionate, unlike anything Harry had heard from her as a student. It got through to Vineet though and he straightened and returned to himself.

An hour later the door opened and students began to step in. Harry stood and watched for his guardian. Ginny came in and gave him a wave and a smile. Snape entered last, with a student in tow, who was summarily told to *sit* rather forcefully. "And you as well," he said to a nearby Slytherin. "Detention, both of you." He looked up and said calmly, "Hello, Harry. Chapter 18 for next class and a short essay on . . . " He looked to be considering a topic appropriate to bad behavior. " . . . hazardous magical tree dwellers."

The bell rang then and most of the students departed, murmuring to each other about various topics. Nott and the other Slytherin sat sulkily in their desks, eyeing the rest of them darkly. Snape stepped over to Harry after dropping his books on a side table. "How is the tutoring progressing?" he asked.

"We are making headway," Sinistra responded pleasantly. "Folding seems to be the technique of choice in Mr. Abhayananda's case. I should start preparing for the evening classes, if you'll excuse me." To Vineet, she said, "Practice that on your own and come back perhaps on Thursday?" When he nodded gratefully, she departed with a small smile.

"And how are you?" Snape asked Harry, sounding unlike himself in this environment. Vineet wandered over to the windows and peered out with interest.

"Good," Harry assured him.

"Training going well?"

"Training is going fine," Harry said, amused by the outpouring. "You haven't been away from home that long, have you?" he teased.

Snape smiled lightly and touched him on the arm. "True, I'll be joining you this weekend. Come with me to my office a minute while I put my papers away."

"Vineet," Harry said, to pull his companion along.

With a glance at the surly Slytherins, Vineet followed. In Snape's office, Harry asked, "What'd they do to get detention?" The sunlight was just right for the windows on this side of the castle, and everything in the office, from the tall stacks of parchment to the empty cage on top of the shelves, glowed with light.

Snape frowned. "Wandered off during class and then pretended they had been there the whole time. I must wonder that they think I have got that easy to fool." He sat down and tilted his head back, apparently to rest it. "A few students have been exceptionally troublesome lately. But onto this weekend, how do you intend to travel? It is getting a little cold for the bike. I need to know what time we should depart on Saturday."

"Oh," Harry said. He hadn't thought about this. "It *is* a little cold for the bike," he agreed to stall. "I don't suppose there's a Floo node. But I think I can Apparate that far now. Although I haven't tried it." Vineet moved to examine the bookshelves, again giving them space.

Snape scratched his cheek. "That isn't the problem, Harry. Your relatives will expect to see Muggle transport, will they not?"

"Oh, yeah." Harry had been looking forward to the visit that he had let that detail slip by him. "We'll have to work something out. Too bad we don't have a car."

Snidely, Snape said, "I don't think so. Noisy miserable contraptions and if I'm not mistaken it is many hours drive by ground means and would require an entire day there and back."

Harry thought hard. "What if we Apparate nearby and take a cab? Except we should take a cab from a nearby town . . . one with a train station. No one would believe we took a cab all that way, but I've never been to the nearby towns to Apparate into. Hm. Well, my mum's cousin's sister knows we're wizards. She'll cover for us."

"That is good, otherwise it is possibly not workable. Does she have a car?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "I'll ask although Muggle post won't get there and back in time. Guess I'll telephone from the Ministry. I have her number."

Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Do let me know what time I need to be home on Saturday to depart."

Harry adjusted his cloak; he had forgotten how cold the castle could get. "Thanks for agreeing to come along."

Snape gave him a wry smile. "I could do no different. You should probably return to the Ministry."

Harry felt the box in his pocket and withdrew it. "I almost forgot. Can you give these to Suze for me?" he asked, holding out the sunglasses in their nice, hard-sided case. "I think they'll stay on during a match, even the way she flies."

Snape opened the box and carefully unfolded and held the shiny, Muggle, plastic sunglasses to the light. He raised a brow at Harry. "Certainly." His lips twitched slightly as he said it, Harry was certain.

"Thanks. It was good to see you," Harry insisted, generating another wry but different smile. "Ready to go, Vineet?"

On the walk back down the lawn, Harry asked, "Did Professor Sinistra help at all?"

Vineet replied, "I am hopeful now. I could feel some measure of control at the end of the lesson."

Harry hadn't noticed this from what they had been doing, but he was willing to trust the other's judgment and his own anxiety eased. "That's good to hear. Hey, shall we stop for a butterbeer?"

Inside the Three Broomsticks it was relatively quiet. Madam Rosmerta came over as soon as they entered. "Harry, my Harry," she said affectionately. "Oh, who is your friend?" she backed off to ask in a low tone. Harry introduced them and

Rosmerta put an arm around Vineet's shoulder to lead him to the best table. "My but you are a handsome one . . . but handsome ones are always taken, right?"

"I am assuming you are inquiring if I am married," Vineet said, appearing perplexed by this rather outgoing woman. She tweaked him on the chin.

"She likes you," Harry said and pulled out a chair for himself.

"I have a wife already, yes," Vineet stated, making Harry look up in surprise.

"Ach! Of course," Rosmerta sighed theatrically and brushed her forehead with her bar rag. "Your free butterbeer, Harry, I will fetch it," she added in a tragic tone.

Vineet sat down beside Harry and looked at him in consternation. "What?" Harry asked.

"Your free butterbeer. It is going well with the free sundaes."

"I . . . They . . ." Harry tried and failed to come up with words. "People like to give me things," he finally said in exasperation.

"Hm," Vineet muttered but was interrupted by their warm mugs arriving.

"So, a wife?" Harry prompted to change the subject.

"Of course. You do not have one?"

"Well . . . no," Harry replied and then laughed. He couldn't even picture being married, or to whom. "So when do we meet her?"

"If I gain a little more confidence in my attenuation, I will send for her. She is living with my mother in India. She did not want to journey until the stay was certain. It is often this way."

"Oh," Harry said, feeling sympathetic. "But she has your mother for company," he observed.

Vineet shifted his mug on the table without picking it up. "I am thinking that my wife is getting eager to move now." He had stated this flatly, without humor, but Harry smiled into his mug.

"That works."

Vineet finally drank some of his butterbeer. "In a way. It does not generate happiness, however."

\* \* \*

On Saturday, Snape arrived home as Harry stood by the mantel shouldering his cloak. "Sorry, Harry, rather a day, and with more student difficulties. I see you are ready to depart."

Snape sounded slightly frazzled, so Harry said, "Do you want to rest up a bit? We are supposedly coming from Highbury on Wye so we could believably be late."

Snape removed his soot-dusted gloves and rubbed his hands together. "Let me wash up at least."

Harry waited in the dining room, feeling more anticipation than a simple dinner warranted. Snape finally returned, looking better than his average, which Harry felt grateful for. "Ready?"

"You are certain you can take us both?"

Harry nodded. "Yep. I practiced this morning a few trips back and forth."

Snape held out his arm, Harry put his hand firmly around it and forcing himself not to think too hard, scrunched down a large paper ball and imagined the shady area under the willow in Godric's Hollow. Harry opened his eyes when he heard a bird scolding above him. The wind moved the long grass of the graveyard and made Harry tighten his cloak and wish for gloves himself.

Snape stepped out from under the low branches and looked about with his usual sharp gaze. Harry followed, detouring over to his parent's marker. The glass egg didn't have any flowers now and the remaining silvering had corroded from the mirror, leaving it a black square framed by tarnished silver. Snape stood a few rows off at the crux of two aisles, waiting with his head down. Feeling heavy in his chest, as he always did, Harry finally stepped away toward the gate. Snape joined him in silence and they walked that way through the village, down the narrow lane and finally up the grass path to the house. The wind grew stronger as they walked uphill, channeled by the adjoining hills that gave the place its name.

Harry knocked and the door opened almost immediately. "Come in, come in," Polly welcomed, her mittened hand gesturing as she disappeared from view. Harry led the way into the kitchen where many things were cooking on the stove, and the counters which were usually crowded, were packed tight with dishes and more pots. When he reached the stove he received a warm, one-armed hug. "Just a moment," she said and turned off a burner while stirring another pot. She finally put the spoon aside and rubbed her hands on her apron. "Well, this must be . . ." Her face changed a bit as she actually looked at Snape. " . . . your adoptive father." Her eyes went to Harry as though to verify what should have been obvious.

"Yes," Harry confirmed pleasantly, unfazed. "This is Severus Snape."

"Ah. Well . . ." She reached out a hand and shook Snape's. "Welcome to the Evans' place." Snape bowed at that, looking stern. Polly frowned lightly before going on with oddly measured speech, "Harry, would you be a dear and fetch the children? They are out in the neighboring field looking for four-leaf clovers."

"Sure," Harry said and aborted removing his cloak. He stepped back out and looked either way before moving out of view.

Polly turned back to her cooking only after giving Snape a much longer look. Farther inside the house other voices rose in laughter. "I don't know quite what I was expecting, Mr. Snape, but you are not it." She stirred a large pot of mashed potatoes before moving things around and putting another on. The pot she stopped stirring began to bubble violently.

"I assure you that . . ." Snape took out his wand and charmed the wooden spoon in the potatoes to stir on its own. " . . . I am Harry's guardian."

She watched the spoon in surprise for a few turns before going on with other things. She took a pie crust out of the oven and poured filling from a pan on top of the fridge into it. "Your name is actually familiar. Is it possible James Potter would have spoken of you?"

"Not unlikely," Snape replied. In the heat of the kitchen he shucked his cloak off and draped it over his arm.

"You can put that down in the next room," she suggested.

Snape did so and returned to stand in the doorway, arms crossed.

She put the pie back in the oven and set the loudly clicking dial. "Yes, I'm quite certain I've heard that name. An odd sort of name, isn't it?" When Snape merely shrugged, she said, "Yes, Snape. . . I'm quite certain, in fact, that James rather disliked you."

"The feeling was mutual," Snape stated calmly. "Whatever it is you are getting at, you may go to directly. I expect Harry will return momentarily."

She uncovered a roast on the small table and prodded it with a long fork. "Now, give an old woman time to put old memories together." She took out a carving knife, prompting Snape to say, "May I assist?" She shrugged and held out the knife, but Snape had his wand in his hand and with a wave, the roast was reduced to slices on the plate. She looked between the empty pan and the full plate before saying, "You do a lot of cooking, then?"

"I have an elf for that. But I do a great deal of potion brewing and ingredient preparation, which is rather similar."

She set the pan aside on the floor. "You are a dry one, aren't you? Harry does speak of you fondly though. I wonder what his father would think of that?"

"I don't know, nor care, frankly," Snape replied darkly.

She put the long fork aside and looked at him hard. When she didn't speak, Snape said in a low voice, "Yes, the worst you can remember James Potter saying of me is most likely true. Or was. You must have sent Harry on a rather roundabout errand."

"If he knew exactly where to go, it wouldn't have been. The children do like their hiding places."

Snape sighed and said, "I appreciate your concern for Harry. He is in need of relatives who understand him rather than vilify him. It is one of the things I cannot heal on my own." The voices from the other side of the house rose and fell in boisterous conversation. Snape tilted his head and waited for silence before continuing. He had caught her off-guard with that comment and she was now more thoughtful than suspicious.

She asked, "Does Harry know that his father hated you so?"

"Yes. And Harry has despised me just as much although he is not as good at it, since his father's personality is tempered by Lily's disposition as well."

Polly smiled, apparently in memory. "Yes, a lovely woman. Very sad what happened."

Snape watched the door in anticipation but there was no sign of Harry. Polly wasn't finished. "The worst James ever accused you of . . . is rather terrible," she stated while spooning string beans into a bowl.

"Almost certainly."

"And all true?" she asked, sounding amused which may have been a measure of her confusion.

"Probably. The worst he could have accused me of . . . certainly was."

She stopped suddenly and a string bean fell onto the floor from the hovering spoon. "He included you in with those trying to hunt them down." She resumed spooning. "I remember James warning Ed and I to be on the lookout for odd visitors . . . characters in black hooded robes with masks, that sort of thing. Seemed like a bit of a game, really . . . until that night." She sounded unseated.

Silence fell between them. She sprinkled fried onions over the heaping bowl. "And now you have Harry."

"Yes," he replied mildly.

"And you with that wand of yours, not much someone like me could do about that."

"You misunderstand," Snape stated. "I could hardly wish Harry any harm."

Her eyes asked for reassurance of that, but looked doubtful of getting it.

Snape sighed lightly and crossed his arms. "Harry very much needs people around him who understand him. I have no need for you to understand me beyond that." He moved to the door to peer through the window. Harry was at the far side of the long field, approaching with two children, one by the hand. Speaking quickly, Snape said, "The Harry I took in a year ago last summer was not the one approaching now. He was worn down, used up even, by the task a heartless prophecy had set him to, which was to destroy the vilest, most powerful wizard in half a century. He had no family to speak of. He had been Voldemort's puppet. He was disbelieved regarding everything that mattered, and not given help when he most needed it." Snape exhaled, frustrated at trying to explain. "I gave him a home--something he had never had. I drew him out of his past--something only I, who had also been the Dark Lord's puppet, could do."

She covered the string beans with the plate she had been holding for this. "So this is about redemption, then?"

Snape shook his head with a frown and reached for the doorknob. Quietly, he said, "There is no redemption for me," and pulled open the door just as a small boy, running full tilt, ran up the steps, and without pausing, inside and through the kitchen.

Harry was carrying the girl. "Oof, you are heavier than you look," he breathed as he put her down. "Hey, Severus, getting to know Mrs. Evans?"

"Yes, of course," he replied evenly with no hint of the seriousness of the conversation.

"Why don't you head on in and sit down?" she invited, arranging other things quickly in the small available spaces.

Harry noticed the self-stirring spoon and gave Snape a shake of the head before leading the way through the house to where the voices emanated.

"Harry!" Pamela exclaimed, pushing her chair back and coming around to greet him as he entered "And . . . this must be your father, adoptive father. No family resemblance there, is there?" she teased.

"This is Severus," Harry said, and introduced everyone except Patricia's husband who stood to shake Snape's hand.

"Sit down, we've been famished waiting for you," Patricia complained with a wide grin.

Dishes began arriving and Pamela jumped up and helped ferry them to the table. Harry tucked into a huge pile of everything, wrapped in the cheery house and relatives.

"So, Mr. Snape," Pamela asked, "What do you teach?"

Snape, who had been monitoring Mrs. Evans' scrutiny of himself, took a moment to formulate a reply. "A diverse course covering various, what you might call, folklore and European myths." Harry's brow started to knit in confusion, but it faded quickly. Snape went on, "It is a new topic for me, I used to teach chemistry."

"That's a change," Patricia's husband exclaimed, one of his few contributions.

"So what kinds of myths?" Patricia asked curiously.

"Mythical creatures, for example," Snape said. "Basilisks, sirens, things of that nature."

"That's very interesting. Did you like his class?" Pamela teased Harry.

Harry grinned, "Yeah, except that he graded me really hard so no one could think he was being too easy on me."

"Did you really?" Pamela asked and the sisters laughed.

Hours later, when they finally put on their cloaks to depart, Snape pulled Mrs. Evans aside and let the door close to the outside. Everyone was seeing them off, which had necessitated calling an actual cab to pick them up. Snape said quickly,



"I am considering suggesting to Harry that he apply for a dispensation to be allowed to reveal his wizardry to his blood relatives, your two daughters. If you have reservations, however, I won't."

Her eyes widened. "Is that how it works?"

"It is complicated, but given who he is and his lack of blood family, I expect the Ministry will accept it."

She put one hand on her hip and moved a spoon from a bowl to the sink. "You are a puzzle, Mr. Snape."

Dryly, he said, "I have no desire to be easily understood, really."

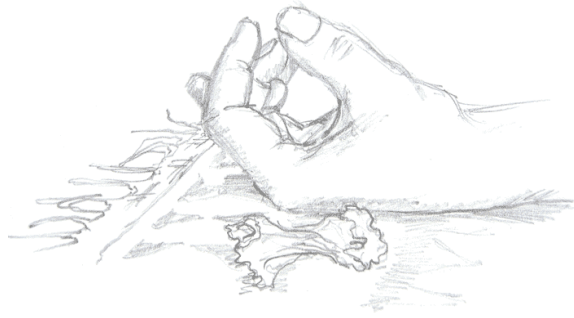
"I think Pammy and Patty would be thrilled to hear that magic is real."

Someone knocked on the door from the outside. "They could not tell anyone."

"They can keep a secret," she assured him. "As can I," she added.

Snape bowed faintly, opened the door and stepped out. Harry asked, "Ready to go?"

At the end of the grass path they had no choice but to get in the cab. They rode in the direction of Highbury on Wye for a few miles before asking the cabby to drop them off at a pub at an unmarked crossroads. They tipped him well and Disappeared when the cab disappeared over the next rise.



## Chapter 66 -- Mum Galore, Part II

Harry arrived for Monday training feeling good about everything. He had dropped a thank you letter to Mrs. Evans in the post on the way out the door along with a letter to Elizabeth who sounded in her last letter as though she were having an exciting time at university.

They were still working on combined spells in training, and Vineet, who was rather good at it before Sinistra's tutoring, was even better now at matching his power to another. Harry, who was his usual partner got the main benefit of this, although Rodgers starting shifting partners around by the end to give the others a chance to work with Vineet and hopefully pick up some of his skill. Vineet, who was not accustomed to being the best at spells, gave Harry a rare smile when they finally broke for lunch. Everyone but Vineet was exhausted and shuffled out of the training room with tired sighs.

Harry was feeling rather relieved that the Indian was certain to stay on past the six month review. He still could not risk casting a spell at anyone other than an Auror but he was gradually improving on this. As they settled into the break room, Vineet passed the cold teapot to Harry to heat. Harry obliged and tapped it with a hollow *tink!* He then asked, "So, have you invited your wife to come?"

The others stopped what they were doing; even the older apprentices, Munz and Blackpool, turned to listen in.

"You're married?" Kerry Ann demanded. "You never said."

Vineet shrugged in confusion. "It is normal. I don't understand your surprise." He turned to Harry, who was taking out the sandwich Winky made for him from last night's leftover roast chicken. "And yes, I will do that this week." In a lower voice, he said, "I am having you to thank, Harry."

"I'm glad you can finish your training now, Vineet. Very glad."

Vineet, appearing embarrassed at that, ducked his head over his bowl of curry.

"So, what's her name?" Kerry Ann asked. "Let's hear all about her..."

Harry, who expected Vineet to be reticent, was surprised when he began to give her family history, father's occupation, a description of his mother's house where she now lived. Harry listened to these details as he ate.

"So where'd you meet?" Kerry Ann then asked, just pausing between bites long enough to get another long part of the story.

"Where did we meet?" Vineet echoed. "At her house, I suppose, when I went to meet her parents to finalize the engagement."

"Huh?" Aaron said. "You have an arranged marriage?"

Vineet gave him a lowered brow. "Everyone does. You are very strange here with this hit-or-miss pretending to be in love system you have." He sounded honestly critical.

None of them could come up with a decent response to that for some reason. "But really," Kerry Ann finally insisted. "How can you live with someone you don't love?"

Vineet looked around at all of them. "You are none of you married. You do not know of what you are speaking."

Kerry Ann's face twisted in thought. "Well, you have us there. I'll give you that."

Harry arrived home to find a letter from Snape on the table. He read it as he walked upstairs to drop off his things and stopped dead on the center step upon reading Snape's suggestion about the dispensation. The thought had not occurred to him before. Through all the hassle of arranging a visit, he had assumed they could never know. Standing there, he was certain the Ministry would allow it if he asked and that made his heart feel light.

*I asked Mrs. Evans directly--that is why I we were detained leaving the house. She gave her consent to it and assured me that her daughters would be discrete.*

Snape's talking to Mrs. Evans before speaking with him, made him a little annoyed, but the thought of visits where his distant cousins knew what he was and what his parents had been, thrilled him enough that he easily put it aside.

The very next day at the Ministry, Harry used his lunch break to visit the Magical Filings office. He waited for his turn at the window a little impatiently; although not outwardly so because a witch had already tried to let him cut in on the queue and he had declined. Behind the desk sat a thin old witch with jeweled cat-eye glasses on a silver chain. "Yes, next," she said in a nasal voice.

"I would like to file a dispensation to . . . " Here he pulled out the note he had written out from one of the Ministry rules booklets he had been given over the last few months--the ones he hadn't really touched otherwise. " . . . allow me to inform a blood relative that I'm a wizard. It is called an Extended and Distant Blood Filing, I think."

She frowned and chewed her gum three times before getting up and going to a cabinet and leafing through a drawer. On the top of the cabinet, paperclips were busy hooking themselves into a chain. By the time she stood straight with a hand on her lower back, the clips were jumping rope with themselves and a seal that had been inanimate until then.

She handed a form over to him. "Fill this out with copies of the appropriate records and bring it back. NEXT."

Harry stepped away and gaped at the hundreds of tiny boxes that covered the form. He jumped literally at the identically packed back of it. "Aye," he breathed as he hurried back to his department.

\* \* \*

Pulling paperwork together became Harry's primary free-time activity over the next weeks. He visited Muggle offices in many different counties. He wrote away for property records. He discovered a dusty Ministry records office he didn't know existed for birth certificates going back three generations, because he had to prove that Pamela and Patricia were actually blood relatives. When the gangly man handed him an unexpectedly thick file of Evanses Harry had stared in dumb surprise before thumbing through for the ones he needed copies of--all under the watchful eye of the clerk.

"What's this tag mean?" Harry asked of the orange dot beside the name on the file label.

"That is color code for, uh, intermittent magical progeny."

"What?"

As though Harry were slow, the man said, "It means magic isn't constant in the family. It shows up only random-like."

Harry was stunned. "Does that mean it's shown up before?"

The man reached over and flipped expertly through the oddly sized papers and decorative certificates in the file. "Here, they're marked in orange too."

Harry accepted the birth certificate the man held out. "Clayton Evans born 1632," he read, then flipped madly through the pile. "Gerabald Evans born 1760. I didn't know there were others."

The man shrugged and, seeming slightly miffed, tapped the remaining pile to make it jump back into order. "Got whatcha need?"

"Yeah, thanks. I need copies of these seven."

Upon his return to his floor, he encountered Mr. Weasley in the corridor. "Hello, Harry. How are you, my boy?" He didn't wait for Harry's reply. "You probably have a ton of invitations, but I thought I'd give you one anyway." He held out a card and Harry accepted it; it was an invitation to a Halloween party at the Burrow.

"Thanks. I'll definitely be there." A pair of witches went by, each hovering a large trunk. They took them into the file room at the end.

Mr. Weasley said, "It'd be nice to see you. Just one set of Weasley twins this time."

"Oh, that's right. I'm really sorry I couldn't make the last picnic--"

Mr. Weasley hit him on the arm. "No problem, dear boy. I know you're busy."

"I had something I really needed to do," Harry said at the same time. "Thanks for the invitation, though." He gestured that he needed to go into the workout room.

Mr. Weasley looked as though he wanted to say more, but he merely gave a little wave and stepped away. Harry thought he seemed a little strained, but he forgot about it as soon as they settled in for reading review.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Harry stood opposite Vineet as they sequenced through their normal blocking drills. Vineet wore his usual furrowed brow that spoke of frustration. "You are pulling your attacks again," he stated.

Harry frowned lightly and lowered his wand. Vineet's blocks were unpredictable, since many of the attenuated ones required fine power control. Excess power usually resulted in an exploded or collapsed block. Harry was very tempted to explain that he really didn't want to hurt him, but decided instead to say, "I'm putting a lot into my attacks, as much as I do with the others."

Vineet also lowered his wand. "I wish to work on my blocking," he stated calmly although with almost a plead in his dark eyes.

"All right," Harry said. When he cast a stronger Blasting Curse, Vineet had to leap back and pour power forward in his Chrysanthemum block. His look of consternation grew deeper but he stepped forward with a determined expression and Harry moved on to a Freezing Curse.

When they changed roles, Harry's blocks held up well against the broad assault of his partner's spells. Deflecting and countering each overpowered attack appropriately required concentration and as the sequences repeated, Harry settled into an intense state that made his blood rush as the flashes and sizzling explosions flowed safely around him.

"Goes to show that Potter is used to being on the defensive," Rodgers drawled as he stepped over from explaining a detailed point about block nodes to Aaron. "Let's try a few combination attacks," he said, "since Potter appears bored. We'll be starting them next week in any event."

Vineet stepped back and Rodgers said, "Oh, no, continue. I'll match you as you sequence."

Vineet stepped through their usual attack sequence, with Harry blocking or countering each one. Rodgers added a contrary attack spell to alternate attacks from Vineet. When he did this Harry found his blocks wavering oddly and felt that he did indeed need practice at this. The fifth one of these attacks made Harry's block fail with a blindingly bright blue flare. Harry went to his knees, his legs suddenly unable to support him. Vineet stepped over and offered him a hand up. Harry, dizzy still, accepted it slowly.

"Problem, Potter?" Rodgers asked.

"Don't know, sir," Harry replied. He had never before felt quite so disoriented from being hit. He forced himself to his feet and blinked at the others. Looking around made him lose his balance and had to step backward to catch it.

"Down to the Healer, Potter," Rodgers ordered dismissively. Harry shook his head in a vain attempt to clear it, and stepped out of the workout room.

In the Ministry Healer's station Harry waited to be consulted by a young witch who seemed overwhelmed. She hurried through healing a nasty cut on the thigh of an older wizard that appeared to have been caused by the claw of something very large. Harry, feeling a little warm in the small closed room, slid his sleeves up off his wrists, and slouched down in the chair. His attention was caught by something on his arms several times before he managed to focus on it properly. Blue jagged streaks resembling an ephemeral net continuously walked up his forearms. Rubbing his skin had not effect on them. Harry stared at it uncomprehendingly while he waited.

Finally, the young Healer took a look at him, cast a few spells at him, and frowned deeply. "I don't know what that is on your arms," she said. "Some kind of spell rebound. I expect it will fade." He was released with the instruction that he should take it easy.

Harry sat out the rest of workout, which was almost over by the time he returned. Rodgers glanced with a frown at the strange electric lines on his arms and waved him to a desk. During the review session Harry could barely keep his eyes open. By the time he returned to Shrewsthorpe he was utterly exhausted, but fortunately Winky had tea and biscuits waiting for him, which helped perk him up.

With his books at his side, he studied for the next day, sleep tugging constantly and unwelcomingly at him as he turned each page of what seemed like endless chapters of mind-numbing information. He replied to Snape's most recent letter with a quick description of what he had learned in the last week. Hedwig took the letter away with her usual energetic flapping.

The next morning Harry wasn't feeling much better although the electric blue effect on his arms was indeed dimmer than the night before. He prodded at the underside of his left arm while he waited for the usual bacon and eggs to appear. The effect was so strange; walking strings of jagged blue glow flickered their way along just under his skin. When one disappeared off his fingers, another emerged from his upper arm.

Breakfast revitalized him as did coffee, but holding on during morning training took every ounce of strength he had. He actually wished, then felt guilty for it, that Vineet's spell power was still weak. Again he forced himself through afternoon review and then home.

The quiet house was a blessing to his raw, worn nerves. Harry ate dinner gratefully, then crawled straight into bed without even cracking a book or opening the afternoon post.

\* \* \*

Professor Snape sent off the student he had kept for detention, a Second Year Hufflepuff with an aggravating penchant for doing the exact reverse of what he was told. Snape imagined the boy's parents were relieved utterly that school had resumed. He sat at his desk and methodically pulled out the rolls of assignment sheets from tomorrow's classes as well as the grade book. As he recorded each grade in an unambiguous hand, his thoughts strayed to Harry, not for the first time

that day. Usually, he found himself half-expecting a visit from him, as Harry had frequently done the previous year. Now he found himself worrying about him, which was ludicrous; he had received an ordinary missive from him just yesterday. He shook himself and focused on the columns of meticulous green numbers before him.

\* \* \*

Friday, Harry didn't have any place he needed to be, which was good, because he yearned to sleep in. Which he did--until a very late ten in the morning and he could do this tomorrow as well, he thought with relief. As he made his way downstairs, he attributed his difficulty with negotiating the steps to excessive sleep. Rubbing his eyes, he waited for breakfast, or whatever Winky decided to prepare so late in the morning. Bacon and eggs and a pot of tea appeared eventually. He had a hard time pouring from the pot as though the porcelain had a shiver charm on it. Using the cozy, he managed to pour with both hands.

The hot tea and heavy food made him feel well enough to do some reading. He did this the library, his stretched his legs out on the lounge as he held one of his books on his lap. During the course of reading one chapter, he fell asleep at least three times. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, wondering why he was so drowsy after such a long night's sleep. Sitting up, he struggled through the remaining chapters for Monday, not certain if he had learned anything memorable from them. Tomorrow he would take some notes, perhaps.

At the end of the day, as he changed into his pyjamas, Harry noticed the blue effect was still there on the underside of his forearms. The strange ripples looked brighter. He wondered with a jolt if maybe they had not faded, but that they showed up better in the dark.

The next morning, Harry could barely force himself out of bed. He wondered if he had caught the flu, although it was hardly the season. He stumbled downstairs and took up his usual spot at the table with his books and parchments. One pot of tea disappeared and then another as he struggled to stay alert enough to read. He would have missed lunch had it not bumped him on the head as it appeared on the table.

Eventually evening came on. Harry looked forward to going back to bed as he sat at the dining room table and slowly, methodically studied. The hearth flaring startled him as he turned the page of a reference book on apprehension charms. Snape stepped out, ducking his tall frame as he did so. Harry greeted him warmly, very glad for the unexpected company.

Snape hesitated at Harry's tone, giving him a faint smile. "Good to see you studying even without my constant presence."

"They haven't given us any less to read," Harry tried to quip, but it came out weakly.

Snape put his satchel down and stepped over to him. He glanced at the open book before Harry and then looked him over with narrowed eyes. He finally said, "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm tired. I've been tired since I got hit during paired spell blocking at training."

Snape's hand brushed his shoulder. "Did you see a Healer?"

"Yes. Right after." Harry rubbed his eyes hard and pushed the book away to fit his elbow on the table so he could lean his cheek on his hand and cease holding his head up. His foggy brain remembered the blue lines. "But this strange effect hasn't gone away like the Healer thought it would," he commented as he tugged his sleeve up.

Snape grabbed up Harry's arm so suddenly that it made him jump. "How did you get this?" Snape demanded.

"At training. On Wednesday," Harry answered groggily, unable even to rise to Snape's alarm.

"Wednesday?" Snape whispered in disbelief. "What happened?" he demanded, sounding almost nasty.

Harry awkwardly explained about the paired spell attacks they had been practicing. About how his block had failed.

