

For Thine Is The Power

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Warnings: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, abandonment, child abuse, childhood sexual abuse, verbal abuse, mental abuse, rape, mutual non-consensual sex, heterosexual sex, homosexual sex, incestuous relationships, graphic description of physical trauma, self-injury, depression, suicide, character death

Author's Notes:

This story's premise was developed prior to the publication of *Half-Blood Prince*; it thus completely ignores any canon after OOTP. Canon for purposes of this story consists entirely of the first five books, and ignores other published or unpublished work by JKR, her interviews, etc.

Furthermore, it makes small changes to pre-existing canon in order to get several important plot points to work. For example, we must rearrange events slightly on Halloween 1981, most importantly, precisely when Minerva met Hagrid. The reader who is not closely familiar with the Harry Potter timeline may not even notice these details, but for those who are, I assure you that I am (for the most part) quite well aware when I have violated the canon timeline, and have done so only when I could not find a work-around (you are welcome to suggest one, of course!). Additionally, the calendar has been fitted as best I could to the 'real-world' calendar, including the lunar calendar, and thus certain events (again, for example, Halloween 1981) have been moved slightly relative to days of the week or dates of the year.

Some small, unimportant details (for example, the location of Snape's childhood home) may be imported from later canon, but the plot will for the most part be entirely divergent.

The plot for this story is loosely based on the Severitus challenge; I have described it elsewhere as a meta-Severitus, or "what you might think Severitus was if you'd never run across the challenge". Thus there will be a letter, some interesting parental revelations, and a few of the other standard features of Severitus fics, but it will not follow the challenge closely.

Furthermore, this is attempt to write superpowered!Harry and abusive!Dursleys in a 'realistic' way. If this is not your cup of cheese, please go elsewhere; there are plenty of lovely Harry Potter stories that do not include these themes.

As for brit-picking, my general rule is that I will make substitutions of more British words for American ones if and only if the British word is well-known to me as an American, and does not mean something different in my dialect. Thus while Harry wears trainers, he cooks on a stove, for to me a 'cooker' is at best a separate appliance unrelated to the stove and worse is rarely used as a word by itself. Furthermore, in order to make the timeline work, I have had to make several minor changes to the timing of Hogwarts terms, and thus the British reader is warned that in my universe Hogwarts functions on a semester schedule similar to my own university, in which term begins the first week of September and ends roughly the last week of May; students returned on the Hogwarts Express after fifth year on the 1st of June.

Lastly, you may notice some odd vocabulary choices, particularly in more specialized terms and in the incantations for spells (especially those readers with a better understanding

of Latin). I have presumed that in a population relatively isolated from the Muggle world, such as pureblood society, some linguistic drift would occur, especially in the realm of specialized vocabulary. Thus, for example, you will see ‘temblor’ used where a Muggle would use ‘tremor’ (indeed, you may notice that Harry uses this alternate term himself); this is not an error as I am well aware that in our world ‘temblor’ refers specifically to an earthquake but rather an example of this postulated linguistic drift.

All that said, please enjoy the story.

CHAPTER 1



The Dursleys

It is hot here today.

Harry stared at the paper in front of him and gnawed on his quill.

I am doing well.

Did that sound too formal? He changed the period to a comma and added *despite the heat. I have an old hat of Aunt Petunia's that keeps the sun off when I do chores.* There. That was better. But would Uncle Vernon be upset about the mention of chores? Would he think Harry was trying to make “them” think he wasn’t being treated right?

I don't mind weeding the garden, even in the heat. I like seeing Aunt Petunia's plants grow.

There: worst case scenario, Uncle Vernon would make him work indoors from now on—and Harry wasn’t sure he’d care, what with how hot the summer was shaping up to be.

Do you know when we are supposed to get our OWL scores? I'm sure Hermione knows. I can't decide whether I want to get mine or not.

He chewed on the end of his quill again. Better stop there; he’d get taunted all summer about how stupid he supposedly was if he wrote more about the OWLs. Ron could read between the lines—and if he couldn’t, Hermione certainly could, and he knew she’d demand to see the letter no matter whose name he put on the outside. She was living at Headquarters already; their first letter had said they couldn’t say why but they were safe now.

“Boy!” The shout from the dining room made him start, a drop of ink falling from his pen and making a splotch on the paper over the word “today”. Swearing under his breath, Harry carefully blotted it and re-wrote the word. “Don’t use that kind of language in my house, boy.” His uncle glared at him from the door.

“Sorry, Uncle Vernon.”

“Make sure you tell them about Friday. I don’t want any freaks ruining this for me.”

Harry held back a sigh. “Yes, Uncle Vernon.” He bent back to the paper.

Uncle Vernon reminded me to tell you that he has an important visitor coming Friday evening, and to please not be worried if my letter is a day late. He doesn't want Hedwig flying in the window and startling his visitor. Please don't send me any post that day using any other birds either.

Hopefully the twins wouldn't get any bright ideas.

"Well, boy? What's taking so long?"

Give my regards to everyone.

He quickly signed his name and blew on the ink. Before he could check to be sure it had dried properly, the paper was snatched out of his hand. His uncle peered at the paper, lips moving silently as he read it.

"Acceptable." The paper was tossed down in front of him. "Well?"

Silently Harry folded it and slipped it into an envelope, then wrote his own return address on the flap and Ron's name on the other side. The envelope was snatched from his hands as well.

"Where's the address?" Uncle Vernon peered at him suspiciously.

"I can't write it down." Harry kept himself from rolling his eyes. This was the sixth time they'd had this conversation—and the sixth letter he had mailed this summer. "Hedwig will know where to go without it."

"Freak bird." But the other man headed towards the garage anyway. Harry could hear him opening Hedwig's cage. "Ow! Stupid bird!" Hedwig made a noise that Harry knew meant she wanted food. "OW!"

Harry couldn't stop himself. He peered into the garage, spotting his uncle shaking his left hand and glaring at the owl, who was glaring back. "Err, Uncle Vernon?" He took a hesitant step into the garage. "I think she's a bit hungry..."

The glare Vernon gave him would have rivaled the *cruciatus*, if looks were spells. "I spend enough feeding you, you miserable brat, now you want me to coddle your freakish owl too?"

Harry's stomach gave a low growl at the mention of food, which he prayed his uncle hadn't heard. Still—he was used to this treatment, but Hedwig was just an owl; she deserved better. "Err, well, if you let her out more often to hunt—"

His uncle's backhand caught him across the glasses and threw him into the door jam. "Do. Not. Question. Me. In my own house, boy!" Uncle Vernon turned back to the cage. "Take the bloody letter and go, you freakish bird, or you'll be dinner instead!"

Instead, her eyes fixed on Harry where he leaned against the door jam, and she gave a plaintive chirp. *Go, Hedwig.* Harry thought forcefully, hoping his face would convey his message. She tilted her head one way, and then the other, as Vernon's face turned redder and redder. Finally, just as Harry was sure he was going to explode, Hedwig hopped to the door of her cage and held out a leg. Uncle Vernon thrust the letter at her, and she took it, then launched herself through the cage door and out the open garage window. They both

watched her go, Uncle Vernon mumbling viciously under his breath and Harry wishing he'd figured out some way to tell her to stay—or at least some way to tell Mrs. Weasley to feed her up while she was there.

“Boy!” Vernon’s angry voice startled Harry again. “Why are you just standing there? There’s chores to be done!”

“Yes, Uncle Vernon.” Harry turned to go, but a meaty hand on his shoulder stopped him.

“And for that bird’s behavior, boy, you’d better finish them by dinnertime or there’ll be no food for you. Understand me?”

Harry’s anger flared but he stomped on it with skill born of five years of potions lessons with Snape. “Yes, Uncle Vernon.”

“Good.” His uncle smirked at him. “Here’s the list.”

Harry’s eyes widened involuntarily as he skimmed it, and his anger flared, more strongly this time. “There’s no way I can finish th—” His uncle raised his fist and Harry stopped mid-word, paling. “I mean, yes, Uncle Vernon.” He resolved to figure out some way to snatch leftovers later that evening.

“That’s better, boy. Now, get started.”

Grabbing the old hat off its peg, Harry returned to the back yard and the weeding, pulling the hat low around his ears. So far this had been an exceedingly frustrating summer.

You knew it was too good to last, he chided himself as he trundled the old wheelbarrow over to the next flower bed. *You should have known better than to let yourself care about things*. He’d survived before by just not having anything Uncle Vernon could use against him. It was really Hedwig that caught him in a bind, though he didn’t want to see his wand—*Or Dad’s cloak*—go up in flames as Uncle Vernon kept threatening. But his owl—all his uncle had to do to her was lock up the garage for a week and do nothing. *And if there’s one thing my uncle excels at, it’s doing nothing and watching someone else suffer for it*.

He just wished he knew why. The last time he could remember things being this bad was... *Seven? Eight? Must have been eight. Piers had just got braces*. Back then Grunnings had had financial trouble, and they’d all been terrified Vernon would come home with a pink slip. *But Grunnings is doing so well—he brags about it every night!*

He couldn’t really blame Aunt Petunia for protecting herself and Dudley, either. Wouldn’t he rather his uncle took his anger out on someone else? No one liked getting beaten, or whatever. Besides, even if he wasn’t allowed to use magic, he was a wizard; he healed faster than Petunia or Dudley. It made sense for him to be the one getting beaten if anyone had to.

He supposed he really should be angry at the whole thing, but what was the point? He was stuck there, and Uncle Vernon had his wand and owl hostage against good behavior. Besides, being angry took so much energy...

He moved on to the next flower bed, hands moving in a well-practiced rhythm that barely needed any conscious direction. For a few minutes he allowed himself to fantasize about Moody showing up and finding out what Uncle Vernon was doing. He’d hex the fat Muggle so hard...

...but then the daydream soured as the imaginary Moody began berating him for not being a good enough wizard. *All I wanted to do was keep Hedwig safe!* he argued with the imaginary man.

Harry shook his head rapidly to dispel the daydream. *All I have to do is get through the summer. I'm a Gryffindor. I can do this.*

Hi Harry!

It's been hot here, too. Even the twins have been lethargic. Ha! There's my word for the day! Hermione's been ~~foreing~~ encouraging me to do vocabulary revision with her every day. Every day we get a new word that we have to figure out how to use in a real sentence that day. Today's word was "lethargic". ~~Take that, Herm-~~

The last few words were crossed out very firmly, and the writing suddenly changed to Hermione's neater script.

Ron likes to complain about the vocabulary lessons, but honestly, I think he enjoys it.

Harry suspected Ron enjoyed Hermione's attention more than the lessons.

We should get our OWLs back roughly a week before the end of July. I know how you feel, Harry; I'm terrified of reading mine! I can't decide whether I never want to get them back or whether I want it over with already!

The writing changed back to Ron's messy scrawl.

I think she's mad—I just want it over with already. A week doesn't give us much time to decide what to continue with. I overheard Professor Dumbledore saying that they would be sending the letters out the first week of August, and they needed to know by then what we would be taking for the year!

DumbleProfessor Dumbledore says to tell you that he will make sure nobody sends you owls on Friday, and that if an emergency came up he would get ahold of you via "your neighbor". Oh! When Hedwig got here she looked awful hungry. Mum fed her until she wouldn't eat anymore. She said to tell you that if you're out of owl treats, she'd be happy to send you some with the next letter.

We said hello to everyone for you, and they say hi back.

Ron and Hermione

Harry slipped the letter back into its envelope and hid it back under the floorboard. Just as he did, he heard steps coming up the stairs. Quickly he stood and backed away from the bed towards his desk—he did not want her to know about his hiding spot. Not that there was anything of great importance there at the moment, but just in case there ever were. . . .

“Here’s your dinner, boy. The guests will be here in an hour. Remember, no noise!”

To his shock, the plate contained a tiny sliver of roast along with a few spoonfuls of mashed potatoes and a handful of limp lettuce. *I guess she really wants me to be quiet.* “Aunt Petunia?” he called out quietly just as he heard her footsteps start to move away. They returned.

“What?”

“D’you think I could get another one of my books from my trunk?” Harry swore he had read every sentence in his transfiguration text six times. He bit his lip and waited, but after a few seconds with absolutely no response he continued. “Reading’s quiet. . . .”

“I don’t have time for this, boy!” she said irritably. He heard her footsteps hurry away towards the bedroom. Shrugging—it had been worth a try—he bent and retrieved his plate before heading back to the bed. He had finished the potatoes and was trying to decide between saving the roast for last and eating it now when her footsteps returned. “Here. You can read about normal people.” A mangled book was thrust through the cat flap and she hurried off again, this time down the stairs.

His mouth hung open in shock for a few seconds before he came to his wits. He thrust the roast into his mouth and chewed it while he fetched the book, turning it over to read the title. *History of England*, 11th edition, by Copeland and Stout. One of Dudley’s textbooks, then. He wondered why she was trusting him with it, even if the back cover had been torn off already. The inside front cover answered his questions, however, as it read “Dudley Dursley, First Form”. Oh well. At least it was a book.

Absently sticking a piece of his lettuce in his mouth, he opened it to a random spot in the sixteenth century and began to read.

To his surprise, the history textbook was actually interesting. Admittedly part of the interest was looking at all the stupid (and poorly done) drawings Dudley had made in the margins, but he was actually enjoying fitting together the Muggle version of history with what he remembered from Binns’ classes. At the moment he was reading about Battle of St Mathieu on 10th August, 1512. He seemed to recall a similar battle from his History of Magic class, except that the main parties in that case had been a pair of feuding wizard clans. He wondered if they were the same battle.

A noise from downstairs almost made him lift his head, but Lord Admiral Howard won out over the curiosity. *That almost sounds like owl post*, Harry thought as he turned the page, but dismissed the thought. Everyone knew not to write to him today. It was probably just his aunt shaking out the napkins or something. He snorted at the nickname for the *Henri Grâce à Dieu*, his imagination conjuring up an image of the Slytherin side

of the history classroom, including an image of Malfoy making snarky remarks. *Of course, then Ron would probably deck him, and then we'd all get detention for fighting.* He could practically hear Hermione now. “Ron! And you, H—”

“HARRY POTTER!!!”

The bellow from downstairs was unmistakable. He heard his uncle’s heavy tread stomping up the stairs, and behind it, his aunt’s voice. “No! Not the roast! No! Get away, you filthy beast!”

His uncle had reached his door and was flinging open the locks with so much force the door rattled. Harry got warily to his feet, book forgotten on the bed beside him. He could hear his uncle cursing at the final lock as he struggled with it, but then it turned and his uncle flung the door wide open. Vernon’s face had already passed red into purple. “What did you do, freak?” he hissed. Harry took an involuntary step back as his uncle continued, spittle flying. “I told you, no owls today! They have *ruined* your aunt’s *roast!* Well? Don’t you have anything to say for yourself, freak?”

“Uncle Vernon, I—”

But his step back had revealed the book on his bed, and Uncle Vernon’s face went even more purple. Harry began to worry that his heart would burst and his aunt would claim Harry had killed him. “Stealing Dudley’s property are you now, boy?” He strode over to the bed and seized the book.

“Aunt—”

He had only time to get the one word out before Uncle Vernon noticed the torn-off back cover and howled incoherently, too angry to form words. He swung the book through the air at Harry, who tried to duck. Unfortunately, the only result was that the book hit Harry on the head instead of the shoulder, causing him to fall to his knees and see stars. As he tried to focus properly and stand up again, his uncle hit him again, this time with his left fist, over-balancing the boy. Harry sprawled at his uncle’s feet, who spat at him and stalked out the door. The sound of the locks clicking back into place sounded very loud in Harry’s pounding head.

Harry sat bolt upright in bed, the movement causing his already aching head to throb, staring around frantically. After a moment he relaxed—he was not, in fact, back in the Ministry, and Sirius Black had not just appeared in front of him, wand out, cruciatus curse on his lips.

That last thought made tears spring to his eyes once more. He would gladly take an angry, vengeful Sirius over none at all. *Besides, I deserve any vengeance he’d mete out to me anyhow—I am the one who went and got him killed.* Harry rolled over and put his chin down on his folded hands. Why couldn’t Bellatrix’s curse have hit him, instead? He’d rather be dead than live without. . .

He chastised himself for this selfishness. *You know you’re the one with the “power to vanquish” Voldemort, and all that. Die, and the hope of the Wizarding world dies with you. How could you be so selfish?* But it didn’t make him feel any better about living when Sirius was dead.

For one insane moment Harry imagined going after Voldemort immediately—well, as immediately as he could, that being when his uncle decided to unlock the door. Harry wondered if telling his uncle he was off to get himself killed would get the man to free him. *Get that dying at the hands of the other business over and maybe someone else will be able to defeat him.* After all, the prophecy implied that Voldemort would be able to live after killing Harry—maybe it meant he'd be properly mortal again too?

No. He owed it to his friends to at least have a plan before going. A will would probably also come in handy. And then there were a few things he really need to say to certain people before he got himself killed. . .

“Headmaster, do you have a minute?”

Albus Dumbledore glanced up at the doorway. “I will in just one moment, Remus.” He read the last paragraph of the parchment sitting in front of him, then picked up a quill and signed at the bottom. “There.” He leaned back and sighed softly. “What can I do for you, my boy? Lemon drop? Tea?”

Remus Lupin hesitantly entered the office and sat down in front of Albus’s desk. “No thank you, and yes please. It’s about Harry.” He watched the older man pour. “One lump please.”

Albus added the requested sugar and handed the cup to Remus. “How is Harry doing?”

“That’s just the thing, Headmaster—”

“Albus, please.”

“Albus. He’s late, writing.” Remus’s eyes caught the brief flash of—something—across the other man’s face, but it was gone before he could categorize the look.

“I thought he wrote to us to inform us that his post would be late.”

“Indeed, but I assumed—we all assumed—that he meant he would be a day late, two days at the outside if he had to send Hedwig away.” Remus gestured with the hand not holding the teacup. “By all our estimates, even with bad weather or one of the new ministry searches and a heavy load—and we’ve checked the weather plots—Hedwig should be no more than thirty hours in flight from Surrey to Headquarters. That means that we should have received word from him by Tuesday morning.”

The headmaster glanced up at the calendar he kept on one wall. “It’s Wednesday afternoon, Remus—”

“I know, I know, we shouldn’t panic yet, but. . .” the younger man trailed off. He ran a hand through his hair and grimaced.

“Are you sure he hasn’t simply forgotten that he did not write on Friday?”

“Even so, he should have written by Monday at the latest, and so we should have gotten his next letter by now.”

“Perhaps it is late?” Albus saw the other man’s expression and sighed. “No, you are right. The boy has written—what, five letters?—all exactly two days apart. It is unusual behavior, to say the least.”

“Six.”

“Eh?”

“Six letters.”

“Ah. Right.” The headmaster paused. “Could you hand me that box with the crystal on top, the one on the third—Yes, that one.” He took the item and placed both hands on the lid and stared fixedly at the crystal. After a moment, the crystal glowed bright green, pulsing quickly. Albus took his hands away, although the crystal continued to glow for a few seconds after. “The wards, including the new ones we added this summer, are functioning properly, and there have been no intrusions. I am hesitant to send someone to check on him yet, especially right now.”

“Er—”

“That’s right, the owl won’t have gotten to Headquarters yet.” Albus’s smile returned, gaining a predatory air. “The hearing is scheduled for Friday just before tea, and if all goes well, we can hold the reading first thing Saturday morning.”

Remus’s troubled expression cleared momentarily, and he grinned wolfishly. “That is good news, Albus.”

“However, if I send someone across the wards now—”

“—the ministry will know, and send someone of their own, and possibly derail the whole thing. Damn that Fudge. I wish we’d been able to keep him from adding his own wards.”

“Now, Remus, is that any way to talk about our illustrious Minister?” Remus blinked. That tone was almost worthy of Snape. “We shall simply have to hope that Harry can hang on until Saturday noon. By then this should all have been settled.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“I don’t know Remus.” The headmaster felt all of his one hundred and fifty-six years weighing on him with that question. “I don’t know.”

Harry was busy staring at his ceiling, watching the reflection from the neighbor’s car top move across it. *Surely they must have noticed by now that I haven’t sent a letter!* He had been sure someone would come for him by Wednesday. *Or is it only Tuesday?* He counted on his fingers, concentrating. No, he was certain it was Wednesday. Well, pretty sure anyway.

He licked dry lips, then forced himself to stop. His aunt had shoved a glass of water through the flap the day before, but he couldn’t be sure when he would get more. He suspected she had done it without his uncle’s knowledge, remembering Uncle Vernon’s angry words to him on Friday.

He had worked out from his uncle’s rant that for some reason a small pack of owls had descended on the Dursley home just before dinner on Friday previous, gaining entry through a front window left open for the cleaning detergent smells to dissipate through. His aunt and uncle had been furious and had attempted to chase them out of the house, at which point they had taken revenge by, ah, soiling his aunt’s table—and the food on it.

Luckily for Harry, his uncle had been able to convince the important visitor that the Dursley’s stove had had a bit of a malfunction, and had been able to put off the dinner until

the next Friday with a visit to a restaurant that night. However, the man's last words—floating clearly up the stairs to Harry's bedroom—had sealed his fate. "I can accept excuses once," the man had said, "but not twice. You must prove to me that you are the man for the job."

Harry had known then that he was doomed. Sure enough, no sooner had the visitor left than Uncle Vernon had stomped upstairs and screamed at Harry. "You'll not get anything more from us, boy!" had been his parting words, even as he threw a bucket at Harry's head. Harry had sighed resignedly, recognizing the words—and smelly, stained bucket—that meant being locked in with no meals for a while.

At first Harry had been glad to get off with nothing more than a few days without food. But as the next day, and the day after, had worn on, he had come to realize that his uncle hadn't just meant food—he had meant water, too. That was when Harry had started to panic.

On Sunday, Uncle Vernon had taken Dudley—somewhere, Harry had only caught a few words, something about games. Harry had been startled when his aunt's hand shoved a large glass of water through the cat flap not two minutes after his uncle had left. By then, he had been smart enough to ration it out, making it last until Monday afternoon. But the one she had given him Tuesday had been smaller, and he was so thirsty—

Quit wallowing in self-pity, Potter.

Harry's mental voice had begun sounding more and more like Snape as the weekend wore on. Now it came complete with greasy hair and nose. He found himself wondering when it would begin swishing its robes as it walked.

He rolled on his side and curled up into a ball. Surely the Order would notice his silence. They would come for him. He just had to be strong.

Harry lay on his side, contemplating his future. Rescue was looking increasingly less likely as time wore on. He might have been able to escape if he'd done so immediately, but he'd been sure Aunt Petunia wouldn't let him die. Now he'd been so long without food and enough water that, again, the chances of successfully managing it were grim.

He'd already tried deliberately summoning his magic, hoping to get someone to send him an owl with a warning at least, because then he could use the owl to write the Order. He'd managed to set his desk on fire—it was now cracked and blackened slightly on top, and his sheet smelled like smoke where he'd used it to put the fire out. His attempts at wandless *alohomora* spells had failed, as had his attempts to blow the door up. He'd tried *aguamenti* but had only managed to scald his mouth with the steam he'd produced. Since it seemed all he could manage was heat, he'd briefly thought about setting the door on fire, but he was rather worried the Dursleys would leave him to burn alive, and he wasn't quite that desperate. Yet.

Could he even die that way? What about the prophecy? What would happen to it then? He couldn't quite see any way to interpret roasting himself alive as "at the hands of the other", but that didn't necessarily mean he'd survive. Maybe it would invalidate the

whole prophecy? *In which case, finding some way to off myself might be the best thing I could possibly do for the Order.*

He thought longingly of being dead, with no prophecies hanging over him or murderous Dark Lords wanting him worse than dead. Just Dumbledore's vaunted "next adventure"—and if he were really lucky, his parents. . . and Sirius.

On the other hand, what if he did survive? What if he survived as a burnt-up useless husk, barely clinging to life until Voldemort showed up to finally off him? That would suck even harder.

He decided he wasn't quite desperate enough to set himself on fire. Yet.

He tried to crack one eye open, but the world swirled around him even worse than before, and he closed it again. Still, he had gotten what he wanted from the brief peek: it was just past six o'clock in the evening on Friday, and his uncle's guest was due any time now.

Maybe after he leaves Vernon will let me drink again. Even the thought was bleary and wavery in his head. He wanted food, too, but water—water was what he wanted most. By now he was certain the Order wasn't coming for him. *What did I do wrong?* a small voice cried in the cupboard in the back of his mind, but most of him just wished that either his uncle would hurry up and give him water, or that he would hurry up and die. The smells from downstairs were the worst, he thought. He could smell the roasted ham. . . and the lemonade. . .

Outside, a car pulled up. Harry heard the engine turn off, and the Dursley's front door open.

"Mr. Volkens. What a pleasure." That was his uncle. The car door slammed. "You met my wife, Petunia."

"Do please come in." His aunt now. "And you recall our son, Dudley Dursley."

"Pleased to see you, Mr. Volkens."

"Such a charming home, Mrs. Dursley." The front door closed. "Thank you, Dudley."

"Dinner will be on the table shortly, Mr. Volkens. Please, have a seat while I take the roast out of the oven."

Harry heard his aunt moving in the kitchen, and the smells increased dramatically. His mouth tried to water and failed. He prayed to anyone that would listen that this would be the end of his torment. *Please, just one glass of water. One plate of food. Or just give me my wand.* He would take having it snapped for underage magic over this kind of torment any day.

"Dudley, run up and wash, dear. May I get you something to drink, Mr. Volkens?"

The word intensified Harry's need even more. *Please. . . give me something to drink. . . Or just my wand, I can conjure the bloody water.* He did his best to tune out the sounds and smells from downstairs—no need to torment himself further.

Something clattered on the floor near the cat flap. Harry's head came up.

On the floor was sitting a plate heaped with roast and potatoes. Next to it was a glass filled with sweet, clear water.

Harry was across the bedroom in seconds. He wavered on his feet as the floor beneath him seemed to roll, but managed to stay upright until he got to the glass. He fell on it and gulped the whole thing down, ignoring the cramps from his parched stomach. Thirst briefly slaked, he turned to the roast, but what was lying next to the plate stopped him cold.

It was eleven inches of holly and phoenix feather.

Something odd is going on here.

Perhaps Aunt Petunia had taken pity on him, although it would be like Uncle Vernon to give him his wand in hopes that he would perform underaged magic. Making Harry choose between dying of thirst or getting his wand snapped would be just his style. His eyes darted around the room and fixed on his bed frame. Carefully Harry tucked the wand along the metal of the bed frame, hidden against the mattress. Then he returned to devour the food.

“Get my coat!” The roar from downstairs froze him with meat halfway to his mouth. “I warned you, Dursley. And then you pull some sort of prank on me? You will be lucky if you have a job tomorrow!”

Oh, shite. Harry listened as Uncle Vernon sputtered at the man, but then the door slammed. A car engine turned over outside, and roared off into the night. The stairs shook as his uncle’s heavy tread pounded up them. *Bloody hell.* Briefly he considered going for his wand and breaking out the window, but then his uncle was turning the locks and it was too late.

“What the hell is going on, boy?”

Harry backed away from the door. It swung open and knocked over the glass, which rolled over under the bed. Uncle Vernon looked down and spotted the plate of food. He turned from red to purple, and appeared to be having difficulty speaking, advancing on Harry with a murderous look on his face. “So it was you, you worthless freak. I should have thrown you out when I had the chance.”

Harry was backed into the corner now, and Vernon was looming over him. “You’re worse than your worthless father, you ungrateful brat!” The first fist caught him on the forearm. “You should have died with your freak parents!” The second hit his shoulder and slammed his head into the wall. “I should kill you now and do the world a favor!” Another blow. He knew his uncle was still screaming but he couldn’t make out the words somehow. And then there was just pain.

Remus and Minerva McGonagall both came to their feet as the Headmaster entered the office. He had dark smudges under his eyes, but the eyes themselves were twinkling brightly and he was smiling madly.

“You were able to obtain it, then?” Minerva managed to speak first.

Albus held out a scroll to her. “The debate went until nearly midnight, but it is here. Once we start, they cannot do anything to stop us.”

Remus peered at the scroll. “Any idea how long this will take, Albus?” His voice was worried.

“I have no idea, Remus, but as soon as we reach the relevant sections I will floo someone to check on the boy.” The headmaster’s twinkle diminished slightly. “There has been no word?”

Remus shook his head slightly. Minerva looked over at him, then at the Headmaster. “What is this all about, Albus?”

“Harry has not written since Wednesday last.” Remus’s voice was flat. “Moreover, Pigwidgeon came back last night—with our letter still attached.”

“And you have not checked on him?” She stared at Dumbledore. “I thought he was to write every three days, or someone would go.”

“He wrote to us to tell us that his uncle had a dinner engagement Friday last and he would likely be late writing,” Dumbledore explained. “Further, the Ministry announced its plan to intercept random owls on Wednesday. Thus we did not begin to worry until Monday, by which time plans were in motion.”

“He had better be all right, Albus.” McGonagall’s stare was icy.

“I pray he is all right, too, but we could not let this slip away from us.”

“The sooner we begin to read, the sooner we can do something,” Remus broke into their argument.

“You are quite right, Remus, as usual.” Albus sounded relieved. Minerva merely nodded, her mouth compressed into a line. “Shall I begin, or would one of you prefer to do the honors? Remus?”

“I... I don’t think...” Remus’s voice broke.

“No, you are quite right. I should not have asked. Minerva?”

“Very well, Albus, I will begin.” She gave the older man one last stare, then unrolled the parchment in her hand and began to read. “We, James Horatio Potter and Lily Evans Potter, do hereby make, publish, and declare this to be our Last Will and Testament, on this third of July the Year of the Muggle Lord Nineteen Hundred and Eighty-One.

“Should our son, Harry James Potter, or any future children that we may have, be under age at the time of our deaths, we do request and authorize Sirius Orion Black to be their sole legal guardian.” Remus made a muffled sound that might almost have been a sob. “In the event that Sirius Orion Black is not available, has died, or is otherwise deemed unacceptable, we declare Harry James Potter and any future children that we may have to be wards of Albus Dumbledore.” The headmaster leaned back with a relieved sigh. “Should Albus Dumbledore be unavailable, dead, or otherwise deemed unacceptable, we declare Harry James Potter and any future children that we may have to be wards of Arthur Weasley or whomever Arthur Weasley’s heir may be if Arthur Weasley is unavailable, dead, or otherwise deemed unacceptable.” She paused, causing both Albus and Remus’s eyes to flicker up to her face, which had gone quite pale but for two bright red spots on her cheeks. Sounding as if she wished the words were hexes, she continued, “Under no circumstances whatsoever is our son, or any future children we may have, to go to, live with, or associate with Vernon Dursley, Petunia Dursley, or any of their issuance, unless of his own choosing after he is of age.”

No sooner had she finished the sentence than an unholy caterwauling burst forth from

the corner of the room, causing Minerva to jump like a startled cat. But what made her nearly drop the scroll was the look on Albus Dumbledore's face. She had seen the headmaster angry, appalled, irritated, and even worried. This was the first time she had ever seen him appear frightened.

Even as she recognized the expression on his face, he was up from his chair and crossing to the fireplace with two long strides. Grabbing a generous handful of floo powder out of a tin, he knelt and threw it down. "Auror Headquarters!"

Shacklebolt's head appeared after a second, expression changing as the wailing alarm penetrated. "Headmaster! Wh—"

Dumbledore cut him off. "Zulu! I repeat, Zulu! Zulu!"

Shacklebolt's face went pasty, and his head disappeared without another word.

Slowly, leaning heavily on the mantle, Albus hoisted himself back up and turned to face the other two. Minerva was staring at him with an expression somewhere between worry and frustration. Remus was in the corner rummaging around. "It's the box with the crystal," Albus said, but Remus was already turning around with the box in his hand.

"Why is the crystal red, Headmaster?" the werewolf asked, but instead of answering immediately, Albus took the box from him and waved his wand over it. Everyone gave a sigh of relief as the horrible noise shut off, although the crystal continued to glow a bloody red, pulsing regularly. Albus set the box down carefully on his desk, staring at it as he sunk back down into his chair.

"Headmaster?" Minerva's voice was concerned.

He glanced back up at the pair of them, looking between him and the box with nearly identical expressions of worry. "It means the wards are down." He looked back down at the box, but to his disappointment it was still strobing red. "Harry is unprotected."

He swam back up to consciousness with the thought that this time it did, indeed, feel rather like swimming. He had always rather thought that was a cliché. Then the pain penetrated, and he could not help moaning a bit. Opening his eyes, he became aware of two things: first, that it was daylight, and secondly, that he was on his bed at the Dursleys. A third thought penetrated: someone had been vomiting. By the strength of the smell, Harry thought it might have been himself.

He attempted to find his glasses, but moving his arm hurt too much. On the other hand, it wasn't like there was anything to see. In fact, he decided, he would rather not see what he looked like just then, thank you, especially if the smell of vomit was indeed his own fault.

He closed his eyes, and went back to drifting.

Some time later—he thought it was later, but it could have been only a few seconds—he felt something change. Frowning a bit, he opened his eyes again, but could not put a finger on what it had been. It had felt almost like a wind blowing through the room, but he was sure his window and door were closed. He forced himself to slowly move his hand towards where he had hidden his wand the night before. The pain forced his breath out between

his teeth, and he felt at least one wound re-open, but there was the familiar, smooth wood under his fingers. His thumb and forefinger didn't seem to want to grasp it properly, but working slowly he was able to use his middle and ring fingers to pull it up onto the bed with him.

He had almost managed to work his hand closed around the wand when he heard a sound that made him fling up his head, causing sparks to appear for one endless second.

Pop. Pop. There was no mistaking those pops: someone, or someones rather, had just apparated onto the front lawn.

Now he knew what the odd sensation had been: the wards dropping. He was sure by now that the Order had forgotten him—which left only one group that could possibly be.

Shite. Where can I hide? He was altogether too exposed on the bed—if they walked in on him like this, he would be dead as soon as they could raise their wands. He didn't think he could possibly make it to the wardrobe, even if he could fit inside. Behind the desk? No, not enough room. The front door opened, and he knew he was out of time. He grasped his wand as best he could and rolled off the far side of the bed, against the wall, pulling the sheet he had been lying on off after himself. He felt something give in his side, and blacked out for another endless second—but from here he had a clear view of bottom of the door. He shoved the glass, which was still under the bed, out of his way with the tip of his wand and cursed silently as it rolled across the floor to stop on the far side of the door. He could have used that as a weapon.

Someone stepped on the creaky sixth stair and muttered a curse. The voice was masculine, and sounded almost familiar. Harry ran down the list of Death Eaters he had met in his head. *Malfoy? No...* He just couldn't remember any of their voices well enough to decide who it was.

Then the same voice began whispering, and the locks began turning, and Harry gripped his wand even more tightly, ignoring the red haze around the edge of his vision. The door would swing towards him—there it went—and then he just had to wait for someone to decide it was safe and step inside—

“Oh, Merlin,” a feminine voice whispered. “There's fresh blood on the bed—and look, the desk is scorched. They beat us to him.”

“Bloody *hell*,” the masculine voice said from the hallway, cracking halfway through. “We'll search anyway. We need to be *absolutely* sure he's missing before we go back.” There was a pause. “*God* but I don't want to be the one to have to tell him.”

Harry frowned. He hadn't thought the Death Eaters had many active women in their ranks, except for Bellatrix, and he wouldn't have thought they'd be so distressed over someone murdering him before they could. But he wasn't willing to take chances—there, a foot!

“Ow!” The owner of the foot had found his glass, and tripped over it, before he could aim his wand. And suddenly, with a rush of hope that left him lightheaded, Harry knew to whom that voice belonged.

“Tonks?” His voice was weak, but by the pair of indrawn breaths, he knew he'd been heard.

Two pairs of feet hurried into the room. “Harry?” Now he recognized the other one as Shackbolt, even as Tonks’s “Thank Merlin!” overlapped with his query.

“Over h—” his voice went out halfway through. “Bed.” he managed to croak. He tried to clear his throat, but the feet were coming the right direction and he lay still instead.

And then there was a face, no two faces, peering over at him. He felt hands touching his shoulder and couldn’t stop the yelp of pain that escaped, just as he couldn’t stop the automatic jerk away from the hands that cracked his head against the wall and sent him back down into darkness.

“Harry is unprotected.”

Minerva’s face went white. Remus’s eyes went yellow. His fists clenched, and Albus’s hand went to his wand. But then the werewolf’s fists unclenched, and his eyes slowly reverted to a dark amber. “If . . .” the younger man’s voice failed briefly. “Where will the aurors take him?”

“They have emergency port-keys for the hospital wing, where they will take him whether or not Harry is injured. I am certain they will find him quickly, but—would you run over and ask Poppy to prepare anyway?” Albus placed his hands on his desk and began to lever himself up. “Minerva and I will meet you there.”

Remus was out of the room before he had finished the sentence.

Minerva came around the desk and took his elbow, helping him up. Once up, he gently shook her off, smiling at her to soften what could have been an insult. She met his eyes, and he could read in them the worry that filled her, the sick fear of what could be happening to Harry now. “He will be all right, Minerva,” he told her softly. “Harry is a strong boy.”

She bit her lip, but was silent.

Albus thought the walk to the hospital wing had never been so long.

Shackbolt swore softly but fervently as Harry flinched away from his soft touch, head hitting the wall, green eyes going vacant and fluttering shut. “Harry? Can you hear me?”

Tonks was already fumbling her emergency port-key from her pocket. She climbed onto the thin bed, ignoring the blood and vomit that instantly soaked the knees of her robe, and touched the Muggle pen to Harry’s cheek. “I’ll go—you secure the premises. *Mickey mouse!*” She saw Shackbolt nod even as the emergency port-key whisked her away.

She reached the hospital wing and fell a foot or so onto the stone and half onto a hospital bed, barely avoiding landing on Harry. “Pomfrey!” Ignoring her bruised leg where she had hit it, she bent over Harry, turning him onto his side and lifting his head a little as he began vomiting. “Pomfrey!”

“Right here, Miss Tonks.” The voice from behind her had never sounded so welcome. “Is that—” Tonks moved aside as much as she could, keeping her hold on Harry’s head.

Pomfrey gasped. Setting down the tray of potions she had been carrying, she waved her wand and Harry's vomiting stopped. "Help me get him into a bed."

Between the two of them they succeeded in hoisting the small frame into the nearest bed, but the movement caused the boy to stir and moan. Tonks bit her lip as she realized there was now fresh blood on the clean white bed-sheets—and her hands. A sound from the corridor caused her to whirl around, just as Remus Lupin skidded into the hospital wing.

"Pomfrey!"

"Not. Now." The medi-witch was bent over Harry's prone form, casting steadily. "Crushed kneecap, numerous cervical fractures..." she muttered.

"Pomfrey, Harry—" Lupin gasped. "The wards—"

Tonks realized she was blocking his view and stepped aside. "He's here, Lupin. He's—" She stopped, realizing she had no idea how she was planning to finish that sentence. But Lupin was no longer listening to her—he had gone absolutely white, and was staring at Harry's prone form as if it were the second coming of Merlin.

Lupin walked forward as if in a trance, stopping when he drew even with Tonks. "Will he... is he..."

"I do not know yet, Mr. Lupin," Madame Pomfrey answered between spells. "I will need some specialized potions. Does anyone know where Severus is?"

"I shall fetch him, Poppy." Tonks and Lupin turned as one to see Dumbledore standing in the entrance to the hospital wing, Minerva McGonagall behind him. The transfiguration professor spotted Harry's body on the bed, and looked at the same time relieved and horrified. "Do you know who did this?" Albus sounded as angry as she'd ever heard him.

It took several seconds of silence for Tonks to realize the question was for her. "No, sir. He was like this when we arrived. Well," she amended, "he was conscious when we got there—he hit his head when Shackbolt reached for him." She frowned. "Not very hard, though—he must have had an injury there before."

"Will he live?" Albus's voice was quiet but taut.

"If you fetch Severus immediately," Pomfrey snapped. "Then you'll need to go to St Mungo's—I daren't move him, it's not in any way safe, we'll have to bring a trauma team here—"

Albus turned to go. "I shall fetch them at once, Madame. Severus is at Headquarters; I shall have him here within the half-hour." He paused. "Minerva, or perhaps Miss Tonks, will you come with me? I shall not have time for Molly's questions, of which I am certain there will be many."

McGonagall glanced at the stains on Tonks' knees. "I will come with you, Albus." She followed him out.

"Miss Tonks, I need some assistance." Pomfrey sounded tense.

"Tell me what to do." Tonks ducked around Lupin, who was still standing transfixed, back to Harry's bedside.

Severus Snape was planning to scream at the next person to bother him. Or perhaps

hex them, if he could get away with it. Definitely if whoever-it-was brought up the Potter boy.

Not that the blasted boy hadn't been the topic of discussion all summer. If someone wasn't reading aloud a nauseatingly-boring letter from the boy, they were discussing writing one to him, or worse yet, talking about how horribly sad the blighted boy must be over his accursed mutt.

Good riddance to bad rubbish was Severus's opinion, not that anyone wanted to hear it.

But now the urchin hadn't written for a week and everyone was in an uproar. Molly was the worst—she was absolutely convinced that the Dark Lord had the boy and was doing Terrible Things to her Precious Harry. It was enough to make Severus gag. For one thing, if the Dark Lord did have the boy, he would never have kept it secret for this long, and assuredly would have summoned Severus by now, and secondly, as of Albus's report last night, there had been no intrusions or disruptions in the warding.

No, the boy was just too conceited and spoiled to remember to write, that was all. Probably hadn't even thought of how the Order might worry about him. Severus scowled at the potion in front of him. *Work, blast you.*

If only he were at Hogwarts. There he could lock the doors and only have to deal with the thrice-damned Headmaster, and maybe a few others if Albus decided to force him to attend meals. But no. "We need this potion to stay secure," the headmaster had said, "and even I cannot assure that anymore in a Hogwarts-provided laboratory."

Severus contented himself for a moment with enumerating all the things the Ministry, the Dark Lord, and the Headmaster could do to themselves, the more painful and less anatomically possible the better. . . . *by a rabid hamster*, he finished, picking up the next ingredient as the potion before him let off a sudden pulse of light.

Quickly he slid in the pickled rose nudibranch slices and held his breath. But instead of turning bright blue, the potion turned a sickly orange and began to bubble. A quick *evanesco* cleared out the cauldron before the potion could explode. Again.

Damn the war and its bloody perpetual demand for potions.

He took a deep breath and checked his pocket watch. It was nearly ten in the morning—perhaps if he went upstairs the kitchen would finally be clear and he could get some toast and jam. He hated eating with the others. Molly would probably still be there, though—she barely left the kitchen anymore. He supposed he could endure Molly's nattering about precious Potter if it got him some of her pancakes.

He was halfway up the stairs when he heard a commotion going on above. Snarling, he banished his hopes of food. Whatever was going on, it had half the members of the Order in an uproar, and three-quarters of them would be glad to take whatever-it-was out on their resident Death Eater—even if he was on their side—if he poked his nose in now. He stalked back to his work station and picked up his notes. *Maybe if I added some of the nudibranch brine as well?*

"Severus." He spun to find Albus standing in the door to the lab, looking haggard. Trying to conceal his surprise, and his distaste for being surprised, he glowered at the older

man.

“What—”

“Please come with me, Severus.” He had never heard the Headmaster sound so urgent, nor so pleading.

“Where?”

“Hogwarts. It is an emergency, I am afraid.”

“Let me—”

“No, Severus. *Now*. We can send someone back if you need something here.”

“Very well, old man.” He glared at the Headmaster just for appearances, and followed him upstairs. Together they ducked around a knot of people shouting at—McGonagall? What on earth could the old cat have done?—and to the floor. He took powder from the tin Albus held out, then threw it into the fireplace. “Hogwarts, Headmaster’s Office!”

He stepped out of the flames into the Headmaster’s office, with the room’s owner close behind him. “Now. What is this about?”

“Walk with me while we talk, please.” The headmaster led the way out of the office and down the stairs. “We successfully retrieved Mr. Potter, but there have been. . . complications.”

“With Potter involved, surely this does not surprise you.”

Albus looked at him, a hint of reproach in his expression—and was that guilt? Severus’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “He has been severely injured, Severus. Poppy has all but demanded your assistance.”

Severus contented himself with raising an eyebrow at the old man. “What are the nature of the injuries?”

“I am afraid I do not know. Poppy and Nymphadora were working to stabilize him when I left to retrieve you.” Albus paused. “From what I saw, he did appear to be severely beaten.”

Severus mentally rephrased that in his mind as ‘Potter had a bloody nose’. Maybe a broken bone. Nothing worth hauling him away from his research, especially with both Albus and the Dark Lord breathing down his neck with regards to his latest efforts. He supposed she might be out of the right variety of blood replenishing potion. The boy went through it like Ravenclaws through books—it seemed the boy could not get out of bed without injuring himself. How much feverfew did he have left?

He was still musing on the possible potions for which he might be asked and their components—and his stocks thereof—when the pair reached the hospital wing. Albus entered first, holding the door for Severus, who stalked in, glaring indiscriminately around. Lupin was standing a few feet away from the foot of a bed, hands clenching and relaxing rhythmically. Madame Pomfrey and Auror Tonks were standing beside the bed, working on someone—Severus assumed it was the Potter boy.

“The other side now—Careful, don’t touch the—”

As Pomfrey and Tonks circled the bed, Severus got his first good look at the boy on the bed. He felt the blood drain from his face. One part of his brain catalogued obvious injuries and blood loss, but the other part simply stared, unable to believe that Madame Pomfrey had been working on the boy long enough for Albus to fetch him. He had seen

victims less injured after Death Eater revels—except that Potter was supposedly still alive.

“Poppy.” He recognized the voice as his own after a second. “I was told—”

“Severus!” she cut him off, looking up from where she was working on one pale shoulder, expression relieved. “Thank Merlin you got here this fast—now the boy has a chance—I’m going to need some blood replenishing and heart stabilization potions, compatible tuned rehydration and renourishment potions, and then a nerve regenerator—”

As she continued listing potions and their relative urgencies, Severus could not help feeling a twinge of pride. He was important, needed. Once again, he would be the one to save their Golden Boy.

Albus stood near the darkened windows of the hospital wing, just outside a set of shimmering wards. Inside, white-robed figures stood over a form draped with white linens. Already they were stained with blood, despite the medi-witch casting nearly continuous cleansing spells on the cut they’d opened in Potter’s neck.

“Here’s another one,” one of the figures said, dropping a white sliver into a metal pan with a clink.

Albus’s eyes closed as he struggled to control his stomach, knowing the slivers piling up in the pan were chips of bone threatening the boy’s very life. He had never felt so helpless in his life, and it was not a feeling he enjoyed. Inside the sterile wards, Harry Potter fought for his life, and there was nothing he could do.

“How are you holding up, Albus?”

He turned around at the sound of his Deputy Headmistress’s voice. “As well as can be expected, Minerva.” He turned back to his vigil, and McGonagall joined him, standing at his side.

“How is he?”

As though the question had been a jinx, one of the spelled orbs they’d lined up at the head of Potter’s bed started strobing and making a soft wailing. A sudden flurry of activity and rushed spells caused Albus to clench his fists and swallow. His breathing increased as several minutes passed with neither the wailing nor urgent spellcasting ceasing. Suddenly all of the healers stood back, and one of them hit the boy’s body with a spell like a thunderbolt. Still the wailing continued.

“Come on, Potter,” said a voice from one of the figures that he recognized as belonging to Poppy. “Don’t do this to us now.” Gesturing to another one of the figures, she continued, “Cast it again.”

A white bolt of light hit Potter’s back, causing the body under the sheet to twitch, but the orb continued wailing softly. “Again.”

“Poppy—if he hasn’t responded—”

“What part of ‘again’ did you misunderstand?” she snapped. “Do it again! We’ll cast together!”

This time the bolt was as large around as Albus’s arm, and Harry’s body jumped convulsively when it hit. He felt Minerva clutch his arm, and unclenched a fist enough to

place his hand over hers. Both of them let out a breath they had not realized they had been holding when the orb cheeped and went back to glowing a greenish yellow.

“Thank Merlin,” one of the figures said quietly. “Think we’d better use the potion?”

Albus tuned out the technical discussion that ensued and turned to Minerva, who was still clutching his arm. “It has been... difficult to tell.”

“I see,” she replied softly, as if afraid to breathe.

After watching the trauma healers turn Potter over and pour a potion down his throat, then turn him back and resume working, Albus said thoughtfully, “I have never been so glad of my decision to hire Poppy in my life.”

“I admit, when you first hired her, I had my doubts as to how well a Healer who had spent years working war trauma cases would adjust to being nurse to a school full of children,” Minerva told him, “but now—”

She seemed unable to complete the thought, but Albus nodded anyhow. “She wanted to get away from all that,” he responded quietly, “and thought a school full of new, young witches and wizards would be the perfect place.” He took a deep breath. “I have never had the courage to ask her if she regrets the decision now that...”

“I actually came up here to show you something,” Minerva said after a minute of watching the healers work.

“Oh?” Albus’s reply was distracted and distant.

She tugged on his arm, pulling him over to one of the windows. Pulling the curtain aside just a crack, she said, “Look.”

Reluctantly, the older wizard tore his eyes off Harry and glanced out the window. He then took a better look, disbelieving what his eyes had shown him. “What—?”

“I think they’re here to wish Mr Potter well,” Minerva told him quietly. “They don’t seem aggressive at all—just standing there, holding candles and singing.” Now that she mentioned it, he could hear a faint edge of melody through the glass.

He stood staring out the window at the sea of candles below him, each one wavering in the light night-time breeze. As his eyes adjusted, he could see the candlelit figures filled the space below him to the edge of the Forest and around both sides of the castle. “Sweet Merlin,” he breathed. Minerva said nothing.

When he finally turned back to watch Harry and the healers working on him, Minerva remained at his side—and behind her, he imagined he felt the weight of thousands of others standing the same vigil with him.

Author’s Notes: I know I said I’d upload on the weekends, but I guess I lied. A reviewer was kind enough to point out some plot-holes, and so I’ve made a couple of modifications to this chapter to try to plug them (hence the new upload). One of them is just a sentence; the other is a good-sized chunk added near the beginning of the chapter.

Some people may still feel Harry is OOC. First, I’d like to say that Harry is supposed to be slightly “off” here; hopefully I’ve thrown you enough clues for you to figure out why, but if I haven’t, it’ll become clear sometime around chapter 6. If we get there (or you go

to my website and read that far) and you still feel confused, let me know and I'll see if I can fix it. However, some people feel that Harry wouldn't be affected as deeply by what I'm describing as I write him being; I'd just like to say that I've been in a similar situation to the one I'm putting Harry in, and it really can change a person quite a bit. If you still don't buy it, that's fine; maybe this isn't the story for you.

There are a couple of references dropped into this chapter; if you don't recognize something I recommend reading its wikipedia page. However, Copeland is someone who used to be a good friend and Stout is one of my ancestors. Anything else that doesn't have a wikipedia page is the product of my fertile imagination.

CHAPTER 2



Hogwarts

Author's Notes: This chapter has been edited to plug a rather bad plot-hole, one I'm surprised no one pointed out. Man, do I feel dumb about missing it! But now I think it's plugged.

Harry opened his eyes to a flat blur of cream. At first he had the horrible thought that he was blind, but then he realized he could still see his nose. His next realization was that nothing hurt.

Awful boring afterlife, was his first thought. Maybe he was a ghost. What *did* ghosts see when they were between floors, or inside a wall? *Bloody sad for me as a ghost if I'm still half bloody blind without my glasses. Figures I'd die without them on.* He rubbed his nose—or rather, he tried to rub his nose, and nothing happened. His brain attempted to tell his adrenal glands to dump adrenaline into his system, but similarly—nothing happened.

Oh, shite. I'm paralyzed.

Before Harry could panic too much, his view changed. A face appeared above him, skewed ninety degrees to his left. He recognized the two blurs of white with gold between them as belonging to the Headmaster. “Ah! Good afternoon, Harry. I apologize—you must be rather panicked at the moment.” A wand tip appeared briefly in his vision. “I am relaxing the spell we have on you enough for you to speak. I fear it will come with some pain, however.”

He was unfortunately right—even as Harry felt control returning, his breath sped up in response to his earlier panic and pain flared in his neck. *At least I can feel something...* He still could not seem to feel his chest.

“There we go. Can you speak, Harry?” The concerned note in Dumbledore’s voice told him there was some question.

Harry tried to say “Hullo” but only produced a hoarse grunt.

“Ah, I must apologize again—please forgive a forgetful old man.” Harry’s eyes followed the older man as he bent over and out of Harry’s field of vision. “Poppy did tell me to offer you something to drink. Now where...? Ah, there we are.” The Headmaster’s face reappeared, and Harry felt something touch his lips. “Wonderful Muggle invention, the straw.”

Harry sucked on the straw, and was rewarded with clean, sweet water. He felt like he had barely moistened his mouth when it was taken away again. “Not too much at a time, Poppy said. You can have more in a minute.” Dumbledore wiped a spilled drop off of

Harry's chin, rousing a stubborn spark of frustration in the young man. "There. Now, do you think you might try speaking again?"

"Hullo—" Harry's voice was rough. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Hullo, Headmaster. Where am I?"

"Why, in the hospital wing, my boy." He suspected the headmaster was smiling at him. "I am surprised you do not recognize it, even without your glasses."

"Er—"

"Where are your glasses? I am afraid that some of the injuries to your head are still quite tender, and so I cannot give you your glasses just now."

"Actually, Headmaster, I was going to ask why I can't feel my body." Harry tried very hard to keep the fear out of his voice. He had half a suspicion that he did not succeed.

"Ah. Yes. You have severe head injuries, Harry, and some trauma to your neck and back." Harry felt suddenly cold. "Severus has been brewing potions for you around the clock, but for them to work you must stay perfectly still. We mustn't have you re-injuring the newly grown nerves by jumping about."

"But... will I..." Harry couldn't manage to make his voice say the words.

"Poppy expects you to make a complete recovery, yes, Harry."

He closed his eyes momentarily with relief, but they sprang open at his next thought. "Hedwig? My wand? My trunk?"

"Hedwig is thin, and she has a nasty cut on one wing, but she will likely recover before you do. Your wand is here next to me on the nightstand. As for your other things, Auror Shacklebolt retrieved them from your relatives' house and they are here, waiting for you, when you are recovered."

For a moment Harry had an odd vision of Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon living in the Gryffindor dorm. "Er, which are? My relatives, sir?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "No, Harry, your trunk and other things."

Harry bit his lip. Should he—if he didn't now, he knew he never would. "Uh, sir? Did Sh— Auror Shacklebolt find the stash under the floorboard?"

