



Chapter 71 -- Arms of the Angels

Friday, very late in the evening, about the time Harry was getting ready to go to his room, Franklin appeared at the window and scratched at the pane. Harry let the owl in and it dropped a letter on the table where he had seconds before cleared away his studies for the night. Franklin flapped up to a chair back and stepped, as though nervous, from one post of it to the other. When he finally paused, Harry picked up the letter, making the bird shift from one foot to the other and cock an eye at him as though to gauge him.

Only Harry's name was on the envelope. He opened it and read: *Dearest Harry*, and swallowed hard. *I find that I need to convey some things more strongly to you than I did before my hurried departure for Hogwarts.* The next sentence had been written after a pause; Harry could tell this because the angle and shape of the writing changed at that point. *I am sorry for the manner in which I treated you over the last week, and before. I am finding it most strange to be reminded of wishing to hurt you, and I wish I did not. You deserve far better and I believe the balance between us was already too tilted toward my vitriol, leaving me even farther behind in evening things out.*

Harry paused to argue aloud, "We're even." He sat down with the letter and rubbed his hair back and forth as he continued.

I do truly hope you were honest and correct in your assessment of my inability to strike anything vulnerable in you. It was very wise of you not to reveal anything that could be turned against you. You did not always do this and I am heartened to see that you have learned to. What pains me most to remember is your offer to start again. Had you tried, I flinch at how much you would have been put through on my stubborn-minded account. It was consideration I did not deserve.

I promise to be more careful. I do remember a time when it was necessary to scrutinize every shadow and every sideways look for enemies. I will do so again. Yours, Severus.

Harry put the letter aside, wishing Snape had not felt the need to send it. Somehow, it revealed less understanding between them and more uncertainty than Harry felt there was. He penned a quick letter back and gave it to Franklin, who had finally settled down. In it he said, *I cannot have given up on you. Rest assured that beyond my concern that the charm might be long term, I wasn't under any real threat.* Harry stared at the letter; it sounded too cold and isolated, but he imagined Snape might scoff at anything more intimate--his Snape, the one who could hurt him very easily. Harry added, *You are my family, Severus. There is nothing I wouldn't do to preserve that.*

* * *

By hand, Snape adjusted the position of the stout, hickory cabinet in the corner of his office. He had found it in one of the castle's attics and although it was small and a bit ugly, its construction was solid. Its former owner must have used it to hold his or her pipe smoking paraphernalia because the top surface showed flares of black burn marks. That was all right; a dangerous ingredient cabinet invariably got stained if not worse.

Snape checked it for existing spells but any spells it held in the past had weakened too much to do more than sparkle. He carefully layered on a new set and checked that the lock functioned before moving anything into it. It wouldn't hold many containers, but at least it would hold the ones most in need of protection from prying student hands.

He had just finished stocking and securing the cabinet and had stepped back from it when a shout and a high-pitched scream sounded from the corridor. Snape was out of the door in an instant, wand in hand, pausing only to get a sense of

direction as another squeal sounded. At the second bend just at the staircase, three first-year students were huddling in an alcove as Peeves pelted them with balloons full of something thick and sticky.

"Peeves! Stop it!" a voice shouted. It was Ginny Weasley, brandishing her wand and her voice with authority. Peeves gave her a raspberry and then mooned her, which made her wand waver in surprise.

"Peeves," Snape commanded, catching the Poltergeist's attention away. Ginny looked relieved to have help. "Off with you. NOW." Peeves turned in fast circles, chanting a twisted nursery rhyme. The first-years were removing their robes. Whatever it was had soaked through to their white shirts. "What is it?" Snape asked.

One of the boys sniffed at it. "Honey, I think," he replied in surprise while trying to rub it off, which only made his robe stick to his hand.

"Peeves, my next stop will be the dungeon to fetch the Baron," Snape threatened.

Peeves stopped circling wildly and slinked away with one last raspberry over his shoulder.

Ginny approached. "Why doesn't the school just get rid of him, Professor?"

"He isn't a thing to be rid of. He is a manifestation of the stresses and mental disturbances of the students. We could get rid of the students," he suggested snidely with a raised brow.

"Oh. I suppose that wouldn't work then," Ginny admitted before moving to help the first-years down to the Prefects bathroom to clean up.

One of the girls was complaining. "Why did Peeves do that? We weren't bothering him."

Snape returned to his office and his task of organizing his old ingredient cabinet. As he reached for the jar of essence of feather star, he paused, almost certain he had not left it so close to the edge of the shelf, even given that he had set it down in a hurry. Turning suddenly, he considered checking the corridor, but then remembered it was empty when he arrived. Peeves behavior now seemed more like a distraction than an accident. He quickly finished arranging the cabinet, grateful that the most dangerous ingredients had already been put aside.

Down in the dungeon, Snape found the Bloody Baron playing a game of chess with a nervous-looking second-year. The boy looked up hopefully at Snape who assumed the boy had gotten himself into the match and could get out of it on his own. Usually the Baron kept playing until you beat him; hopefully the boy was halfway decent at chess.

"Baron, I need you to do something for me," said Snape. When the ghost swooped up to attention, showing his silver stained front to full advantage, Snape commanded, "Come with me." In an empty dungeon classroom, Snape closed the door and said to the hovering figure. "I want you to question Peeves about what prompted him to create a disturbance just now. It may be nothing more than my own renewed paranoia, but I wish to know if he was urged on by a student . . . or even one of the staff," he added, thinking of Greer.

The Baron saluted and sailed off through the ceiling. Snape returned to his office and straightened up his grading, checking that the grade books were still stored as they had been. The Slytherin ghost returned and bowed as he emerged through the floor. Soberly, he reported, "Peeves insists he simply found the balloons sitting in a box by the staircase."

"That's all, Baron. Good day to you," Snape dismissed the ghoulish figure.

The ghost bowed again and simultaneously floated backward through the closed door. Snape was reminded of annoyingly meddlesome students past, one of whom he had adopted. He shook his head and carefully put everything away to leave for dinner.

* * *

Harry received notice on a Monday morning that on the following Wednesday the Wizengamot would consider his petition. The scheduled time was during his morning training, but he assumed Rodgers would let him leave for it. The department was getting busy now with holiday plans and others were skipping out to take care of important errands or to greet out-of-town visitors at the station, so his absence might not be noticed.

In the lift, a wanted poster for Avery was wired to the inside of the gate door. During the long trip to the second level, Harry watched the Death Eater's nervous-eyed face glancing side to side. The photograph looked to have been taken at a garden party, since people kept entering the frame holding drinks with ice in them and wearing white, wide-brimmed, pointed hats.

Harry noticed that the lift had stopped quite a while ago and the lift door had long since unlatched. He slid it aside and stepped out and down the corridor to the training room. Tonks was in the corridor speaking with Kerry Ann and Vineet. She handed Harry a notice. "We received this memo regarding your hearing," he said in her now usual flat tone. Kerry Ann frowned but immediately spoke brightly to Vineet saying, "We'll stop by this evening if that's all right. Have a little welcome party. Harry, can you make it this evening?"

Harry had tentative plans to have Belinda over for dinner some night that week, but her work often kept her late so she did not want to make a firm date. Harry, despite finding himself doing so a few times, did not want to sit at home and wait for her to have time to do something. "Sure," he answered easily. "Did Nandi arrive?" Vineet nodded solemnly, prompting Harry to congratulate him.

Rodgers came over then and the conversation ceased and they moved inside and took their seats.

"We're going to do some . . . yes, Potter?" He stopped because Harry had his hand up, school style.

"Any word on Avery?" Harry asked factually.

"No. I'll be sure to have you owled . . . I know you have a special interest," he stated, not quite sarcastically, and then went on with an overview of illicit objects and why they were regulated. He had a few examples in a box, but for many he drew on the chalkboard. "Now this is an interesting one." He drew a long round spike on the board. "Freezing Stick. Cursed object used semi-legally in Australia during a hunt to bring down and automatically refrigerate game. A few of these turn up every year, it seems. Mostly dangerous because people bring them back and they fall into the hands of someone who doesn't know what it does. Adds a few cases to Mungo's casualty lists every year. Fortunately, most Freezing Sticks work so well, Mungo's simply has to thaw you out." Holding up an ordinary bed pillow, he said, "This is a Lethipillow, not because it contains a Lethifold, but simply because it kills you in your sleep. No good way to identify these, but if you find someone dead in their bed, good thing to check for. Next, we have . . ."

Harry took notes on each object along with his fellows. The fact that they were doing lecture first thing usually meant Rodgers would be out, leaving them to drill on their own. And indeed this turned out to be the case.

Just before 4:00, Kerry Ann urged them all to head over to Vineet's. Harry urged the opposite and suggested running through their least favorite incarceration drills. "I'm not partnering with you then," Aaron complained to Harry.

"Come on," Harry urged, "Avery is out there right now, don't you want to be ready if you come upon him?"

"He's only after you, Harry," Kerry Ann teased.

"I *wish* he was only after me," Harry breathed. "I'd be fine with that."

They agreed to run a few drills and once they got going went on almost an hour more. Harry was better at most of these spells than the others, so after Kerry Ann complained about the tightness of his Mummifying Jinx, Harry stood off to the side and offered suggestions. Vineet as usual was having difficulty with consistency; one spell would be far too much, such as a chain-binding curse with one-foot long links that clattered to the floor under its own weight and the next a perfectly acceptable version. He had taken to biting his lips a lot as he drilled. Kerry Ann and Aaron got into a serious competition to see who could produce the deepest Treacle Track Curse on the other and by the time they stopped, the floor

was shoe-deep in sticky goo which it was nearly unanimously decided Harry should scourgify since the drills had been his idea.

Vineet's flat was in Greenwich. "Ever been?" Kerry Ann asked Harry. When Harry shook his head, she took charge, saying, "Well, we can all take the Floo to a shop that I know there. We'll meet you at your flat, Vineet."

Vineet nodded and Disapparated on the spot. The rest of them had to go down to the atrium where Bones seemed to be holding a press conference. At the sight of Skeeter and company, Harry slipped along the wall from the lifts and took the long way around to the hearths, skirting around behind the small crowd. He caught a glimpse of Belinda standing to the side in a nice line with Bones' other staff, but there didn't seem to be any way to wave to her that would not risk catching anyone else's attention, especially the Minister's. Harry's fellows were waiting for him before the first hearth, hands on hips, gazing at him oddly. Harry didn't try to explain as they took turns in the Floo.

During the longish walk from the flower shop, Kerry Ann said apologetically, "I think I goofed up, Harry." When Harry asked her why she thought that, she explained, "I let slip to Tonks that you had a date with Belinda. Normally I don't gossip about my friends, *really*, but the topic of keeping the Minister's office happy came up and it just slipped out. I didn't think anything wrong with it, but Tonks didn't look happy to hear it and I see she's still snappish with you." After a half of a block, she added, "I didn't know anything was going on between you two. Usually I notice things like that."

Aaron suddenly became unusually interested in their conversation. "Nothing *is* going on between us. Not that I know of." Harry stated this firmly, hoping to squash her line of thinking.

At the door to the flat, Kerry Ann held the bottle of port wine she had insisted on stopping for on the way over. She handed it over to a slightly befuddled Vineet when he opened the door.

"Nice place," Kerry Ann said, as she stepped into the airy second-floor flat. A small dark-skinned woman, with shoulder-length hair so black it glistened blue, stood in the sitting room they had entered, looking pensive. "You must be Nandi," Kerry Ann said brightly while Aaron and Harry trailed behind.

Vineet stepped in. "Yes, my wife," he stated. "These are my fellow trainees at the Ministry," going through introducing each of them. When he got to Harry, she made an exclamation and said, "My Vishnu has such impressive friends."

"Please, sit down," Vineet insisted, gesturing at a white chesterfield behind them. He then insisted on fetching tea while Nandi took a seat. She sat very primly, hands folded in her lap, but her eyes kept straying to Harry.

Kerry Ann made small talk about Nandi's trip until Vineet brought the tray. The teapot he set before Nandi, so that she could use a spell to heat it. Nandi did so with a tap of her wand, and with a sigh said, "I am surprised my Vishnu's magic has not gotten any stronger during his training."

Uh oh, Harry thought. Vineet's lips had drawn thin as he poured for everyone, but he didn't speak. Everyone on the chesterfield shuffled their arms around and tried to appear nonchalant. The visit ended some time later with Kerry Ann insisting upon taking Nandi to her favorite shops that weekend and Harry and Aaron shooting looks of uncertainty at their fellow apprentice.

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Rather than sleeping, Harry lay in his bed staring at the ceiling. He felt cold even though the hearth was burning high. Closing his eyes, he tried to drift and find the green world and its shadows, but it was illusive, perhaps because he was trying too hard. It was difficult not to. Snape's attacker had not been found and lying there late at night with the cold darkness enveloping most of the room, that felt painfully unacceptable. Frustrated, Harry rose from his bed and began to dress with purpose. He put on his thickest woolen Molly Weasley jumper and wool pants as though expecting to be out in the cold for quite some time. When he finished dressing, however, his spirits dampened, and downstairs, while standing before the Floo when he could have announced any destination, he asked for the Ministry of Magic.

"What are you doing here, Potter?" Rodgers asked when he stepped into the office and found Harry sitting at Tonks' desk, his head resting on his arm.

Harry sat straight, feeling anxious for no good reason. "I couldn't sleep," he tiredly explained, tried to explain more, then gave up.

Rodgers put down the file he had been carrying and with a sigh pulled over the nearby chair. "Something gnawing at you?"

"Avery," Harry replied with an aching wish that the Death Eater were before him now so he could simply take him down and be rid of him off to Azkaban.

Rodgers rubbed his hands together before asking, "You can see him somehow, right?" When Harry nodded, Rodgers went on, "Can you see him now?"

Harry closed his tired eyes, thought of his soft pillow waiting at home, and found the green world easily this time. A shadow hovered, but it wasn't particularly close. "Yes," Harry answered. "But he feels distant."

Rodgers stood suddenly and gestured for Harry to follow. "Put on your cloak . . . I want to try something."

Harry obeyed with clumsy motions. Despite his aching, undefined anxiety, he now wished he were back home in bed. Rodgers waited for him to shrug his cloak around himself before grabbing his arm and Disapparating both of them.

They were suddenly in an alleyway. Their arrival had startled something which now scurried frantically over the spilled rubbish piled against the wall beside them. "How about now?" Rodgers keenly asked.

Harry closed his eyes and tried to relax enough to find that green world again. It took him a long time, and he was surprised at his trainer's patience while he worked at it. When the forest with its towering trees appeared in his mind, the shadow was skulking in the distance, still just at the edge of Harry's vision. "No difference," Harry informed his trainer.

Rodgers grabbed his arm again and this time they reappeared somewhere where city lights didn't encroach in the least. The stars glared through gaps in the clouds and highlighted the edges in silver. Hulking pitch-black piles loomed around them. "Where are we?" Harry whispered, his voice sucked into the darkness.

"An abandoned pit. Try again," Rodgers instructed.

Harry did so. If there was any change in the shadow, it wasn't enough to be certain about. "No. Still a long way off."

They repeated the process four more times, until Harry's ears hurt from the *pop!* of air that hit each time they arrived somewhere new. The next time they Disapparated they reappeared back at the Ministry.

"Not the most useful skill," Rodgers commented dryly, although not impatiently.

"It saved my life when Malfoy came to take revenge at our house," Harry explained defensively. He was frustrated and his underlying worry was starting to wear him thin. Forcing himself calm, Harry went on, "Trouble is, distance isn't always just miles. It can also be if one of them is thinking about me, or they are performing dark magic, or fighting each other." With a grunt he lowered himself back into Tonk's chair. "I want to find him. He's up to something. He's involved with Lockhart somehow."

"Lockhart?" Rodgers echoed doubtfully.

His frustration clear again, Harry said, "He was the best at Memory Charms. I'm sure he must have spelled Severus. Do you know anyone else who would even attempt to take away two whole years from someone?"

Rodgers paced once. A door opened and closed somewhere else on the floor, creaking loudly. "I have to admit, I don't. Snape didn't say it was Lockhart though, according to the report."

"You read it?" Harry asked.

Rodgers spun around. "I would like to catch Avery as well, Potter. If for no other reason than that his freedom mocks us." Frowning, he picked up a Remembrall from Shackbolt's desk. It was flashing lightly. "Think that's for me?" Rodgers asked facetiously. With a *bonk!* he put the ball down again on its wooden stand. "I suppose we could issue wanted posters for Lockhart. Certainly have enough pictures of him to choose from."

Giddily tired, Harry quipped, "Have you seen this disgusting smile? After you get your autograph, please call the Ministry."

Rodger's lips curled slightly upward. "We'll put out something. He could be dangerous, I suppose, in the right hands. I expected him to simply show up in some Muggle hospital after being picked up wandering the streets." He sniffed and stood in thought. "Go home and get some sleep. Go on," he commanded firmly, when Harry stalled

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Harry again stood before the Wizengamot, and despite not having nearly as much on the line, found himself equally nervous as the last time. He forced his shoulders down and flipped through the notes resting before him on the podium that stood before and off to the left side of the half-full tiered seats.

"Mr. Potter," Minister Bones said after getting through the preliminaries. She had a copy of his petition and was paging through it. "I must say this is well assembled."

"Thank you, Minister," Harry acknowledged quietly. He was staring at his own disorganized notes without really reading them. While he waited, he glanced around the assemblage again to gauge their faces. McGonagall was not present, unfortunately; Harry thought he could have used a guaranteed ally.

Bones was continuing. "If I may say, despite your thorough documentation of the case, there is little here but secondhand information. To overturn a conviction, even one posthumously, requires a preponderance of evidence."

Harry's first scribbled out potential witness list was open on the podium before him. *Moody, Hagrid, Severus?* Feeling as though he had been dipped in ice water, Harry suddenly realized why he really was doing this: He was still, after all this time, trying to rescue Sirius.

Bones was still talking. Hurriedly, Harry caught up with what she was saying while at the same time trying hard to latch onto the more sensible reason he had settled upon after Rogan challenged him on just this point: It wasn't fair. It set a bad precedent. None of them sounded all that reasonable while standing before the assembled governing body of British Wizardom.

". . . upon what basis do you wish us to make this decision?" Bones was asking in a formal tone.

Harry quickly answered awkwardly, "Uh, upon the confession Pettigrew gave that I witnessed. The others who witnessed it are on the witness list as well.

Bones was relentless. She held the list up to better peer at it and said, "Your best friends and a werewolf, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes, madam," Harry admitted.

Bones removed her glasses and held them between her clasped hands before her. "Let's hear your version of events then, and we will go from there."

Harry put aside his uneasiness at losing track of his purpose and launched into a detailed reminiscence of the events in the Shrieking Shack. He related as closely as he could remember how Pettigrew had broken down in the end and admitted that he had been scared of Voldemort and had given into him. "And lastly," Harry said, "Pettigrew's very existence after his supposed murder, an existence which the Ministry readily admits to, means that the original conclusions about the crime Sirius Black was convicted of were mistaken."

"True," Bones admitted. "Well, we shall deliberate and hand down a decision. I am curious though why you have brought this up now of all times, Mr. Potter?"

Harry had closed his note file and now placed his hand down on it. "It seemed to be a matter that needed to be righted, Minister." He hesitated and then added, "I admit that I have a personal interest in this. My godfather was severely wronged and lost his freedom and his life to it. This is the only thing we can do to right any of it at this point."

"Hm," Bones muttered. "Well, we will take that into consideration. You are released."

Relieved, Harry stepped out and barely noticed the walk up the steps to the busy atrium. He made his way slowly to the lifts, wanting time to think before returning to his training. All he could change now were the history books, nothing else. But that was worth it, wasn't it?

Fortunately, Harry had his mind taken off of the hearing by Belinda showing up in his hearth that evening. "Hope it isn't too late . . ." she said apologetically. Harry had already eaten but he went and asked Winky for another dinner for two.

Back in the dining room, Belinda was sitting with her head resting tiredly in her palm. Harry, truly moved, suggested, "Maybe you should have gone home and gone to sleep early."

She shrugged and sat straighter. "I wanted to see you."

This statement made Harry's insides ooze around happily. "It's good to have you over finally," he admitted.

"Sorry, I'm always so late at work. We never can tell what notion the Minister will get in her head in the afternoons. She gets so many invitations that she can't accept them all, but she'll decide to go to some dinner, or dedication, or memorial, or reception, and expect some or all of us to go along. Behaves like it some kind of treat even."

"But you like working for her?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I like being involved . . . meeting people," she smiled coyly at him then, which made a dimple stand out on her right cheek. She pushed her hair back behind her ear, where it refused to stay, and took on a shy posture, making Harry suspect that she still didn't relax and behave like her true self around him.

"Dinner will be in just a few minutes."