"Rodgers was one of the ones spelling you?" Snape asked. Harry could hear suspicion behind it.

"Yes. He didn't know what it was on my arms either."

"I'm surprised," Snape sneered, "since he fancies himself the Death Eater expert." He turned to the hearth, scooped a clump of Floo power and with a jerking motion, threw it onto the grate and requested the Ministry Auror's office. He tossed his cloak back out of the way as he knelt before the hearthstone. "Nymphadora Tonks, please," Snape demanded when a head appeared.

When Tonks' head floated into view, greeting Snape in a friendly way, Snape laid into her about Harry's condition. Harry sat rigid, holding his breath at the tone of extreme anger.

"Wait, wait," Tonks interrupted. "Step back. I'm coming over." She was all seriousness when she appeared, didn't even apologize for knocking the poker rack over. When Snape showed her the rippling blue on Harry's arm, she asked Harry, "You still have that?"

Snape cut in. "Of course he does, it . . . You don't know what it is either?" he demanded. He paced once, rubbing his forehead with his fingertips. His cloak flared behind him as he turned. "You're too young, I suppose," he muttered.

"What is it?" Tonks asked in concern as she held Harry's wrist to examine it better.

"Sponteingero," Snape said. "A regenerating spell that is draining him as it propagates. It forms when two perfectly counter-phased netting spells are used simultaneously on an unprotected person. Voldemort's servants perfected it. Malfoy and Nott were particularly good at causing it to manifest."

"I don't think I've heard of that," Tonks said apologetically. "This happened by accident, I heard."

Snape stood and gazed at Harry in thought. "It was used for blackmail when there wasn't anything else to hold over the victim. It takes two to cause it, and two to eliminate it. The spell drains your magic as it feeds on it. You probably have no magic accessible at this point, given how long it has been."

Harry pulled out his wand, considered testing that, but then stashed it away again when Snape added quietly, "Eventually it will drain your life."

In alarm Tonks asked, "Can I help? What spell do you need to cancel, or should we take him to St. Mungo's?"

"It is not a complicated spell . . . but I would much prefer someone who has experience with this." He frowned in thought. "Moody has . . . do you know where he is?"

Tonks frowned. "He's off this week, but I could have him found . . ."

"Remus Lupin has experience with it as well," Snape added thoughtfully.

"He's at the Wheezes," Tonks offered. "He's been working for them off and on. We should get Harry to London where we can either find someone or take him to Mungo's."

Without hesitating Snape turned back to the hearth and contacted the three Ws on Diagon Alley. This time a password was required to get through. When one of the twins appeared, Snape asked, "Is Remus there right now?"

"He's just out on an errand. Should be back in a mo." His head turned and looked up at Harry and Tonks, "Wotcher!" he said.

"I am coming through with Harry to wait for him," Snape said, pointedly cutting off more small talk.

"Gotcha. Love to see ya." The redhead backed out quickly.

Snape stood and came over to Harry, lifted him to his feet by the arm, and held him steady. Harry, for his part, forced his shoulders back and tried to stand straight and unaffected. He was swimming in weakness so completely it was almost restful.

"The Floo Network is going to be disorienting for you in this state," Snape said, as he led Harry to stand before the empty grate. He took down the canister of Floo Powder and handed it to Tonks. "If you would throw for us," he said to her. At her nod he pulled Harry into the hearth, careful to ensure that Harry ducked under the mantel.

Harry, finding standing to be far more effort than he could expend, leaned against his guardian as they stood up in the chimney. "Tell me when you are ready," Tonks' voice echoed up into the chimney. As Snape's arms enfolded him, Harry rested his forehead on a shoulder and found himself trusting utterly that he would be taken care of. He wasn't used to this kind of faith in someone else, and wondered idly if all parents warranted that feeling.

The green flames distracted him from his musings and they were catapulted through the darkness. Dim hearths and fires roared past them, making Harry believe he was flying into oblivion. Just as he was losing track of himself, they stopped suddenly with Harry's landing softened by being held off the floor.

The dim, candlelit rooms that made up Weasley Wizard Wheezes' assembly and research area were disarrayed and crowded with odd assortments of things. One of the twins greeted them as they ducked out of the hearth. "What's wrong with 'arry?" he asked as he quickly moved to clear a box of candy rats on sticks off the nearest old straight-backed chair. The rats squealed in complaint.

Harry was helped to sit down, gratefully, because he felt sick and dizzy from the Floo as well as somewhat surprised to be whole and breathing. Snape kept a hand on his arm, he assumed to keep him from falling out of the chair. The hearth flared, lighting half the room, and Tonks appeared.

"Oy, so many visitors, Fred. We have to change the password again," George commented in false tones of being overwhelmed. He stepped over from the dim, far side of the long room.

While they waited, Snape explained about the spell. He held Harry's arm out and said, "It drains all the magic from its victim and then the very life force."

"Aye, Harry has no magic right now?" Fred asked. "My one chance to beat Harry in a duel," he said with relish, pulling his wand out and brandishing it. Snape took only one long stride to block him bodily, eyes flashing. Fred stepped back at his menacing move. "Only joking, Professor," he muttered panicky, quickly stuffing his wand back into his robe pocket and slinking aside.

Minutes later, the door opened and Lupin appeared, gingerly carrying a small glass jar. George leapt over and removed it from him and quickly put it aside in a cabinet. "Just a, uh, necessary ingredient for an experiment," he muttered.

"What is this?" Lupin asked upon seeing them all there. When Snape showed him Harry's left arm, he crouched quickly before Harry. "How did that happen?"

"It happened during his training," Snape explained, glancing sideways at Tonks. "Apparently an accident."

Tonks stiffened and frowned but did not respond. Lupin looked Harry up and down. "Looks like it's been a while . . ."

"Since Wednesday," Snape provided.

"Wednesday!" Lupin exclaimed. "You are doing very well in that case, Harry." He stood back up. "Let's get him on the floor," he said, pushing a stack of flattened boxes off the one clear corner of rug. "Take off his robe so we can see the tracings."



Many hands assisted in pulling Harry's robe down, revealing his grey t-shirt underneath. Urged to the floor, Harry rested his head back on the dusty, red rug. A discarded sweet wrapper crinkled in his ear; he reached up clumsily and tossed it away. More things were pushed aside so that Lupin could kneel on one side of him and Snape on the other.

His short sleeves were tugged up and thumbs pressed into the crux of each of his shoulders. "We are right on the nodes," said Snape instructively to Tonks, who appeared very worried as she stood before Harry's feet. "Ready?" Snape then asked Lupin, who replied by nodding grimly. "Harry," Snape said gently. "You are going to black out when we incant the spell. Don't fight it . . . you will wake up again shortly."

Harry nodded. His total faith was holding strong; although he wouldn't mind being allowed to sleep a little.

"On three," Lupin said and counted. "*Mutusborum*," they incanted together at the end of the count. Tonks gasped. Snape lifted Harry's now limp left arm and turned the underside upward. He and Lupin watched as the blue tracings slowed, grew sparse and then only appeared occasionally. A moment passed with no jagged line.

With his wand Snape tapped Harry on the chest and said, "*Locoinitio*," in a hurried way. Harry drew in a sharp breath.

"Too soon," Lupin criticized. Indeed, a few blue traces appeared again, but they remained sparse.

Snape sighed audibly. "Perhaps you should do the reanimation," he said in a tone of self-recrimination.

"*You* should, Severus," Lupin said. "We'll try it again after he catches his breath."

Harry opened his eyes and lifted his head. Snape said, "We didn't quite get it, Harry. We have to do it again."

"All right," Harry said quietly, resting his head back on the floor. He sounded disoriented.

Lupin counted down a second time and they repeated the spell. Harry again fell limp and quite still. "Count a slow ten after the last line appears," Lupin instructed patiently. They watched Harry's arm as the electric lines faded and finally stopped. Lupin counted aloud. At seven another line appeared and the count restarted. Snape fidgeted, repeatedly changing his grip on Harry's limp hand. One tense count after another was interrupted. Finally, they made it all the way to ten. Snape repeated the reanimation spell, with more power this time, enough to make Harry's body jump as he gulped air. "It's all right," Harry murmured as he exhaled.

From Harry's feet Tonks said, "I'm glad there was someone else to do that spell."

Harry's breathing slowed and he opened his eyes. Lupin tugged him to a sitting position as they continued to monitor his arms. "It's all right," Harry repeated dazedly.

No more lines appeared for several minutes. They helped him back into his robe before pulling him to his feet. Fred and George stood in paired, identical, stunned silences beside the hearth. Harry glanced at them and gave them a small smile.

"Feeling better?" Lupin asked.

"Yes," Harry replied, feeling real strength flowing in his limbs for the first time in days.

"Thank you, Remus," Snape said sincerely. He released Harry's arm when it was clear he could stand on his own.

"Anything for Harry," Lupin said in a teasing tone. When Harry looked over at him, Lupin said, "Stop by anytime. We're all usually here working most days."

"I was admiring your ingredient cabinet," Snape intoned.

"It is open for borrowing . . . I think," Lupin said

"Trades," Fred said. "We definitely do trades."

"Ready to go home?" Snape asked his charge. At Harry's nod Snape pulled the tin of Floo powder from his pocket and held it out for him. Harry took a handful and stepped before the hearth.

"Thanks," he said to the room, eyes dwelling on Lupin a little longer.

"I'll see you on Monday, Harry," Tonks said in a tone of concerned affection. "Rest well until then."

Back at the house in Shrewsthorpe, Harry immediately sat down in a chair at the table and breathed deeply. He felt much better although he also felt strangely numb. Snape arrived in a roar of flame. "Would you like dinner?" he asked after setting the Floo powder back on the mantel.

Harry's stomach growled at the thought, so he nodded. Snape stepped out into the main hall and down to the kitchen. Winky looked up from lifting a cauldron off the wall, clearly in the midst of dinner preparation. Snape crossed his arms and eyed the elf. "I was going to ask you to prepare dinner," he said dryly, "but that is apparently unnecessary."

She hung the oversized cauldron on a hook and swung it onto the fire, which was flaring high on recently added wood. "Winky make dinner," she stated reassuringly.

Snape watched her a long moment before turning to leave. Her voice stating, "Master Harry better," brought him up short. He turned his head around to her. "Yes," he confirmed quietly. They considered each other as Winky stood on the hearthstone and wrung her hands around the tea towel clutched between them.

"Winky is bound," she squeaked finally in some distress. "Very limited. Cannot order Master home. Only compel. Something very strange with Master Harry and Winky can only compel."

Snape stared at her, the long debate he had had with himself about checking on the boy cast itself into new light. In the end it was likely the reason he had decided to come home unplanned. "Thank you," he said.

Winky dropped her gaze and straightened her tea towel upon seeing the state of it. "House-elves get only worst wizards have to give," she said, tugging excessively on the bottom edge of the towel to pull out the wrinkles. "Masters very good wizards," she asserted. "Have nothing bad for Winky." Her oversized eyes finally came up to him, blinking sadly. "Winky not want to lose nice wizard family."

Snape swallowed consciously. "Neither do I," he said. After further thought he considered asking her if she were capable of compelling Harry to grow as well.

Winky pointedly turned back to her cooking. "Winky make dinner now."

"Thank you," Snape breathed again before stepping away. In the main hall he felt a delayed, twisting panic at the realization that it would have been truly ironic if Harry had died from such a thing.

Back in the dining room Harry sat in his usual seat, looking glum. He had had time to build up a list of apologies. "I'm sorry," Harry began when Snape stepped in. "I ought to be able to manage on my own for more than two weeks. I went to the Healer, she didn't know what it was either."

"Harry," Snape interrupted as he pulled out the chair across from him. He sat down and shook his head to indicate the apologetic speech could stop. Harry fell into a brooding silence instead.

When dinner arrived, Harry ate voraciously. He consumed two large servings of roast chicken by the end, followed by chocolates when they appeared.

"That and a good night's sleep should render you quite recovered," Snape stated, sounding relieved. When Harry's eyes tried to fall closed as he pulled one of his textbooks over from the stack beside him, Snape said, "Perhaps you should sleep instead."

Harry stumbled his way upstairs where he changed hurriedly and fell into bed.

An hour later, Snape stepped in to check on him. As he approached the bed, Harry rolled over and looked up at him in the dimness. "Hello," Harry said groggily.

"There is no sneaking up on you," Snape observed.

"Not when I'm asleep."

Snape sat on the edge of the bed. "Let me see your arm," he commanded.

Harry sniffed and pulled an arm out from under the light duvet. In the darkness it would have been easy to see the tracings. A long time passed before Snape said, "It has cleared. It was an unfortunate thing to have happen."

"It's all right," Harry said, pulling his arms back under the warmth. He held his breath as that brought an odd, slippery memory back. "Hm," he muttered.

"What?"

Harry exhaled. "I had the oddest dream when you and Remus hit me with the spell," he said, straining to remember the foggy world where his parents had approached. They had chastised him for being there, he recalled in confusion. Disjointedly they also seemed to expect him, although maybe that had been a second dream where they greeted him welcomingly. He blinked against the darkness, as he thought he remembered Dumbledore as well.

"You could not have dreamt," Snape said. "We used a Mutushorum on you, two of them, directly on the strongest magical nodes of your body. The only way to eliminate a self-propagating spell such as that is to cut it off from all energy."

"What are you saying?" Harry asked, shying away from the inkling he was getting.

"There was no activity in your brain with which to dream. You were effectively dead for sixty seconds the first time and nearly three minutes the second."

A chill ran over Harry's arms and chest. "Is it possible to see beyond the veil in that time?" he asked, fearful of the answer.

"I suppose." Snape shifted, crossing his arms. "What did you see?"

Harry hesitated as he sifted through the memory again and remembered his mother smiling; she hadn't seemed very old he considered, more Harry's own age. "My parents. Dumbledore." Harry remembered another figure moving through the snaking fog, a shy or self-recriminating one. "Maybe Sirius," he said and then had to swallow hard.

"You were speaking when you woke up," Snape said. "I thought it odd that you would have come to awareness that quickly."

Harry let his head fall back on the pillow. "I was talking to my parents," he explained. "They were apologizing for leaving me alone. How did they recognize me, I wonder?" He remembered the half figure of Dumbledore that appeared to be standing in a denser fog beyond his parents. "Dumbledore didn't say anything, just smiled." Harry rubbed his eyes and yawned. "You don't think that was real, do you?" he asked.

"I don't think the concept of reality applies in this case."

"Probably not," Harry murmured in reply. Tired, he rolled over and curled up. Snape took the hint and stood, although he hovered for a minute or more. Harry, realizing he was still there, rolled back and looked up at his faint grey outline in the dark room. "What is it?" Harry asked.

A pause ensued before Snape reluctantly replied, "I cannot help but think I would have deserved to have lost you this way."

"What?" Harry blurted, raising himself onto his elbow.

Snape exhaled before saying in a dark tone, "I certainly have stood by and watched it take others down."

Harry turned the lamp up a bit and sat up farther with a quick motion. "Severus," he started in an admonishing way, but didn't know where to go from there, just couldn't bear to have Snape feel as guilty as he sounded.

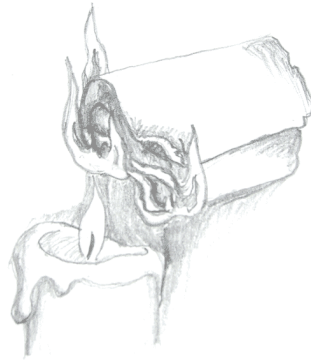
"You should rest," Snape said and turned to leave.

"Severus," Harry called him back as he stepped to the half-open door of his room. "Severus," Harry repeated, when Snape kept going. As his guardian grasped the door handle to open it farther, Harry said with a stab of concern at being ignored, "Dad."

That did bring Snape to a halt, arm immobilized mid-pull. Harry pushed himself out of bed and padded across the floor in bare feet. Snape turned just his head to him, his expression very odd and far away in the sharply shadowed light. "You wouldn't deserve that," Harry insisted. "How could you think that?"

Black eyes flicked over to him, reflecting the single flame of the lamp across the room. "I don't deserve *you*, Harry," Snape stated before again moving to leave.

"Severus," Harry said in exasperation but Snape stepped into the hallway. Harry leaned out the door and watched him walk away, unable to try the word 'dad' again because if Snape ignored him, Harry wasn't sure what it would do to him. Harry stared down the empty hallway after Snape went downstairs. Frowning deeply, he finally returned to bed and the nightstand where he found the last of an old bottle of sleeping potion and drank it down.



## Chapter 67 -- Removing the Mask

At breakfast the next morning, Snape's mood did not seem to have improved from the night before. Harry started eating the plate of food that was already at his seat when he arrived. Snape didn't speak and Harry, feeling bitter in his helplessness, finally decided to say, "Thank you for taking care of me." Snape nodded silently, holding his coffee cup before him without drinking from it. His expression was still too distant. Concerned, Harry tried to make conversation, "When do you go back?"

Snape said, "I need to leave for Hogwarts shortly."

Harry scratched his head. "I'll try to take better care of things," he said, sounding too eagerly helpful to his own ears. Snape's guilt must be tangling him up.

Snape set his cup down and pushed his plate away untouched. He stood and said in a quiet, commanding voice, "If you are in doubt about anything, owl me or even contact the Hogwarts Floo. Someone is always monitoring it, and they will think nothing of you contacting me."

"I'll do that," Harry insisted.

With a stony expression, Snape collected his things together and departed through the hearth. Alone, Harry pushed away his half-eaten breakfast and both plates sparkled away. He rubbed his eyes and forehead, trying to think of what to do. Eventually he gave up and fetched his books; he was very far behind for Monday.

\* \* \*

"Figures he would know," was the only response Rodgers had on Monday to Tonks' reciting of what had happened. Harry stonily let the comment pass, not noticing Vineet's alarm as the explanation was given. Harry's close concentration on their practice made everyone leave him be during the morning, for which he was grateful; he was afraid his temper might be short and didn't want to test it.

When they broke for lunch Vineet stepped to Harry's writing desk, looking grim and uncertain--an extension of his quiet demeanor that morning. Harry put his books together slowly to give the others time to move on to the tearoom. When he did stand, he moved confidently, but Vineet was looking down at his clasped hands and might not have noticed this show of recovery.

"It was an accident," Harry tried. "One of those ironies I'm cursed to attract." With this, Harry winced inwardly, because it reminded him of Snape's mood when he had departed for Hogwarts.

Without responding Vineet took out his wand and studiously rubbed the gold pattern with his dark thumb. Harry prompted the Indian with his name and Vineet finally said, "I am regretful of what happened and not certain how to amend."

Harry was regretful too, for other reasons, but he didn't let on to it. "I don't want you to ease up during drills. I was glad you didn't today," he added brightly.

Vineet appeared more chagrined. "I could not ease up any more than I did . . . I *was* trying."

"Ah," Harry uttered. "Maybe we should go to lunch . . ."

Vineet stood his ground. "You are trying to move from the conversation."

"Yes, because I don't want you to feel bad about it. It wasn't your fault. Come on." Harry urged his companion with a toss of his head.

Despite appearing unconvinced, Vineet gave in. Harry gave him a smile which seemed to work better than arguing.

\* \* \*

Harry was grateful for the quiet house that evening. He opened the mail and replied to Penelope's last letter with one that came out sounding happy and friendly when he reread it, making him think that maybe Snape's dark departure wasn't weighing so heavily on him as he had thought. Thinking he may have gotten perspective on things, he took out a quill and longer parchment and started another letter.

*Dear Severus,* Harry started and then thought for a long while before continuing with, *I've been thinking about what you said and wish you didn't feel so. I'm also worried that you will take your mood out on the students in your house, or worse yet, my house.* He frowned at that; it was too straightforward. He decided that he would rewrite it before sending it. He also decided to try an eyes-only spell so that he could say things more openly knowing only Snape could read it. He dipped the quill in the soot-black ink and continued.

An hour later, Harry had the third version of the letter before him. It read a lot better, for which he was thankful, because he deeply felt he needed to do something. He rolled the parchment and pinched the end to hold it curled and then pulled the white candle closer and, needing grey wax for the spell, dropped India ink into the liquid wax around the flame. Incanting the first part of the spell, he tipped the candle and sealed the parchment with a thin line of dingy wax along the edge and in a ring around the center. The next step was the most crucial one; he took out his wand and tapped the paper while saying, "*Flamen Cypher Severus Snape.*" The paper glowed and the wax darkened. Quickly, while it still glowed, Harry held it over the candle flame. It ignited immediately and began curling away into black ash, which he caught on a white plate.

The last corner of parchment flared orange and went out. Since his breath was disturbing the delicate ash, he held his breath as he mouthed the same incantation again while tapping the center of the ash pile. With a barely audible *whoosh* the ashes reassembled into a scroll shape which flashed white before leaving behind the previous rolled parchment.

Harry fetched Hedwig from his room, giving Kali a pat as he passed her cage. "Straight to Severus," he told his owl. "Don't give it to anyone else." She took off through the window and Harry closed it behind her against the cold evening air.

\* \* \*

A knock preceded Headmistress McGonagall's entrance into the Defense Against the Dark Arts office. "Severus," she said in greeting, though her tone held much more. "Do you have a moment?"

Snape, who had been pacing while reading a textbook, dropped the book on the desk with a slap and crossed his arms.

"Hm," McGonagall uttered thoughtfully. "I just sent a pair of distressed students to the Gryffindor Tower for the night. You were perhaps a *bit* short with them when you kept them after," she suggested.

"They were foolishly attempting spells from the syllabus for the second term," Snape stated. "I will not tolerate that."

"Ah," she uttered and paced casually to the window. The clouds were rippled orange from the low sun and were reflected pristinely in the still lake. "Is everything all right with Harry?" she asked.

"Why do you ask?" Snape returned.

McGonagall frowned and said without turning from the view. "You are behaving . . . well, like yourself, Severus--your old self, that is."

"Something the matter with that?" he asked snidely.

"The students have ceased to expect it," she pointed out calmly.

"Is my performance in question?"

"No," McGonagall answered immediately, finally turning to face him. "I am just concerned. You arrived back on Sunday in this mood and it hasn't eased. It was interesting at first for us all to receive a little lesson in how different you have become, but it has grown old already. What has happened?"

Snape didn't immediately respond. A scratching at the window interrupted his stalling, and when he didn't move, McGonagall opened the sash. Hedwig hopped inside and fluttered over to the desk to drop the scroll with its distinctive wax. She then flapped once to rise to the back of the chair to wait.

"Well, I hope he can talk some sense into you," she said. "Probably knows you better than anyone else." Snape fingered the scroll, turning it to look at the ink-stained wax. "Severus?" she prompted, insisting, it seemed, on some kind of response.

Snape, fixated on the unopened scroll, said, "I arrived home on Saturday and found Harry half-dead from Spontengero."

"Severus! How in Merlin's Realm did he get that?"

"At his training. I am forced to accept that it was an accident. They are all apparently too ignorant to even know what it is," he stated harshly. "But it would have been a fitting end to him," he went on in a dark tone.

"Oh dear," McGonagall grumbled and came closer. With an almost theatrical sigh, she said, "At least I understand where we are here." She took her glasses off, cleaned them and put them in her pocket. "It would not have been fitting, in the least," she argued forcefully. "What is fitting is what everyone says about Harry, how fine he has become, because that was your doing, Severus. That hardly sets one up to deserve what you are suggesting."

She stood straight when he didn't reply. "Well, I'll leave you to the letter. Do try to read it with an open mind." When the door had re-closed, Snape waved a locking charm at it and broke the wax.

Snape's first reaction was pain that Harry had foreseen which students would bear the brunt of his anger. He did not like to imagine himself as that predictable. He read on: *I understand that you feel guilt over the past, and think you are obliged to feel it, but I also know how self-destructive it is--it doesn't lead anywhere. I do hope you can let go of it or at least not let it rule you so. If you can't do it for your own sake, please do it for mine. I assume you realize how much I still need your knowledge and guidance. Where would I be if you hadn't known what was wrong? Moody or one of the Healers at St. Mungo's might have known but what if they didn't? As always, I need you because you know these things, not in spite of it. Even if you feel you cannot make up for the past, most everyone believes you already have. Corner Headmistress McGonagall and try prove me wrong if you doubt it.*

Snape lowered the letter and smiled weakly despite himself. Certainly his colleagues treated him equitably now, which he had come to take for granted. Candida was a sore point still, he tried to disregard her even as she crept into his thoughts at random times throughout the day. In the larger scheme of things, her opinion was minor in comparison to the author of the letter he held, and always had been.

*Guilt doesn't pay anyone back or restore anyone to life; it is more of a dark magic spell you shouldn't be doing because it drains your spirit and can become a habit that only hurts those around you. If you still feel you need to make amends, figure out how to do that. I'm willing to help.*

It was signed below, *Your loyal adopted son, Harry.*

The room, the very school seemed oppressive to that notion, as though years of enmity had been recorded in its walls. Snape rested his head on his hand and considered the letter until a rap on the door interrupted his musings. He rolled the letter up quickly and slid it into his breast pocket to preserve it from the flames locked inside of it.

McGonagall stepped in quietly after opening the door slowly. "Are you coming down to dinner, Severus?"

Snape stood straight, still far away in thought. "Do you believe I owe anyone anything?" he asked, rather than answer.

"What? Oh." She gave that some consideration. "Albus."

"Conveniently . . . he isn't here," Snape stated in annoyance.

She smiled lightly, though with pained eyes. "My, but you are in a mood."

Snape crossed his arms and huffed. "You know what is ironic?" he asked, then answered himself in a bit of a snarl, "How much I care that I care."

"The curse of having a conscience, Severus," she stated in a lightly philosophical way, so that it didn't carry any damaging weight. She turned to the door and invited easily, "Come down with me to the Great Hall. The elves are waiting to put dinner on."

He turned after a hesitation and followed. It was late into the dinner hour and the corridors were empty. As they walked, McGonagall said, "I think, Severus, that of everyone here, I'd trust you the most to do the right thing in any circumstance." At the top of the staircase, she stopped and turned to him. "I think because you, more than anyone else, know the consequences of not doing so. The unexpected price of things can be very high, and most people do not appreciate that. You have that ingrained in you, something Albus put a lot of trust in, although it's taken me a long time to see." He still looked very far away. She patted him on the arm before starting down. "Forgive me for being so slow."

That night, after he was prepared for the next day's lessons, Snape pulled out a parchment and quill. He hesitated a long while before writing simply: *You and Minerva can be quite persuasive when you put your minds to it. Do try to stay out of trouble.* It was a pride-saving letter, he realized with a frown as he sealed it up, but he expected that Harry would understand.

\* \* \*

By Wednesday Harry fell back into the rhythm of training. Rodgers had stopped treating him as though he were breakable and returned to his normal overly-forceful spells during demonstrations with him. By lunch Harry felt he was going to arrive home bruised and was grateful that they would move to a discussion of investigative questioning techniques for the rest of the day.

"Are you going up to Hogwarts again today?" Aaron asked Vineet. "I'll escort you this time," he offered eagerly.

"I believe I can locate it myself," Vineet replied easily. He sounded more relaxed now, almost teasing. "Perhaps you should teach if you wish to spend more time there."

Aaron's face twisted and untwisted. "Is it that obvious I want to?"

Vineet replied before Harry could. "It has been a repeating topic, yes."

"Ah." Aaron nibbled on a carrot and sulked a bit. "What would I teach though?"



"Skiving," Kerry Ann immediately supplied.

"Thanks," Aaron sarcastically replied.

After training, Harry arrived home and again was disappointed by a lack of a reply to his dispensation application. As he half-read a few other letters he wondered if he had actually been expecting special treatment; he really thought a reply would have arrived by now. Not that he couldn't simply walk into Madam Bones' office and simply ask outright. But that was the sort of thing he hoped he wouldn't ever do.

He rolled up his letters and tapped them edgewise on the sideboard. No, he would be patient, he insisted to himself, even though imagining his relatives knowing about magic, knowing about *him*, made his chest swell. If the application came back denied, he wasn't certain what he would do then. That possibility made it easier to picture himself appealing directly to the Minister, which made him feel slimy.

\* \* \*

Friday arrived and Harry was early for his fieldwork as usual. He was paired with Rogan for the first time and the Auror gave him a wide smile when Harry entered the office. Vineet entered behind Harry, and Tonks tossed a memo airplane in the vague direction of the door and stood up. "Well, Vishnu, it is you and I tonight. Just patrol, we hope . . . I hope anyway." Shrugging on her cloak she collected the quiet Indian and they headed out.

"Do we have an assignment?" Harry asked hopefully.

Rogan chuckled and bent his head down, making his mop of straight hair fall into his eyes. He appeared on the edge of exhaustion for a moment before recovering and sitting straight. "You really want an assignment?" he asked. When Harry shrugged, Rogan pointed at a balsam board in the corner where notes were pinned. Harry went over to it as Rogan explained, "The miscellaneous pile of minor Muggle reports that haven't led anywhere. Suspected to be false, but we or Enforcement aren't certain enough to discard them."

Some were sheets yellowed with age and layers deep behind others. One newer looking one had printed on it, *Mysteriously aggressive ivy* with a cartoon doodled beside it of a plant-like snake with long teeth. "How about this one?"

Rogan laughed and stepped up behind him. He plucked the note down and unfolded it. "Dead end, I think, but we can take a look if you like. The report came in on a Friday three weeks ago . . ."

As he read the note in silence, Harry asked, "So what happened with the murdered witch?" He really wished he were more involved and chaffed at that still not being true.

"We haven't arrested anyone."

"No?" Harry prompted.

Rogan sighed. "Some odd facts turned up, such as: she hadn't bought her godchild a birthday present, she hadn't sent in a grocery order for the next week . . ."

"So she did kill herself?" Harry asked.

Rogan looked up sharply. "Figures you'd be good at this. Yes, it looks that way. As bad as it is to admit, it is much neater for us if it is true." He pocketed the note from the board. "Well, Mr. Potter, why don't we try our luck with phantasmic plants this afternoon. Patrol does sound dreadfully boring. And if it sounds boring to me, it most certainly must sound boring to you."

They Apparated into a long narrow alley. "This is as close as I can get us. We'll have to walk the rest. One reason for frequent patrols is to learn every last good Apparition spot possible." When Harry didn't respond, Rogan turned to look curiously at him as they walked. "You aren't always this quiet, are you?" he asked, sounding surprised.

After long blocks of fast walking they turned down a narrow street with no outlet. A quiet consultancy was in the building at the end. Rogan glanced around them and stood on tiptoe to peer in the large window. "Looks empty. I want to use it to look out onto the next street." He grasped Harry's arm and they reappeared inside. Rogan tilted his head and listened for a long minute before he moved farther into the building beyond a disorganized storeroom and to a back entrance.