"I believe so, if that was the hiding place he mentioned under your bed."

Harry tried to nod and failed. "Yes sir." Seizing his courage with both metaphorical hands, he continued. "Er, there should be a letter in there—could you make sure it gets to the person on the envelope?" There. It was done. He found it was suddenly hard to keep his eyes open.

"I will make sure of that, Harry." Something cool was held to his lips. "Drink this for me, and then you can sleep."

Harry forced down the foul-tasting potion, proud of himself for only gagging once. He was rewarded with another sip of water, but sleep overtook him before the straw was even removed from his mouth.

On returning to his office, having been spelled at Harry's bedside by Poppy herself, Albus pulled a box off one of his many shelves. In it were those of Harry's things that had

not been in his trunk when Shacklebolt arrived, with the exception of Hedwig's cage and Harry's wand. The trunk itself was sitting on the floor beneath the shelf, and although Albus supposed it would have been easier to return the items to the trunk, it had rudimentary wards on it which Albus was loathe to break. *I have done enough to alienate the boy already. I do not need to damage his trust any further than I already have done.*

He set the box on the desk and began removing items from it. On top was a bag with what appeared to be mirror shards in it. Peering at them with his enchanted glasses, Albus could see they were magical, but appeared to be harmless enough. Underneath the bag was a battered transfiguration text from the year before. Tilting it up, Albus frowned. There did not appear to be any letter in the box. *Could Shacklebolt have missed it?*

He picked up the transfiguration text to make a further search, and a bundle of folded papers fell out. At first he thought they must be old assignments, but they were taped closed with some clear Muggle material. Perhaps this was the letter? He turned it over.

*Severus Snape
Potions Master
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*

Why would Harry be writing to Severus Snape, of all people? Still, he had promised to deliver the letter.

Popping a lemon drop into his mouth to quiet his sweet tooth, Albus Dumbledore left to find whichever laboratory Severus Snape had hidden himself in this time.

Severus was, in fact, in the large sterile lab he reserved exclusively for making delicate potions for Madame Pomfrey and St Mungo's. While his regular laboratory was up to the task of such simple concoctions as Skele-Gro or a Calming Draught, the nerve regenerating potions he had to brew for Potter required absolute precision with completely pure ingredients. Having a film of dust, or Merlin forbid, a previous ingredient in the bottom of a mortar or on a set of scales could ruin the potion—and Potter's chances.

Not that I care about the boy's chances. Of course not. He had his pride, that was all. He was one of the premiere potions masters of England, and he had to live up to that reputation. Yes, that was it.

He was over halfway through a delicate stirring cycle—stir three times clockwise, add one-half gram precisely of powdered aconite, stir three times counter-clockwise, add three-quarter gram exactly of powdered cardamom leaves, repeat eleven times—when a knock sounded at his door. He ignored it and continued counting. *One, two, three, nine, one, two, three, nine-and-a-half, one, two, three, ten...*

The knock came again. He growled, but otherwise continued to ignore it. *Now, twenty-six drops of feverfew oil, added one each second...*

"Severus?" He recognized the Headmaster's voice despite the thick door. Dammit, the man should know that he only used this laboratory for the most sensitive potions. "I

have a letter here for you, which I was requested to hand-deliver to you. Shall I wait, or leave it on your desk?"

... *sixteen, seventeen, eighteen*... "I will have a short break in ten minutes, Headmaster." He called even while keeping up his mental count. "If you care to wait for me, I can take it then, but otherwise leave it on my desk."

Nine minutes later, the potion was a nondescript grey Severus usually associated with pocket lint, and approximately as opaque. He picked up the last vial from the work table, unscrewed it carefully, and dropped in one precious phoenix tear. The mixture instantly turned a translucent color a Muggle-born student might have described as "International Orange". Without touching the small cauldron, he turned off the flame and stepped away.

Once he was a safe five feet from the potion, he allowed himself to sigh and drop his shoulders. Surely one of the kitchen elves would be ecstatic to bring him a snack in his office—the infernal critters never had enough to do during the summer anyway. He could probably demand Black Forest Cake if he were not afraid one of the creatures might hug him.

He was plotting the right level of culinary difficulty to demand when he stepped through his office door and was hit by the smell of curry. He had his wand out before he recalled that he had told Dumbledore to wait in his office for him.

"Ah, there you are, my boy." The headmaster smiled at him from his seat on one of the chairs in front of his desk. "I took the liberty of ordering us both a bite to eat. I hope you are in the mood for korma."

"It will be acceptable." Actually, chicken korma was one of Severus's comfort foods, which made him wary—he was reasonably certain the headmaster was aware of that particular fact. Why did the old man think he would need comforting? What did he know that Severus did not?

"Good, good." He sat down in his desk chair and accepted a plate from the other man. "How are the potions coming?" Damn the man. Severus had been hoping to avoid having to make small talk, although he should have known better; this was Albus Dumbledore in his office, not some first-year he could terrorize into silence. True, the state of Potter's potions were not *precisely* small-talk...

"I have the next stage of nerve regeneration potion cooling in my laboratory now." He speared a piece of chicken. "It needs to sit for six hours, but Potter will need another two rounds of the current potion in any case. Unfortunately, once it has set, it will only last twenty-four hours at the outside. I would prefer not to administer it after eighteen."

He could see Albus doing the mathematics in his head. "So you will need to brew it at least once a day, probably twice."

He nodded briefly as he chewed on a cauliflower floret. "If he needs the first or second stage of the potion for more than a few days—a week at most—I shall need more phoenix tears."

"I think that can be arranged. Fawkes is quite fond of Harry." They were both silent for a minute or two. The curry was quite good. "When did you last sleep, Severus? You will do Harry no good if you collapse."

“Do I look that infirm, Albus?” By the old man’s expression, he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer. When Potter had first been brought in, he had brewed for thirty-six straight hours, and had only been able to sleep in four-hour shifts since. At least the old man was aware of his efforts; the Dark Lord would have merely inquired if his Pepper-Up brewing skills were failing. Biting back an angry remark about Golden Boys and relative worth, he gave in and answered the question. “I just got up from a nap, in fact, before I began the latest potion.”

“Can you take a nap now? I know you said the potion needs to set.”

“If you wish Potter to have full use of his wand arm, old man, I must brew one of the more delicate variations on Skele-Heal. I believe Madame Pomfrey and the team have finally finished picking bone chips out of his back and shoulder, have they not?”

“I am sorry, my boy. Can we order any of these from St Mungo’s?”

“We could, but they will not be as fresh or as effective. Pomfrey and I have worked out the precise calibrations for his system.”

Dumbledore nodded unhappily. “Is there anything we can do to make it easier on you?”

Keep the Dark Lord busy. No, that would only assure he was summoned. “Do try to keep this from getting to the Dark Lord, Albus. The last thing Potter needs is for me to be summoned in the middle of a critical brew.”

“I fear it is too late for that.” Albus looked unhappy. “The Daily Prophet ran a special edition a few hours after he was . . . retrieved.”

“Ah.” Severus sighed. “Well. I suppose it cannot be helped.”

“No.” Albus propped an elbow on his desk, blowing on a piece of chicken. “Could we call in another Potions Master?”

“It is not as bad as it seems,” Severus relented finally. “Potter is stabilized now, so delays will not be fatal, at least; and we have enough of the nutrient potions to last the week. Furthermore, while the variation of Skele-Heal I must make is exceedingly delicate and difficult to brew properly, it is at least fast. I will be able to lie down for a few hours before I must administer the first dose of the next regeneration potion.”

“Can’t Poppy do that?”

Severus snorted into his chicken. One might think the man actually cared about his well-being. “Unfortunately, while she is certainly capable of doing the physical administration herself, I must be there to observe the effects so that we can fine-tune the next batch.” He paused. “Under the circumstances, since I must be awake for the procedure in either case, I had rather assumed she would appreciate the opportunity to get some sleep herself.”

“Of course, of course.” Albus stroked his beard. “There are days when I wish you two were not so unique.”

Severus fought down the surge of pride at the old man’s words. “Yes, we would be rather cheaper to employ under those circumstances, would we not?”

“Why, Severus, if you wanted a raise, all you had to do was ask.” The Headmaster’s eyes twinkled above his restored smile. “Well, I must be going—I fear it is my turn to be lambasted by our dear Molly.”

You deserve it, old man. Severus kept his eyes on his chicken to prevent the old man from reading the vicious thought, but Albus seemed to have heard it anyway.

“I deserve it, I know.” He sighed deeply and stood. “At the time, if I had known then. . . but hindsight is ever 20-20, as the Muggles say.”

“Indeed.”

“Oh, right!” Albus fished a folded stack of papers from a pocket, now liberally coated with bright purple lint. “Here is that letter I mentioned.”

Severus picked up the folded sheets, which appeared to have been mangled several times by now. The side facing him at first had no writing on it, merely a piece of cell-o-tape holding the papers closed. He turned it over and nearly dropped the stack in shock.

“Albus! What is the meaning of this?”

But the old man had left already.

Severus stared at Harry Potter’s handwriting as if it might bite him. Finally, after twenty or thirty seconds, he reached slowly for his wand. A quick severing charm cut the tape, and the stack flopped open.

20 June 1996

Dear Professor Snape,

I am sure I am the last person you would wish to hear from after our last term at Hogwarts. However, I ask that you please read this letter through.

I fear I may be dying. If I do not live, please tell Professor Dumbledore that I am sorry. If I do live, you have my permission to come scream at me for being overly dramatic—although I feel certain you will find much more creative terms to use. Regardless, the knowledge that if no-one comes for me relatively shortly I shall most likely die has made me aware that there are things I wish to say to you before I do.

To begin with, I wish to apologize to you for my conduct, especially this preceding year. Honesty compels me to admit that at least a portion of the fault for our fractious relationship falls on my shoulders. Whatever the original causes, I certainly gave you reasons enough to dislike me, again, particularly this past year.

Severus thought absently that near-death experiences seemed to do wonders for Potter’s vocabulary.

I want to apologize for not doing my best in your classes, particularly our remedial potions lessons. Whatever misconceptions I might have held, you were attempting to teach me, and I was not particularly receptive, nor did I do my

assignments properly. I fear that particular failure will stay with me for an exceedingly long time, and I am well aware that I have only myself to blame.

Furthermore, no matter what Professor Dumbledore would have me believe, I am again well aware that Sirius Black's death was in large part my fault. I should not have attempted to shift blame to you, no matter how distraught I was. Again, I apologize.

Finally, it has occurred to me in the recent weeks that you might have some concerns for the information I inadvertently discovered while in our final session of remedial potions. Please believe me when I tell you that I do understand your situation, and I have no intentions of using the information in any way. Moreover, I feel compelled to apologize, as the only living Potter, for the actions of my father.

Please accept my apologies, numerous and belated as they may be.

Sincerely,

Harry James Potter

He dropped the letter on the desktop as if it had bitten him. After a beat, he scowled at it and stalked out of the room. *I do not have time for the witless maunderings of sentimental Gryffindors. There are potions to brew.*

Harry was standing once more in the Department of Mysteries, watching Sirius duel Bellatrix in slow motion. “No! Sirius!” He shouted. “Move away from the—” But Sirius ignored him, and then he was falling through the Veil again. Harry ran towards him, time seeming to slow down the faster he tried to run. He reached the Veil just in time to touch his godfather's robe as it passed through.

“Ah, widdle Potter lost his puppy.” Bellatrix taunted from behind him. “Poor widdle Potter can't even save his mutt.”

He spun around to glare at her. “He's not a mutt! And...I...”

“Not such a grand track record when it comes to saving people, eh, Potter?” The voice from behind him made him whirl back around in time to see Cedric step through the Veil. “What did you do for me, Potter?”

A young girl, about six, stepped out of the Veil and took Cedric's hand. “What did you do for me?” Harry recognized her as one of Voldemort's victims, one he had seen in a vision the previous year. Another victim stepped out, and another. “Or us?”

Harry took a step back.

Behind them the Veil rippled again, and another man stepped out, one with messy black hair and glasses. “We're disappointed in you, Harry.”

A woman stepped out with red hair and brilliant green eyes. “We should have let Voldemort have you.”

“Mum? Dad?”

His father pointed an accusing finger at him. “You get more people killed every year. When will you come to your senses and—”

“Potter!”

Harry snapped awake, opening his eyes on the darkness of the nighttime hospital wing.

“Ah, Potter, how kind of you to grace us with your presence.”

Without his glasses, Harry could not make out the potions master’s face, especially in the gloom, but the voice carried the smirk anyway. “Hullo, sir.”

Wordlessly the man held something out and pressed it to his lips. Obediently, the boy drank down the potion.

Harry frowned slightly. Something was different about it this time. “Are you sure that’s the right potion, sir?”

He could feel the man’s glare. “You question my competency, Potter?” Snape snarled.

“It’s just not as vile as the last few,” Harry explained. “Besides,” he smiled weakly up at where he thought the man’s face was, “it must not be working—I’m still breathing.”

Silence fell. Harry was just about to apologize for the bad joke when he heard the professor snort. “Just go back to sleep, Potter.”

It was Harry’s turn to be silent. He closed his eyes, but the thought of his nightmares kept him awake. “I’m not sure I can, Professor,” he said finally.

“And why would that be, precisely?” Snape’s voice was cool.

Before thinking, Harry said lowly, “I keep seeing them.” He winced immediately on hearing the words come out of his mouth, opening his eyes and looking at the dark bulk standing beside him.

“Them?” Snape inquired sharply. “You will have to elaborate, Potter. Your circumlocutions are as impenetrable as ever.”

“The dead.” Harry admitted. “Cedric. People I’ve seen killed in my visions.” He bit his lip. “My parents.” He paused. “Sirius.”

The room was quiet for so long Harry had just about decided that Snape wasn’t going to say anything at all when he finally spoke. He would have jumped if he’d been able. “Unfortunately for you, Mr Potter,” the professor said quietly, “all of the known formulations of Dreamless Sleep react poorly with the potion I have just given you.”

“That’s all right,” Harry replied quickly. “I’ll manage.” He closed his eyes again. Beside him he heard a rustle and then a creak. Snape sitting down? “You don’t need to stay, sir.”

“Unfortunately for both of us, I fear I do.” Snape sighed. “I must monitor your response to the potion so Pomfrey and I may fine-tune the next batch.”

Next batch? That implied batches, plural. He dug in his memory for any information about nerve regenerating potions, but all he could come up with was a vague feeling of overwhelming complexity. “I’m sorry you have to go to all this trouble for me, sir.”

“Albus would never forgive me if I allowed his Golden Boy to perish.” Snape cleared his throat. “Now sleep, you silly child.”

Harry was awakened from another dream, one in which Sirius fell through the Veil over and over again and nothing Harry could do stopped it, by an insistent tapping on his cheek. He blinked a few times until his eyes cleared enough for him to see the dark form standing over him. “Time for my next dose already?” His voice was hoarse. He attempted to clear it.

A straw was held to his lips, and he sucked on it gratefully.

“No.” He recognized Snape’s baritone and winced around the straw. “You were screaming.”

“I’m sorry.” Harry wished he could sink through the bed and disappear. “Er, why didn’t you just cast *silencio* on me?”

“Is that what you wish me to have done?” The potions master’s voice was soft, and without being able to see the man’s face, it was hard to judge how angry he was. Harry wished he could shrug.

“It’s what I do during term, sir.”

“I must be here to monitor you anyhow, Potter. The incidental effort to awaken you occasionally is minor.”

“Oh.” Harry thought that over for a second. “I’m still sorry to bother you.”

“Go back to sleep, you foolish Gryffindor.”

The next time Harry awoke fully the sun was hitting him in the face. *Must be morning.* He cleared his throat, and someone appeared at his bedside.

“Ah, Mr Potter. It is nearly time for your next dose.” He recognized the medi-witch’s voice, and foggily recalled someone waking him up enough to drink foul substances several times in the night after his . . . chat . . . with Snape. “Would you like some water first?”

“Yes, please, Madame Pomfrey. And could you possibly close the curtains, please? The sun is bothering me.”

She did something—Harry thought it involved a wand—and the sun was no longer hitting him in the right eye. He sighed with relief. After he had sipped his water, she gave him a potion that tasted oddly of unripe blackberries. Harry found himself running over all the potions he knew in his head, trying to remember if any of them had that tart taste. He came up blank.

Pomfrey meanwhile was muttering over his lower body. He assumed she was also waving her wand, or at least, he hoped those mutters were not caused by the state of his legs. Finally, after repositioning some sort of sheet, she left him alone, saying only that she would return shortly with the rest of his potions.

It felt like half an hour later, but was probably closer to ten minutes, when she reappeared. Harry slurped down the potions she placed to his lips without complaint, recognizing several from the previous night. He was fairly sure he hadn’t tasted the other two before.

“Very good, Mr Potter” was her comment when he got them all down without gagging, rewarding him with some clean water. “I will be in my office; simply call out if you need anything.”

Harry quickly discovered just how boring it was to be alone in the hospital wing without anything to do but stare at the ceiling. Briefly he considered calling for Madame Pomfrey, but dismissed the idea as quickly as it came. She surely had better things to do than entertain him.

Replaying his quiddich matches in his head was not as much fun as Harry had expected. Thinking of quiddich was still painful after the ban of the last year, and besides, his mind kept turning to memories of just who had given him his broom.

What would Hermione do if she was stuck here?

He began listing all the charms he knew in his head, categorizing them alphabetically and by effect. He knew more of them than he had expected, but still he had run out of charms and was on hexes—specifically, the Stinging Hex—when he heard someone come in.

“Ah, awake again, Harry?”

“Headmaster.” Harry replied.

“How are you doing, my boy?”

“Okay.” It was mostly true. He was bored, but at least he didn’t hurt much. “My teeth feel a little fuzzy.”

He heard Dumbledore chuckle, and mutter a spell. Instantly his teeth felt as if he had just brushed them, and his mouth was filled with a minty taste. “It is good to hear that you are doing well.” There was a pause. “Or at least as well as can be expected.”

The silence stretched out. Harry was trying to come up with some sort of appropriate small talk—the Headmaster was not the sort of person he felt he could ask about the Cannons—when the other man spoke again. “You do look somewhat more like yourself today.”

“Er, who did I look like yesterday, then?” Harry could not resist inquiring. Dumbledore just laughed.

“Sir?” Harry said after another silence.

“Yes, my boy?”

“What’s going to happen to me?” When no response was immediately forthcoming, he elaborated, “for underaged magic, I mean.”

“Ah, that.” Was that relief he heard in Dumbledore’s voice? “Nothing, Harry.” The Headmaster cleared his throat. “To begin with, under the circumstances, it would be considered a form of self-defense. Aurors Shacklebolt and Tonks would have been more than happy to testify in your behalf as to that particular point, as would Madame Pomfrey. However, Minister Fudge has chosen to ignore your use of magic officially—it makes him look better to the press that way, this time around.”

Harry took a minute to absorb that. He had been dreading the arrival of an official Ministry owl since he’d woken in the hospital wing. “It almost makes me wish I’d hexed Uncle Vernon,” he confessed.

“A thoroughly understandable feeling, my boy,” Dumbledore agreed amiably.

“How are Ron and Hermione? And everyone else?”

“Ah! Yes! Thank you for reminding me of the real reason I am here.” Dumbledore bent slightly, and Harry could hear him rummage through his pockets. “Your friends have written to you, and I thought I might read their letters to you, if you wished.” He must have found the pocket he was looking for, as there was a rustling of parchment, and Dumbledore held up what appeared to Harry to be a large cream blur.

“Yes please!” Harry said eagerly.

“Do you mind if I sit, my boy? I realize you will be unable to see me if I do—”

“Go ahead, Professor.” Harry said. “Without my glasses, I can’t see much anyway.”

“Ah, yes. I had forgotten that detail.” The headmaster’s face disappeared, and Harry heard the chair creak beside him. “Thank you, my boy. Now, where shall I begin?”

“Did Ron write?”

“I believe so. Ah, here is a letter from Mr Weasley here on top.” Paper rustled some more. “Dear Harry,

“Professor Dumbledore says you’re been hurt bad and we mustn’t visit just yet. He says he’ll make sure you get this if we write, though.”

“Why can’t they visit?” Harry broke in. He had been hoping to see them every time he opened his eyes. He was aware that disappointment made him sound petulant, but could not bring himself to care just now.

“I fear you shall have to take that up with our inestimable Madame Pomfrey, Harry. In this case, I was merely the bearer of the bad tidings.”

“Oh.” Harry blushed. “Sorry. Do please go on.”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “It sounds bad, mate. Write to us if you need anything, all right? Hermione is trying to figure out how to send you something she calls ‘books on tap’.” Harry snorted. “Sounds ludicrous (hah, another word of the day) if you ask me.

“Mum’s been baking like a fiend since we heard you were hurt. I think we’ve all gained half a stone! Get better quickly or we’re all going to be so fat we can’t move.

“Did you hear about Krum? No, of course you haven’t. Now that he’s graduated, there’s talk that the Cannons might bid for him! I’d be delighted, if only Hermione would only quit making moony faces every time his name comes up. What does she see in the git anyway? Oh well, at least it’s good for the Cannons, eh?”

The juxtaposition of Ron’s words with Dumbledore’s measured voice made Harry laugh slightly. “Poor Ron.”

Dumbledore chuckled too, then continued. “Fred and George wanted to send you something ‘to make life in the hospital wing more exciting’ but Snape—of all people!—nixted the idea. You should have heard him—‘I do not recommend any of your inane concoctions be sent to Mr Potter, unless of course you wish to have his death or permanent disfigurement on your heads, Gentlemen’. Talk about over-dramatic! Although it was worth seeing the looks on their faces! You’d think Snape had done a striptease or something!”

“Ew.” Harry grimaced. “That was a picture I didn’t need, thanks ever so, Ron.”

“Anyway, I hope you feel better soon mate—at least get well enough we can visit. Ron.”

Paper rustled again. “Is there one from Hermione?” Harry asked.

“There should be. Let me see. . . ah, here we are.” He heard paper being unfolded.

“Dear Harry,

“Professor Dumbledore says we mustn’t visit you yet. Honestly, what do they think we’ll do, sneak you out? Feed you illicit potions? Really! Although, I suppose he might have a point about Ron.”

Harry laughed outright. Dumbledore managed to convey Hermione’s exasperated tone perfectly.

“The news came out last weekend that Victor Krum might be traded to the Cannons, and it’s all Ron will talk about. Honestly! What is it with boys and quiddich?”

“Hey!”

“The only way I can get him to shut up about Krum for a few minutes is to pretend I’m still mooning over him. Please don’t tell Ron I said that—it’s the only way he’s bearable.”

“Poor Hermione.”

“Everyone here is worried about you. Even Professor Snape only frowns at the mention of your name, when he’s here anyhow. He had been working nearly continuously in the downstairs lab—doesn’t the man ever sleep? But he’s only been here twice since Saturday, and once was just for a few minutes, to pick up some ingredients, I think. He even asked the twins to help him with brewing Professor Lupin’s Wolfsbane this month! Can you imagine?”

Harry could imagine. He was picturing Lupin’s wolf form with bright pink fur, or ribbons tied through it. He winced.

“Moody is the worst, though. He’s been stalking around as if he thinks Death Eaters are hiding in the cutlery, and snapping at everyone. Mrs Weasley seems to be coping through oven therapy—we’ve all taken to trying to run the other way if we see her coming, because she’ll insist on feeding you biscuits or cake or something. I’m worried about the twins, too, at least a little. No one has been pranked since Saturday either, and they’ve been too quiet. I suppose it could be just the responsibility of brewing Wolfsbane, though.

“I’ve been trying to find the magical equivalent to books-on-tape to send you, especially any of our books for next year. I managed to get a preliminary list out of Professor McGonagall when she was here earlier, and I’ve been trying to get Ron to start on them too—not with much success. Honestly, how does he expect to do well on his NEWTs without studying?”

Not for the first time, Harry wondered just how she had ended up in Gryffindor instead of Ravenclaw. The going theory in the boys’ dorm was that she’d bribed the Hat with something.

“Get better quickly, Harry. We miss you. Hermione.”

Harry chuckled as Dumbledore refolded the letter. “Studying for her NEWTs already, that’s Hermione for you. Sometimes I wonder what she bribed the Hat with to end up with us.”

The Headmaster chuckled too. “The Hat frequently makes decisions that seem odd to the rest of us. Why, I can recall being eleven myself—I was sure I’d wind up in Hufflepuff.”

“So was I,” Harry said wryly. “I was sure I’d fail whatever task it was we’d have to perform. I was just hoping not to be kicked out.” He sobered. “I feel bad about Professor Lupin, though. I hadn’t thought about the Wolfsbane.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Dumbledore reassured him. “Professor Snape would not entrust the task to Fred and George if he were not confident in their brewing capabilities.”

“It’s not their brewing capabilities I’m worried about,” Harry muttered.

“Now, which letter would you like next?”

“How many *are* there?” Harry asked, startled.

He heard the sounds of letters being shuffled. “I believe I have one here for everyone currently housed at Headquarters.”

“Er—” What Harry had been about to say was cut off by an enormous yawn.

“Or perhaps a nap is in order.” The Headmaster’s chair creaked and his face came back into view. “The letters will be there tomorrow.”

The other letters turned out to be all mostly the same, however—short missives wishing him a speedy recovery and expressing their condolences for being stuck in the hospital wing during the summer. The twins complained about being told not to send him any ‘pick-me-ups’ and Professor Moody told him to be vigilant, but those were the only significant variations.

The hospital wing had to be one of Harry’s least favorite places. For one thing, it was terribly boring. *For another, if I’m here, I’m usually not dead yet—but I usually wish I were.*

He almost wished that Tonks and Shackbolt *had* been Death Eaters. For one thing, maybe he could have reduced their ranks by a few on his way out—and for another, he’d probably be dead by now, the way part of him wanted to be. Even in a way that fulfilled the stupid prophecy, meaning Voldemort might now be vulnerable. *Dammit, why did they have to save me?* was the thought that kept running through his head.

Most of him, though, was bored. Even his regular conversations with Madame Pomfrey when he took his potions were not enough. By Saturday he was willing to seize any opportunity for diversion that presented itself.

The only opportunity he saw, however, was when Snape entered the wing that afternoon. Even so, Harry jumped at the chance.

“Professor?”

“Yes, Potter?” Harry could see the man out of the corner of his eye. By the soft clinking coming from that direction, Harry assumed he was arranging or delivering potions. The potions master’s voice was cool but not irritated or angry. Taking heart, Harry asked the first question that came into his head.

“Just which potions am I taking, sir?”

“You are, of course, aware that you are being given a nerve regeneration potion every three hours.” Harry had indeed been aware of the potion, but not the exact time interval. He filed the information away against future use—at the very least it would be a way of telling

time. “Further, you are now being given a variation of Skele-Heal every six hours, and we are continuing you on a nutrient potion, to be given roughly correspondent to mealtimes.” He bent over briefly, fully out of Harry’s vision, with a grunt. “When you were first here, you were on separate rehydrating and nourishing potions, but now you should do well enough on the combination. You are also on a variety of different healing potions for your various other injuries. Some must be given only with the nutrient potion, some only without it, others at various intervals.” His head reappeared, and Harry could tell the professor was looking down at him. Imagination filled in the sneer. “Why the sudden interest, Potter? The Headmaster would be terribly upset if I poisoned you.”

“Actually, I’m terribly bored, sir,” Harry admitted, “and listening to you tell me about potions beats categorizing all the spells I know by the color of their effect.”

“Color, Potter?” The man’s voice was disdainful, but amused.

“Well,” Harry said defensively, “I’d already finished alphabetizing, and categorizing by year taught, effect, type, and wand movements.” He paused. “I couldn’t think of anything else, besides color.”

“Merlin forbid I should refuse a willing student.” Snape’s face disappeared, and Harry thought at first he was being sarcastic, but then he heard the chair creak. “What was it you wished to know, Potter?”

“Tell me about the nerve regeneration potion, please?” Harry requested. “How is it made?”

“Nothing like personal application to foster interest, is there, Potter?” Snape sighed. “To begin with, as you would know if you had done your reading summer before last, there are actually four different potions, administered in stages.”

“Oh.” Harry felt sheepish. “That explains the taste. I thought, from what you said earlier, that it was just you varying the stuff slightly.”

“‘Stuff’, Potter? How eloquent.”

“You know, ingredients, preparation methods—chopping or grinding, that sort of thing.”

“Yes, I do know, and in a sense you are right,” Snape admitted. “The potions are quite similar in many respects.”

“So we’re on...” Harry thought. “The third stage now?”

“Second, actually. I had to alter the formulation slightly to account for the buildup of the Skele-Heal potion in your system.”

“So how long will each stage last?” *How soon can I quit taking the foul stuff?*

“We started you on the first stage immediately preceding your surgery.” His face must have shown his surprise as Snape said “Yes. Pomfrey was forced to open your neck and spine to remove numerous bone fragments threatening your spinal column, as well as removing various fragments in your shoulder and knee. You are indeed lucky you were found when you were.”

Harry shivered as best he could. “Then you started me on stage two...” he counted back. “Tuesday night?”

“Correct, Potter.”

“So when will I start stage three?”

“If all goes optimally, possibly as soon as tomorrow. Certainly by Monday. You will start stage four after a week on stage three, and stay on it for at least a month—preferably three.”

Harry winced at the thought of taking a potion every three hours for *months*.

“Luckily for you, stage three need only be administered every six hours, and stage four every twelve.”

Well, that wasn't so bad. He found himself looking forwards to six hours of uninterrupted sleep. *Assuming a lack of visions or nightmares, anyhow.*

“So how are they brewed?”

“Stage one starts with a base of pure spring water, to which is added pulverized dragon eggshells and chopped basilisk tongue. The potion is then stirred twenty-eight times clockwise while oil of feverfew is added—one drop per stir.”

“Why feverfew?”

“What would you use, Potter?” Harry could hear the sneer in full force.

“I don't know—comfrey maybe? It seems more stable.”

“In theory, Potter, you would be correct.” Harry's mouth dropped open, and Snape chuckled sardonically. “However, comfrey is much more difficult to extract in oil form while maintaining its magical properties, and its shelf life afterwards is exceedingly short. Comfrey oil is thus quite difficult to procure, and due to the short shelf life—a matter of days at best—must be special-ordered in advance. Most brewers of the potion do not have the time to wait for a special order to come in, as I did not.”

“That makes sense,” Harry said slowly, ignoring the snort from Snape. “But then why not use ground comfrey? Shouldn't it actually work better than the oil?”

“Indeed, Mr Potter. Perhaps we should immobilize you during lectures more often. And for cases where the patient is conscious and has free upper-body movement—primarily cases with damage to the lower spine—it is commonly used. However, the ground comfrey will react with the eggshells and render the potion the consistency of spring mud. It is difficult, if not impossible, to administer to unconscious patients.”

“Oh, like Polyjuice?” Harry spoke before thinking, and then wished once again he could sink through the bed and disappear. He could feel the weight of Snape's stare on his cheek.

“I shall leave the question of when, exactly, you gained that sort of personal experience for another time, Mr Potter,” Snape said after a long pause. Harry let his breath out. “Shall I continue, or do you have any more startling revelations for me?”

“Sorry, sir. Do go on.”

“The potion is then allowed to cool for ten minutes, and strained. After straining it is brought back to a rapid simmer and stirred nine times clockwise with a steel whisk, adding one drop of Dead Sea brine with each stir. It then sits for another ten minutes, or until it turns yellow, which may take longer—Potter, I am not here to tell you bedtime stories!”

Harry had closed his eyes. He reopened them at his professor's outburst. “Sorry, sir. I wasn't sleeping, though, honestly. It just helps me visualize.”

“See that you do not.” Snape growled, then continued more normally. “The change of color may take longer under conditions of high humidity, especially if the basilisk tongue was pickled before use. As soon as the potion turns yellow, one phoenix tear is added.” Harry thought of the cost of potions-grade phoenix tears and winced. “The potion will slowly turn green. When the entire potion is the color of fir needles. . .”

Snape detailed the preparation of the major potions the boy was taking until it was time for his next dose. To his surprise, the boy continued to ask intelligent questions. As he shook the nutrient potion to mix it, he contemplated the idea of petrifying all his students during theory lectures. Alas, while it would certainly decrease the number of interruptions, Lord Malfoy would have kittens if he tried it on Draco. Perhaps just the Gryffindors? No, McGonagall would have puppies. Regretfully he dismissed the idea—it did seem so restful.

To his further surprise, the boy drank all his potions without complaint, only a mild grimace at the Skele-Heal. Severus was secretly impressed; he had once had a similar variant of Skele-Heal and was thus well aware that the preparation tasted like used quiddich gear. *Although the one thing everyone on both sides can agree on is that the boy has guts.*

“I don’t think it’s working.” Severus glanced back down at the bed from where he was gathering up the empty vials, but Potter had his eyes shut.

“Yes, you’re still alive. The joke was barely amusing the first time, Potter.” Actually, he had been shocked the boy had attempted to joke with him at all.

Potter’s eyes opened, and he peered in Severus’s general direction before rolling his eyes slightly. “That’s not what I meant.” The brat sounded almost worried.

“Then, pray tell, what did you mean?” Severus asked, more harshly than he had intended.

Potter was silent for a moment. “I still can’t feel anything below my face. Except for the front of my neck,” he amended after a moment.

“Of course not, foolish boy.” It was Severus’s turn to roll his eyes. “If you had listened to the Headmaster, you would know we have a spell on you.”

“I thought it was just to keep me still,” Potter objected.

“There is one for that purpose as well,” Severus allowed. “However, in previous cases, it was found that being able to feel pain but not move the affected body part drove many patients mad. Unfortunately, the only spell strong enough to block the pain also blocks all other sensation as well.”

“Oh.” The Potter boy frowned. “How much—I mean, where—”

“We have left your face free of the spell,” Severus guessed the content of the boy’s stuttered question, “from just above your eyebrows to halfway down your neck, and from cheekbone to cheekbone.”

“And I shouldn’t be able to feel anything beyond that?”

One of the potions master’s eyebrows rose. That was an odd way to ask the question. “No, you should not,” he verified.

“But then why do I have a headache?” The brat sounded grumpy.

Severus froze. “How long have you had this headache?” He inquired sharply.

The boy frowned thoughtfully at the ceiling. “I’m not sure. A few hours maybe.” He looked over at Severus. “I didn’t have it when I woke up this morning.”

This was bad. While he hoped it was nothing more than eye strain, there was no reason to take chances. He refrained from telling the boy to ‘wait there’—what else could the brat do, after all—and strode quickly to Pomfrey’s office. He knocked, but when there was no response, he put his head inside. It was empty. Swearing under his breath at medi-witches who left without so much as a note with their whereabouts, he was about to try flooring the Headmaster’s office when the outer door opened. That sounded like the old man himself. He poked his head back out—indeed, it was Albus, and Pomfrey was with him.

“Professor Snape!” She sounded surprised. “Did you need something?”

Albus was twinkling at him, and Severus realized suddenly that he had missed supper to talk to Potter. Damn the man. Now he would try twice as hard to get him to reconcile with the brat. He snarled silently at Albus, before answering Poppy.

“The boy was complaining of a headache,” he replied shortly.

Dumbledore’s eyes flashed. “Surely that is to be expected, Severus—” he began to object, but Pomfrey cut him off.

“Did you ask him where, Severus?”

“No,” he admitted.

“I’m right here.” Potter protested. “I can hear just fine.”

She crossed to the boy’s bed. “Mr Potter, where is the pain?”

He opened his eyes and looked up at the medi-witch. “The back of my head.” He grimaced. “Sorry I didn’t mention it earlier. I thought—”

“Never mind, Mr Potter.” She patted his cheek and moved around to the head of his bed. The boy closed his eyes again. Albus moved to stand at the boy’s left side as Pomfrey cast a series of increasingly complicated spells.

“You were right to fetch me, Severus,” she said finally. “There is pressure building up in his skull.”

“Er, what does that mean, ma’am?” Harry’s eyes did not open, but he was frowning and his voice was uneasy.

“It means that one of the injuries to your skull has swollen and is pressing on your brain, Mr Potter. I can relieve the pressure, don’t worry.” By the expression on Mr Potter’s face, he was entirely failing to follow that instruction. “Now, I need you to relax, but do not fall asleep. It is extremely important that you stay awake. Talk, or recite something, if possible. This will take a while; it is delicate work.”

The boy took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Okay.”

Pomfrey took a deep breath herself, pointed her wand steadily at the back of the boy’s head, and began to cast. The boy began mumbling to himself, and Severus recognized with amusement the list of first year potions, which Potter appeared to be sorting by color. He smirked despite himself.

“Potter, the wart remover potion should be blue, not green,” he corrected at one point. “You added too much vervain.”

“Oh. I always wondered—thank you, sir.” The boy continued listing potions, continuing on to the second-year list. Severus’s left eyebrow rose nearly to his hairline when he heard the boy list Polyjuice. *At least now I know what year it was. But—second year?* Albus glanced at him and smiled, appearing highly amused.

Potter had just finished the second year list and started on third year when his mumbling began to grow fainter, then faded away entirely.

“Harry?” Albus patted the boy on the cheek. “Harry.”

A muffled oath from Pomfrey caught both men’s attention.

Albus inquired sharply, “Poppy?” but the woman was busy waving her wand.

“He’s started... bleeding... and I... can’t... get it to... stop,” she answered between castings. She cast another spell and cursed again. “We’re losing him. Albus, wake him up!”

Albus leaned over the boy, his face grave. “Harry.” He patted the boy on the cheek again, and this time was rewarded by the green eyes flickering open.

“P’fessor?” the boy’s voice was thready.

“Stay with me,” Albus demanded. “Keep talking to me, Harry.”

The boy’s eyes drifted over to where Severus was standing, and he blinked. They tracked unsteadily back over to Albus. “Why’re you glowin’ sir?”

Albus swallowed, clearly audible over Poppy’s casting. “I’m not sure, my boy. What sort of—” but Potter’s eyes had drifted shut again. “Harry?”

The rapid spellcasting from the head of the bed turned frantic, and Severus found himself moving without thinking. “Potter!” He moved up to stand across from Dumbledore. “Potter!” he snapped in his best classroom voice. The old man glared at him and opened his mouth, but then Potter’s eyes drifted open again.

“Sir?”

Severus cast around for something to say to engage the boy, keep him talking. “What in Merlin’s name were you attempting to accomplish by sending me such an inane piece of drivel?” He snarled. Albus glanced over again, his alarm plain on his face.

“Huh?” Potter frowned up at Snape, the question dreamy. “Dunno wha’ you’re talkin’ ‘bout.”

“The letter, Potter. What on earth was going through that sludge you call a mind, writing such a thing?”

“Oh.” The boy blinked slowly. “I thought... it needed to be said. I needed to say it. Before I died.” Albus swallowed again.

“And? When you were rescued, and would live, why subject me to your mawkish twaddle? Surely you were aware that I have better things to do than read the death-bed maunderings of maudlin Gryffindors.”

“S’not twaddle.” The boy protested weakly. “I meant it. Seemed like a waste of a good letter not to send it.” The brat actually smiled at him. “Besides, what better way to apologize to you than to give you an excuse to rant at me?” He blinked then, an expression of surprise crossing his face. “Hey. You aren’t glowing anymore.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. Albus answered the boy encouragingly. “It’s good to hear, my boy.” He glanced over at Severus with a twinkle.

“Yes, glowing is one fast way to become a target, especially when one is forced to meet in dark cemeteries,” Snape muttered. Albus looked at him questioningly, but Potter grinned.

“There.” Pomfrey said with a sigh, drawing both professors’ eyes. “Headache gone, Mr Potter?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Potter replied after a moment. “Thank you, ma’am. Sorry to be such trouble.”

“Glad to help you, Mr Potter.” She patted the boy on the cheek as she came around to stand next to Severus. “However, I fear we must add another noxious potion to your list.”

Potter grimaced briefly, but appeared resigned. “If you say so, ma’am.”

She patted his cheek again. “If only all my patients were so agreeable.”

“Oh, I’m just saving it up,” the brat replied impishly, making her laugh.

“Well, Mr Potter, I fear it is bedtime for most of us, especially boys who must be woken later to take their potions.” She turned to Snape. “Come with me, Severus, please? You too, Albus.” They nodded, Severus shortly, Albus with a twinkle. “Potter, do try to sleep.”

When the three of them were in her office, she waved them to chairs before throwing up a basic auditory ward. At Albus’s raised eyebrow, she defended herself. “I believe we have all learned the hard way that we cannot be too careful with Mr Potter.”

Snape nodded approvingly. “A sensible and simple precaution, in any case.”

She sank into her desk chair with a sigh. “First—Severus, I’m going to need a schedule of mild clot-fixing blood replenisher potion for Mr Potter that will not interfere with anything else we’re pouring into the boy. I’d use the regular one, but the last thing we want is another clot in his brain.”

Snape tapped his lips with his finger for a moment. “Difficult, but doable. He lost that much blood, then?”

“One of the major blood vessels in his brain went when I tried to reduce the swelling, Severus.” He felt himself turn white, and saw Albus do the same. “I was able to repair it whilst diverting sufficient blood from other sources, but—yes, in a word.” She yawned. “Luckily, he’s already saturated with nerve regeneration potions, so he should not suffer any long-term effects.” She glanced between them. “Furthermore, I hate to do this to anyone, but I need someone else to man the ward tonight. I am simply too exhausted after that.”

Albus looked thoughtful. “Alas, I have another engagement, but... I could ask Molly to come. Or Lupin.”

“The full moon starts tonight. I doubt a werewolf would be of much use,” Snape growled. “Could the man not even keep track of his pet’s cycle?”

“Does it?” The Headmaster looked surprised—too surprised, in Severus’s opinion. His eyes narrowed. “Dear me. Can’t ask him, then.”

Severus knew what the man wanted. “I could,” he said reluctantly. “After I brew the boy’s potion.” He shrugged in resignation. “I shall need to bring it up in any case—administering it is no significant extra burden.” He glanced at the clock. “Someone else will need to take his nine o’clock dosing, though; the potion will take the better part of four hours

to brew, if we are not to poison the boy.” In this particular case, he judged it was easier to simply capitulate; it would keep the old coot happy, and he was telling the truth—it was no significant extra burden.

“I can do that one,” Albus said happily. “I shall have to leave directly after, but no-one will mind if I am a few minutes late.” He glanced at Poppy. “Will it harm the boy if he is dosed a few minutes early?” She shook her head. “That will work, then.”

“Well, if that is settled,” Poppy sighed, pushing herself up from her desk, “you’d best get started, Severus.”

He nodded at her as he stood as well, and turned to leave.

“Oh, and Severus?” He turned back around in the doorway at Poppy’s call. “Good job there, keeping the boy engaged. We might well have lost him, else. It was... close.”

Harry woke several times in the night and early morning to Snape’s prompting, but when he woke for good, the man was gone. He tried not to think too hard about the brief pang of regret that went through him. Madame Pomfrey came in a minute later. “Ah, Mr Potter, you are awake.” She patted his cheek, and he heard her arranging potions vials. “Just in time for your 9 o’clock dose.”

Really he had been there too long, Harry decided, if he was learning to wake by himself on his dosing schedule. He gulped down his potions, trying not to taste them, although honestly, he was starting to get used to the taste, and accepted a drink of water. He did, however, feel well enough to badger Madame Pomfrey about getting to see his friends.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want them working you up or interfering with your treatment, Mr Potter.” She turned to regard him full-on.

He considered that response. “I can understand not wanting interference, although I think you’re underestimating their ability to follow rules—” She snorted, and Harry tried to keep a straight face— “But I don’t see why it matters if I get excited or not.”

“Potter...” She trailed off. Harry rather thought she was probably staring at him. “Do you not recall any of what occurred yesterday?”

“I remember being told to stay calm while you did something,” he said slowly, digging through fragments of memory. “I started categorizing potions in my head, but then things got really...fuzzy...and bright, I think, for a bit. The next thing I remember is Snape yelling at me. He was glowing,” Harry added thoughtfully after a moment.

“You had a brain bleed, Mr Potter,” Pomfrey said, clearly choosing to ignore the issue of glowing potions masters. “I was able to heal it, but you very nearly died, and the injury needs time to complete the healing process.”

“Oh. Um. What’s that got to do with getting excited, though?”

“When you get excited, Mr Potter,” Pomfrey dropped into lecture mode, “your blood pressure rises. Furthermore, strong emotions can cause your own magic to reject healing spells, particularly ones placed on you whilst you were unconscious.” She dropped back to a more normal tone of voice. “In your case, either one could cause the injury to re-open,

and without myself or another trained witch or wizard monitoring you constantly, you would likely be dead within minutes.”

“I didn’t know that.” Harry was shocked. It did make lots of the medi-witch’s policies make more sense, however. He wondered if Hermione knew. “I’m still bored, though.” He couldn’t keep the whine out of his voice entirely.

Pomfrey patted his cheek. “I know being cooped up in here this long is trying, especially for a young man of your, ah,” she paused for a moment. “Activity levels. Let me see what I can do.”

“What if it were just Hermione and Ron?” The medi-witch paused in what Harry thought might be a considering pose, then he could see her shake her head. “Just Hermione?” He pleaded shamelessly.

“I shall see what I can do,” she repeated, patting him on the cheek again.

He woke from a short afternoon nap to the distinctive smell of the potions lab. “Professor Snape?” He gambled.

“The illustrious Pomfrey seems to fear you may perish of boredom,” the baritone came from the direction of the chair beside his bed. “I failed to run fast enough. What entertainment the woman believes I will provide is beyond me.”

Harry thought of the irony of Pomfrey lassoing Snape as entertainment after rejecting Hermione as too likely to upset him. On the other hand, the man had been abnormally well-behaved over the last week. “You could have hexed her,” he suggested politely. “A good jelly-legs would probably have given you a good head start, and I feel certain you know lots more hexes than I.”

“Ah, but then where would I be the next time I required her services?” Snape countered smoothly. “No, it is far wiser to be seen to capitulate, and leave her owing me a favor.”

“Far more Slytherin, at least,” Harry agreed amiably. “I don’t think most of us Gryffindors would think that far ahead.”

“Ah, so you admit to being foolish.” Snape pounced, a satisfied note in his voice. Harry laughed.

“Just near-sighted.”

Snape gave a pleased snort anyhow. “So, about this Polyjuice business—” Harry groaned. “—I assume, since it occurred during your second year, and not as part of the approved curriculum, that it had to do with the Chamber?” Harry could hear the capital letter.

“Yeah. Actually,” he mused, “in a way it gave me the clue I needed to find it.”

“Hm. Am I correct in surmising that Miss Granger did the bulk of the actual brewing?”

“I . . . I’m not sure I should answer that,” Harry responded warily.

“I realize that your present location may be confusing you, Potter, but school is not in session. I can hardly take points or assign you detention.”

Harry mulled this over. It *would* be just like Snape to bring it up *during* term if he refused to answer now, and if he did so, he could reasonably take points either way: if Harry

did not answer, he was disobeying a teacher's order, and if he did, Hermione had broken several rules. "Yes, Hermione did most of it, although Ron and I helped a lot."

"I assume you succeeded, or you would not have personal experience of the texture."

Harry gagged at the memory. "Yeah, we did. Hermione got the wrong hair, though, found out the hard way why Polyjuice shouldn't be used with animal hair."

"So that is what that potion was for," Snape said, sounding as though he had just cleared up a long-standing mystery.

"And for all our trouble, we chose the wrong person to spy on," Harry told him regretfully. "Oh well, at least we met Myrtle out of the deal."

"Myrtle?"

"The ghost in the unused girl's loo? Also, the first victim the last time around."

"Ah, yes." Snape paused. "I trust there will not be a next round."

"Well, I killed the basilisk. So I rather hope not. They'd have to bring in a new one."

"You. Killed. A basilisk. In second year." The note of disbelief was clear in the potions master's voice.

"Well. Fawkes helped a lot."

"Ah. I see. So a twelve-year-old boy and a phoenix together killed a fifty-year-old basilisk." Harry thought Snape didn't seem to think that was much better. The chair creaked after a moment, and Harry pictured Snape leaning back in it. "I fear that exhausts my ability to perform small-talk, Potter." Harry snorted, amused at his idea of small-talk. "I did wish to ask, however—yesterday, during our bit of excitement, you mentioned we were, ah, glowing. What precisely did you mean?"

Harry recalled the moment, trying to find the right words to describe it. "You were... lit within. Like your skin was parchment, and someone had cast a *lumos* inside of you. Only... colored. Swirling, sort of."

"Colored?"

"Yeah. The headmaster was mostly baby blue and silver, you know, like those robes he loves wearing? Then lots of other shades of blue, and a spark here and there of gold, and throughout the whole thing these streaks of hot pink."

"And I?" Snape prompted after a brief silence.

"What? Oh, sorry. I was trying to remember... I think there was a brief flash of purple, too." Harry paused to clear his throat. "Could I have a bit of water, sir?"

Snape held the straw to his lips and Harry sucked on it gratefully. "Thank you, Professor. Where was I?"

"You were about to tell me the colors you hallucinated when looking at me," the man reminded him impatiently.

"Right. Well, you were mostly a sort of spring green and gold—like *Avada Kedavra*, almost, but alive, and this warm buttery gold. Then there was a lot of this really intense deep purple, like a Muggle black-light, so purple it's almost not there, but really bright at the same time. I remember thinking it was a bit odd how the purple didn't mix with the rest, just sort of... eddied... around the edges." Harry was frustrated with his inability to find the right words. "Then throughout the green and gold bits, there were these ribbons

of dark blue, and bits of a warm reddish purple, not at all like the other purple. The deep purple bits had these occasional flashes of really intense red, like hot iron.” Harry frowned. “That’s it, I think.”

“Hm. Quite detailed for a blood-loss induced hallucination. Of course, you would have practice.” The man sounded snide, but oddly satisfied as well. Harry laughed.

“Madame Pomfrey told me yesterday that strong emotions can foul healing spells, and that’s why my friends mayn’t visit,” Harry said after a moment. “Why don’t they ever teach us these sorts of things?”

“In general, strong emotions strengthen your own magic and can thus have varied effects, usually either disruption or strengthening, on spells placed on you. It is not just healing spells,” Snape corrected. “And it is mentioned in seventh-year Defense, when you will begin learning methods to take advantage of the effect. Most students simply do not have the emotional maturity to do anything with the information until then, so it is not taught, although most wizard-born students are aware of the effect.”

“Oh.” Harry felt better about that, then. “I guess that makes some sense. I just wish someone had thought to mention it earlier—I wouldn’t have complained so about her kicking my friends out, all those times.”

“Would you?” The man sounded skeptical, but continued before Harry could respond. “There is another, more pressing reason why you are restricted from having visitors, however, and that is your own protection.”

“My friends wouldn’t hurt me!” Harry protested.

“Mm. Perhaps not intentionally. But—consider, Potter, that a single first-year spell, used carelessly, could render you paralyzed, or dead, at this point in your recovery.” Harry gulped involuntarily. “You say you trust your friends—and perhaps they are even worthy of it. But again consider, Potter, the consequences if your friend should ask even a single injudicious question in the wrong company. We have you well-guarded, but not so well as that.”

“I . . . I didn’t realize,” Harry said finally, when he had found his voice again.

“No. Nor would you have been told, if it were up to Headmaster Dumbledore. I, however, feel you deserve an explanation for your isolation.”

“Thank you, sir.” The words came out low and subdued, but Harry hoped the man could hear the sincerity in them. “I appreciate it, sir.”

“Take heart, Potter.” The man drawled, managing to make the encouragement sound like an insult. “Tomorrow afternoon you will likely begin stage three of your potion, and shortly thereafter the danger to you will diminish significantly. Your irritating little cronies will be here soon enough—for some of us, anyhow—and you can return to endangering the rest of us instead.”

Harry smiled. After a moment’s reflection, he came to a realization. “The full moon started last night, didn’t it? How did the Wolfsbane turn out? The twins didn’t, ah, *do* anything to it, did they?”

“Not to my knowledge, no,” Snape answered Harry’s last question first. “I doubt they would dare, as I threatened them quite thoroughly beforehand. Besides,” the man added,

“they were only in charge of the last stage of brewing it, by which time it is difficult to alter significantly.” He sniffed reflectively. “And yes, I did inspect it before it was given to Lupin—it should have been adequate.”

Harry reflected that for Snape, that was ringing endorsement. “That’s good to hear,” he replied earnestly.

“Hmph. I suppose it would not do to have a mad werewolf tearing about headquarters,” Snape admitted grudgingly. “The portraits might enjoy it, however.”

“At least until he started marking his territory,” Harry agreed. “Wonder what Mrs Black would do if he tried it on her?” He considered that thought for a moment. “Bet Sirius already tried it, though.” His face tried to crumple, and he worked to shove the sadness back down. *This is Snape, remember? You’ll never live it down if you start crying like a baby.*

“Indeed,” Snape said neutrally, while Harry was still struggling with his control. “That might almost have been worth seeing.”

Despite his grief, Harry snorted. “As long as you had earplugs, anyhow.”

Snape made a noise of agreement, and they sat in silence for a few moments before he said, “I fear it is time for your next dose.”

“Do I still have to take the blood replenishing potion?” He couldn’t keep the disgust out of his voice.

“This is the last dose of it, I believe.” Harry heard vials clinking.

“Oh, good. ” Harry was relieved. The stuff was normally vile, but this batch was worse than the ones he’d had before.

The chair creaked and the potions master came into view. “Let us start with that one, then.” He pressed a vial to Harry’s lips.

The next day brought several welcome surprises. In the morning, Madame Pomfrey examined his head and pronounced his wounds healed enough to have the bandages off, which in turn meant he could wear his glasses. His sigh of relief as the world came into focus once more brought a smile to the medi-witch’s face.

Secondly, he had just been given his three o’clock dose—and, Madame Pomfrey told him, his first dose of stage three; the new stuff wasn’t too bad, tasting of stale crackers and flat soda—when the doors opened and two familiar faces peered in. “And now, I believe I shall leave you to the company of your friends,” the medi-witch said in parting.

“Ron! Hermione!” Harry was delighted.

“Harry!” the witch responded, laughing.

“Er, mate, did you know you’re floating?” Ron looked dubious as they approached Harry.

“I am?” Harry asked, surprised.

“About six or eight inches off the bed, Harry,” Hermione verified. “And it’s standard procedure for patients who have to be immobilized for long periods of time. Honestly, Ron, weren’t you listening last night?”

By the expression on Ron's face, the answer was clearly 'no', but Harry decided to bail the other boy out. "Well, I wasn't, Hermione. Do tell."

"It's mostly to prevent sores, but it also helps with hygiene," Hermione answered him, giving Ron one last glare. "Makes transportation easier if they should have to move you, too. But I don't understand—how can you not have noticed?"