"I was hopeful for something to eat, but not expecting it. Thanks." She looked around the dining room with interest, especially at the decorative potion bottles on a high shelf on the far wall. Harry went and fetched the smoky liqueur that was in one of them. It was his favorite bottle with leaded colored glass fixed to it with fine chains and a matching colored glass stopper. As he carried it back to the table he considered that something like it would make a good present next time he was stuck for ideas. "Would you like some?" Harry asked.

"What is it?"

Harry held it to the light. "It tastes like burnt oak and sage and too much of it at once will make you feel like you've been hit in the gut with a Bludger."

She smiled and said, "Sounds good," so Harry poured some for her and a little less for himself. She seemed to think deeply as she sipped it. With another glance around the room she asked, "So this is . . . Professor Snape's house?"

"And his booze," Harry quipped.

"Ah, never imagined I'd find myself at Snape's house, drinking his booze. Nope, never imagined that. With *you* no less."

Winky brought dinner then and Belinda ate voraciously at first before slowing down. "I didn't get lunch either," she apologized. She saw that Harry barely touch his roast and potatoes. "And you've already eaten . . ."

Harry insisted that it was all right. When she had cleared her plate, she became interested in the house again and leaned over to peer into the main hall. "Do you want a tour?" Harry asked, only half serious. But she expressed eagerness, so he showed her around the ground floor and then up to the first.

"What's on that side?" she asked, pointing across to the other balcony.

Harry, thinking of pentagrams on the floor and skull candleholders said, "Just storage. There isn't an attic."

In his room she looked around keenly. Harry was very grateful that Winky usually straightened things during the day while he was out. "What's this?" she asked of Kali.

"Oh, that's a Chimrian." Harry opened the cage door and put his hand in so his pet could crawl up his arm to his shoulder. Belinda leaned close to get a look and Kali hissed at her before turning in a circle and crouching. "She's much better behaved than she used to be. I think she's matured, even though she hasn't grown much. Or maybe she's lost some of her color."

Belinda, who had backed off at the hiss, said, "*Lost* some color? Wow. What does she do? Does she deliver post?"

Kali hissed again, making Harry laugh. "No. She's empathetic and very protective. That's about it." Harry gave her a pat. "She would eat any post you gave her."

Belinda rounded the bed and said, "You haven't really personalized your room."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, glancing around. It sure felt like his room.

"Well, you don't have any posters on the walls or anything."

"I used to, at school. But there there was someone to see them. Most of them were too beaten up to rehang here." She looked around again, more critically. He sensed that she was trying to learn something about him from his space. Giving up on this, she plunked down on the bed. "Pretty normal looking place."

Harry approached slowly. "What were you expecting, wanted posters?"

"There is a new one out for Avery," she pointed out.

Crossing his arms, Harry stated grimly, "I know what he looks like." Kali growled low in her tiny throat.

After a pause Belinda tossed her hair back and asked curiously, "What would you do if you came upon him?"

Harry chewed his lip. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "I'd like to see him put away in Azkaban. I don't suppose I would feel too much regret if something bad happened to him on the way there. I'd like to be able to relax though, and I can't seem to with him running loose."

Speaking the way Hermione might if she thought you were missing an important and obvious point, she said, "Harry, if you are going to be an Auror, I don't think you can ever relax."

He finally relented and sat down beside her on the bed. He spied the album under under his nightstand and pulled it out. "I have some pictures if you want to see them."

"I'd love to."

Harry flipped the album open to the first page, ignoring the chocolate frog card that had gotten stashed there. Belinda plucked it out and looked it over. "I have to get you to autograph one of these for me." When Harry made a small noise of dismay, she froze, holding the card up between them. "You don't like your fame, do you?" she asked in surprise.

"Not really," Harry answered, still looking down at the photograph of him and his parents. His mother waved at the camera.

"I didn't realize that," she breathed. "I'll keep that in mind. The other day in the atrium, I thought you were just being polite to the Minister, skulking around like you did to keep out of view of the reporters." She moved over closer and looked at the album with interest. "Your parents?"

Harry nodded and paged silently and slowly forward. One was of himself in a kind of baby backpack carried by his dad. The next was his parents and some other members of the Order photographed while sitting around a table strewn with maps. The next he now recognized as having been taken in Godric's Hollow. He would have to try to find that spot next visit. His father was posing before a plaque with a Snitch on it, but Harry had never seen a plaque there in the village square where the photograph appeared to have been taken. His father was saying something slowly to the camera, Harry tried to read his lips but beyond "My . . ." he couldn't make it out. He was pointing at the plaque though with some amusement and pride even.

"So," Belinda asked, "What would your dad think of you getting a new dad?"

Harry exhaled. "He'd be appalled."

"Really?" Belinda blurted, sounding amused and alarmed.

"Absolutely. He'd go berserk, I think. I don't know what my mum would think. She was considered the levelheaded one. Maybe she'd be okay with it." He flipped past more pages of bright picnics. "Next time I get stuck beyond the veil I'll ask," he quipped grimly.

Belinda had a mixed response to this, apparently uncertain if he were being humorous. "That happen a lot?"

"Sometimes," Harry said, and then mentally nudged himself. He was being mean doing that and knew it, but let it happen anyway.

"Huh," she uttered, taking that in. "That's Hagrid," she said brightly to a younger version of the Hogwart's groundskeeper, smiling sheepishly from the next photograph. He was holding a pumpkin the size of trunk under his arm as though it weighed nothing; Lily stood beside him holding a much smaller pumpkin, carved with a broad grimace.

"Yeah," Harry said with a smile. "I don't get 'round to see him as often as I should."

"Friend of yours."

"My oldest friend."

"Huh," she uttered again as though forced to readjust her thinking. Harry had suspected that she understood him wrong; maybe after a half-dozen evenings like this, she might be straightened out. Meanwhile, she had shifted closer still so their legs touched and he couldn't miss that fruit scent of her hair. "You playing Quidditch. You were good at that."

"Yeah. We lost that last year's cup though. But it doesn't matter, really. I thought I would remember that loss for a long time but I don't even think about it. The next challenge is always more important than the last, win or lose." She had put a hand on his arm and was moving it slowly up to his elbow. Harry almost commented that *she* wasn't a challenge at all

but then decided that that would be a very unwise thing to say. He flipped through the remaining pages with photographs and closed it. There were quite a number of blank pages remaining.

"There isn't one of you and Professor Snape," she observed.

"No. I'll have to get one." He leaned forward to put the album away, pulling free of her grasp in the process. Then he stood up smoothly. "I have training in the morning . . . I think I have to get some sleep."

She appeared amused, but as though she were attempting to cover it. "All right. Stop by at lunch if you have a chance this week."

"I'll try," Harry replied before leading her down to the hearth and seeing her off, garnering a peck on the cheek as she departed. As the flames flickered down to normal yellow, part of him wished she could have stayed longer, but her infatuation was in the way, a kind of barrier to understanding that had to be pulled down before he wished to risk anything intimate. He sighed into the empty air, feeling a bit lonely.

The next morning, a Ministry post owl arrived. Harry wondered that they didn't just send him a memo at the Ministry. He then reconsidered that he really didn't have a desk for it to arrive at. The language was roundabout but upon a second reading he decided that it promised to add an addendum to Sirius' file casting grave doubt on his guilt but there would be no official announcement. Harry refolded the letter, feeling unsatisfied, and wondering how Bones and this assemblage of the Wizengamot would cope with real problems if they were this careful about dodging controversy when no one who mattered remained alive.

Over the next few days Harry did not manage to stop by the Minister's office at lunch; he felt a deep, simmering frustration with Madam Bones and had no interest in testing his control. Wednesday evening, Belinda's owl arrived as he was doing his post-dinner readings. The letter read bright and cheery and hoped for them to make a date for the weekend, perhaps for Harry to have dinner at her parent's house. "Aye," Harry muttered aloud, bringing Kali's head up from his lap with a curious look. "Think I'm being shown off?" he asked his pet. "Maybe that's unfair," he then answered himself, folding the letter aside to answer later.

Harry didn't make it to the weekend to find out; that night he jerked awake in his bed, feeling badly disoriented. His room was black, except for the orange glow in the hearth, and totally still. The curse detection above the hearth flared pure blue when Harry waved his wand at it, so he flopped back, closed his eyes again, and tried to relax. As he lay there, floating half-conscious, a tangled vision filled his mind; in it, overlapping shadows jostled in a green haze.

In a surge of acid panic Harry leapt from his bed, tossing the duvet halfway across the floor, the breeze of it sending sparks showering out of the hearth. He grabbed up his wand and robe, which he shrugged on as he took the stairs in a rush, three steps at a time. He scrawled a five-pointed star followed by a two-word message on his Auror's tablet and tossed it heedlessly back on the dining room table. Inside the hearth he shouted, "Hogwarts" as he threw down a very large handful of powder. The resulting acceleration through the quiet Floo Network nearly knocked him out. Blurry moments later, he landed in an ashy heap in the largest hearth of the Great Hall.

Wand still in hand, he clambered to his feet and pounded his way out to the Entrance Hall and up the Grand Staircase, amazed and relieved at the fluidity and speed of his own movement. He didn't slow on the staircases and sped to flying speed when he reached the dim second floor corridor.

Snape's office door was locked and an strange foggy glass globe was resting just at the bottom edge of it. Harry pounded on the door, then stepped back, wand aimed. He uttered a Blasting Curse and the jagged bolt from his wand burned the air red and split the heavy wooden door in two with a deafening crack. The unhinged half fell aside and the other swung open, revealing Avery clutching a thick cloth over his nose and mouth, crouched over another figure. Blood splattered the walls and pooled around their black robes. Blue mist floated out into the corridor around Harry's feet.

For Harry, all existence reduced to the man staring at him in surprise quickly turning to fear. All sound faded beyond Harry's own breath and pounding heart. He blasted the man without conscious thought. Like a rag doll, Avery was tossed against the couch from which he flopped to the floor. The Death Eater, eyes bright with pain, brought his wand

around and tried to aim it but an *Expelliarmus* disarmed him easily as though he had the magic of a mere child. Harry stalked forward into the room, his mind over-bright with a white hot wrath. Avery knelt in a pleading pose after giving up on reaching his wand in the far corner beyond the shelves.

Snape lay completely still in the mist clinging to the floor. Harry didn't remove his eyes from Avery, but he could sense no life in the shattered form on the floor before the desk. He had to force himself to breathe, shrinking away from the oily air. Every fiber of his being yearned to utter a Killing Curse at the wizard groveling before him. He took a breath, and his lips incanted a chain binding curse instead. It felt like emptiness, like a bitter winter wind blowing through a leafless tree. Giving vent to more anger he cast a Prison Box charm, an excessively forceful one that shrunk Avery down to less than a foot square. The box shifted and rattled before stilling. The foggy air had drifted on, clearing his view of the shattered form beside his feet.

Harry dropped to his knees then, spent, but with his heart still rushing deafeningly in his ears. Death-heavy air wafted around him and his ash-dusted robe licked at the blood spreading across the stone floor. Any remaining emotion he may have harbored slipped from him as he pushed Snape's shoulder away to turn his face upward and to pull his tangled hair aside. With a hollow heart he considered the familiar visage, the aquiline nose and thick brow, now unnaturally pale and still.

Minerva McGonagall had been woken by the old Order alarm: a half dome of glass resembling a paperweight that she now used strictly as one. She stumbled into her office and read the message inside it, squinting hard without her glasses. It was from Shackbolt and it was short. She threw on her robe and rushed down the far too slowly turning staircase.

When she made it to Snape's office, the door was split and light poured forth between the remains of it. Harry knelt inside over the fallen form of whom she could only assume was her colleague. "Potter?" she questioned sharply as she stepped inside. A rather cramped prison box sat on the floor, but she spared it no attention. Behind her, running feet approached.

"Harry?" she tried again. Only when she was right behind him, did she notice he was rocking forward and back slightly, keening faintly. The sound froze her hand as she reached for his shoulder. In her view over Harry's shoulder, Snape's future did not look promising.

Others entered the office. Tonks moved in, stepping around Harry as though he were furniture. She did not hesitate or ask anything, simply spelled Snape's body with a rapid series of charms. Shackbolt followed into the room as well as another. They were all moving, talking rapidly in abbreviated observations and commands. McGonagall pulled Harry backward out of the way. He didn't resist, although he gave one louder keening.

"Run ahead to Pomfrey," Tonks said to Shackbolt. "It's the only chance." She hovered Snape with a spell and for someone reputed to be clumsy, steered him speedily and unerringly out of the room. The pool of blood glistened in their wake, its surface disturbed.

The remaining Auror took charge of the prison box and the strange glass orb resting on the threshold. He hefted the box with a grunt and carried it to the door where he hesitated and looked back. His disturbed eyes looked over Harry, lying catatonic over McGonagall's folded legs. "What's wrong with him?" he asked, sounding unyieldingly hard.

McGonagall adjusted Harry so he was lying more comfortably and less like a discarded puppet. "If you knew how many parent figures this boy has lost, you would not need to ask that," she stated coldly. He appeared to consider that a half second before departing. McGonagall leaned back against the couch; despair wormed its way in as silence descended.

Another figure, wearing a Prefect badge, materialized from the darkness of the corridor, looking wide-eyed curious and distressed. "Ms. Weasley," McGonagall greeted Ginny. The young woman's face looked as despairing as Harry's should have. "Please, close the door," she said, only after realizing that was not a reasonable request. Ginny did not hesitate, though, just set the heavy broken plank near the half still on the hinges and repeatedly incanted a *Reparo* spell. When it held, she pulled it as closed as it would go.

Alone then with Harry, McGonagall looked down at him. He had not moved at all. It was a mistake, she thought, to have referred to him as 'boy'. He had grown startlingly since leaving school. With broadened shoulders and additional height, he finally actually resembled someone who could believably defeat Voldemort. His face had changed as well, it had stretched into one more like Lily's in the jaw and brow. She brushed his fringe back. His scar had lightened too, as though he were outgrowing it.

She reached around him in a loose hug. "Hang on, Harry," she said. "I have no intention of failing Albus now. Or you." She huffed in frustration, but did not want to bring Harry to the dispensary without word, as it most certainly would not do him any good. This left nothing to do but await news and decide how to proceed from there. She could not bear to chart either path forward without knowing absolutely. She imagined Pomfrey at work with her spells and potions, glad she was here imagining instead of there witnessing, and then wondered how improper it was that she was worried for Snape almost strictly because of Harry.

Footsteps approached the door and McGonagall heard urgent whispering. At the end she distinctly heard Ginny urging the messenger away. "Ten points to Gryffindor," McGonagall whispered.

The door creaked open and Ginny peered around it. "Headmistress? Pomfrey says Professor Snape's going to make it."

McGonagall nearly collapsed before she found the strength to sit forward and hover Harry aside so that she could stand. She shook her head at how much simpler things were if Severus was there to take care of them, which was a first. Ginny's eyes were taking in the alarming streaks of blood on the face of the desk and even the wall.

"To your tower, young lady," McGonagall ordered.

Ginny reluctantly obeyed. McGonagall followed her to the staircases before heading down with her silent burden.

In the hospital wing she settled her silent charge on the bed beside Snape's where Pomfrey was still working with the help of Shacklebolt and Tonks. She watched them sealing a few last minor wounds. When they finished and covered him, McGonagall looked down at Harry, who seemed to have fallen into a disturbed sleep.

Tonks came over to the other side of the bed. Her hands were bloodstained as she rested them on the white sheets to lean over Harry. She studied him a long time and sighed. "I'd keep him under until Severus is up."

"That could be a while. At least after the blood replenisher kicks in," Pomfrey pointed out, glancing doubtfully at Harry's sleeping face.

"I agree that is probably wise," McGonagall said, remembering with a twinge the state she found him in. She pulled a chair over from another bed and sat in it with her wand held at the ready. A Quiescent Charm could be repeated many times without risk, she considered, focusing on that simple fact and rehearsing the spell in her mind even though it was a trivial one.

* * *

Severus Snape moved in a grey fog, one that swirled unnaturally around him as he stepped through it. He felt feather light, as though his mind moved him rather than his legs.

A figure appeared. Snape hesitated at the sight before him, half obscured by tendrils of white and grey.

"Severus," Dumbledore greeted him kindly. Snape looked around in concern and the old wizard said, "Yes, you are in the veil." Dumbledore came closer and put his hands on Snape's upper arms as though greeting him. "But you are still tied to life." He nodded his white head broadly to indicate something behind Snape.

Snape turned and found a glowing cord tethering him to something hidden beyond the fog, in a smudged greyness. Dumbledore didn't release him when Snape turned back to study his old colleague. He looked a little younger than Snape remembered but his light blue eyes still twinkled with an aged wisdom. Dumbledore turned and looked over his shoulder,

appearing to wait for something. Snape followed his gaze and another figure became visible, this one moved through the fog, not disturbing it at all. Snape stiffened when he recognized the dark haired man with a sharp chin. "Black," he whispered. The other man didn't reply, just looked away and stood silent.

Confused, Snape turned back to Dumbledore, who sharply said, "Think of life."

"Life?" Snape echoed, more confused.

"You are at Hogwarts, undoubtedly in the hospital wing. Remain there, rather than here," the old wizard commanded. More figures shifted behind Dumbledore, flickering in and out as the fog cleared and thickened. "If you pass, there is no going back," he explained gently.

Snape struggled for comprehension. He could not have moved had he wanted to, Dumbledore had too tight of a hold. The figures beyond flickered and moved across one another. Sirius continued to stand beside Dumbledore, arms at his sides, gaze averted.

Snape looked down at himself, his hands were fading; he squinted at them, trying to understand. Realization came with a wave of cold. "I'm going to be a wraith," he murmured in fear. If he did not cross over before it was too late, he would be trapped. "I don't relish living out eternity with the Bloody Baron," he said and laughed mirthlessly.

"Life, Severus," Dumbledore commanded sharply. "Remember that. You need to return to it and holding onto it is the only way."

"You're helping him return?" a voice sneered beside them.

Jolted from his fearful musings, Snape turned to find James Potter appearing from an appendage of fog. It released James rapidly as he stepped up beside them. "Why?" he demanded of Dumbledore in hot anger. Behind his old nemesis a shyer figure appeared, although the fog still clung to Lily. Snape was startled to realize that Harry looked much less like his father than he had always assumed.

"You *want* Severus to return," Dumbledore insisted gently to James. "He is caring for Harry now."

"He's what?" James blurted in sharp surprise and tried to reach out to grab Dumbledore's arm. A flash of white surrounded it, throwing his hand back.

"James," Dumbledore admonished calmly, clearly disappointed. "You have seen Harry and what a beautiful young man he has become. You have Severus to thank for that."

Snape tried to appreciate James' rather distressed reaction to that, but his arms were fading alarmingly; although, somehow, Dumbledore still held them firmly. Snape couldn't remember what his body felt like, maybe he had never had one. "Harry needs you," Dumbledore stated firmly to him. "Grab hold one more time. There is still a path back."

Snape tried to do as he was told, deciding that life as ghost would be worse than not trying. He turned and studied James' angry eyes before Lily's more hopeful one's captured his gaze. He was falling somehow, without actually moving. Dumbledore gathered him up. This time, Snape could feel his mind rationalizing that into an embrace, rationalizing something that was not the least bit physical.

Suddenly, as though he had grown skin that instant, he could feel more, imagined he was breathing blessed air. Everything in his field of view was skewing distressingly. "A moment more," Dumbledore said in a reassuringly victorious tone.

"What are you doing with my son?" James demanded, leaning in without touching in order to get Snape's attention.

Snape turned to him and smiled then--his darkest smile ever. "He is my son now," he stated and took in James' odd distorted expression of horror for just an instant before everything skewed menacingly.

"Sirius," Dumbledore said with urgency. "Now." Snape felt himself being manipulated in ways that made no sense. Pain was slashing and hammering at him, but he decided it was best to not will himself to avoid it--it was a part of living after all.

He was pushed to Sirius, who looked sad more than anything else. Their gazes locked before he embraced Snape, crushing him. Dumbledore's voice sounded in his ear, "Do not resist him."

Snape had no fight left in him to resist with. Passively he felt himself being bunched up like a ball of paper by Sirius' arms and eventually just his hands. His last glimpse was from inside his old enemy's hands as massive fingers of darkness closed around him.

Snape's next impression, some time later, was of Pepper-up potion tainting his lips. His body rebelled severely at the notion of conscious activity. The potion flowed into him, nonetheless, as a swallowing spell made him take it down.

He cracked his eyes open and tried to push the cup away. Pomfrey was leaning over him, studying him intently. If he had not just experienced death, he would have thought this pain and total lethargy of will to be comparable.

"You are needed," Pomfrey explained, nodding to indicate the next bed over.