"No window," Harry said, pacing in and out of a tearoom that shared the back wall.

"No difficulties," Rogan said and tapped in the shape of a box in the center of the door. A small window appeared there, framed in wood. Someone passed by on the street, walking a small dog.

"Won't anyone notice?" Harry asked.

Rogan shook his head. "If they do, they'll assume it's always been here. Muggles ignore pretty much everything. You'd think their eyes were closed most of the time, even though they look open." He crossed his arms and looked out at a bit of a distance. "The report was for this block, south side, which is across the street. We'll see if anything happens."

They stood there for a long while, almost an hour. Every time Harry heard something from the street at the other end of the office, he expected the owner to be returning. Rogan paid no mind to this, so Harry made himself relax. Rogan broke the long silence with, "So, Potter . . ." but then stopped.

"Yes?" Harry finally prompted.

"Enjoying your training?"

It seemed like Rogan was going to ask something else, originally. "Yeah. Loads. And every time I go out I see all these spells we haven't learned." He gestured at the window.

"This is an easy one."

"At least we are finally doing barriers," Harry said. "I've been wanting to learn those."

A long silence ensued before Rogan said, "I'm surprised you like the detailed work. Oh, what's this?" he asked, putting his nose closer to the magical glass.

Harry looked in the same direction and saw a woman picking up her bags. With a deep look of consternation, she looked behind herself at the ground, then at the bottom of her shoe. She finally stepped away.

Rogan said, "Could have been those heels of hers, rather than something else." He was squinting now. "Do you see that?"

Harry leaned close in and looked as well. Something seemed to be moving along the pavement trailing out of a grate. It looked a bit like ivy that had gained a rather independent disposition.

"Here's the deal," Rogan said. "I'll give you fifteen minutes to cross around behind that building, the *next* street over. Got that? Yeah, of course you do. I'm going to come at that from the front and I expect if someone is there, they will flush your way so I expect you to get them when they do."

Harry pulled out his wand and stashed it in his sleeve. Glad to be given a real role, he strode eagerly through the unlit office and out the door onto the empty street. Fifteen minutes had sounded like a long time, but the blocks were long. Harry jogged part of the way around the corner and only slowed when he was crossing the street they had been observing, careful to not look at the grate in question and give anything away. A man at the corner was retying his shoes and muttering angrily under his breath when Harry passed. As he made the next corner, he thought that he should have checked his watch at the start.

Harry had counted the number of buildings between the grate and the corner and now stood before the same number in on this side. The block had been short, the buildings stretching fully across from one street to the next. A cluster of schoolgirls went by him, making Harry finger his wand and consider various illusion charms he may need if things got serious. He stepped up to the door and waited. Anxious, he looked around, and down below he spotted another entrance, below ground. It was ajar. Moving quickly, Harry looked around and, seeing no one on the street now, leapt over the rail with a quick pillow charm to the hard concrete below.

He landed silently, cloak billowing, just as the door was jerked inward. Someone gasped and twisted away from the opening, but ran into someone else who hadn't the sense to move. Harry let his wand slide out of his sleeve into his hand. Two boys, one sandy haired, one redheaded, tangled each other up in their panic to get aside and fell inward.

This worked well, because high-heeled footsteps were approaching along the street. Harry stepped inside and knocked them both down with a light Jellylegs since they were trying to run farther inside. The room he had entered was a workshop of sorts with old bicycles in various states of repair and the strong scent of oil. The sandy-haired boy made a noise of alarm but finally gave up and stopped struggling. The redhead glanced fearfully at Harry but upon seeing his companion sitting still, did so as well. Their eyes looked very big in the dim light.

"So," Harry said, crossing his arms, but keeping his wand out. "Up to no good, I see."

"It was his idea," the sandy-haired one whined.

"It was from *your* aunt's garden!" the other countered.

Harry rolled his eyes. They must be ten, just a year from starting at Hogwarts. Rogan stepped in from the far corridor and leaned on the doorframe. Neither boy reacted, making Harry assume they couldn't see him. "Names?" Harry asked.

They both shrunk down. Harry gave them a look he remembered Snape doling out many times and they actually quivered slightly before quickly answering. "Nothing better to be doing?" Harry asked facetiously. They both frowned.

"It was kinda funny," the redhead offered.

"Yes. Getting Muggles suspicious about magic is very funny." Harry was surprised at his own annoyed tone.

"We'll remove it," the sandy-haired one insisted.

"I already did," Rogan stated and the boys both jerked stiff and scrambled away from the Auror. Rogan held out a mesh evidence bag inside of which green leaves and stem snaked as though to escape. He stepped over to the redheaded one and ungraciously hauled him to his feet. "Address?" he demanded. To Harry he said, "You take the other home."

Harry nodded before Rogan Disapparated. "Come on, Tilman," Harry said, "Let's go." Wide-eyed and looking most unhappy, the boy got to his feet. Some part of Harry tried to temper his attitude under the logic that this had been himself many, many times. "Where do you live?" Harry asked. The boy started to answer haltingly that it was only two streets over and Harry immediately said, "I can tell you're lying. Not your grandmum's place. *Your* house."

The boy fell into a stillness during which he looked Harry over as though assessing him for potential danger. "I can haul you to the Ministry to look it up," Harry suggested, and the boy gave his address up. Trouble was, Harry had no idea where it was or how to Apparate close by. Thinking now that he should have simply returned to the Ministry in the first place to look the address up on a map, Harry thought fast to save face.

"Your mum or dad home during the day?" Harry asked to stall for time.

"My dad. Works nights for Wizard Rail. That's why I was at my grandmum's. My dad's asleep all day," the boy added, sounding glum at the prospect of waking him. The boy looked up at the delay in departure and Harry saw a man in his light brown eyes--a rough, bulky man with a two-day beard and the look of one not happy about being disturbed.

"You live in a flat, right?" Harry asked. "What floor?"

"Third." In that instant Harry saw an image of the place in Tilman's eyes, clear as his own imagining of his house in Shrewsthorpe. Before it could fade, Harry took the boy's wrist and scrunched them both down in his mind. An eating area appeared around them. The boy shook his hand free and slouched in worry. Harry felt his blood rush at how well that had worked and how easy it had been. The dishes were quietly washing themselves in the sink and a tea towel was fanning the ones in the rack beside.

The noise of them arriving had indeed roused dad and a side door swung open as though propelled by someone with a strong arm. A man resembling Harry's preview, right down to the t-shirt with a hole in the belly of it, stepped in and stopped stock still. He stared at Harry in complete befuddlement, not even glancing at his son. "What's this, then?" he asked with a stunned quiet that didn't match the rest of him.

Reducing the seriousness with his tone, Harry said, "Your son was playing with magical plant life down in Freebury. Causing a bit of a stir among the Muggles."

The man swelled at that, stalked over in one long stride, and scooped up the back of the boy's shirt which lifted him to his toes. "*You*," he demanded into his son's ear, "were making such trouble as to have Harry Potter himself bring you to bear?"

Harry, who was forcing down memories of Vernon Dursley, said, "Really, I'm just an apprentice. It isn't so serious as all that."

The man didn't appear to hear this. "Sorry, sorry," the boy said, futilely twisting away. "It was only a joke." He was dropped onto his feet where he pulled his shirt straight.

Harry couldn't help his own shoulders falling when the boy was released. He wanted to point out that it wasn't even going to get reported, but then censored that.

The man, waving his finger in his son's face said, "You'll be lucky if Hogwarts sends you a blasted letter. You think they want miscreants of your sort at that fine old place?" Harry again forced himself to refrain from contributing anything. Mr. Tilman went on, "And now look what we've got here, Harry Po-" He stopped then and straightened as though just realizing something. "Mr. Potter," he said, in an voice trying for politeness. "Most ple- uh, welcome to our, humble little flat here. Sorry for the inconvenience."

Harry resisted grinning at the sudden affectation. "It's all right, sir, really. Just . . . doing our job."

"You're, an uh, Auror, then?"

"Apprentice," Harry clarified.

The man returned his attention to his son by regrabbing him by the shoulder of his oversized shirt. "YOU, had to be hauled home by a bleedin' Auror! You know what Aurors does, right? Dark wizard hunters, they are. Shape up or that's where you're headed, boy." He released his son again and again Harry felt himself relaxing when he did so. The man stepped closer to Harry. "Terribly sorry 'bout this. Gettin' harder to keep an eye on him what with the double shifts and all." He sniffed and fidgeted a bit. "Anything we have ter fill out or a hearing or something we need to attend?"

"Oh, no, I don't . . ." Harry dug through his law readings quickly in his head. "No Oblivation was required and no injuries reported, so I don't expect so."

The man's great shoulders fell slack. "Well, that's fortunate for us. So . . . I suppose Hogwarts might not find out then?"

Harry hesitated before replying, "I have to honestly admit that I don't know how Hogwarts finds out most things."

The man snorted and grinned for the first time, which gave him an almost childlike appearance rather than the previous tired workman one. "True. I do remember my days there." This seemed to trigger more thoughtfulness and he turned to his slouching son with a more accepting, though wry, look. "Well, Mr. Potter, sorry again for troubling you."

Harry nodded and gave the now cocky poised boy a sharp look before stepping back to Disapparate. The man saying, "Oh, uh, you wouldn't be willing to give us an autograph, now would you? It would make explaining to the missus a bit easier."

Harry returned to the Ministry because he hadn't been told to return to the scene and since Rogan had the ivy, it didn't seem necessary. If Rogan weren't in the Auror's office, he would just have to Apparate back to the bicycle shop. He had a feeling he should just *know* what to do next.

Rogan was at his desk writing something out. "Are you filing a real report?" Harry asked.

"Just a quick one. I wasn't going to bother filing it under their names. We haven't had trouble with those two before." He scratched away with the quill for a time before asking, "So, how did it go?"

"It was fine."

"Did you talk to his mum?"

"Dad, and he was properly incensed with his offspring."

More scratching with the quill. "It occurred to me after I returned that you may have been forced to take him home via the underground if it was any distance. I find myself mistakenly considering you a full Auror, even though you are far from it." He said all this without pausing in writing or looking up.

"I Apparated him home. I knew the area," Harry lied.

"Good, I was assuming I'd have to apologize for abandoning you."

Harry, who had no trouble with being given more duties, said easily, "No, it went fine."

\* \* \*

Sunday, Harry wondered if he shouldn't have some kind of costume for the Halloween party at the Burrow. He hadn't thought about it until that morning and now he stood before his cupboard, lightly scratching his head in thought. He considered and then dismissed the idea of going as a magical animal, same with pretending to be a Death Eater, although that sounded easy enough, just a hooded cloak and a mask. For a long moment, he was sorely tempted by that idea, as it would certainly get attention, and his friends would find it highly amusing. But the thought of possible headlines in the *Prophet* made him sigh, so he dismissed it. It didn't help imagining Snape's reaction either.

Additional ideas were dismissed as he tapped the door of the cupboard lightly with his fingertips. Kali rustled about in her cage, and he went over to let her out while he thought. She climbed out onto his sleeve and sniffed his hand. Harry watched her climb about, a sly smile forming at his lips.

Harry still could not Apparate all the way to the Burrow, or he thought there was perhaps a chance if he really tried, but he didn't want to get Splinched any more than he wanted a photo of himself in the *Prophet* that would make Snape cringe and wonder that he had lost his senses. So instead, he waited half of an hour after the party's start time and Flooed directly into the Weasley's hearth. A lot of people usually came to the Burrow parties and there was nothing worse than a Floo traffic jam where one could get stuck in a stalled spin for five or ten minutes only to get redirected to an entirely different node and have to start again and hope that one could find more Floo powder to continue on with.

Harry bent very low and replaced his hat when he was clear of the mantelpiece. The sitting room was quiet, but Mrs. Weasley was mixing punch in the adjacent kitchen. Outside the windows orange fires glowed and many voices could be heard. Molly Weasley turned as Harry approached, looked taken aback, and then grinned broadly while shaking her head. "Harry dear, that is something," she said with a laugh in her voice.

Harry looked down at his sky-blue flowing robe and smoothed his long white beard. "Do you think it's all right?"

She was still laughing as she worked. "I think it's adorable." She put the ladle down and wiped her hands on her apron. "Oh, and look at your pet. Oh dear, she doesn't mind being that color?"

"She's usually bright violet, so no, doesn't seem to." Harry adjusted his now-peach colored Chimrian to better sit on his shoulder. He also again adjusted his hat.

This prompted Mrs. Weasley to say, "Did you actually borrow one of Albus' hats? That one looks familiar."

"No, I changed a plain one from memory using an Illusion Charm."

She gave him a hug and said, "It's good that you remember him that well." She released him and smiled even more broadly. "Well, go on out, then."

Harry stepped out and approached the long, crowded tables. Glowing pumpkins hovered above them in crowded rows to provide light. A bonfire crackled and spat a few yards away. Someone turned to watch him approach and did an amusing double-take. The table quieted as he arrived and some even appeared alarmed, making Harry wonder what effect the fire-light was having on his illusions.

"Harry?" a frog-costumed Neville cautiously asked.

"Yep," Harry replied. "It's only me."

This broke the spell that had held the table in a stunned stillness. Everyone laughed which attracted others to come over. Fred and George scampered over wearing just their usual dragon-covered jackets, although the dragons appeared to fly between one and the other, which was disconcerting.

"Harry?" one of them cautiously confirmed. "Wow, a little taller and . . ." He tugged on Harry's beard and Harry had to bat his hand away. "Nicely done." He sounded truly impressed.

"I've been slow at the Metamorphia they've been teaching us, and this is my best one yet. I don't know how long it's going to last though . . ."

"Aye, might be permanent," the other twin suggested with a laugh.

"Then you'd have to retire, join the Wizengamot . . ."

"Not anytime soon, I hope," Harry countered. Kali had climbed down his arm and onto the table, and was investigating a pushed-aside plate. "Come here you. I'll get you something."

Harry returned from the food table and found a seat across from Ron at the far table. "That's a really scary costume, Harry," Ron said.

"We think it's bloody brilliant," one of the twins countered. "Especially with that leather-winged Fawkes of yours."

Harry gave the peach-colored creature a strip of chicken meat, which she seemed less interested in eating than mauling. Fred fetched them all fresh mugs of mead. Other friends came over and laughed over his costume as he ate. Those from the Ministry seemed less amused and more disturbed by his costume than his friends.

"Where's Hermione?" Harry asked, realizing that he had not yet seen her.

"She said she'd be late," Ron replied.

"Office party with the solicitors to attend," Fred supplied with a glance at Ron. While Harry was puzzling out the subtleties of the moment, George hit him on the arm and said, "I don't feel like making any trouble all of a sudden. That's your fault."

Harry, remembering how he had spent his Friday, said, "Good."

"Ah," Fred uttered. "Forget the costume, Harry. You are scary enough on your own."

"No date?" the other twin prompted as a hoard of bats fluttered by overhead. Kali ducked low on Harry's shoulder and watched them, wired and alert.

"Couldn't think of anyone to invite," Harry explained easily. He was certain that Ron's jaw stiffened. Wondering at that, Harry added, "I might have tried Tara if I'd planned ahead a bit." Ron was avoiding his gaze. Frowning, Harry kicked him under the table and asked, "What's up?"

Ron shrugged, eyes still evasive and Fred and George were frowning lightly as well. Mr. Weasley stood up on a far bench and announced that the games were beginning. Ron was the first one up and over beside his father. The first contest would be broom races, their host announced and then explained a racecourse around the property that sounded more like a flying obstacle course. Fred and George stood up eagerly. "You racing? That beard might slow you down," George teased.

"I didn't bring my broom."

"It's pairs, you can borrow mine. I have a 3030--brand new," he graciously offered.

Harry was watching Ron negotiating with his dad to be in the first race. "What's up with Ron?" he asked, rather than answer.

"Uh, nothing sensible," George replied.

"What does that mean?" Harry returned, but the twins waved that they wanted to draw for a spot in the races and headed away. Harry moved down to where the non-racers like Neville, Justin, and some of the older friends of the Weasley family were sitting. The races began with Ron competing against Fred. The two of them took off on broomstick into the darkness to follow a long, hazardous course lit only vaguely by floating jack-o-lanterns. Much shouting of encouragement ensued.

Harry looked up as someone sat down beside him. "Tonks!" he said, very pleased to see his colleague.

"Just stopping by for short visit--technically on duty." She patted his shoulder. "How are you doing, Albus?"

"Good," Harry replied. "Did I tell you you have detention?" he carried on.

"Do I now?" Tonks returned. "What did I do?" she asked with no little insinuation.

"Skiving from your Auror duties, I hear, to attend a Halloween party."

She leaned closer. "Many of the people I'd like to keep an eye on tonight *are* here, so I count it as being on duty." She looked Kali over. "Poor thing. I think her color is fading." She tapped the creature with her wand and her color returned to bright peach from mottled.

"How is my beard?" Harry asked and submitted to inspection.

"Not bad." She gave it a tug, making Harry wince. "You did a good job with that," she praised. "How long has it lasted so far?" They carried on with a discussion of illusion and Metamorph spells as the races went on and the table cleared as people departed to watch.

"Dumbledore, my aligning stars," a middle-aged witch exclaimed as she took a newly empty spot along with some other newcomers. Everyone shifted down to make more room for people and plates. "You're a sight," she said to Harry. "Didn't want to come as someone too famous, eh? Who were you last year?"

"Harry Potter," Tonks and Neville replied together, and Neville continued with, "It was getting repetitive, though, that old costume. About time you got a new one." He winked at Harry.

"Thanks," Harry sarcastically replied.

The newly arrived wizard beside her, who apparently had sampled a great deal of mead before arriving at this party, said, "So, Dumbledore, I've always wanted to know . . . why didn't you ever go up for Minister of Magic like everyone wanted?"

Harry thought a bit, using the shouting from the races as cover for hesitating. Affecting a sage tone, he replied, "It was no longer my time. Others needed to learn that their moment to lead had arrived."

The questioner held his mug before him and glared at Harry with his bloodshot eyes. "You even . . . sound like Dumbledore. Blasted."

"You did ask," Harry returned, still trying for airy. He knitted his fingers before him and sat up a bit straighter. Kali reacted to this by quitting her grooming and sitting up pretty on his shoulder.

The man leaned over to the middle-aged witch and whispered, "Who is that really?" She shrugged. Neville giggled and Tonks ducked her head.

"Something amusing, Mr. Longbottom?" Harry asked in a teacher voice.

Neville held up his hands as though to ward Harry off. "No, no. I can't take it. You *are* too much."

Harry glanced at the openly curious couple across from him. With his eyes changed to blue, the hat over his scar, and the beard hiding his face, he considered that he may not be too recognizable. Strange sort of anonymity, this.

"Do you work at the Ministry?" the woman asked. "You do look familiar."

"I'm there most days," Harry said easily and sipped from his mug, which was nearly impossible without getting his mustache foamy with mead.

"So how's the afterlife?" the man asked, sounding mocking.

Harry thought over his vision of Dumbledore's serene figure from his near death experience. "It's pretty quiet in the veil," he replied. "But I get to see all my old friends and, at my age, that is quite a few people." He had spoken this with such authority that even his old schoolmates gave him surprised and uneasy looks.

"You didn't take that hat out of Dumbledore's cupboard, did you?" Neville asked in concern.

Harry gave him a wink. The spectators grew louder as the finalists were selected for the last race. Ron stalked grumpily back over. "Fred and George, it's always Fred and George. Wish I had a brand new broom to race with." He took a seat and looked around for his mug.

"Who *is* that?" the stranger asked Ron while pointing at Harry.



"Who?" Ron asked, as though confused about the question. "That's Harry Potter, who do you think?" he answered with a sharp edge.

The man let his mug hit the table a little hard. "You don't have to say, then. Blather."

Neville giggled again.

Harry stood up and said, "Ron . . ." while signaling with his head that they should step away.

"What?" his friend asked, not moving.

"I want to talk," Harry explained.

"Going to give me detention if I don't?" Ron asked sulkily.

*If you don't stop behaving as though you're ten, I might*, Harry thought grimly. "Is this costume peeving you?" he asked, unable to come up with a better guess. "I can ditch it. It is just a Metamorph spell."

"Yeah, no showing off there," Ron grumbled low.

Kali hissed--though it wasn't at Ron--it was at something behind Harry, in the unoccupied blackness beyond the aura of the party. Chilled with the notion of what she might be sensing, Harry clamped down hard on his hot anger. Kali calmed and climbed around to his other shoulder. The whole half of the long table was staring at him with mixed expressions. Tonks stood up and went around to Ron where she hefted him to his feet and dragged him away as though it were her duty to help. Harry followed, far more concerned about keeping his temper in line than what his oldest friend's problem might be and grateful for Tonks' quick action.

Tonks didn't give Harry a chance to speak. As soon as they were out of earshot, she asked the redhead, "What's wrong. Why are you being so peevish around Harry?"

"Nothing's wrong," Ron returned.

"Yeah, and I'm a prima ballerina. *What's wrong?*"

Ron finally held Harry's gaze. "Hermione said you stayed at her place the other night."

"So?" Harry said, not understanding the significance of that.

"She didn't want to do anything with *me* that night."

Harry stared at his friend. "I was only there to sleep," he argued, but then thought maybe that wasn't the best thing to have said given Ron's anger. "I was too tired to go home."

"Can't take the Floo?" Ron asked in disbelief.

"I had my bike with me. I'd been out on my bike all day. I'd've had to come back for it."

"What were you doing?" Ron asked as though to test his story. When Harry hesitated, Ron more sharply asked, "Well?"

Tonks appeared interested in the answer as well. Darkly, Harry finally replied, "I was hunting Avery."

"You were, were you?" Tonks asked sharply.

"I was riding around Devon. Having a look," Harry defended himself.

"Find any clues?" she asked smartly, propping her hands on her hips in a disapproving pose.

"No." They stared each other down until Harry said, "It isn't like you've found him. It isn't like all along the Auror's office has done a stellar job of hunting Death Eaters."

"That isn't quite fair, Harry, and you know it. We were hobbled by previous Ministerial edicts."

"You aren't anymore."

She sighed. "No, now we're just expected to take care of bloody everything. Every hexed garden strimmer and rogue hag on a flying carpet."

Harry didn't relax his fierce look, although he kept the emotion superficial. A long silence passed, which was broken by Ron saying, "He thinks you're letting him down." Harry dropped his eyes, reminded starkly of how well Ron knew him.

"The department doesn't revolve around you, Harry," Tonks pointed out.

"I know that," Harry replied. "I'd just feel better--I'd feel like everything was complete--if he were in Azkaban where he belongs."

"We'll discuss it later," Tonks threatened. "Right now I have to get on with patrol." With one last glance around the proceedings, she Disapparated.

Harry said, "I'm sorry, Ron. I didn't know you'd think anything of my crashing at Hermione's flat. I really was too exhausted for the Floo and I needed to talk to someone who understood, because as you just saw, I can't talk to most people I know."

Ron looked more unhappy but no longer angry. He sighed and said, "Hermione's been difficult to get along with lately. I don't know what's wrong with her. She's always upset with me about something."

"I'm sorry for that, Ron," Harry said sympathetically.

Ron gestured at the spot Tonks had occupied a moment before. "Did I get you in trouble?"

"Don't worry about it. I'm head of the Wizengamot, remember?"

Ron laughed lightly. "I got the feeling from Dad's Ministry friends over there that they're afraid you'll believe that."

Harry grinned. "They do seem unseated, don't they? Maybe I should go back and tease them some more. How's my beard doing? I keep expecting it to fade."

Ron gave him a once-over. "Looks convincing to me." They started back to their seats and Ron added, "Sorry I accused you of showing off."

"I wasn't trying to."

"I know," Ron mumbled reluctantly.

Fred and George, now sporting yellow trophy-shaped hats and sweaty hair, shifted to make room for them. As he and Ron took their seats, the drunk stranger said, "Okay, I have more questions for you, Dumbledore."

The others were all grinning, so Harry said, "Why certainly," as amiably as he could manage.

"Why, when you had the chance, didn't you stop Tom Riddle when he was a student? Huh?"

Harry took a deep breath and considered that. Everyone, including his friends, waited for the answer. "I thought there was still hope for him." When the man opened his mouth to ask, Harry interrupted with, "Why? Because I believe that about everyone."

"Oy," George exclaimed, "Fred, get us some more mead if we're sitting at this table."

Fred stood while saying, "I'll just get Dad to run the costume judging so he can go back to being himself."

"What if he doesn't want to change back?" George asked fearfully.

Fred returned presently. "No, Dad's running the William Tell contest first. Hey, Hermione!" he greeted someone approaching from the house.

"Wow, Headmaster," she said, greeting Harry after giving Ron a casual hug.

"You haven't seen anything," Fred insisted. "Ask him a question."

"Oh . . . can I? Hm . . ." She fell thoughtful. "Gosh, it's odd to look at you like that." She looked away and rubbed her cheek as she thought. "Well, I think I'd ask the real Dumbledore how everyone is behind the veil, but . . ."

"Already asked," someone interjected.

"Really? What was the answer?" She sounded honestly disappointed.

"Everyone's fine," Harry replied, but then rethought his answer, "Although, Sirius . . ."

"Sirius what?" she prompted, curious.

Harry realized he had said too much, but didn't see how to back out. He went with his persona instead. "He doesn't seem very happy, but I can't do anything for him."

Hermione stared at him a moment before saying, "All right, this is really creepy."

He leaned over and whispered to her, "I'll explain later."

"That should be interesting. Do I still get a question?" At Harry's nod, she asked, "Are there any other prophecies we need to worry about?"

"Merlin, I hope not," Harry uttered, making the table chuckle.

"That wasn't much of a Dumbledore answer," Hermione criticized.

Harry sighed and cobbled together a sage-toned response. "The future is something best not known ahead of time, lest that knowledge do irreparable harm." He hesitated, unable to stomach the idea of another prophecy that referred to him or any of his friends. "There aren't any prophecies that I know of." Harry truly hoped that Dumbledore's serenity was a sign of Harry's own freedom; he discovered within himself that he counted on believing it.

"That's better," Hermione said. "So how good of a job do you think McGonagall is doing?"

"What about Madam Bones?" Justin interjected.

"Are you asking me?" Harry hesitated. "Or Dumbledore."

They both laughed. "Either," Hermione admitted. "You've been back to Hogwarts a few times."

"Minerva's doing well. She's working Severus really hard, though."

"Severus? Severus Snape?" the stranger interjected. "So, Dumbledore, why did you trust *him*?"

Their end of the table fell still again. "Because he was worthy of it," Harry replied with a flat, deceptive lack of concern. No one relaxed at this. The man wore a smirk making Harry ask, "You believe that you know better than I?"

"Despite that long beard, I've been around a lot longer than you," the stranger countered.

Harry did not at all recognize the man with his small nose and salt and pepper hair, and now wondered who he was. "What department at the Ministry are you in?"

"Can't say."

"And that doesn't narrow it down at all," Harry stated with a touch of snide, assuming the man was in the Department of Mysteries.

"We've been to the Department of Mysteries," Neville, apparently following Harry's train of thought, stated cockily and swigged from his mug.

"No, you haven't," the man returned.

Ron laughed. "We all have. Broke in when Voldemort was trying to get Harry's prophecy."

"Oh, yes. Bloody little punishment all of you got for that." No one responded to that, but Harry could feel them all closing ranks with their postures. The man went on, "So, you *are* Harry Potter. Only you'd have the gall to wear that costume. Joining the Wizengamot soon?"

Mr. Weasley came by before Harry, or anyone else, could come up with a proper response. "Harry, my boy, I see why you are expecting to win the costume competition. Oggie," Mr. Weasley turned to the man across from Harry. "I see you've been getting to know my son's friends. Quite a little crew they all are. Especially this one." Here he clapped Harry on the back. "Come on up--we'll have the judging--and you too, Longbottom."

Harry escaped the table and waited in a row with an amphibian Neville, a rather crude dragon, a far too tall elf, a pair of black cats, and a brightly glowing rainbow. Their friends all cheered loudly when Mr. Weasley held his sparkling wand over Neville's head and just a tad louder when he held it over Harry's. "Harry takes the day with his stunning interpretation of Albus Dumbledore." He presented Harry with a trophy-shaped gold hat. "Any words of wisdom for us?" Mr. Weasley teased. The resulting negative shouting from Harry's table startled the party host.

"I've dolled out too many words already," Harry informed him.

"Ah, I see." The Weasley father grinned, understanding. He leaned in and said, "You fit his shoes better than I would have expected, Harry."

Unsure of how he felt about that, Harry merely shrugged, garnering a pat on the back and a push toward his seat.

"Your beard is fading," Ron informed him as Harry approached.

Before sitting, Harry pulled out his wand, removed the charms, and changed hats for his trophy one, putting the old, now-dull one under the bench. He met the eyes of the man across from him, feeling more at an advantage facing him down as himself. "I didn't catch your name," Harry said.

"Ogden, Tertius Ogden. This is my wife, Olive." The woman held her small hand out to be shaken.

"Your father is on the Wizengamot, correct?" Harry asked.

"Forty-three years this December, in fact. Before your parents were even born," Ogden snidely went on.

"But long after Tom Riddle was," Harry added conversationally while handing his empty mug to George for refilling.

"The Ministry certainly had many chances at him."

Ogden frowned into his own mug. "Disgusting how thrilled the Ministry was to get you," he muttered.

Feeling no threat from this man, Harry just shrugged. Around the table his friends glowered at Ogden as though weighing possible hexes in their minds. Harry merely pondered the odd fact that he felt more confident and certain of his power *out* of his Dumbledore disguise.



## Chapter 68 -- Magic to Muggles

"Invited your wife to come yet?" Harry asked Vineet during a quiet lunch in the department tearoom. Vineet had been quiet that morning, ever since Rodgers had expressed disappointment in the Indian's progress on strengthening his blocks, and Harry hoped to draw him to other topics.

Everyone took their usual keen interest in the answer. "I have. She is planning the details now."

"When does she arrive?" Harry asked.

"She must complete the packing first."

"Uh, oh," Kerry Ann uttered. "How big is your flat?"

Vineet appeared vaguely disturbed. "I have been measuring, yes . . ."

They all shared grins at their friend's dilemma. "Bring her in when she comes," Harry said and swallowed the last of his sandwich. "We'd all like to meet her." At Vineet's solemn nod, Harry excused himself to use the extra time to work on his languished petition to have Sirius' case reopened.