"Mione, think for a second," he chided her, causing her to blush. "I've been stuck on my back staring at the ceiling, unable to move or feel anything, and I just got my glasses back this morning. How was I supposed to notice?"

She put her hand over her mouth. "Oh. Dear. I didn't realize it was... Sorry, Harry."

"Didn't realize what?" Ron looked as confused as Harry felt.

"*Later*, Ron!" She hissed at him, then smiled down at Harry. "Any idea when you'll be getting out, Harry?"

"I have no idea," he grumped, "and let me tell you, being stuck in here with nothing to do will drive a bloke spare in no time." He rolled his eyes. "Can you believe I've actually started to look forwards to Snape's potion deliveries? At least he talks to me."

"Oh, dear." Hermione looked like she couldn't decide whether to gape or laugh.

Ron, however, had no such dilemma; he was gaping like a fish. "Snape?"

Harry couldn't resist twitting Ron just a bit. "Yes, you know, tall bloke, likes black, smells of potions? I hear he teaches at this wizarding school in Scotland..."

Ron rolled his eyes. "But... talking? To *you*?"

"Honestly, Ron, just because the man..." Hermione trailed off, appearing more and more dubious. "Are you sure Professor Dumbledore doesn't have him *imperioed* or something, Harry?"

Ron smirked. Harry wished he could shrug. In lieu of shrugging, he made a noncommittal grunt.

"Oh! Harry!" Hermione pulled out a bit of folded paper, which she promptly unfolded and held up in his range of vision. "I've been saving this for you. With you back in favor, one of the other students came forwards and accused Umbridge of using Blood Quills on students—including you! They're doing a full investigation! She's been suspended!"

But Harry had frozen. "Er, what day was that?"

She peered at the newspaper. "June 14, it says." Harry felt rather as if someone had hit him in the chest with a high-powered stunner.

"Harry? Mate? You okay?" Ron looked worried.

"Er. Sorry. Just had a bit of a mystery solved, that's all." He blinked up at Hermione. "Too bad it was too bloody late." His voice cracked, and he was powerless to stop the tear that trickled down the side of his nose. If they'd done something *before* Sirius had...

She looked embarrassed and confused. "I'm sorry, Harry. I thought... I thought you'd be glad."

"It's all right," he reassured her. "I am glad that—frog—is getting her just desserts, and I'm glad you've saved it for me." Then, in an attempt to change the subject, he asked, "So, what's this I hear about Krum?"

Hermione made a face at him, while Ron appeared distraught. “The deal fell through,” he told Harry morosely.

“Oh. Well, I’m sure they’ll get someone good,” Harry tried to cheer him up. “What about that Laotian seeker? Isn’t his contract up soon too?”

“Yeah, maybe. Hey, think we’ll get scouted, Harry? This could be your big chance!”

“I doubt it, Ron.” Harry said. “Not sure who would hex me first if I did think about it.” At Ron’s blank look he elaborated. “Ron, playing professional quiddich means being in full sight of thousands of people, every game.” Hermione had cottoned on, but Ron continued to look confused. “Line of sight, Ron. How long d’you really think it would take to get one Death Eater with a wand in?”

Ron instantly turned green. “Er. Maybe you should stick to intramural quiddich, eh mate?”

Harry closed his eyes before he could roll them. “Sure, Ron,” he agreed.

“So, Harry, have you got any reading done yet for next year?” Hermione changed the subject again. Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes, again, but Ron did it for him. “Hermione, I went straight from Hogwarts to the Dursleys’, and since then I’ve been lying right here.” He sighed. “But I did read my transformation text from last year over several times, if it makes you feel better.”

Hermione appeared mollified. Ron, by contrast, looked horrified. “You didn’t!”

“Ron. *Dursleys’.*”

“Oh. Right. Sorry, mate.”

There was an awkward silence. “How is Headquarters these days?” He asked finally for want of any other topic.

“Oy, Mum’s been cooking like a maniac!” Ron sounded exasperated.

“Still?” Harry blinked. “I would have thought she’d have quit by now.”

“I don’t think she’ll be happy ’til she gets her mitts on you herself,” Ron told him. “I just hope the rest of us live that long.”

Hermione grinned. “Tonks has been sneaking biscuits and cake and whatnot out to work to keep the rest of us sane, but even her coworkers have started refusing them.” She looked impishly down at Harry. “Even Snape’s put on a few pounds, if you know where to look.”

Harry tried to picture an overweight Snape and failed miserably. Ron turned green again; Harry wasn’t sure if it was from the thought of Snape or the thought of Hermione noticing Snape’s body.

The friends chatted until Pomfrey showed up with Harry’s last six o’clock dose—no nerve regeneration potion this time, just transitioning a few of the healing potions off of the six-and-twelve schedule. Gently, and with an apologetic glance at Harry, she threw the other two out. “See you at Headquarters!” Hermione called on her way out the door.

He was startled to realize, after, just how tired three hours of talking had made him. When he voiced the thought to Madame Pomfrey, she looked down at him sympathetically. “You are using the majority of your energy to heal still, Mr Potter,” she told him. “You will likely find that you tire more rapidly than normal for some time.”

That provoked mixed feelings in Harry: on the one hand he was relieved to know this was normal, but on the other hand, he couldn't help feeling a bit irritated. His face must have shown his conflict, for she smiled at him. "Patience, Mr Potter. You have all summer to recover, after all. You will be back to horrifying us all with your exploits soon enough."

"We aren't that bad!" he protested. The look on her face made him pause. "...are we?"

"Perhaps it is simply that I must patch you all back up every time," she conceded.

Looking at it from her perspective, Harry could see her point. "Sorry," he told her sincerely. She simply smiled and patted his cheek.

His nine o'clock dose was administered to him by a distracted Professor Dumbledore. Harry asked him what was wrong, but the man simply smiled, patted his cheek, and told him to get some sleep. Harry, who had rather been looking forwards to his first night with only one interruption, complied with only token protests.

Much to his disgruntlement, however, it felt as though he had no sooner fallen asleep than he was catapulted into a vision. He had clearly joined in the middle of a meeting, as Voldemort was in the midst of a sentence. "...luck, Severus?"

With a start, Harry realized the hooded figure face down in front of him must be the potions professor. From this angle he could see that Hermione was right: the man had put on weight.

"No, my Lord," he was saying. "The perliana leaf seemed promising at first, but it is proving highly unstable in combination with the nudibranch—"

"Save your explanations, Severus," Voldemort hissed at him. Harry could feel him growing angry. "I do not have the time tonight. And the boy?"

"I regret to report I have had little contact with him as yet, my Lord. I—"

"What you have done is report two failures in one night! *Crucio!*"

Harry discovered that the spell preventing him from feeling his body did not apparently protect him from reflected pain from others. He heard Voldemort laugh in what seemed to be ecstasy before he lost hold on the vision and found himself back in his own body. Opening his eyes and gulping in air, he found Madame Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore looking down at him.

"A vision, Harry?" The old man asked him. Pomfrey meanwhile was casting spells on him. Abruptly the feeling of his muscles—which he still could not actually feel themselves—*wanting* to twitch vanished. He smiled at her in thanks before looking back over at Dumbledore.

"Yes, sir." He was proud of himself for keeping his voice from trembling. "I didn't see anything important, however. Voldemort questioned Professor Snape about some potion, and about—well, me, I think. Professor Snape got hit by an awfully strong *crucio*, sir. He might need some help."

Dumbledore's face tightened at Harry's news. "I shall wait for him, Harry," he said reassuringly. "Madame, if I may—"

She handed him a vial over Harry's chest before he had finished the question, then returned her attention to Harry. "No significant harm done—he'll need a larger than usual

dose next time of his potions, but that's doable. Unfortunately, Harry," she addressed him directly, "I have nothing else I can give you for the sympathetic pain. I fear you shall simply have to sleep it off."

"It's okay, ma'am," he told her. "It's mostly just odd, since I can't actually feel my body." She looked dubious, but nodded anyway. The headmaster appeared—sad? Guilty? Harry couldn't quite decide.

"Well, Harry," the man said after a moment, "I suppose we should let you get to sleep, and I should go wait for Severus." Pomfrey nodded at them both in turn and left. The Headmaster lingered a moment, looking down at Harry. "Thank you my boy," he said quietly, then was gone before Harry could inquire 'for what'.

With the ward quiet once more it didn't take him long to fall back asleep. When he was awakened in the middle of the night for his potions, he grinned happily to see Snape standing over him, vials in hand. The man looked faintly startled. "Happy dreams, Potter?" he inquired in a tone that might have been nasty if it hadn't also sounded worried.

"I'm glad to see you're okay," Harry said sleepily. "Woke me up."

"Yes; it is time for your medication," Snape agreed, apparently deciding Harry was making no sense. For his part, Harry was too tired to correct him. Instead he took his larger doses meekly and fell almost immediately back to sleep, with Snape still staring down at him oddly.

When he woke again the morning sun was filling the ward. It was only then, in the light of day, that it occurred to Harry that he had no way of knowing if the vision had been real. He was still wondering if he had sent Dumbledore on a wild goose chase when Pomfrey came over.

"You will likely be ecstatic, Mr Potter, to hear you can have the spells off you now." She smiled at his involuntary cheer. "You will still have other charms on you," she warned him. "We do not want you falling out of bed should you have a vision, for example. Furthermore, the damage to your right shoulder and hand was severe enough that you will still have immobilization charms on them, as well as a partial immobilization charm on your left knee. But you should be capable of sitting up and drinking your potions by yourself, now."

It was still great news. He grinned up at her. "When do we get started?"

"Now, if you wish," she informed him. "I will take the sensation-blocking spell off first, Mr Potter." She raised her wand and he mentally braced himself. Even so, he let out an undignified squeak as the pain hit. He forced himself to breathe evenly as it peaked and leveled off. After a moment more he was able to look at her evenly again. She looked back, brow puckered with worry but smiling. "Now I will cancel the levitation spell," she said. "Be warned—it will hurt as you make contact with the bed." Slowly he floated lower, until first his head and then legs and back hit the bed. Once again, a squeak was torn from him with every new contact.

When he was fully down, he closed his eyes and took a few moments to breathe heavily before he was able to speak. "Unpleasant, but bearable," he told her, getting another smile. "What's next?"

“The motion-blocking spell,” she advised him, “and then we will need to put you through a few basic stretches to work the kinks out of your muscles. You will likely find yourself weaker than usual as well; it is to be expected after your injuries and the extended immobilization.”

To his surprise, the stretching actually helped, or perhaps it was simply the satisfaction of getting to sit upright under his own power. Sitting up, after she had left, he regarded his wand hand with dismay. Pomfrey had told him reluctantly, when he had asked her why it was still bandaged and immobilized, that it appeared to have been crushed, “as if beneath a boot”. He did not doubt she was right. She had assured him it would heal properly—“won’t be too long now, we can start you on a stronger version of Skele-Heal now that everything’s started knitting together in the right places and you can move again”—but it was still disturbing to be unable to even lift his wand. Worse, the bedside stand was placed to his right, since that was normally where it would be most useful to a student.

He picked his wand up with his left hand, just because he could, and because it comforted him to feel it even if he was unable—and not allowed, to boot—to cast with it. He stuck it in its normal spot under the pillow. Then he turned his attention back to the largish book it had been resting on. Awkwardly he maneuvered it into his lap with his left hand, then turned it over and nearly laughed. It was the standard year six potions manual, one that had clearly been used by at least one student before. Still, it was better than nothing, and he flipped it open, resting his bandaged right hand in the center to keep the pages still.

Meanwhile, Severus Snape was taking tea with the Headmaster. He accepted a biscuit—he was rather fond of the buttery ones, although he would rather face the *cruciatius* than admit it to Albus. He rather suspected the old coot was aware of it, the way the things kept showing up when he visited.

“Sugar?” The headmaster glanced up from his pouring. Severus gave a spare nod. Albus dropped in a lump and handed the cup and saucer over. Finishing his biscuit, Severus accepted it and stirred his tea quietly, preferring to wait out the man when possible.

“How did your visit with the Dark Lord go last night?” the old man inquired after giving him a chance to taste his tea.

“You know how it went. You were waiting for me,” Severus responded with a hint of a growl in his voice. “Thank you for the potion, however.” He could never get over the way the man made his summonings sound like they had been drinking tea and eating scones all night.

Albus lowered his teacup and chided him, “You know what I meant.”

“After some interminable business involving what I took to be an effort to recruit more witches into the ranks, he asked me how the potion was coming, and my efforts to sway Mr Potter. I told him the truth about the former, and lied to him about the latter. I was punished and then dismissed.” His clipped tone did not, he thought, sufficiently cover his distaste for the subject matter. He had, as always, written out an account of what had

occured as soon as his hands had stopped shaking enough to hold a quill. He could see the folder the Headmaster kept his reports in—charmed to be readable only by himself and Severus—from here, for Merlin’s sake.

“You seem to be getting along better with Mr Potter,” the old man said finally.

Severus deliberately sipped his tea before replying. “I am not foolish enough to throw away our best chance at winning this war simply because I would prefer to scream at the boy.”

“I am glad to hear that.” By the way his eyes were twinkling but narrowed slightly, Severus doubted the man actually believed him, but as long as he didn’t push. . . He kept his occlumency shields up and sipped his tea again, and the old man continued. “He is the reason I was waiting for you last night. I fear I will have to begin his occlumency lessons again sooner than I had hoped.” Severus didn’t care, as long as he wasn’t expected to help. “On a related matter, his parents’ will is quite emphatic that I must take him to Gringott’s as soon as possible. I realize that will be exceedingly taxing on his treatment, but under the circumstances I don’t feel we can delay any more than strictly necessary. I have already spoken to Poppy, but she felt you might have some additional suggestions.”

“I may be able to brew some potions that will help the boy’s system to withstand the trip,” Severus offered neutrally. “It would help if I knew what he is to be doing on this visit.”

“I do not know myself.” Judging from the unhappy look in the old man’s eyes, it was the truth. “They simply specified a vault number to which I am to take him. I would presume it is blood-locked, since neither of us have a key, but other than that—” the headmaster shrugged. “Your guess is likely as good as mine.”

Likely better, indeed, since Severus did have an inkling of what this trip might be about, especially given the timing. With all his might, however, he prayed that he was wrong. It could not be—must not be—was simply impossible. Yet, for Potter, the impossible seemed to be regularly doable. He buried his thoughts behind his deepest layer of occlumency shielding. “I did speak to the boy about the glowing he mentioned during that bit of excitement.”

“Oh?” Clearly working to keep his voice light, Albus took the bait. Severus smirked into his tea. “What did the boy say?”

“He said it was as if we were parchment wrapped around a *lumos*, only swirling with colors.” Albus sat forwards, all pretense at disinterest gone. “His description was quite vivid. You he described as a blue the color of your favorite robes, swirled with other shades of blue and with silver, an occasional spark of gold, and streaks of hot pink. Oh, and one brief flash of purple.” He paused before going in for the kill. “Pray tell, Albus, if you were to ask a seer to describe your aura, what would they say?”

Albus leaned back in this seat, one knuckle raised to his lips. Their eyes met, and the acknowledgment of the import of this revelation hung between them like a tangible object. “Your surmise is, as usual, correct,” he confessed quietly after a moment. They stared at each other in silence for a while longer. Finally Albus stirred. “It could be nothing,” he said as if trying to convince himself. “It has been known to occur in otherwise unremarkable

individuals who are near death.”

“Do you really believe that, old man? With this boy, in particular?” Severus’s voice held a hint of mocking, although he kept it soft.

Albus did not answer.

“He also gave a fascinating description of myself,” Severus added reluctantly, after the silence had stretched on for a while. “One that makes me fear the Dark Lord’s rot goes deeper than we had hoped.”

“I am sorry, my boy.” The older man replied softly. “I knew it was possible, but I did hope. . .” he trailed off with a sigh. They sat in silence for another minute while the tea cooled. “I do not want the boy to become a pawn in this war, Severus!”

“Then I fear it maybe be time for him to become a player.”

“He is not yet sixteen!”

“He may not have another choice. Delay much longer, Albus, and you may find the choice has already been made without your input.”

Harry was enjoying his newfound freedom—or newly rediscovered, anyhow; he was uncomfortably aware that not two weeks before, he would have chafed at being restricted to bed, but now being able to sit under his own power seemed marvelous—when the Headmaster came in. Harry deliberately called up thoughts of how *nice* it was to no longer be looking up the man’s nose, and met his eyes.

Dumbledore chuckled. “It is good to see you in such high spirits, my boy.” He sat down on the chair beside Harry, which Harry could now *see*. “There are a few things we need to discuss, Harry, now that you are feeling comparatively better.”

Harry nodded, sobering. He had been waiting for this. “When do I have to go back, sir?” He struggled to keep the fear out of his voice.

Dumbledore looked startled. “Back where, my boy?”

“The Dursleys’. I didn’t spend enough time there—”

“You will not be going back to those monsters again!” the man cut him off, eyes flashing, face fierce. Harry instinctively shrunk back, and the man took a deep breath, looking at Harry regretfully.

Slowly Harry relaxed. “But, sir, not two months ago you said—”

“I know what I said, my boy.” Dumbledore looked tired and sad. “There is something I did not tell you then, not because I did not want you to know but because I was sworn to secrecy.” He patted Harry’s left hand where it lay on the bed. “Besides, after what they did to you, I would turn my wand on myself rather than send you back there—if Poppy or Minerva did not get me first.”

Harry blinked. He would not have to go back? It was as if a wand that had been pointed at his head had suddenly been dropped, and he found himself smiling at Dumbledore, half in disbelief. The man smiled back, although Harry fancied that his smile seemed melancholy. “Sorry, sir. What was it you were saying?”

Dumbledore's smile went out as if someone had said 'nox'. "I believe I owe you an explanation, Harry, for things you possibly do not realize need explaining, and then I have a few decisions you need to make."

"Explanations, sir? Like why *no one* came for me for nearly a week?" Harry's voice came out with more anger and hurt than he had expected, and when he saw the Headmaster jerk as if he had been struck, he wished he could call them back. Another, smaller part of him smiled in satisfaction, and Harry was uneasy with the realization that he could enjoy the man's pain.

"Yes, Harry, like that. Would you like me to begin there, or at the beginning?" Dumbledore's voice was quiet, calm, as if he considered Harry's anger to be his due.

It took Harry a while to decide, and a while more to control his voice enough to speak, during which the Headmaster sat quietly. "The beginning, please."

"First, Harry, let me warn you that I am still bound by oaths to others not to speak of certain events, and so my answers may not be as complete as either of us could wish. I give you my word, however, that I shall be as complete as I can be without violating those oaths." Harry nodded solemnly. "In that case, my story starts the night of 31st October, 1981. As the head of the Order, I had a clock, much like the Weasley clock, for your family, as well as an alarm keyed to their wards." He sat for a long moment, head bowed as if in pain, but before Harry could decide what to say, he continued.

"I was in my office when the alarm went off telling me that your parents' wards had fallen, and I watched—unable to reach you by port-key, apparition, or floo; I tried—as the hands on your clock moved to "mortal peril", and as your parents' hands fell, one and then the other. I could scarcely believe it when yours did not fall, but returned slowly to "at home". I knew you were alone, probably injured and scared, and I came to several terrible realizations. The first was that your parents' will was bound by secrecy, and could only be read in the presence of Sirius Black, who was—we thought at the time—not only a traitor but also likely to be named your guardian. The second was that if I attempted to keep you in the wizarding world until the will could be read and Sirius's guardianship contested, you would be taken by Wizarding Youth Services and placed with a high-ranking, powerful family—who at the time would most likely have been the Umbridges or Macnairs." Harry swallowed. "Neither of those fates seemed acceptable. If I could just find somewhere to put you, somewhere you would be safe until the ruckus died down, I believed I could find a way to work the whole mess out, send you to a good wizarding family—Andromeda Tonks', perhaps." He sighed. "Please understand, Harry, I had at best a few minutes to work out what to do before the aurors came and the WYS workers took you."

"So what happened?" Harry kept his voice neutral.

"You know what I did immediately thereafter. Before I could find Sirius, let alone start any proceedings against him, he went after Pettigrew and landed in Azkaban. Unfortunately, while your parents had made provisions for his death when it came to the reading of their will, they had neglected to make provisions for incarceration. Thanks to his conviction, I was relatively certain that I could have him declared invalid as a guardian, but the Goblins refused to release the will to anyone else, and the Ministry refused to release him to receive

it.” Harry began to see where this was all going. “I then tried to use legal channels to remove him as the stated reader of the will, but by then Malfoy had been released, and he and his cronies kept blocking me.

“I was eventually able to begin proceedings of unfitness against Sirius, but Malfoy managed to get it hung up in court on all sorts of technicalities. By then the Dursleys were on the books as your legal guardians, and if I wanted to try to take you away from them before the proceedings were complete, I had one of two choices. Either I could file a statement of unfitness against them, as I had against Sirius, and have your guardianship legally removed from them, or I could simply take you away. If I attempted the first, without your parents’ will to back up a suitable choice of guardian, Malfoy would claim that I had shown such poor judgment in the past choice of guardians that I could not be trusted to choose another, and you would wind up in the hands of one of his associates. If, on the other hand, I simply took you away, you and whomever I gave you to would be on the run for a very long time—unable to even attend Hogwarts lest you be seized and given over to Malfoy.”

Dumbledore took a deep breath, and Harry took a moment to let it all sink in. “But,” he protested, “what about what you said last term? Was that all a lie?”

“No, just not the complete truth. I honestly believed the Dursleys would be kind and good to you, certainly as a baby, and the protection magic was no inconsiderable reason as well—had your parents’ will not forbidden it, I might well have encouraged them to take you for summers or afternoons, or possibly encouraged them to move into one of your family’s manors with your guardian. Please understand, Harry, the way Malfoy managed to tie up the court proceedings left me bound by oath not to speak of your parents’ will in any way to persons not also involved.”

“Oh. But—what about Sirius? After he escaped, I mean.”

“Then I was prepared to gladly have the will read and him installed as your guardian, if we could just get him cleared, so we could get the court case cleared, so he would be eligible.” Dumbledore made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat. “Until then, the whole thing was still tied up in legal limbo.” He sighed. “Which brings us to recent events.”

“Wait,” Harry interjected, “let me see if I have this straight. You began a court case to have Sirius declared unfit back when you thought he was guilty. Malfoy got it hung up in legal limbo for . . . years, I presume. Then when Sirius escaped and you learned he was innocent—what again?”

“Because of the legal action,” Dumbledore explained, “the will could not be read until it was decided one way or the other. Either Sirius was unfit, in which case the responsibility would pass to Remus and Sirius *could not* be involved, or Sirius *was* fit, in which case the will could not be read *without* him.”

“Oh. So then, when he, wh. . .” Harry’s voice failed him.

“When Sirius died, I realized that I now had the tool in hand to cut the figurative Gordian Knot. I began the paperwork to hold a secret hearing to declare the legal proceedings null and void due to the death of the defendant. I sent you to your aunt’s, fully confident that by the time Hogwarts started again, you would have new guardians.”

“So... what went wrong?” Somewhere, something had obviously gone pear-shaped.

“The morning two days after we saw you off, I received an owl from the Minister of Magic informing me that he had decided I was right about the danger to you and had already placed his own wards on the house to alert him if any wizards crossed the property line, ‘so he could send aurors more rapidly’. Now I knew that Voldemort had—and still has—agents in the Wizarding Youth Services and thus I knew that if the Ministry pulled you out of the Dursleys, unless one of the Order risked their freedom—risked their lives, since they would then be charged with kidnapping the Boy-Who-Lived—to whisk you away from them, you would be dead by nightfall.”

Harry shivered. Maybe not being rescued immediately wasn’t so bad after all.

“Alastor was prepared to seize you anyway, run with you while we got the will read, and then turn his wand on himself so no one could prove we were involved.” Disturbed by the thought of someone, especially Moody, willingly turning his wand on himself just to protect him, Harry shivered again. “But we were so close to getting the will, I decided to gamble—wait until we’d read the custody section, then send someone after you.” The Headmaster closed his eyes for a second, and his voice dropped to a near whisper. “It was a gamble I nearly lost, Harry, and I am only too aware of it.” The single sentence was full of pain, regret, and something more, something undefinable, that Harry recognized from his own feelings about Sirius’s death. Shocked, he sat silently until the Headmaster regained control of himself and resumed. “Unbeknownst to me, your parents had included the clause that you must *not*, under any circumstances, be sent to the Dursleys’. That was enough to bring down the wards we had placed on you.”

They both sat silently for a long minute, during which Harry struggled to reconcile his feelings about Sirius’s death with his relief at being told he would never have to return to 4 Privet Drive. When he thought he could speak again without screaming or breaking into tears, he asked “So who is my guardian now?”

“You are my ward, Harry,” the old man responded, “which under Wizarding law is slightly different from being your guardian. At this late age, however, it likely will not matter to you much which precisely I am.”

“Oh.” It was still sinking in for Harry that he really would not have to return to the Dursleys’. He suspected he would have a fit later about Dumbledore’s choices, but it was all just too new yet.

“There are a few things you do need to decide, Harry,” Dumbledore said gently after he had been silent for a few minutes.

“What? Oh, right.”

“To begin with, as my ward, your legal home is now Hogwarts for as long as I am Headmaster here, or until you choose to move out after your majority.” The Headmaster smiled gently as Harry’s face lit up. “You will eventually need to choose a room or suite to be yours, but that can wait until later. In the nearer future, you should think about whether you wish to spend the summer here or at Headquarters. I would prefer to keep your friends there for the most part, but they would be allowed to visit you here, or vice versa.”

Harry blinked. “Er, I really don’t know... I’ll have to think about it.”

“That’s as I expected, my boy, no rush.” Dumbledore seemed more comfortable now. “Next, there is the matter of the Dursleys.”

“I thought you said I didn’t have to go back!”

“And you do not, although I do wish to have you look over your things and make sure we found everything. However, the Ministry has decided to press charges against them on the basis of what their aurors observed at the scene. We—you—must decide whether to cooperate with them or not.” He looked Harry in the eyes, his face serious. “If you choose to cooperate, your uncle will likely be given a much harsher sentence; as it stands they can only prove neglect. However, I believe everyone would understand if you would prefer not to be involved.”

Stunned, Harry sat with his mouth open for a little while. “I...don’t know, sir.” Someone was pressing charges? For *him*? Against *Uncle Vernon*? Slowly he smiled. “I think maybe cooperate...it depends on what I have to do.”

“In that case, we will speak to a solicitor later.” Dumbledore smiled at him. “They will want to interview you in either case, but if I mention you are thinking of assisting the investigation, they should allow us to put it off until you have a chance to speak to someone. You should be aware that they will likely subpoena Madame Pomfrey to testify, although it would be easier on her if you were to release her to speak to them without legal action.”

Nodding, Harry said, “I can do that in any case.”

The Headmaster shifted in his chair, leaning back a little, and pulled out a small bag of lemon drops. “Lemon drop, my boy? Madame Pomfrey assures me they are perfectly safe for you.”

Harry had not had a chance to taste real food in over a week, although the medi-witch had informed him they would start him on gruel that evening. “Yes, please,” he therefore responded eagerly. Accepting the offered candy, he sucked on it, enjoying the taste of something that was *not* a foul potion. Dumbledore popped one into his own cheek.

“Now, then, there is one final matter on which I fear neither of us have a choice,” the older man said after they had both savoured the candies for a while. “Your parents’ will was quite explicit that I *must* take you to a certain Gringott’s vault absolutely as soon as possible after your fifteenth birthday. Furthermore, now that you are even somewhat mobile, I feel, as does Madame Pomfrey, that we should move you somewhere safer until you recover a little more. Thus, as soon as you are up to port-keying, we will be moving you to Headquarters.”

It took a moment for this to sink in. Harry’s first automatic thought was *I’ll get to see*—but then he remembered Sirius was no longer there, would never be there again, and he felt tears spring to his eyes as his face crumpled. Fiercely he fought them back.

Dumbledore placed a hand on his good shoulder and lightly, gently rubbed it. “It is all right to grieve, Harry. I wish I had somewhere else I could take you.”

Harry sniffled, rubbing the end of his nose with the back of his left hand. “It’s okay, sir,” he said. “I’ll be all right. When are we leaving?”

“That, my boy, will be up to Madame Pomfrey, but we hope tomorrow afternoon. You need to be able to move at least short distances on your own power before we can move

you there.”

Harry nodded. “At least I’ll get to see my friends,” he tried to put a good face on the news. Dumbledore smiled at him.

“That you will. Hold fast to that thought, Harry, and you will manage.” He stood up. “I must get back, to finish the arrangements for your transportation and arrival. However, Harry, do not hesitate to ask Pomfrey to call me if you need something—including someone to whom to talk.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry told the man, who smiled and left immediately. It was only after the doors had swung closed that he remembered he had wanted to ask if his vision had been real or not. Shrugging to himself, and reminding himself to ask the next time he saw either the Headmaster or the potions professor, he went back to reading the potions manual.

This particular copy had obviously been used by a student; not only did it have discolorations and stains and one corner eaten clean off, but someone had written all sorts of comments all through it. Some of them were actually quite helpful, such as the one that read “Professor forgot to mention potion will explode if too many toad eggs are added—is he *trying* to kill us all?” Others were just funny. Harry laughed particularly hard at one, in the corner of an extremely complicated vomit-inducing potion, that read “probably faster to just haul poor suckers up to astronomy tower after Hufflepuff quiddich win under disillusionment charm”. The Hufflepuffs were known for their, ah, *proclivities* after successful quiddich matches, and thus Harry sympathized greatly.

He was forced to put the book down later when Madame Pomfrey came in, carrying a cane, and headed purposefully for him.

“While I am loathe to interrupt your fun, Mr Potter, I would like for you to try walking for me. I believe we will all sleep more soundly with you in a secure location.”

Harry had his doubts as to whether *he* would be sleeping more soundly, but he could see her point. Right now, he was about as defenseless as he could be without being unconscious.

She took down the low barrier keeping him from being able to fall out of bed and directed him to slide his feet off the side. “This will hurt,” she warned him. “Your knee is still healing, but it will bear your weight if you are careful.”

Just bending it over the edge of the bed made Harry hiss. One advantage to being a Parselmouth, Harry had discovered over the summer, was the ability to swear without getting in trouble. Carefully he arranged his feet in the slippers she provided and looked up at her.

She took hold of his good arm and shoulder. “Ready, Mr Potter? On three, then. One—Two—Three!”

He found out why she’d had hold of him as he pushed himself up and promptly nearly blacked out. “Oof.” Concentrating on breathing for a few seconds, he was able to get the sparkles and blackness to recede a bit. Carefully he decreased the amount of weight he was putting on the medi-witch’s hold, and was pleasantly surprised when he was able to stay upright without assistance.

“There you go, Mr Potter,” she encouraged him. “We’ll have you playing quiddich again in no time.”

CHAPTER 3



Headquarters

Author's Notes: For those of you who haven't noticed, there's a new improved Chapter 1 up that fixes some of the plot holes in the previous version. The next two chapters are mostly character development; I hope I haven't spoiled you with the heavy plot nature of the last two chapters. Right now I'm somewhat stuck on Chapter 6, and Chapter 5 needs serious work, so expect updates to delay at some point. I'm updating faster than I'm writing currently, and I'd like to stay at least a few chapters ahead of myself so I can keep the chapter revisions to a minimum.

Several sweaty hours later, Harry could walk the length of the hospital wing by himself with the use of a cane. By far the hardest part, to Harry's surprise, had been coordinating the cane with his feet. Move it too soon, and his knee would buckle; too late and he ended up tipping over. It required a sort of odd two and a half beat movement that looked much simpler than it was. Sitting down on his bed again, he sighed in relief as the weight came off his bad knee.

"Here you are, Mr Potter." Madame Pomfrey reappeared with a steaming bowl of gruel. Harry's stomach growled loudly at the smell, making both of them smile. "Since you were so good about everything today, I took the liberty of adding a little syrup to it."

Harry found it incredibly awkward to handle the spoon left-handed, especially as he could not move the right hand at the shoulder and thus could not hold the bowl near his face. After several failed attempts to get a spoonful to his mouth, Pomfrey took pity on him and levitated the bowl so he only had to get the spoon a few inches.

"Why not just remove the bones and grow them back?" He asked her in frustration.

"The surrounding matrix needs to be intact first, Harry, and I would rather not take chances with such an important limb," she replied absently, focusing on her levitation spell.

Either must die at the hands of the other... Realizing that not just his own life but the outcome of the war possibly rested on how well his shoulder and hand healed, Harry was not inclined to argue. *In fact, I think I shall be very sure to follow all of her instructions to the letter.* But he had to admit he had no clue what she meant by 'surrounding matrix'. "Huh?" He put his spoon down in his empty bowl and watched it float down to his lap.

"We may end up doing just that in the long run," she explained. "However, there are two significant constraints. First, the soft tissue damage must be fully repaired, and secondly, it is wisest not to try to regrow more than one bone at a time, especially in such a delicate and important area. Done this way, there is a much higher probability that you will experience long-term pain associated with the repairs, especially during weather phenomena, but there is a corresponding drop in the likelihood that you will have impairment in return."

“In other words,” he summarized, “done this way it sucks to heal and it’ll likely hurt even after, but I’ll be able to use it.”

“Precisely.” She smiled at him and took his bowl away. “Now it is time for your potions, and then you should sleep. Tomorrow will be tiring.”

Trying to arrange transportation to a house under the *fidelius* charm for someone who could best be described as limping wounded turned out to be more difficult than Harry had expected. In the end, Moody apparated into Hogsmeade just to port-key back with Harry, who was mildly surprised by how excited he was to see the man. The ex-auror had always scared him somewhat before—although how much of that was Moody himself and how much of it was the association of his face with Crouch Jr’s actions Harry wasn’t sure.

“Hello, Potter,” the man greeted him as he stepped into the Hospital Wing. “Good to see you’re healing.” He stumped over to sit on the bed opposite Harry, who had swung his legs carefully over the side.

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said. “It’s good to see a new face.”

Moody grinned at him, a somewhat alarming expression given his scars. “Always thought that was the worst part of healing up—the boredom.”

Just then the Headmaster came in, carrying Harry’s bookbag, and with Harry’s trunk and Hedwig’s cage and a box floating behind him. The cage was empty, causing Harry to give it a curious look.

“Hagrid’s seeing to her until she’s recovered, Harry,” Dumbledore said, presumably seeing his expression. To Moody he said “Good to see you, Alastor. The snorkack mates at midnight.”

“And the puffskins are migrating,” Moody responded. They both nodded. Harry felt rather as if he had been stuck in a bad spy novel, but given previous history, he supposed he appreciated Dumbledore’s caution.

“Here, Harry.” The older man pulled a stack of clothing out of the bookbag. “Molly sent them over this morning. They’re some of Charlie’s old things—she thought they might fit better than what you have in the trunk. She said to tell you that if they fit you can keep them, no-one else fits them anymore.” Charlie was the shortest of the Weasley males now that Ron had hit his growth spurt, and even Ginny was taller than Harry these days.

“Thank you, sir.” Gratefully, he accepted the bundle of clothes. He hadn’t thought about clothes until Dumbledore had pulled them out, but hospital pajamas were not exactly common street wear in London. “I’ll remember to thank her later.” It suddenly occurred to him to wonder just how he was going to get changed—Madame Pomfrey had had to help him get the loose hospital pajamas on; there was no way he was going to get these on by himself, and he certainly wasn’t going to struggle with it in front of Professors Dumbledore and Moody. “Um...” he started awkwardly.

Dumbledore twinkled at him. “Alastor, let’s go find Poppy and then give Harry some privacy.”

“Find me for what?” Pomfrey came out of her office holding a large satchel. Taking in Harry’s bright red face and the clothes on his lap, all she said was “Ah. You may use my office, gentlemen.”

It took several discreet shortening and widening spells, but finally Harry was dressed in trousers that would neither catch on the bandages on his knee, nor trip him up. The short-sleeved shirt was easier—it only required a bit of widening to the right shoulder to go on comfortably, and Harry could even get it on by himself. They didn’t bother altering the jacket, which Harry thought was a little new to be something Charlie no longer wore. Instead, they tucked Harry’s arm into a sling and simply used a weak sticking charm to hold the right shoulder on. Finally, Madame Pomfrey tied his trainers for him.

“There you are, Mr Potter. Ready for the men to come back?”

Pulling his wand from underneath the pillow, he stashed it in one of the jacket’s interior pockets, making sure he could draw it left-handed if he needed to.

“Good idea, boy.” He looked up to see Moody watching him. “Never hurts to be prepared. Can you cast left-handed, Potter?”

“Don’t know, sir. Never tried it.” He pulled his wand out again, flicking it experimentally without casting. Grimacing, he added, “Certainly not anything that requires precise wand movements.” Still frowning, he returned his wand to his pocket, making sure it was secure but loose enough to draw quickly. “Might be able to manage an *expelliarmus* if I had to.”

“We’ll just have to have you practice, boy,” Moody said. “This everything?” He gestured to the trunk, bag, cage, and box on the floor at his feet.

“I think so, sir.” With the help of his cane, it only took Harry two tries to stand up this time. “Ready, sir.”

“These are the boy’s potions.” After handing the satchel to Moody, Madame Pomfrey stood back. “There’s an instruction sheet on top.”

“I will be there tomorrow, Harry,” Dumbledore added. “Don’t overtax yourself, now.”

Moody accepted an old teacup from Dumbledore. “Here, Potter, stand a little closer. There we are.” Reaching down, he hoisted Harry’s bag to the shoulder across from the potions satchel, then picked up the handle of the trunk. The box and cage had already been firmly strapped down. Carefully he touched the teacup to the back of Harry’s hand. “Lion bars!”

When they landed in a London alley, Harry nearly fell over. Moody grabbed his good shoulder, letting the teacup fall to smash on the pavement. “Sorry, sir,” Harry told the man.

“Sssh!” Moody hissed. He cast a lightening charm over Harry’s things, then strode quickly to the mouth of the alley, peering all around. After a bit he motioned Harry forwards, who obeyed as fast as he could. As he came even with the scarred ex-auror, the gravelly voice whispered in his ear, “It’s one block east and over one block to the north. Now—go!” Together they stepped out onto the pavement during a lull in traffic.

Moody tucked his hat tighter on his head as his magical eye scanned ceaselessly all around them. Harry, for his part, concentrated on walking without tripping or falling over.

He was sweating by the time they'd gone the two blocks. Walking with a cane, he had discovered, used different muscles from just about anything else he'd ever done. It felt a bit like trying to play quiddich while riding *two* brooms—mismatched ones. At Moody's low hiss he looked up to discover he'd nearly walked straight past 13 Grimmauld Place. Together they concentrated, and when 12 Grimmauld Place expanded into being before them, it was all Harry could do to get up the steps to the door. By the time he had made it up Moody had the door open and was holding it for him.

It took Harry a moment to work out what seemed wrong. It was quiet—no shrieking, despite the door creaking fit to wake the dead. He stopped just outside the threshold, looking inside suspiciously, trying to work out if he dared drop the cane and go for his wand, or if he'd just fall over trying.

Moody chuckled. "Albus finally found a silencing charm that works on 'em, even if it has to be re-cast every day. Good instincts, though, boy." He gave Harry a hand getting over the sill. "Good thing too; none of our lubricating spells work on the hinges anymore. You go find Molly—she should be in the kitchen—and get her to feed you. I'll just take these up to your room." He closed the door behind Harry and stumped away, Harry's bags following him after a short wave of his wand.

No sooner was Moody out of sight, however, than Harry was swarmed by what felt like it must be the entire Order. Molly was the first to bear down on him. "Harry!" Behind her swarmed the twins, Podmore, Lupin—he was quickly overwhelmed by the crowd pressing around him, calling out greetings and felicitations.

"It's good to see you looking so well!" An older man Harry was relatively sure he'd never met pushed forwards at him. An involuntary step back ran him straight into Hestia Jones.

"We're so glad to have you back!" The woman informed Harry as he turned round to find out who he'd bumped into.

More Order members he had met only briefly in passing crowded around tighter and tighter. Desperately searching for an escape route, Harry found himself hard put to keep his balance. Someone knocked into his bad knee and it nearly crumpled. Feeling increasingly desperate, Harry was just trying to decide if faking a fainting spell was worth the teasing he'd get later when someone stepped on his left foot, and it very nearly became reality. His gasp of pain was lost in the general commotion.

"SILENCE!"

The bellow from the direction of the basement staircase made Harry's ears ring in the stillness that followed it. Everyone, including Harry, had frozen at that irate voice. Snape pushed bodily through the crowd to reach Harry, grabbing his good elbow just as Harry's knee finally buckled. "Imbeciles!" The man snarled. "Were you all asleep when you were told the boy is freshly out of hospital?" He guided Harry back through the frozen Order members to a chair by the kitchen wall as he spoke. "I refuse to see days of brewing go to waste because you do not have a neuron to share amongst the lot of you!" He helped Harry to sit before turning to sneer at the still-staring crowd. "Or were you all planning to give the Dark Lord an early birthday-present? I assure you, he would be most delighted if

you crippled the boy in an excess of enthusiasm.” Shoving Harry’s cane back at him, the potions master turned in an impressive swirl of dark robes and stalked back through to the basement. He was gone before anyone had come out of their shock.

Slowly the Order came out of its collective petrification. Fred and George unfroze first, perhaps, Harry thought, because they were among those least afraid of Snape. “Good to have you back, mate,” one of the two told him, to which the other chimed in, “Find us later—have we got something to show you!” Harry thought it was George and Fred respectively, but it was hard to tell.

“Yes, Harry dear, it is good to have you here,” Mrs Weasley endorsed enthusiastically. “Would you like some food, dear? Tea and biscuits?”

With amusement, Harry noted the wary looks that appeared on the faces of those watching. He, by contrast, had only been on real food for a day—the prospect of one of Mrs Weasley’s meals, or even a plate of biscuits, sounded fantastic. “I’d love a little something,” he responded happily. “Er, I’m not supposed to have much at one go, though.”

She patted him on the hand holding his cane as she headed past. “Don’t worry, Harry dear, we’ll get you fed back up in no time. I’ll just put together a bit of a snack then.”

Eyes followed her into the kitchen, still wary, from all around Harry, then, to his greater amusement, many glanced cautiously in the direction Snape had left before their owners began moving in on him. For the most part the greetings were more subdued this time—usually something to the effect of “Glad to have you back, Harry” together with a pat on his left hand.

He kept his left hand on the cane, which he carefully planted out just in front of his right foot and held out at arms length and slightly to the left, simultaneously shielding his bad knee and providing those who insisted on touching him with a relatively safe target. He was concentrating on nodding amicably, hoping Mrs Weasley or Moody would reappear and rescue him soon, when someone pushed forwards who was, from Harry’s point of view, far too excited to be good news.

“Harry!” Diggle bounced excitedly, working around to Harry’s right. “It’s so good to have you here! So good to see you doing better! Oh! I suppose you might not remember me—Diggle, Daedalus Diggle, Harry—oh, dear, you can’t shake hands, can you, dear me—” He had noticed Harry’s hand, in its sling, and reached over to pat his shoulder instead—the half-healed right one.

Freezing, Harry braced himself for the pain of contact, but just before the man’s hand touched him, it was grabbed at the wrist with an iron grip that stopped it instantly. “Albus Dumbledore *and* Severus Snape warned you with the rest of us, Daedalus,” a low voice said, managing to convey a hint of threat beneath the polite tone.

Diggle’s gulp was clearly audible. “Sorry, sorry, just glad to have you back, Harry.” The man freed his hand and fled.

Harry watched him go and smiled at another well-wisher before turning his attention to the person who had stopped Diggle. “Professor Lupin!”

Lupin returned his smile, which unfortunately made him look even more haggard than before. “Harry. Please, call me Remus.” The werewolf even sounded exhausted, reminding

Harry that the full moon had been just the previous weekend.

“Bad moon?” Harry inquired sympathetically. “You look about like I feel. No offense,” he added quickly.

“That bad?” Remus returned lightly, quirking an eyebrow.

Harry was saved from having to figure out to which of them Remus was referring, and whether ‘yes’ or ‘no’ was the appropriate answer, by the return of Molly Weasley. At the first sight of her aproned figure, the crowd dispersed, vanishing with a speed that made Harry wonder if silent apparition was easier than he had been led to believe. “Harry, dear, I’ve got a bit of a snack laid out for you in the kitchen,” she informed him, but she must have seen his wince at the thought of moving, because she then offered, “or I could bring a tray in here—or up to your room?”

“No, Mrs Weasley,” Harry said as firmly as he could manage. “I’ll go in there. It’s just the logistics of standing up have me a bit concerned.”

“Oy, mate,” Ron put in from where he and Hermione had taken refuge by the coatrack during the Order swarm, “you really have been spending too much time around Snape.”

“Professor Snape, Ronald,” Mrs Weasley corrected him absently, still looking at Harry with a vaguely worried expression.

Harry took a deep breath and attempted to heave himself to his feet, but failed miserably, unable to get even partway up. He was just about to try again when a hand appeared in front of his face.

“Here,” Remus told him. “Give me your cane. Now, grab hold—” The werewolf effortlessly pulled Harry to his feet. Rather than give his cane back, however, he handed it off to Ron and took Harry’s elbow to hold him up. Together the five of them made their slow way into the kitchen. Hermione pulled out a chair for Harry, who, assisted by Remus, sat heavily. Remus lifted the chair with Harry in it, positioning it in place at the table without seeming effort.

Sometimes having a werewolf as a friend pays off. Must remember this the next time I get injured, Harry thought to distract himself from the throbbing in his knee.

“Here you are, dear.” Mrs Weasley set a steaming plate in front of him, and another in front of Remus when the werewolf sat down next to him. Ron and Hermione took seats across the table, waving off proffered plates of their own. Harry thought briefly about twitting his red-haired friend about actually refusing food, but was distracted by the smells from under his nose.

To his relief, the plate in front of Harry proved to have mostly things that were easy to eat with only one hand—even left-handed he could get mashed potatoes to stick to a fork. A quick sideways glance at the werewolf’s plate showed more meat, but by the way Remus was, well, *wolfing* it down Harry figured he needed it. *Wonder if werewolves need more protein after the full moon? Hermione’d know.* The first mouthful of food proved to be just as tasty as it smelled—not that he’d had any concerns; this was Mrs Weasley’s cooking after all—and he fell to with only slightly less enthusiasm than his companion.

Once he had mostly cleared his plate, he looked up at Hermione. “Tell me about this incident you couldn’t talk about in the mail,” he demanded. “The one that resulted in you

living here this early. I know Ron moved in because Mrs Weasley needed to live here, but why are you here?"

"We got a bunch of death threats in the mail," Hermione responded. "We wouldn't have paid much attention—Professor Dumbledore has our house well warded—but one of them had a spell on it that made the Dark Mark hang over our kitchen sink for two days." She made a face. "Even I don't know where Mum and Dad are. We floo-talk regularly, so they must be in a wizarding area, but that's all I know." Shrugging, she finished, "Anyway, so I'm here."

Harry stared at his plate, appetite suddenly gone. "I'm sorry," he told her softly.

"Whatever for?" Hermione asked incredulously. "You can't change who my parents are—nor would I want you to if you could."

He hadn't thought of it from that angle. "But—if I—if we—"

"If we hadn't been friends, who knows where we'd be?" Hermione said pragmatically. "In my case, dead on the floor of the girl's loo, most likely."

"But—I—"

"And if you hadn't been born, Harry, You-Know-Who would still be on his *first* rampage and we'd all be lots worse off," Mrs Weasley said firmly. "So we're all quite glad you were. Now, how about some pudding?"

Pudding was excellent, and this time Ron did accept a small plate. Harry ate slowly, chatting between bites, and they kept the topics light by mutual if unspoken agreement. However, it didn't take long for Harry to start falling asleep in his dish.

"Harry?" By the tone, it was not the first time someone had called his name.

"Huh?" was his wonderfully intelligent response.

"You've been staring at that bite now for five minutes," Lupin said gently. "Moreover, I fear it is time for another round of your potions."

Harry blinked, then glanced at the clock, seeing the werewolf was right. He put down his spoon. "I'm afraid I got used to afternoon naps," he said apologetically. "Sorry for going out on you like that."

"Potter!" The distinctive limping steps of Moody came closer and the man appeared around the corner to the hall. "Ah, there you are. I took your things upstairs, got cornered by Mundungus on my way down. Good to see you eating, boy, you're too thin. Anyhow, according to the instructions Poppy left, it's time for you to down some potions."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said. "I was just headed in that direction."

"Good. Good." The old ex-auror stumped off.

"Come on, Harry," Remus said, "Let's get you up." Pulling out the chair for him, he offered Harry his hand again, and pulled the boy up as easily as before. But Harry was too tired—after the second step in a row where his knee buckled and he nearly fell, Remus made a sympathetic noise, stopped, and turned to face him. "This is going to do your knee no good at all, Harry."

Swaying and leaning heavily on Remus, Harry confessed, "I don't think I can get up the stairs at all."

“Well. Then we’ll have to do this a different way.” He bent and lifted Harry carefully under his knees and shoulders before the boy could protest. “Shush. Being a werewolf has to be good for something. You don’t weigh a thing.”

The man had a point, and it was wonderful being off his feet. Harry stopped even trying to protest and put his head down on Remus’s shoulder.

“Got his cane, Ron? Here we go, then. Watch your feet there, Harry—oh, hello Snape.”

They had nearly run into the potions master in the hall. The other man sneered at them. “I am glad to see someone in this place has a working brain. It is time for his next dose, Lupin.”

“Moody reminded us already, but thank you, sir,” Harry said sleepily, raising his head enough to smile at his professor. The man just gave him another sneer, pushed past them, and stalked into the kitchen. Ron snorted, but Harry merely put his head back down as they turned to climb the stairs.

To Harry’s surprise, Remus did not stop at the room he and Ron had always shared, but instead continued down the hall a short ways to a door that had been locked on Harry’s previous visits. “Here you are, Harry. Hermione, could you—thank you.” Hermione had opened the door and they followed the witch in.

The room had obviously been decorated around a Slytherin theme, but the greens were warm and light instead of the usual darker tone Harry associated with the house. Warmly-hued wall sconces enhanced the effect, and Harry found himself smiling. This room would do. He spotted several more doors—was this a suite? Why was he in a suite?

“Oy, mate,” Ron spoke up, following Remus and Harry in. “Are you sure you want to sleep in here? It’s so... Slytherin.” His tone was one usually reserved for nouns like ‘harlot’ or possibly ‘raw sewage’. “We could conjure another bed for my room—it’d be cramped, but Charlie won’t mind. He’s only here for another week anyway. Ugh, snakes!” While talking, Ron had leaned against one of the bedposts, and the snake carved on it had slithered down to investigate.

“It’ll be okay, Ron,” Harry said. “I don’t mind the snakes, really.” Frankly, he’d probably sleep better—he had no memories of Sirius in this room. To the snake, who was now investigating Ron’s ear, he hissed, “Ssstop that. He doesssn’t like it.”

Ron stared in fascination as the snake immediately went back to its former perch on the top of the bedpost. “What’d you say to it?”

“Just to leave you alone.” Harry shrugged. “I told you, I’ll be fine.”

Lupin set Harry down on one side of the humungous bed. *If Ron and Charlie are cramped*, Harry thought wryly, *they could come sleep in here—I’d never even notice!* Ron handed Lupin the cane, who in turn leaned it against the nightstand within easy reach. Hermione crawled across the bedspread to sit behind Harry, while Ron sat at the foot, still glancing regularly at the snake, who stared back.

“Wow, cushy, mate.” was the red-haired boy’s final pronouncement. Harry laughed.

“Want some bed?” He offered. “I could probably have the entire Gryffindor quiddich team sleep in here with me and I’d never notice.”

“Yes, you would,” Hermione informed him. “Ginny snores.”

Ron looked like he couldn’t decide whether to be wistful or angry. Harry wasn’t sure if the wistful part was directed at the bed, the team, or the idea of sleeping with Hermione, but he figured the angry part was at the idea of him sleeping with Ginny. “No, thanks, Harry,” he responded finally. “I kind of like having Charlie around—I want to enjoy it while he’s here.”

“Harry,” Remus tried to get his attention, “I need to show you a few things before we give you your potions and let you nap.” Caught by the word ‘nap’, Harry turned to face the man fully.

Lupin pointed to an area of the nightstand. “See these here?” Harry peered at what appeared to be glass domes, lit slightly from within. “These are for communicating with us, or summoning us. The green one is for downstairs. If you press it once you’ll be able to talk to the person on kitchen duty—usually Molly during the day.” He pressed it once, and after a few seconds it lit up.

“Yes, Harry dear?” Mrs Weasley’s voice came through quite clearly.

“Just demonstrating to Harry,” Remus answered her. “Sorry to bother you.” He touched it again and it went dark. “If you touch it twice quickly in succession, someone will come up here instead of answering. Touch it three times quickly, and it’ll sound a soft alarm downstairs—useful for if we’re having a meeting and all shouting at each other or something.” He smiled at Harry. “Not that we would ever do such a thing, of course.”

“Of course,” Harry agreed. Hermione snickered behind him.

“The yellow is for me—I’m right next door, and I’ve volunteered to help with things like making sure you get your potions and helping you to the loo at night.” Harry blushed brilliantly red. “I normally sleep fairly lightly, but it has the same alarm system, in case I don’t wake or if you need me immediately.” He touched the yellow glass half-orb three times in rapid succession and they could hear an alarm faintly through the walls. After letting it sound for a few seconds, he touched it again and it went silent. “There’s two more we’ve added instead to the headboard above you.”

Harry repositioned himself on the bed so he could look comfortably at the headboard. Sure enough, in the near corner where the headboard met the bedposts was a wedge of lighter wood with two indentations in it. At the back of each was a softly-glowing glass plate, much like the domes only flat. These, however, were blue and red.

“These are for emergencies,” Remus explained, “and we didn’t want you setting them off by accident, but we also wanted them easily accessible from the bed.” Indeed, they would be just inside arm’s reach for Harry if he were lying down. “The red is for general emergencies. Touch it, and someone will answer immediately. Touch it twice, and someone with medical training will be up here as fast as we can run.” Harry could not imagine using it, but it was good to know it was there. “The blue is for visions. We want to know immediately every time you have one, and what was said and done in it.”

“But—what if they’re fake?” Harry protested. “I don’t want to wake someone up or whatever if it’s just Voldemort playing games with me again.”

“Even the fake ones give us valuable information,” Ron responded. Harry blinked at him, and the redhead blushed. “Think about it—we either know what You-Know-Who is up to, or we know what he *wants* us to *think* he’s up to. Either one’s dead useful.”

“He’s right, Harry,” Hermione told him, “And what he isn’t telling you is that this was all his idea.” Harry stared at Ron in amazement this time, making the boy blush until his face was redder than his hair.