Snape breathed a few times, forced his head to turn, and found McGonagall sitting on the far side of the next bed, upon which rested Harry. Snape blinked in confusion and raised his head a monumental inch. Pomfrey held the cup out and this time he drank several gulps before heaving himself to a sitting position. His hand plucked at the unexpected hospital shrift he wore and confusion about what had happened made him dizzy. Disassociated recollections flickered before him: waking with Avery glaring victoriously over him, taunting him for being overcome by a vaporous potion of all things, pain and furious helplessness, Dumbledore. He pushed it all aside and focussed only on Harry as he slid out and over to the next bed.

"What happened to him?" he asked. His eyes found others nearby; Tonks and Rodgers stood off the end of Harry's bed, looking pensive.

McGonagall responded, "He came for you," she said sadly, "came in from the Floo in the Great Hall." Snape ran his hand through his badly matted hair and looked Harry over. McGonagall continued to explain, "We've been using a Quiescent Charm on him for the last hour. It should wear off any moment." Their eyes met as Snape strained to understand the situation.

To stall Snape said, "Get him out of here." When no one moved, he looked over at Rodgers, who returned him a very dark look before Tonks urged him out of the wing. Snape waited until they were gone to return to evaluating Harry.

"What was that about?" McGonagall asked.

"Nothing worth discussing right now. Mostly, I didn't want an audience," he replied as he lifted Harry's wrist to feel his pulse.

McGonagall sighed and brushed Harry's shoulder with her fingertips. "He broke down," she explained in a dark tone. "Completely."

Snape dropped his head and laid Harry's hand back over his abdomen. He did not believe he had the strength for this. The scene beyond the veil was playing out in his mind in un-sequential pieces, disorienting him further.

"It was a distressing scene," McGonagall went on, "given everything he's been through."

Harry's eyes were cracked open now. Snape put his hands on Harry's arms and called his name without effect. "Give me the Pepper-up," he requested. Pomfrey handed it over and he forced a few sips into Harry, who turned his head away from the cup but Snape followed him with it, forcing it on him. After a few shaking breaths, Harry twitched on the bed and made a low keening sound.

"That's the noise he was making when I found him," McGonagall supplied quietly.

Snape frowned and put the cup aside to shake Harry by the upper arms. "Harry," he prompted a few times. Harry turned his head back, but his eyes stared beyond the ceiling. Snape forcibly turned his head farther to meet his gaze, and held it there. "Come on, Harry. Everything's all right," he coaxed to no response.

Snape took a deep breath and pried into Harry's mind. Pain assaulted him, pain like his heart was being torn out. Snape quickly clenched his eyes closed and blocked it out, thinking as he did that Voldemort had less of a chance than he had previously imagined if that was what he had met with in the Entrance Hall on that long-ago day.

"Severus?" McGonagall's concerned voice prompted Snape back to the present.

Drawing on his fast-dwindling strength, Snape leaned farther over Harry and pushed his hair back from his forehead, intentionally touching his scar, which should have produced a jolt but only made Harry's eyes come into focus.

Harry's eyes blinked rapidly. Reality closed in with awareness and he swallowed a gasp. Damp eyes looked frantically around, finally glaring disbelievingly at Snape. Harry sat up suddenly and grabbed the front of Snape's shrift as though to verify he was solid.

"It's all right, Harry," Snape reassured him yet again.

Harry's mouth worked silently before he quietly said, "I thought you'd left me alone."

"No," Snape said and pulled Harry against himself. Harry closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "Never," Snape insisted. McGonagall gave him a surprised brow at that assurance. Snape considered that she didn't realize Dumbledore was blocking his path through the veil; otherwise he would never express such certainty. Feeling that he had committed to something with more certainty than signing a piece of paper, he ran a hand over Harry's back. His vision was wavering and narrowing though, and Pomfrey gestured for him to return to his bed.

"Are you all right now?" Snape asked, forcing his voice strong. When Harry nodded into his shoulder, he explained, "I have to go."

Harry reluctantly leaned away from him before Snape pushed himself carefully to his feet. Pomfrey helped him back to the other bed where he immediately fell unconscious again. Harry swallowed his distress and reassured himself by watching his guardian's chest rise and fall.

"Lie back, Harry," McGonagall urged. "Get some rest. Madam Pomfrey will keep an eye on Severus."

Harry nodded, still pulling himself together with great effort. He settled under the covers and tried to stem the panic that kept rising to clench at his heart. McGonagall stood to leave, her hand brushing his shoulder.

Harry must have fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew, the room was full of morning light and Dobby stood beside the bed with a breakfast tray. "Harry Potter must be being hungry," the elf squeaked and placed the tray on the side table. Clothes had been laid out for him too, he wondered whose they were, as they weren't his own. They were worn and faded to grey by many washings. Maybe they were just discarded spares.

Harry slipped on his glasses and looked quickly over at the next bed. Snape still slept deeply, but his color was much better, though not normal. Harry turned back to the elf. "Thanks Dobby." Dobby bowed, ears bobbing, and backed away. Harry ignored the tray--he wasn't very hungry--and slid out of bed. He pulled a chair over from between the next two beds and sat close to Snape's side, hands clamped tensely between his knees. Pomfrey stepped over from her office and checked Snape over quickly.

"How long before he wakes up?" Harry asked her.

"A while yet . . . perhaps this evening. The Pepper-up did not do him any favors on top of the Kayo vapor." She stated this brusquely and departed back to her office.

Harry frowned and closed his eyes, feeling guilt reducing him.

In the Great Hall as breakfast was winding down, Headmistress McGonagall stepped away from the head table and down the Slytherin one, which had been exceptionally quiet during the meal. She tapped Suze Zepher on the shoulder and indicated that she should follow. McGonagall led the girl to the other side of the hall where Ginny sat, picking at her breakfast in an unenthusiastic manner.

"Ms. Weasley, please come with me."

Ginny glanced between the two of them and stood immediately. When they reached the Entrance Hall, McGonagall said, "I am giving you both an excused absence from the first class of the day, but I want you to spend it keeping Mr. Potter company; I think he could use a little. I'll relieve you for your second class." She nodded at them both and headed back inside.

Suze moved quickly to catch up to Ginny, who was marching off up the stairs. "I don't get it," Suze said when she came aside the red-haired girl.

"Didn't you hear what happened last night?" Ginny asked.

"Only that Professor Snape was attacked and isn't going to be teaching for a while."

Ginny stopped in the empty corridor, empty except for the paintings, which turned and watched them curiously, whispering to each other. "I had the misfortune, because I was trying to track down the Creevey brother's latest prank before it got the house in trouble, to see the end of what happened," Ginny explained with a waver in her voice. She swallowed hard and went on quietly, "Professor Snape was dead by the time help arrived last night. Harry wasn't . . . coping well with that." She fell silent as the scene replayed before her.

"Dead? What happened? Why was Harry here?"

Ginny shook herself and started walking again. "I think he probably saw the attack in his mind. He told us he saw the Death Eaters fighting in Azkaban last year in his head."

"He saw what?" Suze asked in awed tones. They had reached the staircase to the second floor and both waited for two other students to pass by before continuing.

Very quietly, Ginny explained, "Harry sometimes can see Death Eaters in his mind. If they are close by, thinking about him, or fighting each other."

Suze looked very uncertain as they continued, and at the corridor that led to the hospital wing, she grabbed Ginny and said, "Death Eaters fighting each other?" She trailed off and let go.

"Come on," Ginny urged, heading off down the well-lit corridor.

Suze caught up at a run and grabbed Ginny's sleeve. "But . . ." she whispered.

"Come on," Ginny repeated and opened the door.

Harry looked up as the door to the wing swung open. He straightened upon seeing his friends enter; glad he had pulled himself together enough to get dressed.

"Watcher, Harry," Ginny said with a weak smile when she came up beside him. Her eyes glanced over their unconscious teacher before she moved to fetch chairs from farther down the row of empty beds. Suze stood at the foot of the bed looking anxious. She dropped her gaze rather than stare at Snape.

"How are you, Suze?" Harry asked.

Suze shrugged in reply. Ginny returned with two chairs and placed them both near Harry, took the closer one, and urged Suze to take the other, which she did after some hesitation. She looked very uncomfortable with being there. Ginny sat straight and said with mustered brightness, "He's going to be all right, right?" Harry nodded, rubbing his hair back. Ginny went on, "So, he'll wake up soon?"

"Later this evening," Harry said, feeling pained about that and hearing it in his voice.

"Great Goblins, Harry, you aren't feeling guilty are you?" Ginny demanded.

Harry rubbed his head with both hands. He really had to pull himself together. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Professor McGonagall said you saved his life last night. Why are you feeling guilty? You are some kind of guilt-freak."

Harry narrowed his eyes at her but couldn't find anger to go with it. "He'd be up sooner. . . never mind."

Ginny turned to Suze, who struggled a moment before saying, "Thank you for saving his life, Harry. We wouldn't want to lose our Head of House . . ."

Harry nodded.

After a long silence Ginny said, "Is your training still going well?" Harry nodded again. Ginny went on, "You are doing field work now, right? Is that more exciting?"

Harry finally pushed himself upright and replied quietly, "Yes. I usually get to follow Tonks or Rogan, both of whom I like. Tonks lets me do more now when we're out, like ask questions. She says people answer me more than they do her."

Ginny laughed a bit and said in a falsetto while clasping her hands to her chest, "Oh, the great Harry Potter is talking to me!"

Harry put a hand under his glasses and laughed lightly despite himself. "It's some of that," he admitted.

Harry leaned forward and asked Suze how Quidditch was going and whether they were going to beat Ravenclaw. Suze assured him they would, then glanced at Snape and fell silent again. Harry looked him over again as well. He was sleeping very soundly and it was a little odd to be sitting here chatting like this, but he didn't feel like moving farther away.

"Tell me about your new plays," Harry said to Suze.

"Not in front of the captain of the Gryffindor team," Suze complained.

Ginny folded her arms and stated smugly, "We watch you practice most days you're at the pitch. I think I know them already."

Quidditch filled the next hour until the door to the wing opened to reveal the headmistress. She looked relieved and a little pleased although she still managed a stiff tone as she ordered them off to their second class.

When they were gone, Harry asked, "You let them off from class?"

She ignored his question and sat down with a graceful lifting of her robes. "You seem in a little better spirits."

"Yep. Thanks."

McGonagall didn't remain long, and while she was there she seemed meditative. Eventually she stood and put a hand on Harry's shoulder without speaking. She had an amused expression, which prompted Harry to ask why. She replied, "You continue to prove me wrong, young man." With a wink she departed.

She was not gone long however. She returned looking more official and leaned down close to Harry to say, "There is a woman in the Entrance Hall who wishes to see how Severus is doing."

"Candide?" Harry asked.

"Yes. Shall I send her up?"

"All right," replied Harry, glad that Snape was out of it for this.

McGonagall straightened. "Hm," she muttered thoughtfully.

Reading her, Harry commented, "It's too complicated to explain."

"I am trying to picture Severus with a lady-friend. Though now that I think of it, I remember seeing them having tea in Hogsmeade a few times." At Harry's shrug she turned. "I'll send her up," she said over her shoulder.

Harry waited with mixed emotion. Eventually the door cracked open and Candide leaned in. Her eyes found Harry there and she slipped in, apparently loath to open the door too wide. When she stood at the end of the bed her eyes looked quite concerned, making Harry feel a bit hopeful. "What happened?" she whispered. When Harry didn't immediately reply, she said, "The rumors are flying thick in Hogsmeade. The reporters are scrambling around but no one from the school will talk to them. The Ministry will only say that the last Death Eater has been captured." She stopped suddenly on that point.

"Avery," Harry supplied. "Wanted revenge. He should have come after me, but he's been after Severus instead."

"Why?"

"Because Avery considered him a traitor," Harry said, anger rising. Something gnawed at Harry's mind, some connection he had yet to recognize, and when Candide asked how Avery had gotten into the castle, it blossomed into full suspicion.

"I don't know," Harry said, possible schemes flickering through his mind. Most of them involved inside help. "He filled Severus' office with Kayo Vapor and broke in and overcame him."

Candide unfolded her arms and put one hand on the bed near Snape's feet. "What did Avery do to him?"

"He killed him." The words were like a spell that hollowed out Harry's chest. He clamped his mouth shut and blinked hard.

After a minute Candide said, "He doesn't look dead now."

"The Aurors put a freezing spell on him and Pomfrey managed to save him." Harry spoke this all grudgingly; he really didn't feel like relating it.

"It was a good thing the Aurors came when they did."

"I signaled them when I saw the two of them fighting in my dream. And Shackbolt, one of the Aurors, initiated the old Order of the Phoenix alarm." Harry fell silent before saying, perhaps not intentionally out loud, "I should have killed Avery. Voldemort certainly was tempted to enough times." After further thought he added, "Maybe we'll find out who helped him, though. The Aurors should be interrogating him now."

All of this alarmed Candide and she stared at him warily, hands at her sides. Harry's own ill ease twisted into anger at her. In a deceptively soft tone he said, "This is who we are. We are survivors of Voldemort. Accept that, or go away."

She stood staring, amazed by his tone. Their gazes remained locked and Harry could see her surprise was borne partly of sudden understanding. She looked Snape's supine self over again with a different expression, as though she were weighing things. Eventually she asked, "Do you need anything?"

Harry shook his head. He did wish that the ground did not feel like it might pull out from under him any moment, but he doubted even Dumbledore could have helped with that. Though she lingered a while longer, Candide didn't speak except to say goodbye. Dobby brought a lunch tray just after and Harry managed to eat a little chicken pot pie before his appetite fled.

Harry's friends came in the afternoon. Hermione and Ron appeared about as shocked as they ever had when Harry explained what had happened. At the end Ron said, "Boy, dad doesn't even know half that and he's talked to the Aurors." He leaned over Snape to peer at him curiously. "He'll be all right, what?"

"Yeah."

Hermione pointedly asked, "Are *you* going to be all right?"

To his two oldest friends, he found himself saying, "I feel really unwell, as though something awful could happen again any minute." He watched them share a look.

Hermione patted his back. "That will get better. Everything worked out all right."

"It's true," Harry agreed. It was true that he wasn't sitting here wishing dearly to undo things; they somehow, for once, they got undone on their own.

His friends stayed until the dinner hour when Pomfrey hinted for the third time that there had been enough visitors for one day. Hermione gave him a hug and Ron seemed to consider doing so too, but patted him heartily on the back instead. They promised to come by again the next day. In the silence of their absence, Harry wished he had something with which to occupy himself. Dobby brought dinner, roast mutton with a thick gravy. Harry lied and told Dobby he would eat it when the elf insisted that he should do so. "Harry Potter is getting stretched too thin!" the house-elf insisted in concern.

Around 8:00 Harry was trying to eat a bit of cold meat because he didn't feel like facing Dobby's accusatory expression when he came to fetch the tray. He was sitting up on the bed with his legs crossed, having tired of the hard chair. With a jolt he realized there were eyes upon him.

"Harry," Snape greeted him, and sat up partly against the pillows. Harry was finding the breath that had abandoned him and Snape went on. "It is still . . . Thursday, correct?"

"Yes." Harry quickly set the tray on the nightstand and slid off the bed to stand beside the next. "How are you?"

"I have been better," Snape answered slowly in his usual dry way. "But this is, nevertheless, a welcome improvement." He took a deep breath as though experimenting with breathing.

Pomfrey stepped over and brusquely checked him over before sniffing in a satisfied manner and bustling away. Snape sat up a bit farther, leaning on an elbow in a way that didn't look entirely comfortable.

"I'm glad you're all right," Harry said sincerely.

"Not as glad as I am that you came in time," Snape lightly retorted. "I didn't smell the vapor, only saw it too late. I am getting too old for this game."

They fell silent then, bad alternatives hanging between them.

"I didn't kill him," Harry stated, his heart twisting again as he relived that instant of tenuous self-control. "I wanted to. I could feel the curse--the real one this time." The stinking power of it still vibrated through him, unused; he hoped it would fade.

Snape's black gaze focused more tightly and he seemed to be trying to see into him. Eventually, he said, "You redeemed me with that, Harry."

Harry, still caught in the raw memory of that moment, said, "He deserved to die."

"That is not your place to decide," Snape stated. With a wince he sat up a bit farther and sighed. "Go ask the madam, will you, if I am allowed a dinner tray. Your mutton is making me ravenous."

Harry smiled for the first time that day. "Sure."

Harry sat reading a book Ginny had brought for him from the library when Pomfrey circled to extinguish the lamps. It was nearly 11:00; Harry had lost all track of time. Snape slept soundly, but not as comatose as before. His chest rose and fell regularly, reassuringly. Marking the page, Harry put the book aside and sat back to stare at the tall darkened windows across from him. McGonagall's approach actually startled him his thoughts had wandered so far from the hospital wing.

"Madam Pomfrey tells me Severus awoke." At Harry's nod she looked across at the other bed a moment before saying, "I wonder, Harry, if you wouldn't do me a favor?" At his shrug she said, "Would you cover Severus' classes tomorrow?"

"Me?"

"Yes. It is the fifth-, seventh- and first-years. I do not think you will have any difficulty, but it is up to you. We managed to cover today, somewhat, but the older students preparing for their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s cannot lose even a day of preparation."

"All right," Harry heard himself saying. He had a feeling it was his boredom talking more than anything else.

McGonagall touched Harry's shoulder. "Thank you, Harry," she said in deep affection. She started to turn away, but then stopped, "You know where Severus keeps his class notes in his office?" When Harry nodded she added, "Everything has been cleaned up." She softened that with an understanding smile and a squeeze of her hand before departing.



Chapter 72 -- The Substitute

The next morning, Harry woke with the sun and went to freshen up in the boys' bathroom. The sinks were much lower than he had remembered, requiring him to bend uncomfortably low to wash his face. His reflection reminded him that he needed to fetch some clean clothes, or use a really powerful spell on the grey jumper and trousers he had been wearing for two days. He pulled out his wand, remembering unbidden the scene in Snape's office. It required several moments as a result to remember a Freshening Charm and a Pressing Spell. He didn't look very professorly though. Scratching the back of his head, he considered that one of Snape's sleeveless robes might help.

He returned to the dispensary, thinking that Snape might have woken by now, and indeed he was sitting up with a tray before him, a pile of letters beside his plate. Harry sat on the next bed and eyed the simple toast and poached egg on the tray hungrily.

"You are not going to sit here all day, are you?" Snape asked snidely. "You *must* have training to attend."

"Probably," Harry tossed out dismissively, rocking his feet back and forth under the bed. With a devious look in his eye, he went on. "But instead I'm teaching your classes."

It required a moment for Snape to stare down the truth of this, but then he leaned back and said easily, "In which case you should be eating breakfast in the Great Hall"

"Should I?"

"Yes," Snape confirmed sternly. Harry reluctantly pushed himself to his feet. Snape asked, "And you have found the lesson plans for today?"

"No," Harry tossed over his shoulder. At Snape's look of consternation, he added confidently, "I'll work something out." To which Snape appeared rather doubtful. At the door Harry turned and said he would return at lunchtime.

There was only ten minutes remaining before breakfast would be served. Harry hurried down to the Defense office, which already had a new door--actually an old door, probably older than the previous door given the near black of the thick finish. By the time he found, and dropped the correct syllabi and corresponding notes and textbooks in the classroom, as well as grabbed an sleeveless robe, breakfast had already started.

In the empty Entrance Hall, Harry intentionally walked in the far left doors and strode purposefully between the wall and the Slytherin table. He had made it halfway before the bright swell of morning conversation died down and heads turned to watch him, most eyes a bit wide. He easily found Suze's welcoming smile and gave her a wink.

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall intoned in greeting when Harry pulled out the empty seat beside hers--the only empty seat at the long head table.

"Good morning, Headmistress," Harry returned formally. The room, with its bright ceiling and faces, boosted him enough to bring out a smile as he returned the other teachers' greetings. Cawley came down from the other end to shake Harry's hand vigorously and to welcome him to breakfast as though Harry were again a newcomer. Harry found he still had that instinctive suspicion for the man. He smiled through his ill ease and with a kind of impromptu bow, the man departed.

When Harry turned back to his place a full plate was there. He ate with hungry vigor.

"You have time for seconds," McGonagall stated beside him when he ate the last heel of his toast.

"No, that's-" he started to say but a new plate of eggs, toast, and sausage had already appeared.

"Thanks," he said and rubbed his hair back as a wave of uneasiness swept through him.

She leaned in and softly said, "It will get easier."

Harry didn't respond, just picked up his fork again, wondering if some of the empty feeling he was trying to assuage was from somewhere other than his stomach.

Standing in the Defense classroom, Harry felt more nervous than expected as the fifth-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs filed in. Unlike the advanced classes, these were just two houses, and Harry was happy that it was an easy two. He also knew many of the students personally, so this was really just an expanded session of D.A., he told himself. Everyone looked eager, if not a little surprised. He took roll to learn the few names he didn't already know.