Tonks was at her desk, writing a response on the bottom of an unfolded airplane memo. Without looking up she handed over the file Harry kept stashed with hers. With a quiet thanks Harry took it to the next open desk. Tonks had yet to take him to task about hunting Avery and he continued to expect her to at any time, but apparently at the moment she was too busy. Harry put concerns about trouble out of his mind and perused the to-do list he had spellotaped inside the folder. *Compile witness list* was the main item left on it, with a penned in list of potential names below. Harry had seen the rare Alastor Moody, who was the first on the list, just that morning. He got up and wandered around the corridors peaking in any open doors. He found Moody in the file room, peering closely at a file with his one real eye.

"Potter," he grunted without looking up.

"Can I ask you a favor, sir?"

Moody scratched his grizzled cheek and closed the file before him. "Depends."

Harry explained, "I have a petition for the Wizengamot to have Sirius' name cleared. I need to submit a potential witness list with it and since you were involved in the original investigation, I was wondering if you'd be willing to be called . . . if they decide to call anyone."

Harry couldn't read Moody at all. "Sure, Potter," he grunted before stashing the case file under his arm and walking toward the door.

"Thanks," Harry said as the wide man passed with his limping shuffle.

"Aye. I'm supposed to be retired . . . talking to that moldy old bunch always makes me feel young."

Harry grinned and followed him out. Now he needed to owl Hagrid, whom Harry expected would say yes, but he didn't want to presume. He wished that Dumbledore could have been on the list but pushed that aside.

Back in the offices, Tonks was absent, so Harry took her desk instead. Rogan stepped in and peered over Harry's shoulder. "Getting that finished?" he asked.

"Almost," Harry replied.

"Would you like it looked over?"

Harry gratefully handed the bulk of the file to the Auror and waited with impatiently grasped fingers for him to read through it. A paper airplane sailed in and landed in the excessive pile already on Tonk's desk, causing them all to shift around as though they all wanted to be on top.

Mid-flip of a page, Rogan asked, "Why are you doing this?"

"Because it isn't right that Sirius is still believed to have helped Voldemort," replied Harry, trying not to sound annoyed at such a question.

"So, you are doing this for the dead?"

"Well . . . he was important to me. It's not right."

Rogan closed up the file and pushed it back to Harry. "So, you are doing this for yourself . . ."

Harry could not read his intent. "You don't believe I should be doing-"

"I didn't say that. Are you doing this for yourself?" Rogan reiterated.

"No, for Sirius' memory."

"For the dead then . . ."

"I guess," Harry admitted.

Rogan shook his robes out, crossed his arms, and said, "It looks good, but before you step before the Wizengamot, figure out the answer to that question and stick with it. Controversy is not kind to those who waver," he added helpfully.

Harry sighed his annoyance away, grateful for the advice; he wasn't looking forward to the actual hearing with much relish.

\* \* \*

The week passed with no response to Harry's dispensation application, which would allow him to tell his cousins that was a wizard, would in fact, make them real family. Fidgeting his impatience, he read the Friday morning mail with little interest. He had owled Ron the day before, asking what his plans were. This had been a nearly arbitrary decision--whether to owl him or Hermione, since it no longer seemed safe to assume that their plans were the same. Harry was in dire enough need for a real break that he wished he had planned a party for this weekend. He should plan one for next weekend, perhaps, after the Hogwarts Quidditch match. A little desultory, he dropped the unopened mail on the sideboard. If he simply showed up at the Ministry early for his shadowing, he wondered if they would let him do something useful while he waited.

Sighing, Harry pulled out his books and did a little reading instead. Before he left for the Ministry, Pig arrived with a quick note saying to meet Ron in their usual pub at 7:00. No hint of whether anyone else would be there. If shadowing

ran long, Harry might not be on time and he wouldn't want his friend sitting there alone. He sent a reply back reminding his friend about his duties sometimes running late.

When he arrived at the Ministry, Rogan took Harry up to the street by the hidden staircase where the alley entrance was disguised as a loading dock for a lingerie shop. At first Harry followed the Auror in silence, until he remembered that Rogan didn't expect him to be quiet all the time. "What are we doing today?" Harry asked.

"Hm . . . just looking around," Rogan airily replied.

That sounded vaguely misleading, but Harry didn't ask more. They walked along a crowded shopping street for well over a mile, turned and walked another. Rogan did appear to be looking for something in particular. Harry, rather than prying, kept a watchful eye out around them. The neighborhoods they passed began to decline in appearance and the number of pedestrians dropped significantly. Rogan stopped then, right in the middle of the pavement before the taped-over window of a closed hat shop. He made a thoughtful noise.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

Speaking low while adjusting his sleeve where his wand was hidden, the Auror replied, "Just a few too many strange reports from this area. Thought it worth a look around."

"Something more than animate ivy?"

"Definitely. But not so clearly described." He looked at Harry finally, as though trying to decide something. "Tonks said you sometimes sense things. Do you feel anything right now?"

Harry closed his eyes and tried to find the green world or the Dark Plane without luck; he was far too wakeful and in too good a mood. He shook his head. Rogan stepped away and Harry caught up. "Sorry," he said, not wanting to disappoint.

Rogan chuckled. "Why are you apologizing?"

When they were back in a more lively area, Harry asked, "What's been reported?"

Rogan stopped again, even more suddenly. "I need a cuppa," he announced, stepping into a little gyros place. Harry followed him in. The young man behind the counter put a tea bag and hot water into a plastic foam cup and handed it over. In the corner away from the one table of customers, Rogan replied, "Nothing significant and that's what bothers me." Harry gave him a confused look as the Auror sipped stained water.

Rogan explained, "Meaningless things don't filter down to the Aurors office. So when a run of seemingly harmless things come up, like a wizard's dog disappearing here and a minor memory charm there, I start to wonder. We are too busy to investigate something with no serious magical crime attached to it." He frowned and drank from his very Muggle cup. "It feels the way things did when Voldemort was around. Reports came through, but those involved and what had happened were only vaguely or incorrectly described, uselessly so. These reports are useless too."

The young man behind the counter was moving a meat-covered pole from one machine to another. No one else remained in the shop. "Voldemort is definitely not back," Harry stated.

"I didn't mean to imply he was. But something doesn't feel right to me and there is a geographic link to that area for the reports. I didn't want to Apparate in, hence our long walk. Taking you out is a good chance to investigate because if my instincts were right and something very bad were going on, I'd expect you could take care of your end. But on the surface it looks like I took you out on low risk patrol."

He put down his tea suddenly and reached with alarm into his pocket. He stared at the wooden-framed square an instant before pulling out his wand and sending a confusion charm at the young man who was now topping up the paper cups in the dispenser beside the cola machine. The tower of cups toppled onto the counter as his hands became clumsy. Rogan then grabbed Harry's arm and the shop disappeared.



They Apparated into the hazy upper room of a pub furnished only with an old couch and burnished brass lamp. "Wait here," Rogan ordered and promptly Disapparated again. Another *pop!* and Tonks and Vineet appeared just an instant before Tonks departed again.

"Some kind of emergency," Vineet opined as he wandered over to an old leaded window through which the world was too distorted to see.

Harry joined him there where he could just make out that people were walking outside on the street below. "I wonder why they didn't just tell us to return to the Ministry?"

"The rules state that we are to return to the closest safe place."

Harry circled the several empty connected rooms which composed the floor, feeling imprisoned and unuseful. A carved wooden railing surrounded the staircase down. He leaned down to try to see to the level below. Vague noises of a pub filtered up. "I wonder if we can get an order of fish and chips. I didn't have lunch."

"You are concerned with food?" Vineet asked in shock.

"They don't very well let us be concerned with anything else, do they?" Harry snapped. He circled the whole floor this time, eyeing the poor view out each window, before returning to the old red velvet couch, dropping into it and resting his head back. "I suppose I would get kicked out of the program if I tried to find them if we're still here in an hour."

Vineet sat down as well. "I do not recommend doing that," he stated dryly.

Silence ruled for many minutes before Harry asked, "So how do you like shadowing Tonks?"

"She is the same as Mr. Rogan."

"You think?" Harry returned in surprise. "You didn't find Rogan a little more . . . loose?" Vineet shook his head, making Harry utter, "Huh." Harry bounced his crossed ankles impatiently a while before asking, "So do you think they'd notice if we just slipped down to the Ministry? We could walk even . . ."

Vineet, who was sitting calm and still, replied, "I believe the instructions were quite clear."

"Hmf." Harry crossed his arms and again rested his head back. "So, tell me again . . . how did you get the name Vishnu?"

"It was my *ḍachnam*. My child name, which is supposed to be temporary and is usually less serious. When one knows a child's real name, it is then given."

"But your mum didn't give it up," Harry suggested.

"Correct. But among family, this is quite common."

Harry blinked at still not following completely. He gave up on it. "So when did you first know you were a wizard?"

In his usual level voice, Vineet replied, "My mother said she always knew. Everyone else, meaning my whole family, discovered during my rice ceremony."

"What's that?" Harry asked, glad to have conversation as a distraction.

"It is an important passage for an infant where I come from. The whole family is there. As part of it, the child is presented with three plates, one with earth upon it, one with money, and one with tools. It is to determine the lifepath of the child. The story is that my uncle was urging me, when I refused all options, to take the money, and I did so only after transforming it into chocolate."

Harry laughed. "So you like chocolate, then?"

"Yes."

"Wish we had some now. Transform us a box of Honeydukes, will you? Or nip out for some? If they come back while you're gone, I'll tell them you're practicing invisibility charms."

"I believe the Hero of Wizardry is much less likely to be removed from his apprenticeship if he is caught fetching chocolate when he is supposed to be staying put."

"Yeah, but they'll be more disappointed in me. You can always say I talked you into it."

Vineet tilted his head. "True." He too rested his head back on the bolster. "Perhaps if an entire hour does pass . . ."

Harry frowned and after a long pause asked in annoyance, "What are they doing? Did you get any clue?"

"No, I did not get a glimpse at Ms. Tonks' wooden tablet."

Harry rubbed his hair back and forth. "Hope they aren't in trouble."

"It is my understanding that they are considered competent to face trouble."

Silence descended again. Pigeons alighted outside the window, casting flickering shadows across the room. Harry finally broke the silence with, "Looking forward to having your wife here . . . Nandi, right?"

"Yes. She is supposed to be with me."

Harry gave him a doubtful look. "That's the only reason?"

"She is my wife," Vineet explained patiently.

"Yeah, but . . . never mind," Harry gave up on that too.

"The British do not understand this, I realize. It is a better way, though," he stated.

Harry didn't feel like arguing, so he remained silent and tried not to imagine Tonks defending herself against a spell onslaught from some violent hooded figures.

Vineet continued though. "Love is a poor way to choose a life mate. It is not a good predictor of compatibility."

Harry resisted pacing the room again by calling forth that waiting patience he had built up during his abduction. This relaxed him as well since it reminded him that he wasn't truly imprisoned at the moment, only inconvenienced. He finally said, "I think you'd try harder with someone you love."

"That may be true, but it is not offset by additional complications it causes."

Harry began to feel a tiny bit sorry for this unknown Nandi person. "I can't see it."

A long while later, Harry pulled out his watch. Seventy minutes had passed. "Tell me again why we can't just go to the Ministry?"

"The rule is straightforward and is applied, I am quite certain, whether we are in County Cork or Central London," Vineet explained.

"That's kind of dumb, don't you think?" Harry began to pace the perimeter of the floor yet again, and this time leaned over the rail to peer down the stairs more keenly. He didn't know if this was a Muggle establishment or not.

"I think it eliminates all uncertainty. There is a barrier on the stairs, you realize."

"There is?" Harry had been very close to stepping down just then. "How can you tell from all the way over there?" he challenged.

"It is in the floor." Vineet tapped his foot on the wood. "And it extends across the opening downward, keeping everything and everyone out, presumably."

Harry looked around at the old, slightly warped, wood floor. "You're good at that. I can't sense barriers without casting something at them."

"I have always found barriers easy to detect." After a moment, he added, "And to disable."

Harry gave him a thoughtful look. "So, you can get us downstairs?"

"You may go when you like. You will not be able to return," the Indian intoned casually. Harry crouched and frowned at the landing below, which was all he could see. His mind pondered his options one after another. Vineet's voice caught his attention fully, "How do you know that this is not a test?"

Harry stood and stared at him. "Ah," he uttered, feeling foolish. "I don't." He returned to the couch and relaxed, wishing now for a chess set.

Much later, when a *pop!* sounded, Harry turned from the window, wand at ready, which he had not planned on doing.

"My," Shacklebolt said, looking between them. Vineet also had his wand out and aimed. "Remind me not to sneak up on either of you. Back to the Ministry with you both. Come along."

In the Auror's office it was quiet, but Harry had learned that meant everyone was out and things were actually at their busiest. Shacklebolt checked them both in and said, "Your shadowing is done for the day, head on home."

"But where is Tonks . . . and Rogan?"

"Out on a call, go on home," he repeated, sounding more commanding this time.

Harry, feeling difficult, said, "I'm actually supposed to meet some friends at a pub in London, can I do that?"

"Of course. You know what I mean. I don't want you out looking for the other Aurors."

Harry slung his bag over his shoulder and pointed out, "I don't even know where they are."

Shacklebolt propped his hands on his hips, which, with his long cloak, gave him real presence. "Somehow, Potter, I don't think that would stop you."

On the way across the atrium, Harry said to Vineet, "They don't trust me."

"I was noticing this," Vineet said.

Harry frowned, put-off by that notion. "What do I have to do, I wonder?"

"Obey, I would think," Vineet offered levelly.

Harry really looked forward to meeting with Ron to whom he could complain about all this, and he would actually be early. "I'll see you on Monday."

\* \* \*

Sunday, Harry received a Ministry owl, which at first he thought was a reply from Tonks to his message asking if everything had gone all right on Friday. It wasn't. It was a letter from Rodgers telling him to wear his dress robes to training the next day. Harry preferred his dress Auror robes to the fuzzy workout suits they normally wore, so he had no difficulty with that. It also occurred to him that he could use the opportunity to file his petition for Sirius with the Minister's office if he pulled it all together in time. Doing so wearing his dress robes seemed like a good idea.

The next morning Harry rose an hour early, dressed, and in the pale morning light, checked himself in the mirror on the cupboard door. As much as he was rushing, this brought him to a halt. The image that reflected back at him was yet again a leap beyond what he had expected. He filled out the carefully measured fabric of the tunic in a way that implied physical as well as magical power and the high collar made him look older and competent. In the robe pocket, he found his medal bar, which he pinned on straight the first try. A wrist flick brought the cloak over one shoulder, showing off the red edge of it. He would trust himself, he thought; he looked like he could do anything.

Still feeling this confidence, Harry arrived at the Ministry just as the elves finished mopping. Tonks' desk was a disaster of parchments, maps, and a broken quill or two, but he found his work file in the stand where it always was. He used the tearoom to finish organizing things and a copy spell to make a duplicate. His copy spell was still a little poor and the ink on the copy turned out faded and bluish, but it was readable, so he stuffed the original set in a large envelope and tied it closed. There was space on the tie for a wax seal, but he didn't think he need bother.

The offices were getting busier as he made his way to the lift, where he checked his watch. He just had time to drop off the documents before training. In the Minister's office, the receptionist looked up sharply and then her expression relaxed, as though she had expected someone else.

Harry said, "I have something I want the Wizengamot to consider," as he held out the packet.

The woman at the desk, whom Harry recognized as being in the Weasley Twin's year at Hogwarts although she had changed rather a lot, stood and accepted it with a formal air. Through her formality, her eyes flickered over him less so. "I'll see that the Minister gets it."

"Thanks," Harry said. He was noticing the shine on her auburn hair that covered the right quarter of her rather smooth face when she looked down.

"Unless you'd like to present it personally?" she asked and gestured toward the office door behind her. She almost looked to be blushing and it didn't look bad on her.

"No, that's all right," Harry reassured her. He hesitated, thinking he could add something along the lines of a personal question, perhaps. Looking at her, he got the distinct impression she wouldn't mind that at all. He was just stealing himself for something in the theme of *Don't I remember you from . . .* when voices entered from the corridor.

Harry turned and found the doorway filled with figures that stood out from the usual Ministry denizens, and not just because of their very fancy Muggle suits. Two of them wore rather alarmed expressions and the one in the lead was very familiar. Harry and this man stared at each other a few long seconds before the man said, "My, and you must be Harry Potter, correct?"

Harry recovered his poise and couldn't have been more grateful to not be in his usual silly workout suit. The man stepped forward, leaving his companions frozen in the open door, and put his hand out. Harry said, "Prime Minister," as he shook it. The man's eyes twinkled almost unnaturally when he smiled.

Madam Bones had been called from her office and swooped in at that moment. "Tobius," she said in familiar greeting. "I see you have met our most famous Ministry employee."

"Yes," Mr. Daire confirmed, "I just did." To Harry he said congenially, "We hope you can be counted on to prevent the next spillover out of the Wizarding world should you have another powerful rogue wizard causing difficulties."

Harry took that in and composed a safe response. "I intend to." In his head he was thinking, *spillover*? "As soon as my apprenticeship is complete. Speaking of which, I'm going to be late . . ."

Daire smiled that smile again. "By all means, we don't mean to get you in trouble . . ." He gestured at the door gallantly. Harry nodded at Bones, took one very quick glance back at the receptionist and escaped the room, parting Daire's slow moving assistants still rooted in the doorway.

"Nice of you to join us, Potter," Rodgers stated grimly when Harry rushed into the workout room.

"Sorry, sir." Harry took his seat, not bothering to explain.

Rodgers returned to writing a list of accidental magical reversal procedures on the rarely used chalkboard. Aaron asked, "Why are we in uniform today?" and Rodgers didn't respond until he had finished the second board. He stepped back and eyed the long list. "How does that look?"

"Like it will impress the Prime Minister," Harry quipped. When his fellows turned in surprise, Harry said, "He's with Madam Bones right now."

"Really?" Kerry Ann spoke with eagerness. Her eyes brightened as she asked with relish. "Is he coming up here?"

Aaron gave her a disgusted look. "Don't tell me you like that bloke?"

Kerry Ann geared up for a reply but Rodgers interrupted. "I thought it unnecessary to point out that we should be behaving in a dignified and organized manner." He gave Harry an odd look and put the chalk away.

Aaron turned backward to Harry. "So, he isn't talking . . . why's Daire here?"

Harry replied, "He wants to be assured that we aren't going to allow rogue magic to spillover into the Muggle world again."

"Ah. Is he right?" Aaron asked their trainer.

Sounding vaguely annoyed, Rodgers replied, "Of course Potter is correct. Must have gotten the memo even before the department did."

Harry, not wanting a return to their previous animosity, banked his all-knowing attitude and said with a shrug and a laugh, "I didn't get a memo, sir. I just happened to stop by the Minister's office this morning." The rest of the room had stiffened and they now all turned to see their trainer's response.

"You do that every Monday morning?" Rodgers asked with the slightest sneer.

Harry considered explaining about Sirius' petition, which he had not been keeping secret, but given the political waves it might cause, it was easier to respond with, "It was a good chance to talk to Belinda, Bones' receptionist."

Kerry Ann made a noise of amusement. "Oooh, Harry has his eye on someone."

Harry frowned but could not, despite his efforts, keep his face from heating up.

Rodgers rolled his eyes and muttered, "Flirt on your own time, Potter." Munz and Blackpool entered then, and with a glance at the clock, Rodger's whole demeanor changed. "Push the desks aside and line up here. We are supposed to be the second stop on the tour."

They stood waiting, which Harry thought a little silly. They should be doing drills instead, especially since Kerry Ann was quietly interrogating Harry about Belinda, as well as dropping gossip she knew, which Harry was ignoring for the most part. On his other side Vineet leaned over and, sounding as though he truly wished to be helpful, said, "Imagine how much easier to simply have your parents meet with hers and decide."

"I'll ask Severus if he's willing to do that then," Harry returned.

Vineet straightened and muttered, "Ah, yes. I was letting my mind slip on that fact." He sounded vaguely alarmed, which made Harry grin.

A troupe of footsteps came down the corridor, ending all conversation. Falsely toned introductions could be heard from the Auror's office across the way. Rodgers muttered, "Merlin, I hope Mad-Eye is out today." He didn't sound as though he were trying to be humorous, more truly worn down and Harry felt a little bad for having set him off earlier.

Madam Bones came into view, Daire right beside, followed by a pack of his and Bones' assistants. "And here is the future of our Magical Law Enforcement efforts," Bones asserted brightly. "This is our largest ever class of Auror apprentices, all of them the highest achievers on our rigorous admissions examinations." The Muggle assistants to the Minister did not appear to have relaxed at all and still maintained antsy postures as they stood just behind their boss, who took no notice of their alarm. Harry considered that they may have been informed just that morning that magic truly existed.

Daire passed along the line of apprentice Aurors and with that smile still fixed asked, "So, how does one enforce magical law against someone practicing black magic?"

"Can we have a little demonstration, Reggie?" Bones asked.

Rodgers walked along behind his charges and put his hands down on Harry's and Vineet's shoulders. In their ears he whispered, "Give them a bit of a show--lots of light and noise." More loudly, he said, "Certainly. We'll run through some of our drills for you, starting with two of our first year apprentices."

While Harry slowly took his place in the open end of the room he considered what spells made a lot of show without straining a block; the last thing he wanted was to actually knock Vineet off his feet during a demo before the Prime Minister. The visitors arranged themselves beside the other apprentices and Harry noticed that Belinda, standing on the end beside Daire's assistants, appeared keenly interested in the demonstration, in contrast to the Muggles in suits who appeared only additionally alarmed.

Harry lifted his wand and after a decent pause, sent a simple Freezing Charm at Vineet. It had a nice blue spell trail and some sizzle, which drew a gasp from someone. Vineet countered and spelled him with a rather broad Blasting Curse in return. Harry blocked it sufficiently, but he had not been expecting so much power in return. The boards in the floor shook. They exchanged another set of spells and again Harry went easy and bright and Vineet didn't curb his power. Harry bit his lip and considered what to use next.

During the pause, Daire said, "Bit of a mismatch here, Madam Bones. I thought young Potter was your star."

This bothered Harry far more than he would have liked.

"Oh, he can be counted on when it matters," Madam Bones returned casually, but beneath it Harry thought he heard a challenge.

Harry sent a chain-binding spell at his opponent, which he knew required timing and exactness on the block. Vineet was forced to use his agility to jump out of the way of it as his counter failed and the heavy chain floundered loudly on the floor before vaporizing. The Muggle assistants, who had been backing up with each exchange, were now up against the wall.

Vineet found his feet and his former spot and sent a blue torrent of Freezing at Harry, who found enough concentration for a block with an ease that made his heart race. Ice crystals clattered to the floor around him in a circle. Harry, deep in the zone of competitive concentration, cast back a whiplike disarming curse they had learned just the previous week. Vineet's wand clattered as it skid across the floor and stopped at Kerry Ann's feet.

"Ah," Daire stated with strange happiness. "Wizards are helpless without their wands, now aren't they?"

Harry had not been able to read Vineet's eyes until that moment, but he saw then that he longed to have a try at Harry with his martial arts. Harry didn't lower his wand. Madam Bones was beginning a complicated explanation of different magicks when Vineet demonstrated unexpectedly. One moment he looked to be stepping rapidly forward and the next a white tiger was loping straight at Harry, who took a few quick steps backward, partly from startlement and partly to gain time. Vocal expressions of surprise were coming from more than the Muggles. Harry raised his wand, dismissed spells as fast as they came to mind, and then dropped it to the floor instead, in favor of his own Animagus transformation.

Harry had no attention for the sudden movement of the audience to get farther from the pair of them. His attention was fixed on the tiger, which in its last bound before reaching him, was desperately trying to avert its approach. Claws scabbled at the wood floor to no avail. Harry, only in the interest of avoiding having his feet taken out from under him, put forward one of his large scarlet feet, knocking the snowy, delicately striped tiger over with ease. For a breath, nobody moved. Harry had spread his wings for balance without thinking, and now pulled them consciously in as he stepped back off of the prone big cat. Vineet flipped to his four feet and then just as smoothly stood and transformed back into himself as he returned to upright. He gazed up at Harry with eyes vacant in surprise. Harry quickly released the spell and flushing, picked up his wand while attempting an attitude of normalcy. Unfortunately, even the other apprentices were gape mouthed.

"Well," Daire exclaimed, clapping his hands once. "That was illuminating. Madam Bones, good to see you have someone to keep your star wizard properly challenged. What's next?"

"Sports and games, I believe," Bones said, failing to recover quite as quickly as her counterpart. She gestured to the door and Daire followed but had to turn when his assistants failed to move from where they leaned heavily on the wall in a tableau of horror.

"Come along then," Daire cajoled them. "Much more to see."

Only their eyes moved at this and Kerry Ann had to turn to hide a laugh at the comic disbelief they held. Only after further urging they did finally slink away in an attitude which implied that any sudden noises would be unwelcome.

Rodgers immediately spun on his apprentices. "What was that?" he demanded.

Harry didn't have a good answer. Kerry Ann provided one after a long pause. "Harry was colorful," she offered.

This put Rodgers on a different tack. "What was that, anyway, and you had better be registered."

"I am," Harry responded, careful not to sound anything but cooperative, even though he longed to snap at his trainer.

"It wasn't on your application," Rodgers breathed in annoyance.

"I hadn't managed the spell in time for my application," Harry offered calmly. "And my form is a mountain gryffylis."

Rodgers rubbed his eyes and then his face. "Well, you certainly made an impression. I guess that was the object of this exercise," he added with a groan before commanding, "Pair up, let's get some real drills in before lunch. Not you two," he added, gesturing at Harry and Vineet. "Vishnu, pair with Aaron."

When they finally broke for lunch after remarkably sober drills, Harry approached and said to Vineet. "I couldn't come up with a spell that would stop a four hundred pound tiger without hurting it."

Vineet appeared pained as he quietly said, "I allowed my frustration to rule me, for which I am apologizing."

Aaron and Kerry Ann stood by the door and waited for them. Harry said, "In a real fight you wouldn't give someone so much time, so you wouldn't necessarily need your blocks. After the first spell I think you'd be all set."

"It is more than that. I cannot even heat my tea without destroying the teapot. I have destroyed several and I do wish to have one when Nandi arrives. She will wonder."

"Maybe you could get a metal one or use a cauldron, they're tough," Harry offered helpfully.

Vineet brightened only a little as he replied. "I didn't consider a cauldron, I will do that."

\* \* \*

The envelope didn't look very impressive but Harry's heart started to race even as he tore the seal of what he was certain was the response to his dispensation request. The roundabout wording required a heart-stopping minute to sort out, but it confirmed what he had assumed: that the Ministry would allow him to inform his two cousins of his magical background, with the caveat that they not tell anyone else and that their doing so would be grounds for reevaluation of the dispensation and make them subject to action by the Magical Reversal Squad.

Harry raced to the drawing room for a pen and paper to write to Mrs. Evans with the news. When he got there, he stuffed them back away and instead fetched his cloak and Apparated to Godric's Hollow, to his usual spot, the deep shade below the Willow tree, which wasn't so shady now as it had lost its leaves. A cold wind blew through the small valley, making Harry wrap his cloak around himself and wish for gloves. He paused only a moment at his parent's grave before walking swiftly to the Evan's house where he interrupted Mrs. Evans reading a magazine with her tea.

"Harry dear, what a surprise." Her short grey hair was pulled back in a scarf today and the house was warmer than Harry was accustomed to.

Harry gave her a broad smile in return and pulled out the dispensation which he had stuffed into his pocket. It had crinkled it rather badly, so he quickly smoothed it with a charm and handed it over.

Polly Evans adjusted her glasses and asked, "That work for shirts as well?"

"Sort of. There are better spells for laundry."

"I haven't felt jealous of anyone in years but I have to say waving a wand to do the ironing has rather a strong appeal." She handed the letter back with a smile of her own. "Would you like a spot of tea or are you going to rush over to Patty's this instant?"

"Is she home?" Harry asked.

"She may be in the square with the children, even in the cold they prefer to be outside." She smiled at Harry's indecision. "Perhaps you should fetch her here for tea and we can share the news. Pamela will be home in an hour or so."

Harry's chest tightened for the tenth time at the very thought. He said he would return quickly and headed back out into the brisk breeze.

Patricia didn't answer her door, so he walked over to the small village square. The wind was much lower here, blocked by the buildings and a row of pines. His cousin sat on one of the two benches in the middle of the weedy cobblestones; her two children ran in fearsome circles nearby, chasing a bright pink football. The boy was too small to kick it and resorted to picking it up and dropping it instead. His sister tried in vain to explain better.

Harry approached from the side and said, "Hello."



"Harry! This is a surprise. You came all this way just to call?"

"Um, yeah. It's not all that far really," he said as he sat beside her, bundling his cloak around himself better. He watched the youngsters at play a minute and finally asked, "Anything strange ever happen around them?"

"What?" Patricia asked, sounding alarmed. Sounding amused instead, she added, "Why do you ask?"

Harry shrugged and found himself hoping one of the children would turn out to be magical. The prospect of little magical relatives was dizzying. The ball rolled to Harry's foot and he picked it up and tossed it back into the game, such as it was. Neither child had on mittens. "They don't mind the cold, eh?" Harry asked.

"No, not at all. If I tried to keep them inside all day I'd go nutters."

*They'd make good Quidditch players*, Harry thought to himself, still wishful. His friends' various stories about how their relatives tried to determine if they were magical flitted through his mind. The next time the ball rolled his way, Harry held it out of reach to see what would happen. The girl just stood on tiptoe and bounced until the ball was given up.

"Did you stop and see Mum?"

"Yep," Harry replied and shook himself. "She said to bring you round for tea."

Patricia stood immediately. "Sounds good. Come on Basie," she called to the boy when he didn't follow immediately. His sister picked up the ball, which forced him to follow with a cry of displeasure. As they walked, Patricia asked doubtfully, "So you stopped by just to say hello?"

"No, I have something I want to explain."

"About what?" she asked, sounding curious.

"Um, partly about the night my parents were killed."

"Hm," she murmured eagerly and accepted the ball from her daughter to carry. "Mum knows something and she would never tell. It was always so mysterious what with dad always making up crazy explanations to tease us with. So what really happened?"

Harry took a deep breath. "An evil wizard came and killed my parents."

She tossed the football at him, hard. Only his Quidditch reflexes let him catch it although he jammed a finger doing it. "Ow," he muttered. "What was that for?"

"You sound like Dad," she complained.

"Ah," Harry said in understanding. They were on an empty street so he pulled his wand out and tapped the ball, turning it bright blue. He gallantly handed it back. She turned it around and looked it over, then looked at what he held, the wand. To her credit she kept walking.

"Ball!" Briar, the daughter demanded.