“Now, Harry,” Remus said seriously, causing Harry to turn back the other way, “there are two kinds of visions where we want you to use the emergency call instead. First, if you think someone may be in immediate peril, even if you think the vision may be fake. We’d rather check and find out everything is fine than *not* check and have it *not* be.”

That made sense, put that way, and Harry nodded solemnly. “I’ll do that. What’s the second kind?”

“If you have a vision in which you feel any effects from the spells used, especially the cruciatus. If the cruciatus is used, and you feel it, you are to push the emergency call twice, as soon as you are able. No, Harry,” Lupin said forcefully when Harry opened his mouth to argue, “you will, or we will resort to our original idea of having monitoring spells on you twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.”

“No one really knows much about how your scar works, Harry,” Hermione put in from just behind his left shoulder. “The medi-witches think they can keep you from suffering permanent effects, but only if they get there fast enough. Otherwise you could end up in St Mungo’s someday.”

Harry thought of Neville’s parents and shut his mouth. “Okay,” he said meekly. “I see your point.”

The other three all let out a breath and the two Harry could see smiled with expressions of relief, as if they’d expected him to argue longer. *I’m not that bad, am I?* He thought he might have been irritated if he weren’t so damn tired. Just then, as if to underscore the thought, he yawned hugely.

“We should give you your potions so you can sleep,” said Hermione, scrambling off the bed and grabbing the satchel. “Here—I’ll read them off; you dig them out, Remus.” She pulled out a roll of parchment and held the bag out.

Remus had opened his mouth as if to say something, but he closed it again and tamely took the bag from her. Ron gave a significant glance at the bossy witch and rolled his eyes at Harry, who shrugged slightly and grinned back.

Hermione unrolled the scroll as soon as the satchel left her hands, and her eyes went wide. “Oh...dear.” She glanced up at Harry sympathetically. “I didn’t realize you were on *quite* so many—and most of these are supposed to taste awful! How do you ever stand it?”

Harry shrugged his good shoulder again and leaned against the headboard tiredly. “You get used to them after a while.”

Making a face, she acknowledged, “I guess I got used to mine too. You never think it should be possible, given how bad they taste, but I suppose it is.”

Lupin meanwhile had removed the potion racks from the satchel—which had clearly been enchanted given the number of racks he was able to withdraw from a relatively small

bag—and set them up on a side table. “All right, Hermione, where do we start?”

“One nerve regeneration potion, 3rd stage. Red-tinted bottle, blue seal.”

“Got it.”

“One small vial Skele-Heal.”

“Small vial. . . here’s the big vials. . . ah, here we are.”

“One large vial of healing potion number three. . .”

They had six vials lined up on the nightstand for Harry shortly, and one by one Remus broke the seals and gave them to Harry, who downed them each in one gulp. “Ugh,” the man commented halfway through, “these even *smell* awful! I think I’m going to have to agree with Hermione—I don’t see how you manage to get them down at all!” He watched Harry toss the last one back with an expression of amazement.

“Water, please?” was Harry’s response.

“Come on, Ron, let’s get out of here and let Harry get some sleep.” Hermione shooed the young wizard towards the door as Remus put away the empty vials and Harry sipped his water. “Will we be seeing you tonight at dinner, Harry?”

“If someone wakes me up for it,” Harry responded.

“I can do that, mate,” Ron assured him confidently, making everyone laugh. The two teens left and Remus started to follow.

“Wait—Pr. . . Remus. . .” Harry turned bright red.

“What is it, Harry?”

“I, err. . . I can’t get my shoes or trousers off by myself.” Harry was sure he must be as red as Ron had been earlier. “Um. . . if it’s not too much trouble. . .”

Remus’s smile was kindly and warm, and Harry felt his blush fade a little. “Harry, I have never known you to be too much trouble,” he told the boy with a laugh.

“Not even when you were teaching?” Harry rejoined, feeling better about the situation. “I suspect most of the professors would have a rather different opinion.”

Looking up from where he had knelt down to untie Harry’s shoe, Remus grinned. “Okay, maybe a few times. But not about something like this.” He got the trainers off and made a face. “Harry, we have got to get you new footwear.” He set the tattered shoes neatly by the nightstand. “All right. Time for the trousers.”

Harry stood up, a little wobbly, but was able to undo the belt and fly himself. “It’s pulling them off I can’t manage,” he confessed.

Together they got Harry undressed for bed, but Harry balked when Remus suggested he not bother with pajamas. “What if someone comes in?”

“The only people who will be coming in here, short of an emergency, are myself and Ron,” Lupin pointed out, “and I would assume Ron has seen you in much less since you two share a room at school.”

The man had a point. Harry hesitated a moment more but gave in.

“Here,” Remus said, “I’ll hang your dressing gown off the bedpost and if anyone does come in you can tell them to turn their backs while you put it on.”

There was an awkward moment as Remus tried to figure out how to hang the gown without bothering the snake, but Harry hissed sleepily at it and it was happy to put out its

tail for the gown to hang on.

“Now, do you need help getting to the loo?”

Turning bright red again, Harry managed to say “I think I’ll be all right. Thank you.”

“All right, then. Sleep well, Harry.” He held the bedcovers while Harry crawled under, then showed him the metal plate to touch to cause the lights to go out, leaving them illuminated only by the faint glow from what Harry had already mentally dubbed the communicators. He wondered if Hermione, being Muggle-born, would get the reference. Another faint glow came from behind a set of curtains—did this room actually have a window? “I’ll be just next door—don’t hesitate to call.” With that Remus went out and closed the door, leaving Harry alone.

“Rise and shine, Harry! It’s dinner time!”

Harry reflected that for someone who had been whinging about his mother baking too much not two days earlier, Ron was far too chipper about the prospect of food. “Ugh.” He responded. “I’m awake.” He pushed himself to a sitting position, cradling his wand arm in his lap. Only then did he realize he was only wearing his underpants. Surely his face must be bright red.

Ron turned red himself. “Oy, you are wearing something, aren’t you?”

“I’ve got underpants on,” Harry said a bit grumpily. “I can’t get trousers on and off without help. Remus said there was no point in putting on pajama bottoms just to struggle to take them off again.”

“Not with your own bath, no,” Ron agreed, sounding faintly jealous. “I see his point,” he said a moment later, watching Harry struggle with just the short-sleeved shirt. “Want some help with that?”

“If you could just hold the collar—thanks, that’s great.” Harry finally got his arm into the sleeve. “I don’t know what I’ll do for clothes tomorrow. There’s no way I can get Dudley’s shirts over my head and I don’t want to have to ruin any more of Charlie’s things.”

“If you don’t mind them being awful long,” Ron offered, “you can borrow some of my things, or maybe the twins have something.”

“Thanks, Ron,” Harry said gratefully. “You’re a real mate.”

He shook out his pants and glanced at Ron out of the corner of his eye. “I can help you with those,” the other boy offered, although his face was turning red again. “You don’t need to bother Remus.”

“Thanks! The big problem is getting them on and over my knee. If you just—yeah—and then—there we go.” With Ron holding up the waistband, Harry was able to button them up himself. The belt proved a bit trickier—he had to have Ron hold the buckle while he got the other end through—but together they got him dressed.

Looking at his battered trainers, Harry sighed. “Think anyone would mind if I went down in just my socks?”

“Nah,” Ron assured him. “Might want to put something over that, though—some of ’em are pretty old-fashioned.”

“Huh?” Harry looked down at himself, confused.

“A robe or something.” Ron blushed. “It’s sort of, er... what’s that word Hermione uses? Risque... to go out with your... rear end... uncovered.”

Harry twisted around to look at his butt. “Isn’t that what trousers are for?”

“Well... but you can, y’know, see... things...” Ron was turning increasingly red.

“Never-mind.” Harry said quickly. “D’you know where I can find a robe to borrow? I’d rather not wear my wool Hogwarts robes in this heat.”

“I’d offer, but they’d drag on the ground,” Ron said ruefully. “And Charlie seems to get a kick out of scandalizing them all—he’ll be no help.”

“Only one thing for it,” Harry said, and touched the yellow communicator gently. It lit up almost immediately.

“Yes, Harry?” Lupin’s voice said. “Need help getting dressed?”

“Er, Ron helped with that,” he told the dome, “but now we’re having a bit of a robe crisis.”

“Ah!” The werewolf’s voice was amused. “I’ll be right over.”

When Remus stuck his head in the door several minutes later, interrupting a spirited argument about beater tactics, Harry waved him in. Looking curiously at the pile of fabric he had draped over one arm, the young man inquired, “What’s all that?”

“I rather thought this might come up,” Remus explained, “so I did a little exploring while you were napping. These were Regulus’s when he was your age—they’re dated now, of course, but I thought they’d be more comfortable than school robes.” He shook out the bundle, which resolved itself into three summer-weight robes, and draped them over the end of the bed in a row. “We’ll have to change the colors, of course”—for every one was Slytherin green—“but they should at least fit.”

Ron looked the pile over. “I think the middle one looks best,” he offered. “Least ancient, anyway.”

“Yes, I thought that one might be good for going to Gringott’s,” Remus agreed. “That cut aged better than the others, I think.” He picked up the left-hand one and shook it out. “This one should do for tonight. What color would you like it, Harry?”

Harry, who was secretly fond of the Slytherin green, thought briefly about telling Remus to leave it be, but decided it wasn’t worth a row with Ron just then. “Er. I don’t know. Maroon, maybe.”

The color clashed badly with the room, but both Ron and Remus agreed he looked quite dashing in it. “Of course,” Ron said thoughtfully, “it’s not like most wizards really notice color much, one way or another, so long as it isn’t obviously a House color.”

“Look at some of the things D—Professor Dumbledore wears,” Harry agreed.

“Or Diggle.” Ron shuddered.

“It does matter more for young men your age,” Remus pointed out gently. Ron nodded. “Harry, do you want the sling over or under your robes?”

Harry said thoughtfully, “Under is more comfortable, but maybe if I wore it over, people will remember I’m injured.”

“Over it is, then. If I hold the robes up, can you get your arm in?”

“Can’t move the shoulder,” he informed Remus. “Have to slide it on from below—thanks.” Once they had the robe on, Remus got out Harry’s sling and helped him adjust it so the robes lay smoothly underneath. “I’m going to be so glad when I can use that shoulder again!”

Remus glanced down at Harry’s feet. “We’d better get your shoes on—Tonks is coming for dinner tonight.” Both boys winced. “Here, Harry, sit down and I’ll get them on for you.”

Once out in the hall, the three were met by Hermione, who was leaning against the opposite wall reading. “Ah, there you are,” she said happily, marking her spot with a scrap of parchment. “Mrs Weasley’s waiting dinner on you.” She cocked her head at Harry. “You look nice. Good color on you.”

Indeed, when they got to the kitchen, all the seats were taken but four, all right at the head of the table: two on the left, one on the right, and the head seat itself. Harry hesitated, but Lupin guided him forwards to the empty position at the head, helped him with his chair, then sat down in the one remaining right-hand seat. Hermione took the seat to Harry’s left, with Ron next to her.

“Well! Now that we’re all here, let’s eat!” Mrs Weasley’s words from the bottom of the table were met with murmurs of approval. As she waved her wand, several of the dishes on the table began steaming, filling Harry’s nose with enticing scents that made his mouth water.

Still not allowed to have full Weasley-style meals, but also not wanting to miss out on anything, he took a little of everything—or rather, told Remus to give him a bit of everything. He had to get help with most of it, and it was as the man cut up his meat for him that the reason for placing him and his friends at the head of the table penetrated. Put here, there was no one who could bump into his injuries by mistake except Hermione, and the only one who could reach his injured shoulder was Lupin, neither of whom would ever forget he was hurt. He accepted his plate back from his father’s old friend with a smile, feeling better about his seeming elevation.

They had all just about finished pudding and were picking at the last bits on their plates or sipping at their goblets (Harry’s held only watered-down pumpkin juice, but he was starting to suspect the adults had something a touch stronger) when Shackbolt, halfway down the table to Harry’s right, stood and tapped his goblet for attention. Eyes turned to him; conversation died. When the last unobservant wizard was silent and attentive, the Auror spoke.

“I’d like to propose a toast. Harry, I think I speak for all of us when I say ‘thank you’—thank you not just for defeating You-Know-Who the first time,” as his eyes, and nearly every other pair around the table, flickered to Harry’s scar, “but for continuing to fight the bastard. You’ve shown us the true courage of your house in standing up to him and defeating him, not just once, but multiple times.” Down the table, Harry saw Snape glare into his goblet. “And for that, I admire you.” Shackbolt raised his goblet to Harry. “Witches and wizards, Harry Potter!”

“Harry Potter!” The table chorused. To the toastee’s surprise, even Snape drank, and he was absolutely sure he was bright red with embarrassment. Shacklebolt began to sit, and a few murmurs broke out again. Before he could think better of it, and talk himself out of the idea, Harry pushed himself up awkwardly; the table quieted and eyes turned to him.

Leaning surreptitiously on the table for balance, he nodded to Shacklebolt. “Thank you for your kind words, Auror Shacklebolt, although I have to confess, from my perspective, I wish the bloke weren’t quite so *persistent*—I would have been perfectly happy to stop at once, thank you very much.” Laughter, although slightly nervous, sounded around the table.

“It hasn’t just been me, however,” Harry went on. “We need to thank everyone who fought Voldemort with me as well as those who train us to fight.” He looked around the table, meeting eyes—Lupin smiled at him, Ron turned red, and Snape raised an eyebrow when he deliberately held the man’s gaze. “But I also want to thank all of you for supporting Dumbledore and myself, for supporting our joint cause. Directly or indirectly, you make our victories possible. Thank you.” He nodded in a general way at the table, and was met with pleased murmurs.

Allowing his smile to fade, and looking around at them solemnly, he was rewarded by renewed attention: people straightening in their seats, putting down their forks, lowering their goblets. Satisfied they were listening, he went on in a low voice, trying to use it to hold them the way Snape held students in lectures. “However, in war—and make no mistake, *we are at war*—we should remember that no victory comes without a cost.” Around him people were leaning forwards now, faces intent on him. “Some of you here have paid a price already, and many of you will be called upon to pay one in the future. All too often in this war, our victories have been costly indeed, and we should *never*,” he paused briefly, glancing around the table again, “never forget those who paid dearly that we might win. Let us remember them always.”

As Harry shifted his weight and raised his goblet, the silence was so absolute he suspected everyone of holding their breath. His words rang clearly in that silence, quiet and solemn though they were.

“To absent friends.”

He was surprised to see glittering in the corners of many eyes as the rumble came back: “Absent friends.” Together they drank, and it took a minute for conversations to start even after Harry had collapsed back into his seat. Those that did were more subdued than before, but had a new intensity.

Remus reached out a hand and laid it quietly on Harry’s, and as the young man looked over he was astonished to see unashamed tear-streaks on the last Marauder’s cheeks. “Thank you, Harry.” The man whispered lowly.

Harry did not ask ‘what for’.

CHAPTER 4



Visions And Discoveries

Author's Notes: I'm completely stuck on chapter 6, and worse, my hands have been so swollen that I can't type. I'm really sorry about the horrid delay. I'm working on the story, I promise—it just hasn't been going so well recently. Expect a similar delay for chapter 5.

The vision interrupted something that might have been trying to be a nightmare. He had been dreaming that he was invisible to everyone except Snape and Voldemort, which would have been rather a full-fledged nightmare if it weren't for the hilarious reactions of the rest of Voldemort's Death Eaters. Even in the dream, he wondered about how used you had to get to Voldemort to find a dream with him in it funny.

At first, he wasn't entirely sure it wasn't his dream, as Voldemort and a pair of Death Eaters he didn't recognize seemed to be making plans for some sort of dinner event. Watching the Dark Lord draw up a guest-list and fret about the ratio of witches to wizards was not precisely the image of Voldemort he had become accustomed to seeing. He was finally convinced it was a vision when one of the Death Eaters knocked a drink into Voldemort's lap and got hit by a relatively short, lightweight *crucio* for it. Personally, Harry failed to see how frying a man's brain with pain would make him *less* clumsy, but he supposed Voldemort wasn't known for his logic when it came to punishment.

"You go on and draw up the invitations," Voldemort said to the smaller of the two eventually. "But be sure to bring them by for my approval before you send them."

"Yes, my Lord." The man bowed and left.

"How are the plans for spring coming?"

The remaining Death Eater bowed. "So far, quite well, my Lord." He made a slight hand gesture that looked somehow familiar to Harry. "What would my Lord like to know?"

"The munitions—are they in production yet?"

"Next week, my Lord."

"Very good. Go. Send in Severus while you're at it." The man complied, bowing and walking backwards out the door. Voldemort chuckled.

After a moment, the lean form of the potions master pushed the double doors open once more. He allowed them to fall closed behind him and bowed. "My Lord."

"Ah, Severus. I have a project for you." Voldemort's hand reached out, holding a book of some sort. "This volume is reputed to contain several lost potions. Translate it for me, and see if the instructions work."

"Yes, my Lord, gladly. This will, however, require time be taken from my other—"

“Yes, yes. Can’t be helped—concentrate on the Potter boy and on this. How is that coming?”

The man made a graceful gesture conveying dubiety. “I have been able to speak with the boy privately several times, but he is difficult to sway, even for those who have the luxury of speaking to his biases.”

“You are lucky we are not in public, Severus—I do hate punishing you.” Voldemort made a soft, sibilant noise. “Go on with you. Have something good to report by our next meeting. Oh, and send in the Stoutwaters.” He waved a hand, shoosing Snape away.

“Yes, my Lord.” Snape bowed and backed out like the previous Death Eater, but managed to make it look natural and graceful instead of stilted and awkward. Harry wondered if the previous two were new.

The next person to enter was alone, despite the fact that Voldemort had specified a plural. Harry had watched enough meetings to know this was not a good sign and braced himself. The man bowed and scraped, but Harry could feel the rising tide of Voldemort’s anger. “Bruce.” The Dark Lord’s tone was low and dangerous. “Where is your lovely wife?” His voice dropped on the word ‘lovely’, making Harry tense further.

“She—she refused to c—come, my Lord.” The man was shaking.

“Any more defiances and we may be forced to...do...something about her.” Bruce gulped, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. “However. Her refusal also reflects poorly on you, Bruce. *Crucio!*”

This one was full-strength, unlike the earlier weak version. Even as his own vision tunneled, Harry watched Bruce go down convulsing in front of him. The pain seemed to go *on* and *on*, but finally there was merely a dim glow in front of Harry’s eyes and a carved wooden snake peering at him worriedly.

He tried to reach for the call pads, but his muscles spasmed again, throwing him hard onto his injured shoulder. Suddenly the wisdom of having an emergency call made sense. Trembling, it took him three tries to get to it without setting off a convulsion, but finally he managed to reach it long enough to tap it twice and was rewarded with the red glow indicating it was active. He slumped back, glad just to relax. God his shoulder hurt.

Feet pounded down the hall and suddenly his room was awash in light. He threw up a hand to cover his eyes, but instead triggered another spasm, this time throwing him up on his bad knee and wringing a cry from him.

“It’s the cruciatus,” someone said. Cool hands touched his shoulder, but even though it was his good one, it felt like raw electricity arcing through his body. He screamed. “Sodding hell, a bad one. Harry, can you hear me?”

He managed to croak out “Yes,” but it left him panting. As soon as he could, he added, “Turn down the blasted light.”

“*Lume redigere.*” The person leaning over him resolved into Shacklebolt as the light dimmed, with what Harry thought was probably Lupin standing behind him. A short incantation from the auror later, it felt as if someone had cut all the strings holding Harry together. “Think you can manage a potion now?”

“Sure.” Harry blinked slowly and amended, “As long as you don’t actually expect me to hold it.”

Shacklebolt chuckled, and held the potion for Harry to drink. A wave of warmth swept through his body, and Harry took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh of relief.

“Can you tell us about the vision?” The voice was definitely Lupin’s.

Harry pushed himself into a sitting position with his good hand, leaning against the headboard. “Yeah,” he answered, “but let me have a drink of water first?”

Lupin turned away from the bed; Harry heard clinking and then he was handed a glass of water. “Thank you,” he told the man. Once Harry’s throat felt slightly less raw, he reached over and grabbed his glasses, then looked up at Shacklebolt. “Where would you like me to start?”

“At the beginning,” the tall man said with a smile.

“Well, at first I thought I was still dreaming because it seemed so ludicrous,” Harry said, “So I might have missed something. But the first thing I clearly remember is Voldemort and a pair of—well, Death Eaters, I suppose; I couldn’t see their Marks but who else would be hanging out with Voldemort? Anyway, they were putting together arrangements for some sort of dinner event, I think. Seating charts, guest lists, invitations—it was a bit surreal, really,” he added with a snort.

He recited the names off the guest list that he remembered, and then explained the rest of the vision up through Bruce’s *crucio*. Both men looked grim at the thought of munitions in Voldemort’s hands, but let him finish. Once he stopped talking, the other two glanced at each other briefly.

“Any idea what kind of munitions?” Remus asked intently. Harry shook his head. “What about the reference to ‘spring’? Any feel for what that was about?”

Again, Harry shook his head. “The only other thing I was able to pick up was a sense of anticipation when he was talking to Snape.”

“Hm—” was Shacklebolt’s response.

It took Harry a while to convince the two that he really didn’t know anything else, but finally Shacklebolt left, although Lupin lingered. “Are you sure you’re quite all right, Harry?” The man asked gently.

“Mostly,” Harry said reassuringly. “I’m still back on the dinner party thing.”

Remus chuckled. “I meant physically, although I can see how that might be a bit distracting.”

“I’ll be fine,” the boy replied. “Just need some real sleep.” He hid his still-twitching left hand out of sight below the covers.

“Mm.” Lupin did not look or sound convinced, but all he said was, “Well. I suppose I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Bruce?” Was Ron’s response when Harry told the red-haired boy and Hermione about his vision the next morning over breakfast. “There’s a Death Eater named *Bruce*?”

Chuckling sardonically, he said “Apparently not a particularly good one, though.” He shrugged, watching Hermione cut up his pancake for him. “I feel somewhat sorry for the man, really. Being punished for something he’s got no control over.”

“But—He’s a Death Eater!” protested Ron. “Named *Bruce*,” he added after a moment, edges of his mouth turning up.

Hermione looked vaguely disgusted with Ron. “What does his name have to do with anything? Bruce is a perfectly fine name!”

“Not very wizarding, though, is it?” Harry responded. As she slid his plate back across the table he continued, “Sounds rather Muggle. Wonder if he’s a half-blood? Maybe his wife’s pureblood, and that’s why Voldemort’s pissed.”

“Bruce.” Ron was chortling to himself.

“What I want to know is why Voldemort is so interested in society functions. Doesn’t seem the type to be holding balls and whatnot.” Harry tried to disguise the random tremors in his hand as he ate, but when he noticed Hermione looking at him strangely, he stretched his shoulder out as if he’d slept on it wrong.

Ron completely missed the byplay as he stuffed food in his mouth. “Beats me, mate,” he said to Harry as he reached for another pancake. “Who knows why You-Know-Who does anything? The bloke’s mad.”

“He probably wants to instill a sense of respectability and normalcy in his new recruits,” Hermione said thoughtfully. Absently the witch reached across the table and picked up the fork Harry had just dropped, putting it back on his plate in easy reach. “It’s probably also a good opportunity for him to recruit—you said he was trying to get wizards to bring dates, right?”

Harry shrugged. “That’s what it sounded like, but—”

“Ron? Hermione?” Mrs Weasley called. Sticking her head around the corner she said “I need you two to help me with those boxes upstairs. Harry, you stay here,” she added when he too made to rise. “I want you to eat at least another pancake, and Headmaster Dumbledore will be here soon.”

When Harry was quite sure the other two teens and Mrs Weasley had left, he risked reaching for the pancake platter. As he had half expected it to, his hand spasmed as he tried to close it around a pancake. Swearing lowly he took a deep breath and tried spearing it with his fork instead; this time he got it halfway to his plate before his fingers arched back, releasing the fork with a clatter. He stuffed down the urge to cry, rolled his shoulder to relax it, and hoped the pancake was close enough now that he could get it the rest of the way without dropping it.

Harry was just reaching out for it again when long fingers closed about his wrist. The contact was not particularly painful in itself, but the pressure triggered a tremor that had his fingers and wrist twisting painfully enough to elicit a gasp. The fingers immediately loosened their grasp, but did not release him.

“Potter.” The voice from over his shoulder was, as he had feared, Snape’s. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I don’t—meaning of what?”

The potions master turned Harry's chair to face him with a swish of his wand, never letting go of the boy's wrist with his left hand. Pulling the limb towards him, he gave it a small shake. "This," he said, even as the movement caused a spasm intense enough to make Harry let out a small cry.

"It's just from last night." Harry bit his lip as the man's eyes narrowed. "It's nothing, really."

"Am I to understand from your cryptic blathering that something occurred last night?"

Surely the man wasn't that slow. But he continued to stare at Harry, who finally said, reluctantly, "I expect Bruce Stoutwater's worse'n me."

Snape's eyes widened perceptibly. "You mean to tell me that you witnessed his punishment?"

Harry nodded slowly. "And that other fellow." He added. "Didn't give a name—tall, curly-haired blond bloke." He shrugged. "Wasn't that bad, really. I'm fine now."

The man's eyes narrowed again. "You will come with me," he said, but as he began to pull Harry from his seat, Lupin and Dumbledore came around the corner.

"Good morning, Severus! Good morning, Harry," the Headmaster greeted them cheerfully.

Severus ignored the man, turning viciously on Lupin. Harry slumped back in his chair as his wrist was released. "Not content with your previous attempts on the boy's life and sanity, were you?"

"What are you talking about, Snape?" Lupin replied, brow furrowing.

"Perhaps it is you we should be checking for the Dark Mark." Snape reached savagely for the man's left arm, but Dumbledore placed a hand between them and he withdrew slightly.

Lupin calmly rolled up his left sleeve to display a forearm criss-crossed with white scars, but otherwise unmarked. "As you see, Snape, your accusations are baseless. What is this *about*?"

Voice still accusing, Snape snarled "Do you mean to tell me you were unaware that the boy is suffering from *crucio temblors*?"

Lupin jerked back as if he'd been struck. Dumbledore's eyes narrowed and his hand withdrew from where he had still been holding it between the two. As one, the three turned to look at Harry, who did his best to draw into himself.

"Is this true, Harry?" the Headmaster asked him, voice gentle but with a hint of steel under it.

"I don't know, sir." Harry shrugged. "My hand's been a bit shaky, but—"

Snape reached out and grabbed his wrist again, easily capturing it despite Harry's attempt at evasion, pulling it rapidly towards him. Although Harry had anticipated the move and bit his lip, the motion triggered a violent spasm that wrenched a muffled cry around the boy's teeth. Raggedly he said, "It's not that bad, really. It's just when I reach out—"

Lupin cut him off, moving quickly to kneel at his side. "Why didn't you *say something*, Harry?" His voice broke.

Harry shrugged again. "I didn't want to be a bother. It's always gone away by itself before, anyway." Wanting to remove the look of distress from his friend's face, he said "Really. It'll be okay in a day or so."

"Do I understand, Harry, that this has happened before?" The Headmaster had moved to stand next to Snape while Harry was looking at Remus, who had not appeared to be comforted by Harry's words.

Feeling surrounded, Harry shrunk back as far as his wrist in Snape's hand would let him. When all three continued to stare at him, he nodded slowly. "It's always just gone away by itself, though!" he protested. "I don't understand why you're all making such a fuss."

"You are suffering from *crucio temblors*," Snape said as if to a small child, shaking the wrist in emphasis.

"I don't understand," Harry repeated, wincing as his fingers clawed the air next to Snape's arm again.

"Harry." Lupin recaptured his attention from where the man knelt next to his chair. "Remaining tremors *after* the potion we gave you should not be... unless you have been exposed to the *cruciatus* repeatedly and with such intensity..."

"What the wolf is trying to say," Snape said dryly, when Lupin trailed off, "Is that this is a sign that you may be in danger of permanent damage from the *cruciatus* curse."

"Oh." Harry suddenly felt even smaller. "I'm... I didn't know." He turned to Lupin. "I'm sorry."

"Is there anything we can do?" Lupin addressed not him, but Snape.

Harry was surprised to see the Potions master sigh and run his free hand through his hair rather than snap at his old schoolyard rival. "Possibly. Hopefully. I shall have to see. Much of it depends on how long this lasts—it should give us an indication of the level of damage with which we are dealing. We should summon Pomfrey at once. Potter," Harry's eyes jerked up to meet the man's from where he had been staring at his wrist, "You said you have encountered this effect before?"

"Yes, sir," he answered the man. "It usually happens after one of my visions. I figured it was normal." He didn't miss the glance that Dumbledore and Lupin exchanged, but was unable to interpret the heavy emotion it contained. Lupin stood and disappeared back in the direction of the floo.

"How long does it usually last?" Harry returned his attention to Snape as the man questioned him. "How wide-spread are the effects?"

"It's usually just my left hand," he responded, "And it's usually gone when I wake up the next morning. If Voldemort was really angry," he winced as Snape's hand tightened on his wrist and triggered another brief spasm, "It sometimes lasts until the next afternoon or so. I don't think it's ever lasted more than a full day, though."

Dumbledore laid a hand on the man's shoulder. "I believe you can release the boy, Severus."

Snape let go of the offending limb, pulling his hand back in as if it had been bit. "I shall be downstairs working on that project," he snapped, turning to leave. He halted at

Harry's words.

"Oh, the translation project?"

The man turned slowly back to give Harry a narrow-eyed stare. "Indeed, Potter. What—of course. The vision."

"Be careful with it, sir," Harry urged the man. "Voldemort was all excited about it—excited in a nasty way, like he gets when he thinks he'll get to *crucio* someone soon, you know?"

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. "I am familiar with the Dark Lord's punishment habits, Potter." Harry winced—he hadn't meant it like *that!* Grudgingly, the man went on, "The warning is, however, appreciated. Now, if you will excuse me?" He was gone in a swirl of dark robes.

"Harry." The Headmaster turned one of the chairs to face Harry's and sat down in it, looking at him seriously. "I would like to believe that we could not have missed this if you had not indeed been hiding it from us deliberately," he said introspectively. "Could you please explain to an old man, one more time, why you did so?"

Harry dropped his eyes, unable to deal with the expression on Dumbledore's face. Why had he said nothing? Why had he actively hidden his trembling hand, not just this once but on numerous occasions before? An old memory welled up: a cupboard door being slammed, Aunt Petunia's voice saying "You don't deserve help! Medicine isn't for freaks like you! Deal with it by your freakish self!" He knew he was a burden. He knew he shouldn't bother them unless it was important.

Looking up, he met Dumbledore's eyes as he tried to find words to explain, but before he could even get out the first syllable out, the man had recoiled violently, turning aside his face and nearly upsetting his chair. In turn, Harry flinched away from him, one hand instinctively going up to shield his face. He could not help feeling unaccountably small and dirty. Miserably he stared at his forgotten pancake on the table.

A hand on his good knee made him look up again even as he instinctively moved away from the contact. "Oh, *Harry*," the wizard said sadly, scooting his chair closer to the boy. "Forgive me—I did not intend to pry; strong memories practically leap out at those of us who are natural Legilimens."

"It's okay, Professor, really," Harry responded, still wary.

"I wish things had gone differently." Dumbledore continued distantly. "If I had known—if I had guessed—I might have...but hindsight is perfect, and I am not." He blinked, eyes refocusing on Harry from far away. "It appears I have managed to fail you, yet again, my boy. I doubt you will believe me when I tell you this, but I feel I must say it in any case: *You are not a burden to us, Harry*. Even the trivial difficulties in your life are important to us."

He was, as usual, correct: Harry did not believe him. Still, he smiled politely at the old man. "Thank you, Professor."

A sad, soft sigh was the Headmaster's only response. If he had been going to say anything, it was interrupted by Madame Pomfrey's arrival.

“Mr Potter. What is this I hear about crucio temblors?” She asked, setting a large bag down on the table.

Mutely he held out his left hand, watching as it trembled and spasmed briefly.

“Indeed. And when did you say the triggering incident occurred?” This question was directed at Lupin, who had followed the medi-witch into the room.

“Approximately eleven last night, ma’am,” Remus responded. “Shacklebolt may know the exact time—I was asleep when the alarm went off.” Harry instantly felt guilty.

“That’s close enough,” Madame Pomfrey told him absently. “So it’s been—” she pulled out a pocket watch and checked it—“roughly ten hours. Give that hand here, Mr Potter.” She muttered to herself as she drew her wand and poked Harry’s hand all over with it, occasionally eliciting a tremor. Harry watched her work with some trepidation. *Permanent damage?* He hadn’t realized. . . . He was not comforted in the slightest when he glanced over at Dumbledore and saw similar worry on the older man’s face.

“Well, I must speak to Severus before making any pronouncements,” Madame Pomfrey said finally in an upbeat tone of voice, “And it will depend on how long this episode lasts. But I think we can safely say that this is treatable to some extent. Now that we know it is occurring”—with a sharp look at Harry—“I suspect we can reduce or eliminate it entirely in the future.”

Harry did not miss the soft sighs of relief from both Remus and Dumbledore. For his own part, he felt a smile coming on, entirely disproportionate to the news. Here he had been worrying that this meant he would be confined to St Mungo’s or something!

“I am afraid, however,” she said to the headmaster, “that this means you will need to put off your trip for another day. Even if he could usefully do anything in that vault right now, I would prefer to keep him here for observation.”

“I understand, Poppy,” Dumbledore told her reassuringly. “At this late date another day one way or the other should not make a significant difference in any case.”

“I really do need to consult with Severus—I had expected him to be here. . . .”

“Ah, Madame, he said he would be downstairs in his lab. If you will follow me?” Dumbledore escorted Pomfrey out.

“Come on, Harry,” Remus told the boy, who blinked and realized the man was holding out a hand in front of him. “It’s time for your morning potions, and we should get you out of those pajamas.”

Severus stared sightlessly at the small, black book in front of him. When he had gone upstairs for breakfast, he had been disappointed to find the Boy Who Lived still in the kitchen, apparently only part-way through his own meal. Standing in the doorway, trying to decide whether to go or to stay, he had been shocked (he refused to use the word ‘horrified’; he had sworn in May that nothing that boy could do would horrify him again, and he refused to break that oath) to see the boy drop his pancake, not once but twice. He had confronted the boy under the assumption that the imbecile had been failing to take his nerve potions on schedule.

If he had been shocked (not horrified, he reminded himself firmly) at the thought of the boy intentionally crippling himself by ignoring instructions, he had been doubly so to realize that the tremors were, in fact, the result of witnessing the Dark Lord's vicious torture of a failed recruit. Vicious enough, indeed, that the man had died even as Severus had been attempting to pour a potion down the man's throat—the same one Potter had had poured down his throat that same night.

But if that had been bad, his hor—*shock* had doubled again at the realization that Potter could look him in the eye and tell him quite seriously that this was a normal occurrence, was not that bad, and would go away by itself.

Among the Death Eaters, *crucio* temblors were jokingly called 'recruit hands' after the Dark Lord's habits of negative reinforcement training; Severus could not count the number of times he himself had sneered at a fellow Death Eater for having 'hands like a raw recruit'. Having to go to Severus for their first *cruciatu*s-relieving draught was something of a rite of passage for a new follower, one he had never particularly considered other than as a minor nuisance during summers when recruitment was high.

Seeing Lily's eyes looking at him from a body that shook painfully even after a standard dose of the draught made him, yet again, wonder how he could ever have considered the Dark Lord's service to be—

"Severus?"

He glanced quickly up to see Pomfrey standing in the doorway, with Albus a step behind her. "Madame," he replied politely. "Do come in." Moving casually he swept the book off the desk along with several rolls of parchment. "I presume this is about the Potter boy?"

Poppy took one of the two seats Albus, predictably, conjured for them. "Indeed. The temblors are not particularly strong for their sort, but I must admit to perplexity: I checked with Remus, and he did indeed administer the draught as directed; and yet, I can find no evidence that the boy took it."

"Is it possible that he spit it out, swapped it for another, or otherwise faked drinking it?"

"I must admit, that was my first thought too," Pomfrey replied, "But according to Remus, Shacklebolt poured the potion into the boy's mouth himself, and both of them watched the boy swallow it and then subsequently down an entire glass of water. I cannot work out how the boy could have managed it under those circumstances."

Severus tapped a finger on his lips. "When the impossible is eliminated, whatever remains, however improbable..." Dumbledore chuckled faintly, but Severus ignored him, continuing, "It occurs to me that the draught has never been tested in conjunction with several of the potions Potter is taking. It is highly improbable that they could react in some unforeseen way, but not, I suppose, impossible. I shall have to run tests..."

"In the meantime, do you suppose it is safe to give the boy another dose? There appears to be none of the original remaining in his system, and I could detect no ill effects that appeared to be from some interaction rather than from the *cruciatu*s itself."

"I don't see why not," he told her. "It should be safe in dosages considerably higher than the standard. I should appreciate it, however, if you could monitor the boy while it is administered, and see if you can detect any reactions."

"I shall. Thank you," she added, standing.

"I must converse with Severus further," Albus said to her, "Do you think you can find your way back from here? I can accompany you if you would rather—"

"No, thank you, I think I shall manage. Do keep me informed of those tests, Severus?"

They sat in silence for a minute or so after the woman had left, watching each other. At least, Severus was watching Albus; the old man was looking back, but how much he was seeing Severus was unsure.

"I asked Harry why he never said anything," Dumbledore said finally, "when we were alone."

"Did he answer?"

"Not in words." Albus appeared to be struggling for words himself. "You are also a natural Legilimens—you are familiar with how strong memories leap out at one—"

Ah. Severus nodded, but said nothing.

"Did they really keep him in a *cupboard*, Severus?"

He could not quite—*quite*—bring himself to snap at the Headmaster, not with that note of quiet anguish in the old man's voice. "I believe so." Certainly he had seen enough memories of it when he had been teaching the boy occlumency. At the time he had brushed them off as adolescent anger and distaste for perfectly reasonable punishments—he was quite familiar with how frustratingly insolent the brat could be—but now. . . . Well. He was not naïve enough to believe Potter had crushed his own hand under a boot, nor viciously beaten his own skull in.

"He remembered being locked into it and lectured for being sent home sick—from school, I assume—and being told he did not deserve medication; that medication was not for. . . people like him."

That did explain rather a lot about Potter's attitude towards his health. He briefly searched for something appropriate to say, but Albus continued before he could.

"I. . . I flinched from him, Severus. And he—he raised a hand as if to ward off a blow. From me, Severus. From me."

"Flinch reflexes are, as you know, quite deeply ingrained, Albus." He found himself uncomfortable with the sudden reversal of their roles: he was usually the one confessing his misdeeds and fears. He did not know how to handle this too-human Albus Dumbledore. "He likely knows intellectually that you would not hurt him, but the reflex is. . . difficult to stop."

"I tell myself that, but. . . to see one of my own students raise a hand to defend himself from me. . . ." Albus sighed. "Minerva would be telling me that I am merely reaping what I sowed."

"She would have a point," Severus said neutrally, "But she. . . she has made fewer mistakes in her life than I have. I am quite familiar with. . . with the costs associated with bad decisions—even, or perhaps especially, decisions I believed to be correct at the time. We cannot always be right—and sometimes the result is costly." He raised an eyebrow. "How

many times have you said this to me, Albus?”

“It is unexpectedly difficult to be on the other side of the desk,” Albus mused. “I hope you will remind me of today the next time I am harsh with you.” He sighed again. “You are right. As you too frequently are.”

Severus smirked slightly. “I shall, old man.” Changing the subject slightly, he continued, “I wish we understood the boy’s scar connection better. I suspect the difficulty with the potion comes from the nature of the link—but it is difficult to develop potions for a subject one does not understand.”

“As do I, my boy, as do I. Not so much for the potions aspect—I shall leave that to you—but if I understood it, perhaps I could find some way to block it.” Albus frowned. “I must admit to a growing sense that occlumency will not be the answer. Surely Riddle is not deliberately allowing the boy access to his meetings?”

“It is difficult to know, with the Dark Lord,” Severus responded. “His objectives are frequently opaque even to his closest followers, and I find that all too often I do not understand the means he chooses. I suppose it is possible that he has some deeper plot at hand.” He mirrored the other man’s frown. “I admit, however, I too find it difficult to believe.”

“Still, I suppose it cannot hurt to try to teach the boy.” Albus shrugged.

“Do you really wish to make it easier for him to lie to you?” Severus could not help pointing out with a smirk.

“If I must worry about Harry lying to me, when it is important, then I have failed to such an extent. . . .” Albus trailed off, staring through Severus once again. “At the very least it will make it more difficult for the boy to be possessed again.”

“Possessed, Albus?” inquired Severus sharply. “*Again?*”

That broke Dumbledore’s half-trance. “No, Severus,” he said. “That is the boy’s story to tell you—or not—as he wishes.” The Potions Master was glad, however, to see a slight twinkle re-enter the blue eyes. “I dare say he will likely tell you, if you request it politely.”

Severus made a harrumphing noise.

“His warning about the project—any idea what has Tom so excited?”

Severus opened the drawer he’d shoved his materials into earlier, removing the book and placing it on the desktop. “I have no idea,” he admitted frankly, “although, as a general rule, any potion that might interest the Dark Lord enough to pull me off my other projects can be assumed to be worth a warning.”

“How are those projects going?”

This time he did snap at the man. “I have been spending all my time brewing for the boy or kow-towing to the Dark Lord—which you are well aware of! Precisely when do you imagine me to have made progress?”

Albus held up his hands in surrender. “Forgive me, my boy. It was a thoughtless question.” The twinkle was, however, definitely back now.

Severus sneered at the man, just on principle. Irritatingly, the twinkle only grew brighter.

Harry had endured another round of poking and prodding by Madame Pomfrey before he was given another dose of the *cruciatus* draught. After she had watched him swallow it, she'd informed him that she'd have to monitor him for the next hour, but "not to let her bother him". How he was supposed to have managed that when she'd been constantly walking around him in circles waving her wand at him, he had no idea.

At least she'd finally left him alone. Grumbling, he went in search of his friends—with quite a bit of help from Remus, who still had to help him up the back stairs. The pair found them in the attic, sorting through old bags of clothes.

"Merlin's left big toe, have you ever seen anything quite so hideous?" Ron held up a pink-and-green polka-dotted robe covered with frilly lace. "Ugh!" He threw it away from him as if worried he might become contaminated.

"Hullo, Harry!" Ginny was the first to notice him leaning on the doorjamb and trying to catch his breath.

"Harry! What are you doing all the way up here? What if you had fallen on the stairs?" Mrs Weasley appeared from behind a stack of boxes, already scolding. "You could have broken your neck! How could you take that kind of—"

Rather than even try to get a word in, Harry shifted to the other side of the door so she could see Remus.

"—Oh. Why didn't you say something, Harry? Well, come sit down! Remus, I'm sorry he dragged you all the way up here—"

"It isn't a problem, Molly," Remus said calmly, cutting her off. "If it weren't for Harry here, I'd be stuck downstairs on kitchen duty listening to Mundungus tell stories. Again. I find making sure he does not break his neck on staircases to be a much preferable duty."

The woman narrowed her eyes at Remus, but just smiled at Harry and said "Well, have a seat, then, Harry." A crash sounded from the back of the attic, and she hurried off again.

Wandering over to where Ginny was sitting, Harry sat down next to her on the crate. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"We're sorting through old clothes," she replied with a laugh.

He wrinkled his nose at her. "I can see that," he informed her. "But whose clothes are these, and why are we sorting through them?"

"Mostly Regulus's," Hermione answered him from Ginny's other side. "And the goal is to see how many of them are still wearable."

"I'm afraid I gave Molly the idea," Remus put in. "She thought that robe you were wearing last night was quite nice, and she was delighted when I told her there were whole bales of the things up here."

"Basically, Harry," Ginny said as she tossed a flaming pink shirt on top of the polka-dotted robe, "there are four piles: wearable, hideous but sound, needs mending, and scrap." She folded a nice black shirt and set it onto the smallest pile.

“We figured there was no point in taking the risk of taking you clothes-shopping, if we had clothes up here that were perfectly good,” Lupin explained further. “Even most of the hideous pile only needs a few spells.” He picked up the pink shirt and waved his wand at it; immediately it turned a dark, vibrant blue instead. With the color change, it went from being eye-searingly ugly to sedately fashionable. “See what I mean?”

“Nice, Remus,” Ginny complimented him. Reaching down into the pile she pulled out a frilly, lacy shirt that was an unfortunate dirty brown. “Do this one—I thought it might look really nice in light pink.”

Obligingly, Remus waved his wand at it.

“Oh, that does look nice, Ginny,” Hermione said. “It looks just about your size too—I wonder whose it was?”

“I expect it was Bellatrix’s,” Remus answered her. “The Black sisters used to live here summers, especially when Sirius was in Hogwarts, and she loved earth tones.”

“Ugh.” Ginny fingered the shirt thoughtfully. “I wanted to wear this—but knowing Bellatrix wore it—well, I’ll just have to wash it thoroughly, I suppose.”

Ron cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable, glancing between his sister and Harry.

Ginny caught the glance and turned red. “Oh—Harry, is it okay if I take this?” She looked over at Harry hopefully. “Please?”

“Sure,” he said, a bit confused. “It’s not like I can wear it.”

“The spell will wear off in a day or two, Ginny,” Remus warned her, “but when it does I can cast a permanent version if you like.”

“Thanks!” Ginny folded the shirt carefully and put it next to her. “Thank you too, Harry.”

“No problem, Ginny.” Experimentally, he reached into the bag she held. His fingers touched something—furry? Curious, he pulled it out. He nearly fell off the crate when he found he was holding what appeared to be a half-grown, dead kitten. “Yargh!”

“What’s wro—” Ginny said, looking up from the bag as Hermione leaned around her curiously. “*Ewww!*” Both girls shrieked in unison.

“Did it—did it *die* in there?” Ron was looking at his own bag nervously.

“I—I think it’s a *purse*,” Harry said, astounded. “At least, it’s got a handle and a flap with a button.”

“Oh, that’s just *sick!*” Ginny couldn’t seem to look quite at the thing.

“Goodness!” Remus spoke up, staring at the object in Harry’s hand. “It’s Furball!” He came over and examined the purse up close. “She was Sirius’s kitten first year—but he returned without her after Easter break.” He took the dead cat from Harry’s hand and turned her over thoughtfully. “He swore to us that his mother made her into a purse, but I never really believed him.”

“Oh! Poor Sirius!” Hermione looked horrified. “How could she do that to his pet?”

“Well, this is the same family that produced two Death Eaters and Narcissa,” Harry pointed out.

“Sirius told us that he wanted to stay upstairs and play with her rather than come down and entertain his mother’s guests.” Remus was still examining the preserved cat. “He used to keep a picture of her by his bed after that.” He looked over at Harry. “Would you mind if I kept her?”

“N...no,” Harry replied slowly. He couldn’t imagine wanting to keep a preserved cat—purse—thing, but, on the other hand, he hadn’t been Sirius’s roommate at Hogwarts either. He supposed he might feel similarly if someone made Pig into a purse, especially if Ron were dead.

Carefully, Remus tucked the cat into the crook of his arm, absently stroking her fur.

The four teens looked at the bags. “I’m scared to reach in there now,” Ginny admitted.

“Well,” responded Harry, “now we find out why we’ve all been wearing red and gold at Hogwarts.” Taking a deep breath, he plunged his arm back into the sack, and pulled out an old, worn pair of black wool socks. After a moment the other three returned to sorting as well.

By the time lunch rolled around, the five of them—Remus had eventually been conscripted as well—had cleared a significant portion of the clothing bags, and Harry thought they could probably outfit half of Gryffindor, if the house didn’t mind wearing hideous clothes.

The other three teens went back up to the attic after they ate, but Remus vetoed the idea of Harry following them. “You may not feel like you need it, Harry,” he said, “but you do need to lie down for a while, or Poppy will have my head.”

Feeling rather like a nursery school student, Harry went to his room for his afternoon nap, Remus following him.

“Sit down, Harry.” Remus bent down to untie Harry’s shoes.

“Why did Ron make Ginny ask me if she could have the shirt?” He asked the older man. “It wasn’t my shirt.”

An expression of surprise crossed Remus’s face, and he glanced up in the middle of removing Harry’s left shoe. “Didn’t anyone tell you?”

“Tell me what, Remus?” Harry knew he sounded short, but, well—he was.

Remus got his other shoe off and set both of them neatly by the nightstand before replying. “We read Sirius’s will while you were in a coma,” he replied finally. “You were his sole heir.” He gestured around them. “It’s all yours now—down to the ugly clothes in the attic.”

Astonished, Harry stared at the man, who gestured for him to stand so they could get his trousers off. “Why me?” He unbuttoned his fly and helped Remus slide the legs off. “Why not you?”

“You were his godson, Harry,” Remus reminded him gently. “And I am a werewolf, you know.”

“So?” Harry frowned. “Sirius wasn’t prejudiced!”

The other man blinked at him, trousers hanging in his hands as they stilled in surprise. “It has nothing to do with prejudice.” He glanced down and began folding the garment as he talked. “I’m a werewolf, and werewolves are not allowed to own property.” His voice was

matter-of-fact and his face calm.

“*What?*” Harry practically shouted. “You aren’t *allowed?*”

“A werewolf may own a wand and up to twenty-five galleons worth of personal effects and clothing,” Remus said, sounding as if he were reciting. He set the folded trousers on the bed-stand and turned back to Harry. “All other property and money must be held in trust by a family member or the Ministry.”

Harry stared at him in horror. “But—what about your books? Your trunk?”

“Technically speaking, I am borrowing them from James—well, from you now, I suppose.”

“That’s...” Harry struggled to find words. “Horrible!” A sudden thought struck him. “If you aren’t allowed to have money, how do you buy Wolfsbane?”

“Ah.” Lupin’s voice was dry. “And there, Harry, you have hit on the reason why Voldemort’s side is so attractive to werewolves.” He pulled the sheet down and gestured. “In you get. You don’t have to nap,” he cut off Harry’s protest, “but you do have to lay there for an hour—quietly.”

When he came downstairs a few hours later—despite his protests, he had indeed napped—he found Madame Pomfrey waiting for him in the kitchen. “Hullo, Madame,” he greeted her.

“How are you feeling, Potter?” Madame Pomfrey inquired.

“Fine, thank you,” he replied automatically.

With a harrumph, she pulled her wand and started waving it at him, ignoring his automatic flinch as her wand came out.

“Well,” she said finally, “it appears you have suffered few ill effects from your most recent excitement, Mr Potter. I suppose I can proceed as planned, then.” He frowned at her in confusion and inquiry. “I believe it is time you had some use of your wand arm, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes ma’am!” His face lit up, and he beamed at her. “That would be wicked, ma’am.”

Ten minutes later, the spells on his right arm had been recast so that Harry could move both the shoulder and hand moderately. Pomfrey looked up from tying off the last of Harry’s bandages, grabbed her wand again, and cast an impervious charm over them. “There. Now you should be capable of bathing by yourself, without the bandages being any worry.”

He smiled at her again. “Thank you, ma’am. This is great!” He went to pick up a fork from the table just because he could, but dropped it nearly instantly. “Er. Am I supposed to be, er...”

“Some weakness is expected, Mr Potter,” she reassured him. “Remember when you first got out of bed?” He nodded slowly. “Furthermore, I have not weakened the spells very much; even if your muscles were at full strength you should only be capable of lifting a few ounces or so. I do not want you re-injuring any of your newly-healed muscles by working them too hard too fast.”

He nodded again. "It's still brilliant," he assured her. "It'll be awesome to be able to eat and—things—by myself." He turned a touch red, thinking of all the embarrassing things he'd had to have Remus's help with over the last week.

She seemed to read his thoughts, because she smiled and said "There are things we would all prefer to keep private, Mr Potter," and left it at that. "Do try to stay out of trouble for a day or two, Mr Potter," she bade him farewell.

When she was gone, Harry picked up his wand just to hold it. *Okay, so I can't hold anything much heavier, but it's a start.* He fingered the eleven inches of holly reverently.

"Harry?"

He looked up to see Dumbledore watching him. Startled, Harry wondered when the man had come in. "Yes, sir?"

"This just passed the Wizengamot review committee." He pulled a thick cream envelope from his robes and set it before the boy, then folded his hands together. Harry looked warily between the twinkle in the man's eyes and the envelope, but reached for the latter anyway.

He read the parchment inside twice over before looking up suspiciously. "Is this for real? Are you really Professor Dumbledore, or are you Gred or Forge playing tricks on me again? Dumbledore'll be pissed when he finds out you're impersonating him."

The person before him chuckled. "I assure you, my boy, it is I."

"Prove it," Harry demanded. "What's the third to last word in the Prophecy?"

He could see the man before him counting in his head and relaxed slightly. "As," the man finally said, and Harry took his hand off his wand. "Very good question, Harry, but are you sure it's wise to advertise that you know it?"

Harry shrugged. "To the world at large? No. To the twins? I deliberately chose a word that wouldn't give anything away. I doubt 'does Harry know the prophecy?' will be high on the list of questions they'll be asked should they be captured, anyway—and if they were captured, we'd have much bigger things to worry about."

Dumbledore seemed to consider this, and Harry watched him anxiously. "I can see your point, my boy," he replied finally.

"Besides," Harry told him, "it was the only thing I could think of that you and I know and no one else." He glanced down at the parchment he still held. "So this is for real?"

"Yes, Harry, it is." The old wizard smiled at him. "Use it wisely, mind you."

"Wicked! Thank you!"

Upstairs, Ginny and the twins looked at each other, each one holding an end of an Extendible Ear. "He knows the Prophecy?" Fred said.

"I thought it was lost," Ginny whispered. "But clearly Professor Dumbledore knows it."

"D'you—" George started slowly. "D'you think he really is the Chosen One?"

They all looked at each other, no one wanting to come out and say it. Finally Ginny said, "Voldemort seems to think so, anyway."

Fred looked sick. "I reckon that's worse," he pointed out. "Either Harry is the Chosen One, and You-Know-Who knows it, or he isn't, and he's got the creepy bloke after him for

no reason.”

“Think we should ask him about it?” George asked.

Ginny shook her head quickly. “If he’ll tell anyone, he’ll tell me—but we don’t dare push him or he’ll close up on us completely.” She chewed on a strand of her hair. “Let me think about the best way to approach this.”

When Harry knocked on Ron’s door, Charlie answered. “No, they aren’t here,” he told the young man. “I think Hermione dragged him off to the library.”

“Thank you,” he told the man politely before limping back off down the corridor. Charlie was in fact, correct—when he stuck his head inside the library, he found Ron and Hermione sitting at a table, books spread in front of them.