Holding the class notes a bit tightly, Harry glanced at the attentive faces and said, "Today you are supposed to begin covering powerful dark magic creatures, let's see--giant spiders, Lethifolds, great black poison toads, and, uh, Dementors." Out loud he mulled, "I wonder if I should have brought the Lethifold from the office."

A hand went up. Harry looked up at Sanders, a Ravenclaw girl, and she asked, "There isn't really a Lethifold in Professor Snape's office, is there?"

"There was last year. Unless it got out again," Harry replied with deceptive casualness. This led to some widened eyes. "I can go fetch it if you want to see it . . ."

"No," she replied quickly. "That's all right, we . . . can read about them," she insisted.

Harry thought he understood why the sorting hat had such an easy time with most students. Feeling mischievous, he muttered, "That will leave more time for calling in a few Dementors, anyway." He really should be more careful, he considered, as he took in their alarm, but he was too busy trying not to grin too broadly. "You really can't tell when I'm joking, can you?"

A Hufflepuff boy by the name of Mumfred, who wore a prefect badge, and whose long hair was tied back in a frizzy puff said, "Professor Snape doesn't joke much. Can you really summon a Dementor?"

Harry thought about that, replaying in his mind the sounds from the dark plane to reconsider if he had heard the Dementors there. "I'm not sure," he finally replied when the students began to shuffle nervously. "Interesting question."

"Maybe not try it here, sir?" Mumfred suggested.

Harry smiled in amusement. "Do you know how much trouble I'd be in if I did that?" he asked rhetorically, leading a few to laugh in relief.

"The Ministry probably wouldn't like that," someone agreed.

Harry lifted the notes to read from again, now feeling confident and relaxed. "Forget the Ministry; I was thinking of Headmistress McGonagall." This led them all into a relaxing laugh.

At the end of class Harry dismissed them all just as the bell rang. They hadn't even grumbled much about the essay assignment, which Harry himself thought a bit extensive. That, he supposed, was why they were in those two houses, either smart enough to make it easy, or hardworking enough not to care. Harry barely had time to go to the office and change over materials before the seventh-years began arriving.

Ginny gave him a very big smile as she sat ahead of Colin Creevey, in the front row, where he truly doubted she usually sat. Colin himself and the other old D.A. members all looked very pleased to see him and said hello as though they were old friends.

Harry did a quick count, noticing that the Slytherins sitting in the back left corner looked much less welcoming. "Everyone is here, so we will skip roll." He picked up the notes for the next few classes. Today's schedule indicated they should finish up bog and moor creatures, but next week they were starting counter-curses. "So does anyone mind if we jump ahead?" Many heads shook.

A voice in the back sullenly said, "Professor Snape might mind."

Harry grinned lightly. "I'll worry about that." He flipped ahead a few sheets. "Counter-curses," he announced to much happy *ooing*. The list looked very easy and almost useless, most of the spells not powerful enough for any serious attacks. "We'll start with the counter for the tremor class of curses, such as Jelly Legs." Harry called Colin up to demonstrate. He backed up and asked the boy to spell him, which he did, very lightly.

"You can put a little more behind it than that, Mr. Creevey," Harry chastised.

With a mischievous spark in his eye Colin gave him rather a hard Jelly Legs curse, powerful enough to show the spell trail, which it normally didn't. Harry countered this one as well, although he had to step back to catch his balance. "Your turn, Mr. Creevey. Ready?"

Colin swallowed hard and raised his wand, but Harry sent only an weak curse his way. Harry then went through the rows making each of them come up and try the counter. Their attitude was almost universally one of having fun, and he was not certain if it was his presence that was causing that. He tried to sound more serious as he gave instructions. He called the first of the Slytherins up. A tall, lean, redheaded girl named Sylvia Askunk who was wearing a Prefect badge. She didn't raise her wand when Harry asked her to give the spell a try.

In a voice of trouble, she said, "No one will say how our Head of House is doing."

"Oh." Harry put his wand hand behind his back. "I'm sorry, I should have said. I assumed the headmistress said something before breakfast."

Sylvia said, "She said he was going to be out a few days. Someone said you attacked him."

Someone snorted, presumably Ginny. Harry resisted glancing over the other Slytherins, looking for who might have suggested that. "No," Harry responded calmly. "I would hardly do that. Avaricious Avery, the last free Death Eater attacked Professor Snape . . . out of revenge." Still calm and sounding odd to himself, he added, "He's going to be all right though." Harry did glance over the room then and found Ginny's very sympathetic gaze. She was chewing hard on her lower lip and looked to want to speak. Harry did look over to the Slytherins then and found various expressions there, mostly hopeful.

Turning back to Sylvia, he said, "Shall I show you the spell again?"

The last Slytherin was called up and approached reluctantly. Nott, shoulders hunched, looking older than his fellows in more ways than his height, stepped up onto the platform and ground his teeth impatiently. Harry considered him and wondered who had taught him how to Occlude his mind. "Can you show me the block again, Teacher?" he asked flatly.

Harry stepped back and wand at careful ready, gestured for the boy to curse him. Nott raised his wand and shouted a spell that wasn't even related to a Jelly Legs. Instinctively and feeling that he foresaw this, Harry put up a Diamona block. Not his best one, but it chimed like crystal when Nott's Dissecting curse hit it.

The room fell hushed. Harry held his wand at ready and said, "That was very stupid thing to do." Nott was gnashing his teeth. "I didn't know it was you until you did that."

"What?" Nott mocked. "You wouldn't assume it was the son of a Death Eater? Are you stupid?"

"I believe everyone deserves a chance to prove their own worth." Harry relaxed his wand hand just slightly, perhaps trying to draw another attack, perhaps trying to move beyond the exchange of spells. "Shall I tell your housemates what you did?" This, of all things, disarmed Nott. "Yes," Harry went on pleasantly, "You threw away everything. And for what?"

"Avery said his lord was rising again."

"He isn't," Harry snapped.

"His mark was darkening. I saw it," Nott countered triumphantly.

"He was lying. I would know long before that. There is a spell that will reveal a mark, which is after all just a Proteon Charm." Harry banked his anger when Nott's looked shifted to frightened. With a flick Harry disarmed the boy and caught his wand out of the air.

Nott looked sullen now rather than full of fury. "He deserved it. For being a traitor," he growled, fists clenched around nothing. A few students whispered to each other, the first noise anyone had made.

"Severus wasn't a traitor; he was loyal to Albus Dumbledore," Harry said. "And I hope that revenge was worth throwing your life away for. Come," he said, stepping down from the platform. When Nott hesitated, Harry held out his wand and threatened, "You can walk or I can stuff you in a box as small as the one they took Avery away in. Your choice." At the door Harry turned and said, "Ginny, describe the rest of the counter-curses from the notes on the desk until I get back."

She went from befuddled to bright like a switch. "Sure," she said and stood up eagerly.

Harry dragged Nott, who was only an inch shorter than himself, down the corridor by the back of his robes. Anger built in him as they walked and all he wanted to do was scream at the boy if not pummel him. Nott was looking crafty as they approached the gargoyles. "Please try something," Harry whispered softly, avidly. This brought the boy to bear with a fearful gape.

"What are you going to do?" Nott asked.

Harry held off on the password. "I'm going to inform the headmistress and have the Aurors office come get you." Harry paused, mind chewing on things. "Funny that Avery didn't give you away. They interrogated him already almost certainly."

Nott's lip twitched. "I don't know how Aurors remember to breathe they are so stupid."

Harry still held off on the password. "You know, Avery couldn't have come up with this. Brewed the odorless Kayo vapor, gotten into the castle. You expected him to get caught and gave him a Memory Charm. No, you had Lockhart give him one," Harry restated. When Nott's look darkened, Harry said mockingly, "Aurors don't need to be very smart if you keep giving things away." Hot anger was trying to fill Harry and he was listening for any sound from the Dark Plane, but there didn't seem to be any. "So, where is Lockhart?" Harry demanded.

Nott pressed his lips together before smiling faintly. "I don't know, actually."

Harry thought fiercely. "You used an Imperious Curse on him, didn't you?"

Nott put a hand on one hip. "Can we get on with with this? Your playing at the Great Auror is really a drag. In fact, watching the Slytherin Head of House fawn over you nauseated me. Professor Snape doesn't deserve that honorable title, he deserved to be hurt . . . *removed* from his position."

Harry had Nott lifted up by the shirt and flat against the wall in the next instant and was pleased that the boy's eyes flickered with fear. "You tried to take away something I care deeply for," Harry hissed as Nott twisted in an attempt to get away. "I already have major moments of regret at not killing Avery. You think anyone would question for even a second if I took you out right now?" Actually, part of Harry's mind interrupted, Snape would. Harry released the front of Nott's robes, very surprised that they hadn't been overrun by dark creatures then and there given the fury pumping through him. But the corridor was silent, and the gargoyles unfazed. Harry spat the password then before his own will weakened, and dragged a resisting Nott up the turning steps.

The office still reminded Harry forcefully of Dumbledore. "Sit down," he ordered the boy, who obeyed in silence.

McGonagall came down from the upper level. "What is this?" she asked in her official voice.

"Avery's inside help," Harry explained, and now that he had backup, he pulled out Floo powder and notified the Aurors.

When he stood again to await their arrival, McGonagall was circling Nott's chair like a cat waiting for a mouse to twitch. One of the few unsleeping paintings *took* chastisingly. "You failed your second chance, Mr. Nott," McGonagall said in a low voice. "I now have to apologize to Mr. Potter for having given you one in the first place." She looked up at Harry and her eyes said how sorry she was. "You had too much to live down, I suppose," she said, returning to Nott.

Nott, arms crossed and head tilted far to the side, said, "Avery said Voldemort was coming back. He lied."

"Ah yes," McGonagall said. "So as usual, you are the victim. That makes everything all right."

The hearth flared and Rogan and Shacklebolt stepped out of it, wands out. Shacklebolt turned to Harry, "What do we have?"

"The person who helped Avery into the castle. In fact, I expect he planned the whole thing." More of the paintings around them woke up and blinked in surprise.

"Well, Theo," Shacklebolt said, and then in one smooth movement, hauled the boy to his feet, put a binding curse around his arms and pushed him to the hearth. "I'm sure your father's old friends will be blasted happy to see you." Two flashes and they were gone.

Harry shook himself to return to the present. "I have class I think."

"Harry," McGonagall's regretful tone pulled his attention back from a room full of bored and highly creative seventh-years.

Harry cut her off, putting a lot of effort into a level tone, "Don't apologize for trying to uphold Dumbledore's virtues . . . Minerva."

She smiled faintly. Then a breath later chuckled lightly. "Merlin, Harry, don't make me apologize to Severus yet again."

"For what?"

"I don't even wish to tell you. Go back to your class now," she brushed him away with her hand as though he were a student.

Harry, as he rode down the stairs, wondered about the headmistress' tone at the last and considered that everyone around him seemed to be holding onto their pride a bit too fiercely.

Ginny was still at the front of the room and everything was surprisingly calm. When he stepped in, she asked bluntly, "Did the Aurors take him?"

"Yes." She returned to her seat, handing the pile of notes to him as they passed. Harry thanked her and stepped to the front. Only ten minutes remained in the session. "Well, who wants to demonstrate a Hydra Counter?" Askunk shot her hand into the air and Harry gestured for her to come up. With a nod of warning he sent a bucket of water her way. The spell was capable of producing something resembling a fire hose, but Harry wasn't doing crowd control as he had been taught the spell was good for. She didn't use the counter from the lesson but a heat one, which was a little dangerous since it generated a flash of steam and if incanted too late it would burn. Harry explained this patiently.

She stood with her arms stiffly at her sides, looking angrier than before. "I want to duel you," she snipped fiercely when Harry broke off the spell instruction.

"You're sure about that?" Harry asked, not unkindly. Even here he apparently was something to measure up to. Her gaze didn't waver nor did her lips unpurse. Calmly, ignoring the students who were avidly leaning forward in their desks, Harry said, "Trouble is, you have a huge advantage over me."

Her brow shifted to confused. "Why?"

"Because if I put you in the dispensary for so much as a pin prick, I'm in very serious trouble. Whereas you don't appear to care if I end up in Mungo's through Christmas. May I ask why you want to duel? Are you the school champion looking for a bigger challenge?"

"I'm the House champion," she said, raising her wand. Harry matched her on instinct; although he didn't want it to be an invitation.

"I'm quite certain Professor Snape doesn't run dueling competitions."

"He doesn't," she replied, grinning without happiness. She threw a blasting curse at him then, which he blocked. At his sharp look, she said, "You had your wand up." She sent another one, harder.

"Goodness, Slytherin Prefects are selected on some unexpected criteria." Harry teased, "You do realize that if you hurt me, Professor Snape will be most displeased."

"Yeah, right." She tossed something stringy and sizzling at him that he ducked, but it came back after bouncing off the wall. Harry tossed a Titan behind him to block it.

"Sheew," he breathed in honest surprise at the unknown attack. The class were definitely enjoying themselves, but the bell was due to ring any minute.

"Why don't you send something back?" she asked sharply, sounding spoiled.

"I really can't," he insisted. "I'd rather you get in trouble than me."

Ginny said, "Professor Snape would be very upset if he knew you were doing this, Harry."

Harry laughed and countered a Freezing Charm, ice battered the floor. "That's Professor Harry, to you. All right then, go back to Blasting Curses and I'll demonstrate," he instructed Askunk. "Go on then. Hard as you want." When she raised her wand, he called out "Chrysanthemum," and used that block. The windows rattled and someone's book flew off their desk in the resulting shattering force. "Again," he prompted.

They worked their way up the list, her spells only increasing in force and focus. "Ever consider being an Auror?" Harry teased.

Her wand hand fell to her side. "They won't take me," she snapped as though he were being stupid.

"Why not?" Harry returned in disbelief.

The bell rang then. "Assignments," Harry said, suddenly remembering. Fortunately everyone paused in putting their things away. Quickly looking through the notes, he found a list for the next session. "Chapters 11 and 12 and a pop quiz. Oops, not much of one if you know about it."

"Cheers, Harry," Ginny said, laughing. Colin beside her winked.

"That was an accident, really," Harry insisted, but they turned away still grinning.

Harry quickly collected up the lecture notes and caught the Slytherin Prefect as she arranged things in her bookbag. She shot him a dark look that converted to a frown. As the room cleared, he asked, "Why wouldn't they accept you?"

"They don't take Slytherins. Everyone knows that."

"Who said that? They don't ask it on the application."

Her teeth ground together. Gesturing at the door she demanded, clearly upset, "So why are you arresting us all?"

In a very serious tone Harry explained, "I took Nott in because he set Avery up to kill Professor Snape."

"And how do you know that?" she sneered.

Harry looked over her angry features and said, "I hope you aren't too attached to Nott . . . he's going to be in Azkaban for rather a long time."

"No one ever gave him a break," she said, voice wavering. She tossed the last book into her bag hard. It clunked loudly against the chair seat. When she moved to lift the bag over her shoulder, Harry put a hand on her arm. He had a bad suspicion she had been helping Nott, but perhaps without really knowing what he was planning.

"Look," Harry said gently. "His biggest chance was getting to come back to school after arguably fighting on the wrong side in the final battle. He was given the benefit of the doubt for defending his father, who abandoned him in the end. It would take a lot to get over that and his injuries, and Nott didn't have it in him, apparently."

"Yeah, and what would you know about overcoming something like that?"

"A bit," Harry returned, sounding snide to his own ears. He forced everything down again and managed a soft tone. "But I can't overlook anyone attacking my family. Or anyone helping attack my family." He let that hang out there intentionally, but she didn't react more than to appear thoughtful. "If you knew Nott, the Aurors are going to want to talk to you." Her eyes rolled. "If you want your parents or Professor Snape, or even me there, that can be arranged."

"I don't want Professor Snape there," she said quietly.

Harry took out a scrap of parchment and jotted down Aaron's name and the Ministry address. "And take this. Aaron Wickem, a fellow apprentice would be happy to owl you, I believe. He was most definitely a Slytherin, so whoever told you they weren't accepted was lying." Harry strongly suspected Nott.

She looked painfully at the scrap and with a frown muttered a grudging, "Thanks."

"I have to run. I want to visit Severus before lunch. Good luck," he added before hitching up the now disorganized stack of lecture notes and heading out the door.

In the dispensary, Harry found Snape sitting up but resting his forehead heavily on his hand. He raised it immediately when the door swung open and sat a bit straighter as Harry approached. "How are you feeling?" Harry asked in concern.

"Improved. How was your morning?"

"Hectic. You do this all week. How do you manage it?"

Snape smiled faintly. "Practice."

"I have to confess that while I followed your notes with the fifth-years, I didn't for the seventh-years." At Snape's questioning brow Harry sat on the next bed and explained casually, "I, uh, jumped ahead and started on counter-curses because I'm better at those than the creatures you were covering. And, I had to arrest Nott because he let Avery into the castle, and—"

"What?"

"Afraid so."

Snape sat back and stared thoughtfully at the high ceiling. "Not too surprising, frankly."

"And I'm going to suggest the Aurors talk to Askunk as well."

"You are a quick study, Harry; they have been friendly of late. How much Legilimency did that require?"

"None." Harry returned a bit cockily, before glancing at the clock. "I have to go down to lunch. I'll see you this evening. Only the first-years yet."

"Hah," Snape snorted. "You think they are the easiest."

Harry turned. "They aren't?"

"Mindbogglingly frustrating, they are."

"And you have to watch that you don't step on them," Harry added, sounding sober.

"Yes. Please do avoid that."

They shared a grin before Harry turned again and departed in a swish of Snape's faded robe.

After a quick lunch Harry had to search the office, which had grown almost alarmingly disorganized just since that morning, for the right notes. He was about to simply wing it, when he found the correct folder. It was one minute after the hour when Harry stepped briskly into the room. The conversations dropped off to absolute silence as he walked down the middle row. Still rushing, he spun at the front and faced all twenty two of them, the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors. Out of them all, Harry only recognized tiny Erasmus, whose large eyes and hair were about all there was of him.

No Dementor jokes this class, Harry thought, scanning the wide-eyed, nearly alarmed faces all turned up at him. The ones in the front row almost appeared to be ducking a bit. Putting on a friendly smile, Harry picked up the class roll. "Looks like you are all here, but let's go through the list so I can learn some names."

They each responded to their names in varying impersonations of a house-elf. Harry honestly could not imagine being one of them; he could not have been. He put down the roll and scanned the notes, but all he could think of was Snape's comment that he had shown up smaller than Erasmus the Mouse, there. "Well, looks like you did hex deflection last week. Is that right?" Someone nodded, a girl with about six little pigtails arranged around her head. She then swallowed hard, apparently at having attracted Harry's attention. In that instant Harry wished for a few Slytherins to liven things up. "And this week you have been covering the forty-one restricted potions . . ." Harry didn't know there were that many.

"Hm," he said as he quickly glanced through the notes mostly in curiosity. "Not my best topic, apparently," he confessed. "Sounds a little boring too. What could we do instead?" He glanced at Pigtales, whose brow was furrowed. "Yeah," Harry said, "I know, Professor Snape likes to stick to the syllabus."

Oops, Harry thought. Have to watch that. Pigtales was leaning back in shock at having her thoughts spoken aloud. They were open books; it was almost impossible *not* to read their eyes. Plowing on, Harry stepped up onto the platform. "I'm partial to counter-curses myself. I wonder what we could get through in an hour and a half? Titan maybe?" The students were glancing at each other.

"Pixley," Harry said to a boy with very short jet black hair, whose name he had remembered. "Come on up. And who knows some good hexes?" All heads turned to a blonde girl in the back. "Shrumm, right?" Harry dredged up her name. "Come up too. Stand there." He indicated the far end of the platform. Looking very nervous, they both moved to stand where he had asked them to. Harry leaned down to talk to the boy. "Now, the Titan goes like this." Harry held his wand hooked under his thumb with his fingers spread, the boy copied that, looking interested rather than doubtful. Harry turned him around; it was like moving a metal spring Pixley was so tense. Harry dearly hoped it wasn't fear because there was only one thing on the platform to fear and it wasn't the champion hexer of the First-Years who stood waiting fifteen feet away.

Continuing on as though everything was fine, Harry lifted the boy's hands into position. "This is a dome block, so all you have to do is push outwards from your hands."

"What's the incantation?" Pixley asked.

"There isn't one." Harry crouched behind the boy copying what they had done sometimes in D.A. when members had difficulty learning a spell. "Here, let me show you." He pressed his hands behind the small shaking ones, steadying them. "You simply push away with your mind the way you'd push something physical away. But you use the ball of magic inside you instead of muscles. I'll throw up a block, ready?"

"Yeah," came the small reply, actually more of a 'no' in intent.