"Just a second, dear," Patricia insisted. "Neat trick."

"I don't actually know many tricks," Harry admitted. "That's an illusion. He took the football back and tapped it with an incantation to turn it into a blue golf ball."

"You're a magician?" she asked, sounding hopeful.

They had reached the field leading to the Evan's property. "Not exactly," Harry admitted. "A wizard."

"There's no such thing," she countered with a laugh.

Harry removed the illusions and tossed the ball ahead of them on the freshly mown field. Giggling children gave chase. The children remained outside as they went into the house.

"Hello, dear," Polly greeted her daughter. "Met our magical relative?"

Patricia froze at that. "Sort of," she hedged.

At Harry's questioning look, Polly explained, "I knew you couldn't wait to say." She fetched the teapot and biscuits and took a seat and cajoled her daughter to join her.

"He's telling one of those crazy stories like Dad used to," she said. "About magicians, no . . . wizards." She shook her head with a frown.

Harry took a seat across from her. "Give us a little show, Harry dear, since you have your wand out. Get us the sugar, perhaps."

Harry hovered the sugar bowl from the shelf above the stove. Patricia closed her eyes and muttered, "Gracious. You aren't kidding."

"You should wait for Pammy or you'll have to tell it all twice," Polly said helpfully, sipping her tea with a smile. "I do so remember your mother with fondness."

"Lily was a . . .?"

"Witch," Harry and Polly replied together.

A bit reluctantly, Patricia queried, "Ah, and the question you had about anything strange happening with the children . . . ?"

"I haven't seen a sign of anything," Polly went on. "But I don't really know what to look for."

Harry calmly explained to his rattled cousin, "Magic shows up occasionally in this family. But only every hundred years or so." He shrugged. "But either of them could be magical. You'll know for certain when they turn eleven if not before."

"Why when they turn eleven?"

"Because Hogwarts school keeps track and sends every single magical child in Britain a letter saying they can go to school there. Not all of them do though. It isn't the most normal education."

"Your dad seems to teach normal things, chemistry, well, mythology is a little different."

Harry shook his head. "He used to teach Potions. Now he teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Oh," Patricia quipped. "Potions . . . as in Love Potion?"

"I can brew one of those . . . they're easy."

"Pammy could use one," she stated authoritatively between bites of biscuit. "Hover something else," she then insisted.

With a bright smile Harry obliged.

When Pamela arrived, drawn by multiple mysterious messages left on her telephone answering machine by her sister, Patricia dove right in with. "Guess what? Dad wasn't joking, it really was an evil wizard."

It grew dark outside the window as Harry and Polly explained. Much dismay was expressed about the prophecy, which made Harry feel unexpectedly good.

"So, wait, your dad, Mr. Snape, he's a wizard as well, then?" Pamela asked when Hogwarts was explained.

"Yes," Harry replied.

"I have to admit to finding him a little creepy before," Pamela confessed. "That doesn't help."

"He has his moments, I'll admit," Harry said. "He's good at intimidating students."

"Even you?"

"Well, for a while," Harry hedged. "I see through it now."

"So one of the children could be magical?" Pamela asked. "That would be fun. Maybe I should have a few," she uttered thoughtfully. She didn't notice the gleeful expressions on either her sister or mother's face. Harry ducked his head to hide his laugh.

"I should show you my album. Let me fetch it." Harry said, and promptly Disapparated. He arrived in his room directly, picked up the album out of the nightstand and returned. Three sets of stunned eyes fixed on him as he held the album out. "I didn't explain about that, did I?" he asked and swallowed hard. "That's called Apparation. It's how we get around."

Silence reined until Patricia glanced at the album and said, "You went all the way to your house? Isn't it just miles and miles away?"

"Yes," Harry admitted and tried to distract them with the album which, of course, was full of animated pictures, which didn't help the general sense of alarm.

"And this is me playing Quidditch for my house team. My dad played too when he was in school. And that's the end." Except for the chocolate frog card that Harry had had forgotten was in there between the last page and the back cover.

"What's that?" Pamela asked, grabbing it up and reading it off. "It looks like a football card. Are you famous?"

"Sort of," Harry admitted. "Everyone's very happy to have Voldemort gone."

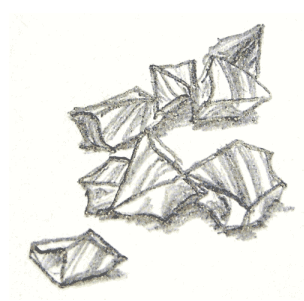
Patricia took the card next, watching the picture on the front closely. "You look small in this picture."

"I was. I've grown a lot since then."

"Looks it." She continued to peer into the card intently until she noticed the time suddenly and insisted she had to get the children home to bed and get some dinner together. She gave Harry a hug, and the card, and departed.

"I need to get to my studies as well," Harry said, remaining standing. He said his goodbyes and insisted he would visit again soon. Polly had less than dry eyes as she gave him a hug as well.

At home the house seemed extraordinarily quiet and his light heart made it hard to finish his readings. Before getting into bed, he wrote a quick note to Snape explaining about his evening, which refreshed the memory rather happily. He fell into sleep with a smile still quirking his lips.



## Chapter 69 -- Circling in the Dark

Harry decided to depart early for the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw Quidditch match so that he could visit at Hogwarts beforehand. For the match he planned to meet up with Ron and some other former schoolmates as well as Aaron. As he moved around his room getting ready, he wished that he could just Apparate into Hogsmeade, since that distance was easy for him now. After he finished feeding Hedwig and Kali, he found himself half tempted to try. Closing his eyes he imagined High Street and scrunched himself down hard, only to be popped back so fast he had to take a step back to stay on his feet. Harry sighed to himself; he really couldn't have expected that to work. Both of his pets were peering at him with identical tilted head expressions of curiosity.

"Yeah, I know--*Hogwarts, A History*," he grumbled at them.

As expected, he became stalled in the Floo for long minutes before getting dumped a bit unceremoniously on his knees on the hearthstone of the crowded Three Broomsticks. Pretending nothing was amiss, he got to his feet and brushed himself off.

"Harry!" a familiar voice rang out and Seamus came over to greet him. When his old schoolmate started discussing the match-up in great detail, Harry had to beg off. Other than the occasional letter where Ginny discussed a new play, Harry had no sense of the two teams and wondered that he had lost touch so quickly.

A cold wind blew steadily sideways along the path to the castle. Harry tightened his cloak against it and walked most of the way with his arms wrapped around himself. Few others were on the lawn this early, preferring instead the warmth of the pubs until game time. Only a pair of well-bundled students were moving quickly in the other direction, so quickly that they took no notice of Harry. In contrast to the empty lawn, many students were milling about in the Entrance Hall. He didn't expect to see Ginny or any of the other players since they would be down in the changing rooms already, but many students waved hello as he passed through and only a few stared in surprise.

Snape was in his office grading a thick roll of essays. "You are early," he said in a way of greeting.

Harry dropped into the visitor's chair and relaxed into the familiar feel of the surrounding stone walls. Snape continued to work uninterrupted. Harry peered around the office, eyes alighting on a few things that had not been there before, like a brand new manual of forbidden potions that sat alone upon the top shelf beside the dusty pensieve. Below that Harry spotted the tin from the Himalayan tea alongside some other ingredient jars and realized with a jolt that Snape's birthday was fast approaching and questions about potion books fled his mind as he fiercely considered what he might get his guardian this year . . . quickly.

"Are you coming home next weekend?" Harry asked, rapidly plotting ahead.

Snape's eyes lifted from his task. "I was not considering it."

Harry, who regretted not thinking of plans sooner, but figured he could safely assume Snape did not have a date with Candide scheduled for his birthday, suggested, "Shall we meet in Hogsmeade on Friday?"

"You have nothing better to do?" Snape asked lightly. When Harry shook his head, he prodded, "Wouldn't rather be out with your friends?"

"They're all coming over this evening."

"Ah, do try to keep things sedate, if possible." Snape rubbed his hair back out of his eyes and held it there as he searched through a pile of books. "We can meet in Hogsmeade if you wish," he said.

He sounded just a bit down to Harry, but of course this time last year he had a date. Harry figured that was probably what was bothering him. With a glance at his watch he stood. "I'm going to meet my friends. I'll see you after the match?"

Snape nodded and started to wave him out, but then closed the book he had started to search through with a *snap*! "Everything going all right, Harry?" he asked soberly.

Harry gave him a smile. "Well enough. Very well, I think." Snape seemed to expect more elaboration, so Harry leaned a hand against the doorframe and said, "My visit to my relatives went very well, but I owled you about that. They are expecting us for Christmas at some point, just to warn you." Here Harry smiled even more, but bit his lip as he added, "And I didn't tell you that I submitted a petition to the Wizengamot to have Sirius' case reconsidered. I haven't heard anything about that yet." Snape's passive gaze didn't waver, so Harry went on, "Um . . . I met the Prime Minister, but I didn't tell you about that because the demonstration of Defensive magic got a little out of hand and Daire's two assistants needed calming draughts by the end of the day, and I was a little embarrassed about the whole thing." Harry felt his cheeks flushing at the vaguely disturbed expression that had overtaken Snape's face. "We'll keep the party tonight small and quiet . . . I promise."

Snape raised a brow and rubbed his chin. "I was going to suggest that perhaps life had gotten calm and ordinary for you, but I realize not." He turned back to his papers. "There was some strange rumor about a griffin fighting a tiger at the Ministry and my paranoid thoughts immediately leapt to you." He raised just his pitch dark eyes to peer at Harry with a vague challenge.

Harry smiled sheepishly. "The press wasn't there. Thank Merlin."

"I would say," Snape intoned. "Perhaps you should join your friends. I had hoped to finish grading these essays before the match."

"I see you later then, although I'm not staying for dinner. Is Minerva expecting me to?"

"You should probably find her or leave her a note in that case."

As he exited Snape's office, Harry checked his watch and found it was still well before match time. He headed farther on, around to the gargoyles, but didn't know the password. He was turning to go ask Snape and came face to face with Professor Greer. "Good morning, Professor," Harry said in a rather friendly way, he thought. It was easy to let go his dislike of her since he was feeling even farther removed from this place than last visit.

"Mr. Potter," she said with a sour shape to her mouth. She grinned then. "Don't know the password?" she asked the way Dudley might have, as though to taunt.

Harry calmly refused to rise to it. "No, ma'am," he admitted.

She swung her full robes around, "Lemon Verbena," she commanded haughtily and the gargoyle jumped aside.

Harry followed her up the office where McGonagall appeared to be having a meeting with Professor Cawley, who looked a bit more worn down than Harry remembered. "Do try to be firm with them . . . it does no good to give them a chance to rule the situation . . ." McGonagall was advising when the turning staircase reached the top. Her door was open as usual.

"That might cut down on the Slytherin skiving as well," Cawley responded.

"Ah, Gertrude . . . and *Harry*," McGonagall said, pleasantly surprised. "Please come in. I'm sorry, you've caught us in the middle of an impromptu staff meeting." She came around her desk and gave his hand a light shake. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"No, sorry, Professor. I'm having a party tonight." Harry noticed that she looked greyer than ever.

"Ah, well. It was nice enough of you last time. Know that you are always welcome to stay after the match." She glided back around her desk. "But I'm afraid at *this* moment we have issues we must discuss."

"Of course," Harry said amiably and started back to the staircase. A frosted glass dodecahedron mounted on a spindle shifted to follow him as he passed by it.

"Ah, but . . ." McGonagall said, pulling him back around. "There was something I wanted to ask you." She had an odd smile on her face, as though reluctantly amused. "I heard a very strange story about the Prime Minister, a scarlet griffin and a rare white tiger, or some such." Harry's shoulders fell, which he feared gave him away. McGonagall went on pleasantly on the surface but underneath she sounded as though she might be getting even for something. "The story was too many tellers removed to be wholly accurate . . . I thought you would . . . perhaps have heard what actually happened."

Greer and Cawley both turned back to hear the answer as well. "No one got hurt," Harry pointed out instead of replying. "And Daire seemed to enjoy himself. It's a long story," he breathed, not willing to explain.

"Ah," McGonagall uttered, eyes twinkling. "Is Daire as good looking in person?"

Harry shrugged, unable to gauge that. "My fellow apprentice Kerry Ann can't shut up about him now, so I guess he is."

She smiled and waved him out with a generous goodbye. Harry fleetingly suspected that she enjoyed knowing that his penchant for trouble was someone else's problem now.

To overcome that thought, Harry walked the other way around the castle to find Hagrid in his garden, harvesting the last of his peas. Only they weren't ordinary ones. Even browned by the frost, these kept trying to reach out and tangle Hagrid's hand while he plucked the nobbly pods off into a massive basket.

"Good to see ya', Harry," Hagrid said with feeling. They had a pleasant long chat that didn't include any discussion of any kind of trouble Harry might or might not have gotten in at the Ministry.

When Harry found his friends in the visitor's section of the Quidditch stadium, he gratefully tucked into a bag of wriggling caramel caterpillars and a butterbeer that Ron had purchased for him. He and Hermione had formed a small section of former students along with Neville, Seamus, and even Lavender, whom Harry had not seen in a long time. When Aaron arrived, Harry made them all shift down to make room.

"As long as you aren't a Slytherin," Ron commented around a mouthful of cinnamon popcorn.

Aaron beat Harry to a reply, by sitting straight and saying haughtily, "And what would you do if I were?"

"Ah," Ron uttered. "Nothing, I guess," he admitted sullenly. He swallowed and leaned over to whisper to Harry, "You've picked up some strange friends."

"This from someone who works with Trolls and Goblins," Harry retorted teasingly.

Ron sighed and slumped in his seat. "True."

The match was long--three and a half hours long. Harry thought that they should have used the old Snitch given that both Seekers were new. He also wondered if anyone else knew of the switch in equipment. By the end all of the players were utterly exhausted. Ginny's hair had fallen completely out of its tie and she was doing much more shouting at her players than Harry would have expected, probably out of frustration due to their trailing by two goals most all the game.

The Gryffindor Seeker, Louisa Llwelan, finally caught the Snitch almost by defense when it veered suddenly as though imitating a Bludger and came right at her. The Ravenclaw Seeker hung his head and shook it, tossing his long curls side to side as he did so. Ginny had mentioned in one of her letters that even though he was a Third Year many of the girls had a crush on him. He had poise in losing though, and flew over to shake hands with Louisa before landing where his team had gathered on the pitch. The Ravenclaws slouched off the field as the Gryffindors slapped each other on the back, although they didn't do this with the usual enthusiasm; perhaps they were too tired even to celebrate.

The crowd lacked energy too and filed slowly out of the stands. "Good thing we have a party to look forward to," Ron said, slapping Harry on the back rather hard.

\* \* \*

The doorknocker sounded, just audible over the voices in the crowded main hall of the house. Harry, while maneuvering his way across to answer it, had not realized that he had invited so many people. He opened the door to reveal Aaron with a fashionably pretty girl on his arm from whom he seemed to be getting more than moral support. Harry wondered at that, he had only two hours with which to pick up his date after the match.

"Harry!" he greeted and then gesturing with a wine bottle that sported a crinkled red ribbon at the neck, he introduced, "Rachel . . . Harry Potter . . . how're ya' doin', Harry? This is for you." With this he held out the bottle.

"Come on in," Harry invited, stepping back and gesturing with his arm. Rachel passed with wide, surprised eyes as though trying to see him better in the darkness of the entryway. Aaron drove ahead without noticing his date's amazement.

As they made the hall, Rachel said to Aaron in a confused and heavily French-accented voice, "Zo, you really are an Auror?"

This seemed to get through to Aaron's alcohol-fogged brain. "Yeah," he replied in a hurt tone. "I wouldn't make that up. What if someone expected Auror things from me if I did make that up?" He sounded honestly alarmed.

"Have some punch," Harry offered from the tray Winky carried past at that moment.

Rachel accepted the glass of glowing blue liquid, still fixated on Harry. "Zis is your house?" she managed to ask.

"Yes."

Aaron looked around with a keen eye. "That's right, this is Professor Snape's place, isn't it?" He swallowed hard and looked more wary.

"Nothing hazardous here," Harry assured him. "Unless you start drinking things from the medicine cupboard without mixing or diluting first. Speaking of which, before you leave I can mix you something you are almost certainly going to want."

Rachel stared at Harry over her untouched glass which was making her hand and chin glow. "You are really ZE Harry Potter?"

Harry neutrally replied, "Yes. Aaron and I are in the Ministry Auror's program together."

She appeared to be reevaluating Aaron, including looking him up and down. "Huh."

"Let me introduce you to some of my friends. . . "

The party only seemed to get more crowded as the evening wore on. Perhaps this was due to the excessive amounts of food Winky kept bringing out. Harry looked around at the laden tables covered in trays of little snacks in alarming variety. Someone had brought a Wizard Wireless set and strains of eerie music were battling with the conversations.

"Harry," Ron said, stepping over. "Quite a spread of food. I really need to get an elf. Maybe when I get a pay rise."

"How *is* Gringott's?" Harry asked.

Ron shrugged. "Good. I got to see the ninth level this week, which is the second most secure and full of all kinds of nasty stuff. The Goblins are good at cursing iron, I'm hoping to learn how they do it." Ron fell into explaining with relish. "They have this double door leading to the lowest levels . . . it looks like two ordinary reinforced doors, but if you aren't supposed to be there, these triangular spikes pop out and the two doors snap together like an iron maiden."

"That's nice," Harry replied, feeling more queasiness from thoughts of physical harm than from magical.

Fred and George slinked over, their usual broad grins visible even in the low candlelight. "Great party, Harry. You do have an awful lot of friends."

"Everyone wants to be Harry's friend," the other twin teased as they both leaned in close.

"How goes your training, O Auror? You haven't come by for a visit in a long while."

"Yes, we need to ply you with treats now, so you don't arrest us later."

Harry wondered what they were getting up to. "You haven't been expanding to other neighborhoods, have you?"

The twins appeared curious. "No, why?"

"Just wondering. Have anything new and interesting that would help an Auror?" Harry asked as a distraction.

"Hm, George have we?" Fred asked thoughtfully.

George rubbed his chin in a pose of careful consideration. "We'll have to think about that." He tugged on his brother's arm as though to keep him from speaking.

"What *are* they working on?" Harry asked Ron when the Twins had moved off, wearing identical sly grins.

Ron finished chewing before answering, "Well, they spent a lot of time trying to make an invisibility cloak. I don't think they quite managed it, or how about, I think they actually wanted to make an invisibility lemon drop. They get bored with that and moved on. I actually don't know what they're working on now. Ginny might . . . she keeps up with that better."

Tonks wandered over, her expansive pink Mohawk bobbing above the crowd. "Have to go, Harry. Thanks for the invite."

"You just arrived . . . didn't you?"

She laughed brightly, which plucked at something inside Harry's chest. "Two hours ago, Harry."

"Really?" Harry asked in shock and fished out his watch; it was nearly midnight. "Well, glad you could come," he stated with some formality. She gave a little nod before she disappeared with a *bang*! Harry, looked around the crowd to avoid Ron's gaze. He watched Aaron dancing with his date across the floor, agile in the crowd and rhythmic, despite dancing while the Wizard Wireless announcer was giving Quidditch scores. They tangoed near to them and stopped, with Aaron dipping his date almost into the punch.

"Hello, Harry," Aaron said graciously, sounding a bit like his mother might. "We should have parties every night," he said dreamily. "Rather than readings, for certain."

"Readings?" Rachel asked, straightening up.



Aaron sighed, "Yes. Aurors, we're all nearsighted from living inside a book, you know . . ." Here he tweaked Harry's glasses.

Harry pushed his glasses back up his nose. "I've had these a long time," he pointed out.

Aaron took his date's arm through his own, and she draped herself against him and gazed at Harry with a strange look of wonder. Harry cleared his throat. "So, where did you two meet?"

"On the train," Aaron said, patting Rachel's hand. "She is visiting from Lyon and I offered to show her the sites, you know, Tower of London, Dungeon of London . . . Harry Potter."

Rachel giggled with an elegant hand over her mouth. "I sought he waz joking."

"Ah," Harry uttered. "You pick up women by telling them you know me?" he asked in dismay.

Aaron leaned over as though to confide something. "Harry, you should be picking them up by *being* you. Why don't you have a date?"

Harry had owled Tara, just as a casual invitation, but she already had an engagement. During the week, he had tried to think of a reason for stopping in at the Minister's office, but didn't want to actually run into the Minister until he was certain she had forgiven him for the demonstration, so he hadn't. He shrugged.

"Aye," Aaron breathed and pulled his date over so he could put an arm around Harry. "We still have so far to go with him," he murmured sadly.

"Good luck," Ron quipped while eating his twentieth sausage roll of the evening.

The party finally began to thin out, although the food hadn't, Harry noticed. He didn't see Winky in the hall and, fearing that she was making yet more snacks, headed to the kitchen.

It was blissfully quiet even on the steps leading down and at the bottom only the crackle of the kitchen hearth fire was audible. Winky was busy cleaning cauldrons. "Hey, Winky," Harry greeted her.

"Master need something?" she asked in concern.

"No, no, I was just coming to make sure you didn't bring anything else out." It was warm and cozy down here and Harry's ears were ringing from the noise, he discovered in the quiet. He took a seat on a low, elf-height stool. "Thank you for doing so much for the party," Harry said, making Winky bow.

A foot scraped on the stone steps. "I thought I saw you duck down here," Hermione said, coming into the red firelight, the only light in the kitchen. "Big party."

"I didn't mean it to be," Harry said, rolling his sleeves up in the warmth.

"Did you make all that food, Winky?" Hermione asked.

"Winky make food, yes," Winky replied, while pulling at the edges of her teatowel.

"That's a lot of work," Hermione said, pulling over a crate of potatoes to sit on between Harry and the low table that dominated one wall.

"Oh, no Mistress, little work for Winky." Apparently seeing Hermione's doubtful face, the elf went on, "Winky not given much work--Winky like work."

Hermione slapped the back of her hand lightly on Harry's arm. "Harry, you're not much work. Loan me Winky, will you?"

"You?" Harry blurted in disbelief. "*You* want to borrow an elf?"

"No, I guess not." Then thinking further, added, "I'd eat a lot better if I had one, though."

"How are things at the solicitor's?" Harry asked.

"Interesting enough," she said, sounding vaguely insincere. "Really, it is challenging and all, but I spend *too* much of my day going through books."

Harry gave her an even stronger look of disbelief and lightly pinched her arm. "Is that really Hermione in there?"

She slapped him weakly in return. "Yes," she replied in exasperation. "It's just that . . . I don't really use my magic at all. And I'm *good* at magic. I heat the office tea with my magic. You and Ron get to use magic all the time and you get to learn lots of new magic." She rested her chin on her palms and stared into the fire. "It's hard to mix magic and serious work. But I'm not sure what else to do. I get to do all kinds of important things now, but not what I had set out to."

They both considered the hearth in silence until Hermione said, "I need a change."

"Considered being an Auror?" Harry teased.

"Yes, and the conclusion was, 'No'," she stated emphatically. "Maybe I *should* try to find something at the Ministry. . . ." She sighed and rested her chin down on her hand again.

A dark, cloaked figure silently descended the five steps leading to the kitchen. Harry looked up and said, "Hey, Vineet."

"I should be departing," the Indian intoned.

Harry stood and shook his friend's hand. "Thank you for coming. Sorry, we didn't get a chance to talk."

"Your invitation was most welcome . . ."

Aaron barreled down the steps at that moment and grabbed Vineet up from behind, apparently for support. "Harry! great party. You should have more of these. Hello, we didn't get introduced, did we?" he said, squinting at Hermione.

"We met at the match. Hermione Granger," she said, holding out her hand.

"Harmony, nice name," Aaron greeted, shaking her hand. "Aaron's the name. Harry and I are at the Ministry together . . . I mean, we are training at the . . . well anyway. See ya' Monday, Vishnu. I should get the lady home . . . she wants to . . . I have to go." With a sharp pat on Vineet's back he departed with an unsteady step.

"*He's* an Auror Apprentice?" Hermione asked in concern.

"He's all right normally," Harry assured her with a laugh. Aaron was not leaving much of a positive impression and he left without any pink stuff, although he might get more care out of his date as a result.

"I will be seeing you Monday as well," Vineet said and gave a little bow in Hermione's direction. "Harmony," he stated formally before turning and departing.

Harry expected his friend to express annoyance at the mishearing of her name. She didn't say anything however, just sat in silence while Winky hung cauldrons up to dry along the wall. "Who was that?" she asked finally. "Another of your fellow apprentices?"

"Yeah, that was Vineet."

A long pause ensued. "How's he doing?"

"He was using a mismatched wand until recently, so now he has no power control." Harry smiled, "It really annoys him too." Seeing her odd expression, Harry added, "He's getting better. He can counter, but he can't put up a block worth much. Otherwise he'd be the top of the class."

"Where's he from?"

Harry cast back in his memory. "Oh, he said, once. Uh, Bhube-something."

"Bhubaneswar?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied. "You've heard of it?"

"They are famous for their white tigers," she explained, locking her hands around her bare knees below her skirt and rocking back on her crate.

"Ah. I can imagine," Harry stated cryptically.

"So, how is Auror training going. Seems like you have interesting fellow trainees."

"I like the training a lot, except that drills get a little tiresome and things are going on and no one tells us anything. That annoys me."

"You don't get to go to staff meetings?" she teased.

"No. And I found out the other day that they don't trust me."

"They don't trust you?" Hermione echoed in disbelief. "What are they thinking?"

"They think if I know where trouble is I'll disobey and try to get involved."

"Oh," Hermione uttered, sounding too understanding of that.

Harry huffed into the still air. "You think I would too."

Hermione rocked back, still holding her knees tightly. Her bright white socks glowed in the firelight. "I think it would depend on what was going through your head. Like if Tonks were in trouble . . ."

Harry stood suddenly and paced the very short distance to where stray broken biscuits lined the edge of the table. He munched on one as a distraction.

"Harry . . . you like her, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Harry replied, trying for an ordinary tone.

"No, I mean, *really* like her."

"I'm not allowed to," he answered quietly.

Hermione sighed and stood up beside him. "My advice, if you are willing to hear it: don't wrap yourself up in her, it will only make it worse. Go out with someone else."

"I've been doing that. Well, I've been trying anyway," Harry answered defensively. "I avoid thinking about her, but when I suspect she's in danger . . ."

"She got by just fine without you looking out for her, you know," Hermione pointed out gently. "When things were much worse."

"Something's going on," Harry whispered, needing to tell her that.

"What?" she asked, alarm quick to her voice she stood up and came beside him.

"I don't know exactly. You haven't heard anything, have you?"

With a sharp laugh she replied, "You're asking me?" A paused ensued before she asked, "Are you sleeping well?"

Harry faced that question. "Not always," he admitted.

"You haven't been hunting Avery again, have you?"

"No, but maybe I should be," he replied flatly.

She patted his back. "Be careful, Harry, all right? Whatever you do."

\* \* \*

That night, Harry awoke in the coldest hour just before dawn, a headache grinding at his temples and an odd dream disturbing his calm. The fire in the grate flickered weakly and it wasn't enough heat for this late in the year. Harry slid out of bed, the duvet wrapped around him. Halfway across the floor, he considered that he could have used his wand to hover more wood onto the fire instead. With a huff he dragged the covers the rest of the way across the room and rearranged the coals with the poker before adding new wood. He pulled over the velvet-covered stool from before the rolltop and sat close to the hearth for warmth as the fire rose up. Rubbing his eyes hard did not make the cotton in his head go away, in fact it made his head pound a little more.

As he sat hunched close to the rising flames, the dream flickered though his memory; in it he had been fighting a panther in the Forbidden Forest. The sleek, pitch-black cat moved unnaturally, as though not entirely solid. Harry had been fighting it in his Animagus form and only his ability to fly was giving him any advantage at all over the sharp toothed, slippery-bodied beast. Every time it turned and lunged, he pumped his wings hard downward and lifted himself out of reach, but he could not manage to bring the creature down. His claws repeatedly passed through the thing as though it were only a shadow.

Harry rubbed his eyes again. Perhaps he had drunk too much mead and eaten too many spicy sausage rolls.

\* \* \*

Harry, tired of waiting for Tonks to open the subject, did so himself the next chance he had, which was Monday, when their training broke for lunch. She was reading through a thick stack of files at her desk. People were going in and out, but they looked otherwise occupied. Harry pulled a chair over and sat down, which brought her attention up to him.

"You were supposed to yell at me about Avery . . . I just thought I'd remind you."

She closed the file before her and put her hand on it. The thickest file emitted a sigh and the pile settled. "Yes, I was, wasn't I?" she asked rhetorically while staring beyond the note-laden cubicle wall at the back of the desk.

Whitley stepped by with his usual stooped shoulders and handed her another file, which she stacked with the rest, this time eliciting a groan from one of the folders. Tonks rubbed her cheek thoughtfully. "Someone would help you, Harry . . . you hardly are in this alone." Voice harder, she added, "You never were, you know."

Harry pressed down unwelcome memories and focused on the present. "I haven't sensed him in a while. And I haven't been looking, not since Halloween."

"He was a dunderhead, Harry," Tonks stated. "Unlike many of the others we need to deal with right now."

"Why is he still out there then?" Harry asked, upset at being put off.

"A lucky and extra paranoid dunderhead."

Harry paused until Rogan finished fetching a small crystal ball from his desk and departed again, tossing it in the air and catching it again as though uncaring of the value. When he was gone, Harry said, "But he must think it is safe for him now, eh?"

"We've not had any sightings, Harry. Only you have any news of him, and you haven't exactly been sharing it," she pointed out, anger underlying her words. "Just because you aren't allowed to be involved at all levels, doesn't mean you aren't part of this team. Where did you sense him last?"

"Near London."

She tilted her head as though this was news. "He must have gotten better at disguise." She bit her lip. "Or he has help. There are still people out there, although not many, who would sympathize with him." She stared off in the distance thoughtfully. "We can issue another round of posters. No one would complain if we did." She pulled out a mostly blank scrap parchment and scratched a note on it. "London, eh?" She stuck a pin through the note and added it to the layers upon layers of notes already pinned to the cubicle divider. "Any other news, Harry, please consider sharing it," she stated this in such a cold tone that Harry felt it as well as heard it.

Harry stood, fighting the tangle under his ribs. "So what happened the other day when Vineet and I got left at the safe-house?" He asked this because he figured he had little to lose and only information to gain.

"Nothing," she replied.

She sounded honest, so Harry echoed, "Nothing?" in disbelief.

"Turned out it was a complicated mistake."

Harry thought of Rogan's comments about vague and inaccurate reports and felt uneasy. "That's strange."