“I don’t understand,” Ron was saying. “Why should we start the potions essay when we’re not even sure we’ll get in?”

“Honestly, Ron,” Hermione replied, complete with hair toss and eye roll, “do you really want to try to read six Potions references and write five parchments the night before classes?”

Ron folded his arms. “But why not wait at least until we get our OWL scores?”

“Hello,” Harry broke in, limping in and letting the door shut behind him. “Charlie said you were in here.” He sat down heavily in a chair Hermione quickly shoved out for him. “What are you up to?”

“Summer work,” Hermione responded. “Or at least, some of us are.” She glared at Ron.

“I just don’t see the point in starting something when I’m not sure I even I have to do it!” the red-haired boy defended himself.

As the two started the familiar row—start early or procrastinate—Harry’s mind wandered back to the parchment sitting in his pocket. The longer he thought about it, the worse he felt about it.

“What’s wrong, Harry?”

He looked up to see Hermione watching him, concern written across her pretty features. Pulling the parchment from his pocket, he tossed it on the table. “Dumbledore gave me this.”

“Professor Dumbledore,” the witch corrected him absently, picking it up and unfolding it. Her eyes went wide and one hand flew to her mouth. “Oh my goodness, Harry! This is wonderful!”

“What is it? Let me see!” Ron snatched the parchment out of her hand. “Blimey, Harry, this is an underaged magic waiver! A full one!”

“I know,” Harry replied crossly.

“What’s wrong with you?” Ron asked impatiently, jealousy obvious in his voice. “I’d love to have one of these!”

“That’s just it,” Harry told him. “It’s only for me. And since when has it been just me in a sticky situation?” He folded his arms. “I think it’s just a PR ploy.”

Hermione retrieved the parchment from Ron and read it over again. “I’m not so sure,” she said slowly. “Look here, Harry—‘Requesting party: Albus Dumbledore’. I don’t think this is some Ministry plot.”

“Still.” Harry knew he sounded even grumpier. “I wish they’d given you two waivers as well. What fun is it to learn spells by myself?” Personally he wasn’t sure Albus’s name on it meant it wasn’t a ploy—although he hadn’t noticed it before. Merlin knew he wasn’t too happy with the old man right then. Maybe this was his way of getting back into Harry’s good graces?

“Oh, Harry,” the witch responded fondly. “You know you’re always the one at the center of the fight, even when the rest of us are with you. If any of us should have one, it should be you. Besides, you’ll teach us all the things you learn next term, right?”

He nodded. “But still,” he said stubbornly.

“She’s right,” Ron put in, earning himself a snort and a smug look from Hermione. “It’s not your fault you’re Harry bloody Potter. I reckon if anyone needs one of these you do.”

“Thanks,” he told the other boy. “Now, what are you lot studying?”

“I’m still on the transfiguration essay,” Ron responded. “Hermione’s working on History of Magic.” He wrinkled his nose. “I don’t think I’d continue in that even if I did get the marks for it.”

“History is important, Ron!” Hermione said hotly.

“Either of you have a spare Charms textbook?” Harry said quickly before the row he felt brewing could escalate. “Mine’s in my room.”

“Here you are, Harry.” Hermione pushed hers across the table.

“Oy, why don’t you do your Transfiguration and we can work together?” Ron asked grumpily. “Merlin knows that witch isn’t being much help.” He glared at Hermione, who glared back.

“Fine,” Harry replied with a sigh, “but then Hermione will have to lend me a quill and parchment. Those’re back in my room too.”

“Why don’t you just summon your bag?” Hermione asked him. He blinked at the sensible question. “I mean, you’re allowed to do magic now.”

“That’s. . . why didn’t I think of that?” Harry pulled his wand, making the witch start smirking again. “*Accio* bag! *Accio* Transfiguration text!”

A few seconds later Harry had his own quill and Transfiguration text in front of him. He glanced again at the essay prompt: *Compare and contrast transfiguration from animate to inanimate and from inanimate to animate. Be sure to discuss both permanent and impermanent transfiguration.* Carefully dipping his quill into his ink, he flipped open his textbook and began taking notes with a relatively shaky hand.

“Hey, Hermione?” Ron asked after a few minutes. “Why is it harder to transfigure a rat into a paperweight than a snake? The book doesn’t say.”

“Because rats are warm-blooded,” Harry responded absently, concentrating on his own parchment. “You have to alter their metabolism or kill them outright. Snakes are cold-blooded, so the metabolism doesn’t need to be altered as far.” He glanced up after a

moment. “Sorry. You weren’t asking me, were you?”

“Harry’s right, though,” Hermione said proudly, sparing the black-haired boy a wide smile. “I thought you were having me on about reading your Transfiguration text so many times. See what can happen if you study, Ron?”

Ron grumbled under his breath. “Thanks, Harry,” he said after a moment, bending back to his writing.

Nearly a half-hour later, Harry had a fairly comprehensive set of notes that he felt he could write a decent essay from. He got out a clean sheet of parchment and bent to start organizing an essay outline.

“... flesh of the servant, willingly given...”

Harry’s head snapped up and he stared at Hermione. “What did you say?” he asked her sharply.

“Huh?” She looked up and stared at him. “Was I talking?”

Ron looked up too and nodded. “Something about servants, ‘Mione.” He took in Harry’s pale face and added, “Is something wrong, mate?”

“I must have been mumbling as I read,” Hermione said slowly. “Are you okay, Harry?”

“I—I thought I recognized what you were saying,” Harry replied shakily. “What were you reading?”

“What? Oh—it’s for the optional History essay, about interpersonal feuds. This is an old book about scandals, but it’s the only full account I could find of the feud between Oswyn Sleaford and Mathias Pryerman in the early 1500s.”

“What were you reading when I stopped you?” Harry pressed her when she stopped.

“Well, Oswyn killed Mathias’s stepdaughter and only living relative Mawde—apparently by accident. So Mathias swore revenge on Oswyn, but Oswyn killed him in a duel too. He came back as a ghost, and he convinced his servants to perform a spell to return him to life, and then went after Oswyn—that’s where I was when you interrupted me.”

“A spell?” Harry felt his blood run cold. “What sort of spell?”

“Well, more of a ritual, really.” Hermione frowned down at the text. “It doesn’t sound to me like it would work, even. It seems to involve a very odd sort of ritual sacrifice. It’s in pretty archaic language, but—I’ll try to clean it up a bit.” Frowning down at the book, she read, “And they placed him in the bowl, and the servant ground up a bit of bone, and he placed it in the bowl as well, saying ‘Bone of the father, unknowingly given, restore your son.’ Then the servant cut off his smallest toe, and placed it in the bowl, saying ‘Flesh of the—”

“—of the servant, willingly given, you will revive your master.” Harry said along with her. Her head came up, and she stared at him even harder than before. “Let me guess, then the servant poured Oswyn’s blood into the bowl and said ‘Blood of the enemy, forcibly given, you will resurrect your foe.’”

“Err. Well, actually, it says ‘unwillingly given’, but—yes.” She bit her lip. “Harry—how did you know?”

“That’s the ritual Wormtail used,” Harry told her, his voice sounding distant and hollow to his ears. “In the graveyard.” He paused for a moment, then just had to ask, “Did

it work for this Mathias person?”

“Well. Yes. Quite well, actually.” She glanced down at the book. “It says here he went on to kill Oswyn—I’m going to need to do more research on this spell—it could be important—”

Across the table, Ron’s eyes were fairly bugging out. “That’s—that’s creepy, Harry,” he said finally.

Harry was just about to reply when he had three books thrust under his nose by Hermione, who was madly thumbing through another one. “Wha—?”

“Read.” Her voice was flat. “These are more books I found with Oswyn or Mathias in them. Maybe they’ll have a clue.”

“I thought you said this essay was important!” Ron protested as more books were shoved on top of his own paper.

“It is,” the witch told him, “but helping Harry defeat Voldemort is more important.” She glanced up and pinned the boy with a stare. “Unless you disagree?”

Put that way, both boys had no choice but to open their books and start reading.

The next morning, Harry came down to find Dumbledore already at breakfast. Molly Weasley was dithering because all she had made were pancakes and eggs; Dumbledore was arguing that he rather liked pancakes and eggs, thank you very much, so there was no need for her to do any extra work. This argument did not seem to be getting through to the agitated witch.

“Good morning, sir,” Harry greeted his headmaster.

“Good morning, Harry. Did you sleep better last night?”

He nodded. “I did, thank you for asking, sir.” A leaden weight settled in the pit of his stomach—he was dreading this Gringott’s trip. “When do we leave, sir?”

“Are you in a hurry, my boy?” Dumbledore smiled at him. “I had planned to leave around eleven this morning so that we would miss the noon rush, but—we could leave earlier, if you would rather?”

“Oh, no, sir,” Harry said hastily. “I was just curious, sir. No need to change the plans on my behalf.”

“If you’re sure—” The blue eyes felt awfully penetrating.

“Yes, sir, I’m sure,” Harry responded rapidly.

“Here you are, Harry.” Mrs Weasley broke the tension by placing a plate in front of the young man, pancakes and eggs both steaming. “You’re still too thin!”

Strangely, Harry found eating with his right hand again awkward after several days of only using the left, and he had difficulty cutting his pancakes with his still-weak dominant hand. Biting his lip, he struggled with them, wishing he could use a spell on them or something.

His frustration must have showed, because the Headmaster leaned over. “May I?” he asked. When Harry nodded, he produced his wand and waved it at Harry’s plate. Instantly the pancakes were perfectly cut into eight radial slices.

“Wicked!” Harry told the man, staring at the pancakes. “You’ll have to teach me that! Er—if you don’t mind, sir,” he added hastily.

“Of course I’ll teach you, my boy,” Dumbledore replied with a smile. “It is, however, a curse rather than a charm—so you should be careful what you use it on. Do be sure you want your target cut before you use it. Now, the wand movement is an upwards semi-circle, like so—”

When Ron came into the kitchen a few minutes later, he stopped short at the sight of a platter full of strangely-shaped pancake pieces, with a laughing Harry holding his wand over them. “Blood hell, mate, what did you do to breakfast?” were the first words out of the boy’s mouth.

“Oh! I’m sorry, Ron!” Harry’s face fell and he immediately felt guilty. “Professor Dumbledore was teaching me a slicing spell for food, and—well—” He looked apologetically at the plate.

“They are still quite edible, Mr Weasley,” Dumbledore put in, “merely already sliced.”

“No worries, mate,” Ron said instantly. “Saves me the trouble of cutting them myself. Thanks!” He served himself a generous heap of pancake slices and eggs and fell to without delay.

Ginny and Hermione were the next to appear. The bushy-haired witch seated herself of the other side of Ron and reached for the platter. “Slicing Curse?” she asked immediately. Harry nodded.

“That’s pretty advanced stuff,” Ginny commented. “I wish I could learn spells as fast as you do.”

“I don’t learn that fast!” he protested. “Have you seen my Transfiguration grades?” He shrugged. “Mione always gets spells first, not me.”

“How long do you spend practicing them, though?” Ginny asked, looking between Harry and Hermione.

Harry looked blank. “We’re supposed to practice? I mean, outside of lessons?”

The red-haired witch turned to Hermione, who promptly said, “A half-hour a night before bed and while Ron and Harry are at quiddich practice.”

Harry gaped at her. “I—but—”

“Harry, my boy,” Dumbledore said gently, “I learned the spell I just taught you at seventeen, and it took me a week to be able to cut anything thicker than a leaf.” Harry stared at the man in shock. “Miss Weasley is correct—you do learn spells remarkably fast.”

He couldn’t quite get his mouth to shut. “I—I . . .”

“Are you finished with breakfast, Harry?” He turned to see Lupin with his arms full of papers.

“Er—yeah,” he replied, pushing away his plate. “What’re those?”

“We thought it would be beneficial to have you read these before you go out in public,” Remus responded, setting the stack down in front of Harry. “The first one doesn’t have much—Hermione highlighted the articles we thought you should read.”

Now that they were in front of him, Harry could see they were a stack of Daily Prophets. “Er—why?” he asked, a bit confused. He looked around, but no-one would meet

his eyes.

“It’ll make sense as you go through them,” Hermione said finally, “but we—well, we thought you should read them for yourself.”

The first newspaper was dated 22 June and was the standard Saturday edition of the Daily Prophet. On page three was a brief article about Umbridge’s inquiry that had been highlighted; Harry was delighted to read that they had decided to take the matter to trial. Page five held two articles of interest: the first headline read “Potter Will To Be Read”.

According to sources within the Ministry, the long-standing row over the Potter will has finally been resolved, and the reading of the will is expected to take place sometime this morning. A Gringott’s representative confirmed that the will had been retrieved, but refused to comment further. It is widely believed that the will is Secrecy Bound, so that it may be read only in the presence of certain persons named in an accompanying document.

It is interesting to speculate who may benefit from this will. It is expected to formally name a guardian for Mr Potter, who has been in the care of unnamed relatives since his parents’ death in 1981. Some sources suspect that close family friends may be named, but the most common name dropped is “Dumbledore”. “He seems like the logical choice,” Jane Emmett of Dorchester told us. “He was a friend of the Potters, and he’s powerful enough to protect the boy.” Another reader, Margery Reid, countered by saying that she expects Mr Weasley, an employee of the Ministry, to be named. “He’s got boys Harry’s age,” she reminded us, “and he and James were close before his death.” Only time will tell who precisely will claim the post as the guardian of the most famous boy wizard in England.

Other speculation centers on the vast Potter fortune. While the majority is expected to fall on Harry Potter as his father’s named Heir, there are various theories as to who else may benefit from the will. Some say close family friends may be in for as much as several thousand galleons. Unconfirmed rumors of other benefactors abound, ranging from the Society for the Protection of Kneazles to a large donation to the Fund for the widows of MLE employees.

Of more interest to Harry was the article below it, a short piece on his parents. It reminded readers who they had been and had several pictures Harry had never seen before, including a pair from the year the two started Hogwarts. After checking to be sure nothing important was on the other side of the page (a full-page ad for the Nimbus line of broomsticks, as it happened) Harry used a cutting charm to carefully detach the article; folding it, he placed it in his pocket.

When he picked up that paper to set it aside, he realized why they were having him read these papers. A banner proclaimed this to be a special breaking edition of the Prophet, and the huge headline read “POTTER NEAR DEATH! Boy Who Lived In Critical Condition!”

Harry Potter, famous across Wizarding Britain as the Boy Who Lived, fights for his life at an undisclosed location after sustaining severe injuries. Mr Potter was found in his home at approximately nine am this morning, apparently the subject of a vicious attack.

The Auror corps confirmed to us that two of their number were called this morning to Mr Potter's residence, where he lives with his Muggle aunt and uncle. Upon discovering that Potter had been 'viciously attacked', our source says he was whisked to an undisclosed location by emergency port-key. A half hour later, witnesses report Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, arrived at St Mungo's and left shortly thereafter with "one of the best trauma teams in Europe".

Sources within both St Mungo's and Magical Law Enforcement say Mr Potter may not live the night. One St Mungo's employee, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told us that based on her understanding of Mr Potter's injuries, "there's at best a one in two chance that Mr Potter will see daylight—and that's only because of who he's got working on him." Members of the MLE's crime scene squad say they doubt he is even alive at all. "When we arrived at the scene," lead investigator Maybury said, "there was blood all over. No normal wizard could lose that much blood and survive. If the auror's telling the truth that Potter spoke to him on their arrival, it's a bloody miracle." He went on to add that they have confirmed that the blood belongs to Mr Potter.

Albus Dumbledore was not available for comment, but sent us a statement that says Mr Potter is alive and his chances are good. It also confirms that Professor Dumbledore has been named to the wardship of Mr Potter. "He remains under expert care and we thank the wizarding world for their concern," the note concludes.

Concerned members of the public plan to hold a candlelight vigil for Mr Potter. For more information, please see "Candlelight Vigil Planned For Potter", page 3.

Numbly Harry stared at the words 'may not live the night', imagining the reaction that must have caused across the wizarding world. *We're bloody lucky there weren't mass panics in the street!* He could not actually believe the article was written about him—it felt so bizarre to see words in black and white discussing whether or not he would live.

Below the fold, several smaller headlines vied for space. Harry read the one entitled "Potter Family Taken Into Protective Custody":

After receiving several death threats aimed at them in the hours since Mr Potter's attack broke on the Wireless, Mr Potter's family has been taken into protective custody by Magical Law Enforcement officers. "If indeed they are not

responsible for the attack on Potter,” Ministry spokeswitch Clemence Farrowe said, “it is our duty to protect them from outraged witches and wizards who mean to do them harm.”

Meanwhile, the family remains under suspicion for its role in Mr Potter’s attack. “Mr Potter was found in a bedroom not ten feet from the aunt and uncle’s bedroom, and well within shouting distance of the kitchen,” MLE officer Graye told us. “It is hard to imagine they were unaware of Mr Potter’s plight.” The uncle and aunt are both expected to be interrogated with Veritaserum later today or tomorrow.

He skimmed the rest of the paper, reading articles with titles like “Potter Beaten? An Analysis” and “Trauma Team Profiles”. While the Special Edition was short—only a few pages—it was filled cover-to-cover with news about his injuries; not even an advertisement appeared. Setting it aside finally, he felt a sense of shock that the Prophet thought he was that important.

Picking up the next paper he stared at a headline reading “Harry Potter Remains Critical”. Below it an article with the title “Potter To Undergo Surgery” made his stomach turn slightly, for it was full of ‘experts’ debating on whether he would survive the procedures described. Even though he was clearly alive, he could not help feeling anxiety reading their words, afraid for the unknown boy they were describing, lying on the edge of death in some unnamed hospital.

If he had thought that was bad, however, the next page was worse. The caption at the top read “Potter Crime Scene Photos Leaked” and held a full spread of pictures from his bedroom. He gagged at the sight of blood smeared on the walls and even a spray on the ceiling. Looking at it, he had to agree—he did not see how anyone could have survived that. When he came to the picture of bed linens soaked in blood and vomit, he had to turn his head aside quickly to keep from losing his breakfast—despite, or perhaps because of, knowing that he had laid on that very bed for at least ten hours. He swallowed heavily.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Hermione said quietly. “We should have warned you.”

The following page, however, held a series of photos that made Harry stare in amazement instead of horror. The headline read “Thousands Turn Out For Potter Vigil” next to photos of what appeared to be a sea of candles. He glanced at the text below it:

Thousands gathered at the doors of Hogwarts and the front of St Mungo’s last night for a candlelight vigil for Harry Potter. The Ministry of Magic estimates that approximately four thousand witches and wizards stood outside Hogwarts and one thousand more gathered outside St Mungo’s, blocking Muggle traffic until MLE officers could encourage them to move out of the path of the Muggle cars. Those at St Mungo’s were joined by Muggles who had heard of the boy’s plight via the Muggle news.

“I’m not sure why we’re standing outside an abandoned department store,” one Muggle, who we found standing on the pavement outside St Mungo’s holding

an old emergency candle, told us, "but when I heard there were people holding a vigil for Harry Potter here, I came down immediately. I heard about him on the six o'clock news—it's just horrid."

Those at Hogwarts gathered underneath the windows of the school's hospital wing on a gamble that the boy had been taken there. "We want him to know there are people thinking of him," one witch told us. "Even if he's unconscious, we're still here, praying to all the gods we know of for his safe recovery."

Other well-wishers left gifts and flowers in front of the Hogwarts doors. . . .

Harry stared at the pictures in shock. *Why on earth would they hold a vigil for me? I'm just a kid! A half-blood, half-grown kid!*

"Harry? Are you all right?"

He glanced up into Dumbledore's concerned eyes. "I think so, sir. I just. . . I don't understand. . ." He waved at the pictures in the paper. "Who would. . . Why?"

"I believe you would be surprised, Harry." The old man smiled at him. "You are seen as a symbol of hope to many. Even to the Muggles you have become a symbol of struggling against one's oppressors." He glanced down at the images. "I saw them, that night. We've saved the gifts and flowers they left, as well; they're in a storage room in the dungeons."

"I—I'm just a fifteen year old kid!" Harry objected. "How can I be a symbol of hope to anyone?"

Dumbledore merely smiled more broadly. Harry shrugged mentally and dropped his eyes back to the paper in front of him.

As Harry read the next few days' editions ("Harry Potter In Coma", "Potter Remains In Coma Following Surgery") he could not help feeling sorry for the poor witches and wizards who saw him as the world's only hope against Voldemort. *And I suppose they're not far wrong*, he realized with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. *Until one of us dies at the hand of the other. . . .*

By the 25th, he was down to only occupying three pages of the Prophet, but on the 26th the banner headline read "Harry Potter Awakes!" and he was back up to four pages. When he put the last of the stack down, he felt a heavy weight hanging near the pit of his stomach. *I'd never realized how much they put their hopes on me.* How was he ever to live up to those expectations?

"Harry? Harry?"

He blinked at Dumbledore, who was gazing at him worriedly. "Sorry." He shook his head slightly. "It's—a lot to take in."

"I understand, my boy," Dumbledore said sympathetically. "Will you be all right?"

If Harry were to be completely honest, what he felt was more along the lines of 'completely overwhelmed' than all right. "I suppose so, sir," he said, however. "It's—it's so *much*." So much of what, he could not have said, but the old man must have understood because he nodded.

Hermione reached across the table and took his hand. Wisely the young witch remained silent, merely letting him grip her hand, and after a minute Harry felt enough himself to smile at her.

“Any ideas for what we can do until eleven?” He asked her, desperate to change the subject. He realized a moment later what he’d let himself in for as her eyes lit up—still, he supposed, it would keep his mind off those papers. He was full of awful images and questions. *Did they really cut open my neck to pick out bone chips? Did my heart really stop twice?* To cut the questions in his head off, he stood before she could finish opening her mouth. “Well, what are we waiting for?”

She immediately stood as well. “Let’s go.”

Ron looked between the two of them and his plate, and regretfully pushed it aside to stand as well. Once the trio were in the hallway, Harry turned to the other young man. “Sorry,” he told him. “I didn’t think I could take not having something useful to do for another minute—not after those photos.”

Blinking, Ron asked, “Were they bad, then? Mum wouldn’t let me look.” At Harry’s expression, he said quickly, “Sorry. Shouldn’t have asked.”

“Bad enough that you should be glad,” Hermione chastised the boy.

“Oh.”

“I’ll let you look later,” Harry said, “if you want.”

They were quiet after that on the walk to the library.

Author’s Notes: Thank you to everyone who’s reviewed. I’m afraid I’ve lost track of who I’ve replied to and who I haven’t, but I plan to sit down and thank everyone personally again at some point. One person sent me an exceedingly in-depth review, for which I’m quite grateful; it’s fueled some changes in earlier chapters (I think all those updates are up now). Also, thank you to the person who caught that I used “lintel” instead of “sill” in the previous chapter; I’ve changed that now.

I’m doing nearly a complete re-write on the portion of chapter 6 that I have completed, and we’re waiting for blood work to come back to see if I’m developing arthritis in my fingers. So please be patient with me—I can only type for a few hours a day, and most of that is taken up by doing my schoolwork. If you want to know what’s happening with the story at the moment, check out the homepage link on my author page—it links to where I post the current raw version of the story. You can see what I’ve got typed up so far there—and watch as it changes :-)

CHAPTER 5



The Vault

Author's Notes: First, I want to apologize for how long this has taken to post.

The short version is that on 25 November 2007, the car I was driving was forced off the freeway by a van who did not look before it changed lanes; I rolled (or perhaps 'bounced' is the better verb) down a 40 foot, tree-filled embankment going nearly 60 miles per hour. I'm damn lucky to be updating this at all.

I lost roughly 100 pages of work on the story, fractured my C1 vertebra, and my dominant hand was trapped under the car for the better part of an hour (along with other injuries). So this has all taken rather longer than I had expected.

I expect some of you will hate me, because the next update will be quite a time in coming. The "in progress" version, and a "raw scenes" file, can be found on my story homepage: go to my author page and click on "homepage". When you get to the end, you'll understand why I make sure you know that.

Secondly, Chapter 2 has now been edited to bring it into compliance (I think) with Years 1-5 canon. I think that takes care of the bulk of my outstanding canon issues, but if anyone spots any, please drop me a note.

This is a rather short chapter, but I think it's got enough plot that it's justified.

Several hours later, when Remus appeared at the door to the library, the dark feeling in Harry's stomach had only intensified. It had become clear as they read the various accounts Hermione had turned up that they were all based on a single source, but they had been unable to track down that source. Still, the single description of the resurrected Mathias as 'quytte more pouerfulle' than he had been made Harry rather an unhappy wizard.

"Harry, we need to go," Remus said when he caught Harry's eye.

"Oh, right." Harry took a deep breath and stood. "I'll see you two later?" He made it into a question, and the two heads in front of him nodded.

"Nervous much, Harry?" Remus asked lightly as they made their way down the hall towards the front entrance.

"How did you know?"

In answer, the man tapped his nose. "Wolves can smell these things."

"Oh. Neat." Harry spent a moment thinking about what that would be like, then remembered this had started with a question. "Yeah. I am. I just can't figure out what on earth could be in that vault that's so important—and that I have to do when I'm fifteen. Sixteen—maybe it's something to do with coming of age, or family secrets or something—but fifteen?"

“Sixteen is the traditional magical coming of age—not the legal one,” Remus explained when he saw Harry frown, “but it’s seen as the age at which you come of power. Many families have magical gifts that mature starting around sixteen, and some of them—well, it’s better if you have some training first.” He shrugged. “I know Lily had a touch of Seer blood in her from Merlin-knows-where. Maybe this is about that.”

“But then why keep it such a secret?” Harry argued. “If you know all about it, why not just tell you to get me training at fifteen?”

“For one thing, your parents believed me to be the traitor,” Remus said softly. “But for another—of the four of us, how many of us are still here?” Harry winced, and Remus put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Harry—I just meant that perhaps they wanted to be sure you’d be told.” He shrugged again. “As for secrecy, do you know how many nations would kill—quite literally—for a true Seer? Even the small amount of Seer blood Lily possessed could have made her a valuable commodity. She kept that bit of information quite closely guarded.”

“I suppose,” Harry replied reluctantly. “But I don’t *want* to be a Seer!”

Remus laughed. “I’m not sure you get much choice in the matter, Harry; either you are or you aren’t. Either way, you should see what’s in the vault before you begin to worry too much. For all we know, it’s some horrid family scandal and they picked fifteen because James was a traditionalist.”

“Was he?” Harry asked. “I really don’t know much about their—views, I guess is the word I want. Other than that they were in the Order.”

“Oh, goodness, yes,” Remus told him fondly. “He was quite the despair of your grandfather, who was exceedingly progressive. Why, they had a huge fight just over whether to name you Harry or not—your grandfather said it was an outdated pureblood tradition no one followed anymore, and James said that was exactly the reason to do it.”

“Harry? I don’t understand. What’s controversial about Harry?”

“It was his name, your grandfather’s, I mean. It used to be traditional that the first boy child would carry the first name of his paternal grandfather and the middle name of his maternal grandfather.”

“Wait—so James isn’t for my father?” Harry had always just assumed it was.

“Well, that too—Lily was determined to name you after him somehow, so she joined in the fight against your grandfather. You see, her father was also named James, so from her perspective it was perfect.” Remus chuckled. “Your grandfather Harry was willing to yell at his own son, but not so willing to yell at the mother of his first grandson and future Heir—as soon as she joined in any fight, he’d roll right over.”

Harry laughed. “What was he like, my grandfather?”

“He was a bit like you—quieter than his son, but passionate in his own way. I think he and Hermione would have got on like a house on fire; he loved books and was always trying to get their house elves to accept clothes.”

“Couldn’t he just give them clothes?” Harry wondered out loud.

“Of course, but he was also too kind to force any of them to do anything they didn’t want to—it was a running joke in their household by the time I met him. He’d always offer

the elves clothes at breakfast, and they'd always turn him down." Remus chuckled again. "You would have liked him, too, I think."

"You sound like you knew him well."

"We all did. James used to invite us all over for vacations, especially after Sirius got kicked out. We spent most of our Easter and summer vacations there." Remus sobered. "It nearly killed us all when they were killed, but I think what was hardest on James was you—you'd just started talking, and you used to ask him 'Where gampa?' or 'Where gamma?' all the time." He swallowed hard. "It was shortly after their deaths that they moved to Godric's Hollow."

"Oh," Harry said softly. "I never knew I'd known my grandparents." He looked thoughtful. "I'm not even sure I have any pictures of them."

"I'm sure there must be some in that album of yours," Remus assured him. "When we get back we can sit down and I'll point them out to you. Maybe sometime we can go through and label the photos with everyone that's in them. Hello, Albus, Alastor, everyone."

They had reached the front entranceway while they were talking, and a tight group of Order members, most of whom Harry recognized from the previous year's broom trip to Headquarters, was waiting for them. "Hello Remus, Harry," Professor Dumbledore responded. "Harry, these fine witches and wizards will be your guard while we are in Diagon Alley—if you become separated from them, for whatever reason, you are to use this." He handed the boy a metal disk; peering at it in the low light Harry realized it was a Muggle game token. "The activation word is 'butterfingers' and it will take you to my office at Hogwarts."

Harry nodded solemnly, placing it in a pocket. "Activation word 'butterfingers', to be used if I become separated from you lot, destination Headmaster's office at Hogwarts. Got it." He looked around, memorizing each face. A question occurred to him after realizing there were at least ten people there, counting himself. "How are we all getting there, anyway?"

"A port-key of course, my boy," Dumbledore responded. "We'll port-key into the Ministry building, where we will be met with an additional escort of Aurors. We will then take one of the Ministry back routes into Diagon Alley itself."

Harry nodded again. He hated port-keys, but with the size of their group—and with him unable to use the Floo—it made sense.

"Everyone ready? Got everything?" Moody growled. "Now, remember, you lot, Potter is your first priority. If anything happens, you get him out first, understand? And don't forget, *constant vigilance!*"

Everyone around him nodded solemnly, glancing between the grizzled ex-Auror and Harry, who tried to stand as straight as possible.

"Very good," Dumbledore said affably. "Everyone grab hold." He held out an old length of rope. "Harry, come here, in the middle." He waited until Harry had shuffled into the center of the pack of people, skin crawling at having so many people around him, and then said, "On three, then! One—two—three!"

Harry landed in a dark corridor he didn't recognize, and even as hands grabbed his shoulder and arm to keep him upright, his wand was in his right hand. "Is this the right

place?” he asked Dumbledore, eyes scanning back and forth. Even as he asked the question his eyes fell on the red-robed Aurors standing nearby, and he relaxed slightly, although he did not drop his wand.

“It appears to be,” Dumbledore replied. Striding forwards, he said to the figure in the lead, “How many galleons are there to a sickle?”

“Twenty-one,” the figure replied. “What color is Polyjuice?”

“Blue,” Dumbledore said, and they both relaxed. “Pleased to meet you, Auror—?”

“Inglethorp, sir. Ignacius Inglethorp.”

Around the pair, wands went back into holsters or pockets on both sides. The Order members fanned out into a loose quadrilateral around Harry, with Dumbledore at the point. Rather than seeming offended, the Aurors formed up around the Order group, mostly standing before or behind the main contingent.

“Class of 1987, weren’t you, Ignacius?” Dumbledore was asking the Auror in a friendly tone. “Hufflepuff, if my memory serves me.”

“That’s right, sir,” Inglethorp replied, seeming to stand a bit taller. “Originally I was going to go into Magical Sports and Games, but—my mum, she got on the wrong side of one of the gangs where she lives, and—well, I wanted to make sure it didn’t never happen again.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Dumbledore said solemnly. “You seem to be doing well as an Auror, though.”

“Yes, sir!” Inglethorp told him proudly. “They says I have a real talent for it.” He shrugged. “Haven’t had no one killed on my squad yet, anyhow.”

“A worthy achievement, my boy,” Dumbledore murmured. Harry stifled a snicker. “Have you met Harry Potter?”

Harry wiped the smirk off his face as fast as he could as the man turned around. “Pleased to meet you, Auror Inglethorp,” he told the man politely. “I would shake your hand, but—” He held up a bandaged hand, and wiggled his cane with the other.

“I understand, Mr Potter,” Inglethorp said politely. “Pleased to meet you. I’ve heard quite a bit about you.”

Harry snorted.

“No—no, I mean, Auror Tonks trained with me—we still go to dinner occasionally—” Now Harry was having a really hard time keeping the smirk off his face. “Bloody hell, I’ve put my foot in it, haven’t I?”

Harry finally gave up and laughed outright. “Quite all right, Auror Inglethorp,” he told the man more naturally. He shifted his weight off his injured knee, grimacing slightly, trying to decide if it was his place to say something.

Dumbledore must have caught the look, because he asked Inglethorp, “Where did you say we were going, my boy?”

“Oh—sorry. This way, please.” He waved them all forwards, and they started off. At first the lead Aurors kept outpacing Harry’s slow three-legged limp, but he refused to be pushed, and eventually they caught on. Remus stayed right by Harry’s elbow, and more than once he caught the young man when he stumbled on a rough patch on the floor.

“Where are we?” Harry asked the werewolf under his breath, knowing the man’s sensitive ears would pick it up.

“Are these the old catacombs?” Remus asked in a more normal tone of voice. “I’d heard there was a way through them to the Alley, but I always figured it for a rumor.”

“We don’t generally publish it about,” Inglethorp replied, “but yes. This is actually an older Roman tunnel—or possibly once a street—that we’ve shored up and paved.” He gestured up ahead. “We’ve also put a variant of a shrinking spell on it so it isn’t so damned long—that’s the door right up there.”

Harry was short enough that all he could see was a sea of cloaks and feet, but up ahead of him, Dumbledore said “Ah, I see! How clever, using a shrinking spell like that,” so he supposed it must really be there.

He had been feeling somewhat silly about being surrounded by twenty (give or take a few) fully-armed combat witches and wizards, half of them in full uniform, but it suddenly made sense when he emerged through a door into the late morning sunlight. He was standing at the other end of the Alley from Gringott’s, between two shops. The lead aurors hadn’t been outside for a minute yet, and there was already a growing crowd staring at them. As he looked around, the shout went up—“It’s Potter! Harry Potter’s here!”—and it seemed like instantly the crowd doubled as people streamed out of nearby shops.

Instantly the aurors went into action, spreading out around the core of Order members, throwing up a glistening shield that seemed to be physically repelling the crowd pushing in on it. “Combined shielding,” Remus said under his breath. Harry glanced up at him curiously, and he continued, “Very difficult magic. Quite impressive.”

“Come, Harry,” Dumbledore said when it was clear Harry had stopped walking entirely. “We should keep moving.”

Harry began to stomp forwards again, watching the crowd around him with wide eyes—at least, as best he could past the cloaks and robes of the Order. At one point, he heard a high childish voice call out, “Is that him, Mummy?” and saw a brief flash of bright blonde hair past Moody’s kneecap. He waved in its direction, and he heard the same voice squeal, “He waved to me, Mummy! Did you see?”

“Good one, Potter,” the ex-Auror told him in an undertone. “Having the public on your side never hurts.”

As they drew nearer to Gringott’s, however, it took increasing effort for Harry to remain upright. “Dammit,” he said quietly to Remus, “I thought I had more stamina back than this.”

“That spell they put on the tunnel doesn’t actually decrease the work it takes to traverse it,” Remus replied in a similar undertone, just loud enough for Harry to hear over the crowd. “It just decreases the time it takes.”

That made Harry feel slightly better, even if it did nothing to stop sweat from springing to his brow as he stumped on. Suddenly he nearly ran into the back of Dumbledore, and realized the man had stopped. Glancing up, he saw the Gringott’s sign waving above them, and the crowd roared as he turned around to look. Instinctively he waved at them and the noise redoubled. He smiled and waved again, and was rewarded with a resounding

cheer that made Harry's ears ring.

"Come," Dumbledore said quietly, and Harry saw that they had gotten the crowd cleared between him and the doors while he'd been waving at the crowd. Together the two walked between the aurors, who were holding the crowd back, into the nearly-deserted bank lobby.

"God, I hope they're gone by the time we come back," Harry said nervously, "or the goblins won't get anything done around here."

Dumbledore chuckled. "The goblins have some creative ways of getting bystanders to move along. How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine," Harry responded automatically. At Dumbledore's penetrating stare he amended that slightly. "My knee hurts a bit, and I could use a sit-down, but I'm all right."

Turning away from him, Dumbledore spoke briefly to a grizzled old goblin who had appeared out of a side door.

"Vault 284, eh?" the old goblin asked nastily. "Well, I hope you know what ye're about. Consequences be on yer heads." Snapping his fingers, he summoned a cart. Dumbledore climbed in first, after which Remus helped Harry in, then climbed in himself.

Harry glanced curiously at the other Order members, but they reformed into a tight knot and went to stand stiffly by the doors. "They will wait for us," Dumbledore explained.

The cart ride seemed much less fun every year, but Harry thought this would probably go down as one of his least favorites ever. Every jolt and bump seemed to go straight to his injuries and he was surprised not to taste blood in his mouth with how hard he had been biting his lip when they finally stopped in front of a dusty vault door.

"Vault 284," the goblin announced. They disembarked in reverse order, with Remus lifting Harry bodily up out of the cart and setting him on his feet. Once they were all out, the goblin walked to the vault door and stroked it lightly with a finger. Expecting the door to open as it had when he and Hagrid had visited his first year, Harry was surprised when a shiny silverish circle about the size of a dinner plate melted out of the door instead. "Place your hand on the circle."

He glanced at the other two, but they were both looking at him, so he walked unsteadily forwards and placed his unbandaged left hand in the middle of the circle. He felt a brief tingling in his palm, and then the circle melted back into the door. He waited for something to happen and was just about convinced this was all some sort of posthumous prank by his father when a doorway melted in the vault wall like the Diagon Alley entrance from the Leaky Cauldron. He thought he heard Dumbledore give a sigh of relief behind him.

But what he found most alarming was that the door was covered with a wavery sort of—effect—that he could not see through, much like the Veil. He swallowed hard, and glanced back at the others.

"It is quite safe," Dumbledore told him. "It is merely a stasis field." He glanced at Harry. "Shall I go first?"

"The boy must go first. One only may accompany him." The goblin's voice was flat and nasal.

Harry glanced between the two men, a protest on his lips, but Remus was already

pulling out a book from a pocket. “I brought entertainment, Harry. I shall be perfectly fine, and I will be here when you finish.”

Left with no real choice, Harry took a deep breath and walked through the door.

Whatever he had been expecting to find, this was not it. By the half-snort, half-chuckle he heard from Dumbledore behind him, as the older man emerged from the doorway, this was not what he had expected to find either.

The room before him could almost pass for the Gryffindor common room, if Gryffindor held only a handful of students. Two low, plush maroon armchairs squatted on either side of a low table, each flanked on one side by an end-table. At one end of the central table stood a second, taller table with a small chest sitting on top of it. On the table were two letters, each folded and sealed. One bore the words “Harry: Read Me First”, the other one “Harry: Read Me Second”. Next to them sat a steaming tea service with a plate of biscuits.

“Shall we sit, my boy?” Dumbledore broke the tableau by walking over to the far chair and lowering himself into it. “Ah, perfect. Your mother always did have good taste.” He picked up the teapot. “Sugar?”

Feeling as if he had just fallen down the rabbit-hole, Harry walked over and took the other seat, leaning his cane up against the end-table next to him. “Err—how is there tea, if no one’s been here for years?”

The Headmaster poured two cups of tea, adding sugar to both before sliding one over to Harry. “A stasis spell, as I said. They are quite difficult charms, but your mother always was good at charms. All they had to do was brew the tea before they left, and the charm would take care of the rest.”

Harry picked up the cup and saucer. Somehow hot steaming tea—even hot, steaming, fourteen-year-old tea—made him feel more at ease. Once he had relaxed a little, he reached for the letter marked “Read Me First”. Cracking the seal, he scanned the short note.

Harry,

For security reasons we have locked all of these letters (there are more in the chest) to your blood and magical signature. In order to read the next letter, you must place a drop of blood on the seal and say “aperire”. To view the letters in the chest, you will need to merely place a drop of blood on the seal on the hasp, and it will come free; use the “aperire” incantation while holding a letter and it will become readable.

To allow others to read the letters, simply have them hold one end of the letter while you hold the other end, and say “aperire” followed by their name. There are several security features, however. First, you must have read every word in the letter first. The letter will also only be readable as long as it is within line of sight to you and within twenty feet. If they remove it beyond that, it will cease to be readable to them.

Please be patient with these tedious security arrangements. It's hard to know how valuable and dangerous the contents of these letters will be fourteen years in our future.

Love,

Lily and James

“Do you have a knife on you?” He glanced up at Dumbledore, who appeared surprised by this question. “It says the letter and chest are under some sort of spell—I have to put a drop of blood on the seal and say this word.”

“No,” the man said, “I don’t believe I do, but—here, give me your hand.” Taking out his wand, he pointed it at Harry’s middle finger and murmured something in Latin, and immediately a bright drop of blood welled up. “I can repeat that when we need to open the chest.”

With his other hand, Harry turned the other letter so that the seal was facing him. Carefully he touched the drop of blood to the seal of the next letter, starting a bit when it began to glow a bright gold, and said “aperire” as he had been told. The golden glow expanded over the entire letter, flashed briefly over Harry, then faded into the parchment, and the seal cracked in two.

This letter was quite thick compared to the other. Unfolding it, he glanced briefly at Dumbledore, who was watching him curiously, before dropping his eyes to the writing and beginning to read.

8 October 1980

Dear Harry,

I must confess, this is one of the hardest letters I have ever had to write. In fact, this is my thirteenth draft, but we plan to drop this off at your vault tomorrow, and James says to just write something and get it over with. “Start at the beginning,” he says, so I shall.

Before I begin, however, let me say this. Whatever you think of what you will read here, we love you, Harry, both of us. We always have, and we always will, whatever happens.

When I was your age, Harry, I began to have visions. It took me a while to catch on that these were visions of the future, or rather, of possible futures. Every night I was shown choices I would, or might, face and possible outcomes of those choices. By the time I was sixteen, I had seen—oh, goodness, thousands of futures, I suppose.

At the time, Voldemort was beginning to rise to power and every week there would be news of a new killing, a new person found tortured until their mind

broke, another house burned to the ground. Those of us in Gryffindor used to sit around the fire, long after the firsties had gone up to bed, and talk about what we could do to stop him. We all pledged to do whatever we could—"whatever is necessary"—to defeat the evil man.

Over time, however, the pattern to the futures I was shown became increasingly clear. In nearly all of them, Voldemort triumphed, at least for a time. In the best of those, he was brought down in a few decades by his own meglomania; in the worst, the world became barren and humanity was gone. There were only a handful that seemed hopeful, futures in which machine guns and nuclear bombs did not meet the Killing Curse, in which children laughed and played.

From my point of view, there was a huge problem. Every future I found that was at all hopeful featured three similarities: I married James Potter and I bore him a dark-haired, green-eyed son—and in all of them, James and I died before that son left for Hogwarts.

At fifteen, I loathed James Potter with a hatred like nothing I had ever felt. He was the scum of the earth to me. And here some nameless fates were telling me that I had to marry the git and have—you know what—with him, or watch the world go to hell? The dying part didn't phase me—I was a Gryffindor, you know how Gryffindors get—but James Potter? I couldn't bear the thought.

So I said nothing for over a year, until the day I came back to the common room to find one of my roommates sobbing on the shoulder of our Head of House. That was the day my first friend was killed by Voldemort and his Death Eaters, and it was the day the war became personal.

The next morning I dumped my poor Slytherin fiance and gave him his ring back, and immediately turned to chasing Potter. The winter of our seventh year, James asked me to marry him, and I said yes.

As the wedding approached, I knew I had to say something. I knew I had to let him make his own choice, but I kept putting it off—because, you see, what I had never counted on was actually falling in love with the arrogant git I'd been chasing. Finally with a week left until the wedding, I came over one day and fell apart in his arms, and told him the whole story. I will never forget: he had just one question for me. He asked me "Do you love me?" and I said "Yes, I do," and he said, "Then let's do this thing together."

You are probably still too young to find that endearing, but show it to your fiancee someday when you have one—she'll understand.

So we were married, and time went on; nearly seven years worth of time, in which we both studied and worked and fought Voldemort. It became increasingly

clear that there was one problem: no black-haired, green-eyed babies were making appearances, despite constant, err, attempts to produce one.

Finally in desperation we turned to the idea of using a fertility aid. We researched all sorts of possible spells, potions, and rituals, and finally we chose one that seemed perfect. It was simple—just requiring the two of us and a clearing on a ley line on a cross-quarter day—and even better it was known to work. We planned to use a clearing I knew about near Hogwarts, in the forest (not the Forbidden Forest, the regular one), about a mile and a half outside Hogsmeade, on Halloween. Our research said that Halloween should be the most potent day to do the ritual, and even though Lammas would be sooner, we both felt Halloween would be perfect.

What I didn't tell James was that I had begun having visions again. I knew you would have to face Voldemort sometime in your life—I don't know when, but someday—and I knew you would need to be powerful when you did. So in secret I brewed another potion, a highly illegal, Dark potion, said to guarantee the drinker the birth of a magical son if taken within twenty-four hours of conception.

So when Halloween came, I downed my potion and apparated with James into the clearing we'd chosen. We had just finished the ritual and were preparing to leave again when our luck turned amazingly sour.

You see, we had apparently chosen the same clearing for our ritual that the Death Eaters had chosen as a gathering point for their Halloween night revel.

I shall not go into details. We were both treated as Death Eaters treat captives with whom they have time to toy. It was when they began to rape me that I knew we were to be killed—no wizard, sane or insane, would risk the penalties for raping a witch. And yet, just as I had given up hope for sure, the Order arrived—summoned, I found out later, by a spy in the Death Eater ranks, who paid for his warning with his life at the next revel—and James and I both escaped.

It wasn't until we found out that I was, indeed, pregnant that it occurred to us that we might have a problem. If you were not James's son, that was no great problem to either of us—we knew we would love you whoever your biological father was—but it could be a huge problem for you if Voldemort found out. The only way to successfully protect you long enough for you to grow up was for us to begin casting disguise charms while you were still in my womb.

So we bought a set of Paternity Parchments—there's a brand-new set in the chest, if you want to check what I am about to say to you—and followed the directions. Neither James nor I was prepared for what it listed. Rather than two names, it listed eleven.

Simon Avery
Regulus Black
Lily Evans
Rabastan Lestrangle
Lucius Malfoy
Walden Macnair
Nathaniel Nott
James Potter
Tom Riddle
Evan Rosier
Severus Snape

We're still not quite sure what happened—I assume my potion interacted in some strange way with the ritual, but we don't know for sure. I've included all my brewing notes and all of our research notes in the chest for you to look at if you want to.

At this point, we knew we had a serious problem thanks to Voldemort's love of Blood Magic. So we began a complicated series of spells intended to keep you safe and your heritage hidden until you read this letter. They alter any physical characteristics inherited from your other—well, we call them sperm donors—to James's features. They also suppress all non-physical traits inherited from anyone but the two of us. There are more—there's more information in the letters in the chest—but you get the idea.

It wasn't until you were born that we realized we had another problem—you giggled up at me, and your hair changed from the touseled black I had foreseen so many years before into my own auburn. After that we cast more spells on you, some of which block any gifts or aptitudes (the difference between 'traits' and 'aptitudes' may seem trivial, but all these spells rely on precise arithmantical descriptions—anyway, again, there's more information in the chest if you're interested) you may have inherited from your other sperm donors, and one which tied the previous spell on your physical features into what we assume is a Metamorphic ability.

Furthermore, to keep you safe, I cast spells intended to conceal your true potential. If you appeared too powerful or too talented, you might attract unwanted attention. If you were too far below your peers, it might cause suspicion. If it works properly, you should have been completely average for your first fifteen years—not too powerful, yet not too powerless. (We aren't entirely stupid, however—if you are in great danger, the spells will relax and allow your power through). We chose fifteen so that, at least, you would have a few months at nearly full power to study before your OWLs. I do hope you do well on them, dear

(goodness, but it's odd writing that to someone who is currently a four-month-old baby!).

Then we prepared the spell we have used on this letter. You see, the moment you opened this letter, you began the process of the spells unraveling. They will fade between now and your sixteenth birthday, and on your sixteenth birthday will fade entirely (except for the physical features: we don't know what will happen if you haven't fully mastered your Metamorphic ability by then. It may or may not end). If for some reason you don't get this before your sixteenth birthday (although I don't know why I'm writing this—perhaps so you know you aren't insane?) the spells will all end on your sixteenth birthday.

There are letters in the chest, not just for you—we try to drop off a new one every week on our way to work—but also for various people we think you may need to tell. There's letters in there for each of Sirius, Remus, and Peter, for example.

One final word about one of your—fathers, I suppose. Severus Snape was good to me in Hogwarts, and I found out later that after his experience on Halloween he began spying on the Death Eaters for Dumbledore. I don't know if he is even still alive, but I encourage you to seek him out and get to know him. He is a good man at heart. He teaches at Hogwarts at the time of this writing, so I have included several letters for him as well. If he is still on the side of Light, he deserves to know ahead of time what will happen to him on the Halloween after your sixteenth birthday.

We love you, Harry.

Lily Potter.

Harry stared at the signature in shock. Half of him wanted to believe this was all some kind of hoax or prank. The other half was whispering that it made too much sense—*Parselmouth, Expecto Patronum at thirteen...* It was impossible—and yet, it was all too possible.

“Harry? Are you all right?”

He glanced up briefly at the worried face of Dumbledore. “I...I...” He could not make his voice work properly. He didn't know what he'd say anyhow—*was* he all right? What did being ‘right’ mean anymore? Instead, he shakily went over to the chest. Biting his finger to start the flow of blood again, he rubbed the small wound on the seal stamped on the chest and was rewarded with the hasp popping open. Lifting the lid, he found the chest full of papers, but right on top was a stack of sealed envelopes bearing the label “Paternity Parchments”.

Lifting several of them out, he returned to the chair and set them on the table. “Do you know how to work these? Can they be tampered with?” His voice sounded like it belonged to someone else.

Dumbledore's face was beginning to show alarm, but he said nothing. Instead he picked up the top envelope, turning it over several times. Finally he waved his wand over the seal, which glowed silver. "The seal is intact," he said in a voice that was too calm. "It has not been tampered with. To use it, you need merely break the seal, remove the parchment inside, and place some small amount of your blood on it. Anywhere and any amount will do; even a paper-cut."

Harry followed the directions, squeezing his finger again to get enough blood to wipe on the parchment. Immediately it sunk in, very much like the ink had sunk into Riddle's diary in Harry's second year. Swallowing down the memories, he placed it in the middle of the table where they could both watch it. Dumbledore glanced at him with an expression of concern, but the young man focused on the parchment.

Nothing happened for a long moment, and then words began to appear.

Harry Potter
Simon Avery
Regulus Black
Lily Evans
Rabastan Lestrangle
Lucius Malfoy
Walden Macnair
Nathaniel Nott
James Potter
Tom Riddle
Evan Rosier
Severus Snape

Dumbledore drew in breath noisily; it might have been a gasp from anyone else. Harry shoved the parchment in his direction and said, "It was in the letter."

The old man picked up the parchment and scanned it, then met Harry's eyes again. His face was grave and his voice serious. "This is—unexpected news, Harry."

"They raped my mother," Harry said, voice nearly cracking. "*He* raped my mother, and she wants me to forgive the bastard. She wrote him a bloody letter!" He thought briefly about overturning the table, but decided it would require too much energy.

Dumbledore glanced down at the bottom of the list he held again. "I have no words of wisdom for you, my boy. If you wish to vilify Severus for what he has done, neither of us—perhaps especially not Severus—will blame you."

Somehow that took the air right out of Harry's sails. He could feel himself deflating, and he said in a small voice, "I suppose I should at least read the letter she wrote." He took a ragged breath and continued in an even smaller voice, "I'm just not sure I can—just now." He glanced at the chest. "Even if I had the energy to dig through all those papers and letters to find it."

"Could we take the chest with us?" Dumbledore asked gently. "I believe if you close the lid the hasp will re-lock." He slid the parchment back across the table to Harry, who picked it up and put it in his pocket.

He considered the idea for a moment, then nodded. “I—I just can’t face it today,” he said, ashamed. “I’m sorry.”

“Harry, my boy.” Dumbledore reached across the table and took his hand. “I am astonished you have dealt with this as well as you have. In your place, I dare say I would be screaming and raging and threatening to destroy half of Gringott’s.”

Harry looked up at him. “Destruction didn’t help last time,” he pointed out. “I don’t know what will, though.”

“Have a biscuit,” the man urged him. “Everything looks better after a biscuit.” Harry did as he was told and did indeed feel slightly more himself. “Then when we get back to Headquarters you can take a long nap and have some hot dinner before you need to face this again.”

Harry nodded slowly. “I think I can manage that,” he responded.

When the two left the vault, with the chest trailing behind Dumbledore thanks to a levitation spell, Remus’s head came up and he stuck a bookmark in his book. “Harry! Are you all right?” He sniffed the air delicately, a frown creeping over his features. “You—you smell different.” He glanced between their long faces. “Was I right, then?”

“Yes.” Harry told him hollowly. “In more than one way.” He took a deep breath and let it out again. “I can’t—I can’t tell you right now, Remus. Later.”

Remus’s frown turned from confusion into concern, and he put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Whenever you’re ready, Harry.”

The ride back up to the surface and the trip back to Headquarters was a complete blur to Harry. The next time he felt fully conscious, he was standing in his bathroom, holding pajamas. “Take a hot bath, Harry,” Remus’s voice floated through the door. “There’s some relaxing herbs on the shelf above the tub. They’ll help you get to sleep.”

“Thank you, Remus,” Harry called. “A bath sounds lovely just now. Thank you.” It really did. Somehow he felt dirty, grimy, disgusting after the trip to the vault—hurriedly he shed his clothing, setting his wand on the ledge, and started the water running. When it was deep enough to have warmed the bottom of the stone tub, he climbed in, adding a small handful of the herbs that were, indeed, in a jar on the shelf above the tub.

He leaned back against the smooth marble curve of the tub, resting his head on the edge and staring at the ceiling. In his head, he knew he was the same Harry Potter who had climbed out of bed that morning. Who he was—that hadn’t changed. What he was—in most ways, that hadn’t changed either. He was still the bloody Boy Who Lived, whoever his parents were. He was still the marked one from the prophecy. He was still the son of James and Lily Potter.

The idea of new talents didn’t bother him so much—he’d already dealt with being a Parselmouth and being shunned as a result. He knew he could deal with any fallout there. Unexpectedly he found the idea of physical changes to be the most distressing.