Harry pushed out the weakest Titan block he could, the orange dome didn't even hover, but Pixley caught his breath. "Okay, let me try," he insisted impatiently. Harry backed off and the boy tried for a minute, even squeezing his eyes shut.

"You're trying too hard. Let me show you again." Pixley willing submitted to a second demonstration and Harry said, "You know, it is easier to bring it up under threat, I think. Shrumm, give us a small hex this way."

Harry noticed her shifting her wand. She apparently had been trying the Titan while she waited. Twisting her face in concentration she tossed a hex at them and Harry pushed a block through Pixley's hands. "A little much to counter a hair-growing hex, but it works."

"Let me try it alone," Pixley insisted.

Harry gratefully stood straight. "Nothing stronger than that, Ms. Shrumm," he warned sternly.

She blinked at him and said, "That's the worst one I know."

"Oh. It's true, you're not a Slytherin, are you," he thought aloud. Many giggled.

Shrumm sent another hair growing hex and Pixley invented his own incantation, something along the lines of "Yah!" But there was the smallest of orange flares and when he patted his head in a panic, no extra hair was present. "Did I do it?"

"I think so. Try it again, and let's get some more pairs working on it."

In the end Harry ended up teaching more hexes, because they were needed for practicing the block. He ignored the inner voice that chanted how unhappy certain quarters might be about that. But eight students produced some form of the

block within an hour, although Harry cheated with Erasmus with just a little Legilimency to get the feel of the spell across. The boy was so thrilled to have gotten it, Harry didn't feel guilty at all.

"All right now, take your seats again." The students piled down from the platform and, with far more relaxed postures, took up their quills again, though their eyes were still awfully wide when they took him in. He sat down on the edge of the platform, thinking that might help. "We have some time for questions, or if you want to start talking about restricted potions. . ."

A hand went up. Harry called on a chubby boy with blonde hair growing straight up from a clump on the top of his head. The boy's name was Donovan, but Harry couldn't help internally referring to him as Dudley, even though the boy seemed perfectly normal.

"I have a question," Donovan announced and then remembered that he could take down his hand. "Who took the photograph on your chocolate frog card?"

"I meant questions about the lesson," Harry clarified, but a glance around the room revealed many interested expressions. Hoping that they didn't intend to take notes on his answer, Harry rubbed his brow and replied, "I have to honestly say that I was a bit distracted at the moment it was taken." Some grins appeared. "So I didn't notice. Someone told me later it was one of the Ministry recorders. Normally such photographs don't get released. Normally."

Pigtails piped in, "Everyone wanted to see he was really dead."

"Yes, they did," Harry agreed.

"Why did he come to the school?" Donovan asked, sounding confused. "Do all dark wizards come to the school?"

Harry chuckled. "No. Not as far as I know. Only when they are trying to kill me."

"Good thing he did," Donovan said with feeling. At Harry's disturbed and questioning look, the flustered boy quickly explained, "Because he needed to be gotten rid of and if he'd kept hiding, or whatever, he would have lived a lot longer. Sir."

Harry tried not to balk. "I suppose you could look at it that way."

"You killed him so easily," Erasmus pointed out.

"Uh. It didn't take long, but I wouldn't have said it was easy. Let's talk about something else."

"Aw . . ." Many voices said in disappointment.

Pigtails raised her hand. "Are you going to be teaching us next week?"

"I don't think so. I have training and Professor Snape should be back in . . . not too long." More noises of disappointment. "Don't you like him?" Harry teased.

"He's all right," Pigtails admitted, "But you're more fun. Snape's really tough."

"*Professor* Snape," Harry corrected stiffly, then winced inwardly at the irony. "And he's tough because wants to save your life. If you really need a spell to protect yourself and you didn't learn it here that would make him feel he'd failed, I think."

Pigtails frowned thoughtfully. "He can be mean though," she complained.

"Ignore it," Harry said with a wink. "That's what I do."

They had endless questions, it seemed, or they really didn't want to start the other lecture. Yet another student with copious freckles put her hand up and said, "So why are *you* teaching instead? Aren't you too famous?"

"I didn't have anything else to do today," Harry explained pleasantly.

A previously quiet girl with long black hair asked, "Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Sort of," Harry hedged.

"What does that mean?"

Donavan leaned over and whispered loudly, "It means he has too many."

Harry pushed his hand over his hair; he was losing control of the situation somehow. "Next topic."

Freckles repeated, "But don't you have better things to do? Like, dark wizards to catch or something?"

"I'm only an Auror apprentice. I'm not supposed to be doing anything. But I caught a dark wizard this morning if that makes you feel better. And one the other night."

Pigtails asked carefully, "The one that came after Professor Snape?"

"Yes," Harry admitted. The class fell silent then and their alarmed expressions began to reappear. Harry shook himself out the dark reverie that they may be picking up on. "So I don't get in trouble with Professor Snape, I'd better give you your assignment." He read the chapter readings off the syllabus.

Erasmus had his hand raised again. "Do you ever get grounded?"

Freckles scoffed. "And who would ground him?"

"Professor Snape," Erasmus returned as though the girl was slow. "He's Harry's dad."

Freckles looked shocked and disbelieving. "Don't be stu-"

"Ah-" Harry uttered sharply to shut them up.

Erasmus protested, "But he is. It said so in the American newspaper my mum gets."

Confused and possibly dismayed faces turned Harry's way. "Mr. Van Eschelon is correct. He's my adoptive father."

"Professor Snape!" Pigtails blurted. "Really?"

"Yes," Harry replied in a stern tone.

"Oh," she muttered, just as the bell rang.

Erasmus stepped up to the front as the others departed, happily realizing that they were finished and had the weekend ahead of them. "Thank you, sir," Erasmus said, holding his small hand out.

Harry shook it, amused. "You're welcome." Behind him two of the girls were whispering. When he looked up, they blushed, said goodbye, and departed quickly, heads ducked.

"Girls," Erasmus scoffed.

"You should get your Friday underway, Mr. Van Eschelon," Harry prompted, then wondered who he was turning into to say that.

In the office Harry felt obligated to try to reorganize all the files he had pulled out, mixed up, and simply spilled on the floor in his rush to find everything. It took him half of an hour just to figure out how the files were supposed to be organized. Luckily, Snape had a strict scheme that was possible to pick up on. As he sorted, a rap sounded on the door and Belinda poked her head in.

"Hello," Harry greeted her warmly and put down the file he held open. "Didn't expect to see you here."

She smiled sweetly and said, "I convinced Minister Bones to let me come scope out what was actually going on." She closed the door with a click and approached the desk.

"Ah," Harry said. "I'm teaching. Severus is recovering. I sent Theodore Nott off with the Aurors."

"We heard about that, of course," she pointed out and leaned upon the desk, facing him. "And you are doing?" she asked concernedly.

Harry sighed lightly. "Is this for you or for your report to Bones?" he asked, honestly needing to know.

Her eyes darkened. "That's not fair, Harry. It's me asking. Trust me a bit," she added, sounding stung. After a pause, during which she studied his eyes closely, she said, "Is that why you are so standoffish with me? Do you think I go back to the Minister and report on everything we do?"

"No, of course not," Harry replied, feeling he didn't have enough spare emotion for this conversation and wishing it weren't happening. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to accuse you of that."

She leaned farther over, and he could smell her hair and ash from the Floo. "I was worried about you when I heard you were still at Hogwarts and I needed a good excuse to leave the office. Trust me to summarize anything personal out of what I tell her when I get back."

"All right. Of course you would." Harry rubbed his head and gathered his wits, which seemed more tattered than he wished they were.

"You're teaching?" she asked, glancing around the desk.

He picked up the file he had been working on. "At the moment I'm refiling. I was in a hurry."

"Want help?"

"No, that's all right. *I* messed it up. Have a seat though unless you have to get back."

She gave him that heart-rate increasing smile again. "I have a few minutes. Tell me a bit more I can 'report' on, if you will."

Harry put a file of pop quizzes back away. "What does the Minister think of Severus?" he asked, wondering if she still considered him a free Death Eater, a former associate of Dumbledore, or didn't consider him anything at all.

"That's a question, not a fact I can pass on," she complained lightly. "I don't know the answer to that anyway. Why do you ask?"

Harry shrugged, not wanting to explain. "Just curious."

After a pause she said, "You are so mysterious; you know that?"

Harry looked up in surprise. "I don't try to be," he returned.

She clasped her hands together over her crossed knees and said frankly, "I've read everything there is written about you, but I don't know you at all." When Harry didn't respond, she went on with a touch of sadness, "I feel like . . . you hold that against me . . ." she frowned with pursed lips and looked hopeful for a response.

She seemed honestly hurt, which Harry didn't intend, so he said, "Some things . . . are just too hard to explain. I don't mean to . . ." He frowned as well, not finding words. He picked up another file and put it back down on another pile, aimlessly.

Belinda stood suddenly and straightened her robes. "I'm sorry. You have a lot going on and I'm here adding to it. I'm glad Professor Snape is all right and that you captured the last Death Eater. I'll tell the Minister everything is calm here and I'll see you at the ministry next week."

Harry called her to a halt when she reached the door, stood up, and came around the desk. He said, "Look. I like you a lot. It just takes time for me to want to share some things. It's actually harder with you because I don't . . . well, I don't want you think badly of me, or wonder . . ." Harry trailed off. She turned with such an aching expression that he gave in and finished the thought. ". . . wonder that I'm actually a dark wizard or something." Harry turned his gaze away as he spoke and tossed his arm to the side in frustration.

She gave him a nearly comically disbelieving glare. "Harry, how in the Wizarding world would I ever think that?" She sounded bizarrely like Ron as she said this. Her neutral face reasserted itself a moment later, as though she didn't want to behave so forcefully. She fell silent before suggesting, "You still have Dementors in your head or something?"

"No, but . . . I have other things in my head," Harry admitted and then immediately wished he had not.

She took that in during a longer thoughtful pause. Eventually, she said, "How could you not? After all that's happened. Merlin," she then muttered, "we're still discussing this." She came closer and gave him a firm hug. While holding him by the shoulders after releasing him, she said, "Harry, I refuse to believe that you are only pretending to be the nicest guy I've ever met. The nicest guy who also kicks serious arse when necessary." Harry let his eyes drift away from her very sincere hazel ones. She went on. "The Aurors said you managed single-handedly two nights ago. That's amazing. On the other hand they dodged the question of how you knew Avery was here."

Harry gave in again and stated, "I saw it in my dreams. I often see Voldemort's servants in my dreams, especially if they are performing dark magic."

She took that in while Harry waited for her reaction. "That must make it difficult to get a good night's sleep," she commented.

"Sometimes," Harry admitted, not entirely certain if she were simply putting forth that calm of hers and was actually alarmed behind it. He wished that she didn't make him feel so needful of her acceptance. Maybe he was doing that on his own. She tweaked him on the chin and he met her gaze.

"I won't pass that on to the Minister," she said.

"Maybe not," Harry agreed with a wry twitch of his lips.

"No wonder you and Professor Snape get on so well."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"He always seemed like a dark magic fan. You must fascinate him," she suggested, half-teasing.

Harry exhaled. "I fascinated him when no one else wanted to deal with me because I think I alarmed them too much." This time it felt like a release to explain things and Harry thought maybe he could make a better try at doing so.

"That explains things a bit." She glanced at the clock and gave him a quick kiss. "I have to get back. Take care, all right. Stop by at lunch when you can."

Harry now felt a bit sad to see her depart. "I'll do that."

Harry returned to the desk, diligently keeping his thoughts from the feel of her kiss that still lingered minutes later, and continued to go through every folder to make sure everything was straight and in a reasonable order before filing it away. As he was re-filing the midterm notes that had somehow been mixed in with N.E.W.T. preparation quizzes, an exceptionally light tap sounded on the door. Harry called out that it was open. He was expecting McGonagall, although it didn't seem like her kind of knock.

The door swung partly open and a small face peered around it, followed by another, the second face was Freckles from the previous class. "What can I do for you?" Harry asked.

"Um," the first one, a plain looking girl with glasses, uttered in hesitation before getting pushed into the room by Freckles. A third and fourth followed with no little trepidation. They resembled turtles to some degree; their heads were tucked down so far between their shoulders.

Freckles, clutching a large book as though it were a shield, said, "We, uh, wondered if you'd give an autograph?"

Harry slowly looked over the four sets of large, disturbingly fawning eyes. He believed he now knew what a freshly unwrapped ice cream treat felt like. "Hm," he said, mostly to stall. "How about this?" He pulled out the class notes he had just filed and found the lecture notes he was supposed to have gone over. "Got a quill?"

All of them moved, so quickly that two bookbags spilled onto the floor to much blushing and perhaps even one tear. Harry casually went on, "Write these down." He read out the five potions from the list that he didn't recognize. They hadn't covered potion regulations yet in his training, but it bothered him not to know what all of these were, when Snape was teaching them to first-years. He wondered if the former Potions master wasn't trying to show up the current one a bit. "Take out your books and write out what each of those is for me, will you? I'll trade that for a few autographs." If he could buy things on Diagon Alley that way, he considered, he wouldn't need an allowance.

Brightly, the girls got to it, all managing to somehow share the one small desk and extra chair. Harry went back to filing, ignoring the occasional long glance he received. He shook himself for thinking like Lockhart, which reminded him that he needed to find Lockhart, or that someone needed to find Lockhart. Without a keeper he should turn up pretty quickly, probably wandering in Piccadilly Circus through Muggle Lorry traffic. That image heartened Harry rather a lot. Lockhart would be better off if someone other than Harry found him.

"Mr. Potter, sir?" Freckles, the apparent group leader, prompted Harry out of his far away thoughts.

He put on a smile. "I'm not teaching as of an hour ago, call me Harry."

She blushed better than Ron. "Okay," she replied in a very tiny voice.

Harry accepted the sheet and looked it over with a critical eye, which wasn't easy given the variations on the admittedly highly neat writing. Something about the hearts, smileys, and even flowers and birds used in place of various punctuation made the content hard to get to. But it read like something straight out of a book.

"Thanks." He set it aside. "What would you like autographed?" She held out the book she had been carrying. He flipped it open to the marked page. "What is this?" he asked.

"The *Witch Weekly Yearbook*, sir, uh, Harry." A bright smile followed.

"I've never seen this."

"You're in it a lot," she stated helpfully, clearly happy about that. She leaned over the desk and pointed at a picture of him from a Quidditch match, the one the Dementors interrupted. But it was a good picture of him, in the close foreground, cutting in the opposite direction from Malfoy, who did not look to be having fun and whose figure kept trying to get out from behind Harry. "Can you sign that one, please?"

Harry did so, and handed the book back. The next girl, the one with gold-rimmed glasses, shyly came forward. Harry tried a reassuring smile and wondered if he looked like Lockhart used to. With a jolt he also wondered if what that man had been hadn't been less himself and more what the world turned him into. Glasses had a Gryffindor flag to be autographed. When signed, she gingerly took it back as though it had turned to glass, and backed up a step before saying, "You're much cuter in person."

"Am I?" Harry asked, for lack of anything else to say. There was general agreement about this. "Better than being uglier, I suppose."

Autographs finished, they packed up their things and thanked him repeatedly. One of them whispered to the other. "I'm going to owl my mum!"

Before they left, Harry said, "Don't show those around 'til I'm gone this evening."

Freckles smiled conspiratorially, "Sure, Harry."

They departed with much whispering and giggling, and McGonagall stepped inside in their wake. "Ah, the Harry Potter Fan Club did manage a personal appearance."

"Yep," Harry sighed.

"I do hope you are coming down to dinner?"

Startled, Harry asked the time while he found his watch. "Yes," he replied, "are you going down now?" He quickly filed the last two folders, hoping he had put them to right.

"Take your time, Harry," she said gently. She paced slowly around while Harry put a few stray things away and straightened up. McGonagall stopped in the middle of the office and stared at the stone floor with a faraway expression. Harry followed her gaze and felt that terrible shifting of reality as if those two drastically diverging paths of recent past could be accidentally swapped, leaving him again facing that agonizing grief.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said. "I didn't come here to take you back."

Harry stood and slipped Snape's robe back on. "It's all right," he said, but the floor felt unstable and his chest tight.

"Also I hope you will do me a favor?" At his nod she went on, "Take Severus home for the weekend if you will. Make certain he rests and, if on Monday morning--no make that Sunday night--if he is not one hundred percent, owl me and we will cover his classes, as long as necessary. I don't want him straining himself. Remus said he is available. All right?"

"Sure."

She held out her arm, crooked at the elbow and Harry, with a smile, accepted it. She escorted him this way, patting his hand with her other, as they walked around to the staircase. "It is good when everything works out all right."

"It's shocking when everything works out all right," Harry commented vehemently.

"Oh, my poor Harry," she said sympathetically.

Harry was in the mood for sympathy and accepted it in silence.

The Grand Staircase and Entrance Hall were full of loudly chatting students. Many turned and greeted them deferentially as they passed. In the aisle on the way to the front of the Great Hall, McGonagall said, "Are you coming to our Christmas Ball?"

"I don't think I can find a date in time," Harry pulled out as an excuse.

"I thought perhaps you would be mine," she returned with a wink. A few strides later, they were on the platform beside her chair. She gave his arm a surprisingly hard squeeze before turning to speak with Flitwick. Harry took the seat beside hers and made small talk with Sinistra on his right.

The hall gradually filled with boisterous students. Ginny gave Harry a wave and came up to stand before the head table. "How was your first day of teaching?" she asked.

"Too eventful," Harry returned over the general noise.

McGonagall said, "Ask him how the first meeting of the unofficial Harry Potter Fan Club went."

Harry shot the headmistress a dismayed look. Ginny said, "Oh dear. Who is that?"

"The four muskatellas," McGonagall said.

"Oh. Them. Poor Harry," she said in sympathy.

"I survived," Harry countered.

"Take your seat, Ms. Weasley, and we will start." Ginny turned with a last wave at Harry. McGonagall clapped her hands twice and platters appeared. Harry had just reached to serve himself when he noticed the center doors opening and a familiar figure enter. He released the long spoon and watched as Snape, heavily relying on a cane, made his way down the center aisle. Many of the students stopped and turned as well. Harry had to grip the table edge with both hands to resist jumping up to help his guardian.

Eventually, Snape made it around the long table to where they sat in the middle. He put a hand on Harry's shoulder and leaned on it hard. McGonagall stood and with her wand, waved another place setting between them. Snape didn't move to it; he gestured for Harry to. "Go ahead, Harry. I'm sure Minerva would like to sit beside you, as she has more than enough of my company."

Harry looked up at him, marveling at his very strange smile. Snape gestured again and Harry shifted over one. Their place settings magically switched as he settled in. Snape, gingerly it appeared, lowered himself into the chair Harry had vacated. Harry wanted to ask if he were really recovered enough to be here, but held back; it wasn't as if Snape were going to turn around and return to the dispensary this minute. Instead, Harry pushed the potatoes over to him, and then swapped that bowl for the chicken stew.

As they all started eating, McGonagall leaned close and whispered, "You are hovering, Harry. He hasn't chastised you for that?"

"Am I? No, he hasn't," Harry muttered back. He tried harder to relax then but panic seemed to surge through him for no good reason.

"How were the First-Years?" Snape asked.

Harry took a deep breath. "Mostly all right. You didn't warn me about the mooners."

"Ah. Didn't think to. Did you make it through all the potions?"

"No, sorry. I stuck with what I'm good at--defensive spells."

"Really? What did you teach them?"

Harry served himself more mead to stall. This moment had not been on his mind when he had arbitrarily changed topics in class. "Um, a counter-curse."

Sounding dubious, Snape asked, "And how did that go?"

"Um . . ." Harry considered that less than half of the class got anything out of it. "Well . . ."

Snape leaned past him. "Minerva," he spoke across Harry. "You hired Harry Potter to teach Defense today and no matter what the syllabus said, he taught only counter-curses. All day."

"No. The first session I covered . . . Dementors and Lethifolds."

"Sorry, I take it back," Snape said with more of his old snide. "He can cover other topics with which he is personally familiar."

Harry laughed. McGonagall leaned forward and said, "Judging by the jealousy I have heard expressed this afternoon from the students not so honored as to have Mr. Potter's tuition today, I believe we can allow him some leeway. For one day, at least."

"Hm," Snape muttered doubtfully, but he was still smiling vaguely.

The Great Hall emptied out after the plates and platters vanished. Harry felt much more relaxed with a warm full stomach and Snape beside him, the color more than returned to his complexion. The teachers, unusually, were the last to depart, aside from a few Seventh-Year Gryffindors, who were waiting for Harry. When the three of them stood, McGonagall leaned close to Snape, "I have instructed Harry to take you home to recuperate, Severus. No arguments."