Without looking up from the file she had reopened, she replied, "It was. We spent a lot of time determining that it was truly the case . . . that nothing was going on." She sounded dismissive, so Harry moved off, feeling heavyhearted.

When Harry opened the post that afternoon his spirits lifted when he found a letter from Patricia. Inside was a photograph of her, her husband, and the two children. He stared at it for several seconds before realizing that it was unlikely to start moving. It occurred to him that he had no good picture to send back, unless he wanted to send a page of the *Prophet*. He placed the photograph inside the edge of the frame of a picture of him and his friends from third year. He could really use a new one of the group of him and his friends as well, they looked much too young in this one--naïve even. And sometimes when he looked at it, he felt the cursed grip of the events to follow, as though they were still in the future. But they weren't. Voldemort was gone. The Ministry was run more competently. Things had changed a lot from that moment captured at the Leaving Feast that year, but the otherwise innocent photo still unwelcomingly evoked that past.

The unmoving photo of his smiling relatives covered too much of the one underneath; he would have to get a new frame. He would also have to get a picture with his guardian, as he didn't have a good one to send or even to keep.

Harry wrote out a nice reply addressed to Patricia, and just in case her husband might see, put it in care of Mrs. Evans and gave it to Hedwig to deliver. His owl's white form soared away over the trees, making Harry smile at the expected

scene of her arrival. He had mentioned how wizards send post . . . hadn't he? In any event, they would welcome an owl delivery he was certain, unlike the Dursleys.

\* \* \*

"Don't put your things down and change yet," Rodgers said when they arrived on Wednesday. "We are going to do some work outside, practice some larger barriers. Magical Games and Sports is storing a herd of racing thestrals in our usual spot, but fortunately our assistant department head has offered the use of his property in Ottery-St. Catchpole for our spell practice."

Harry's spirits rose at the prospect of visiting the Burrow. They Apparated in just behind the house and Mrs. Weasley came out, drying her hands on a bright yellow polka dot apron, a dingy grey parka pulled over her shoulders. "Harry dear," she said, giving him a big hug. She then released him and straightened her apron while flushing under Rodgers' dismayed scrutiny.

"Mrs. Weasley," he said soberly shaking her hand as though to make a point about decorum. "We promise not to be any trouble, please let us know if we disturb you at all."

Harry was very grateful he had left his rabbit-lined gloves in the pocket of his cloak, as they followed Rodgers of the uneven ground to the area usually used for Quidditch. In fact one of the poles still held a bent bicycle rim. Rodgers turned to Harry. "This is technically not far enough away from a Muggle settlement," he breathed as though wanting to hold that over him.

"In the summer the trees block the view from the nearest road," Harry pointed out, then hoped that it wasn't obvious that the trees had grown magically fast. Right now they looked like ordinary leafless trees.

Rodgers frowned at the tall line of trees and then let it drop in favor of explaining the barriers he wanted to practice. "The first is an object repelling barrier, traditionally called the cannonball catcher because it was widely used to protect castle walls. The second is a Muggle repelling charm such as a Quidditch stadium would have . . ."

They worked for hours. The spells began with them holding their wands in the air near each other and incanting a spell in unison repeatedly until a hazy glow encompassed all of their wands. Usually the glow would only be around two of the wands and almost always around Vineet's and Rodgers'. Harry did as poorly as the others and he struggled with the advice to *feel the spell* and *channel the nearby magic* as well as his own through his wand. Vineet patiently followed along, although it was clear he didn't need the practice.

Lunchtime came and went and still they worked at it, Rodgers apparently not pleased with their progress. Mrs. Weasley interrupted around 1:30, for which Harry and his rumbling stomach were very grateful. She brought them all cups of chicken soup and Rodgers accepted one rather than complain about the interruption as Harry expected he would.

When their wonderfully warm mugs were empty, he said, "All right, back to it. You are the slowest bunch I've ever seen at this." Harry, Kerry Ann, and Aaron shared a frown as they raised their wands yet again. Harry restrained himself from pointing out to their trainer that the Ministry had never tried to teach barriers to this many apprentices at once, so how did he know?

Despite his aching arm and frustration from training, Harry dearly needed to shop for Snape's birthday present for that Friday. They departed the Burrow after Mr. Weasley arrived home, so twilight hovered over Diagon Alley when Harry stepped out onto it. Few shoppers were out this late in the cold and some of the shops, such as the Apothecary, were already shuttered for the night.

Harry wandered down the street, still having no good ideas of what to buy. He had been saving his allowance and had a good amount to spend, but without any ideas, Galleons themselves weren't helpful. Harry peered into the Eeylops window and dismissed any owl accessories as too boring. Fortescue was doing a brisk business in hot cider and small cakes. Harry ordered a cider and was desperate enough he almost asked Florean for gift ideas.

"Hello, Harry," came a voice beside him as he gingerly sipped from a steaming, chipped mug. It was Belinda, Bones' receptionist.

"Oh, hi," Harry replied, pleased to run into her, but given his dilemma, not showing it.

"Your stop on the Prime Minister tour went memorably," she said with a bright smile.

Harry had previously thought that if anyone else had mentioned that, he would have reacted very differently than he actually did. Instead of snapping, he grinned mischievously and said, "We got their attention."

She smiled more. "So what are you doing out on such a nice evening?"

Harry thought that her sarcasm needed a little more work . . . she sounded serious. But Harry realized she might be able to help. "I need to buy a present for my guardian--my adoptive father. I have no good ideas. Do you?"

"Hm, I don't think I realized that you had been adopted."

"You keep up with these things?" Harry asked evenly between sips of clove-scented cider.

"I have to for my job. I read a lot of personnel files, believe me." She bit her lip then and Harry wondered if she had pulled his just recently. She went on, "But . . . gift ideas. I think I can help with that. I do a lot of that as well for visiting dignitaries."

Harry set his empty mug back up on the window ledge. "I'd really appreciate any help. Last year I got him an exotic tea, which he really liked, but now he orders that kind for himself. That idea was someone else's too." They began walking slowly down the street together. Harry strangely found her very easy to talk to. Maybe it was the way she managed to look interested in what he was saying without looking overly interested.

"Well, let's see. What does he do in his spare time?"

"Hm, works on spells, I guess. He doesn't have a lot of spare time, really."

"Well, so I assume you considered a spell book?"

They were in front of Flourish and Blotts, and stopped as a result. "Yeah. But he has a lot of books and an entire library at his disposal, so it would have to be something rarer than I can get in two days."

"Two days?" She laughed. "You didn't leave yourself much time," she chastised gently.

"I've been thinking about it for, well, a few weeks at least."

"I think you're taking it too seriously. You just need to have *something* to wrap up and hand over. With dads that's all that matters, I think." She stopped to retie her boots which Harry now noticed stretched all the way up beyond her knees. They had high heels on them too, which explained why she was his own height. "So," she uttered thoughtfully while straightening, which she did with a certain charm, especially the way she tossed her thick hair back at the end. "What does your adoptive dad do?" she sounded quite curious.

"Strange my file doesn't have it in it," Harry commented casually.

"It is," she immediately rejoined and then sucked her lips in at giving herself away.

Harry laughed. "It's filed with the WFC."

"The paperwork at the Ministry rarely seems to find its way where it belongs. I once ordered a file from the records office for Jacob Jackson, this plaque maker the Ministry hired to redo the office labels and it wasn't until I finished summariz-

ing the file that I realized the birth date was 1225 and the two was written like a nine. That Jackson had been dead for seven hundred years." She shook her head. "You know though, much of the stuff the WFC deals with isn't supposed to get into the personnel records. Your boss isn't supposed to find out if your kid is disowning you right after your wife ran off with a circus magician. But . . . back to your present."

"You know my dad. You had him at Hogwarts--Professor Snape."

She gave him a long look. "You are perfectly serious of course," she stated strangely as though accustomed to suppressing her reactions to things. She started walking again. "I distinctly remember Potions," she said in a neutral tone. She clasped her gloved hands together before her. "Well, a present for Professor Snape," she intoned slowly as though getting used to the idea.

"Never imagined thinking about that?" Harry supplied, amused.

She shook her head slowly. "Nope. Doesn't do much in his spare time," she repeated thoughtfully.

"Except make up ways to torment first-years," Harry quipped easily.

"Stop speaking my thoughts. You don't know Legilimency, do you?" she asked, teasing.

"I do, but haven't been using it. That is in my personnel record I expect, if my application is in there."

"Yes, it was," she admitted. "I only read your essays."

"Ugh. I wrote them under duress," Harry insisted with a groan, which made her laugh. She had a nice laugh, the realization of which made Harry step back emotionally. He knew nothing about her availability beyond Kerry Ann's rumors that she had given up dating Ministry people in some kind of huff.

"What would he like if he could have anything?"

*Candide*, was the very first thing to leap into Harry's mind. He looked up at the first floor windows across from them and traced down to the darkened ones of the accounting office. A few windows further down, the lamps of Tri-W *were* lit. "Hm," Harry uttered, getting an inkling of something. "I have an idea, but you should wait here."

"Why?" she asked curiously.

"Well, because if this works I'll be breaking several Ministry regulations and I don't want any witnesses about whom I don't have anything to hold over their heads. And I know almost nothing about you . . . "

Before Harry could turn away, she tugged his sleeve and quickly said, "My full name is Belinda Beatrix Beluna, but everyone always called me Bell when I was young. My parents are both magical and I didn't have any sign of magic even after my Hogwarts letter so my first year was really very difficult, even with everyone insisting that the school never made a mistake, but I since found out that they actually did once graduate a Muggle in 1421 after not having the heart to kick him out." She finally took a breath. "I've been working for Bones for a month, even though I always wanted to be a broom charmer growing up but that never worked out, and working for Madam Bones is a lot of pressure but I really like meeting all the interesting people who come through the office and I get to know everything that is going on . . . " She bit her lip and fell silent.

Harry laughed lightly. "Okay, so I do know something about you. But . . . oh, well, come along then. I'm going down to the Wheezes."

"Fred and George's place? Those two are completely bonkers." She bit her lip yet again and straightened attractively. "All right then," she said more gamely.



Harry liked the way she could do that, sort of pull a diplomatic face down. If Kerry Ann was correct that the Minister was very pleased with Belinda, then Harry could imagine that might be one reason.

On the rickety dark staircase leading up, Harry took Belinda's hand, to help her along, of course. At the top Harry lowered his luminescent wand and knocked on the door. Much scrambling about could be heard from the other side and then nothing. Harry was about to knock again when something slithered out from under the door and stretched up before them. Belinda stepped back suddenly at the sight of the eyeball on a long pink thread that hovered before them, a detached eyelid blinking over it bizarrely.

"Harry!" the door popped open and one of the twins stepped out and quickly bundled up the eyeball and stuffed it away. His eyelid was still inside out however, and he deftly flipped it over.

"Extendable eyes?" Harry asked, pointing to his bulging pocket. The Weasley rooms smelled even more pungent than Harry remembered and he had to put an effort into not wrinkling up his nose.

"Still experimental. Not selling them yet. Come on in. And who is . . . ah, Belinda. How are you . . . haven't seen you in yonks. George, come see what time has wrought on little Belinda."

"Hey there," she complained.

As George shook hands, Fred asked, "To what do we owe this little visit?"

"I need a favor," Harry said. "I need a present for Severus and some of the few things he might like that he doesn't already have, you do have."

"Ah," the two of them uttered in joint understanding.

Harry asked in a slightly pleading tone, "Is there anything you didn't end up needing that you think he might like, or something I can replace later, because his birthday is on Friday and don't have much time."

Fred pulled his hat around so that it pointed forward and rubbed his unshaven chin thoughtfully. "Replace I don't think is possible for you, but we may have something or two somethings." He and his brother stared at each other. "The K.T? We haven't used those and they are taking up space in the volatile storage trunk."

Equally cryptic, George said, "The A.S. as well. It's been in there a year."

"All right, then!" Fred said, suddenly excited. He and his brother went to the corner of the long narrow room and after much shuffling of things around, including hovering two trunks to the corridor because there was no space elsewhere to put them down, they gingerly unlatched a large steel-sided trunk. Fred, tongue sticking out with the effort, reached oh, so slowly into the trunk and removed two packages. "Oh, and this too," he whispered, sounding very nervous. Finally the trunk was closed again and extensively latched back up.

Fred handed over the three packages one at a time after he was certain Harry had each of them. "I can't believe we are getting presents together for Snape. Harry, you do make life interesting for us all, you know."

"But, what are they?" Harry asked.

"This . . ." Fred held up a silver ball with a hinged top a third of the way up. ". . . is Asteroid Salt. Have to confess we never got it to react with anything although it is considered sought after. These are Kraken teeth," he explained, pointing at a thick leather sack in Harry's hand. "Very active if mixed properly. *Don't* get them near a flame. And . . . the jewel that has proved too hot to handle . . ." Here he took back the sandalwood box and after de-enchanting the lid with a wave of his wand, opened it. Inside were tiny bits of black broken glass and lots of glass dust. "Two of the top five most powerful Japanese potions require it for proper brewing but it is highly regulated even there. Our first two experiments with it went so badly that we haven't tried again. Frankly, we just need to dispose of it now."

Harry was staring at the sparkling stuff that filled the box. His heart felt oddly emptied as he peered at it.

"Harry," George prompted, sounding concerned.

"What? Oh, what is it?" He closed the lid himself and felt better immediately.

"It is crushed glass of a Kuromakyo--a demon mirror."

"Why do you have that? It sounds darkly magical on its own."

George shrugged. "It is used in magical paints in Japan to get an iridescent glow. That's what we were going to use it for, that coloration, but if the potion isn't perfect, the power isn't trapped right and . . . "

Fred shuddered. Belinda leaned over and opened the box to peer into it. She looked interested rather than alarmed as Harry might have expected.

"But, when the power is trapped by the right mixture, it is just beautiful. We saw the effect on an antique in a shop in York and talked the proprietor into selling us the glass powder. He had no use for it anyway, just kept it around to tell the story."

"I tried to bring it back to him but he'd retired and moved to Majorca and I didn't trust the couple running the shop now," Fred explained.

Harry slowly accepted the box. "So . . . it is from a mirror into the demon world?" Harry asked, very curious and just a little hopeful that perhaps the Japanese knew something more about the Dark Plane.

"No," George replied, surprised by that guess, "It is from a mirror *used* by a demon."

"Ah," Harry said, still uncertain.

"Harry," Fred admonished. "If you are looking for a present for a master potion brewer, it doesn't get any better than that one."

"True," George said. "Having invaded his personal stocks on, well . . . shall we say, having *glanced* at his personal stocks on several occasions, I've never known Snape to shirk from a powerful potion ingredient."

As Harry and Belinda were leaving, Fred ran down the steps to catch them at the door. "Oh, I almost forgot . . . don't take those in the Floo. Or, how about, *I* wouldn't take them in the Floo, even if I were married to a hag and dying of a terminal ingrown toenail. Just a bit too much Floo powder and you could vaporize a dozen Floo nodes if you were carrying those, not to mention your own insides. Oh, and nice to see you again Belinda." He gave a gallant bow to her and zipped back up the steps.

Harry stood in the street and stared down at the packages while he figured out what to do.

"Shrewsthorpe is way in the north, isn't it?" She glanced at her watch. "The overnight leaves in half of an hour..."

"Good idea," Harry said. "I can probably Apparate all right to the station." He hefted the packages as though checking the weight. "I should probably go. . . "

"Maybe we should . . . " Harry started to say just as Belinda said, "Do you think . . . ?" Harry waited for her to continue, which she did after a gay laugh. "No, you please," she insisted.

In the silence of thinking harder, Harry found himself having to force the words out of his mouth. "Should we plan to get together sometime?" he asked, trying not to look strictly down at the packages in his hands rather than her bright brown eyes.

"I'd love to. How about next weekend sometime?"

"Excellent, I'll send you an owl," Harry assured her and then, stepping back with a nice goodbye, Disapparated while very carefully cradling his burden in his arms.

He reappeared at the far end of the platform, beyond a drinks machine. It was a little risky but since it was night, Harry figured it would be quiet. He only needed to walk back along the platform and through the barrier. Platform 9 and 3/4 was deserted this early. Harry took a seat and rather than risk setting his packages down, continued to hold them until the train arrived.

\* \* \*

Friday, Harry rushed home from training, changed into his nicest robes, snatched up the small trunk he had packed with a feather pillow and an old towel, grabbed up his broom, bundled himself in his winter cloak and gloves and took off from the back garden. It would be nearly an hour flight to Hogsmeade in good weather, heavily laden. Harry straightened the compass on the broom handle, gripped the trunk tightly under his arm, and leaned into the fastest speed the broom could sustain.

By the time Harry landed, his arms were numb from the wind. Repeated heating charms had quickly been negated by the misty cold air buffeting him. Outside the Middle Inn, he swung his arms to loosen them before he straightened his hair in the reflection from the window set into the door. He ascended the rickety stairs and, as he waited to be seated, tried to look normal while holding a broom in one hand and a trunk under the other arm. The dour waiter directed Harry's cloak and broom off to a side room with a flick of his wand before leading him to an empty table.

Snape arrived ten minutes later, enough time that Harry had himself fully composed and warmed up. "Happy Birthday," Harry offered as a greeting.

A small smile took over Snape's lips as he sat down. "Thank you for coming," he said a little stiffly.

"Wouldn't miss it," Harry chastised him.

The meal passed quickly in quiet conversation. Harry had the sense that Snape needed a break more than entertainment so he kept his training stories few and far between, although now that he was here with his guardian, he found himself wanting to share all kinds of things he had forgotten until then.

By dessert, the formal restaurant had filled with Wizarding's more fashion-sensed members. Bright conversation poured around them and everyone seemed to be smiling, making Harry wonder if this was normalcy or not. It didn't feel too bad. Remembering, Harry reached under the table and gently took out the trunk, which Snape certainly would recognize as one of his own. "I got a present for you," Harry said, setting it down on Snape's side of the table. "But don't open it here," he quickly added. Snape's hand moved away from the latch and his hawk-like visage shifted to curious.

Speaking quietly, Harry explained, "It's some rare, and probably regulated if not banned, potion ingredients."

With a teasing snide Snape asked, "The Ministry didn't teach you how to look up regulations yet?"

"Oh, they did. I just thought . . ." Harry shrugged. ". . . that I was better off not knowing."

Snape placed the trunk on the third empty chair at the table. "Well, thank you. You somehow always know what to get me."

Before they finished their slices of chocolate cake, Snape put down his fork and said, "I find myself much too curious . . ." He had Harry's attention because Harry didn't know the topic. "What is in the box?" Snape asked.

"Oh," Harry laughed and then more quietly, said, "Get ready for this: Kraken teeth-"

"Indeed?" Snape asked, sounding very pleased, making Harry think he should have just stuck with that.

Harry went on, "Asteroid salts."

Snape's brow left brow rose higher and he almost reached for the trunk but restrained himself. He looked as much like a first-year in a sweet shop as he ever had.

"And the real zinger," Harry went on, "Demon mirror glass."

Snape didn't respond immediately, when he did, he soberly said, "You are, of course, joking."

"Mm, nope," Harry insisted. "Most of it is in a pretty fine powder," he added for good measure, assuming that broke down the magic more.

Snape blinked down at the small battered trunk beside him. He actually looked vaguely uncertain. "I think . . . I will need to respell my potions cabinet. Most definitely. Or perhaps get a new potions cabinet." He patted the box very lightly. "A most pleasant surprise, Harry."

Harry grinned happily. "I was going to get a tie, but then I thought, he never wears ties."

"Your gift comes just when I was thinking it was time to show Greer up a bit in the brewing department."

"Oh, please embarrass her for me," Harry pleaded as his empty cake plate was removed.

"I will do my best." Snape stood when the waiter asked if they wanted coffee. "It is getting late, I'm afraid. I have to check a student doing detention with Filch this evening." While Harry placed sufficient Galleons on the table, Snape picked up the trunk, hefting it experimentally. As they departed, he asked in sudden alarm, "You didn't take this in the Floo, did you?"

"No, I came by broomstick." At that moment Harry received his broom and cloak back from the waiter.

Snape turned at that. "That was a long ride in the cold."

"I didn't mind," Harry insisted, forgetting his numb arms in the wake of Snape's pleasure at his gift.

"Be careful with them," Harry teased when they parted in the middle of the street.

Snape gave him an acquiescing bow and a snap of his cloak and stepped away.

\* \* \*

All the next week they were dragged out into the cold field at the Burrow to practice barriers. By midweek, Harry was even more impressed with Vineet's patience, especially since it seemed to be setting an example for Rodgers to follow. Rodgers at least called for breaks now when he was frustrated with them, rather than getting angry.

During one such break, Harry and Aaron stepped away in the direction of the makeshift Quidditch goal.

"You aren't just pretending to stink at this, are you?" Aaron asked.

Harry laughed which felt good after two straight hours of negligible progress. First thing that morning they had finally all managed a basic object repelling barrier and everyone had cheered, even Rodgers. But since then their Muggle repelling barrier and their illusional steep incline barrier had little success.

Mrs. Weasley, bundled in two Gryffindor scarves, came out with hot cocoa. Everyone gathered around and thanked her effusively.

Kerry Ann broke the resulting sipping session with, "So, Vishnu of the Great Barriers, when does your wife arrive?"

"She is coming in two weeks time."

"Ah, bring her into the Ministry," Kerry Ann urged.

"I do not wish to overwhelm her so soon."

"Oh, come on," she teased, putting a thickly jumpered arm around Harry's shoulders. "Harry will behave himself."

\* \* \*

Harry spent a restless evening trying in vain to finish his readings for Thursday, the day Rodgers seemed to actually question them closely on their assignments. He found, however, that he could not sit still. He paced to his room to change out of his street clothes and into jeans and a housecoat, thinking that he might relax if wearing something more comfortable. It didn't work; his left foot continued to bounce on its own as he sat at the dining room table with a thick book entitled *Mahemic Mastery Manual* open before him to a daunting page four.

Harry slapped the book closed and paced the hall once. Perhaps a walk, he considered, to lose some of this energy. Or, perhaps a flight. That idea lifted his spirits considerably. He stepped to the back entry and out to the dark, wild garden behind the house. Stars winked overhead out of a clear dark sky and the cold air froze his lungs. Without hesitation Harry transformed into Gryffylis and stood tall, breathing in the now comfortable air. The stiff wind felt refreshing and freeing as it ruffled his furred legs and feathered chest.

Harry raised his wings upward and with a powerful leap, launched himself over the garden wall. Many powerful flaps later, he reached a comfortable speed and relaxed into flight just above the treetops, which loomed dark as they passed below him. This was the first time he had started from standing and, despite the effort at getting going, he thought it had gone pretty well. Two hard, quick flaps gained him enough height for a sweeping turn and a sheep field slid by below him, the street lights casting the telephone poles as long bars across it. Then their street went by, and Elizabeth's neighborhood, and then fields again.

Harry gained more height and played with his speed a little to see what took the least effort to maintain. He found that if he shifted the long feathers at his wing tips--sort of like spreading his fingers--the air that would pass through his wings at the angle his wings normally slowed him down. He experimented with this along with relaxing into a long glide to see how far he could go without flapping. It wasn't as far as he would like and he had to touch down in a field with one back and one front foot to get airborne again. He supposed that he was rather more ungainly than your average eagle. But he was pleased to find that his wings had a natural position for gliding that required almost no muscle to maintain and small foldings in and out of his wing tips was sufficient for steering and leveling. The air still felt wonderfully refreshing even though on a broom he would have been quite frigid. Perhaps the hot rush of freedom was helping keep him warm.

Harry continued on, content with simply following north along the river valley. He knew he could always Apparate home, although he was planning on testing if he could find his way back on the wing. Passing over the motorway resulted in an unexpected lift, so Harry ducked his head to dip lower again. The river turned eastward and Harry rose to clear the hills on the left to continue north.

A village, all alight with shops and a petrol station, passed by below him on the other side of the hill. Muggles were moving around their cars and walking on the pavements, bundled against the chill. Harry felt sorry for them there on the ground. He grinned as well as he could with his catlike mouth and flapped higher to avoid being seen.

A dark, wooded area passed beneath Harry now, a large one that stretched to the distant hills, although the sky was lit ahead as though by a big city. Harry swerved side to side to practice his steering some. It was on one of the broader turns to the left that he espied a bonfire through the trees. He veered back and flapped harder to speed up and get a look.

Three fires came into view, burning in a clearing. The positioning, an equilateral triangle, was typically the way witches would have them during a coven gathering.

Curious, Harry flew closer, peering in detail with his odd gryffylis vision. The fires flared green and the next instant Harry was upside down with the star-packed sky below his feet. Frozen with surprise he held his wings straight and still. The dark trees loomed above him and gravity was pulling him in confusing ways but mostly toward the trees it felt like. Harry forcefully put himself past the panicked disorientation and considered that he had *not* turned over; he was certain of that. Methodically Harry flapped his wings hard and balanced on the stars as downward. Repeatedly he flapped, stubbornly ignoring the approaching crash with the craggy dark forest. Suddenly, he was upright again, flying high above the ground and the three fires which now appeared small and close together. Harry rose higher still and rotated quickly away to gain some distance before circling lower and gathering his thoughts.

Figures moved around one of the fires. Harry used his keen animal eyesight to get a good look at the space between that fire and the wall of trees beyond it. Then, taking a very deep breath and steadying himself, he flapped and raised his head to come to a dead halt in the air. One last flap gave him a straight up lift and just as he reached the top of it, he released his Animagus form, and Disapparated.

With a *bang!* that Harry heard echoing when he arrived and dearly wished he did not have to make, he appeared behind the five robed figures. His wand was in hand from his housecoat pocket before they turned around. They were witches--the kind that fit the Muggle understanding of that term much too well.

"Who are you?" one exceptionally stooped one asked. When Harry didn't reply, she used her staff to stomp in his direction.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked in his best Auror voice.

Behind the approaching witch the others were feeding the fire and muttering about something getting away. Wood was hovered onto the other fires, making them spit tall towers of sparks into the dark air.

"If you must know," the witch answered snidely, "we were brought in by the neighboring village to rid them of a vampire. I don't know what business it is of yours . . ."

"Why don't they have the Ministry take care of it?" Harry asked.

"Ha!," she scoffed. "We are a very long way from the Ministry, my *boy*. Up here, *we* are the assistance most wizarding folk get."

Harry didn't think he had flown *that* far, but he didn't know enough about hedge wizardry to argue. She was eyeing his wand, so he lowered it and stepped over to the others at the fire, from which the heat radiated too much to get really close, although the witches seemed to be able to.

"Yvonne," one of the others complained. "Something was definitely in the trap but it has vanished."

"That was me," Harry said.

They turned and looked him up and down, eyes dwelling on his orange and green plaid housecoat and maroon knitted slippers a little longer than on his face. "You don't dress like a vampire," one of them commented dryly, as though trying for an insult.

"I'm not." Harry put his wand away and looked up at the sky, stars barely visible over the bright fire. He didn't know how to catch a vampire, only repel them, and thought perhaps he would like to wait around in case one showed up so he could see.

Yvonne shuffled over to him. "So . . . what are you then?" she asked challengingly. "You don't have a broomstick."

"My Animagus form can fly," he explained. "I was out stretching my wings and saw your fires and got curious." After she had examined his eyes to assess the truth of that, he added, "I really think the Ministry would send someone to help if there was a problem with a vampire."

She scoffed again and stepped back to her cohorts. Harry stepped back from the fire to better see the sky, but not so far as to get cold from his poor late-autumn dress. The witches were leaning close together and whispering; one of them turned and glanced back at him with a throaty giggle before breaking away and approaching. She was the shortest of the group and her robes the most worn. Her long crooked nose even sported the expected wart. She gave him a half-toothed grin that set Harry's neck hairs on end.

"Yes?" Harry asked. "I just thought I'd wait around . . ."

"Oh, no matter, no matter," she cackled and continued to approach. Harry stepped back, farther from the fire, thinking perhaps he should go rather than wait. The approaching witch looked different now. Harry blinked and watched as she grew taller and younger and long auburn hair spilled out of her hat, which was no longer worn and bent but shiny and straight. Her clothes too changed into a fancy black dress with a fur cloak and long black gloves. Harry stepped back again. The spell progressed differently from a Metamorphmagus one, making Harry curious what spell it was.

"Do you like Alberta now?" she asked provocatively.

"Um," Harry hemmed and took another half step back as she continued to approach. Perfume even wafted around her. "It's not bad," he opined. Her eyes were now bright green and she flickered long eyelashes coyly before smiling in a most pleasant way. Harry was still slowly backing away. "But I think I should be going now . . ."

"Oh," she said playfully, "just when things were getting interesting."

"Uh, yeah. Really. Sorry to have bothered you all." Harry scrunched himself down to Apparate away . . . or tried to. Instead he found himself on his knees, in the center of the triangle of fires, Alberta right before him. Harry growled at himself; he had fallen this time for the same trick as before where he was fooled about direction. Instead of stepping back into the trees, he had stepped right into the center of their power.

Harry pulled out his wand and stood straight, eyes fierce. Alberta just laughed and the other witches approached, all grinning with amusement and anticipation. "And what are you going to do with that?" Alberta asked airily.

Harry's wand began to shake queerly. He lifted it and found himself holding the rattle of a long-fanged snake that twisted and coiled as it tried to strike him. "*Stop it!*" Harry hissed at the snake and it relaxed and uncoiled slowly, sniffing the air with its tongue unconcernedly. The witches were no longer smiling and Alberta, who had returned to her normal self, looked alarmed. "Remove the illusion from my wand," Harry ordered. The snake disappeared. Harry rubbed his fingers over the wood before holding it upward, not aimed, but ready.

An impasse seemed to have taken over. One of the witches huddled in the pack quipped, "Not often you see a dark wizard about in a housecoat. More the high-collared cloak type."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm an Auror, not a dark wizard," he insisted.

"You don't see them about in housecoats much either," someone else commented.

"We don't seem them about around here much at all," Alberta said.

Yvonne, the oldest one, stepped forward. "Most Aurors introduce themselves as such," she stated.

"Do they?" Harry asked. "Well, I'm still learning protocol. I'm new." He considered lowering his wand again but wasn't keen on letting down his guard at all. "Don't you know who I am?" he asked rhetorically. They all stared blankly at him. "You haven't seen my picture?"

"We don't have many pitchures here. Only pitchures we've got's on chocolate frog cards," the stoutest of the bunch retorted. The others chuckled.

"I'm on one of those," Harry pointed out. "Although, I've grown a bit since that photograph was taken."