I always hated this body, he thought, looking at his hands and down at his scrawny chest. *I suppose they’re right—it’s only when you face losing something that you know how*

precious it is. That led naturally to just like I never realized how precious Sirius was—I'd have tried harder, done something better, different—

He bit off a sob and tried to force his thoughts back where they came from.

He supposed that if he really was a metamorphmagus, like Tonks, he could change back anything he didn't like. *But I don't want to have to!*

What if I look like Tom?

He didn't think he could handle that—and suddenly, with that thought, it all came crashing down on him, seeming too terribly real where a few seconds before it had felt too unreal. He was the son of the most dangerous Dark wizard in the world, the son of half his Death Eaters. It was real—thanks to a fertility ritual gone wrong, he might wake up the next morning looking like Draco Malfoy.

If that realization rocked the foundations of his world, the one that followed on its heels shattered them.

My parents created me. They created me to be the Boy Who Lived. They created me because I would grow up to defeat Voldemort. They didn't go through all of that because they wanted a son—they went through it because they wanted a weapon.

That broke his tenuous hold on his emotions, and he found himself curling into a ball in the bottom of the tub and sobbing. He could not have said why he cried, or for what he cried, but he knew somewhere inside him, some dream he had always cherished had been wiped away—and it had taken with it nearly everything that mattered.

He could not have said at the time how long he cried. He cried until his eyes were red and his nose was running and his face felt like it must look like he had mumps. He cried until his nose hurt and his forehead hurt and his head hurt and his throat was scratchy and raw. He cried until he could not cry any more.

When the tears finally stopped, he uncurled from the ball in the bottom of the tub. A part of him was surprised to notice that the water was still warm. It felt unfair in some very basic way. Most of him, however, merely felt drained. He leaned against the wall of the tub and stared at the ceiling again, mind blank.

I don't have anything left.

The thought hit him in the chest, deep under his ribs, where the sick feeling churning in his guts lived. He found that he wanted to cry again, but he couldn't—he had nothing left there either.

His eyes fell on his wand.

Picking it up, he ran his fingers down its long length, stroking the wood with water-softened fingers. There was a thought in the back of his mind, trying to come forwards; rather than chase it, he let his mind drift, toying absently with eleven inches of holly and phoenix feather. He remembered, as if in a dream, the day he had bought the wand, the first spell he had cast with it. . .

. . . the spell he had learned that day. The Slicing Curse.

Turning over his left hand, he traced the vein along the forearm with the wand—then he spoke the incantation and did it again.

He was at once surprised by how much it hurt, and how little it hurt. He was definitely

surprised by how much it bled. He tried to transfer the wand into the other hand and do the other arm, but he couldn't get his left hand to work quite properly. He wondered absently if he'd cut something else by accident, and then wondered why he cared. He put the arm under the water, and was fascinated by how rapidly the water turned red. It felt different there, too.

His head felt heavy. He put it down on the stone rim.

CHAPTER 6



Wilderness at Beersheba

“Harry?” Remus knocked on the door, but got no response. “Harry, it’s dinner time. Do you want to come down and eat with us, or would you like a tray brought up?”

The boy must still be asleep. He opened the door, and went in, preparing a teasing quip about sleeping in the middle of the day. To his surprise, however, the bed was entirely empty.

Could he have gotten up already? Glancing around, he noticed that the door to the bathroom was still closed. *Poor boy must have fallen asleep in the bath.* He snorted, preparing a new quip about prunes.

He walked over and knocked gently on the door. “Harry? Harry, it’s dinnertime.”

Absolute silence.

He tried the door, but found it was locked. “Harry!” He knocked again, hard enough to rattle the door on its hinges.

A faint scent came through when the door moved slightly—no human would have detected it, but to a werewolf it was as if someone had lit off a beacon.

Blood.

He dove across the bed, slapped the emergency alarm twice, then rolled upright and began firing spells at the door. *Alohomora* had no effect. Neither did the next two unlocking charms he tried. He vaguely recalled Sirius bragging about how well-equipped his family home was—“if the world ends the only things left will be the cockroaches and the Black bathrooms,” he’d said. They’d been built as refuges in case of attack by the Ministry.

He swore, and switched to stronger spells.

The hallway door burst inwards as Remus ducked a spell that the bathroom door had reflected back at him. “Remus! What’s going on?” The Headmaster’s voice was alarmed.

He looked over to see Albus Dumbledore and Emmeline Vance, both with wands drawn, Vance with a sack of potions over her shoulder. “I smell blood,” he said shortly, gesturing at the door. “Harry’s blood. And he’s not responding.”

Albus swore a blistering oath that Remus had not believed the usually-affable man knew. “Emmeline. Get Pomfrey, bring her back. *Run.*”

She ran.

The two wizards began pounding the door with every unlocking and removal charm, hex, spell, and curse they knew. “Dammit!” Remus said finally. “I knew they were built as refuges, but—”

“I daren’t hit it with anything harder,” Albus said, lowering his wand. “Harry may be right behind it—I suspect anything I can throw that will destroy this door will destroy it utterly—”

“Nothing for it,” Remus said grimly. He sheathed his wand and stalked up to the door, letting the chain on the wolf slip through his mental fingers. *I must get to Harry!* Growling low in his throat, he pulled back a hand and punched the door just beside the latch.

As he had half suspected, the door was no match for the physical strength of a desperate werewolf. His hand went straight through it, and he was able to lift the latch from the opposite side. Withdrawing his hand, he shook off the droplets of blood—the wounds were already closing—and shoved the door open. He took two steps inside and froze, only managing to choke down half of the howl that rose in his throat.

Harry lay in what appeared to be a bath of blood. His head lolled back against the bathtub edge, eyes half-open but only whites showing. His right hand draped over the side of the tub, wand lying on the floor underneath it. The stench of blood hung in the air like a visible miasma.

“No,” Remus whispered.

Someone shoved him aside and he only just barely managed to slip the leash back on the wolf in time. Albus ran past him to kneel at Harry’s side. Face tense and grim, he reached out two fingers to touch the boy’s throat.

After a tense few seconds, the old man’s eyes closed and his head dropped forwards as he gave an explosive sigh.

“No.” Remus barely recognized the voice as his own. “No!”

Albus’s head came up, and Remus’s heart started beating again as he saw the man’s expression more clearly—it was not, indeed, despair, but the faintest edge of hope.

The old man ran a hand down Harry’s left arm into the bath, ignoring the stains soaking his favorite robes. Pulling out the boy’s hand, he turned it over to reveal the long, precise cut running all the way up the forearm. Remus choked again, staring the proof of what had happened here in the face.

But the older wizard was speaking as he clamped the wound shut with both of his hands. “I don’t dare try to heal this—but there should be blood replenishers in the bag Emmeline left—”

Remus darted out of the bathroom, grabbed the bag, and ran back in, skidding on the damp tiles. He quite literally ripped the bag open, the seams popping under his hands, and he grabbed the familiar red-sealed bottles (*“Red for blood,” he recalled from his early days in the Order, “Just remember that—”*). He used his teeth to break the seal and pull out the cork as he tilted Harry’s head forwards. Holding his godson’s head in one hand, he carefully poured the potion down the inside of one pale cheek. Amazingly, the boy swallowed on his own.

“What now?” Remus asked tensely.

“We wait.” Albus’s voice was just as taut. “We wait, and hope we found him in time.”

To her credit, Madame Pomfrey barely glanced at the hole in the door when she arrived. The scene in the bathroom, however, was enough to make her pause.

Remus looked up from where he was sitting on the floor, cradling Harry's body in a bloodstained towel. He had the boy's head propped up against his chest, tucked under his chin, and was stroking the damp black hair with his free hand. Albus was still holding the long gash in the boy's arm closed, his hands coated in blood. The floor and both men were liberally soaked with bloody water, and the tub was full of the rest of the deep crimson fluid. Between the tense expressions on the men's faces and the too-even gash running down the inside of the boy's arm, it was instantly obvious why she'd been called.

"Oh, Potter." She exhaled and came forwards to kneel next to Albus, setting her bag down on the driest patch of floor and pulling out her wand. She used it to cast what Remus recognized as a basic diagnostic spell. Glancing at the ripped-open potions bag, she asked, "Did you give him anything?"

"One standard blood replenisher," Albus responded quietly.

She frowned. "Odd... I wouldn't expect... unless he used something other than the standard cutting charm..."

Albus closed his eyes. "I taught him the Slicing Curse," he admitted in a tight voice.

That got both Remus's and Poppy's attention; both turned to stare at him. "Albus, what were you *thinking*?" the witch asked him incredulously.

"I used it on his pancakes," Albus explained distantly. "He asked him to teach it to him. I did not expect... well."

"Hmm." Poppy returned her attention to her patient, casting another, more complicated spell. "That does explain why you didn't try healing him—and a good thing, too, I don't think I've ever seen an emotional aspect quite like this. It's fueling the rebound component quite impressively. If you'd tried any healing, I dare say you'd have taken his arm clean off."

Albus winced.

"But..." she muttered, clearly to herself, "that still doesn't explain... I need to get Severus up here." Using Remus's shoulder, she pushed herself up, then strode out of the bathroom towards the hall door. The two men could hear her speaking in low tones to someone outside; Remus, with his sensitive hearing, could hear her asking Hermione to run and get Professor Snape. One of the Weasleys asked if they could see Harry, only to get the door shut in his face.

When Madame Pomfrey returned, she regarded Harry for a moment silently, then sighed. "Let's see if we can get you better stabilized without making anything worse, Potter," she said, drawing her wand again.

Severus was in his laboratory cutting more pickled nudibranch slices when Miss Granger knocked diffidently on the doorframe. "Yes?" he snapped at her, although he was already reaching for the clean jar he'd set out earlier. Granger was not one to bother him needlessly. Carefully he slid the paper-thin slices into the jar, then cleaned his hands on a bespelled rag before putting on the lid.

"Madame Pomfrey sent me, sir," the girl said. "She wants you to come upstairs to Potter's room."

Ah, so that commotion earlier had been about Potter. There were few people here who could cause that much uproar—at least, without the call to battle sounding. He had heard the boy’s emergency alarm go off earlier; if the emergency were in the boy’s room, it stood to reason that it was Potter rather than a vision about someone else. “Did she ask me to bring anything?” he inquired of the girl hovering in his doorway.

“She just said...” Granger screwed up her face. “ ‘Run and get Professor Snape up here, Miss Granger. Go, now!’ ” She paused. “If it matters, though, it’s Harry.”

He refrained from asking her, “It’s Harry what?” just to be difficult, but only just. Instead he commented, “I am not deaf, Granger. I heard the boy’s alarm like the rest of the household.” Meanwhile he snatched up one of his standard emergency potions satchels and began adding vials to it. *What else could interact with the boy’s potions? Hm... feverfew for aconite...*

Finished, he swept out of the room without further acknowledging Miss Granger. He heard her behind him, running to keep up, but he neither slowed nor turned. She was a half a flight of stairs behind him when he reached the door to the Black heir’s suite; brushing past the Weasley brood he opened the door and went in, taking pleasure in shutting it in their faces. Turning, he swept the bedroom with a quick glance; no one was there. The door to the bathroom was, however, open; he turned in that direction.

“Severus, is that you?” Madame Pomfrey called out. “We’re in the bathroom.”

He glanced at the door as he passed and filed a note away in his memory. Lupin must have been desperate to punch through the door like that, especially one of the Black bathroom doors. It was useful to know what could get through them, although he was mildly surprised the wolf had managed it at all—

He came around the corner and stopped cold at the sight in front of him. Long and painful experience in the Dark Lord’s service instinctively brought the detached Death Eater’s mental mask down before his expression could change, but inside he felt sick. The long, even gash seeping blood over Albus’s fingers and the bloody bathtub water told him, as clear as any explanation, what had happened here. He hardened his face as he felt it trying to change even past the mental barriers.

I was wrong. The boy can still horrify me.

Carefully, he set his bag down next to Madame Pomfrey’s. “What can I do for you, Madame?” he inquired, pleased when it came out smoothly without a hint of the sick churning in his stomach.

“He’s mostly stable now, but—my diagnostic spells are picking up an odd... well, I’m not sure exactly what to call it,” Pomfrey replied. He cast his own diagnostic spell as she continued. “Lupin says they gave him a standard blood replenisher, and I was—”

Pleased to finally have an acceptable outlet for his feelings, Severus turned sharply on the wolf, cutting Poppy off. “And what, pray tell, were you thinking?” he demanded harshly. “This is the second time in two days that your stupidity has nearly cost him his life! Unless you have another explanation for ignoring my express instructions *not* to give the boy potions *without asking me first?*”

Lupin opened his mouth, but Harry stirred slightly in his arms and drew the wolf’s

attention. Thus it was Albus who responded quietly, voice barely above a whisper. “It was I who ordered Remus to give the boy that potion, Severus. I had, I judged, less than a minute before his heart stopped.” Remus’s hand stilled on the boy’s head. “There was no *time* to consult with you, Severus. He would surely be dead before you arrived if I did not act.” He paused, taking a deep breath. “As it was, he stopped breathing twice before the replenisher kicked in fully.”

“The second time, the spells didn’t work,” Lupin added, cradling Harry’s body protectively. “We... I was forced to use Muggle CPR.” The grimace on his face told Severus how likely they had believed it was that it would work. The wolf glanced up at him, and behind his eyes was a flash of memory—*“It’s no use,” Albus was saying, voice rough. “He’s dead, Remus.”*

“His heart is still beating!” Even as he said it, the pulse under his fingers began to falter. “I have to try something!” He tilted the boy’s head back and began to breathe into his mouth, praying to any god who would listen—

Severus blinked to clear his eyes and turned to Madame Pomfrey. “It is possible that the blood replenisher, in conjunction with the nerve regeneration potion, could cause both reactions—but that would require a class two curse, at least—”

“The Slicing Curse,” she interrupted him tiredly. “And with a distinctly odd emotional aspect and a blasted strong rebound.”

Pulling his own wand, he cast the same diagnostic spell she presumably had. He did, in fact, recognize that kind of emotional aspect. “Sixteen years, seven months,” he said lowly to her, and was rewarded with a widening of her eyes. In a louder voice, he asked viciously, “And precisely whose brilliant idea was it to teach a suicidal teenager that curse?”

Albus’s wince was answer enough. Severus opened his mouth again, but Poppy forestalled him. “Severus. The boy.”

“Is there any nerve damage?” he asked her.

She nodded. “The boy has cut his medial nerve.”

He swore again. “Well, then, the standard counteragent is out. How much time does he have?” He held his breath.

“We’ve got him stabilized for now.” Severus began breathing again. “As long as it doesn’t take more than about... oh, six hours, he’ll be... well. No worse for it.”

He nodded. “I’ll have to brew a specialized counteragent—luckily I kept the boy’s custom blood replenisher. We’ll have to counter the standard blood replenisher, and then give him one of the safe ones. It will take only a few minutes to brew, but—” he nodded at the boy’s arm, where Albus’s hand had begun to shake. “Perhaps we ought to find a means of relieving the Headmaster first.”

“You begin brewing,” Poppy told him. “I’ll deal with this.”

He nodded and went to an open area of floor, far enough away from the rest of the group that even if Potter began to seize, it would be safe. *Thank goodness the Heir bathroom is large enough to house half of Slytherin.* With efficient motions he opened the self-expanding potions kit, then removed and set up his portable brazier and cauldron, filling the latter from a bottle of pre-brewed potions base he kept for just such emergencies. As

he waited for it to boil he took out the vials of whole comfrey and newt toenails. Reaching for the next ingredient, he paused. Would it be better to use unicorn hooves or phoenix feathers?

As he deliberated, he glanced over at Potter; Pomfrey had taken out a length of self-adhering bandage and was tightly wrapping the boy's wound with it. The sections applied to the wound had already been stained with blood. Whatever the witch said, he needed to work fast; unless he missed his guess the standard blood replenisher would not keep working much longer. With that in mind, he reached for the hooves; they would dissolve faster, and the boy could use every second Severus could give him.

As with any emergency, time both crawled and sped as he brewed the counteragent for the blood replenisher. Finally and too soon he was turning off the brazier and ladling the finished potion into a vial for administration. He selected one of the vials of Potter's pre-tuned blood replenisher and returned to the medi-witch's side, casting a cooling charm on the glass vial in hopes of getting the potion to be drinkable faster.

"We will have to administer the counteragent first," he told her softly, "then wait until it takes full effect and administer the new blood replenisher." She whitened, and he nodded. "If there is anything more you can do to stabilize him, Madame, do it now."

"What—what's wrong?" Lupin asked, brown eyes not missing the witch's reaction.

"The blood replenisher we gave him is interfering with the healing," Albus answered him, Poppy being busy with Potter. "They must counteract it before they can do anything more for him." He glanced at Severus, who gave a quick affirmative jerk of his head. "However, unless I miss my guess, both the counteragent and the blood replenisher take time to work."

Lupin, who, Severus remembered, had been there before the first blood replenisher had taken effect, whitened as well, eyes lightening to a dark amber. He clutched Potter close as if he could protect the boy physically. "Is there..."

"There is no other way, wolf," Severus told the man, although not unkindly. "Done this way, it will at the least give him a better chance than waiting for the current replenisher to run its course."

Poppy looked up at that moment. "I've done everything I can. Is the counteragent cool enough to drink?"

He tested it with a finger and found that it had cooled to barely above body temperature. He nodded to her.

Taking it from him and opening the boy's mouth she poured it down the inside of one pale cheek, touching the boy's throat with the wand held in her other hand. Potter swallowed. "Here we go, then," she said quietly, handing the empty vial back. Touching the boy's pulse point with one hand, she kept her wand pointed at the boy with the other.

Lupin's eyes drifted closed, although his hand continued its rhythmic stroking. His mouth moved silently; watching him, Severus recognized a standard C of E prayer. He had not known the wolf had been raised in the Church. Albus was quietly cleaning his hands with whispered spells.

One minute passed, then another. Poppy cast a diagnostic spell with a soft whisper,

keeping her hand on the boy's pulse point.

Severus knew the instant the potion began to take effect: the blood seeping around the edge of the bandage slowed, then stopped. The boy's lips began growing pale, then downright blue. "Come on, Potter," Poppy encouraged the boy softly as the boy's breathing grew softer. "Just another minute now."

"Stay with us, Harry," Albus added.

For a few seconds it seemed as if Potter were listening to the exhortations as his breathing steadied. Just as Severus began to relax, the boy coughed once, then twice—and then his chest failed to rise again. "Dammit!" Poppy swore. She cast a spell at the boy, enveloping his chest in a warm golden glow; he breathed again, once, twice, thrice—and then the glow faltered, and his chest fell and did not rise. She cast it again, and again it failed, after two breaths this time.

As she raised her wand to cast it for the third time, Severus saw the soft flutter at the boy's pulse point, which had been growing fainter as the boy's blood replenisher failed, suddenly grow erratic and stop. "Lay him on the floor," Poppy ordered Lupin harshly. "You said CPR worked last time. Let's hope it works again."

Lupin tilted the boy's head back and began breathing for him while Poppy started chest compressions. Drawing back the bandages on the boy's right wrist, Severus felt for the quiet pulse point—there, a flutter! Another. With his other hand he cast a spell, and there it was, the sign he had been waiting for: the counteragent had worked. Now, if Potter would just stay alive long enough—"His heart is beating, Poppy," he said, hearing the roughness in his own voice. "We need to get the new potion into him."

Working as quickly as they could, they poured the all-important vial down his throat, and then Poppy tried the breathing spell again. This time, it took; as Potter's chest rose and fell rhythmically, the fluttering under Severus's fingers steadied and grew stronger. When the golden glow began to fade over the boy's chest, they all held their breaths. It faded entirely; the boy's chest was still for a moment, and Severus felt his fingers tingle as a new rush of adrenaline hit—but then Potter took a breath on his own, and he slumped as surreptitiously as he could against the wall.

"Well." Poppy said as the boy's color returned. "Now for the hard part." She pointed her wand carefully at the wrappings and muttered a spell. Nothing happened; blood continued to seep around the edges, a drop falling to stain the towel preserving Potter's modesty. Frowning, she cast it again, with the same result.

"I thought the blood replenisher was the source of the problem," Albus said to her, his voice making it into a question.

"As did I," she responded absently. "Severus?"

"I cannot think of any reason this should be happening," he agreed with her. "To the best of my knowledge, Potter has not gained significant magical power in the last week."

Albus froze.

"Even then, it would be unusual—" Severus noticed the Headmaster was not moving, and frowned at him. "Old man? Is there something you know?"

"Is there any other way to clear the curse?" Albus inquired softly.

“Soaking the arm in a strong solution of dittany might do the job,” Severus answered, “but we risk the boy bleeding out while we try it. We could try both at once, I suppose, although it’s never been done before.”

Albus frowned. His eyes fluttered closed, and his mouth moved silently. Severus raised an eyebrow at the old man, but when nothing more was forthcoming, he turned to Poppy. “We would need a long, thin basin, I think, to surround the arm without requiring too much solution. Do we have time to call in a stronger Healer?”

“I don’t know of any within Apparition or Floo distance,” she responded. “I know someone in America, but it would take a few hours for him to get here—I’d prefer to try the dittany bath first; I think I can keep him from bleeding out at least long enough to tell if it’ll work. Do you have enough h—”

There was a sudden flash of light that sent Severus ducking and snatching for his wand; he had it raised before his eyes cleared and he realized that it was not some strange attack but merely the Headmaster’s phoenix, who glided down to settle on the edge of the tub, regarding them all curiously.

“Fawkes,” the man was saying affectionately, “do you really need to blind us all like that? Look, you’ve scared Severus.”

Severus glared at the man. He had not been scared, dammit, merely startled. The phoenix tilted its head at him and trilled dubiously.

“You remember Harry,” Albus continued. “He’s managed to do himself quite an injury—do you think you can help, dear friend?”

Fawkes sidled along the edge of the tub, then hopped to Albus’s shoulder and peered at the boy in question. He looked the boy over, then looked at Albus, tilting his head and trilling a questioning note.

“The injury on his left arm,” Albus answered the phoenix. “I believe we have the rest under control, do we not?”

Poppy nodded. “I have not been able to clear the curse from the boy’s injury,” she explained to the bird, turning the arm in question to display the bloody wrappings. “We were just about to try a dittany soak, but—”

The phoenix hopped from Albus’s shoulder to her arm and tugged at the boy’s wrappings impatiently.

“I believe he wants the wrappings removed,” Albus translated for the bird.

“Are you sure, Fawkes?” the medi-witch asked concernedly. “It’s rather deep—he might bleed out—”

Fawkes trilled a comforting scale of notes at her, and she nodded slowly. “If you’re sure,” she warned the bird, who nodded in a very human manner. Glancing once more at the phoenix, she reached for the knot. “As I remove this, will you begin holding the boy’s wound once more, Albus? Keep your fingers clear of the wound so Fawkes can work, but anything we can do to slow the bleeding can, I assume, only help.”

As she unwrapped the boy’s wound, Albus shifted his hands to grip around the thin arm, holding it partially shut. Fawkes hopped over to the Headmaster’s arm, leaned over the gash, and began to cry into Potter’s wound. A dark miasma rose from the wound with

each tear that fell.

When the phoenix looked up again, Poppy reached over with a clean cloth and wiped off Potter's arm. The long gash appeared slightly cleaner somehow, although Severus could not put his finger on what had changed. Drawing her wand, she re-cast the spell from earlier, and this time, was rewarded: a purple haze rose from the wound and slowly settled out over the rest of Potter's body before dissipating slowly. Quickly Poppy began casting further healing spells over the boy.

The phoenix gave a soft chirp and launched himself from Albus's wrist, lighting on Severus's shoulder and preening his dark hair. Absently he reached up and scratched the bird's crest as he watched Poppy finish dressing Potter's wound.

"Come," Albus said with some amusement. "Is there any reason we cannot put the boy to bed now, Poppy?"

She cast a diagnostic spell at Potter. "No," she said after a moment. "He's stable enough, for now." She watched as Lupin gathered the boy up with great care. "We may need to re-figure the healing potions, Severus—"

"Blast, the secondary healing potions," he said, realizing that they would have been counteracted as well. "Has any damage been done?" He waited as she pointed her wand at the boy in the wolf's arms again.

"No immediate damage," she said after a moment. "I don't like the looks of that patch in his brain, though—and we'll need to re-adjust the nerve regeneration potion, or start him back on an earlier stage."

They followed Lupin out into the bedroom, turning politely aside as the wolf dressed the boy's limp body in pajamas. "Readjusting them would be easier, but less optimal," Severus said to the medi-witch. "However, we'd need phoenix tertiary feathers if we want to be sure about his brain, and I don't have any left—"

The bird on his shoulder shifted his weight and bit down lightly on Severus's ear. Severus just barely kept from reaching up and swatting him. "Does that mean you'll donate?" he asked the phoenix, rubbing his ear. In answer, Fawkes shifted himself again, and shook himself; several perfect tertiary feathers drifted down to fall at Severus's feet. As he bent down to pick them up, causing Fawkes to dig his claws in painfully, he swore he heard Albus chuckle.

"That solves that problem," he said to the medi-witch, ignoring the Headmaster. "I should begin brewing—it'll take several hours for the first potion to finish, and I'd feel better if someone stayed here to monitor the boy until then. If that patch in his brain goes—"

She nodded. "Teach your grandmother to suck eggs, Snape," she told him, although her tone was fond. "Go. Brew."

As he turned to go, Fawkes launched himself from his shoulder, gliding down onto the bed where Lupin was tucking the boy in, and cuddled into the boy's chest. Severus stopped, looking back to watch the bird lay his head on Potter's shoulder and close his eyes; after a moment, he realized the whistling sound coming from the bird was *snoring*. Shaking his head, he headed for the door once more. He had potions to brew.

It was with a vague sense of bemusement that Remus watched Fawkes cuddle into Harry's chest. "Does he normally do this with injured people?" he asked the Headmaster curiously.

"Only his favorites," Albus responded. "Poppy—will the boy be all right?"

She glared at him from where she was setting up monitoring devices. Remus was glad Albus had asked the question first: he would not want that look directed at him! After a split-second, however, the medi-witch sighed and her glare lost its intensity. "Physically—eventually. He'll be awfully sore tomorrow, and there's not a lot I can do to keep that arm from scarring, but he'll recover eventually. It's a good thing you found him when you did; he'll be under the weather for a while, but another minute of uncontrolled bleeding, five at the very outside, and. . . ." She shook her head. "Well, you wouldn't be worrying about his healing."

"The disruption to his other healing potions?" Albus pressed.

"It'll take a hair longer for him to heal his original injuries than it otherwise would have but in general, there's nothing critical there," she answered. "However. Albus, I can only heal the boy's body." The bite returned to her voice. "If neither of you can bring yourselves to *talk* to him—and more importantly, *listen*—you should see about finding someone who will! The boy needs more than spells and potions to heal!"

The Headmaster nodded solemnly to her. "I know, my dear," he responded tiredly. "Now, anyway. If. . . would you be able to recommend anyone?"

"I know a few people who might be willing to take him on." Her voice softened again. "I'm sorry, Albus. It breaks my heart to see him like this. . . and I worry we won't be in time next time."

"I as well," Albus replied. "Thank you, my dear."

"Do give talking to him a try, both of you," she urged them. "I think you'll find that it isn't so bad once you get started."

Both men nodded to her. "I swear to you, Madame, that I will do my best," said Albus in a solemn voice. Remus nodded again.

Poppy's face relaxed further. "Thank you," she said quietly. "It breaks my heart every time I have to patch one of these up." Gathering her bag, she stood with an audible creaking. "These here—" she gestured to the row of softly glowing spheres, cubes, and one icosidodecahedron—"are monitors for Potter. If anything goes wrong, they will alert me as well as emit an auditory alarm and change color." She stifled a yawn. "Is there somewhere nearby I could bunk for the night, Albus?" Yawning again, she muttered, "Why, Potter, do you always seem to do these things in the evenings?"

Albus looked over at Remus, who immediately volunteered, "I could give up my room for the night."

"No," she said firmly. "All I need is an open space large enough for a bed. My bed-conjuring skills may have rusted since the last war, but they're still there. I refuse to turn anyone out of their beds."

"There's a sitting room adjoining this one," Albus offered slowly, "but it hasn't been properly cleaned yet. I'm reasonably certain there isn't anything deadly in there, but that

is about all I can say.”

“Perfect!” she said instantly. “Just point the way.”

“I can at least conjure the bed for you, Madame,” Albus told her, striding to a door and opening it, “so that you may sleep comfortably knowing the conjuration will not wear off and drop you on the floor while you sleep.”

“I am not that rusty!” Madame Pomfrey protested briefly, then sighed and followed him. “But I’ll take you up on that offer anyhow. Not all of us have your power levels, you know, Albus.”

Remus looked up from where he had been staring at Harry as Albus came back into the room and dropped tiredly into the chair by the bed. Their eyes met, Harry’s bandaged body between them, but after a moment, Albus dropped his eyes. Picking up the boy’s limp right hand, he stroked the callused fingers gently. “How I have failed you, my boy, I am now beginning to comprehend. I swear on my magic that I shall strive to do better in the future.”

Remus started to leave to give them some privacy, but the Headmaster’s voice stopped him.

“Remus, where did I go wrong with him?”

He turned back to find the older man looking at him with an expression of abject sadness. “Albus. . . .” He sighed. “I cannot even tell you where I went wrong.” He turned to face the body on the bed. “I cannot Five minutes, Albus. You heard Poppy. If Molly had made meat loaf instead—if I had stopped at Ron’s room first—” He choked, unable to continue.

“We would be planning his funeral.” Albus completed for him. “We have been unreasonably lucky where he is concerned, overall.” He cleared his throat. “Four times, Remus, he has nearly died in the last two months. And every time, it was at least partially my fault.” He paused. “Perhaps I should cede my position as his warder.”

“No, Albus!” Remus exclaimed. He leaned on the bedpost and regarded the other man solemnly. “You have made mistakes—but would any of the rest of us have done better?” He clenched his fists. “My God, Albus, I closed him in that bathroom—knowing he was upset and unbalanced. If you should cede your position, how doubly I? I have done quite a bad job of being his godfather, and it’s only been a week!”

Albus’s shoulders fell as he sighed deeply. “Whatever am I going to tell Molly and the children, Remus?”

“I don’t know that you need to tell them anything, Albus.” The man began pacing. “They are not related—they have no real right to know.”

“The Order will need to be told,” the Headmaster pointed out. “They will, after all, be the ones manning the—dear Merlin—suicide watch.”

The word fell heavily between them. Remus turned abruptly away, discomfited. Looking for something to do with his hands, his eyes fell on Harry’s discarded robes. He stepped into the bathroom to pick them up, and returned to find Albus regarding his hands with seeming fascination.

As it usually did, having something in his hands helped Remus calm down. “If you plan to tell the Order, then yes, telling Molly first is likely a good idea—and if you tell her, you should tell his friends.” He folded the trousers and placed them in a quickly-conjured bag. The Hogwarts house elves might be able to get the blood out—they were absolutely astonishing that way.

“And yet, I feel I owe it to Harry to preserve his privacy as much as I am able,” Dumbledore was saying. “How do I balance that with the need to protect him—even from himself? That is the question.”

“Perhaps we can side-step the issue entirely,” Remus suggested as he began folding Harry’s shirt. “Do you trust Harry to keep his promises? Would you trust a promise not to hurt himself?”

Albus leaned back thoughtfully. “He’d break it if he felt he had to. But... absent an emergency, yes, I believe I would.” He glanced up. “That is an excellent idea, Remus.”

“I had a Muggle friend who did a similar thing once,” Remus said softly. “They released him on his promise that he wouldn’t harm himself without contacting the hospital first.” He glanced at the bed. *I do hope Harry keeps his promises better.* He placed the shirt in the bag on top of the trousers.

“But until we extract that promise?” Removing a bag from his robes, Albus offered Remus a lemon drop before popping one in his own mouth. “How do we keep him safe?”

Remus shrugged. “We take turns watching him, of course. Between you, me, and Snape, we’ve got enough people to take turns until he wakes up. If he doesn’t wake fairly soon, we can worry about letting other people know then.” Glancing up, he caught the Headmaster yawning. “I’ll take the first turn.” He shook out the robes Harry had been wearing, and discovered they were still clean and relatively dry. Setting the bag down near the door, he began to fold them.

“I won’t argue, my boy.” Yawning again, the Headmaster stood; Fawkes lifted his head and chirped before briefly taking wing to land on the older man’s shoulder. “I’m afraid my day started well before sunrise. I’d forgotten how much work the Wizengamot and the International Council can be. Do please wake me, however, if he wakes.”

“Of course, Albus,” he said absently. Something crinkled in one of Harry’s robe pockets, and Remus withdrew a small square of parchment and unfolded it. Eleven neat names met his eyes. Frowning, he turned it over.

“Good night, Remus.”

“Wait!” he managed to choke out, stopping Albus halfway to the door. “Is this... Is this what I think it is?”

Albus glanced down at the scrap of parchment in the werewolf’s hand. “I cannot answer that, my boy, not without Harry’s approval.” Turning again, he left the room before Remus could stop him again.

Slowly Remus sank down into the Headmaster’s abandoned chair. Albus had as good as answered his question. *Dear Merlin!*

He distracted himself by examining his short, clipped nails; frowning, he picked a sliver of wood from under his thumbnail. Within him, the wolf growled; it had liked its taste

of freedom. *Rip, tear them*, it whispered. *No one does this to My. Cub.*

Remus forced himself to stop growling. *The problem is, 'them' is 'us'*. He sighed. He could not escape the feeling he should have done, should have been...more...more. Whatever he had said to Albus, he blamed the two of them in his heart. How he wanted to blame the Headmaster, drop all the fault on the shoulders of the old wizard. *He was supposed to be wise!* part of him cried. Yet he was old enough to have learned that everyone—even Albus—was merely human. And he was Gryffindor enough to own up to his own—disastrous—mistakes.

The bit of wood came free at last. He placed it on the nightstand to be disposed of later. Next to it sat the piece of parchment Remus had discovered earlier. He was seized with a sudden urge to rip it into tiny shreds, burn it, vanish it—anything to be rid of it. And yet, again, he was old enough to realize none of that would change the truth printed on it in black and white—well, cream, anyhow. Even if it would be satisfying.

He could not resist picking it up and scanning the list of names one more time. This time, rather than the last name, his eyes settled on the second.

The significance hit him suddenly, like a stunner in the back. *He's Sirius's Blood Heir*, he realized. *Not just his inheritor. Sirius didn't specify—did he know? Did he suspect?*

Maybe he had wanted Harry to inherit everything he could. That was not uncommon, especially when other family members were greedy and unwanted. Narcissa and Draco would have to prove Harry could *not* inherit before they would be granted any of the blood artifacts.

But Remus could not shake the sense that Sirius had known, or suspected, somehow. He reminded himself that James had suspected him to be the traitor—had trusted Sirius implicitly. Who knew what he might have been told, and Remus excluded from?

He ran his eyes down the list again. At least James was on it, he thought. How much worse might it have been for Harry to discover he was not his father's son at all? Still—he could scarcely blame the child for being upset. How would anyone react to finding out they were the son of the dreaded Dark Lord?

He turned his gaze on Harry—his godson, now; that was the one position he could legally fill as a werewolf, and Sirius had left it to him in his will. He knew next to nothing about parenting, but then, neither had Sirius. It would work itself out. *... as long as he lives that long. Merlin, let us keep him alive.*

Several hours later, Remus was starting to feel the effects of staying up all night. As seventh years they had thought it great fun to stay up all night; now he wondered how they had ever managed it. It had only been 18 hours, and he was yawning regularly. At least his conjuration skills were up to tea, and he had been able to summon one of his novels from his room.

But then, Snape is downstairs, brewing through the night—again—on Harry's behalf. I should not begrudge a little sleep. He yawned again. *I would not want to be in his shoes.* The man had looked half-dead when he had come upstairs an hour previous to drop off the first of Harry's potions.

He set his cup of tea down on the saucer and turned the page. Absently he picked up the cup again without looking and took a sip, eyes scanning the page. His feet were crossed where he had them propped up on a conjured ottoman; after a few minutes he crossed them the other way. It was quiet; he could hear the odd taxi passing a few streets over in Muggle London. A lorry rumbled by the window, a low bass note. In a few hours, the city would begin to wake, but for now it was still and serene. He turned another page.

A groan from the bed brought both feet down. The cup was forgotten as he set aside the novel and concentrated on the slight figure on the bed.

“Mum? Dad?” Harry blinked myopically. “Sirius? Is that you?”

Remus’s heart clenched painfully. “No, Harry,” he responded gently. “It’s Remus.”

He could see the implications work through the boy’s no doubt drug-filled brain. Harry’s face fell. “Oh,” he replied flatly, closing his eyes again. Remus’s chest felt leaden at the word.

“I found you, Harry,” he continued, not bothering to disguise the pain. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so relieved as the moment Albus found your pulse.” Now was not the time to tell the boy about the agonizing moment when they’d lost it again.

“Huh?” the boy replied, opening his eyes to look up at Remus with honest confusion.

“I was so glad you were alive,” Remus clarified. “I am glad,” he added. “In some odd way, you are the last of the Marauders. My godson; the cub of my pack. I was terrified you were dead. Five minutes later, and you would have been,” he added softly, still unable to believe they had come that close.

Harry wished the man would give it up.

“You wouldn’t feel that way if . . .” he began angrily, cutting himself off halfway through and closing his eyes again.

“If I knew about your parentage?” Remus finished for him. Harry’s eyes popped open, and Remus smiled at him. “I found the Paternity Parchment in your pocket. And as far as I’m concerned, it makes no difference beyond assuring that Sirius’s will will hold up.”

“You—but—I—you—” Harry spluttered. “How can you say that? I’m the son of bloody Voldemort himself!”

“Harry.” Remus reached over and took his hand. “If it mattered whose blood flowed in a person’s veins, Voldemort would have given up his movement a year ago.” Harry blinked at him, and he sighed. “You are still the same boy I welcomed into the world sixteen years ago, the same one I taught two years ago, and the same one I fought alongside two months ago. Nothing has changed that.”

“But—” Harry felt frustrated. “But M—Lily blocked all my other fa—fathers’ traits and stuff. Maybe she blocked the bad part of me, too.”

“I sincerely doubt such a thing is possible, Harry, and even if it were, I doubt Lily would do it. Regardless, evil is not hereditary. Or would you call Sirius evil?”

“No!” Harry protested immediately, then realized what had been implied. “But—it’s not—oh, never mind.”

“I will promise you, Harry, that if I believe you are going evil, I will tell you immediately,” Remus said with a small smile. “Would that make you feel better?”

Harry nodded grudgingly. “It will, a little, I suppose.”

“I promised Headmaster Dumbledore that I would summon him as soon as you awoke. May I?” Remus’s hand hovered over the call orb.

Both of them looked up as the door swung open. Remus rose, wand in hand; Harry wondered what the man imagined could penetrate this far into Headquarters without the alarms going off. Headmaster Dumbledore entered, closing the door behind him. He nodded approvingly at Remus before his eyes fell on Harry.

“Harry, my boy! You are awake!” Harry nodded to the man, who strode forwards to stand by Harry’s bed. The phoenix riding his shoulder chirped and took wing, gliding down to land on Harry’s bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, sir.” Absently Harry began to scratch the phoenix head that had appeared under his hand.

Dumbledore took the seat next to Remus, who sat down a moment later. “I am glad to hear that, Harry,” the elderly wizard replied. “Your friends have been quite worried—as, of course, have the rest of us.”

Harry didn’t see that there was any ‘of course’ about it, but he nodded anyway. “I’m sorry you all were worried,” he said finally.

“And I am sorry we failed you so, Harry,” the old man replied.

“Huh?” Harry couldn’t stop the immediate response.

“I knew you were upset and not... thinking straight,” Dumbledore said seriously. “I should have expected an... extreme emotional response. I should have been there for you, Harry. You should never have had to face this alone.”

Harry stared at the man. Was he serious?

“Professor Dumbledore is right, Harry,” Remus said softly. “We erred badly, and we apologize for it.”

Harry continued to look between the two of them. Okay, they were serious. But it made no sense!

“Harry?” Dumbledore prompted gently. “Are you...?”

“I don’t understand,” he said finally. “You didn’t rape my mum, conceal my parentage, or write me a bloody letter to tell me all about it!” Remus looked confused and mildly upset, and Harry realized he’d have some explaining to do later. “And you certainly didn’t hold me down and slit my wrists! So what are you *apologizing* for?”

A quick glance passed between the two men, a glance Harry could not interpret. “You should never...” Remus started, then stopped.

“We should have noticed your distress, Harry, and we should have done more.” Dumbledore leaned forwards. “We should have made it clear that we will help you through this however we can. You are not alone, Harry, and Death is not your only option.”

“It isn’t?” Harry met the man’s eyes. *Isn’t it, Professor?* he thought. *How can I ever dream to defeat Voldemort?*

“No, Harry, I don’t believe it is.” Dumbledore regarded Harry thoughtfully, although

Remus looked even more baffled. “It is clear that the letter you received upset you greatly. Would you like to talk about it?”

Harry shrugged. “There’s nothing to talk about. Hi, guess what, you’ve got ten fathers, and by the way, nine of them are Death Eaters—or worse. Oh, and we put a bunch of spells on you to keep all the stuff you’d inherited from them suppressed. It’ll all wear off over the next month. Love, mum.” He glanced up to find both Dumbledore and Remus staring at him. “What?”

“Spells, Harry?” Remus asked sharply.

Harry nodded bitterly. “Oh yeah. To conceal my inherited talents and attributes and whatnot. Oh, and to ‘conceal my true potential’, or something like that.”

Remus sank slowly back into his chair from where he had begun to rise. “Dear Merlin.” His entire face had gone grey.

Harry blinked at him. He was rather upset, but he had not expected such an extreme reaction from his father’s old friend. A quick glance at Dumbledore revealed the old man was looking similarly floored.

“No wonder Madame Pomfrey could not release the curse,” Remus whispered.

“I don’t understand,” Harry said in confusion. “What curse? What are you talking about?”

“The Slicing Curse, my boy,” Dumbledore replied. “The one you used to try to . . . kill yourself.” He managed to say the words without stumbling over them too badly. “Madame Pomfrey was unable to heal it.”

Harry looked down in confusion at his arm even as his cheeks turned red at the reminder of his actions. “But—I—”

“It took Fawkes to clear the curse enough for her to do the rest, Harry,” Remus said. “None of us could figure out how you could cast such a powerful curse.” He rubbed his face. “But if part of your power had been blocked before. . . .”

“But the spells aren’t supposed to wear off immediately!” Harry protested without thinking.

“What exactly is supposed to be the time frame?” Dumbledore finally managed to inquire after a minute.

“From when I read the letter until my birthday,” Harry replied. “Except. . . .”

“Except for what?” Remus raised a brow.

“Well. . . any physical changes. . . they’re supposed to be. . . .” Harry trailed off.

“Go on,” Remus said gently.

“Supposed to be linked to me mastering my metamorphic abilities,” Harry finished reluctantly.

“You are a metamorphmagus?” Dumbledore inquired curiously, as if Harry had just told him Mrs Weasley would be serving lemon ice lollies for pudding. Remus seemed more taken aback, staring at Harry.

“My mother seemed to believe so, sir,” Harry said carefully.

“How interesting.” Dumbledore leaned back. “Well. This month should prove quite exciting, shouldn’t it?”

“Sir,” Harry said with a touch of desperation, “I don’t understand. How could my mother *do* that? Bind up my abilities and whatnot, I mean.”

“That question has several different answers, Harry, depending on how you mean it.” Dumbledore regarded him thoughtfully. “Which are you asking?”

“I don’t know. All of them, I guess.”

“The spells themselves are difficult, but do not require much power. For a witch of Lily Evans’ calibre. . . they would be quite manageable. They are, however, Dark magic—and quite illegal. Your mother would be facing a life sentence in Azkaban if she were alive and if this came out.” He raised an eyebrow. “She must have felt it was absolutely necessary to your safety to contemplate using such spells. Which brings us to the last answer. If she felt it was necessary for your survival—well. The woman did face down the Dark Lord for you, Harry. Azkaban. . .” He shrugged.

“She knew she’d never face Azkaban,” Harry said woodenly. “She knew she’d be dead before I left for Hogwarts.”

“Oh?” Dumbledore frowned.

“She said she’d. . . she’d seen a whole bunch of possible futures. In every one she found that turned out well, she died.”

Dumbledore sat bolt upright. “Keep that secret, Harry. If it gets out that you have Seer blood, more than just Tom will be after you.”

Remus nodded emphatically. “Do not let it slip to anyone you do not trust implicitly.” He leaned forwards. “Even if you do not manifest it yourself, every government—and would-be government—will try to seize you.”

“But why?” Harry felt confused. “I mean, if I’m not. . .”

“Breeding,” Remus said simply. “Go quietly, and they will keep you in a comfortable cage for the rest of your natural life. Resist, and you will be kept in a cell and. . . used. . . like a stud horse.”

Harry stared at him. “You’re serious.”

“Quite, Harry.” Dumbledore nodded as he said the words. “You would be wise to keep all of this secret until Halloween, but the Seer portion you must safeguard closely for the rest of your life.”

Harry nodded slowly. As much as he wished he could go somewhere and be safe from Voldemort, being a human stud—quite literally—was not on his list of acceptable methods. “I understand, sir.”

“But, to return to a more. . . present. . . topic. . .” Dumbledore leaned forwards again. “Harry, please. . . I want you to promise me that if, in the future, you feel the urge to. . . hurt yourself. . . that you tell someone.”

Harry frowned. *Oh, that’ll go over real well.* And how long would it be before he’d see freedom again? *They’d never let me alone again!* “I swear I will tell someone if I wish to hurt myself before I act on that impulse,” Harry said carefully.

“Thank you, my boy,” Dumbledore said to him. “We appreciate it greatly.” He glanced at Remus fleetingly, and Harry tried to keep his expression neutral. “We. . . we are glad you survived, Harry. Quite aside from the potential. . . Well. We would be exceedingly

sad if we lost you.”

Harry had the feeling that asking the man “Why?” and especially “Why?!? You didn’t seem to care *last* year, or the year before, or, well, ever. Whatever caused this change of heart?” would be a bad plan. Yes. Bad plan. He settled for a nice, bland “Thank you, sir.”

Dumbledore gave a small sigh. “Harry. My door is always open to you. Please do not hesitate to call on me—no matter the time—”

Harry yawned. Then he turned bright red and opened his mouth to apologize for cutting the man off so rudely.

“Goodness me, look at the time!” The Headmaster rose before he could get a word out. “Well, one advantage of age is that no one will say anything if I nod off in the middle of the Board of Governors meeting tomorrow.”

Harry immediately began feeling bad about keeping the Headmaster up. “I’m sorry I kept you up, sir—”

Dumbledore waved him off. “I meant it, Harry, about the time being of no consequence. Besides, judging by that yawn—” at which word, Harry yawned again, and Dumbledore chuckled— “Judging by those yawns, we’ve been keeping you up as well.” He smiled at his phoenix. “Fawkes, are you planning to stay with Harry, or come with me?”

The phoenix tilted his head at Harry, and nibbled on the boy’s fingers briefly, before hopping off Harry’s chest and back over to the Headmaster, who held out an arm for the bird to climb onto.

“Sleep well, Harry,” Dumbledore said, settling his bird back on his shoulder.

“Good night, Headmaster,” Harry said politely, and settled back down to go to sleep, handing his glasses over to Remus to be put on the nightstand. The man began rearranging the bedcovers that had gotten in disarray, but he kept glancing over at Harry, as if he was thinking about something but did not want to say it. Finally Harry asked, “What is it, Remus?”

“I think you should tell Snape,” Remus said reluctantly. “I . . . you know we have no love lost between us, but I think you should give him fair warning.”

“Give him fair warning of *what*?” Harry asked irritably. “M—Lily said something similar, but I don’t know what either of you *mean*.”

Remus sat down slowly on the bed. “It—the Wizarding world regards rape as one of the worst sorts of crimes, Harry. The penalties for it . . . vary somewhat, but . . . at their socioeconomic level, they will be forced to surrender property, and if they hold any sort of position of power, they will have to face a hearing.”

“That’s it?” Harry said, dumbfounded. “That’s all?”

“Property is tied to voting in Wizarding Britain and—well, it can all wait for another time.” Remus sighed. “Those who are still free—including Snape—will be lucky if people do not spit on them in the street.”

And this will be a bad thing how? Harry thought to himself, but did not voice it. Snape had been unusually nice to him since he’d been rescued from the Dursleys. “I’ll have to think about—” He yawned involuntarily, cutting himself off.

“Don’t . . . there are records made, of these sorts of crimes. Magical ones. It will come out, on Halloween, no matter what you do, Harry. Don’t take too long.”

Harry was quite sure he wasn’t entirely following Remus’s explanations, but he was awfully tired. “I . . . said I’d . . . think about it,” he repeated through wide yawns.

Remus nodded, seeming to accept the answer. He stood, twitching the covers back into place for the second time. “Sleep well, Harry.”

Harry thought he replied, but he was asleep so quickly he could not be sure.

Something was buzzing. Yawning, Harry found his glasses and fumbled them onto his face, then searched for the source of the noise. After a moment, he located an old-fashioned alarm clock sitting on his dresser that was going off. *I’m pretty sure that wasn’t there yesterday. Remus or the Headmaster must have left it.*

Climbing sleepily out of bed and leaning on the chair for balance, he first located the button to turn the alarm off before removing and opening the note that had been spell-taped to the top of the alarm clock.

Dear Harry,

I apologize for the rather rude awakening, but I was called away with Albus at the last minute this morning, and it was the only way I could think of on short notice to make sure you got up to take your potions on time. I’ve already set out most of your doses for the day. Snape should be up sometime this afternoon with more; ask him about the schedule for those, he knows it better than anyone.

Stay safe, and be good while we’re gone.

Love, Remus.

P.S. In case you don’t know, pushing in the small metal button on top will turn off the alarm.

Harry found his first set of potions and downed the lot, barely grimacing anymore at the taste. Afterwards, he sat on the bed and looked around. *I’m not going to be able to get back to sleep, but it’s too early for anyone else to be up. What am I going to do with myself until breakfast?*

His knee was doing much better this morning, he decided as he flexed it. Now if only the rest of him weren’t quite so sore. He supposed it was only to be expected after the previous day’s excitement. Cautiously he stretched out his legs, stopping when the familiar ache re-appeared in his injured knee. *At least it’s getting better, even if it is awfully slow. I just hope it gets strong again by September, or getting down from the Tower in the mornings is going to be painful.*

He was mildly surprised that he was alone in the room: he'd expected to wake to find someone watching him. It finally occurred to him that he was thinking like a Muggle, and he mentally chastised himself for it. *Ten to one they've got all sorts of monitoring charms on me*, he thought with a bit of anger. *You know they wouldn't trust you, even after you promised. They've never done before.*

His eye fell on the chest they'd brought back from the vault. He was curious what his mother had written to Snape about, and now he'd have a chance to find out without anyone else watching. Rising, he limped over to it; he expected to have to find something to nick his finger with again, but it popped open when he touched the hasp. Pushing the lid open, he started flipping through the contents, and it didn't take him long to locate the envelope marked "Snape, Severus".

It was not sealed, and he was surprised to find more than one letter inside. Each was marked with a yellow Muggle sticky-note, and it only took a moment of flipping through them to work out why. "Snape at Hogwarts, Harry a Slytherin," read the one in front. "Never met Snape" was the next one. He found and removed the one that read "Snape at Hogwarts, Harry in Gryffindor", and, taking it back to sit on the bed while he read it, spoke the keyword.

Allowing the letter to fall closed, Harry pursed his lips. "Yes," he said aloud. Snape deserved to read that. Besides, Lily had asked it of him, and he owed her—and she was still his mother, wasn't she? He read the letter over again, imagining Snape's response. *The trick will be keeping him from hexing me and dismissing it all as a prank.* He got up and fingered the Paternity Parchment from the day before, which Remus had left on his nightstand. Should he take a blank one with him when he spoke to Snape?

The clock sitting next to the Parchment reminded him of the time, and he was surprised to see breakfast should have started a few minutes ago. He wondered why no one had woken him, but then shook his head at himself. Of course, they were letting him sleep—they probably figured he'd gone back to bed after he took his potions.

He hobbled carefully over to his wardrobe and began selecting clothes for his day. A quick glance at his left arm told him he wouldn't be wearing tightly-fitting shirts for a while, so instead he pulled out an older, larger shirt of his—well, Dudley's—and some of his 'new' hand-me-down robes and a pair of trousers.

With a start, he realized that Regulus's clothes were no longer just some stranger's. They were clothes that had belonged to his—one of his fathers. He shook his head—it was a very strange thought, indeed.

He hung the clothes over his left arm and headed for the bathroom. Someone had cleaned up in here, he noticed immediately: the surfaces were all, universally, sparkling-clean and there was a faint smell of detergent hanging in the air. He wondered when they'd managed to do it, and how it hadn't woken him up.

He set his clothes down on the side of the tub and paused to regard himself in the mirror. Well, he didn't look like Malfoy yet. He fingered his nose—was it a hair longer than

it had been yesterday? Or was it just his imagination? *Probably just my imagination*, he decided, turning away to do his daily business.

Once he was out of the loo, however the idea of going down to breakfast was overwhelming. He knew the Order rumor network was nearly as efficient as the Hogwarts one—it was a sure bet everyone knew what had happened, or thought they did. His face began to flame bright red. It wasn't so much that he was *ashamed* of what he'd done, he decided, as that he'd *failed*, and they all knew it.

He wondered if it was possible to call a house elf all the way from Hogwarts. If he'd been at school, he'd have talked Dobby into bringing him a tray. Experimentally, he snapped his fingers; when neither Dobby nor Kreacher put in an appearance he sighed. *Whatever happened to Kreacher?* he wondered suddenly.

Well, there was nothing for it. He'd have to go downstairs if he wanted any breakfast.

He entertained the idea of simply not eating. It wasn't like he really needed to, anyway. The Dursleys had seen to it that he was comfortable going quite a while without food. And anyway, he had his invisibility cloak here; he could sneak down while everyone was otherwise occupied, and snitch food.

It's my own bloody house now! I shouldn't have to sneak about! He wondered if he could kick people out or not, being underage. That would be the easy way. . . .

—But the Order did need the headquarters, and anyway, it was stupid to do something like *that* over something like this.

His left hand still didn't want to work and his right was still weak; it took him several tries and the help of two of the bedpost snakes to get his clothes on for the day. Any other day he'd have given up and gone down in his pajamas, if he was having this much trouble getting dressed, but. . . he thought being dressed might help him face the others. Something about facing a distraught Mrs Weasley, Ginny, and Hermione—all at once, if his luck held true—in his pajamas sounded like a bad idea.