Harry, who was considering going and speaking with his friends, remained in place instead and tried to appear stern. "Hm," was all Snape said before he hobbled along the back of the head table, the rest of them in tow. "I should perhaps go pack, in that case," Snape conceded. Harry started to follow him to the doors of the hall, but Snape stopped and said dismissively, "I believe your friends wish to visit with you."

Harry stopped. "Oh . . . yeah." Snape gave him an extra visual nudge, so he turned and walked over to Ginny, the Creevey brothers and a few others who were still gathered at the end of the house table, talking animatedly. They greeted him warmly and made space on the end of the bench for him.

* * *

McGonagall followed the slow moving Snape to his office where he stopped to run his hand over the worn, age-blackened decorative flower carving on the replacement door. They stood in silence as a large cluster of third-years passed, after which McGonagall asked, "Are you all right?"

Frankly, Snape replied, "Very much so."

McGonagall hesitated before following as she worked out that reply. "That didn't sound the least bit sarcastic, Severus." She closed the door behind her, blocking out the youthful voices from the corridor.

Almost pleasantly, Snape replied, "It wasn't." He pulled out a small trunk and began filing a few things into it.

"Severus, don't work. Don't concern yourself with anything."

"I will go mad with nothing to occupy myself."

"Catch up with Harry. He clearly misses you." Dropping her voice, she added, "He clearly needs a rest as well."

Snape stared through the far wall, lost in recent memory. He laughed lightly as he tried to take it all in.

"Perhaps . . . you also need a slightly different kind of Healer . . ." she gently insinuated.

"No, I am quite all right," he countered, still sounding queerly pleasant. The small trunk was returned to the cupboard, empty. Lifting it even empty had been a strain, but Snape didn't let on to this. He met her worried gaze and held it steadily. That light feeling from the veil had not completely escaped him, or perhaps it was lack of blood making him faint and euphoric. "I've won," he stated and then laughed in a huff.

McGonagall didn't speak, although she did rub her hands together before dropping them at her sides. Snape discovered in himself an unusual desire to be understood by his longtime colleague. He tugged his long sleeves down over his hands to cover a chill from the cool room on his arms. "I could not pass through the veil. Albus prevented me from doing so."

Her expression shifted to amazement. "Truly? You saw Albus?"

Smiling wryly, he replied, "Yes. My assurances to Harry were not misguided." She started to speak but then stopped. Snape filled the silence with an even more wry observation. "He insisted I return to care for Harry--as opposed to for my own benefit."

McGonagall smiled lightly with him. "Albus always assumed those around him wished to be as selfless as he was."

Snape considered that he understood the old wizard better now; previously, similar situations had aggravated him. He put a few textbooks into a shoulder bag and placed it on the desk just as a rap sounded on the heavy door. The door opened and Harry put his head inside. "When are we leaving?"

"Soon," Snape replied.

Harry waved his friends on and started to step in, but McGonagall said, "I need a moment more with Severus, if you wouldn't mind, Harry dear."

"Oh. All right." He backed out and pulled the door closed behind him.

McGonagall paced before the desk while Snape waited for her to continue. Quietly now, she said, "I've underestimated you in the past, but I am concerned that you are not skilled enough to fully help him." She gestured at the door.

Without rancor Snape replied, "I believe I can manage."

She persisted, "He is injured--"

"He is scarred. He wears in it plain sight." Snape hoisted the books over his shoulder and replayed his own assertion to James Potter in his mind. "I appreciate your concern, Minerva. But trust that I do understand his difficulty--as well as my responsibilities." He fell into silent thought before observing, "The risk Harry took in accepting me as a guardian has only become clear to me now, and I am compelled to honor that--as well as other oaths I seem to have taken in the interests of getting even."

She studied him closely, trying to eek out some understanding of that.

Snape went on. "I am not averse to your assistance, however. I can certainly bring Harry to you more often for visits."

She scoffed. "You force me to confess my utter gratitude at your survival to care for him. He was in my hands, and I was completely unable to help him."

Snape picked up his cane and used it to step by her to the door. "Harry desires your praise--of that I am certain. You could perhaps be freer with it." He opened the door to cut off any reply she may have to that.

Harry and a cluster of older students were waiting in the corridor. Harry immediately came over and took Snape's bag off of his shoulder.

"You may use the Floo in my office," McGonagall invited.

Harry made his goodbyes and followed along farther into the castle. In the headmistress' tower as they organized before the hearth, McGonagall said, "Anything you need, please owl. Anything at all."

"Thanks," Harry said sincerely and gave a little wave goodbye. McGonagall waved back as Harry stepped into the blackened hearth.



Chapter 73 -- Revenge and Redemption

At home, Harry put Snape's books down in the library and quickly returned in case his guardian needed assistance on the stairs; although, he looked to be managing. Harry hesitated helping without Snape signaling that he would accept it, so Harry followed a step behind, straining to remain patiently inactive.

"Feeling all right?" Harry asked when they made the balcony.

In a reassuring tone, Snape replied, "Yes, Harry, I'm fine--just being careful." He patted Harry's arm before turning to the doorway to his room.

"Minerva said I was hovering. I don't . . . sorry."

"Your apology is unnecessary," Snape stated without turning from his slow journey into his room. "My father owed to say he and Gretta would stop by this evening. Show them to the drawing room and come fetch me if you would."

"Are you certain?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Snape firmly replied. "I put them off visiting Hogwarts, but could not put them off longer."

Harry wondered that Snape would put so much effort into not appearing weak before his father but nodded that he would do as instructed. He returned downstairs to check the post and straighten things up before the guests arrived. The *Prophets* he stacked neatly and the post he sorted and took to the drawing room where he put it in the desk. Snape's previous desk diary was in the drawer and Harry drew a finger over its soft leather. The desk and the room resonated with Snape's presence and Harry again felt fiercely grateful that he still had his guardian's living presence and not just the hollow memory and physical shell of his things.

Harry wandered the ground floor, unable to settle down to any calm task. He organized his books, pulling them all down to stacks on the floor and reordering them, flipping through several of them to remind himself of dimly-remembered spells from the first month of his training. When the Floo sounded, he shoved the remaining books quickly back away and went to the dining room. Shazor looked exactly as Harry has last seen him, but Gretta seemed older and her smile strained. Harry welcomed them and led them to the drawing room. He had been vaguely dreading their appearance but was now glad for the distraction.

When he went to fetch Snape, however, he found him dozing and disliked disturbing him. Snape woke on his own when the hinge creaked and refused to let Harry do more than hand him his cane. Outside the drawing room, Severus straightened his stance more than Harry thought possible, and entered. Shazor stood quickly to greet him and looked him up and down, shedding his concerned gaze for an annoyed one. "The *Prophet* seems to have exaggerated your injuries."

Severus took a seat with some care, saying snidely, "I doubt that, given that I spent a rather lengthy ten minutes beyond the veil."

Harry gaped at him, but hid it immediately. Shazor was too startled to notice Harry's own surprise. Gretta *looked* in pained sympathy before saying, "You are very lucky to have returned, in that case."

Severus gave a pained, flickering smile before saying to Harry, "Have a seat."

Harry, gripped by bad memories and equally bad possibilities, had to force himself to obey. Shazor and Gretta seemed more like a television program he could not switch off than real people there in the same room. Severus shot him a concerned look before saying to his father, "I was foolish. I knew my ingredient cabinet had been raided by a student, but I was fooled into believing their diversion. They left the Feather Star shifted on the shelf when they must have actually taken some of the extract of Ocimumum."

A heated tendril of anger snaked through Harry at that. "You knew someone was brewing a restricted potion?"

"I suspected," Severus corrected. Sounding more defensive, he said, "The door to my office was well-spelled with an Imperturbable Charm, but Nott must have known how to remove it. Your friend Ms. Granger was the only student I've ever previously known to have mastered that cancellation."

Shazor sounded vaguely chastising as he said, "Unfortunate to have been overcome by one of your own students."

Severus explained, "I woke and heard someone in my office but did not realize that the vapor had already started to affect my judgment and my magic." He fell silent then, looking grim, but it faded quickly and he gave Harry another concerned studying.

Winky appeared during the pause, bearing chocolate biscuits, which Harry gratefully accepted.

Small talk consumed the rest of the visit and eventually Shazor and Gretta departed with Harry getting the usual hug from Gretta. Snape slumped slightly when the hearth flared a second time and they were alone. "You should rest," Harry insisted. Snape merely nodded in silence and made his slow way back to his room. Harry followed, wondering what an ordinary family would be doing right about now.

Harry watched Snape settle into his room before he went to his own and stopped beside the corner bedpost for a time, just staring at the floor and the edge of the trunk by the window. He was simultaneously tired and overexcited, but he moved to change into pyjamas and dressing gown, remembering with a jolt that he was wearing some stranger's discarded clothes. After removing the faded black pullover, he held it up and studied it; the knit had stretched and sagged with time, but he tossed it into the hamper for Winky to clean, thinking that he could wear it while gardening in the spring.

With everything put away Harry tried to read for Monday, but instead wrote a few letters to his close friends, explaining that Snape was home now and recovering gradually. The hollow alternatives resisted his writing down these simple things, as though some rational part of him knew differently and didn't want him sinking so far into delusion.

Still uneasy, Harry gave all the letters to Hedwig to deliver around London in one trip. She cocked her head at him at first, but flew off after adjusting her grip, claws spearing the stack to hold them all firmly. Her ghostly form flitted away down the road and over the streetlight. Harry closed the window and sighed at the sight of his lamp-lit, neatly made bed. Complete exhaustion drew him to it, otherwise he might have organized his cupboard first.

Harry woke to the dimness of the short wick on his bedside lamp. For a moment he couldn't figure out why he wasn't in the dispensary and then wondered why he thought he should be. The last few days came crashing in upon him. He groaned and rolled over, punched his pillow, hugged it a bit, and tried to fall back to sleep.

He must have managed because he found himself jarringly awake, the same confusion playing out again, adding to the wearing on his spirit. He felt around in his nightstand drawer for a potion bottle before giving up on looking with the cold fear that he might not wake up if he were needed. Eventually, because his body demanded it, he plummeted again into sleep.

The next time Harry awoke he stared through the orange dimness at the stone floor between the bed and the door, and, with a nauseating quiver in his limbs, realized what was wrong. The eerie emptiness of the quiet around him felt suffocating suddenly rather than calming. Stumbling from his bed, he tugged his housecoat down from the bedpost and took up

his wand from the night stand. His rational mind told him that if he were correct, then he was much too late. His frayed nerves ached at the renewed urgency and he stumbled from his room.

On the balcony, light spilled from Snape's room. Harry stepped unsteadily that way and pushed the door open the remainder of the way. Snape sat in bed, propped up by many large pillows, reading a book. He looked over at Harry in curiosity. Harry let his wand hand fall to the side, feeling very little beyond the throbbing of his overwrought nerves.

"Harry?" Snape prompted.

Harry cleared his throat after unsuccessfully trying to speak. "You're supposed to be resting." It was all he could think of to say. He forced himself to breath normally.

Snape closed his book with a *clap*. "I have been resting for two days straight," he complained lightly. When he glanced at the wand in Harry's hand, his face fell slightly. "Come in," he invited gently. "What is wrong?"

Harry stepped forward halfway to the bed. He thought about his repeated empty wakings and breathed, "I've lost you."

Snape's expression grew alarmed. "Harry . . . come here," he said said more sternly. "I am right here."

Harry shook his head. "That's not what I mean," he insisted. He stepped over beside the bed, however, and after two attempts found the pocket for his wand and put it away. "I keep waking up and . . . you're not there."

Snape's confused expression narrowed to a very intense one. "You . . ." He swallowed hard. "You do not see me in your mind anymore?" At Harry's half nod, Snape asked, "Are you certain?"

Harry gestured sloppily in the direction of his own room. "I've woken up three times and . . . I'm alone." He pushed his hair back. "I thought something had happened to you. I was too tired to figure it out. To realize."

Snape rubbed his forehead. "Are you certain?" he whispered again.

"Yes. Three times. I usually see you all the time when you're home."

Snape was clearly stunned. "You sound . . . disappointed," he said in disbelief.

"I like knowing when you're around," Harry argued. "When you come check on me." More quietly he insisted, "No one had ever done that before."

"Yes, but . . ." Snape started and then laughed oddly. "Is that possible? To be unmade from such a thing--from being the Dark Lord's servant?" He rubbed his left forearm through his coarse sleeve.

"You weren't anyway. Voldemort is gone," Harry pointed out firmly.

Still gripping his forearm, Snape said, "I did not see it that way." He looked up at Harry, gaze far away, then he laughed lightly again. "I would not have imagined," he whispered. After a half minute more he shook himself. "You are having trouble sleeping?" At Harry's nod, he asked, "Do you want potion?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm afraid I won't wake up . . . if something happens."

"Harry, you must sleep sometime," Snape swung his feet off the bed and reached for his dressing gown. "But it is half past five. We can have breakfast instead. I am quite hungry."

Harry helped him to his feet, which Snape did not resist, and held him steady while he reached for his cane. Putting an arm around Harry's shoulders, Snape gave him a half-hug. "Merlin, I wouldn't have imagined." He ran a hand over the back of Harry's head. "Thank you, Harry."

"You're welcome . . . although I don't know what I did," he said a little smartly.

Snape started for the door, leaning on Harry more than the cane. "You gave me something to return for. Come, let's get you some breakfast." He ran his hand again over his charge's head. "And see what else we can do for you."

Harry ducked his head in embarrassment. He was overreacting to everything but, even with effort, couldn't find a rational instinct for things.

In the dining room Snape asked yet again, "Are you certain?"

"What?" Harry's thoughts had drifted into a bad circle of memories. He roused himself and stirred the coals in the hearth to warm the room. "Yes, I'm certain your shadow is gone."

Snape lowered himself into a chair. Harry gave up on the fire and sat across the table from his guardian. Snape simply stared at him. "Merlin," he muttered again. "You will forgive me while I am occupied with being stunned, won't you?"

Harry relaxed an inch and smiled. "Sure." He certainly hadn't ever seen Snape with quite this expression; it was an almost amusingly befuddled one.

Winky stepped in, hands clasped before her. "Masters wish for breakfast?"

Distractedly, Snape replied, "Yes, please. Thank you, Winky."

Harry laughed as Winky departed after a bow. "Oh sure," Harry taunted. "One never thanks the house-elf."

Snape appeared startled. He quickly turned to the door and then back. "I must be slipping," he breathed, with a tinge of dismay.

Coffee appeared. When Snape reached for it, Harry grabbed it first. "Pomfrey said you weren't to have any." At Snape's utterly appalled expression, Harry relented and poured him a quarter cup and pushed it over to him. Snape stared into it before taking a very small sip as though to make the scant amount last.

Harry put his cup down and stoked up the fire more and added another chunk of wood. The tongues of flame quickly rose to blacken it. He put the poker aside and returned to his seat and watched the fire build. Usually he found the fire relaxing, now it reminded him of his mad run to Hogwarts.

"Harry," Snape's voice cut through his thoughts. "Do not dwell on it . . . it only feeds it."

"I'm not trying to remember," Harry countered, annoyed. Part of him wondered what he had been thinking to put so much at risk and accept someone as a father yet again. Hadn't he learned from the past?

"Harry," Snape repeated. "I will be here for you."

Angry suddenly, Harry argued, "How can you promise that?"

Snape actually smiled lightly. "Albus is blocking my way through the veil. Otherwise, I would *not* promise such a thing."

It was Harry's turn to gape. "Dumbledore! You saw Dumbledore?"

Calmly, Snape poured himself another quarter cup of coffee. Morning light was just beginning to infuse the room, brightening the walls. "I did, and I agree, he looked much younger than he did when he died." Thoughtfully, Snape sipped his renewed cup. "I wonder if he reverted to the age he was when he began using the Philosopher's Stone to make elixir."

"When was that?"

"I do not know for absolute certain, but I got the sense it was just after Grindelwald's defeat." Snape was quiet for a long time, eyes focused far beyond Harry. "Albus would never discuss some things and that was one of them. My suspicion was that he knew Riddle would rise to power in Grindelwald's wake, and he wanted to be there to guide whoever was destined to defeat him. That happened to be you."

"So he didn't just defeat Riddle himself," Harry complained, even though he knew this.

Snape didn't reply right way. When he did speak, he sounded as though he were composing his response very carefully. "I suspect he believed that whoever did defeat him had other things that they must do after."

Harry's jaw clenched. "Oh. Great," he muttered. "Here I am going along thinking my life is my own."

"No one's life is their own. Not yours . . ." Snape's voice dropped low as he added, ". . . and certainly not mine, now." With a light smile he teased, "Chin up Harry, by the time the next dark witch or wizard makes an appearance, you will be very powerful indeed."

Breakfast materialized while they both thought that over. Harry hadn't believed he was hungry but the heaping plate looked very inviting and his stomach rumbled even before he could pick up his fork. In short order, his plate was empty again and it disappeared.

Snape laughed lightly.

"You're sure you're all right?" Harry asked. "All this chuckling worries me."

The smile didn't fade from Snape's lips. "I've won."

"You're no longer a shadow to me, you mean?"

"There is that as well," Snape stated pleasantly. "I was thinking, actually, of cheating death . . . among other things."

Harry stood up to collect the *Prophet* from the owl that was dropping it off rather than let it sit outside on the sill. The cold air woke him up sharply before he re-closed the sash. "What other things?" he asked, putting the paper down beside Snape and returning to his chair.

Snape hesitated rather a long while. "Well," he finally began, "I no longer hold any ill will toward your godfather, who sent me back here, to the land of the living."

Harry froze. "Sirius did that?"

"Yes. He apparently has additional powers beyond the veil, perhaps because he arrived whole rather than the usual way."

Harry feared the memory that drew forth, but it didn't cut nearly so deep as it used to. He put his hands down on the table to feel its solidity. "How did he look?"

"Black? A bit melancholy, I must admit."

Harry remembered his own moments beyond the veil. "That's what I thought," he admitted sadly. "Too bad there isn't anyway to . . . to thank him."

"Not that I can think of. I am certain a time will come when you can do so in person, but hopefully that is well in the future." Snape moved to pour himself yet more coffee, but Harry pulled it out of reach.

"That's enough," he chastised his guardian.

"Hm," Snape muttered, but didn't argue. His eyes were abnormally bright, especially given their color.

Harry, needing a distraction from all the emotion churning within him, turned the paper over to glance at the front page. Avery was relegated to the bottom article and a scandal involving someone rigging Quidditch Bludgers had moved into the headline, which read, *Falcons Must Forgo Questionable Wins*. That nagged at Harry but he dropped it on the worn wood and pushed it back over to his guardian. Snape was giving him one of the closer lookings-over he had ever received.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," Snape said, sounding strangely pained. He picked up the large folded parchment news and scanned it.

It was still early when the door knocker sounded. Harry went to answer it and found Candide outside, bundled thickly against the cold.

"Can I come in?" she asked shyly, sounding as though she expected to be turned away.

"Sure," Harry invited, figuring there was nothing for it.

Snape had come into the hall, leaning on his cane. "How are you?" Candide asked him, sounding concerned.

"Improving," Snape answered amiably.

Harry excused himself and went upstairs. When the door to Harry's room closed, Snape said, "Something I can do for you?"

She smiled wryly. "I wanted to see how you were doing. I stopped by the school again and the headmistress said you had gone home." At his questioning look, she explained, "You were out . . . cold when I stopped by the first time." She glanced up at the balcony. "Got a good chewing out from your son." Snape's brow lowered and she quickly added, "It's all right. He explained something I hadn't understood. And he was only protecting you. That alone made me think." She sighed and swung her arms at her sides once. "You know, I miss being around you, but it is really hard to accept some things--no matter how much time has passed. But I keep reminding myself that Harry Potter himself has forgiven you, so who am I to hold things like that over you?"

Snape didn't respond, just stood in calm silence. She huffed into the quiet space around them. "I really want to let it go. I want to be sorry for what I said." She frowned a bit. "I want to spend time with you again," she said with a short laugh, then ducked her head. "Can we try again?"

Snape sighed lightly. "If you wish."

This simple response caught her off guard. "Oh . . . all right."

Snape gathered the sides of his dressing gown together as though he were chilled and leaned a little harder on the cane. "I would invite you for dinner, but I am not the best company at this time, and as well . . ." Here, he too glanced up to the balcony to check Harry's door. "I must devote myself to Harry for a time."

"I understand," she agreed, sounding flustered. "He did seem rather stretched to his limit when I stopped by Hogwarts." After a span of awkward silence, she moved toward the entryway and turned back, head tilted shyly. "Well, owl me then. All right? I can show myself out." Snape nodded.

After the outside door opened and closed, Snape made his way up the stairs and knocked on Harry's door. Inside, Harry was sitting on his bed, immersed in his Auror-assigned readings. "How'd it go?" he asked.