The witches gave him puzzled expressions now. "He can't be . . ." one of them began to say when she was interrupted by the fires flaring green and nearly exploded with sparks. The witches scattered to tend the fires and Harry ran to the side to get out of the way. His hair and clothing had begun blowing around as though he had become the eye of a whirlwind. For many minutes a battle raged between the fires and something distant. The witches held up their hands and incanted spells into the fires and Yvonne stomped between them hurriedly shouting instructions.

Eventually, something dark fell into the center of the clearing. It fluttered there desperately before giving up and transforming into a man-shape. The man who straightened up, set Harry's teeth on edge, let alone the hair on his neck. He straightened slowly and crossed his arms as he considered the witches surrounding him. His grey and black streaked hair fell back when he shook it that way with eerie sensual confidence and his clothes were exquisite, although far out of date.

That awful chittering sounded just at the edge of hearing, making Harry realize that this man, this creature really, brought with him a gateway to the Dark Plane. Harry stood, transfixed, as the witches continued their spells as they moved in, their hands up, palms outward, the green glow from the fires forming a dome over events. He hoped they knew what they were doing. The Vampire's eyes went from cocky to wary. He dropped his arms and gave his cloak a toss backward and disappeared. But he hadn't actually, he had transformed into a mist which unfurled itself, trying to get around the circle of witches. A chant in old english rose up from the five and the smoke drew into itself until it was in the shape of a bat and then solidified into a black bat that flapped madly an instant before a silver net was tossed over it and cinched down very tight.

Much shouting of glee went up from the witches who quickly collected their things. One bent and petted the bat like a child might. Harry had approached to get a closer look and, after some effort at getting her attention, asked the witch holding the net what they were going to do with the vampire.

"We're going to have a bit of fun," she said gleefully and then she Disapparated, as did the others, leaving Harry alone in the clearing, the bonfires still burning hot in the cold night air.

Harry Apparated home. His house felt blissfully peaceful as he walked through it up to his room and then back down to the toilet for a much desired hot bath. With a sigh as he settled into the warm water, he considered that he still had much too much to learn.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Harry arrived early at the Ministry with the intent of behaving like a real Auror, despite the distraction of an owl from Belinda agreeing to a movie in London on Saturday night.

"I need to file a report," he informed Tonks, who appeared to have been up the entire night.

She perked up at that, however. "Do you now? Anyone we know in this report?"

Harry didn't rise to the bait. "Some witches who hold a coven near Hadrian's wall. I only have two names, Yvonne and Alberta."

"Hm, what are they up to?"

"They were capturing a vampire," Harry explained, accepting the long parchment form she handed him along with a never-out quill. The form was dauntingly long, but Harry settled in at Rogan's desk and methodically filled in all the details he knew.



Harry was working on the report section itself, for which he was having trouble coming up with the right terms for things as he had seen in other reports, when Tonks tapped him on the shoulder. "You have to get to training." She took the form from him and started reading it even before he departed. She was sober and serious around him now, which he continually found himself stinging from, despite efforts to dismiss it.

Training today was curse neutralization, because Rodgers insisted that they all needed a break, especially him. Fortunately they were all pretty good at this, so it became a bit of a game between them and Rodgers, with the trainer increasing the morbidity of the curses with each round and all of them avidly working together to break it.

Harry was glad the week ended on a high note; it left him in a good mood looking ahead to that weekend and his first date with Madam Bones' receptionist.



## Chapter 70 -- Time and Tide

Harry met Belinda in the Leaky Cauldron. She was leaning gracefully on the bar, chatting amiably with Tom who was wiping mugs with a cloth and lining them up on. "Hey, Harry!" Tom greeted him as he pushed open the door from Charing Cross Road, the windows of which hadn't had a cleaning in a century.

Belinda gave him a nice smile that implied that they shared some secret, and indeed they were the only two present dressed in Muggle clothes. She swigged the last of her mead and leaned away from the bar. Tonight she was wearing very high-heeled boots and was actually taller than Harry. He graciously held out an arm as she hooked her heavy cloak and they headed out. Behind them Tom loudly wished them a nice evening. Many heads in the room turned at that, although no one Harry recognized.

They walked to the Odeon, briskly because of the cold evening. Harry, in fact, had to keep up with his date, despite her loud and heavy boots. At first he considered offering to use a Silencing Charm on them, but then decided not to risk offending her. They arrived in plenty of time for the film so they settled into the small bar and had a beer while they waited.

"How was your week?" Belinda asked conversationally.

"It was not the best week of training I've had. We are working on barriers and most of us are turning out to be slow learners at it." Harry shrugged. He then felt the need to justify a bit. "Barriers are supposed to be hard to do, but for some reason Rodgers expects us to pick up a barrier spell the first time he shows it to us. But you have to tune your magic to all the others building the barrier and we apparently don't work well together when we're actually sharing magic. I think we are all too different from each other or something."

More people were crowding around, ordering drinks. Belinda said, "The Ministry is thrilled with your class' progress otherwise."

"Are they?" Harry asked.

"I'm pretty certain," she said with a sly smile.

The movie Belinda had picked out was about a time traveler who gets sent back to 1999 and must spend the movie fruitlessly trying to convince everyone that an army of robots was shortly going to take over the world. Halfway through, about the time the main character was plotting an escape from a mental institution, Harry slipped an arm around his date's shoulder. He didn't have to wait long for a reaction; Belinda immediately leaned into him, and Harry relaxed into the warmth and the fruity scent of her hair.

On the screen, the man was frantically tying dental floss he had hoarded into a trip wire for the guard. Belinda asked, "Do you believe time travel is possible?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "I've done it before."

The woman beside Belinda scoffed in amusement and rolled her eyes. "I believe him," Belinda retorted playfully. Into Harry's ear she said, "You'll have to tell me about it over drinks after the movie."

"You really want to hear that story?"

"It must be better than the one we're watching . . . this guy fails at the end. I think he goes completely insane and they lock him up for good."

"He'll probably be dead before the robots arrive, so that's okay," Harry opined.

The movie finally let out and the unsatisfying ending was negated by Belinda leading Harry out by the hand. An older lady waiting to file out gave them a wink as they exited in front of her. At a pub down the street from the Odeon, they settled into glasses of ale just before last call. "So time-travel. Tell me all about it," Belinda urged.

"Well, it was my third year of school and my friend Hermione had been given a time-turner by the headmaster so that she could take classes that were occurring simultaneously." Harry paused at Belinda's amazed look. Harry cast his mind back to that day, the desperate race to save Sirius . . . the desperate, and in the end, futile race to save Sirius.

His face must have reflected too much of his feelings because Belinda said, "Looks like it did fail."

"Yes and no," Harry admitted, hesitating to piece the story together because he wasn't certain how much old pain would rise with it and wondering if he could still damage time by explaining this long after. The passage of time made it *feel* safe.

"Drink up your ale first, then try telling it," Belinda urged.

"Sorry," Harry said. "In the end I couldn't save the one person who passed for family to me. At the time, that is. We were successful with the time-turner, all right, and my godfather escaped the Dementor's kiss by flying away on a hippogriff."

"Wait a minute . . . is this the hippogriff that was supposed to be executed? The one that slipped its leash?"

"Buckbeak, yes, the very one. My friend Hermione and I freed it just in time and flew it up to the tower where they were holding Sirius. They were just fetching the Dementors . . . "

She put her mug down with a load *thud*. "Ugh, that's awful. Fudge was completely inhumane." Harry didn't comment, he was seeped in the memory of Snape's anger at Sirius' escape. Belinda said gently, "I didn't mean to bring up bad memories . . . "

Harry conjured a smile for her. "It's all right. I haven't thought about some things in a while. And I have a family now . . . " He shrugged lightly, although unease still clawed at him. They finished their ales with harmless small talk and departed when the pub closed, moving with the bleary-eyed Muggles making their way out the door in a clump.

Harry walked Belinda in the direction she indicated led to home. "I live just here," she said eventually and stopped before an apartment building on a small side street. As Harry looked around, she said, "A wizard from Sports and Games lives on the second floor there, a witch lives on the end there. It is nice to have someone to fall back on if something magical comes up. Like once I left an ironing charm uncanceled, and fortunately Mrs. Florence went over and stopped it from ironing all of my books, which it had started on after it did the drapes and the bed sheets. My cat was cowering under the bed when I got home, so maybe it had got ironed as well."

Harry chuckled.

Belinda stood in silence looking up at him with bright eyes. "Are you coming up for another drink?"

"I think I should head home. I had field work late yesterday."

This took her completely by surprise. "Oh. All right. Well, I had a very nice evening . . . "

Harry gave her a quick kiss and friendly hug before holding her at arms' length and thinking that she just needed to lose that vaguely worshipful look and then she would be perfect. Harry said good night and with a glance up and down the quiet street, Disapparated to the Leaky Cauldron to use their Floo node.

At home he stepped through the house, humming faintly. He checked the post and actually ran up the stairs in a burst of unneeded energy. He paced his room, far too wired to sleep or even get ready to sleep. He wrote a letter to Hermione instead, explaining about the very nice date he had just had. As he read it over he considered that Belinda must have some flaws. Presumably he would find out what they were, eventually. Still humming, Harry tried to do a little reading, but even this was tough in his overactive state. He forced himself to not wish he had accepted her invitation to come up to her flat. The evening would have ended predictably, and he needed to get to know her a bit better, but just a bit.

\* \* \*

Severus Snape opened his eyes and raised his head from the cold ground. He squinted perplexedly into the blue late-afternoon light radiating off the dusting of snow before pushing himself achily to his feet. He stood beside the peeling back wall of the Three Broomsticks and at his feet a patch of green grass had been revealed where the snow had melted. That was odd; the grass should be dead by now. Shaking out his cold, wet cloak before wrapping it and his arms around himself, he stumbled between the buildings to the road and looked around. Orange light poured onto the snow from the shop windows and the low sunlight made the ruts in the road look treacherous. Nothing unusual seemed to be happening, nor did he see anyone he did not trust. He turned in the direction of the castle and managed to put one half-numb foot before the other.

At the edge of the village, a small voice said, "Are you all right, Professor?"

Snape turned jerkily. Tracy Trillium, a first-year, barely recognizable through the thick cloak and knitted scarf bundled around her, was walking alongside, wide eyes looking concerned. "Of course," he snapped at her. "Why wouldn't I be?"

She shrugged, which barely translated through her thick outerwear, but continued to walk just behind as he cut across the street to take the path to the gate. "Are you following me?" he asked her, truly amazed by the notion. "And are you allowed out of the castle at all?"

She looked pained and explained haltingly in her muffled voice, "I, uh, was making sure you made it to the castle, sir."

Snape actually stopped hard and stared at her. "You what?"

Her arms waved awkwardly as she gestured in both directions. "You didn't look like you would make it for certain, sir," she explained.

"Off with you," Snape huffed at her in annoyance, too befuddled to manage anything more pointed.

"Yes, sir," Tracy replied. He stared at her as she headed back to the village, small back hunched over against the cold.

The castle torches flaming beside the doors were a welcome sight. Snape stepped inside, passing Filch, who was checking students in on his list. He headed down the stairs and strode to the dungeon classroom with purpose, intending in his chilled state to collect his thicker fur-lined cloak from the cupboard. He yanked open the door and got snagged on the threshold when a voice said, "Yes?" rather forcefully.

Snape stared at the chubby, curly-haired woman who was obviously mid-brew of something complicated at the front bench. A bit more rudely, she said, "Something you want, Severus?"

Snape looked around the subtly altered room from the primitive painting of the London skyline on the wall beside the supplies room door, to the short curtains on the small upper windows, something even he wouldn't have thought useful in a dungeon. "No," he replied, thinking fiercely. Clearly he was the one out of place, though that didn't seem possible. He started to close the door, only to look in and around again in quick verification.

Grimly shaking his head, he strode with purpose up to the second floor and around the long corridors to the gargoyles. "Lemon drops," Snape said. They didn't move. He tried a few other common passwords to no avail. A student wandered by, one of the Prefects, Snape didn't turn to him, wished simply that he would go away.

"Need the password, sir?" the boy asked. It was Mumfred, one of the Hufflepuffs. Snape gave a noncommittal sideways nod. The boy said, "Lemon Zinger is the password."

The gargoyle jumped aside. "Is that a kind of sweet?" Snape huffed.

"Tea, sir," the boy patiently explained.

Stalking forward, feeling even more dread, Snape muttered angrily, "Right."

The moving staircase carried him to the top landing where the door stood open, something he rarely encountered. McGonagall paced behind the desk with a long parchment in her hand. The office was significantly changed and most of the mechanical contraptions were gone. "What can I do for you, Severus?" she asked, not removing her eyes from her reading.

Uncertainly, Snape said, "I suppose you would think me daft if I asked where Albus was?"

The parchment fluttered violently as her hand dropped to her side. It required a moment for her to say, "Yes, I suppose. Though not daft, perhaps befuddled." She looked him over very closely. "Have a seat, Severus. Tell me what is going on with you."

He accepted the chair and sat heavily in it. Mud was drying in spots on his cloak; he should have removed it before sitting. "I just now found myself, rather unexpectedly, on the ground behind the Three Broomsticks," he reluctantly explained. "I . . . seem to be in the wrong place now."

"Or the wrong time," McGonagall suggested easily. She came around and studied him still. "What do you believe the date to be?"

Snape started to answer, then hesitated. "February. I don't remember exactly," he added, disturbed by the lack of detailed memories for just the day before.

"That would indicate a Memory Charm. Especially since it is November."

"November?" Snape echoed. He sat straighter. "What has happened. Where is Albus?"

"Albus is dead, Severus."

"Not retired to beekeeping, then?" he asked, sounding alarmed as well as snide.

She smiled faintly. "No." She went over to the hearth and took down her canister of Floo powder. "I'm going to call the Auror's office, get someone to investigate."

"You think it worth their time? Aren't they a bit busy with important matters?" Snape asked, not liking the idea very much.

"I expect it worth their time. You don't appear injured so I doubt you had an accident. I'm assuming someone had ill intent, making you lose so very much time."

"What happened to Albus?" Snape asked after she spoke with a floating head at the Ministry and was told to wait ten minutes or so. "What kind of trouble are we in now?" he asked a little frantically.

"Relax, Severus," she soothed. "Perhaps I should call Madam Pomfrey after all? You are bit haggard, even for you."

Snape combed his hair back with his fingers, plucking out a dead leaf, and leaned back in the chair. "I am not myself, apparently." He then muttered, "Thought in this state I would not have any luck avoiding those meddlesome Gryffindors: Potter and his little friends."

Her face crooked into a small smile. "You needn't have worried about that, Severus. They are gone."

Snape fell still an instant before he asked, "They are dead as well?"

"No. They finished. It is November of ninety-eight. You are missing a bit more time than you realize."

Snape's hand fell from the back of his neck as he went slack in shock. "Ninety eight?" he breathed. He glanced around the office and brushed his hand over his left forearm. "What of the . . . Dark Lord?" he asked carefully.

"Gone."

"Dead?" Snape asked in surprise.

"Very much so," McGonagall replied kindly.

He found it very hard to believe her. "You are certain? For good?"

She nodded and said, "You are very far behind, Severus. Very far. But you need not worry about Voldemort."

He flinched but moved on. "And my classroom? Some strange woman was in it."

"What do you think you are teaching?" she asked with a sparkle in her eye.

Snape pushed his shoulders back. "I am finally teaching Defense?" he asked, sounding almost hopeful. When she grinned in reply, he asked, "You did that?"

She shook her head. "Albus. Although I didn't disagree with his assigning you that position."

Snape relaxed just a bit, but his hands kept clasping and re-clasping. "What happened to the Dark Lord?"

"You really should use his name, especially now that it doesn't matter," McGonagall pointed out in a matter-of-fact tone. She heated the teapot with her wand and held it up to ask if he wanted any. Snape nodded and accepted the cup when she had poured it out. "Need something stronger in that?" He nodded again, while hiding his surprise at her solicitous offer. She pulled a silver flask of brandy out of a desk drawer and gave him a splash of it.

He sipped the doctored tea carefully, hand not completely steady. "I cannot use his name. Even if he *is* gone."

"You do all the time," she observed.

"Do I?" he muttered in disbelief.

The hearth flared green, interrupting them, and Tonks stepped out and shook herself off.

"No partner today?" McGonagall asked conversationally.

"No. Only Fridays. And I wasn't certain what was going on, so I didn't pick him up." She stepped briskly over to Snape and pulled out her wand. "Hold still," she commanded. Snape looked very dubious, especially when she tapped the end of his nose with her wand, but he held still. A spark jumped from the end of it and stung him. "Looks like a Memory Charm, all right."

"From February ninety-seven," McGonagall supplied.

"What?" Tonks blurted. She spun back to Snape. "That long! I don't think I've ever heard of such a charm. You have . . . ninety-seven? You have no idea what has happened?"

"No, I do not," he replied nastily, tired of this.

"Oh, dear. Well." She rubbed her head. "That eliminates someone just trying to erase evidence of something recent. Let's take you back to where you became aware again and see what we find."

Accompanied by the headmistress, she led him out and down into the village. The three of them looked around the buildings, talked to people inside and to some of the other shopkeepers. No one had anything helpful to say. By the time they were walking back toward the Three Broomsticks, having canvassed the village, Snape was lagging behind.

Tonks waited for him to catch up. "Disoriented?"

"Fatigued," he snapped back.

"We should take you home to rest. A charm like that can be wearing. I've never heard of one covering so much time--it can't be holding tightly to any part of your memories . . . it has to be spread too thin. There's a chance you'll recover on your own as it weakens, but I'll have St. Mungo's send a specialist." She looked Snape up and down in concern. "Hopefully we'll have luck with you. I'd really like to find who did this."

\* \* \*

Harry heard the flare of the hearth from the library and, curious who was coming in, headed that way, but Tonks was standing in the doorway to the dining room, holding up her hand to forestall him. Mystified, but accustomed to obeying her, he waited. The hearth flared again and voices sounded beyond. Tonks was speaking to someone who sounded like McGonagall. Harry inched forward and saw the headmistress helping Snape into a chair at the table. Concerned, he touched Tonks' shoulder.

"Just a sec," she said quietly.

Harry didn't feel like waiting a second. He couldn't understand why he was being kept out when something clearly had happened to Snape.

"You said you would call someone from St. Mungo's?" Snape was saying when Harry pushed by Tonks. Snape looked up at him, eyes narrowing severely. McGonagall, who looked about to reply, fell silent. "What are you doing here?" Snape demanded of Harry.

Harry blinked at him, then looked between the two women. Tonks explained, "He's had a Memory Charm."

"Yeah? One that took out how much?" Harry asked a little vehemently. The implication rattled him.

Snape pushed himself to his feet and stepped toward Harry. "You didn't answer me," Snape pointed out, voice holding nothing but cold, rocky cliffs.

Harry actually took a step backward, bumping the mantel, before he gathered his wits. Snape's looking him up and down as though surprised by his height gave Harry an extra moment to level himself.

"I live here," Harry stated frankly, feeling unseated to be arguing about such a thing.

Snape's eyes narrowed farther, lids vibrating a little. He turned to McGonagall, who shrugged broadly. "Was a surprise to everyone, believe me."

"*What* was a surprise?" Snape asked dangerously.

McGonagall looked as though she were trying hard not to grin. "When you adopted him."

Snape seemed to swell at that. His head tilted to the side and he looked back at Harry who took another small step back in concern at the sheer fury he was seeing. "This is an elaborate hoax, isn't it?" he asked in a very low voice. "They gave you a height spell and Ms. Tonks an anti-clumsiness charm." Menacingly, he headed at Harry, who backed up again, almost to the wall beside the hearth, but Snape ended up nose to nose with him anyway, radiating anger.

The sound of teacups rattling distracted everyone. Snape turned, and aborted what he was going to shout at the elf bringing in the tea tray. "Who is this?"

The house-elf curtsied. "Winky, Master."

"Where's Tidgy?" Snape demanded.

After a silence Harry replied, "She was killed by Nagini." Snape's hard gaze came back around to him. "You know I'm telling the truth," Harry said levelly as he matched the intense black stare.

Snape snarled and stepped back to the table, which he leaned on heavily while gazing around the room, apparently to get his bearings. He spied the photograph of Harry with his friends on the sideboard and growled at it, turned away from it, then stepped around to slap it flat, out of sight. McGonagall, who had been amused, now looked concerned. She gave Harry a very sympathetic expression.

"What?" Snape began loudly. ". . . on earth . . . would possess *me* to adopt *you*?" Snape asked, waving a hand at Harry.

Harry, who knew several reasons, some Snape's stated ones, some his own guesses, nonetheless didn't feel like going over them before an audience. He remained silent instead, hoping like a thunderstorm, Snape would run out of energy.

"What?" Snape mocked. "No answer to that?"

"I don't have an answer you'll understand, Severus" said Harry, sounding unhopeful to his own ears.

"DON'T call me that!"

McGonagall came around to face Snape down. "Sit down." When he glared at her challengingly, she said, "I inherited Albus' mantle, I'll have you know. Sit down." Snape grudgingly obeyed after hesitating, apparently for show. "Now, listen closely. You have lost almost two years. That is a very long time. Blustering about like this isn't helping anyone, including yourself." She stood straight and sighed. "What you need is a good night's rest and a good looking over by a Healer." She sent Tonks a forceful look before stepping over beside Harry and placing a hand on his shoulder. "I need to return for dinner and two meetings, as well as to arrange for a replacement for him for the next week."

"I can teach," Snape insisted forcefully. "Defense, certainly. My memories of Defense are quite clear in my mind, thank you."

She spun on him while gripping Harry's shoulder harder. "Oh really? Tomorrow's lesson for the seventh-years is the Patronus. Ready to teach that?" She sounded downright cruel. "Your modern counterpart has it down rather well." She straightened and propped a hand on her hip as she surveyed the effects of that. Snape did look knocked back a bit.

Tonks uncrossed her arms and shrugged her cloak straight on her shoulders. "I have to get going as well. Stop by St. Mungo's, then the Ministry to file a report." To Harry she said, "You going to be all right here? I'll come back if you want."

"I'm fine," Harry replied flatly.

As they moved toward the hearth, Snape scrutinized Harry darkly, making Harry scoff, which only darkened Snape's expression. McGonagall hesitated on the hearthstone until Harry waved her on. "Owl if you need anything, Harry. I could borrow a variety of useful things from Mr. Filch . . ." she added with a crooked grin.



Harry waved her off again, but almost smiled at her offer. Tonks left with a, "See you tomorrow." When they were gone, Harry started to march out of the room, until Snape's, "Where are you going?" pulled him short.

"I'm going to continue my studies for tomorrow."

"Aren't you finished with school?" Snape prodded insultingly.

"I'm an Auror's apprentice, so I guess the answer is 'no'." Snape's lips pursed but he let Harry leave.

Harry glanced back to see Snape sitting slouched, eyes hinting at distress. Harry didn't see any path but to wait this out even though he longed to force Snape to understand. He returned to his reading but found it extremely difficult to concentrate. An hour later, after banging around in the drawing room, Snape stepped into the library. Without preamble he lifted the cover of Harry's book to read the title. His eyes narrowed in surprise at *Spell Predestination and Propagation: a Primer*. He wandered the perimeter of the room like a caged animal, pausing a half minute at the shelves added for Harry's books before heading over to the overstuffed black leather chair in the corner by the large wall lamp. He looked like he really wanted to say something but was holding back. Harry turned back to his reading, head pounding.

Time ticked by. Harry, when he looked at the clock, was surprised how much time, given that he was forced to study with dark eyes inscrutably upon him. It began to occur to Harry that Winky had not asked if they wanted dinner, which should have been hours ago. He sighed and closed his book.

"Giving in already?" Snape sneered.

"I've been reading since noon. I wouldn't say, already." He stood to return the book to the shelf, which normally he wouldn't have done; he would have left it on the small table beside the lounge.

"So, an Auror. How sweet," Snape said in falsely touched tones.

Harry met his gaze. "Ironically," Harry began, level and conversational. "You don't know me well enough to hurt me. The current you could do it like that." Harry snapped his fingers. "But wouldn't."

"Someone must have addled him utterly," Snape said, sounding disgusted.

Harry shrugged. "I am surprised this you isn't at least grateful."

"For what?" he almost laughed.

Harry studied him instead of replying right away. "You haven't been told anything, have you?"

Snape violently swung himself to his feet and growled, "NO. I'm dragged back to my house only to find it isn't mine anymore. I've a new house-elf. My dungeon has some strange, rude woman in it."

"Greer," Harry supplied. "Gertrude."

"I've heard of her at least," Snape muttered, barely concessionary.

"She was rude to you because she despises me. And surprising as you'll find this, that doesn't make you and her allies."

"Goodness, were you as stellar in her Potions class as in mine?" Snape asked, voice dripping in sarcasm.

"For your information, I received an O on my Potions N.E.W.T. and my Defense one. On all of them except Transfiguration, Divination, and History, on which I received Es."

Through a twisted mouth, Snape said, "Well, good for you."

"I've already thanked you for your help in preparing for them, so I hope you don't mind if I skip thanking you this time around."

Snape stalked around the room again. "I won't miss the thanks, believe me."

Harry considered Snape as he stopped and pulled one of the fatter law books from Harry's shelf and flipped it open with a scowl. His head was bent tiredly over it, making Harry feel a little sorry for him. He was mean because he had never known much else, Harry had already decided, but had to remind himself. Harry's stomach reminded him about dinner. "I'm going to ask Winky for something to eat."

Snape paused before looking up. "And?" he asked rudely.

"Nothing," Harry said, and departed for the kitchen.

Harry ate alone, avoided having a glass of the smoky liquid which had replaced the used up sherry, and tried not to imagine that Snape's memory would stay like this because he couldn't bear it. After eating, he returned to the library, where Snape sat in the corner, going over a stack of parchments in a file. He peered in mystification at some of them. Glancing upside-down at the label on the file, Harry said, "You're the deputy headmaster, if you are wondering why you have that stuff."

Snape froze as he took that in. Without responding he stacked it all neatly beside the chair and began instead to stare beyond the wall beside him, fingertips rubbing his forehead in a fidgety way. Harry rubbed his own forehead as he dropped onto his seat, feeling beaten down in a way he couldn't fight. He closed his eyes as he rubbed them and then gasped hard and reached for his wand. Two shadows hovered close-by. Up in an instant, Harry reinforced the property boundary spell with the best barrier spell he could manage in a hurry, hoping to trap the invader in. Red light flared outside the window as the spell fought something. Harry evacuated the window and casement, leaving a neat, square hole in the stone wall, and then sent a barrage of incarcerating spells out into the darkness. With a two-step start he leapt out onto the side wall a yard from the window, teetering there after a moment's Animagus transformation and wing flapping to balance.

"Damn," he swore when he didn't see anyone. The fresh night air felt good, even as the stones and sharp broken mortar cut into his shin where he perched. Snape was at the window, looking astounded. Harry, as he had leapt out, thought he had heard a loud *pop!* of Disapparation, which meant he was too late and his spells insufficient. Harry jumped back to the missing window and climbed in. "Damn," he repeated forcefully, the stress of the evening fueling his frustration. He waved the window back into place and paced the room. "Must have been Avery, but I can't imagine him getting away."

Snape looked from the window to Harry and back, twice. "Why would it be him?" Snape asked doubtfully and as though he were attempting to be derisive but could not manage it. He sounded undone.

Harry stalled in his pacing and feeling his patience running low, said in a difficult tone, "He's the only one not in Azkaban."

Snape re-stashed his own wand finally. "Could have been someone else, could it not?"

Harry sighed. "No." He then laughed mirthlessly. "Is there anything you *do* understand?" he asked, going for derisive himself, then wishing he hadn't. When Snape didn't respond, Harry added, "It was Avery, or someone else has escaped, but I expect we'd have got a message right away because the Ministry knows they'll come here looking to off either you or me, I honestly don't think they'd care which."

"I am surprised you didn't catch whoever it was," Snape said, managing to not sound like he was complimenting Harry, though he sounded honest. "But how do you know?" he insisted. "There was no hint, none of the protective spells gave a warning until you boosted them."

Harry's lips quirked into a smile. "I saw him in my mind. *Voldemort*," Harry accented with clear enunciation, "left a little of himself behind, which I inherited" When Snape unconsciously rubbed his left arm, Harry said, "Not that ability, as far as I know."

"Is that why I took you in?" Snape asked honestly, looking wary. "To pacify you."

Harry dropped onto the lounge. "I doubt it. I've never had that sense. Do you want to know what you told me was the reason?" Harry asked as he fetched a parchment and Never-out quill from the desk in the drawing room and began a note to Rogan, who would be on duty tonight, regarding what had happened.

"I don't know. Do I?" Snape asked, facetious sounding.

"You said," Harry went on, feeling relentless and like he had gained the upper hand with his Voldemort revelation, "that you enjoyed my company and were tired of living alone." Harry signed the note and whistled for Hedwig to come down. She fluttered into the room and Harry handed her the letter and let her out the window of the library after checking that no one was around outside. Then, finally, he met Snape's strange gaze and went on into the silence, "Other theories have been expounded: You are looking for protection from the Ministry, which you have needed, by the way because Dumbledore isn't here to vouch for you. You are looking for redemption, which is also possible given the story you told me about Nott recruiting you and yes, you told me that story."

Snape looked startled but didn't speak further. Harry's eyes ached. He tried to piece together the Memory Charm on Snape with Avery coming to the window. The connections didn't form. "I'm going to bed," Harry informed the room. "We can catch up more tomorrow late afternoon if you want, when I get home from the Ministry. I keep expecting you to ask about what happened to Voldemort, since it seems like Minerva didn't tell you."

"I asked, she . . . did not get around to answering the question." Snape turned away with a jerking motion and pointedly returned to his pile of parchments. Harry left for his room, feeling strung out and dangerously in a mood to punish this version of this man.

The next morning, Snape was at the table when Harry arrived for breakfast. He had already eaten, but Harry had not expected that Snape would wait. He had also already finished the *Prophet*, which indicated he had been awake for a while.

Before leaving for training, Harry stood beside the hearthstone, hand clenched around a ball of gritty Floo power. "Try to keep an eye out," he said. "Someone obviously wants to get at you."

With derision Snape growled, "You think I don't know how to watch out for myself?" He had his wand in his hand in less than an eye blink. "The weak, simpering me that you apparently know too well was the one taken advantage of, not *this* me. I have survived far more than you can imagine, O Auror apprentice."

Harry listened to this diatribe without looking up. When it wound down, he tossed down the powder without responding. At the Ministry, Tonks noticed that Harry had arrived early.