He winced as he finally got the robe settled. He'd been hoping the lingering soreness he'd woken up with was just temporary, maybe from all the walking the day before, but it didn't seem to be working itself out as he'd hoped. He swore it was actually getting worse. Every joint and muscle twinged as he moved. *Maybe some food will help*, he theorized. Couldn't hurt, really. Well, it could, but it probably wouldn't. Not Mrs Weasley's food, anyway.

He stowed his wand in easy reach of his hand inside the robe. At the last minute, he grabbed the parchment and letter off his nightstand and went out, closing the door behind him. Once outside he found himself shaking. What if they were all angry? What if they laughed at him? He didn't think he could handle being laughed at.

Come on, Harry. Cut it out. How bad could it be? They're your friends and allies.

It could be that bad. In fact, it was worse.

Harry stepped into the dining room and froze—half the Order was there, it seemed. Ginny was the first to see him standing by the hallway door and stop eating, the fork halfway

to her lips. Hermione caught the motion—or lack of it—and turned; a half second later the whole room was staring at him.

“Harry, come sit,” Hermione broke the silence, patting the seat next to her. Feeling exposed, he limped over and lowered himself gingerly into it. She served him without another word; for once he blessed having such a busy-body friend, as she picked out his favorites and gave him none of the foods he disliked without him having to say a thing.

Slowly conversation around them resumed, but it had a half-absent, stilted air; experimentally, Harry glanced around the room and watched gazes skitter away from his look. They were indeed staring at him.

“What?” He realized Hermione had asked him a question.

“I asked if you thought you’d be up to joining us in the library after breakfast,” she repeated. “Mrs Weasley found an infestation of something she doesn’t recognize, and our assigned task for the day is to figure out what it is and how to get rid of it.” Mrs Weasley made a short, abortive motion, but stopped and looked down at her plate when Harry glanced at her.

“Er. Yeah. Sure, I guess,” Harry responded. “I had been planning to finish up that essay, but not getting eaten in my bed sounds like a better plan.”

They ate in silence for the most part after that. The people around the table kept shooting furtive looks at Harry, who did his best to ignore them. He was finishing the last of his waffles when it happened.

“So, Potter, is it true?”

He raised his eyes to find a middle-aged man staring at him. He’d seen the man around occasionally for meetings, but didn’t know his name. “Is what true, Mr. . . ?”

“Did you really try to kill yourself?” the man demanded imperiously. He had a nasal accent, and Harry disliked him immediately. He stared at the man, flabbergasted more by the rudeness than by the question. Before he could answer, however, Mrs Weasley boiled out of her seat.

“Gaius Vibius Gage! We agreed we would not ask the boy that question! Have you lost your mind?”

“You agreed!” he shouted back at her. “Not me!” He pointed a bony finger at Harry. “We’re being asked to risk our lives for the boy. The least he can do is answer a few simple questions!”

“He doesn’t owe you anything!” Mrs Weasley yelled back. “Sit down!”

“I am not one of your children, to be intimidated!” The man’s voice rose further. “And I say that as long as I risk my life, I have the right to ask him questions!”

Mr Weasley was on his feet now. “The door is that way, Mr Gage. And as far as I am concerned, the small risks you’ve taken in no way repay the debt you owe him.”

Gage turned in place, appealing to the rest of the group. “Surely you all deserve an answer even if I don’t. Who knows when the boy may put you in danger, if he’s unbalanced.”

“The boy deserves some privacy!” That was Doge, climbing slowly to his feet and pointing a frail hand at Gage.

“He’s the Boy-Who-Lived! He has no privacy!”

“And whose fault is that?” “He never asked to be famous!” The two replies were nearly simultaneous.

“Does it matter? He needs help, not—enforced isolation!”

“If you can’t respect the boy, then leave!”

“It’s not about respect,” Gage said angrily. “It’s about self-preservation.”

“You know,” another member of the Order spoke up, a witch Harry barely recognized, “he’s got a point. If we’re to risk life and limb guarding the boy, shouldn’t we have some indication of which way he’ll run under fire? I mean, if he wants to die, I don’t want my neck risked for it.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Tonks leapt to her feet. “Harry would never risk another’s life if he had a choice!”

Within seconds the entire Order was on their feet, yelling and screaming at each other. Through it, Harry sat there, staring at his eggs and feeling distinctly forgotten.

“Harry would never do such a thing!” Mrs Weasley was shouting. “Try to kill himself? You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“How do you know?” The man returned. “You know nothing more than I do!”

“I know the boy, and I know he wouldn’t!”

“Have you asked him?”

“I don’t have to!”

“He’s right here! We should ask the boy!”

Mrs Weasley turned abruptly to Harry. “Tell him. Tell him you did no such thing.”

Harry stared at her in horror. *Oh... bollocks. Now what do I do?* He gulped and took a deep breath as the rest of the Order stopped arguing to stare at him. *Oh, God. What do I tell her?*

Now Mrs Weasley was staring back at him in equal horror. “Oh, Harry,” she whispered. “You didn’t.” She sat down abruptly. Arthur Weasley came around the table to put his hands on his wife’s shoulders, staring at Harry with dread in his eyes. “Did you?” Mrs Weasley put a hand over her mouth. “Oh, Merlin. You did.”

Harry nodded slowly. “Yes.” He was aware of all the shocked faces staring at him. “I did,” he admitted.

“Oh, Harry,” Mrs Weasley whispered. “What on earth were you thinking?” She burst into tears. “Don’t you—don’t you know how much we’d miss you? Don’t you care?”

Suddenly it seemed as if half the room was yelling at him for his selfishness while Mrs Weasley continued to sob. “I’ve never heard anything so selfish!” one of the witches yelled. “Don’t you think about anybody else?”

“Killing yourself! Boy, I’ve never heard anything as stupid in my life! Don’t you appreciate all the work we’ve gone to to keep you alive?”

“Of all the stupid, idiotic, half-brained, selfish things to do...”

The other half, including his friends, continued to sit there open-mouthed. Harry looked at Hermione and Ron for backup, but they just stared at him. Resentfully, he frowned and lowered his head into his hands. *Why couldn’t Remus have been five minutes later?*

Harry escaped some minutes later when all the adults started screaming at each other again and took their eyes off him. Trudging up the stairs, he considered hiding in the library, but decided that lying down sounded better than being hard to find just then. He discarded his shoes at the end of his bed, threw himself down, and rolled over onto his back.

A knock on the door startled him. Groaning, he rolled off the bed and limped in sock feet to the door. He yanked it open, preparing to yell at whoever it was, but was surprised to see Ginny standing outside. His breath went out of him in a huff, and he just stared at her, blinking.

“May I come in?” she asked him softly.

He moved aside; she entered and closed the door behind her. “Want to talk about it?” she asked matter-of-factly.

He snorted and sat back down on his bed. “Isn’t that Hermione’s line?”

“Well, I could get her if you’d rather,” she offered, “but she’s yelling at the Order at the moment. It looked to be a while, so I came up here instead.”

He blinked at her. “Yelling at them?”

“Well, I suppose Ron was doing most of the actual yelling. They were sort of tag-teaming them, you see. Ron’d shout them down, and then Hermione’d hit them with logic until they started yelling again.” She grinned. “I was helping for a bit, but Ron’s got way bigger lungs than me.”

Harry wasn’t sure what to say to that. “I—they—you. . . Won’t they get in trouble?” he managed finally.

Ginny shrugged. “Who cares? They shouldn’t treat you like that.” She sat down on the end of the bed, across from him. “So, do you want to talk about it? Or about anything. I’m good at keeping secrets—just ask the twins.” She pulled up her legs so she was sitting cross-legged, back against the bedpost.

Harry stared at her for a moment, then shrugged. What could it hurt to tell her the basics? “You ever have a basic, fundamental part of your life just suddenly. . . ripped away? Something you’d just accepted your entire life, something you never thought to question?”

She leaned her head back against the bedpost, her face scrunched up in thought. “Well. . .” she said thoughtfully. “There was the time my grandmother died. She’d lived with us, you see, and she died quite suddenly one night in her sleep. But I don’t think that’s what you meant.” She thought some more. “Finding out the dreaded mass murdered Sirius Black—” Harry flinched slightly, but nodded at her when she paused to see if he was all right. “Finding out he was innocent was quite a shock. All my life we’d been told about him—he was a little like the bogey man, I think, or a boggart. Then suddenly, boom! One day he’s your wrongly-convicted godfather instead, and then we move *in* with him. . . but that was just odd more than anything else.” She chewed on a bit of her hair. “I guess that’s all I can think of.”

“Oh.” Harry thought. “Uhm. . .”

“Not really what you had in mind, eh?” she said, tilting her head. “But—even something like that left me feeling. . . unsure of things for a while. Wondering what would

change next, like things I knew to be true mightn't be so. Is that how you feel?"

"Mm... not really." He shrugged apologetically, and debated with himself for a moment. "Look... I can't tell you some of it, and I'd want to talk to Dumbledore before telling you other bits—"

"Look," she said hurriedly. "If you can't tell me anything, it's okay. I understand."

"No—well, most of it, yes, and there are worse bits. But... I found out my parents basically set me up to be the Boy Who Lived. Oh, they weren't sure of the specifics," he added quickly as her brows rose. "But... well, essentially, they deliberately used me to go after the Dark Lord."

"Oh... my." She blinked. "That's... I don't know what that is."

"Neither do I," he said tiredly. "Part of me says it's horrid, and they must not have really loved me. The other part... well, I'm not sure I wouldn't do the same thing."

"Oh, Harry." She pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

"And—I don't know, Ginny. If I'd use a friend or family member... or even consider using them... if it'd bring down or even weaken—Tom... does that make me evil?"

She considered the question, gnawing thoughtfully on the ends of her hair. "I don't know," she said finally. "On the one hand, most of your friends are pretty committed to fighting him themselves." He winced internally at the reminder that—as far as she was concerned—he had no family left. "On the other... we made that choice, not you. I don't know if you have the right to choose for someone else."

Harry leaned back against the other bedpost. "Isn't that what Professor Dumbledore does every time Snape comes home? Choose whether or not to... to save someone, or allow them to die for the greater good?"

"I don't know," she replied, giving him an odd look. "I don't know that much about what kind of intelligence Snape brings back." She shrugged. "It seems to me that there's a difference, though, between choosing not to interfere and deliberately putting that person at risk."

"Is there?" he countered. "I should think that, if you knew you could interfere—as you put it—successfully, the moral... whatever would be the same."

"Maybe," she said doubtfully. "I guess... I guess it depends on how you look at it."

"And," he went on, "it's not like my parents didn't sacrifice themselves trying to keep me safe." He couldn't help thinking of his mother's screams in his head, his father yelling... *Run, Lily! Go! I'll hold him off!*... did it matter to him that they had shared the danger? "So they shared the danger they'd put me in. It's not like they handed me over to Voldemort and said 'Hi, here's a present for you' like some sort of twisted Trojan Horse."

She nodded. "But they still chose to—to use you, you said, to go after Him."

"Yeah."

"My dad has this saying..." she started reluctantly. "It's what he says every time someone asks him why he joined the Order. 'The good of the many outweighs the good of the one'."

Harry couldn't help it; he started laughing.

“What?” she asked petulantly. “It’s a good saying!”

“It is,” Harry said, still laughing. “It’s also from a Muggle movie.”

“Oh,” she responded, startled, then started laughing himself. “Well, that’s Dad for you. Sometimes I’m tempted to study Muggle—what do they call it, Pap Culture?—just to understand half the things he says.”

Harry laughed harder. “Pop culture,” he told her. “Pap is, uh... a kind of... feminine test.” His ears started turning red. “I don’t really know what it is, but it involves some sort of intimate test, I think.”

“Oh my,” she laughed. “Oh dear. Right. Pop culture.” She pretended to write it in some imaginary notes on her lap.

When Harry could breathe again for laughing, he told her, “Thanks. I think I needed that.”

She smiled at him, her whole face crinkling up and her eyes dancing. “Anytime, Harry.”

He just stared at her, caught. *She’s beautiful. When did Ron’s little sister grow up into... into that?* “Er—thanks,” he said awkwardly, blushing a little.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth and looked at him shyly. “I...er...” she stammered a bit. “I know you’re better friends with Ron than me,” she said finally. “But... I like being around you, Harry.”

“Thanks,” he told her again, meaning it. “I... I like being around you too.”

Someone knocked on the door, making them jump a little. “I’ll get it,” Ginny said, springing up before Harry could react. He followed her belatedly, snickering a little as whoever it was pounded impatiently on the door again as they were halfway to it. Ginny rolled her eyes and flung the door open. “Hello, Ron. Hi, Hermione.”

Ron pushed past his sister, face flaming red, but by his murderous appearance not from embarrassment. “I could *kill* those... those...”

“Good morning to you, too, Ron,” Harry said. “Do come in. You, too, Hermione.”

Apparently his sarcasm penetrated, because Ron stopped ranting and his ears joined the rest of him, flushing bright red. “Sorry, Harry. Good morning.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Hermione said. “Don’t mind if I do.” She stalked into the room, slamming the door behind her. “Augh!” she growled. “I cannot believe those... those pompous sons of flobberworms!”

“Whoa,” Ginny commented. “Tell us how you really feel, Hermione.”

Hermione sank down into a chair with a great sigh. “I’m afraid I yelled at them a bit. I hope I didn’t make things worse for you, Harry.”

Ron threw himself lengthwise on the bed. “It did feel good to tell the lot of them off, though. Bloody...” He punched the mattress. “Going on like you belong to them!”

Harry shrugged. “I’m just not looking forwards to tomorrow’s Prophet.”

“Oh, blast,” Hermione said, eyes going wide. “I didn’t even think about that. Oh, Harry—do you really think they’ll leak it?”

“I don’t know, but can you imagine the field day Malfoy’ll have at school this year if he hears about this?” Harry said bitterly. “Never mind everyone else hounding me.” He sat

down heavily on the bed. “Makes me wish Remus’d been a few minutes later.”

The three other teenagers fell completely silent for a moment, exchanging wide-eyed looks. It was only then that Harry realized what, exactly, he’d said. “Oh...blast. I’m sorry. I...I didn’t...” He felt his cheeks grow warm. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Hermione said, leaning forwards. “Are you...if you ever want anyone to talk to...”

“I know just where to find you,” Harry replied, trying his best to smile at her. “Thanks. You lot are a good bunch of friends.”

Ron turned red again, and Hermione and Ginny smiled slightly. “We just...we care about you,” Hermione said quietly. “I—I don’t want you to ever feel you can’t tell me something, Harry. I promise I won’t yell or nag if you...if you ever want to share something that...” She waved a hand.

“That goes for me, too, mate,” Ron said, still red. Ginny nodded.

Harry forced another smile. “I don’t believe you about the nagging bit, Hermione, but thank you.” She turned red. “I...I’m sorry. I really didn’t think about...well, I’m not sure I thought much at all.”

Hermione nodded. “Just...just make sure you do, next time—if there’s a next time. Please.”

“I will,” he told her. “I promised Dumbledore, anyway, that I’d talk to someone if...if I...felt like doing...that again.”

Hermione gave a little sigh and relaxed a little. “Thank you, Harry.”

There was an awkward silence. “So!” Ginny said finally, in tones of forced brightness. “How about that local quiddich team?”

They all laughed.

None of them noticed that their fourth had dropped off until he began stirring and moaning. Ginny looked slightly frightened; Ron and Hermione glanced at each other knowingly.

“Vision or nightmare, do you reckon?” Ron asked the witch thoughtfully.

“Hard to tell,” she responded. “He hasn’t really cried out, though, and doesn’t he usually do that when he’s having a nightmare?” She reached for the yellow call, saying, “Either way, it won’t hurt to get Remus in here.”

“Is he back?” Ginny asked curiously. “I thought he and Professor Dumbledore were off doing something...Order-ish.”

Hermione paused, the tips of her fingers nearly touching the orb, then shrugged. “Again, it won’t hurt to try.”

But even after waiting a minute, the call remained unanswered. “Should we try the regular vision alert?” Ginny suggested tentatively, watching Harry press one hand to his scar and toss his head from side-to-side.

Ron waved them to silence impatiently, whispering, “Can you catch what he’s muttering?”

Surely enough, when all three were silent, it was evident that Harry was muttering words in his troubled sleep.

“I think he’s saying ‘Must get Potter,’” Ginny said finally. “Does that sound right to you?”

Hermione nodded. “That decides it,” she said briskly, and tapped the blue vision call in the headboard twice. “Ron, you go wait outside the door—tell whoever comes to be quiet.” Ron opened his mouth as if to argue, but got up and left when she glared at him. “Ginny, you and I should listen to him, see if we can figure out what he’s saying.” She dug a pen and a Muggle notebook out of her bag. “I’ll write it down.”

She had a page and a quarter of hastily scribbled notes when Harry gave a sudden gasp and sat up, narrowly missing Ginny. One hand was still pressed against his scar, but now the other came up to rub at his neck. He opened his eyes to find both Ginny and Hermione staring at him, the latter with pen poised over paper. “Gyah!” he exclaimed incoherently, starting back. “Oh, it’s you.” Shaking his head as if to clear it, he said in explanation, “That was . . . bizarre.”

“How so? Can you describe it?” Hermione fired the questions rapidly, already writing down ‘bizarre’.

“Either I was in Voldemort’s dream, or I’ve spent far too much time in the bastard’s head,” Harry said slowly. “I’m going to guess the first—my scar hurts something awful, and I don’t think I’m far enough gone to dream about myself as my own worst enemy.”

Hermione just barely kept herself from glancing at the bandage on Harry’s left arm. *Not that it would be all that far off*, she thought, but instead simply nodded. “Can you tell me about it more specifically?”

“There were several parts to it, you know how dreams sometimes have?” When she nodded, he continued. “In the first part, I was trying to find something—me, I think, I mean Harry, not me in the dream, or maybe the prophecy. It was somehow both at the same time. I think maybe I thought I—blast it, this is confusing! I think maybe I thought Harry had the prophecy, but I couldn’t find it. We were in this sort of maze, a bit like the Hogwarts dungeons, but it was hot and stuffy. Then I realized something was chasing me, so I ran out of the castle—which was and wasn’t Hogwarts, all at the same time—and made for Hogsmeade, and then I realized someone—Dumbledore?—was chasing me. And I kept running away, trying to get back somewhere—my stronghold?—but he kept gaining on me, and everywhere I looked, there were people, and they were all staring at me, and no one would let me through!”

Hermione scribbled frantically, trying to get all that down. Thankfully, Harry paused and took a deep breath, seeming to try to calm down. “Go on,” she prompted when she’d caught up again but he hadn’t started.

“Well, I made it to my stronghold place, but just as I made it inside, Dumbledore caught up with me. He started attacking me, and I was trying to hold him off. There were all these Death Eaters standing about, and I kept calling out for them to help me, but they just stood there watching.”

“Then what?” she prompted again when he stopped.

“Then I woke up, and you were here,” he finished. “I think I must have somehow gotten sucked into one of Voldemort’s dreams, don’t you?”

Just then, Ron stuck his head in. “Mate! You’re awake!” he said upon seeing Harry sitting up and talking. “Hermione, I don’t think anyone is coming.”

“Guess not.” She touched Harry’s vision call again, making it return to its quiescent state. He frowned at her; catching the look, she defended herself, “You were moaning and clutching your scar, and muttering about catching the Potter boy. It wasn’t really all that much of a stretch.”

“I suppose not,” he said, rubbing his scar. “Ugh. That was... not very restful.”

“Would... would it help to go back to sleep?” Hermione asked doubtfully. “We could leave if you want a nap.”

Harry tilted his head, considering the idea. “No—I don’t think I could sleep. And I’d probably get sucked right back in.” He shook his head. “Sorry. I couldn’t have been good company.”

“Don’t worry about it, mate,” Ron said reassuringly. Hermione smiled at him, and he blushed. “You’re still healing up. Sleeping’s normal.”

Harry’s stomach growled suddenly, making Ginny giggle a little. “D’you know how long it is ‘til lunch?” the teenager asked his friends. “I think I’m a bit hungry.”

“Not long,” Ron replied without even glancing at the clock. “I’m hungry too, mate. We could go down early.”

Harry shook his head. “No—I don’t think that’s a good idea.” His face settled into a tight grimace. “I...don’t really want to give them any more time to yell at me than necessary. This is going to be bad enough as it is.”

“Sorry, mate,” Ron said, sounding abashed. “I didn’t think about that.”

“We’ll be there,” Hermione said. “But you’re right. We don’t need to go down early either.”

“Thanks,” Harry told her, forcing a small smile.

It felt like walking into the open mouth of a dragon. Harry halted at the bottom of the stairs. “I don’t want to do this, Hermione.”

“Just go,” she said, giving him a light push. “Get it over with.”

“Besides, you can hex ’em if they say anything,” Ron put in helpfully.

“Ron!” Hermione hissed.

Harry looked over in interest. “I can?”

“Well, this is your house, right?” Ron said as if he hadn’t heard the witch. “They’re enjoying your hospitality, so you have the right to duel them if they offer sufficient insult.” He shrugged. “It’s polite to let ’em know before you start throwing spells, but not strictly necessary.”

“Harry will *not* be hexing the Order!” Hermione said somewhat loudly.

“But *they* don’t know that,” Ron pointed out smugly. “Just reach for your wand if they get irritating, Harry. Watch them backpedal.”

“Oh, for the love of—” Hermione huffed. “Go on, Harry. We’re right behind you.”

“Yeah, go on, mate,” Ron said as his stomach growled. “I’m hungry.”

“When aren’t you?” Harry grumbled, but started forward anyway.

The instant he rounded the corner into the dining room, all conversation cut off. He glanced around, but no one would look in his direction. Feeling increasingly awkward by the minute, he lowered himself into his chair at the end of the table. He looked along the table, and found Mrs Weasley staring at him with pursed lips and a worried frown, but the moment she realized he was looking back she turned away and went back into the kitchen.

“Want some peas, Harry?” Hermione offered the dish with a tone of forced brightness.

“What? Oh, sure. I mean, yes please.” He picked up his fork and started in on the food the witch began heaping on his plate the moment he’d said yes.

Lunch passed in almost complete silence. Occasionally one of the teens would request or offer a dish, but the rest of the table seemed content to communicate via gestures and sporadic soft grunts. Beside him, Ron was growing increasingly red; Hermione was ominously silent, her back tense. He shrugged and smiled at her, and she returned it, but her smile was equally taunted and unhappy. “Sorry,” she said quietly. He shrugged again.

Finally Harry could stand no more. Rising, he waved off Hermione’s offer of seconds and Ron’s offer of pudding. “I think I’ll go upstairs and study some. No,” he added when Ron put down his fork and began to rise, “you stay here, finish eating. I think I want to be alone for a bit anyways.”

Ron and Hermione exchanged loaded glances, and down the table someone made an unhappy noise, but after a moment Ron sat back down with a shrug. “Come find us if you want company.”

Harry nodded. “I will. Later,” he said, and left. No one said anything as he walked out of the room, but as he passed out of sight of the doorway, he heard conversation start up behind him, and felt his temper rise. Stopping to lean against the wall for a moment, he listened to the voices rise and fall in what was clearly a heated if muted argument, and muttered several uncomplimentary things about the order. A portrait hung on the opposite wall grinned toothily at him, said something—made inaudible by the silencing spell—and saluted him. Harry flipped the portrait off and moved further down the corridor.

I wish there was someone I could talk to about how to deal with it when they’re like that. He stuck his hands in his pockets. *Someone who’d understand.* Paper crinkled under his hand as he clenched his fists in his pockets. Frowning, he pulled out the letter he’d stuck there that morning. As he turned it over, and realized what it was, an idea took shape.

Author’s Notes: I couldn’t come up with a good title for this chapter. It went through several revisions, including “Reactions”, “Consequence”, and “The Shadowed Valley”. Eventually I settled on this one, which comes from 1 Kings 19. It’s been split; this is the first part of what was originally a single, exceedingly long chapter.

I’ve been asked if Harry will end up hating his parents (by which I assume people mean James and Lily). I find this sort of funny. Harry’s *sixteen*—I think it’s some sort of

universal law that teenagers have to go through a period where they hate their parents, and he's got more reason than most. So in the short run, yeah, he'll be pretty pissed. In the long run... well, we've got to get there first.

For those of you who were confused: yes, all eleven really are Harry's parents. Yes, Harry is just as confused about it as you are.

About revisions: In order to keep updates coming regularly, what I've decided to do is update every time I finish a chapter, and then upload revised versions of previous chapters at the same time. I'll note at the top which chapters have changed in that revision. For this one, there's just a minor fix to Chapter 2.

Warnings: I've added incest to the warnings. We won't see any really explicit incest, although I suppose it depends on your point of view. But in any case, I thought I'd better add it.

I will *not* however warn at the top of each chapter as some people have asked me. For one thing, I think that's practically a spoiler. But for another, a lot of these themes are going to recur throughout; I can't really confine Harry's depression to one chapter, for example. So I ask you now to go back and read the warnings on Chapter 1, and if you don't think you can handle coming on any of that by surprise, don't read this story.



The Very Long Night of Severus Snape

Author's Notes: Here's the second half of the chapter.

Extra points for anyone who gets the reference in the title.

Edits: Only a few, none important. I changed what happened to Hedwig in chapters 2 and 3; now she's got a "nasty" cut and she's staying with Hagrid while she recovers. In chapter 6, I put back a couple of lines that got cut because I felt they were too sappy; Harry and Remus both refer to "5 more minutes" but it's unclear where they got it. Hopefully that's fixed now. Sorry if it breaks the sappiness barrier. Lastly, also in chapter 6, I changed the exact wording of what Harry says about his mother's visions.

The knock on his doorframe came just as Severus was bottling the last of Potter's new potions. "This had better be important," he snarled without turning around. "I have been up the night brewing Potter's new potions; unless the boy is dead I don't want to hear about it."

"Er—sorry, Professor," the ashamed voice came from behind him. "I'll, uh, come back another time."

He spun, only years of Death Eater training keeping the flush from his cheeks. "Potter!" The boy froze, one foot on the bottom riser, but did not turn around. "Come back here, Potter."

Slowly the boy turned, revealing cheeks that were bright red. "I'm sorry, Professor," he said immediately. "If I'd known you'd been up all night, I wouldn't have come. I'm sorry you had to go to all that trouble."

Severus narrowed his eyes at the boy. "Are you, now." Miserably the boy nodded, eyes fixed firmly on his shoes. "Why were you down here at all, Potter?"

"I... I just wanted to talk to you," Potter responded so quietly that he had to strain to hear it. "I can come back later." He peered up at Severus, meeting the man's eyes for a fraction of a second. "I really didn't know..." He trailed off, waving a hand in a vague manner.

"Well, you are here now," Severus pointed out to the boy. "Surely you are capable of saying whatever it is you wish to say," he prompted when the boy was silent. When still nothing was forthcoming, he sighed and began cleaning out the cauldron he had been using.

"How do you deal with knowing people only put up with you cause you're a good spy?"

Severus dropped the cauldron in shock at the boy's impertinent question. His hand was halfway to his wand when his better sense prevailed. "You realize, Potter, that in some circles that question would be a dueling offense," he said conversationally instead.

Potter flushed. “Sorry, sir,” he responded, sounding genuinely contrite. “I didn’t mean it as an insult to you.”

For a moment Severus imagined he had heard a faint emphasis on the final pronoun, but then he dismissed the notion. He had clearly been up too long. “I believe you overestimate my worth in the eyes of the majority of your cronies, Potter.” The boy’s lips thinned—interesting. “But how do I ‘deal’ with it? With keeping my hand off my wand, gritting my teeth, and frequently a great deal of Old Ogden’s.”

The boy frowned at him, but not angrily. Severus believed it was the first time he had ever seen the boy think in his presence. “That’s . . . not quite what I meant. Sir.”

“Then you will have to clarify, Potter. I am afraid I do not speak lower-class Muggle teenager fluently.”

To his great shock Potter smirked. “Where on earth did you learn to speak it at all?” He waved a hand and blushed again. “Never mind.” The frown returned. “I meant the word ‘deal’ in a . . . more mental sense. Psychological. How do you cope with knowing they all see you as . . .” The boy trailed off, clearly looking for a polite way to put it.

“Only slightly higher than a rabid dog, and that only because I am of use?” Severus suggested. He was faintly aware that he sounded angry and resentful, and thought absently that he really should sleep before having these conversations.

Potter shrugged. “I . . . something like that, anyway.”

Severus regarded the boy before him evenly for a minute in silence. Unsurprisingly to him, Potter began to fidget fairly shortly, playing with the edge of his robe with the fingers of his right hand. “Look, I’m sorry,” Potter muttered finally. “It was a stupid thing to ask you.” He shifted his weight. “Sorry.” He turned as if to leave.

“I am not sure I have an answer for you, Potter,” Severus said lowly, making Potter turn back around. “In truth, I have very little choice in the matter. I suppose I ‘deal’ with it by reminding myself of the lack of alternatives.”

Potter stared at him for a long moment. “Why don’t you go back to Voldemort?” he inquired. “He doesn’t treat you nearly as badly as this lot—or he wouldn’t if you actually followed his orders.”

Severus felt as if someone had kicked him in the chest. *Is the Boy Who Lived beginning to doubt which side he should be on? Heaven help the world.* For a faint moment he thought of the irony of achieving the Dark Lord’s orders by refusing to follow them. Then his eyes fell on Potter’s bandaged left arm, and he could breathe again. No, this was likely about something rather different. . . . “Of all the people in this universe, Potter, you are perhaps the last I expected to hear defending the Dark Lord,” he managed to say.

Potter immediately grimaced, and Severus’s chest eased further. “Ew. No. Just. . .” He shrugged uncomfortably. “Trying to see it from your point of view.”

“Ah.” Snape regarded him solemnly for a moment. “In one way, you are correct,” he said finally. “The Dark Lord’s service is in many ways an easier path, especially for one such as me. However, it comes with costs that I do not care to pay—at least, that I wish to offset as best that I am able.” His eyes narrowed. “Why, exactly, are you asking me, Potter?” he inquired softly. “You surely know how to ‘deal’ with living with those who despise you by

now.” He hoped the boy would catch the acknowledgment he had been wrong about the boy’s home life.

Harry bit his lip. “The Dursleys hated me, but...” He paused, clearly choosing his words carefully. “I knew it would end. Eventually I would grow up, and leave. And... I had the dream of loving parents, then. I could believe there had been someone who loved me, once.”

Severus tried to control his astonishment at hearing the past tense from Potter. Even he, who had hated Potter—both of them—could admit that if James Potter had one redeeming quality, it was love for his son and wife. “Whatever your father’s flaws,” he began, only to see Potter flinch noticeably, “James loved you and your mother dearly. Your mother loved you as well.” That was not a good look on Potter’s face. The roil in his stomach intensified.

“I know about your relationship with Lily,” Potter said quietly. Severus froze again.

“Indeed,” he said in a voice that felt as if it should chill the entire room.

It did not dissuade Potter, however, who looked at him solemnly and went on. “Did you ever wonder why she left you?”

Of course he had. “Yes, Potter,” he said in a growl. “Of course I did. Contrary to popular belief, I am human.”

A faint smirk touched Potter’s lips, and he snorted, but went on. “She left me a letter, you see.” He looked down at the table between them. “She... she had a vision. She had a vision telling her she needed to produce a son with James Potter.” He paused, taking a deep breath. “She left you in order to create the Boy Who Lived.”

Severus nearly took a step back, but controlled himself in time. “That is an interesting claim, Potter.” He thought he was beginning to see where this was going.

“She knew they wouldn’t live to see me grow up,” Potter said quietly as if he had not heard Severus. “He knew it, too. And they created me anyway.”

“Created you?” Severus thought he really was too tired to be discussing this. He could not adequately keep his surprise and disquiet from showing in his voice.

“Did you never wonder what they were doing in the woods on Halloween?” Potter asked, still looking at the table.

“Yes,” Severus breathed, fear beginning to grip him. Merlin, let this not be going where he feared.

“They couldn’t get her pregnant,” Harry began. Oh, Merlin. “So they did a fertility ritual. And a potion.” Severus was sure he was pure white by now. Luckily, Potter was still staring at the table. “So yeah, they created me. To be the Boy Who Lived.” Harry continued looking down after he finished, slowly rolling his hem between his fingers.

“Why are you telling me this?” He knew he was croaking like a frog. He tried to stop the beginnings of relief that the boy did not appear to be going where he had feared.

“She said you made it bearable,” Potter whispered. “She said seeing you gave her an anchor—said you were gentle when it was your turn.” He glanced up at Severus, not quite meeting his eyes. “You... you have been kind to me, these past few days. I had hoped... had hoped you might understand. Might help me... figure out how to live with... things.”

The incredible irony of Lily’s son coming to Severus for life advice struck him suddenly.

"I..." he began, then realized he had no idea how to finish that sentence. Instead, steadily regarding the top of Potter's head as he did so, he unbuttoned his right sleeve. He saw the boy begin to protest, saw him realize it was the other sleeve, saw the green eyes narrow in curiosity. "I have not always dealt well with my situation either, Potter." He rolled up his sleeve and presented the arm beneath it to the boy.

Potter glanced at it, frowned, and looked up at him, clearly seeking permission. Severus nodded, and the dark head bent over the proffered limb.

He knew the moment Potter had spotted it; the boy's head flew up, eyes wide, and his right hand sought out the bandages covering his left arm. "Yes, Potter," Severus said softly. "I, too, discovered how difficult it is for a wizard to die from exsanguination."

"Oh, is *that* why..." Potter broke off, flushing. "I just figured I'd bollixed it up, like usual," he added bitterly under Severus's dark stare. "Is that what it'll—I mean, you can barely..."

"Advances have been made in curing wounds made by the Slicing Curse since then," Severus said, "and too, you have a more competent Potions Master brewing your healing potions. In a year, you will need to know your scar is there to find it." He looked thoughtfully at Potter. "At the time, I felt that anything would be preferable to facing another day in my position. Since, I have discovered that the secret to going on is simply that: doing it."

Potter stared at Severus's right forearm. "Thank you, sir," he said finally, barely above a whisper. He glanced up at Severus. "I appreciate it. Really."

Severus nodded curtly as he did up his buttons again.

"There... there is one thing," Potter said, voice no stronger. "My... Lily... she wrote you a letter. Said you deserved to know what would happen on Halloween." Severus froze. For a moment it seemed as if his heart had stopped, but then it redoubled. Potter continued, seemingly oblivious. "It... it has a bunch of protections on it—well, you'll see." He held out a folded piece of paper, but did not release it immediately when Severus took it, instead holding onto it and muttering something. The letter flashed gold; Severus recognized the type of security charm. *Paranoid much, Lily?*

Several minutes later he set the letter down with hands that shook. *I have until Halloween to live, he thought numbly. A spy is of little use if he is unable to spy—unless I can convince the Dark Lord that my potions skills are invaluable...*

The boy across from him was watching him with a faint frown on his face, but he dropped his eyes the moment Severus looked up. "I hope you will understand if I wish to verify this claim," Severus drawled.

Potter nodded. "I sure did," he said softly. Pulling a battered piece of parchment from his pocket, he slid it across the workbench. Severus picked it up and turned it over before nearly dropping it in shock. It was a Paternity Parchment, one with Potter's name on it. Surely enough, there was his own name at the bottom—on a list of eleven names.

"Professor Dumbledore was there and verified that parchment himself," the boy—his *son*—was saying. "You can check with him. Or buy your own. Or I have a whole stack of them upstairs if you trust them. They're still sealed."

Severus scanned his eyes down the parchment again, with a sense of surreality. His

first impulse was to throw it down and send Potter scrambling out of his laboratory at wand-point; this was just the sort of joke Black would have thought was funny.

He did not do so, however; he rather thought that if it *was* a bad joke, Potter had been taken in as well, and Poppy would not thank him for disrupting the boy's healing that way for the mere crime of being too gullible.

Wait. . . "Albus verified the parchments?"

Potter nodded. "He said it was still sealed properly, and he didn't think D—James could counterfeit that without Lily's help, and Lily wouldn't."

No. James was good at charms, but counterfeiting of that nature was far beyond his abilities. He would not have put it past Lily—after all, if the letter was to be believed, she had concealed Potter's true parentage from him despite Severus looking for signs that Potter was not, well, a Potter—but while she might have been willing to do so for a reason, she would not have considered pranking Severus to be a sufficient one.

Severus sank back onto the stool behind him, not wanting to believe this was not a prank but real; but the evidence available suggested otherwise. "I see," he said finally when he realized Potter was staring at him, brow furrowed.

"Professor Dumbledore said something about verifying it independently, but needing to be discreet," Potter continued after a moment, still watching Severus warily. "I figure he reckons people will get ideas if he runs out and buys things to check someone's parentage."

Indeed—Severus was not the only one who remembered Halloween 1979 in detail; he would not care to speculate what the Dark Lord would think if given such information. "There are a few potions I can brew that will reveal the degree of blood relation of two individuals," he said thoughtfully, "but it will require something from you—blood, preferably—"

"Of course," Potter said immediately, as if Severus had requested that he continue breathing. Did the boy have no concept of what could be done with his blood? "Just let me know when, sir."

"Not today," Severus said, when the boy looked at him expectantly, like he expected Severus to produce a tourniquet and needle on the spot. "I do not have the resources to store blood, and the test is most accurate when the components are fresh."

"Just let me know which cauldron to bleed into," Potter said with a half-smile that was almost a smirk. Severus snorted. Abruptly the boy sobered and bit his lip. "Er—sir?"

"Yes?" Severus set the parchment carefully back on the table; Potter picked it up and stared at it, still chewing on his lip. "You wished to ask a question, I presume?" he prompted when the boy still did not continue.

"Er—well—I was wondering—how is it possible for it to be true?" Harry waved the parchment. "I mean—how does someone have more than one father? I thought that wasn't, er—" He waved his other hand this time, cheeks bright red.

"You are correctly informed of the facts of life," Severus said dryly, and was rewarded by seeing the boy's entire face flush. "However." He glanced at the letter, still sitting between them on the table, and sighed. "I do not imagine you recognized the potion? No. I thought you would not." He wanted to pace, but could not find the energy to rise from his stool; as a substitute, he drummed his fingers on the table. "It is something of a legend

among Potions Masters. I expect Lily did not know the story either; it is the sort of thing rarely committed to print anymore, for it sounds ludicrous on the face of it.”

Potter frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The potion in question was created by a Muggle-born, who made his fortune selling his concoctions to pure-blood women who were desperate for a child. He claimed—and got several families to believe—that he had a variant which would allow the woman to conceive a child with more than one father. When he died, ironically without an heir, his notes were given to the Potions guild; the formula for the potion your mother drank was among them, with a marginal note saying only, ‘It is possible to alter this potion so that the child may be multi-fathered; the formula is too long to write here’. The full formula was never found. Indeed, it has never even been certain whether the potion works; there are portions which must be brewed with, or preferably by, the woman who plans to drink it, and so it is inherently resistant to double-blind tests.” Severus smirked. “That, and it has been illegal to drink for political reasons since a mere fifty years after the man’s death, so studying its use has been difficult. It may still be found in some manuals, but even those omit the legend.”

Potter was staring at him, wide-eyed. “So—you think Lily found it?”

“It would seem that way, would it not?” Severus cocked his head thoughtfully. “It makes one wonder how many other women have inadvertently brewed the other variation, and it simply has never come to light.” He glanced at the letter again. “The legend persisted through the centuries due to several unusual traits which suddenly appeared in certain bloodlines—notably, those bloodlines who had gone to this brewer for assistance conceiving a child. At the time, methods of determining paternity were crude; the child was always shown to be that of the correct man, but the question always remained of whether there was another father somewhere. And so the legend remained as well.”

“It figures,” Potter said bitterly. When Severus raised a questioning eyebrow, he flushed slightly, looking down. “Nothing ever goes normally for me. It just figures that if my mum brewed a fertility potion, she’d get it ever so slightly wrong, and something weird would happen.”

Severus had frequently been heard to complain that if Potter went for a walk, he would discover some as-yet-unknown mortal danger; he was not quite hypocritical enough to dispute the boy’s words. However, the boy’s comment reminded him of another question. “Am I correctly interpreting your mother’s letter in presuming that you are in possession of her brewing notes?”

Potter nodded. “I haven’t found them yet, but she says she left them for me.” He leaned on the table across from Severus, absently sticking the parchment he still held in his pocket.

“When this comes out—” on Halloween, spelling the end of Severus’s life, but he would not dwell on that now— “you will likely find that those notes are in high demand. If I were you, I would place them somewhere safe now, that no one might think to take them from you by force.”

“Great.” Potter rolled his eyes. “Another thing I have to keep secret and safe.” He rubbed his forehead with one hand; Severus’s eyes sharpened, but he quickly realized it was

not over the boy's scar.

"Another th—" Severus was halfway through the question when Potter swayed, blinking rapidly and putting out a hand to steady himself. Snape cut himself off and stood, drawing in a sharp breath. Before he could even frame the question in his mind, however, Potter's eyes unfocused and he began to tilt dangerously; Severus knocked over his stool in his haste to get around the table. It was a good thing he did, as he reached the boy's side and grabbed his arms just as Potter finally overbalanced.

Suddenly finding himself with an armful of unsteady, shaky Potter, Severus was forced to wrap his arms around the boy, practically holding him up, to keep him from collapsing to the floor. "Potter?" he inquired sharply, transferring his hold on the boy so as not to bruise the thin arms. "Potter!"

"Ugh," the boy responded just as the adrenaline began to hit Severus's system, leaving him lightheaded with relief. "I—what happened?"

"That is what I was intending to ask you," Snape said tartly.

Potter shook his head, blinking rapidly. "I suddenly—I was standing there, and then everything went silver and sparkly, and I couldn't quite manage to focus on what you were saying." He seemed to be having some difficulty catching his breath.

Alarmed, Severus felt for the boy's pulse, and discovered it was racing. He glanced at the clock, and began to mentally curse himself for ten kinds of a fool—he had been supposed to deliver the boy's new potions at least a half-hour ago; no wonder the child was feeling faint. He hoped he could dose the boy in time to prevent the more—unusual—effects of missing a dose. "Come, Potter," he said, and was relieved to see the boy's eyes flick up to his face; he was at least tracking that well. "Can you walk unassisted?"

"I—maybe," Potter replied, although his tone was dubious. Using Severus's proffered arm to stabilize himself, he pushed away and stood shakily but independently. "To where?"

Still keeping a sharp eye on the boy, Severus waved his wand with a muttered "Alo-homora" at the unobtrusive door set in one corner. "I keep a small area for when I must stay over nights," he responded. "I fear you must lie down for a short while, at least until I fetch your potions. You should have taken them a quarter-hour ago."

"I should have?" Potter blinked at him. "I'm sorry, sir. I'll try to do better next time."

"Walking," Severus reminded him, and the boy turned his head—slowly, as if afraid the world might go off kilter if he moved more rapidly—to regard the door. Potter let go of Severus's arm, and took one step towards it, and then it was a good thing that Severus had moved with him, as he stumbled, leaned too far over, and nearly went down in a heap. Only Severus's quick grab kept him from hitting his head on the table.

"Sorry, sir," Potter said, sounding younger by the minute. "Just a moment, I'll get up."

"Allow me to assist you," Snape said, taking the boy's arm again.

To his horror, the boy flinched away from him, thumping against the table leg hard enough to leave bruises. "Please, Uncle Vernon. I'll get up, I promise."

Definitely alarmed now, Severus crouched down. "I am not your uncle," he said,

trying to keep his voice soft so as not to alarm the delirious boy further. "He is not here."

"S—Snape?" Potter blinked at him. "What are you doing—where am I? This isn't my cupboard!"

"No," Severus agreed, feeling that questions could wait for later. "It is not." Deciding the boy would not be of any further help, and unwilling to leave him on the basement floor when the boy needed warmth, he swallowed his pride, cast a mild lightening charm on the boy—it would not do if he dropped him halfway—and picked the boy up bodily.

To his mild consternation, Potter went rigid the minute the minute Severus's arms went around him, and curled himself up in the smallest ball he could manage. While it did make getting through the doorway easier, it made holding onto him rather more difficult, and Severus was carefully not considering the reason Potter's instinctive response to being held seemed to be to protect himself.

He shoved the door open with one hip, allowing it to swing shut behind him, and deposited Potter carefully on the cot. Once he had the boy covered with one of the quilts, with warming charms cast on it, he retreated back into his lab to gather the boy's potions. Thankfully, he had not only the newly-brewed ones, sitting neatly to hand in a bag, but also extra doses of the others in a cupboard—against just this sort of eventuality. At the time, he had been imagining Potter managing to pull the table with the potion racks down on himself, or some similar calamity, but he was now glad of his own forethought.

When he returned, a small collection of vials in his hands, he found Potter sitting up on the bed, the quilt wrapped around his body. The boy had wedged himself as far into the corner as he could get, and watched Severus enter with eyes that were wary and suspicious, but also clearly muddled and confused. Severus allowed the door to swing shut behind him; the boy jumped when the latch clicked, drawing his good knee tighter to his chest and hunching his shoulders.

Moving slowly, Severus set the vials on the small table in clear view. "I have brought your potions, Potter," he said evenly. The boy did not reply, eyes tracking the Severus warily. Rather than repeat himself, he reached for the first one, breaking the seal and uncorking it, and held it out to Potter, who watched it suspiciously and curled more tightly in on himself, shaking his head desperately.

Evidently, I shall have to administer it to him. Severus prayed he would not have to resort to force; Potter was clearly befuddled and he doubted the boy was even aware of where he was. Again careful to move slowly, he sat down on the edge of the bed.

The simple act of sitting down on the bed made Potter flinch, and Severus's brows furrowed. "Please, no," he begged in a voice that had Severus freezing. "Please, sir, don't hurt me."

"I will not hurt you, Potter," Severus replied. "I merely require that you drink this."

That seemed to make Potter more wild instead of less, and Severus drew back at the look of sheer desperation that appeared in the boy's eyes. "Please—I'll do anything you ask—just don't make me—" Potter's pleas sounded, to Severus's ears, as if the boy did not expect them to make a difference, but could not help voicing them anyway. "Please—"

Severus schooled his features into a neutral mask before he could frown and frighten

Potter further. “Child,” he said as gently as he could manage. “This is to *help* you. Please take it.” He held out the vial again.

The boy’s eyes tracked it, but then when he did not approach any closer, they flicked to his face. For the briefest of instants, he met Severus’s eyes; it was enough to make Severus nearly drop the vial.

—on a bed, small room, there was a man, a bad man, no the man would hurt him, please no, please don’t, please don’t make me—holding a drink, a drink a bad drink a funny drink, choking on liquid—please no please please please don’t—

The fuzzy, muddled memory faded away with an abruptness that Severus had only ever experienced from the Obliviated, but the fear lingered, fear strong enough to have his own heart racing in sympathy. He carefully tucked his impressions of the memory away in his own mind for later consideration, and then held the potion out a little further. “Please, Potter.” He moved a few inches closer; Potter’s alarm increased more than was commensurate.

This is getting us nowhere rapidly. They were caught in a catch-22: the boy’d current state was most likely due to lack of this very potion, for it had some odd withdrawal effects, but the boy’s current state was effectively preventing him from administering it. He could *stupefy* the boy and pour the potion down his throat, but he was oddly reluctant to do so to a child who was so clearly terrified.

Taking another deep breath and swallowing more of his pride, he made himself as small as possible and softened his voice even further. “Please. Please take it.” Potter’s eyes were not on his face, but rather watching Severus’s hands; he kept the hand not holding the vial relaxed on the bed, away from the boy. “Please, Harry.”

As if the use of Potter’s given name was a talisman, a minute amount of sense returned to the boy’s eyes. “Pro—?” he began, then shook his head in confusion. “I—”

“Please, Harry,” Severus pressed, not wanting to lose his chance. “Please drink it.” It took force of will to meet the boy’s eyes this time, but he dared not look away. This time, no memories leapt at him, and he did not go seeking them. “Please.”

He nearly withdrew his hand in surprise, but stopped the motion in time as Harry’s hand lashed out and grabbed the vial from him, drawing it back into the boy’s protective blanket nest. Potter sniffed it warily, and Severus held his breath; it did not exactly smell appetizing. But after a moment, to his mild surprise, the boy upended it and drank the contents down.

This time, Severus was expecting the sudden release of tension from the boy’s muscles as the tranquilizer he had slipped into the potion took hold; he caught the vial as it fell from suddenly-slack hands, the other arm going around Potter to keep him from slumping over abruptly. Even with the potion in him, Potter stiffened as Severus touched him, trying to move away and failing.

Quickly Severus pocketed the empty vial—pockets could be cleaned later—and moved the boy to lie on the bed, releasing him as rapidly as he could. “Lie still, Potter,” he told the boy, who was still trying to squirm away from him. “Lie down, and give that a minute to work.” He reached out towards the boy’s ankle, intending to untangle the quilt from around

it, but the foot lashed out and nearly caught him on his jaw. Backing off and standing, Severus decided that perhaps it was best to wait for the rest of the potion to take effect.

Slowly, Potter's tight expression relaxed, terror fading into a general wariness. After a minute, his brow twitched into a half-frown, and he spoke again. "Pro—Professor Snape? Where—what are we doing here?"

Cautiously Severus moved back towards the boy, relieved when the boy did not flinch away this time, although the green eyes still tracked him warily. "Do you know where you are?"

Potter opened his mouth and began to nod, then glanced around in apparent confusion. "Er—no, sir, I don't." His eyes returned to Snape's. "Where are we?"

"We are in a small room I keep for resting between brewings," Severus told him evenly. "I fear you missed your two o'clock potions dose; the results were rather spectacular, and it was necessary for you to lie down."

"Oh." Potter still flinched when he reached for the quilt, but did not otherwise protest Severus untangling it and tucking it back around his legs. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to—"

"You are not at fault," Severus cut the boy off, surprised by how easy it was to admit. "The fault rests with me, as I was responsible for instructing you that a dose was required."

Potter looked at him as if he had just announced that he was the Second Coming of Merlin. "I—er—"

"I fear there are more potions to be drunk," Severus warned the boy, cutting off his stammering. "Do you feel up to holding a vial?"

The boy tilted his head, and held out a hand as if to request a potion. The hand, however, shook like he had recently been subjected to the *cruciatus*. Potter looked at it in surprise, and then shook his head. "Guess not."

"No matter." Severus retrieved the rest of the vials and moved up the bed to sit by the boy's head. "The first will be the worst, I fear." He slid an arm under the boy's shoulders, which instantly stiffened, and propped the boy up against his shoulder. "Try to swallow it in one go; you may have some water or juice afterwards if you wish."

Potter nodded, glancing up at Severus through the messy hair which had fallen down over his eyes. "I understand."

Nodding himself, Severus uncorked the vial and held it to the boy's lips. The boy gulped, and then shuddered convulsively, coughing and looking like he wanted to spit. Expecting the reaction, Severus offered the boy a glass of water, quickly conjuring a straw so as to avoid spills.

"Thank you, sir," Potter said when he had sucked down half the glass. "And thank you for warning me."

The rest of the potions went more smoothly, and then Severus insisted Potter lie down properly. "You must lie flat and relax as much as you can manage," he told the boy, who kept trying to prop himself up on one elbow. "When you have lain still for fifteen minutes, then you will eat something, and you may sit up somewhat; your blood sugar is likely woefully low."

There was some muted grumbling from the direction of the cot, but Potter turned so he was lying on his back, and began fighting to get the quilt properly situated. After a moment of watching the boy kicking at it, trying to get it in place, Severus sighed. “Stop that,” he told the boy sharply.

“But it’s all tangled!”

“I am aware of that, Potter,” Severus growled. “Patience is a virtue, one in apparently short supply today.” Potter shot him a glare, but did stop kicking at the blanket. Once he felt it was safe, that he would not get kicked for his pains, Severus began untangling the boy’s feet. Somehow Potter had managed to get the quilt wound completely around both ankles, but in a short span he had it undone and tucked flat around the boy’s legs. “Now rest.”

When he stood up to glare at Potter, the boy was staring at him oddly, as if expecting him to metamorphose into another person in front of his eyes. “Thank you, sir,” the boy said carefully.

“You are welcome, Potter,” he responded, returning to the tiny table and chair he kept in the other corner. “Rest.” He took up the papers he had been correcting, keeping himself awake by virtue of sheer stubbornness.

It took twelve and a half minutes—he timed it—for Potter to begin fidgeting. When he heard the boy shift on the bed, Severus opened his mouth to chastise him, but before he could speak, Potter said, “I’m sorry, sir.”

When he looked over, Potter was still lying flat; he had simply rolled onto his side and was peering at Severus. “For what, exactly, are you apologizing?” he inquired, feeling a mild sense of confusion.

“I’m sorry I bothered you, and made you lose track of the time,” Potter replied as if it was self-evident. “I shouldn’t have been a bother, and I should have remembered the time.”

Severus pondered how to respond. “To begin with, Mr Potter,” he started with a hint of snideness, “I am an adult, and fully capable of making my own decisions.” Potter blinked at him, and he elaborated, “If you were a bother, I am perfectly capable of telling you to leave, or even, should the situation warrant, causing you to leave most precipitously.” Potter turned red. “Furthermore, it was my responsibility to recall the time; that it was your responsibility as well does not absolve me of mine.” He tapped his fingers on the table. “It is my duty to look after you, Mr Potter, even when you are doing your best to distract me from it.” He wasn’t entirely sure that he was making sense anymore; he was well past thirty-six hours without sleep, but he was also quite sure that the boy would not call him on it if he was not sensible.

“Oh.” Potter considered that for a few minutes. “I’m sorry for being a distraction, then.”

“Are you still in pain?” Severus asked, changing the topic abruptly. Any more conversation down that particular path, and he would be forced to admit that he was grateful that Potter had come to him with that particular distraction. “How is your arm?”

The boy frowned. “Er, which one, sir?”

“The one you decided to slice open, boy,” Severus snapped, then rubbed his face. “I am sorry,” he said before the boy could do more than flinch back.

“Er—well—” Potter stared at him for a moment longer, then transferred his gaze to his quilt-covered arm. “I don’t know.”

“Explain.”

“It—it doesn’t really hurt, sir,” he said slowly, “but it tingles, rather a lot, and the hand keeps twitching.” A note of irritation crept into his voice. “And it *itches* something awful.”

Severus relaxed. The temporary lack of potions had not, at least, disrupted the boy’s healing; he would not be to blame for the boy losing the use of his hand. “The tingling and, ah, itching is, unfortunately, a side-effect of the nerve re-growing. I fear it may itch for some weeks.”

Potter started. “Nerve?”