"Fine," Snape assured him. He stepped in and gimped around to the window, stopping at the cages. Hedwig's stood empty but the Chimrian looked up at him and flapped her wings while holding them bent in the confining space. "Shall I let her out?" he asked.

"Sure," Harry replied. "You didn't have any great fondness for the curtains in here anyway, right?"

Snape turned to the window and studied the drapery, which now hung in wide tattered strips. "Hm. No, not particularly." He opened the cage and Kali flapped down to the door edge and then out and over to the bed. Harry perched her on his shoulder where she hunkered down and appeared to read with him.

Snape turned to the window with a wince, attracting Harry's attention. "You all right?" Snape assured him that he was, but Harry went on, "Pomfrey is supposed to check on you, right?"

"This afternoon."

Harry glanced at the clock; it wasn't even 9:00 in the morning yet. "I can fetch her now."

"It is unnecessary. I will go down to the library and take it easy."

"Why don't you just go to bed?"

"I am . . . thrilled . . . to be up and out of bed. I have no intention of returning until it is absolutely necessary. I will rest downstairs."

Harry followed Snape to where he settled onto the lounge in the library. He fetched Snape's books for him and hovered a minute to be certain he was settled and then went and fetched his own things anyway. Kali, who had gripped him painfully hard when he was moving quickly, settled down when he did at the small table.

Harry tried to follow the chapter on spell dissipation that he needed to read for Monday. It was interesting; really, he had always wondered why certain transfigurations lasted longer than others, why some kinds of spells were easy to cancel and others nearly impossible. But his attention wandered constantly and he had to keep repeating paragraphs to remember what he had just gone over. For the first time in a very long while he wished for a television to look at so he didn't have to think.

Owls arriving provided a welcome distraction. "Ron and Hermione want to stop by this evening. Is that all right?" Harry asked.

"Certainly," Snape replied without looking up. "If they are staying for dinner, you should perhaps inform Winky."

Harry reread the letter from Hermione, which was so full of compassion that he skipped over parts of it to keep from unbalancing himself. "Doesn't say. I'll assume they are."

The morning dragged on with Harry savoring the reassuring presence of his guardian, letting it ease the panic that kept trying to rise whenever his mind wandered backward in time three days.

During one of those moments, Snape urged him, "Do try not to dwell, Harry. Perhaps you should set up the chess board and we can play a little."

Harry shook himself and pretended that everything was all right. Just pretending made him feel better and he went to the drawing room for the roughhewn marble chess set. He moved the small desk over beside the lounge and transfigured it to be a little larger before moving the set onto it and arranging the pieces.

As they played, Harry leaned heavily on his elbow and finally just rested his head on his arm while he waited for his opponent's move. Kali had crawled down into his lap and curled up into a warm lump.

"Why don't you go have a nap, Harry?" Snape suggested.

Harry shook his head; he was about to put Snape in check, and when his move arrived, did so. His bishop made a motion as though to test the weight of his mace in anticipation.

"Have you been playing?" Snape asked as he surveyed the board.

"No." He was however, easily seeing the board as a whole, which was not usually the case.

"You have improved at this game," Snape observed as he moved his king one space to the left. Harry moved his other knight closer in, to box in the black king on the next move and waited again for Snape to take a turn. He must have closed his eyes and drifted off because when he opened them a tea set was being placed beside his elbow. The black king was on its side.

"I concede," Snape informed him as he poured out a cup for Harry.

Harry lifted his head and rubbed his neck. "That's the first time I've won playing you," he observed.

Snape settled himself back on the edge of the lounge and blew on his hot cup. "I blame your unorthodox distraction techniques."

"What distraction?" Harry asked, confused.

"Your sleeping beside the board, for one thing. It tends to lower one's expectation for one's opponent to mount a decent strategy."

"Everyone underestimates me," Harry complained while resetting the board.

Snape wrapped his hands around his cup and simply held it. "I think there will come a time when that will no longer be true. I hope you can rise to it when it does happen."

They played two more games which resulted in draws before Harry settled back into his reading, feeling relaxed, although later, the Floo flaring in the other room startled him, until Snape, getting slowly to his feet, said, "That must be Madam Pomfrey."

Harry longed to give him a hand, but held back and instead went to greet the visitor. Lugging a battered, black bag, the Hogwarts Healer took Snape upstairs with her usual efficient manner, with Harry observing their slow progress from the floor of the hall.

Inside his room, Snape made his way to the bed and with his now usual care, lowered himself to sit on the edge. Madam Pomfrey plunked her bag beside him and tapped it open with a finger. Its metal-hinged top yawned wide like a mouth and she plucked her wand out of it. "Looks like you are in a bit more pain than you ought," she observed.

Snape adjusted his dressing gown and nodded his head to the side noncommittally. Using her wand, she tapped him in the center of his chest and huffed quietly. She then extracted a tall, cork-stoppered bottle from her bag, much too large to fit had the bag been the same size on the outside as the in. She used it to fill the bedside glass nearly to the brim and handed it to Snape, who sniffed at it doubtfully.

"Another dose of tissue knitter is in order, Professor." At Snape's frown she retorted, "Better than suffering forever."

He sniffed at the clear liquid again. "Is this a new batch?" he asked.

"Yes," Pomfrey admitted and when Snape continued to examine the liquid doubtfully, she said, "Professor, the Potions Mistress would not poison another member of the staff."

Snape raised his left brow at her with a dubious expression.

Pomfrey went on, conceding, "And in any event, I tested it this morning on myself . . . no harm done." She lifted her hands from her full-skirted sides, as though to show off her normal self.

Snape huffed and drank a gulp before holding the glass to the lamplight. "Tastes a little off."

"Drink it all. Come now," Pomfrey cajoled as though to a child.

Snape swayed slightly and obeyed with a frown. She took the glass back and suggested that he lie down. "The knitting isn't the most pleasant, sleeping through it would be better anyway."

Snape's head was nodding and in a blink he fell over onto the pillow. Pomfrey scooped his slippers onto the bed and covered them with his dressing gown. "There we are," she said happily.

Speech slurring, Snape muttered, "You . . . slipped in . . . sleeping potion."

She propped her hands on her hips. "Serves you right. After the last dose of knitting potion you ran down to dinner. No wonder you needed another."

She adjusted his pillow and had to lean close to hear him say, "Had to . . . reassure Harry."

She sighed. "Well . . . never mind. This should be the last now." She closed up her bag and held it in her hand while resting two fingers on the pulse point of his wrist hanging over the edge of the bed. Humming lightly to herself, she finally turned down the lamp and departed.

Harry met Pomfrey at the bottom of the stairs. "How is he?" he immediately asked.

"He'll be fine," she stated pleasantly. "Although he'll be asleep for a few hours. See that he isn't disturbed." She headed for the hearth in a businesslike manner, but before she tossed in any powder she said, "When he wakes up, see that he gets a good meal . . . he should be quite hungry."

Harry returned to his reading without much ability to concentrate, but it wasn't long before Ron and Hermione arrived. Harry was very grateful to see them as he was in dire need of an understanding ear and something different to occupy his thoughts. They settled into the drawing room and played wizard chess while Hermione perused a few books she found in the library.

"I shoulda brought my set," Ron complained at one point.

"What? Mine aren't as crazed as yours?" Harry asked.

"I like a chess set that always does as I say," Ron went on. He ordered his rook to slide over beside his queen.

Harry didn't usually try very hard at this game, mostly because Ron almost always won anyway, but today, bolstered by his other win, he was in the mood for a challenge. That move looked as though Ron were trying to distract him from some other ploy. Harry studied the board thoughtfully, refusing to be baited. Thinking of making his own distraction, Harry asked, "Would you like a butterbeer?"

"Oy, yes, thanks."

Harry started to stand, but Hermione volunteered to fetch them from the kitchen.

When she got there, Winky was holding three, fully warmed butterbeers and glasses on a tray for her. "Thank you, Winky," Hermione said as she accepted the tray. She lowered it to her waist and stood with it, hesitating. "Are you happy here?" she asked a little quietly.

Winky straightened her sparkling white tea towel. "Oh yes, mistress. Winky very happy. Masters is very nice wizards."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, they are, aren't they. Well, thank you for the refreshments." Winky bowed her out, smiling broadly as well.

"Are you staying for dinner?" Harry asked later when his stomach began to complain.

"We'd like to," Ron stated forcefully.

"Ron, you don't invite yourself for dinner," Hermione complained.

"I wasn't," Ron retorted.

Harry held up his hand. "It's all right. I'd like you to stay. I don't think Severus is going to be awake for a while." He should have just invited them outright, he regretted to himself as each of his friends eyed the other in annoyance.

The meal was quiet, given that his friends were continuing to be a little peeved with each other, although Hermione kept trying to keep a conversation going regarding Harry's attempts at teaching. Harry, who had decided perhaps he hadn't done all that brilliant of a job, wasn't really in the mood to dissect his performance. When the dessert dishes cleared themselves away, the two of them made their goodbyes to Harry, including a long hug from Hermione that made Ron tap her on the shoulder.

"I'm glad everything's all right, Harry," Hermione said with feeling as she released him.

"Thanks."

When they had gone, it felt much too still in the house. Glancing in concern at the late evening hour, Harry made his way quietly upstairs to check on his guardian, wishing that Pomfrey had told him *exactly* how long Snape should sleep.

Inside Snape's room, the low lamp and the flickering coals in the hearth were just enough to see by. Quietly, Harry stepped in, causing only Franklin to turn his head. Snape lay on his side in his dressing gown, one foot slipped, the other bare foot overhanging the edge of the bed. The air felt cool so Harry moved to add fresh wood to the grate. He crouched and prodded the new wood against the radiating embers until it caught and only then let them roll forward on the wrought iron to continue burning. He straightened, brushed off his hands, and approached the bed, where he stood and watched the reassuring lift of Snape's shoulder as he breathed. Two strands of black hair lay across his face. Harry gingerly lifted and brushed them back and considered Snape's angular profile, stern even in sleep. He stood that way, back bent, forcing this scene to overlay the other bad one, to soften its razor-like edge. Afraid suddenly of being caught so close should Snape awaken, Harry backed off and stepped lightly away, latching the door carefully.

In the dimness Snape rolled onto his back and rubbed his brow, and only after doing so did he remember how much pain to expect with that much movement. There was none; apparently the last dose of potion had worked itself to completion. Feeling Harry's distress like a weight on his chest, Snape stood with new ease and went over to the low shelf behind Franklin's cage. On a square of scrap parchment he scrawled out a quick note to Tonks, folded it, and gave it to the owl before letting him out the small window to deliver it. He then pulled an old straight-backed chair before the crackling fire and sat meditatively, long enough to make Harry expect he had woken separately from his visit. A quarter-hour later, overheated from the high fire, Snape took up his cane, straightened his dressing gown, and quitted his room.

Harry looked up from his reading in the library when Snape appeared in the doorway. "How are you feeling?" Harry immediately asked, glancing down at the cane Snape still used, although he wasn't leaning on it nearly as hard as before.

"Much better. I think I will ask Winky for a plate of cold joint and bread. I assume you have eaten?"

"Yes." Harry stood and went over to him. "My friends were here for dinner, but they left half an hour ago."

Turning, Snape commented, "Good, at least you had company."

Of a sort, Harry thought to himself. He went to the dining room to make certain it was straightened before Snape arrived with a heaping plate of cold meat slices and half a loaf of bread. "Hungry?" Harry asked in amazement.

Taking a seat, Snape returned, "The elf apparently believes I am. Why don't you have some as well?"

Harry tore off a chunk of bread and proceeded to press it flat in his fidgety fingers. He looked Snape up and down. "Are you going to be ready to teach on Monday?" When Snape hesitated replying, Harry went on, "You should take another day off. McGonagall said that would be fine."

"Hm," Snape muttered.

"Severus, please don't push yourself," Harry said, hearing a plea in his own voice that undid some of his careful emotional bolstering.

Calmly, reassuringly, Snape said, "I won't Harry. Don't worry. I will take Monday off, then."

Harry relaxed and nibbled on the now-dense bread. Hopefully training would not run late on Monday, he thought.

Snape eventually pushed his plate over to Harry who waved it off. He had only been eating out of nerves and was now over-full. After a glance at the clock, Snape grumbled, "Back to *resting*, I suppose." Using his cane, he gained his feet. Harry put out a hand to steady him. "I'm all right, Harry, really," he said, shrugging him off.

"You should owl McGonagall," Harry insisted. "So she can warn your replacement." A wave of distress hit Harry at that, unsettling him as though he were starting all over again from the worst moments. He ducked his head and waited for an admonishment for his lapse, or something lightly snide even, as he grappled with himself with what he felt was a heroic effort.

Instead of a well-meaning, yet biting, comment, Snape stepped closer with his cane and put his free arm around Harry's back. Harry grimaced with the effort at squashing the renewed surge of memory and emotion. It was as though a gaping wound had opened, revealing a hollow at his core that the cold blew straight into. He let his forehead touch his guardian's sharp shoulder bone. Solid. Warm. Harry calmed as relief flowed in.

Snape's voice distracted him. "At least I did not lie."

"About what?" Harry asked without moving.

Snape chuckled and released him. "I don't think I want to tell you."

Harry stood straight and stretched his shoulders back. "Tell me what?" he echoed.

With a sigh Snape squeezed Harry's shoulder. "Merlin, I must be redeemed . . . I am feeling guilty for what I did."

Harry blinked several times, completely not following this. He waited to see if Snape would explain. Snape paced a little with his cane as though he didn't really need its support. Facing the table, head bowed, Snape admitted, "I got even with your father."

Harry pieced that together with the other things Snape had said. "In the veil?" At Snape's nod Harry uttered, "Oh," with mixed feeling and continued confusion.

Reluctantly, still staring at the table edge, Snape went on, "I regret it now. Ironically, I only now comprehend what I did."

A long silence passed as the hearth burned down and shifted, throwing sparks. "What happened?" Harry asked.

With a faraway expression Snape finally replied, "Albus restrained me from passing through the veil, but time passed before I could return, or be sent, more precisely." A long pause ensued before he continued, "Your parents appeared." Snape

looked up at Harry as he started and gave his charge the smallest of smiles. "Your father was not pleased that Albus was helping me return."

Harry bit his lip, glad that Snape was looking at him now as he spoke.

"Albus explained to your father that he should wish me to return, because I was caring for you."

Harry's eyes widened. "Dumbledore told my father that?" he demanded, stunned silly. He swallowed hard, heart thudding.

Snape nodded and held up his hand to examine the palm of it. "I was fading. It was very strange. I actually forgot what it felt like to be alive, and Albus kept insisting I remember."

"Wh . . . what if you hadn't made it?" Harry asked.

"Just like anyone who refuses to enter the veil. I'd have become a ghost."

"Severus!" Harry exploded, alarmed. "Don't risk that for me. I wouldn't want that to happen--not for anything."

"My," Snape returned, sounding amused.

Harry found a new measure of control at that insistence; one that he sorely needed.

"Albus most likely would have prevented it, but it was my choice to risk it," Snape finished sternly.

"Don't do it again," Harry insisted, stern as well.

Snape's lip curled. "I don't expect there to be a next time."

Harry thought a moment. "What did my dad say to that?" he carefully asked.

Snape appeared uncomfortable, but finally replied, "Well, he was not pleased. He demanded to know what I was doing with you . . . 'doing with his son'. This was as the world began drawing me back; although, it was a world composed entirely of pain--the only time I have ever welcomed it." He hesitated, but finally added, "I told him that you were my son, now."

Stunned by trying to imagine events that he had never considered possible, Harry leaned one hand on the tabletop and rubbed his hair back and forth repeatedly with the other.

Snape added, "I do now regret saying that. I certainly wouldn't want anyone saying it to *me*. And he has no recourse. Absolutely none."

"You hope he doesn't," Harry commented.

Snape huffed, amused still, "True."

Harry breathed deeply, the wind outside had pushed a curl of smoke out of the hearth and its sweet scent reminded him of Hogwarts and here, of home. "I wouldn't have imagined my parents finding out," he said, uneasily laughing his distress. "What did my mum say?"

Snape shook his head. "Nothing. She remained in the background, in the fog." He brushed Harry's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Harry," he said, sounding more like he meant it than Harry thought possible.

Harry took a half step back at his guardian's fervent expression. The expression dulled an instant later. "Huh," Harry uttered, still trying to take it in. "But Dumbledore told him before you did," he pointed out.

"True. But he wasn't quite so . . . cruel about it." Snape turned with a shuffling of his feet to face the dying fire, gaze far beyond it. "If anyone tried to take you from me . . ." he faded out darkly.

Harry felt undone in a whole new way at the same time as he felt more secure. He didn't have a response.

About the time Harry was going to insist that Snape return to bed, even though he was reclined in the library, the door knocker sounded. Harry imagined Candide had returned so when he opened the door he was unprepared to find Anita there instead, insufficiently dressed for the wind in a thin wrap, but apparently not feeling the weather.

"Uh, come in," Harry invited when he caught up with the situation.

"How is Severus?" she asked. "I only just received the news about what happened."

"He's fine," Harry assured her. He led her into the main hall and she followed with apparent reluctance, posture uncertain.

Snape looked up and started in surprise. While they stared at each other, Harry backed up a step, uncertain if he should stay. Anita said to her son, "You look to be doing all right."

Snape sat up easily, almost normally. "I have had rather skilled care," he explained. He then stood and approached the doorway and her. "I am surprised to see you here."

She fidgeted. "I don't like being away from the coven, but the copy of the *Prophet* I saw described your injuries as nearly fatal. I guess if I had known how well you were doing . . ." She trailed off uncomfortably.

Harry expected Snape to react to that, but all he said, in a rather calm voice, was, "I am quite well. Do not concern yourself. I have Harry here to watch over me, if all else fails."

Both Harry and Anita took that in over a few silent seconds. Still awkward, Anita said with a small laugh. "That's good to know. But which of you adopted the other?" she added, trying for a joke.

Snape's lip twitched and he crossed his arms. "It is growing unclear," he stated in that new amiable tone of his that still struck Harry as vaguely worrisome or potion induced. "Trust that we are both all right. Do you require more assurance?" He sounded so confident and calm, that Harry had to bite his lip against the hopefulness that perhaps this woman no longer held any power over his guardian. While she worked out a response to that, Snape continued to levelly meet her gaze without even a flicker.

"Ah, no, I don't *require* more assurance than that. I realized that, unlike previously, I found myself believing that you perhaps no longer deserved such an attack, even from a former fellow Death Eater." Behind her, Harry's jaw hardened. She went on more brightly, "But I see that you are recovering nicely . . ." She paused, seeming to try to comprehend the altered man before her. She shook her cloak as though considering leaving.

"Recovering very well, I assure you," Snape replied. "But I believe you are uncomfortable here; perhaps you should return." It wasn't a dismissal, simply a statement of fact.

"It has been a very long time since I've been out. But . . . I thought since I had apparently almost lost my only offspring . . . that I should see how he was faring. But you are clearly all right." She gazed closely at him again before stepping back, clearly to depart. "If you can come for Christmas, you would be most welcome."

Harry frowned lightly, remembering their last visit. Snape said, "Owl with the details and we shall see."

She departed with a last long curious look back at Snape. Harry saw her out, wondering at the change in his guardian and whether Pomfrey's potions were still working at him.

In the morning, Harry awoke after an uneasy and frequently broken sleep. He had had a vivid dream of speaking with Sirius through the mirror his godfather had given him. It was very strange, Sirius wanted to know if Severus had arrived all right. Harry wished he really could use the mirror to speak to him, to thank him, but if it ever could have been used for that, the silvering was beyond hope now from the weathering it had received.

Harry was finally drawn from his bed when an owl appeared at the window, one from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry rubbed his eyes, took the letter and discovered it was from Tonks.

Harry, Headmistress McGonagall assures me that Severus is recovering but I think you should take a bit more of a holiday, at least until Severus is back at Hogwarts. Harry blinked at that, feeling suspicious even as he felt grateful. *If Reggie begrudges you the extra time, I'll let him have it.* Harry grinned at that but then his face fell and he bit his lower lip. McGonagall, when Harry had insisted on hearing details, had told him that Rodgers himself had taken Avery away. Harry had no recollection of his trainer that night. There was nothing in his memory but a queer, confused greyness between finding Snape in his office and his guardian's subsequent rousing him in the dispensary, as though a time-turner had been used in between or it had all been a hallucination.

Harry folded the letter and ran his nails along the edge to crease it, then folded it a second time, again creasing it hard. Darkly, he wondered what Rodgers thought of him now. Certainly he had to believe Harry too weak to be an Auror. Harry imagined his trainer would return to treating him twice as hard as his fellows. Well, he would just match whatever Rodgers threw his way, he thought with resolution, to the point where he hoped the man did just that.