"A patrol is going through Shrewsthorpe in about ten minutes . . . I thought you'd still be home when they arrived. Things okay?" she asked. When Harry restricted his response to a shrug she frowned. "Shacklebolt and Moody will be reinforcing the spells around your place when they come through the first time. And I found the best Memory Healer I could, asked him to visit your house this evening. I thought you should be there while he is."

Harry shrugged that he agreed to all of this.

At lunchtime, Harry, dearly needing company, headed to the Minister's office. He carefully peeked in the open door to assess the situation. Bones' office door was open and she was loudly giving instructions to three staff members who were scurrying about between the reception area and her office. Belinda looked a little frantic as well, as she flipped through a file. Harry made a low hiss and she glanced up, looked surprised and then gave him a nice smile followed by an apologetic shrug. The other staff headed into Bones' office at that moment and Belinda slipped away and joined Harry in the corridor.

"Good to see you. Hope you weren't expecting me to go to lunch," she said.

"Guess not. I just wanted to see you."

"All right. Here I am," she teased.

Harry glanced into the offices to make sure no one was paying attention. "I may not be able to do dinner this week. Something's come up."

"Oh," she said, disappointed. She appeared to want him to tell her what but as usual her expression neutralized neatly.

"It's too complicated to explain. Maybe later," Harry said, hearing a touch of strain or sadness in his own voice. "I'll let you get back to work. Good to see you."

At home, after a day that went much too fast, Harry found Snape in the drawing room, going through his files in a rather destructive manner. He strongly expected that Snape would later regret having thrown things around so haphazardly. When he spied Harry in the doorway, he dropped into the desk chair, looking exhausted and tense. Harry felt a twinge for him, even as nasty as he was behaving. Snape appeared to remember something and dug through the piles on the desk and pulled out a note. "Explain this to me," he commanded. Beside the stacks sat a rolled up copy of the adoption papers. Harry eyed them as he approached, but they looked unruffled. To get to the desk, he had to step wide over tipped piles of parchments and file folders.

Harry took the note card and opened it. "I've never seen this." He mulled over the date and Dumbledore's signature with a bit of a chill. "This is months after he died." Harry read the note, feeling very awkward as though he were eavesdropping. He folded the note and handed it back. "What do you want explained?"

"What is this anniversary to which he is referring?"

"Don't ask. I don't want to talk about it," Harry replied.

Snape appeared keenly interested in this response. Winky stepped into the doorway and announced dinner, something she had never done before. Harry followed her out and after he sat down and began, Snape arrived as well. They ate in silence, Harry rereading his letters from his friends, thinking he should write back but not sure he would have anything happy to discuss. Snape was reading *Witch Weekly*, which he never did. It was unfortunately the *Most Eligible Bachelor* issue, the only one they owned.

Snape noticed Harry watching him. "You must be insufferable to live with," he commented disgustedly, indicating the magazine.

"I try," Harry returned.

The door knocker sounded. Harry got up and let in the Healer, an older wizard with poor eyesight. He looked Harry over critically before Harry convinced him that it wasn't he who needed attention. In the dining room Snape was convinced to sit still for an examination of the charm.

After several tests, the Healer put his wand and magic crystals away. "I've never seen such a charm, and I've seen quite a few. Any dreams last night you think may be missing memories?"

"I did not sleep last night."

"Well, you most likely will tonight, then," the wizard said brightly. "If your memories are going to break loose on their own it will start with your dreams. Short of the charm weakening, I would want to have the wand that did it in hand before attempting a reversal." He gave both of them a nod and departed, leaving Harry feeling unsatisfied and anxious.

After a long silence Snape asked, "When did I cease to hate you?" Harry shrugged because he didn't really know. Snape then asked, "When did you cease to hate me?"

Harry thought that over. "Some time around the end of my sixth year. You were being nicer to me." He ignored Snape's snort. "And I wanted a home badly enough to overlook a few things."

"Albus had something to do with this according to his missive from the grave."

"Of course."

The door knocker sounded again. Harry went to the door and accepted the book Elizabeth held out. "How are you?" she asked brightly.

"Surviving," Harry quipped. "I really can't visit right now. I'm having a personal crisis."

"Oh. All right." She stepped back from the door. "Good luck with it. If you need anything else, just owl again. I'll accept any distractions after the term I had."

"Thanks and I hope your revising is going well," Harry said sincerely. He closed the door, turned and handed the book to Snape, who was hovering behind him. "Since your pride won't let you ask for some stupid reason, you should read it."

Snape took the book and slowly turned it over in the dim hallway light. Harry turned up the wick in the lamp beside the coat cupboard, spilling surging light and smoke around them. The book was the *Wizard Annual 1997*, a slim volume to fit neatly beside the multi-volume *Wizard Encyclopedia Albion*. Snape opened it where he stood and paged forward roughly.

"Let's see, H for Hero, or I for Insufferable."

"V for Very effing messed up," Harry suggested, feeling more anger. "P for Prophecy, perhaps."

Snape froze an instant but flipped to the back as he slid down the wall to settle in across from the cupboard. Harry slid down across from him, bumping the cupboard door closed. The floor was cold. Snape swallowed hard and began reading in the poor, shifting light, "*Voldemort, AKA The Dark Lord, AKA Tom Marvolo Riddle. Voldemort's dreaded reign ended this year when the prophecy that set the precepts for his downfall was concluded. Harry Potter; The Boy Who Lived, so marked by Voldemort himself to be the One with the Power to Vanquish the evil wizard, brought Voldemort down with a single spell, a Killing Curse.*"

Snape paused and considered Harry across the small space. Harry stared at his fingers as he clenched them together. It seemed too recent as well as too long ago. It made it hard to get a hold of the emotion of it.

"*The Dark Lord, after tricking the witches and wizards guarding Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry away from said school with a ruse of having located a Celtic power Sceptre which they just had to free from a mound to make use of, attacked the school with twenty-two of his Death Eaters, intending to kill young Potter and terminate the prophecy.*" Snape swallowed hard again, looking vaguely alarmed. "Albus must have been getting doddered." He went on reading. "*Harry Potter and nineteen of his schoolmates . . . not twenty two?*" Snape halted to ask snidely.

Harry cleared his throat. "There were three more, which was a coincidence really, but they were First- and Second-Years, so I made them stay back."

"It wouldn't have mattered," Snape sneered. "If you had lost, they would have all died."

Harry didn't respond, so Snape went back to reading. ". . . *went down to meet the Dark Lord in the school's Entrance Hall. The battle lasted only minutes and at the end three Death Eaters were dead as well as Voldemort. Nine students were taken to St. Mungo's for treatment.* This is what you meant by grateful?" he asked.

Harry couldn't read his tone. It was less nasty, but he refused to feel hopeful. He shrugged. The lamp sputtered, sending more orange sparks along the wall. Snape shut the book with a snap of its thin stiff covers. "Or shall I read *your* entry?" Contrary to his threat, he set the book aside. "I cannot understand this person you expect me to be."

"My expectations aren't much, really," Harry said, feeling on better footing, even though he didn't like the defeated tone Snape used. "Just the things Dumbledore mentioned in the letter. Even you at your worst are an improvement over my aunt and uncle."

"This is insane," Snape huffed as he shoved himself to his feet and stalked off, leaving the book behind. Harry felt despairing suddenly, as though the situation were taking control of him. He picked up the book and thumbed idly through it. His bum hurt from the uneven stone floor so he stood and went to his room.

\* \* \*

Severus Snape awoke the next morning, a dream chasing his conscious mind. He was still fatigued and it was early, but he rose anyway and put on a dressing gown. He should be teaching . . . something; this forced idleness in the middle of the year made him antsy. As he headed downstairs, the dream caught up with him. In it he and Potter were at the zoo, a surreal scene in itself, but while Harry was enjoying the animals, Snape was studying the boy, looking for cracks in his demeanor, any sign of old wounds. It didn't make any sense, this dream, especially the stark memory of Harry smiling at him between bites of an ice cream.

After his toilet he settled at the dining room table with the day's newspaper. The coffee service sparkled into existence, something Tidgy had not been able to do. Snape folded and put aside the *Prophet* before sipping the scalding coffee, considering in dismay and confusion his thoughts and intentions from the dream.

An hour later Harry came down, looking poorly slept. Snape's gut reaction to him came to the fore, holding him from returning Harry's automatic greeting, which shifted to a small frown as he poured himself coffee. Snape considered that in exchange for eliminating the Dark Lord, he probably did owe the boy something, but not his house and life; that didn't seem acceptable, and why would Potter want those anyway?

In silence Harry ate and departed, earlier than he said he needed to leave. Snape returned to the drawing room and began the arduous task of reassembling the files he had tossed around in his frantic hunt for understanding.

\* \* \*

Harry returned from the Ministry after running his errands in Diagon Alley and loitering alone in a coffee shop Belinda frequented. He had stood in the corner of the crowded place as long as his hot chocolate held out. This was a change, this not wanting to go home. Usually he wanted to share the day's learning, and for the most part Snape wasn't there, except the random weekend. It was well into evening, dinnertime, and Snape was at the table. He half-turned his head as Harry ducked under the mantel to enter. Harry considered putting his shopping bags down, but then changed his mind and carried them to his room, wanting to avoid a possible transgression. He wondered how Snape had spent the day, but didn't want to ask, since silence, as sharp as it was, at least didn't cut in unexpected ways.

Snape seemed more subdued as they ate, which was an improvement over the vitriol Harry was expecting. Halfway through, Snape said, "You never explained the letter. What does it mean?"

Harry put down his fork and swallowed some mead. "It means he thinks you had redeemed yourself, even though you didn't think so. What do you think it means?"

Snape took that in with a confused expression. "Why did he send it *then*? What happened a year before? There is nothing in my notes or my files. The Dark Lord wasn't defeated until a month later."

Harry sighed and firmly replied, "I don't want to tell you. Telling you is handing you a weapon you can take me down with, which I expect you will do. This is hard enough already with you not understanding enough to be dangerous."

After a long pause Snape said ploddingly, "I had an odd dream last night: we were at the zoo together."

"That was just before school started," Harry said brightly, then forced his elation down.

The hearth flared before Snape could respond and McGonagall stepped out of it. "Sorry to interrupt dinner," she apologized after taking in the scene. "How are you doing?"

"Not well," Snape said, crossing his arms.

"I wasn't asking you," McGonagall returned. "But here is your post, in any event." She placed a small bundle on the table. Snape didn't deign to look at it, just glared at her. To Harry, she affectionately said, "Surviving, Harry?"

"I'm fine," he replied quickly. He would have crossed his arms too if it wouldn't have mimicked Snape.

She pulled a chair around to the table end where she could sit between them. "So," she addressed Snape, "decided yet that this trade is acceptable?"

"What trade?"

"Your freedom for this responsibility," she explained, indicating Harry.

Snape rubbed his left arm inside his sleeve. "I am not accustomed yet to believing he is truly gone. And no sane version of me would ever take this on as a proxy son. No matter how thoroughly and utterly I believed it would appall his father." He ended with quirked lips.

McGonagall sighed. "You strode into my office one day and asked me to witness some papers. His adoption papers," she gestured at Harry. "You seemed sane that day, even though I was too shocked to make any masterful observations."

"I know nothing of parenting," Snape returned harshly.

"But you do know something about being too closely affiliated with Voldemort," she returned. "And separate from that, I have seen you caring for him with surprising ease, in fact." When Snape huffed and turned his head away, she turned to Harry. "Any news?"

"The investigation hit a dead end," Harry said. "Unless someone comes forward who saw something or he remembers . . ." He shrugged, trying not to appear too strained.

She patted his arm and stood up. "Don't take what he says personally," she said.

"DO take it personally," Snape countered vehemently.

McGonagall straightened her cloak. "Well, I am glad he is here and not Hogwarts. Thank you for that, Harry." Snape growled. "Do behave yourself, Severus. Goodness, I normally say that to Harry. Goodnight, both of you. Do try to not kill each other," she said pleasantly and then she was gone.

Snape rubbed his forehead as though he had a headache and pulled his post over closer to his plate. He untied the bundle one-handed and flipped through the envelopes, pausing at the third one and opening it slowly. "Who is this?" he demanded of Harry, pushing the envelope over.

Harry glanced at the purple ink. "Your lady-friend, Candy." Snape mouthed the word, *candy*, in sickened dismay. Harry leaned forward and Snape jerked the letter toward himself. "I wasn't reading the letter, I was noticing that there was more than one in the pile. She might be worrying about you. I didn't owl her because I didn't know you were corresponding. Things are a little shaky between you as it is. Frankly I thought it was off."

"Oh, thank you for your confidence," Snape returned sarcastically.

"To fill you in," Harry said. "Her officemate was just a few years behind you and remembers the old you very well. It has things on the rocks as it is. If she met this you, I think it *would* be the end, even considering that she was half-expecting you to ask her to marry her at one point."

"What?" Snape demanded, startled.

"This situation is far too complicated to explain . . . to this you." Harry crossed his arms. "To any you, actually," he added wryly.

Snape turned to the letter again before refolding it and opening the other one. "She is asking for some board game back and trying to justify something," he uttered in confusion. "I am not this man. This is madness," he then huffed as he pushed all the letters aside. "Me as a husband. Me as *your father*. Do you go around calling me 'dad'?" he asked nastily.

"Only rarely," Harry admitted. "Don't you want a family, though? Did you really like living alone?"

Snape sneered, "Your father would disown you if he saw this," and then straightened as he appeared to consider that a positive. "You must be truly desperate. The wizarding world abandoned you again, then?"

"No, not at all. I wanted to live with you."

Snape appeared more annoyed. He pushed his plate aside, starting when it disappeared, before standing up. "It cannot work. It is madness. I see the hopefulness in your eyes," he accused, then leaned in close. "Give. It. Up," he snarled, then grabbed up the letters, spun and stalked away. Harry frowned and pushed the rest of his dinner away uneaten.

\* \* \*

The next morning at breakfast, Harry, feeling a bold desperation, poured coffee for himself and asked, "Any dreams last night?"

Snape shook his head, looking fierce. "Just a nightmare." They waited for plates to arrive in silence punctuated by the rustle of the newspaper.

"I was hoping you'd remember something more," Harry said in a normal tone before tossing the *Prophet* aside after scanning the headlines.

Snape eventually said, "It was rather a fatally horrendous nightmare--it cannot have been a memory."

"What was it?" Harry asked quietly.

Snape put his cup down with a loud *bonk* that Harry thought might have easily shattered it, but didn't. "I was surrounded by Dementors. Literally hundreds of them," Snape explained, voice far away.

"Two hundred and sixty-three of them," Harry supplied. At Snape's narrow-eyed look, he explained, "That wasn't a dream . . . that really happened. They were sent by Malfoy and his cohorts to take revenge on me for killing Voldemort."

"I don't believe you," Snape returned flatly.

Harry pulled his head back. "You think I'd make that up?" He stood and stalked to the library and, after hunting around, found a book marked with a chocolate frog card, which he brought back and tossed on the table. "Or read it in the Annual, which is in my room."

"Of course. More incipient fame," Snape growled as he lifted the card. His expression shifted as he studied the photograph to one less hard and more far away. Finally, he flipped it over and read, "*Famed also for the expulsion of over two hundred Dementors from the Hogwarts Quidditch grounds*. Lovely. How did you manage that, O Supreme Mage Wizard Potter."

"Malfoy apparently didn't realize that Voldemort had made himself one of them."

"One of the Dementors?" Snape asked, all curiosity suddenly.



Warming to that, Harry replied eagerly, "Yes. So that meant I was after he was gone."

Snape aborted lifting his coffee to his mouth and put it back down. "Really?"

"I cut them a deal and they went away."

Snape considered that. "You worry me, Potter."

"You always say that."

"At least I am not completely addled."

Harry grinned, almost made himself stop, then let himself grin more. Snape grumbled in a warning tone. "I am not this person you think I am."

"You are and you aren't," Harry countered. "In the months after Voldemort's defeat you were the only one who seemed to care that I was getting sucked into these green visions full of shadows and webs." Snape's eyes narrowed at that in thought. Harry went on, "See, like that. You don't shirk . . . you wonder about it. Everyone else was well-meaning but they were exhausted and too happy to have Voldemort gone to pay any mind . . . thought everything would just work out on its own."

Harry looked at the clock; he needed to go. He stood up and drank the rest of his coffee down before collecting his bag from his room. Before he tossed in the Floo powder, he said, "It made a difference to you before, so maybe it will again. There was a reason it only took one spell to take Voldemort down, and you were the reason. You don't owe me or anyone else anything." He tossed the powder in and ducked into the roaring green flame, thinking that at least Snape's expression had been thoughtful upon hearing that, if not still grim.

When Harry returned that evening, he couldn't find Snape in the house. Panicked with concern he checked the front, noting in passing that Snape's winter cloak was on a hook, so he shouldn't have gone far. The street contained only an old car turning at the next corner. "Winky!" Harry called out when he stepped back inside.

Winky came up from the kitchen and pointed shyly out the back. Harry strode quickly to the back entryway and outside. Snape sat on the frozen ground, leaning against the wall of the house, looking over the rampant dormant vines curtaining the walls of the back garden. It was cold and Harry worried how long he had been outside.

In an accusing tone, Snape said, "That is Black's bike," referring to the tarp-covered hulk against the high stone wall to the right.

Harry crouched beside his guardian and noticed that Snape's loose dressing gown was frozen stiff as though he had been out here a long while. Harry explained, "He left it for my eighteenth birthday. You could have not let me have it." When Snape shook his head, Harry added, "You flew it to visit your mum."

Snape's brow twitched. "I did?"

Harry smiled slightly, feeling he had an entry point to pry at. "Yes. She was appalled."

"How do you know?"

"We went together."

Snape's eyes fell half closed. "I don't understand this," he said, sounding utterly defeated--so much so that Harry wished he were angry instead.

Harry tugged on Snape's upper arm. "Come on inside, Severus," he urged kindly.

Snape scoffed. "Listen to you." But he tried to stand, and with Harry's arm around his back, managed just barely.

Harry led him inside, which now felt overly warm in comparison. He put his burden down on the lounge in the library and pulled out his wand to use a warming charm on him. Snape sat silently through it until Harry put his wand away.

"Same wand you killed him with?" Snape asked flatly.

"Only one I have," Harry answered.

"He is truly gone?" Snape asked quietly, rubbing his arm unconsciously, a habit Harry was glad he no longer had.

"He is truly gone. You are truly free," Harry assured him. He pulled over a chair to sit across from his guardian and leaned forward. "Look," he began. "I know you hate me right now, but you don't know me very well."

"Don't I?" Snape sneered. "You are an attention-seeking, sorry excuse for a student," he snarled tiredly.

"Well, no."

"And that article in *Witch Weekly*?"

Harry ducked his head, feeling no anger, only a eagerness to explain. "You think I knew about that? That was Skeeter's way of punishing me for not granting her an interview." When Snape glared at him doubtfully, Harry cajoled, "Come on, you know I'm not lying." Snape looked quickly away. Harry touched his arm. "Look at me," Harry said. "What do you see?"

Snape exhaled and turned halfway back to stare at the far window. "Someone taller than expected," he replied, sounding difficult and as though he were reserving the right to become uncooperative.

"And?" Harry prompted. When Snape remained silent, Harry filled in, "Someone who has been pulled carefully back together after sacrificing every ounce of himself to take Voldemort down." Snape didn't respond, although his head moved marginally. Harry said, "Do you know who everyone, from Dumbledore to McGonagall to Remus, even, credits for that?" He paused, and receiving no response, asked again, "Do you know?"

Snape shook his head.

"You," Harry said firmly.

Snape scoffed quietly, but his eyes had lost their edge. "I would have no idea where to start," he commented quietly before rubbing his forehead hard.

"You did. And I'm very grateful you did."

With a bit more snarl, Snape snipped, "I don't owe you anything."

"No," Harry agreed. "I owe *you* a lot. Almost everything."

Snape jerked his hand up to rub his forehead again. "Start acting like it then, and leave me alone," he hissed. He stood shakily and shook off Harry's offer of help. In silence he headed up to his room, leaning heavily on the handrail. Harry watched the door snap closed and went back to the lounge, pulled out his reading and forced himself to get lost in it, although his thoughts kept worrying terribly if Snape would ever be completely all right.

Harry tired early and headed upstairs as well. When he topped the stairs, he saw the light on under the first door and knocked. When there was no response, he pushed the door open. "Severus?" Harry queried. Snape sat on the edge of his

bed, still in his clothes and dressing gown, one hand on his head, one holding a teacup from the tray on the night stand. The sharp scent of valerian root wafted in the room.

Harry stepped forward in concern. Snape half-raised his head and said, "So many . . . odd memories."

"I should get the Healer," Harry said. He started to leave, but Snape's voice pulled him back.

"Wait," Snape said. "Was . . . was I there when you killed the Dark Lord?"

"Yes. You were coming up from the kitchens."

"You lied," he snarled in pure anger. "I almost made you fail. You looked at me and the Dark Lord almost overtook you."

"No," Harry countered forcefully. "It was a stalemate and Voldemort thought he had me, but I turned it into a trap. One I wouldn't have thought to lay in the beginning, I admit, because I didn't like remembering."

"Remembering what?" Snape asked suspiciously, still looking predatory.

Harry rubbed his hair backwards and forwards; it still bothered him to remember. "The night that the letter from Dumbledore was an anniversary to." When Snape didn't respond, Harry went on, "I don't want to explain. Let's just say you and Dumbledore had to rescue me that night after Malfoy's old friends took revenge on me for him ending up in Azkaban." Harry, drawn into the memory, said, "I was a mess." He kept his gaze down instead of Occluding his mind. "Let me get the Healer," he said, and left the room.

Ten minutes later, the old wizard from before arrived with a *pop!* in the front garden. Harry led him upstairs and stood aside as he examined Snape.

"It is a good sign, these memories. Are they clarifying things for you?" he asked Snape.

"No," Snape replied darkly.

The Healer, who was putting away the strange crystal instrument he had used, paused at that. "You must want to remember if you are to do so completely." He looked to Harry. "Is there some problem?" When Harry nodded sadly, the wizard said, "You must remove this problem." He lifted his bag and stood before Harry. "Contact me if there is any more change and give him this before he sleeps."

Harry accepted the bottle and nodded. When they were alone, Harry placed the bottle on the night stand, surprised when Snape didn't immediately scrutinize and criticize its contents. Instead, his dark eyes stared straight ahead at the empty wall. "I cannot be this man you expect," he insisted tiredly, doggedly.

Harry crouched before Snape and looked up at him. "I'm willing to start again," he said, though something tore loose inside his chest as he did. He kept his voice level and plowed on, "It could work. You and I understand each other."

Snape gave him a dubious look, then put his fingers to his forehead with a groan. "I hear myself saying that." More condescending, he added, "To Minister Obolensky of all people." Harry grinned, prompting Snape to say, "Why are you so insistent? I can't make you go away."

"You are the only father I've ever known."

Snape snorted and mocked, "Most unfortunate for you."

Harry shrugged, untouched. When Snape rubbed his forehead for the tenth time, Harry asked, "More memories?"

"Yes, but not understanding." He sighed. "I do think I enjoy teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts . . . I keep remembering that."

"You do enjoy it," Harry confirmed.

"The students don't seem as completely inept at it as they always are at Potions. Minerva said that Albus gave me that position."

"Yep. As soon as Voldemort was gone."

"He always held back. I assumed to punish me. Perhaps he did finally believe I had atoned. Or that if he pretended he believed it, I would change, thus making it so. He *so* liked to work that way."

Harry laughed lightly, drawing Snape's attention and a disgusted shake of his guardian's head. Harry stood straight on knees that had stiffened too much. Reaching for the bottle, he said. "Take some of this and get some rest. It's late. I'll be here tomorrow all day and we need to not kill each other."

Snape accepted the bottle, opened it and sniffed it before pouring out a splash into his empty teacup and handing it back. He stared down at the muddy brown liquid and asked, "Did I do all this just to avoid owing you?"

Harry set the bottle back on the night stand. "I don't know," he replied honestly. "I guess it wouldn't surprise me if that were part of it. One thing I am certain of . . . the original reasons don't mean anything anymore."

Snape downed the potion in one swig, then held the cup out before him, turning it around in his fingers. His eyes narrowed as they traced a tea-stained crack in the side of the porcelain. A memory was leeching into him, matching the dim room, the cup, the hearth . . . and Harry. Snape had a vision of huddling close to a dusty hearth that gave off only paltry heat, a badly injured Harry unhappily resting too close, but too weak to move away. Snape himself forced by his loyalty to Dumbledore to care for the boy as best as possible under the limited circumstances.

And Snape was doing this duty, reluctantly, and with restrained complaint, but he had done something wrong. Something he didn't understand. After the years of withering insults and outright threats, he had accidentally broken the boy down, utterly.

Snape squinted at the hearth beyond his raised cup, trying to capture more of the memory and any true comprehension of it. It must be the events Harry refused to discuss, for which Snape could not blame him. Fear had motivated Snape as well in that memory. Fear that this annoying, aggravating, bad-memory inducing boy was far too important to them all. And indeed that fear had been borne out, it seemed.

Snape looked up at the far different Harry standing patiently before him. This one was tall and broad shouldered and looked slightly less like his father than he used to. He was also looking hopeful again, as well as concerned, and half a dozen other completely incomprehensible emotions. Snape rubbed his forehead. That event was the key to all of this, according to the foremost wizard of the last century; not an opinion Snape could entirely ignore. Rubbing his head, he considered reluctantly that some kind of understanding could have resulted from what had happened. He wondered what had set Harry off so. What possible vulnerability had he touched?

Harry finally asked, "Are you all right?"

It hurt to hear Harry speaking so; it meant Snape had no power to make him understand how ludicrous he was being. It also, more frightfully, meant that much too much was expected of him. But apparently he *had* risen to it. Maybe the biggest change that fateful night had been in himself. Snape ignored Harry's question and settled back on the bed, still clothed, to stare at the ceiling, at the arch of light from the lamp beside the bed.

Harry turned down the lamp with a sigh, apparently giving up on getting an answer. "Good night, Severus. If you need anything . . . "

"Leave me alone, Potter," Snape murmured, unable to find the heart to snap at him.

Harry departed for his own room and found sleep easier than expected.

The next morning, Harry quietly passed by Snape's room and peered in. Snape was still asleep, as he had left him the night before, so he went quietly down to the dining room. At half past eight he grew concerned and went back up to check on him. Snape was sitting up, rubbing his temple.

"Do you want the Healer?" Harry asked.

"Healer?" Snape muttered. "Oh, no, it is all right." He squinted at Harry after glancing around the room in dismay. "I am not entirely clear on what is happening, or why I am home."

"Are you remembering?"

"Remembering what?" Snape asked, sounding much more himself.

Harry, heart speeding up, went over to him. "You do remember--enough that you are confused. Do you remember who gave you the Memory Charm?" Snape's gaze focused beyond the walls. Harry prompted, "Behind the Three Broomsticks. You woke up there, anyway."

After an extremely long pause during which Snape's eyes roved the walls, he said, "They were wearing a hood, a Death Eater mask. It wasn't Avery, but there was something familiar . . ."

Harry grabbed his shoulders. "You remember!" he said, overwhelmed by elation.

"Harry," Snape chastised him, plucking Harry's hand off his arm. He stood suddenly and paced the room, looking caged again.

Harry watched him, forcing himself to be patient for a minute before asking, "What do you remember about the spell?"

"I remember what he said, but it was a strange voice I did not recognize."

"Which was?" Harry asked in painful eagerness.

Quoting, Snape said, "As much as you deserve to die, death is too easy. Instead, am going to take away everything you've gained cheating your Lord and Master, everything that matters to you." He looked at Harry. "I don't know who it was . . . The eyes were familiar, but not the voice." After a sigh, he said, "You were remarkably tolerant of me. You should have just left."

"I couldn't do that," Harry insisted. "It was Avery that night here though, I sensed him. What happened exactly . . . do you remember?"

"It wasn't Avery in Hogsmeade." Snape leaned on the wall and rubbed his face. "I remember someone calling out. I was in the road and I walked between the buildings . . ."

"Didn't you have your wand out?" Harry asked sharply.

"Of course I did. I believe I got hit from behind," he sighed and appeared even more weary.

"I should summon the Healer," Harry insisted.

"I don't need a doddering old wizard; I need coffee," he muttered, crossing in front of Harry a little unsteadily. Harry took his arm and led him downstairs.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," Harry insisted vehemently, pulling out Snape's chair for him. His voice was not steady and he was glad that Snape did not seem to notice.

Coffee appeared immediately. "What? Don't want more abuse?" Snape asked snidely.

"I understood the old you better than I used to," Harry explained, taking the coffeepot up as Snape set it down. "McGonagall will be pleased, I'm sure."

"Owl her to stop by today, but do not inform her I have recovered," Snape said, taking a large gulp of coffee with unsteady hands. "I've a few things to say to her."

Harry nearly spit out his mouthful of coffee. After barely managing to swallow, he laughed into his hand.

Snape considered him from hooded eyes. "I don't deserve you, Harry."

"Don't be silly," Harry returned. "It's good to have you back. It's been a long week." Seeing Snape carefully set his mug down with shaking hands, Harry stood. "Healer," he breathed, angry at himself for forgetting in his excitement.

The old wizard set up a few complicated charms around Snape, which he barely sat through, though at the end Snape's back was less bent and he looked much more alert.

"You'll get my bill," the Healer said as Harry showed him out afterward.

"Thank you for everything," Harry said to the wizard as they stood in the doorway.

"He was lucky. Whoever did this tried to do more than they were capable of. If the spell had not been overextended, I think they'd've have succeeded permanently. Quite a charm, in any event."

Harry bit his lip and nodded that he understood, thinking also that there was only one wizard he knew of with that kind of exceptional skill at Memory Charms. Back in the dining room, he said, "We have to figure out who did this. Avery came to the window here, I'm certain. But it wasn't him behind the Three Broomsticks, what if it was Lockhart?"

Snape held his coffee cup before him and pondered that. "I'm not certain. I have to admit to ignoring him most of the time he was at Hogwarts . . . it was the only way to keep down a meal."

Harry went on, "I'll have Tonks check with the Ministry that everyone is still in Azkaban, no Doppelgangers, Aging potions, Polyjuice or otherwise." Breakfast appeared. Harry was getting angry now and it felt good. He looked up at his guardian. "Be more careful, all right?" he commanded.

"I have relaxed of late, it is true," he agreed.

Still angry, Harry said, "I don't want to lose you."

Snape, with a small smile, tilted his head to the side in a kind of nod.

Part way through eating, Snape said, "I apologize for the way I treated you."

Harry shrugged. "You really didn't know how to hurt me."

Snape straightened his napkin a little fussily. "I am glad for that," he admitted quietly.