Snape was reading the last few days' newspapers at the table when Harry came down. Businesslike, Harry poured himself coffee and sipped it, ignoring its scalding heat. The world felt more stable this morning, less like a wishful delusion. Oddly, thinking of his parents made him feel calm, as though their learning the truth had released some binding inside him that he had been unaware of. He felt light, almost euphoric.

"Did you sleep all right?" Snape asked.

Harry shrugged, not wanting his guardian to worry. "Well, enough."

Snape considered him closely as though assessing the truth of that. An owl came to the window with a letter. Snape waved Harry to remain seated and fetched it himself.

"Where's your cane?" Harry asked.

Not looking up from opening the envelope, Snape said, "I don't seem to need it this morning."

"You're recovered?"

"Well enough to not require a piece of bent wood to get about, yes."

Snape's snide tone made Harry grin. "I *could* go to training tomorrow, then."

"I was thinking of something else, perhaps."

"What?" Harry asked, amused by Snape promoting skiving.

"Some Christmas shopping."

"Somewhere Muggle?" Harry asked hopefully.

Snape's lips twitched as he lowered the letter to peer at Harry over it. "If you insist."

Harry spent a quiet morning in the library studying, answering owls from his friends and idly considering what he might get them tomorrow while he was out. After lunch, since he had an extra day to address his reading list, he settled onto the lounge with the purple book, and tried to read some of it. The weight of the dry text--*The Atmos of the Parallel Planes presents a disquieting conclusion to the visitor that reality is indeed a thin, fragile construct.*-- pulled Harry's poorly-slept eyes closed.

Snape, taking a break from a much-needed re-filing of his papers, stepped into the doorway of the library. The bright noon sun played at the window Harry had expertly removed and replaced with a spell when Avery had come snooping. Harry himself lay asleep, half curled, his arm trapping his book from falling, even though it hung half off the black leather surface. Snape drew it free and flattened its crumpled pages before setting it on the floor because the side table already contained a teetering pile of Harry's reading.

Harry did not stir through any of this. Snape straightened slowly and considered his sleeping face, his especially mussed hair, the fine white line of his lightning scar. The Hero of Wizardry fast asleep, Snape considered, and then additionally, his personal hero as well. Tempered by his knowing how dearly Harry needed him, he failed to bristle at that.

The library was the only room in the house with no hearth, making it far cooler than the drawing room. Snape shrugged out of his sleeveless outer robe and draped it slowly over the sleeping Harry, but even then he could not walk away and return to his parchments. With a broad sigh he sat on the edge of the lounge, leaned slowly back, and draped an arm behind Harry, who continued to sleep as one shorted on proper rest for too many stressful days.

Snape allowed his head to fall back and stared up at the ceiling, absorbing the moment, and resisted squeezing the shoulder beneath his hand, lest he wake his charge. His chest tightened as he felt the burden of Harry's strained emotions, even though they had been noticeably improving and at the moment, were nonexistent. Raising his head, he studied the top of Harry's mussed head and felt an utterly alien pity for his former nemesis James Potter--pity that James was not here in his place. This guardianship Snape had accepted, too lightly it seemed in retrospect, had grown into covetous honor and it felt cruel to be here in Potter's stead.

One day, Harry would rival even Dumbledore for power, but at this moment he needed the shelter of this house and Snape's knowledge and understanding. In response to those simple things Harry returned a fierce loyalty that made everything else extremely easy. One day, too soon, Harry would no longer need these things, but for now Snape felt a burning pride that it was himself in this place, carrying this burden.

Harry shifted as he slept and Snape took that opportunity to pull him closer so that his forehead rested against him. Harry appeared to fall even deeper into calm sleep, making Snape wonder if he should not have been trying to give a bit more affection to him all this time. Harry hadn't given any indication one way or the other, but perhaps he wouldn't know to.

Concerned that perhaps he had been badly remiss in this, yet still bristling at the awkwardness, Snape rubbed Harry's back once, causing his eyes to snap open. Harry seemed rather startled to be held so and Snape read in his green eyes his vague dismay and the certainty that he was too old for this. Snape laughed lightly at the irony that he was just a little bit too late.

"You're doing it again," Harry complained, but rested his head on Snape's shoulder with an expression that hinted at recent pain.

One part of Snape marveled at how ordinary this felt. Soberly, he stated, "Everything is all right."

"I know," Harry said, sounding short on patience with hearing that yet again.

After a silence and thinking of his own renewal, Snape murmured, "'The one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord.' I did underestimate you. You go on defeating him."

"I really didn't do anything," Harry argued.

"Except be yourself . . . your ordinary heroic self."

Harry lifted his head. "Don't *you* start that," he said sharply.

"Only for a few moments," Snape promised.

"Well, all right," Harry conceded reluctantly, but appeared annoyed.

Amused, Snape said, "I do love you, Harry." Only after, realizing that viperous word, that incantation which always threatened to turn and maul the incanter, had slipped out so easily. Snape froze a few breaths before sitting straight, but Harry appeared to have returned to sleeping. Uncertain, Snape asked, "You have no reaction to that?" When all he got in reply was a shrug, Snape pointed out, "I've never said that to you before."

Holding his eyes closed as though intent on returning to his nap, Harry said, "I assumed you did. Why else you've adopted me."

Snape sat in stunned silence, working out if that might actually be true, but in the end decided that it did not matter and returned to his filing, leaving Harry to his well-deserved rest.

Harry woke much later to the hard leather surface against his face and lifted his head. He had not intended to sleep quite so very much, just to rest his eyes briefly. Rubbing his hair, he sat up and discovered the faded robe draped over him and smiled gratefully. Chilled, he slipped it on as he rose to his feet. He found Snape in the drawing room, reading from a stack of parchments.

"Sleep well?" Snape asked.

A bit embarrassed, Harry replied, "Yes." With a sigh and a rub at his gritty eyes, he sat in one of the chairs, first turning it to face the desk as though he were still a student. Snape shifted the stack of parchments and put something smaller aside, something that resembled Dumbledore's last message. Harry asked, "So where are we going tomorrow?"

"I was thinking that Edinburgh is much closer and it would be easier to ferry packages back by Apparation. Unless your range reaches London now."

Harry shook his head. "Not quite. Although I actually haven't tried," he added thoughtfully.

"We will go to Edinburgh then," Snape said decisively.

After a pause Harry said, "I'm glad you're nearly better," with far too much emotion.

With a wry smile Snape said, "I have you to thank for that. You and your godfather."

Harry smiled at that. "It helps to know that old animosity is gone."

"It is quite gone and I'll agree, it helps." Snape steepled his fingers and looked to want to add something, hesitated a long moment, but in the end remained silent with a small frown.

* * *

They Apparated into a wooded area where a narrow trail cut and winded across a steep slope. "Where is this?" Harry asked in confusion.

With a knowing, haughty smile, Snape said, "Follow me."

Around a bend in the trail, they emerged into cloud-broken sunlight halfway up a forested escarpment. Soon their trail joined ordinary pavement and steps before leading across an old cemetery to a busy shopping street. The wind whipped along the pavement, making Harry wish he had on two jumpers under his cloak.

"Let me know where you would like to stop," Snape said.

"Somewhere close-by," Harry returned.

"There is a sizable shopping center ahead if you can hold out."

"Where?" All Harry saw was a large open monument. He wondered if he could manage to hit himself with a warming charm under his cloak without attracting attention. Snape's robes, despite his cloak mostly covering them, already were attracting extra gazes from passing pedestrians.

By the time they turned indoors Harry couldn't feel the fronts of his legs. But contrary to external appearances there was a bustling multilevel shopping center hidden in the hillside. "This is more like it," Harry muttered, shaking off his cloak and blinking in the colorful artificial light radiating from the shop signs.

They wandered along a few shop fronts together. Harry needed to find a glassware shop if he were to buy potion bottles. A stationery store came up on the right. "Maybe I can find something in here," Harry suggested, thinking of Hermione and perhaps Belinda.

"Do you wish to split up?" Snape suggested, hovering at the threshold of the store, beside the security post.

"No," Harry replied immediately, then more lightly added, "Not until I figure out what I'm getting for you."

Snape followed behind as Harry navigated the narrow aisles, muttering about how ugly and cheap Muggle paper supplies were. That was, until a display of hand-held computers caught his eye. One was a student edition displaying the periodic table and other science references. Harry backed up and peered over his shoulder. "Find something you like?"

"It would break, most certainly," Snape commented.

"It would certainly stop working," Harry teased, "You have no place to plug it in."

Snape brushed the shiny metal edge of the display model. "Do you miss the Muggle things you had before, Harry?"

"No, not at all," Harry assured him.

Snape dropped his hand. "Good. I do not think I could tolerate them, even for you."

"They remind me of the Dursleys, especially my cousin, so I'm fine without them." Harry picked up a warm brown leather folder that held a legal pad. "This is nice," he opined. "Some things like this are better from a Muggle store. At least they are always made from a named animal."

"You disapprove of dragonhide?"

"It's fine for fireproof gloves. What I dislike is finding that my boots are made of trollhide and my gloves of seaworm skin." He flipped the folder open and closed a few times. "I think I'll get this for Hermione." By the time they reached the front of the store, Harry had collected a small pile of presents. As he waited in a queue to pay, he added them up. "Um, do you have a few extra pounds I can borrow?" Snape pulled out his coin purse and handed over a stack of twice-folded one-pound notes. "Thanks. Sorry," Harry mumbled, thinking that he had more presents he wanted to get. He should have been saving his allowance more adamantly.

The family ahead of them was debating which relatives were going to be the most annoying to have visit and the current sale was held up because of something to do with 'too many transactions this time of year.' Snape intoned, "Do not apologize, Harry." More quietly, if not oddly pained, he said, "I find myself currently unwilling to withhold anything from you."

Harry ducked his head, surprised and touched by his tone. Feeling sly and half teasing, he asked, "Does that mean I can get a new broom? A prototype Flugenblitzen M3 was in the shop in Diagon Alley last week."

Snape raised a brow and replied sternly, "No you may not. You do not need a new broom in any event."

"Ginny does. I was thinking I could give her my old one. They really want to win the house cup and she had Charlie's old one, which was only decent ten years ago." The queue finally advanced and stacks of photo albums were piled onto the counter.

"As little as I wish to assist with improving Gryffindor's chances, may I suggest you just trade brooms."

"That's a thought," Harry muttered. "Trouble is getting Ginny to go for it without hurting her pride. She's supposed to get a new broom when she finishes school, but that will be too late for the cup." Ahead of them the family was debating which plastic card to use for payment. "How are the sunglasses working out for Suze? She sent me a letter, but she hasn't tried them in a match."

"Very well during practice," he assured Harry. "Unwise of you if you wish for Ms. Weasley's team to win the cup."

As Harry put his stack of things on the counter, he said, "I'm sorta torn. I want Suze to do well, but on the other hand, she has more years to show off after Ginny and most of my Gryffindor friends have finished."

As they exited the shop and stood at the edge of the flow of shoppers going past, Snape said in a reluctant tone, "Is there something *reasonable* that you are hoping for for Christmas?"

Thinking of how much he nearly lost, Harry said, "I have everything I need, Severus."

"Rather difficult to wrap that," Snape complained dryly.

"My first present ever was a birthday cake from Hagrid. It wasn't wrapped." More quietly, in the presence of hundreds of hurrying Muggles carrying thousands of presents, Harry said, "Neither was the one you gave me for my birthday. The ones that can't be wrapped are the best ones."

Their gazes locked a long moment until Snape said, "As usual, you display an odious sentimentality for such things, Potter." But his eyes were just a bit too bright as he made this assertion.

* * *

Early, because he had slept long and sound after a day of Apparating back and forth to Chester and Edinburgh for shopping, Harry stepped downstairs and joined Snape already at the table eating breakfast. Snape finished quickly and hooked a cloak around himself as he stood before the flaming hearth.

Harry stood to see him off, wishing he could stay a little longer but holding back on showing any bit of it. As though reading his thoughts Snape said dismissively, "Christmas is fast approaching." His tone shifted immediately, though, and he added in a softer tone, "Owl if you need anything at all. Owl even if you don't."

"All right," Harry promised, working harder on his forcing down his reluctance at seeing Snape go; he clearly was prepared to depart and even eager since he had to prepare to teach that morning.

Rather than reach for the Floo powder, Snape instead rested his light satchel on the floor and stepped up to Harry. Taking Harry's shoulders in his hands he commanded, "Take care . . . when you are at your training, and otherwise."

"I will," Harry promised.

"And I will see you in two short weeks." Snape appeared to wait for Harry's nod before taking down the Floo powder. "Owl should you need *anything*," he repeated firmly, voice reassuringly full of the promise of swift response.

Later that morning, Harry stepped out into the quiet atrium at the Ministry of Magic. The fountain bubbled musically, drawing him that way as he crossed the open expanse. The translucent, abstract sculpture in the center seemed to radiate light as water coursed down its surfaces; although the glow looked natural rather than magical. The pool was too big for the piece and Harry remembered the larger previous sculpture and the battle that had destroyed it. He had not thought about it in a long time and now considered that he had possessed a laughable amount of skill back then. As he fantasized his current self there now, he felt almost confident with his chances, even alone against the vilest of wizards.

He reached into himself, into that pathway that had drawn him here that night. The path was hollow, empty; Voldemort was gone. Harry not only felt his absolute absence, but had begun to feel he had never been a part of him. Considering that Snape had also freed himself only added to Harry's surge of independence. Standing there in the early light with the water in the fountain glistening, Harry, for the first time, felt truly whole and distinct, and in control of the future.

A figure stepped up beside him, light of foot. Vineet looked over the curves and angles of the fountain with a discriminating eye. "Not a very attractive thing," he observed.

"Better than the last one," Harry opined. Gesturing at the space where each had stood he explained, "It had a man and centaur a goblin and an elf all in these affected poses."

"What happened to them?" Vineet asked.

"Well . . ." Harry said, hesitating with a little cringe. "They leaped to life to protect me from Voldemort. Even the man after his head was knocked off."

Vineet gave Harry a very dubious and disappointed expression. "You cannot believe me so foolish," he stated almost annoyed, crossing his arms to peer along his nose at Harry the way Snape used to.

"I'm not making that up," Harry insisted, then laughed, deep down, in a manner that a few days ago he had not imagined ever doing again. He waved his hand around the atrium and tried to explain the scene more clearly before giving up. "Oh, never mind. It's embarrassing anyway."

Vineet appeared to reconsider Harry's honesty but he changed the topic. "The *Daily Prophet* spoke of nothing this weekend except your capture of the Last Servant of the Unnamed One. Like all stories about you, it seemed lacking in large substantial fact."

Harry hadn't read any of the articles, but he knew everyone intended to keep quiet about Avery having a mission of revenge against a traitor, because it led to uncomfortable, renewed questions about Snape. "It's finally over," he said, feeling unexpectedly gratified.

"Another will rise," Vineet stated authoritatively.

"That's a positive way of thinking."

"Another must rise. It is the way of things, this circle."

Harry, who preferred to consider a straight line leading out from where he stood, resisted this point of view. Although, he figured it naïve to consider that another dark wizard would not rise to power, sometime. "We have a little while though, right?"

"Usually." Grimly, as though speaking only because he felt he had to, arms still crossed, Vineet went on, "The newspaper was mistaken in stating that *all* Death Eaters were in Azkaban, even though the Minister announced this herself."

Harry met his dark brown gaze and held it steadily. "No, she wasn't mistaken." Then he smiled, broadly, couldn't help doing so. Vineet stiffened.

Harry turned back to the sculpture, smiling wryly. "Have you ever seen beyond the veil?"

"No." Then a long pause ensued before, "And you?"

"Yes."

"Did you see the Unnamed One?"

"No, actually," Harry replied. "Just my family . . . my friends." It would have been odd to have seen Voldemort, he considered, but he must be there. For the tenth time he imagined what his father's expression must have been when Snape made his assertion to him. Mixed emotion roiled in him at the vision.

"You would seem to be there now," Vineet offered, sounding awed.

Harry pulled himself straight. "No. I'm here."

The atrium had begun to fill with witches and wizards on their way to work. A familiar voice hailed Harry and Arthur Weasley stepped over and patted him on the shoulder. "How are you, my boy?" he asked in concern.

"I'm fine, Mr. Weasley, thank you."

Mr. Weasley leaned close and, while gripping Harry's upper arm, said, "Minerva told us what happened. An awfully close one, there, my boy."

Harry, attempting lightness although it came out wavering, said, "I don't mean to continue to be so hazardous to those around me."

"Ah, Harry," Mr. Weasley said, sounding far too moved. "This wasn't your doing. *Some* things were set in motion long before your time."

"And it's all right now," Harry added. At Mr. Weasley's confusion, Harry said, "It's hard to explain. Maybe over dinner sometime." He fell silent, thoughts pulled back a few days. But calm flowed through his limbs again and he smiled lightly. "Things are better than you know."

"Well, that would be a change." Mr. Weasley redirected his attention and greeted Vineet. "I hope you are helping keep an eye on him," he said, indicating Harry.

"The attempt is being made," the Indian stated dryly.

As Mr. Weasley said good day, turning his balding rear pate their way, Harry halted him with, "Hey, tell Vineet what happened to the old sculpture."

"Oh, it . . ." He paused and to Harry asked disbelievingly, "You really want me to?" At Harry's sharp look he said, "Well, I wasn't here--just Harry and old Albus Dumbledore, oh and of course He-Who-Shall--"

"Mr. Weasley!" Harry snapped.

"Oh, yes, Voldemort. Sorry, Harry. Apparently Dumbledore used the figures as allies in sending the old, evil bird off."

"Really?" Vineet uttered, still sounding stubborn about believing.

"Intent on killing Harry, he was, and mad as hell about not learning the rest of the prophecy as he'd hoped. The figures were all smashed to bits by the end." He glanced down at his watch. "I have to go. Nice seeing you Harry, do call for dinner soon."

Harry studied the abstract statue again. Parts of it seemed bulky and solid, other parts reached up and out, but the whole thing remained balanced from all angles. Unlike the figures, this one allowed him to define it himself. It could be anything, and he found himself appreciating that for the first time.

"You are very introspective today," Vineet said after a long pause. "And I am believing you about the other statues."

Harry realized that there was real luxury in being harmlessly disbelieved. "I don't have to make things up," he teased.

The deep brown of Vineet's eyes looked a little softer. "Are there any places where memories do not resonate so for you?"

"Not around here."

After a cart loaded with boxes of parchment rattled by, Vineet said, "And there are no free Death Eaters of any sort?"

"Absolutely none," Harry replied confidently.

"Hm. We are late, just to be letting you know."

Harry glanced at the time and they both hurried away. In the lift Harry said, "All right, explain this dark wizard circle to me."

"It is not just dark wizards . . . it is all things that cycle," Vineet patiently lectured.

"Day night day night," Harry offered as he pulled open the gate.

"That is a very obvious example"

"And the good wizard cycle coincides with the bad one, right?" Harry said, getting into this notion.

"Hopefully."

Since they were the first to arrive in the workout room, they pulled the desks away from the wall and arranged the four of them. Harry removed his books from his bag and sat down with blank parchment and a quill, still thinking. Kerry Ann came in, looking underslept. She gave Harry a high-five as she passed. "Good going, Harry. Got them all now."

"Thanks." Harry chewed on the end of his quill before turning to Vineet again. "Can someone read these cycles and know when the next dark wizard is going to appear?"

Vineet's gaze went a little hard. "Some believe they can, but this art is very difficult. When there is a gross imbalance the gods may send an avatar to right things."

"A very powerful wizard, you mean?" Harry prompted.

Vineet didn't respond.

"What are you two on about?" Kerry Ann asked curiously. Rodgers stepped in then, seeming brusque as though he had interrupted something important to come. Aaron dashed in behind him, out of breath, and took his seat with an innocent smile. Rodgers hurriedly straightened his notes and didn't chastise the latecomer.

Harry, sly grin on his lips, leaned over and said to Kerry Ann, "I think Vishnu here is disappointed he didn't get his crack at Voldemort." When Vineet turned to him, eyes narrow and surprised, Harry hit him on the arm and said, "You were welcome to him. How 'bout you take the next one?" Rodgers cleared his throat and Harry dipped into the inkwell and bent over his notebook, quill poised with a ball of fresh ink teetering on the point of it. Harry whispered, still grinning, "Let us know if you need any help. We'll be here."

888 THE END 888

Author's Notes: Thanks to everyone for their comments and encouragement in continuing this beast. Couldn't have done it without you all. Also certainly couldn't have done it without the enormous help of all the beta readers past and present: Amy, Audrey, Nana, Cathal, Jane, Whitney, Stephanie, EC, Kate.

The sequel is Revolution, which is posted as well. The third in the series, Resolution, is a work in progress. An additional chapter was written as a standalone short story for a charity auction. That's entitled Resonance Chapter 23.5.

If you want to join the new chapter/story mailing list send a message to darkirony at gmail dot com.