“Yes,” Severus responded snidely. “You sliced one of your nerves clean in two, Potter. You are lucky to have been already on the nerve regeneration potions, or you may well have lost use of that hand entirely.”

Now the boy looked scared. “Er—”

“Oh, do not look as if—” Severus cut himself off, reminding himself that reminding the boy of the loss of his mutt was likely not the best thing to do at the moment. “I believe you will recover full use of it,” he began again when he could speak calmly. “You may experience some areas of insensitivity, however, especially in your fifth finger.”

“Oh.” The boy worked the hand in question out of the quilt; as he held it before his face, Severus could see that it was, indeed, twitching very slightly. “No wonder—” He cut himself off, pinching his lips together.

Severus glanced at the clock, and decided that it had indeed been a quarter-hour since the boy had taken the last of the potions. He stood and approached the bed slowly, sitting down on the edge near Potter’s feet and feeling under the bed for the box he kept there. “No wonder what, Mr Potter?” he asked as he did so.

“It—” Potter turned his face away, his ears going red. “I couldn’t hold my wand,” he said into the pillow. “To—to do the other arm.”

Something in Severus’s gut clenched at the boy’s admission, and he abandoned the box he had half-out from under the bed, sitting up to stare at the boy. Cutting one arm that deeply could have been a momentary stupid impulse; to try to cut both. . . . And certainly, if the boy had managed, he would not now be lying on the cot in front of him. The thought bothered Severus more than he cared to admit; he could barely even admit to himself that it scared him. “Why did you attempt to do so?” he asked softly.

“I—” Potter had pulled his face slightly out of the pillow, but was still speaking to the wall. “I just wanted it not to hurt anymore. I figured—I figured if I did both arms—I thought maybe I’d get to see Sirius again.” He glanced furtively at Snape. “I know—I know he was a right bastard to you—but he cared about me.” He buried his face in the pillow again. “And I was tired of hurting.”

“I see.” Severus leaned over to pick up the box he had retrieved. It was, perhaps, the

one redeeming characteristic of the mutt; it had also been his downfall. “There are others who care about you,” he pointed out carefully. “And—have you spoken to Poppy about—the other? She would not deliberately leave you in pain.”

“I don’t—” Potter paused, then continued reluctantly into the pillow, “I didn’t mean that kind.”

“Ah,” Severus responded carefully. “That... does make it more difficult to relieve.” He opened the box, and then the tin inside it. “Have a biscuit.”

The boy stared at him; Severus resisted the impulse to put a hand to his head to check for horns or other sudden growths. After blinking several times, the boy managed to squeak, “Excuse me, sir?”

“You require food, Potter, to raise your blood sugar,” he growled, holding out one of the buttery items. “Take one.”

Potter worked the other hand out from the quilt and accepted the biscuit, although he looked at it as if he expected it to bite. Severus narrowed his eyes at the boy, who flushed and nibbled on it carefully.

Watching the boy out of the corner of his eye, Severus took one of his own. Absently chewing on it, he waved his wand over the table; a tea set materialized a moment later. “I fear that long exposure to the Headmaster has accustomed me to tea with my biscuits,” he said wryly. “If I help you to sit up, do you promise not to move except to drink your tea?”

Potter nodded after a moment. “Please,” he said.

Remus stepped out of the fireplace in Headquarters and turned to assist Albus Dumbledore, who was right behind him. “I swear, the floo system gets grimier every year,” he grumbled as they brushed soot and floo powder off their robes.

Albus gestured for him to turn around, and began trying to get the soot of his back. “I suspect it does,” he said tiredly. “I cannot recall the last time their department got even half the funding they requested.” They traded places, and Albus shrugged. “Every year, I warn them of the dangers of under-funding critical infrastructure, but—” He shrugged again.

“That’ll be interesting if Harry is confirmed for the Potter Seat,” Remus said thoughtfully, but with a bit of sardonic humor. “Isn’t the Potter Seat the traditional chair of the Conclave budget committee?”

Albus nodded, a wicked gleam in his eyes. “I will admit to the occasional happy thought of the day he takes his Seat,” the older man said with a chuckle.

“Best not count our owls before they hatch,” Remus warned. “If James wasn’t confirmed, Harry may not be either.”

Albus shook his head. “I expect James’s problem will be no issue at all for Harry,” he said obliquely.

Remus shook his head too, more at the Headmaster’s typical cryptic response than the subject matter. “Speaking of whom—I wonder where he is, this time of day.” He checked his pocket-watch. “Dinner won’t be for at least another hour... he’s probably with his friends.” He looked up, a wry expression stealing over his face. “I’m sure he won’t appreciate being checked up on, but...”

“But you would feel better if you did so anyway,” Albus completed with a smile. “I believe I would like to see the young man myself.” He winked at Remus. “I am sure there is something we have forgotten to tell the young man.”

“Of course,” Remus agreed with a smile. “They’re probably either in Harry’s room or the library. Might be upstairs with the girls, I suppose.”

They turned down the corridor leading to Harry’s room and the library. Harry’s door was closed, and there was no response when they knocked; Remus shrugged at Albus and they continued down to the library. As they neared, however, they heard the sounds of a low argument.

Ron and Hermione were standing in the middle of the library, arguing in low tones. The witch had her arms crossed, and the young man was waving his wildly.

“Hermione? Ron?” Remus frowned at them, not angry but mildly alarmed.

The worry grew when they both turned and immediately looked relieved to see the two men standing there. “Remus! Professor Dumbledore!” Hermione greeted them. “Do you know where Harry is?”

Remus blinked at her. “That’s. . . what I was about to ask you.”

“No, we don’t,” Ron said, glancing mulishly at the young woman next to him. She glared back, and Remus tried to control the corner of his mouth, which had started twitching.

“When did you last see Harry?” Albus asked the pair.

“Er.” The two looked at each other. “After lunch, actually, sir,” Hermione replied, biting her lip when she finished. The teens exchanged another glance.

“Well,” Remus said. “Did he say where he was going?”

“Up to study, he *said*,” Hermione responded. “He said he wanted to be alone for a bit, so we didn’t go looking for him until just now.”

“So you haven’t looked very hard.” Remus’s shoulders relaxed a little.

“No,” Hermione said sheepishly. “We’ve been in Ron’s room, mostly. We just assumed he was in his room or the library, but no one’s here, and no one answers when we knock there either.”

“Then perhaps we should check other likely locations before we worry,” Albus suggested calmly.

“Er—” Ron began, glancing at his witch friend. “That’s—that’s what we were arguing about, sir. Whether we should look at all.”

“What do you mean, Mr Weasley?”

“Er. . . well. . . He said you’d made him promise. . . well, if I was him, I’d be p—upset if you went looking for me. I think I’d reckon you didn’t trust me at all.”

Albus stroked his beard thoughtfully. “I can see your reasoning, young man.” Ron turned red. “However—” He glanced over at Remus. “Surely, if we have something to tell him, he will not be upset with us.”

“I think we should look for him anyway,” Hermione said stubbornly, making them all turn to look at her. Her cheeks turned pink, but she continued, “I think as long as we don’t yell at him when we find him, he won’t mind. And if it were me, I’d want someone to look for me. I think I’d feel like nobody cared if I disappeared the day after I—hurt myself—and

nobody went looking.”

“She’s got a point,” Remus pointed out to Albus. “We should at least check likely locations. And if he’s upset with us anyway...” He shrugged. “I think I can live with that.”

Albus nodded decisively and turned to the teens. “Where would you recommend beginning?”

Harry sipped at his tea, watching his professor warily. A large portion of his mind was screaming at him—the scene was so surreal as to be unbelievable. He was drinking tea and eating biscuits with *Snape* of all people, all while tucked neatly (his mind shied away from the word *caringly*) into the man’s cot. He was under the man’s *quilt* for God’s sake. A green-and-grey one, to be sure, but his mind was just struggling with the idea of *Snape* keeping a *quilt* around.

Snape glanced up at him periodically, but spent most of his time frowning at the papers he was reading, or writing on them in what appeared to be bright red ink. Harry couldn’t figure out what on earth the man was doing—it was the middle of the summer; surely he couldn’t have grading left to do.

Finally his curiosity won out. “Sir?” he asked cautiously. The black eyes flicked up to his, and he had to look away. “Er—if you don’t mind me asking, sir... what are you doing?”

The man looked down at his hands. “Correcting papers,” he replied. Harry blinked and opened his mouth, but *Snape* smirked and he closed it again. “Not for school; I help review papers for an American potions journal when I have the time, and I find writing on them aids my memory later when it comes time to write my responses.”

“Oh,” Harry said in mild surprise. “Er—how many do you have to do?”

Snape gave a half-shrug. “Not too many—five at the moment, I believe.”

“Er—are they very long, then?” Harry asked, glancing, startled, at the visibly-thick pile.

“Not too long for their genre.” He flipped through the stack quickly. “I believe the current lot average fifteen standard American pages.”

“Oh,” Harry said again, frowning slightly. “That’s, uhm...”

“Roughly eleven and a quarter feet apiece, not including the conversion factor since these are typeset and not handwritten.”

“Whoa,” Harry commented. “That’s... a lot. D’you review a lot of them? I mean—how long will it take you to finish those?”

“Not so many,” *Snape* responded, voice somewhat absent as he frowned at the page in front of him. “It is roughly equivalent in total length, all together, to perhaps one and a half fifth-year essay assignments.” He made a mark on the page, then looked back up at Harry, one dark brow lifting. “Considering a career as a journal editor, Potter? I fear your academic abilities may require polishing if so.”

Harry flushed a little. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to pry." Snape muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'rather late for that', and Harry frowned. "I'm sorry, sir?"

Snape glanced up again. "I do not require an apology. You are not being intrusive at the moment."

"Oh." Harry realized he was still holding a biscuit and nibbled on it; wordlessly, Snape handed him another. "Then, uh... why an American journal?"

"Pardon?" Snape lifted his head, frowning slightly.

"Why are you reviewing for an American journal? Why not English or... or European? Are they better or something?"

Snape shook his head. "No, although I thank you for the compliment. Rather, the American journals are... rather more strict about remaining apolitical than the European ones."

Harry frowned. "Huh?" Snape looked up again and raised one eyebrow just as it penetrated. "You mean... they won't let you work for them because of—" He waved his hand at his left arm, tracing a sinuous pattern on it.

"Precisely," Snape said darkly. "They will not so much as return my owls. The Americans—who also, it must not be forgotten, have the insulation of a large ocean between themselves and our politics—do not care what is on my arm so long as I am competent."

"But—you were acquitted!" Harry protested. "Dumbledore himself vouched for you."

Snape set down the quill momentarily and stared at him. "Surely you, of all people, would appreciate the distinction between 'acquitted' and 'innocent'," he said finally. Harry blushed slightly and shrugged. "Although—there were still a very few places I could publish, on the Continent, before Albus spoke on my behalf. Now they will not consider me because of my link to him." He let out a soft sigh and picked up his quill again. "Hence—the Americans."

Harry finished his biscuits and slowly sipped his tea, trying to make it last. Snape mostly ignored him; he stared into his teacup as a return favor, thinking hard. *I don't understand Death Eaters*, he concluded after a few minutes. *Why would anyone—other than Bellatrix, anyhow—voluntarily join an organization that's going to get you shunned throughout the Continent?*

He eyed the biscuit tin. Snape was distracted and he was still somewhat hungry; did he dare take another? No, he'd better wait until dinnertime.

"You may have another if you wish one," Snape said without looking up, making Harry start badly enough to slosh the tea over the edge of his cup onto himself. Swearing, he blotted at his shirt; Snape calmly picked up his wand and vanished the stain. "You may have as many biscuits as you wish," the man continued evenly, turning back to his papers, "providing that you do not consume so many as to be unable to eat your dinner later."

Cautiously, watching Snape for any hint of a negative reaction, Harry reached for the tin. Snape did not so much as move; boldly, Harry took two. Snape raised an eyebrow, then, and he guiltily dropped one back into the tin. He glanced back up to see if Snape looked less irritated; the man was watching him and their eyes met. The other man suddenly frowned,

a dark, angry expression, and instinctively he dropped the second biscuit back in and drew his hands back to his chest, steadying the teacup when it began to quiver on its saucer.

Snape sighed slightly; after a moment his expression smoothed out to neutral blankness again. Harry relaxed slightly, enough to sip his tea, although he could still feel the man's eyes on him.

"Potter." The silky voice made him glance up again; the black eyes that met his glittered strangely. "Go on."

He blinked in confusion, and realized Snape was holding out a hand. Resting in the palm were the two biscuits. "Are... you're sure?"

Snape nodded curtly, tipping the pair into the hand Harry reached out uneasily. "Do you wish more tea?" the man asked abruptly.

"Er—" Harry glanced into his teacup, debating with himself.

A hand closed on his teacup, making him start again. Thanks to Snape's steadying grip, the cup barely rattled. "I shall take that as a 'yes'," the man informed him. Taking the cup out of Harry's loose grasp, he filled it but then set it down on the small table instead of giving it back. "You must take more potions shortly; you will want this to remove the taste afterwards."

"Waste of good tea," Harry complained as he accepted the first vial from the potions master.

Snape tapped his wand. "There is more where that came from."

"Any luck?"

The Headmaster shook his head. "He is not downstairs in the kitchens or the dining room, and Molly has not seen him since lunch."

Something in the Headmaster's voice made Remus stop and look at him harder. "Is something the matter?"

"Harry's disappearance is insufficient?" Albus raised a hand and sighed, his other hand coming up to rub his forehead, before Remus could reply. "There were a number of Order members in the kitchen; I gathered that they had something of a confrontation with Harry over breakfast."

Remus groaned. "Just what he needed."

Albus nodded shortly. Just then the two teenagers came around the corner; they shook their heads in unison as they spotted Albus and Remus. "He's not in the attic, not unless he's hiding in a crate or something," Ron said.

"He is, similarly, not downstairs in the kitchen or dining room," Albus reported. "I even looked in on the old kitchen—Severus's laboratory—but he was not there."

"Did you ask if Snape had seen him?" Remus asked, thinking of his request to Harry the night before.

Albus shook his head. "The door to the room he keeps was firmly closed, and he was not in evidence; I presumed he was asleep and chose not to wake him." To the two young people he said as an explanation, "He was up the night brewing Harry's potions."

Remus nodded. "He's not in any of the bathrooms either," he said. "Again, at least not unless he's hiding from me. Charlie is showering in the one on the eastern fourth floor, but I would assume he isn't in there either."

"Now what do we do?" Hermione asked after a moment.

They all looked at Albus, who stroked his beard. "Perhaps... he had reason to be somewhat upset, correct? Perhaps he is in one of the unused rooms, working it off via cleaning."

Ron looked dubious, but Hermione nodded. "It's possible," she said. "Er—sir? Could it be possible that he's in his room, but just not answering the door?"

Remus and Albus looked at each other, and Remus's heart sped up at the reminder of finding the boy the previous night. "I shall check that possibility presently," Albus said after a moment. "Meanwhile... if you would start at the top, and work down? I imagine he would wish to be as far away from the kitchens as possible at the moment."

Remus nodded, and turned to escort the children upstairs to begin searching anew.

Harry felt a little better after having his potions, despite their nasty taste. The minute he'd swallowed the contents of the last vial, Snape had pressed the cup of tea into his hands; when he'd grimaced at the bitterness of the tea after the bile flavor of the last potion, Snape had taken the teacup from him and replaced it by a glass of pumpkin juice without a word. Harry was trying very hard not to reflect on how good that small gesture had made him feel.

"Sir?" he asked cautiously. "I'd like to ask you something—but I just want to say, first, that if you want to tell me it's none of my business and to bugger off, I'll understand."

"And what is this offensive question?" Snape asked drily when he paused for breath.

"Um. I was wondering... why do people join the Death Eaters, sir? Or... why did they?"

Snape regarded him, dark eyes inscrutable. Harry gazed back, hoping the man could read the sincerity of the question in his eyes. "It depends on the person," Snape said after a minute. "Was... is there a person in particular that you were wondering about?"

"Er... not... really," Harry mumbled, cheeks flaming.

Snape nodded, one corner of his mouth twitching. "I see. Well... many of the original Death Eaters swore themselves to him in the days when he was merely Mister Riddle, the junior—and very conservative—councillor from the West Midlands."

"Er—the what from the West Midlands?" Harry stopped him to ask.

Snape frowned. "Heaven help us if you are Seated," he said cryptically. "A councillor is one of the members of the lower legislative body of Wizarding Britain."

"Oh," Harry said. "Like... like the House of Commons?" It occurred to him that he knew next to nothing about Wizarding government—not even how the Minister for Magic was chosen.

Snape nodded. "Just so. In those days, he ran on a platform calling for the increased separation of Muggle and Magical worlds, including the formation of additional wizard-only areas and mandatory wizarding adoption of Muggle-born babies who manifested their power

within a certain time after birth.” Snape’s eyes were unfocused; he appeared to be staring off into midair. “He was quite popular with the lower classes and small-town wizards, who tend to have a more difficult time hiding their... activities.”

“It... that actually sounds somewhat *reasonable*,” Harry said, earning himself a sardonic smirk from Snape. “So... when’d he go, uh...”

“Dumbledore had just defeated the Dark Lord Grindewald at the time, and had a great deal of political power and influence,” Severus continued his story. “He managed to block, or more usually moderate, all of Riddle’s more... extreme proposals. Eventually, Riddle was reduced to near-impotence as his colleagues began to believe that his name on a bill was, alone, enough to get it killed in the Conclave—the wizarding version of the House of Lords.” Snape sighed slightly. “His constituency felt he had failed them, and he was not re-elected to a third term. Riddle came to feel that he could not make his voice heard from within the government, and turned to other methods of achieving his goals.”

Harry nodded slowly. “He... he was right, in a way, wasn’t he? Was that when he became Vol—” At Snape’s sharp glare, he amended himself, “When he changed his identity?”

“You are probably correct,” Snape said, “about the first. The majority of the country was enjoying post-war prosperity, and had no patience with his ideas. In fact, many laws decreasing the separation of the two worlds were passed during that time, often over his nay vote.” He shook his head. “Riddle and his followers continued to work openly for a time, trying to convince the people that the Muggles were dangerous and would bring the ruin of the Wizarding world.”

“So—when did he become the Dark Lord we all know and love?” Harry asked sarcastically.

Snape leaned back, steepling his fingers and tapping them together. “As they grew increasingly marginalized, they grew increasingly radical. Eventually they went underground for a few years to begin preparations for a new plan. Riddle had become convinced—and had convinced his followers—that the only way to prevent the destruction of the wizarding way of life was to enact a violent revolution and install him in power. After a few years he resurfaced under his present name—and the first war began.”

“Oh.” Harry thought that over. “And—the ones who joined after that?”

“The Dark Lord still promises a return to the old ways, a renaissance of wizarding culture, and safety from the Muggles and Muggleborns,” Snape replied softly. “It is only upon achieving entrance to his inner circle that one realizes that his movement is more about power and immortality for himself and his closest followers—and the indulgence of a love for cruelty—than about ideals.” His hand had crept down to cover his left arm as he spoke; Harry wondered what he was remembering.

“Oh,” Harry said softly again. “Don’t... doesn’t it bother them, ever, the things he does?”

Snape shrugged slightly. “Those who join the Death Eaters are well-aware that they are joining a group devoted to the overthrow of the current government through militant, violent, and subversive tactics. It is, however, one reason he has so many un-Marked supporters—they are able to convince themselves that if they do not actively participate

in his more extreme activities, they are not at fault.”

“Oh,” Harry said yet again.

“Of course, not all recruits have ideals in mind,” Snape went on, distantly. “Many join because their families are supporters, or because their friends all joined, or simply because they want some respect for once. . . .” he trailed off, then looked up suddenly, catching Harry staring at him. “More tea?”

“Er, yes please,” Harry responded bemusedly.

Snape nodded and poured, his hands not quite steady on the teapot. Harry kept his eyes on his cup even after it was handed back. “You must lie there for a few minutes more,” Snape said after they had both sipped. “But you may go up to dinner shortly.”

Remus turned as someone came into the room he was searching. “Albus,” he said in greeting. His stomach fell as the man’s grim expression penetrated. “What—did you find him?”

“No,” Albus said quietly, “but I found his potions.” Remus frowned, and the man elaborated, “He took the two morning doses—but the afternoon ones are untouched.”

Remus stared at him, heart beginning to race painfully. “You don’t. . . what do you think could have happened? You don’t think. . . .”

Albus shook his head. “The wards are intact, and there is no sign of him crossing them. I. . . I hope he is merely somewhere in the house, having been incapacitated somehow—a fall, perhaps.”

Remus swallowed. “If he couldn’t reach his wand. . . .”

Albus nodded. “I hope that it all it is.”

They turned to complete searching the room. For once Remus cursed the spells that allowed wizards to pack more space into a given exterior volume; no London townhouse should have this many rooms, and no room should have this many nooks and crannies.

They leapfrogged the room the teenagers were searching. Albus had told them to use magic if necessary so the four could split into two groups and search faster; if the teens got into trouble for it, he had said, he would make it right with the Ministry.

Together he and Albus forced open a pair of very old French doors to a walk-in closet. As they moved together into it, wands held at the ready, Remus finally put his finger on what was worrying him.

“Albus,” he said tensely, “Harry’s promise, last night. . . he said he’d tell someone before he *acted*. Suppose. . . suppose he thought he could. . . do the job. . . by simply *not* acting—by just not taking his potions.”

Albus stopped dead in the middle of the closet, looking rather sick. “Dear Merlin,” he said softly. His eyes met Remus’s, and they both shivered in unison. “We had. . . simply better make sure we search thoroughly.”

Remus nodded.

They searched another closet before the Headmaster spoke again. “Harry does not own a pocket-watch, does he?”

Remus shook his head. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Suppose...” Albus frowned. “It has just occurred to me that it is difficult to tell the passage of time, in these back rooms.” He looked over at Remus. “Suppose he simply... missed the time for his next dose, not deliberately but accidentally.”

Remus nodded slowly. “What would happen?”

Albus stroked his beard thoughtfully. “The first dose he missed was the two o’clock. If he did so by accident...” His voice trailed off, and he looked back up from where he had begun studying the carpet. “One of the first symptoms would be confusion and disorientation, followed by a regression into the past. He could very well have attempted to find some place he would have felt safe when he was younger.” He looked around the room. “We should be sure to search all the cupboards.”

Remus stared at him, horrified. “You mean—it’s true, about the cupboard under the stairs?”

Albus nodded slowly. “I fear so, my boy.”

They both looked around at the number of places a boy, believing himself to be a small child and feeling safe in small, dark places, might hide himself. Remus groaned. *It would be just Harry’s luck to be eaten by some Dark creature while hiding as a result of having accidentally missed one dose of potions.* “I should go next door and warn the teens,” he said. “They should know to check all the small, dark spaces.”

Albus nodded.

There were a few moments of absolute panic and terror when they came upon the boggart hiding in a closet.

Remus had opened the doors and thrust aside molding clothes to reveal Harry, lying still and silent, eyes open and staring, on the closet floor.

His choked gasp brought Albus running; he stepped aside to allow the Headmaster to see, whereupon there was a muffled *crack* and suddenly Harry was lying in a slowly-spreading pool of his own blood. Remus drew a shaky breath and closed the closet door firmly, nearly in Albus’s face, before collapsing against it. “Just a boggart,” he said unsteadily. “It was only a boggart.”

Albus was staring blankly at the closed door. “Dear Merlin. You are sure?”

Remus nodded. “Before you got here, he was just...lying there. The blood only showed up when you did—and didn’t you hear the crack?”

“Dear Merlin,” the old man repeated, rubbing his face with quivering hands and leaning against the wall. “I thought...I thought...”

Remus nodded. “Me too,” he said. “Well. We’d better keep looking.”

They’d cleared another two rooms when Remus’s stomach rumbled; surprised, he looked down at his watch. “Albus,” he said slowly, “it’s nearly seven.”

The old man didn’t look up from where he was shining wandlight around yet another small closet space. “Is it?”

“Harry would have missed his second dose of that brain-healing potion fifteen minutes ago.”

Albus stood slowly and turned around. "Is that so."

"Albus. . . how long can he survive without it?"

The Headmaster's eyes clouded. "I. . . I do not know. I would need to ask Severus—or Poppy."

They looked at each other. "I think maybe it's time to wake him up and ask him," Remus said finally. "And I think we'd better get more people in on this search—this is taking too long."

Albus nodded. "Should I go now, do you think?"

Remus nodded back. "I think you'd better. You weren't there when he dropped off the new formulation last night—he checked Potter over, and then said something like 'six or eight hours without it, and he'd have only minutes to live if he's lucky'."

Albus paled, and they both checked their watches. "You are, of course, right. I shall go."

"I'll finish checking this room, then collect the kids and meet you downstairs," Remus told him. "Go on."

The Headmaster nodded and went.

"You will likely be exceedingly dizzy when you first sit up," Snape warned.

Harry stopped trying to push himself up and frowned. "I will?"

"You must give your heart time to adjust," Snape went on, standing up from his seat. "Thus, when I said 'you may sit up now', I did have in mind you waiting for appropriate assistance."

"My heart?" Harry blinked at him. "But. . . I sit up all the time."

Snape smirked. "Then, by all means, do."

Harry narrowed his eyes at the man, but began shoving himself up anyway. He got his torso perpendicular to the bed and grinned triumphantly. "See? I told you. . ."

Snape's hands caught him as his world went abruptly grey and he slumped sideways. "You were saying?" the man asked snidely, easing him back down onto the pillow.

"Er. Nothing." Harry put a hand to his chest, feeling the racing heartbeat. "Ugh."

Snape's face tightened. "Are you in pain? Any trouble breathing?"

He shook his head 'no'. "Just really dizzy," he said after a moment, "and my heart feels like it's going a mile a minute."

Snape pulled Harry's right hand off his chest and felt the pulse point. "Not dangerously fast," he said after a moment, "and the pressure feels good. You must lie there a minute, until it slows again, however; then you may try sitting up again, this time with assistance."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. "Sir? What's wrong with me?"

Snape gave a slight snort. "To enumerate would take years, Mr Potter. Among other things, you did attempt to kill yourself."

"Yeah," Harry muttered, rolling his eyes at the man. "I know. But. . . I meant, what's wrong with my heart?"

Snape did not answer for a moment, and then he let out a sigh. “When you were initially injured, Potter, at your relatives’ house, your magic kept you alive. By all rights, the blood loss alone should have killed you, never mind the trauma, yet here you are. It. . . is not my field, but my understanding is that it did so by deferring the damage—by essentially borrowing healing from your future. It did the same thing last night, when again, you should have died.”

“Oh,” Harry said. He seemed to be saying that a lot today. “So. . . now I’m kind of. . . paying back that debt?”

Snape nodded. “You were paying back the original debt, which weakened your reserves and thus your heart and lungs.” He paused, surveying Harry, and added, “You stopped breathing twice last night as a result. By the symptoms, I would venture your uncle attempted to strangle you.”

“I stopped *breathing*?” Harry had had no idea just how close he had come to achieving his goal. “Really?”

“We. . . Lupin and Poppy performed Muggle CPR on you,” Snape said distantly. *No wonder my chest hurt this morning.* “So you are, now, laboring under the healing burden of all your injuries, as well as the magical debt owed due to keeping yourself alive not once but twice in the past month. The result is a weak cardiopulmonary system—your heart and lungs.” He refocused on Harry. “If you still desire to die, it should be quite simple. Simply forego the plum-colored healing potion two or three doses in a row—overnight should do it—and then run up a flight of stairs. I promise, your heart will stop and you will be quite dead before anyone can do anything about it. In fact, I doubt the stairs would be necessary; you would likely not wake to see the day.”

Harry swallowed tightly, his eyes caught by Snape’s intense gaze. “Er. Oh,” he replied incoherently. “I promised Remus and the Headmaster that I wouldn’t, though.”

Snape nodded, the tight lines of his face softening slightly. “How is your heart doing?”

Harry put a hand to the vein in his neck. “Er, well, it’s slower anyway.”

“Hold out your right hand,” Snape ordered, and he complied.

“Sir? How is it that you know so much about. . . healing and stuff?”

“The Dark Lord sent me for emergency medi-wizard training when I was first recruited,” Snape answered, taking Harry’s wrist. He took out a pocket-watch and opened it, putting it on his knee in easy sight, then settled two long fingers over Harry’s pulse point. “Albus supplemented it when I began working for the Order, and then Pomfrey as well; they assure I keep up-to-date, although between the Dark Lord and the Order I do not lack for practice. I am, now, a fully-certified basic medi-wizard in my own right, with a concentration in medical potions.” He released Harry’s wrist and put the watch away. “It should be safe for you to attempt sitting upright again, provided you allow me to assist you.”

Harry nodded. “What do you need me to do?”

“Relax, remain calm, and try not to flinch,” Snape said evenly as he threaded an arm about Harry’s shoulders. “I will raise you, and then move the pillows. You must relax against my hold, and tell me instantly if your chest hurts or if your vision begins to cloud again.”

It didn't, and Harry relaxed back into the conjured pillows as Snape released him and sat back. "Will—how long will I need help sitting up?" he asked fretfully.

"Not long," Snape assured him. "After your next dose of potions, you should be able to sit up slowly without worry; by tomorrow afternoon, you should have no difficulties. It is the confluence of the missed dose and your low blood-sugar levels which are causing the bulk of the dizziness."

"Oh, okay," Harry said. "Er. . . thanks."

"Sit there, quietly, and do not move until I tell you it is all right," Snape cautioned sternly. "I should not care to explain to the Headmaster how it came to be that you fainted and hit your head falling out of my bed."

Harry snorted. "Yes, sir," he replied.

"Good." Snape appeared to be about to say something, but someone rapped urgently on the door, and he stood with an expression of mild irritation. Whoever it was knocked again as Snape circled the table, and Harry snickered a little, remembering Ron that morning. Snape shot a look at him. "Very still," he reminded Harry, and pulled open the door.

On the other side was Headmaster Dumbledore, his fist raised to knock again. The man's entire body radiated tenseness, and Harry wondered what on earth could have happened to put that expression of profound worry on his lined face. His own heart sped up in answering concern, and he concentrated on remaining absolutely still. Whatever had happened, now was clearly not the time to fall over and hit his head.

"Severus," Dumbledore said tautly, "how long can Harry survive without his potions? We cannot find him, and he has missed several doses."

Snape stared blankly at the Headmaster. "Albus—"

Dumbledore went on as if he had not heard, speaking rapidly and urgently. "He did not touch any of the afternoon doses, starting with the two o'clock. We are searching for him, but it is taking time, and so I must know—how long does he have? Is there a chance, any chance, that he is still alive?" He tensed even further, like a man expecting a painful blow.

Harry realized he was sitting in shadow; the man had clearly not seen him. "Professor Dumbledore?"

The old man's eyes widened, scanning behind Snape. They fixed on Harry, sitting upright in the corner, and all the tension left the Headmaster's body with an explosive sigh; he caught himself on the doorframe. "*Harry*. Thank Merlin." He put out a hand and gently moved Snape aside, eyes never leaving Harry's face, and moved half-blindly forwards. "Thank Merlin," he repeated, groping for the edge of the cot and sitting on it. "We feared. . . we feared the worst." Gently he took one of Harry's hands, simply holding it in both of his.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, flushing a little. "I—I didn't think, Professor. I'm sorry."

Abruptly, Dumbledore pulled Harry forward into a hug, holding the boy tightly against his chest and stroking his head and back as if he were a cat. The man took a shaky breath; Harry could feel the man's hands quivering and awkwardly wrapped his own arms around the Headmaster. "I am simply glad to find you well," the man said, his hand

tightening where he was holding Harry's shoulder. "So very, profoundly glad. So you have been here the whole time? What are you doing in bed?"

"He came down to speak with me," Snape said; they both turned their heads to look at him. He was half-sitting on the edge of the table, watching them. "We both were distracted and missed his two o'clock dose, whereupon he became weak and disoriented; I made him lie down whilst he recovered."

Dumbledore released Harry and held him away enough to look at him. "Are you feeling better now, my boy?"

"Better than I was ear..." The movement and sitting up under his own power, combined with his surprise at being hugged, had apparently been too much; a dull ringing flooded his ears and he trailed off as the edges of his vision went grey. He swayed, suddenly dizzy.

Dumbledore caught him, holding him again, and Snape stood up from his perch fast enough to nearly overturn his ink bottle, also reaching for Harry to steady him. "He is indeed better than he was," the potions master said to Dumbledore; it sounded to Harry like the man was speaking from much further away than just near his shoulder. "However, you see why I have had him lying down all afternoon. The missed dose put additional strain on his heart."

"Will he be all right?" Dumbledore asked worriedly. "What can we do for him?"

"He will be fine, in time," Snape reassured the man. "He needs a good meal more than anything—I have been feeding him biscuits, but his blood-sugar levels are woefully low; he must not have eaten much lunch."

"Not really, no," Harry confirmed. "It was... rather awkward."

Dumbledore's face hardened slightly. "I heard about that, my boy. I will have words with them." To Snape he said, "Molly should be serving dinner about now, if you think he can get upstairs and sit for dinner. I should go reassure Remus and the children, in any case."

Snape nodded and addressed Harry. "We will assist you to stand; once you are upright, you must hold onto us until the dizziness passes, do you understand?"

Harry nodded, and allowed the man to pull up upright. He clutched at Snape's arms, aware of Dumbledore hovering behind him, until the sparkles faded from his vision. "Okay," he said, a bit shakily. "I'm okay now."

He was able to walk out of the room and to the staircase without much difficulty, it all being on the flat, but he had to lean on the Headmaster to make it up the stairs. Snape followed behind, hands at the ready should Harry fall.

At the top of the stairs they paused for Harry to catch his breath, then continued out into the hallway. There they came upon Remus, Hermione, and Ron, all in a tight huddle near the main staircase. He could only see Remus's back, but the two teenagers looked tense and scared.

"Remus," Albus said quietly.

The werewolf spun, revealing an expression of abject terror; apparently, Harry thought, the Headmaster wasn't the only one who had feared he was dead, or worse. "Alb..." His

breath trickled out soundlessly as he spotted Harry. For a moment he just stared, but then he crossed the hall in three long strides and caught Harry up in his arms, hugging the boy tightly. “Harry,” he said into Harry’s hair. “Thank Merlin!”

“Mate!” Ron’s voice said next to his shoulder; when Remus released him slightly he looked over to find both the red-head and Hermione grinning widely at him. “You’re all right!”

“I’m so sorry,” Harry told the three of them. “I didn’t. . . I didn’t realize how worried you’d be. I’m sorry.”

“Do not apologize, Potter,” Snape said from behind him; Harry felt Remus stiffen. “You are not the one trained in medical potions; you could not have known that a minor delay would result in trapping you with me for the afternoon.”

“You’ve been downstairs this whole time?” Remus asked, then laughed quietly. “Well. Now I feel rather silly.”

Albus shook his head. “He was doing what I encouraged him to do; I should have considered the possibility.”

Remus shook his own head ruefully. “I encouraged him, too.” Ron and Hermione looked a little lost; Harry mouthed ‘later’ at them. “Still, better safe than sorry, I suppose.” He chuckled quietly, the sound one of sheer relief, and hugged Harry tightly again.

“The boy needs food,” Snape reminded them in his best bored tone. Reluctantly, Remus released Harry as Snape went on, “Be careful—the mishap this afternoon put additional strain on his heart.”

Thus it was that Harry entered the dining room flanked by Dumbledore and Remus, with Snape looming behind his right shoulder and his friends close behind. Conversation cut off as the entered; Harry swore he heard someone giggle quietly, but for the most part the faces watched him warily. He wondered if it was him, or if it was all thanks to his escort.

They took their accustomed seats, with Remus and Dumbledore assisting him into the chair at the end of the table before taking their seats to his right. Snape hovered until Harry was safely settled, then swept past them to claim a place next to the man from that morning—Gage, Harry recalled after a moment. He suppressed a snicker as the man edged his chair away from Snape.

They all sat there for a moment, looking at each other, before Mrs Weasley rose and waved her wand at the dishes on the table. “Dinner is served!” she said with forced cheer.

As they were all finishing up the main meal, Dumbledore, who had been quiet through most of it, spoke up. “If Order members could please remain after pudding,” he said, not loudly, but it cut through all the low conversation like a sharp knife.

The Order members shot each other looks of mixed apprehension and concern; the rest of the household exchanged looks of curiosity. Harry looked over at Ginny to find her raising an eyebrow at him, and shrugged back, but it reminded him of something.

“Professor,” he said quietly to Dumbledore, who turned from where he had been exchanging a few low words with Remus. “I don’t know if anyone mentioned it to you, but I had a. . . sort of vision this morning.”

“No, they did not,” Dumbledore replied, sounding interested. He leaned forwards slightly. “How do you mean, ‘sort of’? And is there a reason you did not report this in the usual manner?”

“Er, well, I fell asleep after breakfast,” Harry explained. “I think I got sucked into one of his nightmares. Hermione has the whole thing written down, I think.”

They both looked over at the witch, who blushed slightly and nodded. “He was mumbling in his sleep, so I took down everything he said—after we realized what was going on, anyhow—and his description afterwards.”

“Excellent thinking, my dear,” Dumbledore complimented her, making her blush harder. “And—why, if I ask, did you not use the vision call?”

Harry raised his eyebrows at Hermione, who nodded and answered. “We did,” she said simply. “I hit it as soon as it became evident that it was a vision and not just a nightmare. I was trying to write down what he said, so I used the mode requesting someone come upstairs, and then sent Ron out into the hall to wait for them. No one ever came.”

Ron, who had looked over at the sound of his name, nodded. “I didn’t even hear anyone on the stairs,” he said.

“Anyway, once I woke up, Hermione took it all down, and then it didn’t seem worth bothering anyone about,” Harry explained further. “I figured we could just tell you later. It wasn’t even an interesting nightmare.”

“Standard being-chased nightmare, combined with social anxiety,” Hermione confirmed, and he nodded. “I’ll copy it all out neatly for you, but I don’t think it’s a surprise to anyone that Voldemort fears you, sir, and wants the prophecy.”

“We did learn that he’s asleep at half past ten in the morning,” Ron pointed out, making them all turn to look at him; his ears turned red. “It’s another piece of information about his daily schedule.”

“Very true, Mr Weasley,” Dumbledore said approvingly, making Ron flush further. To Harry, he went on, “I am disturbed that the call was ignored; I shall have to get to the bottom of that.”

Once pudding—a most excellent chocolate cake—was cleared away, the younger members of the household stood and prepared to leave. Remus hovered near Harry in case he should need help, but Snape had been right: with a full meal inside him, Harry only had to lean on the table momentarily for balance.

As he turned to follow his friends out, Dumbledore put a hand on his arm to stop him. “Would you please wait nearby?” the man requested quietly. “I shall wish you to come back in perhaps ten or fifteen minutes; it would be more convenient for both of us, I think, if you did not wander far.”

Harry nodded, slightly startled but agreeable. “There’s that office just down the hall,” he suggested. “I could wait there.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Perfect.”

Harry nodded again and left; Remus closed the large double doors behind him, and as he turned, he saw them sparkle briefly with some sort of spell. His footsteps sounded slightly dead as he turned back, and he realized it must have been some form of soundproofing ward.

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were waiting for him in the hall, and they all trooped together into the office, leaving the door open. “So you were with *Snape* all afternoon?” Ron asked immediately.

Harry nodded. “Yeah,” he admitted.

“Doing what?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Er.” He looked between his friends, debating with himself. He thought ruefully of Ron’s temper, especially where all things *Snape* were concerned, and decided that now was not the time. “I . . . can’t really tell you right now. Maybe later. I think maybe I need to talk to Professor Dumbledore first,” he added, thinking of the numerous cautions he’d received. “But . . . in short, my mum left him a letter to be given to him if—” *when*— “she died in the war.”

“Oh,” Ron said, frowning. “How’d she know he’d still be on our side, or even still alive?”

“She didn’t,” Harry replied patiently, “which is why she left it for me to give to him, if I wanted to.”

“Oh,” Ron repeated. “And you can’t tell us what it said?”

Harry hesitated, then shook his head. “Anyway, what were all of you up to?”

They all looked up in surprise as a faint roaring sound penetrated the room from the direction of the dining room. “My god, was that Remus yelling?” Ginny asked incredulously after a moment.

“I didn’t know you *could* overwhelm that ward,” Hermione said, blinking. “Anyway,” she went on after a few seconds of silence, “Ron and I spent most of the afternoon in Ron’s room.” She glanced at Ron and blushed slightly. Ginny smirked. “Then, about half past four, we started getting worried because we hadn’t seen you, and we went to look for you.”

“Remus and Professor Dumbledore showed up while we were ar—while we were in the library,” Ron went on. “None of us had seen you, so we all started looking. We figured you were just off somewhere br—reading or something, at first.”

“But then Professor Dumbledore discovered your afternoon potions were untouched, and we got rather worried,” Hermione picked the story back up. “So then we really started searching for you.”

“Mind you, nobody bothered to find *me* and ask me to help,” Ginny said irritably, frowning at the other two. “I spent my day reading, none the wiser.”

“I’m sorry, Ginny,” Hermione told the other witch sincerely. “When I looked in that first time, you were so deep in your book that I didn’t want to bother you, and then when we started to really worry, I just . . . didn’t think of it. I’m sorry. We could have used your help.”

“D’you have any idea how many rooms this place has?” Ron added, shuddering. “And all of them creepy!”

“Lots of spiders,” Hermione explained to Harry as an aside. “Anyhow, whoever put the expansion charms on here must have been really powerful—there are way more rooms than should fit in the exterior volume.”

“Look,” Harry said, feeling he should apologize for their useless search, “I really am

sorry I worried you. I really didn't mean to wind up confined to Snape's bed all afternoon."

"Snape's *bed*?" Hermione raised both eyebrows.

"Yeah—he keeps a little room down there with a sort of cot thing—it's even got a quilt, can you imagine? Anyhow, when I kind of collapsed, he made me lie down on it. He mostly corrected papers," he said, wrinkling his nose. "Very boring. D'you know, he helps review papers for an American potions journal?"

"An *American* one?" Hermione's brows rose again.

"Yeah, that's what I said," Harry responded, nodding. "But he said—"

Remus appeared in the doorway, making Harry stop as they all turned to look at him. "Harry, if you could come with me, please?" he requested politely. "The rest of you, stay here."

They all looked at the irritated expression on the man's face for a moment. Hermione appeared like she wanted to protest, but Harry shook his head at her and followed Remus out.

Remus knocked on the doors leading to the dining room, which were no longer glowing. A moment later, there was a click; Remus opened the right-hand one and waved Harry through, following him in and shutting the doors behind them before recasting the ward.

Albus Dumbledore was standing at the end of the table, hands on the back of the chair Harry usually occupied. He appeared stern and also somewhat unhappy—maybe even a bit angry, an expression Harry had rarely seen on the man's face. However, he smiled kindly, if still somewhat unhappily, at Harry, and the boy relaxed somewhat. Whatever was going on here, it appeared that the Headmaster at least wasn't angry at *him*. "Thank you, Remus," the old man said, waving both of them over.

Harry approached cautiously, looking around at the assembled Order members. They appeared, nearly universally, rather unhappy; the sole exception was Snape, who merely looked murderous. Dumbledore stepped aside slightly as Harry reached the foot of the table, allowing him to hold onto the chair back for support. Remus came up behind them, stopping behind Harry for a moment to put his hand on the boy's shoulder before continuing back to his seat.

"Harry," Dumbledore said evenly, but with a hint of steel underlying the words, "I believe the Order has something to say to you."

"We're sorry, Harry," the assembled adults chorused, sounding rather like a class of chastised primary school students. Harry blinked at them; there was a moment of awkward silence, and then Gage stood up.

"Mr Potter," he said formally, "I wish to apologize for my conduct this morning. I had no right to question you so, certainly not so rudely, and there was no excuse for calling you unbalanced.

"As a group, we want to apologize for putting you in a difficult situation, and for yelling at you. It was absolutely unconscionable of us to call you selfish, being untrue, uncouth, unkind, and most uncaring." Heads nodded around the table. "We also want to apologize for our treatment of you during lunch, which piled rudeness on disrespect. Lastly, we want to apologize for the incident of your... vision call. We should not have allowed

ourselves to miss that, whatever the distraction.” Apparently finished with his speech, he dropped back into his seat, inching it further away from Snape, who was studying Gage like he was a particularly troublesome potions ingredient.

There was another short, awkward silence during which most of the Order tried to watch Harry without actually looking at him. He looked to Dumbledore after a moment, but the older man simply raised an eyebrow at him, and he realized they were waiting for his response.

“Er,” he said uncertainly, and blinked as everyone grew very still. “D’you all feel like that? I mean, his speech, it goes for all of you?”

Everyone but Snape, Remus, and Dumbledore nodded. “Yes,” they chorused, a handful bemusing Harry by adding “sir.” He wondered what on earth Dumbledore had said to them.

“Well, er... thank you for the apology,” he said. It appeared to be an acceptable response; they sighed or leaned back in their seats, and seemed generally relieved. “Sir?” he asked Dumbledore. “Did you need anything else?”

“No, thank you, Harry,” the man replied with a nod. “You may go back upstairs, if you wish.”

Harry wondered what would happen if he didn’t wish and insisted instead on staying, but right now the Order was creeping him out a little, and he was awfully tired. “Thank you, sir,” he said, and turned to go, stumbling a little over his own two feet.

“Remus?” Dumbledore said, reaching out to steady Harry. “Would you assist Mr Potter? He has had a long day.”

“Wait,” said Mrs Weasley suddenly as Remus started to rise. “I’ll do it.” Her husband rose as well, and she amended, “We’ll do it.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry, who shrugged and nodded. “Very well,” the older man said. “We shan’t be long; Remus can tell you later if you miss anything of importance.” They nodded and came around the table; Dumbledore nodded to Harry. “Good night, Harry. Remember, about my door.”

Harry nodded to him. “Good night, sir.” He nodded also to Remus and Snape before turning to leave.

The two adults followed him out, pausing as he told his friends goodnight. The two Weasley children took one look at their parents’ faces and said nothing, simply nodding; Hermione said a quiet “goodnight” to him in return.

Mrs Weasley took Harry’s arm as they climbed the stairs, Mr Weasley following close behind the pair. Their silence was starting to make Harry nervous, but when they paused on the landing for Harry to catch his breath, Mr Weasley said quietly, “We aren’t angry at you, Harry.” Mrs Weasley nodded emphatically, and he was able to breathe more easily. “We just... would like to say a few things to you in private, that is all,” Mr Weasley continued, smiling at Harry. “Got your breath back now? Shall we keep going?”

When they reached his room, the two adults entered and then shut the door firmly behind Harry. He nervously took a seat on the bed, glancing between them expectantly.

Mrs Weasley lowered herself into the chair by the side of the bed with a sigh, and Mr

Weasley went up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "I . . . I wanted to apologize to you privately, Harry," the witch said after a moment, covering one of her husband's hands with her own. "I'm sorry for how I acted this morning."

Harry noticed for the first time that her eyes were red-rimmed and her cheeks more blotchy than a simple flush could account for. He nodded to her silently, eyes widening slightly. *Has she been crying?*

"I shouldn't have let Gage draw me into that stupid argument," she said after a moment. "I shouldn't have presumed to tell you what you did and did not do, and I *never* should have put you on the spot like that. I'm so sorry, Harry."

He nodded again, too bemused to say anything.

"And then, once I'd forced you to say 'yes' in front of everyone. . . I'm sorry for what I said to you. I shouldn't have said it, and I shouldn't have let everyone shout at you either." She sighed. "I—" Her husband shifted slightly, and she amended, "we are terribly sorry for that."

"Er. . . okay," Harry said slowly. "Er. . . thanks."

They looked at each other. "Harry," Mr Weasley began hesitantly, "We. . . we love you like you were our son. Like you were our seventh son." Harry blinked at him blankly, and they exchanged looks again. "It seems Albus was right," he said quietly to his wife.

"It's okay if you don't understand," Mrs Weasley said after a moment. "But we do love you, and it terrifies us to think of losing you." She began to cry again, blotting impatiently at her eyes. "And. . . oh, it's no excuse, but when I'm scared for one of my children, I tend to either yell or cry. Or both," she said, chuckling through her tears. "My. . . the rest of my children understand that, because they've lived with me all their lives, and sometimes. . . sometimes I forget you aren't used to it."

Harry sat dumbly for a minute, and finally said quietly, "Mrs Weasley. . . what I don't understand is. . . you wouldn't even look at me during lunch."

She and Mr Weasley both sighed. "It's no excuse," she repeated, "but the Order. . . we were all having a bit of a fight. Some of them. . . they thought that if you couldn't be convinced to keep yourself a-alive for your own sake, you should be. . . shamed into doing it for ours." She grimaced. "I'm afraid that's also why we missed your call—we were all too busy shouting at each other about what was good for you that we never noticed you needed us. Anyhow. . . I'm ashamed by it now, but they had me convinced, and I was afraid if I said anything to you, I'd blow the whole thing. That, and I was afraid I'd start bawling again," she added belatedly, sniffing slightly.

"Er. . . I see," he said slowly.

"I should have known better!" she burst out suddenly, making him start. "You have to be the *least* selfish teenager I've met—just look at how you risked your own life on a gamble to try and save—" she cut herself off, then went on, "and Ginny is only *alive* because you went after her into the Chamber."

"They were sort of right, though," Harry confessed in a small voice. "I was only thinking of myself. I didn't think. . . I didn't think any of you would miss me, really."

They both stared at him for a minute, open-mouthed, and then Mr Weasley said

quietly, “Dumbledore *was* right. I swear, I could murder those Muggles with my bare hands were they here now.”

Mrs Weasley began weeping in earnest. “Oh... I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “I’m just... so *glad* you’re... Harry, may I give you a hug?”

He nodded nervously, thinking he had been hugged more in the last few hours than he’d been hugged his entire life with the Dursleys, but that one more wouldn’t kill him. She rose to sit next to him, pulling him against her chest. “I’m so glad you’re alive,” she said into his hair.

“We both are,” Mr Weasley added.

He sat there, letting her hold and cry on him, until finally she gave a little hiccup and released him, giving him a smile that was only slightly watery. “Now—is there anything we need to help you get to bed? Do you need help undressing?”

Harry’s cheeks flamed. “Er—”

“We’ve raised six boys,” Mr Weasley said with a smile. “I promise, we’ve seen plenty of boys in their underpants.”

“Well—er—I could use a hand with the trousers,” Harry mumbled, embarrassed.

Severus sighed and rolled his shoulders tiredly. It was so good to be back in his own quarters, within his own wards, one of the few places he felt safe. He sipped at his drink. What a very, very long day it had been.

Someone knocked on his door; he glanced at the clock as he spoke the words that would release the wards and allow the Headmaster entrance. *Ten minutes earlier than I guessed. I must be slipping.*

“A knut for your thoughts, Severus.”

He turned from where he was studying the fire burning in his small grate through the tumbler of amber liquid. “You would find you had overpaid, I fear, Headmaster.”

“Why don’t you allow me to be the judge of that?” Albus Dumbledore leaned against a bookcase and watched him with calm blue eyes. *In those pink robes, when he looks like that, it is easy to forget one is speaking to the most powerful wizard on three continents.* He tried to remind himself of it regularly.

“Potter,” he answered finally, setting the tumbler on the mantle. “He brought me a letter today, claiming to be from Lily. He showed me a parchment purporting to support the letter’s claim that I am—among with several other Death Eaters—the boy’s father.” He raised an eyebrow. “I am given to understand that you were aware of this.”

“Harry told me when he found out,” Dumbledore replied softly. “Are you all right, my boy?”

Severus raised a shoulder and allowed it to fall again. “I knew—knew from the instant I did not prevent Regulus from calling in the Order—that this day might come. And yet, I find myself unprepared.”

“How do you mean?”

“I find myself at a complete loss, Albus. Apparently, I have a son. What do I do? Now that we both know the truth...” He trailed off, unable to articulate how he felt.

“Yes. Things will change as a result of this,” Albus said softly. “I do not think it will be easy on any of us.”

“I find myself frightened for the boy, Albus. I fear what losing another parental figure, even one so . . . inadequate as myself, will do to him.” His hands tightened into fists. “You know it has been a long time since death was something I feared on my own account. But now, here, when the end begins to take shape before me . . . it is odd to find myself fearing it on account of another.”

“What do you mean?” Visibly alarmed, the Headmaster pushed off the bookcase and came nearer. “Has—has something happened with Tom?”

Severus shook his head. “Nothing you do not already know.” He regarded the Mark on his arm, bared to the air here in his private quarters. “He ceases to trust me, you know. He grows even more suspicious that I am passing more information your way than his, that I am ceasing to be properly obedient.” He let out a short, humorless laugh. “Today Potter asked me why I didn’t return to the Dark Lord—said if I’d just do as I’m told, he’d be easier on me than the Order is.”

Albus swallowed. “Are they treating you badly again?”

Severus went on as if he had not heard. “I did not tell him that I doubted I would be allowed to return to being just a Death Eater—no longer a double-agent.” He covered the Mark with his hand. “What use is a spy with nothing to spy on, Albus?” He looked up then, met the man’s eyes. “I doubt very much that I will live to see December. I will be lucky to live to see Halloween night end.”

Albus sucked in a breath, eyes going wide. “Severus—forgive me. I had thought of how Halloween would affect Harry, but not how it would affect you.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” Severus said hollowly. “Indeed, I only find myself concerned by it due to how it will—as you put it—affect Potter.” He drew a breath and dropped his hand from his arm. “I must see to it that he sees the occasion as one to rejoice.”

“If you believe he will do so, I believe you do not know Harry Potter very well,” Albus told him quietly.

“No.” Severus picked up his tumbler from where he had set it on the mantelpiece. “I fear very much you are correct.” He took a swallow, then glanced over at the other man. “The bottle is on the table if you want some.”

The Headmaster shook his head. “It is late, and I have an early meeting with Fudge. But thank you for the offer.”

Severus nodded. “How did the business this morning go?”

“She is safe—for now.” He sighed. “I fear that safe-house may be compromised, but I cannot work out how it is possible.”

Severus rubbed his eyes tiredly. “I will have to give it some thought. It is an interesting mental puzzle.”

“Well, in the meantime, no one was harmed.” Albus yawned. “I fear it is approaching this old man’s bedtime. Good night, Severus.”

“Good night, Headmaster.” He watched the old man let himself out the way he had come in and sighed. What to do about Potter?

The Mark etched into his flesh twinged and then began to burn. Cursing, he set down his drink and went to find his robes.

Author's Notes: I could use your help with something. If you could give me suggestions for fun powers Harry might end up with, it'd be great.

I've already got a small list going, but I'd like some completely wacky powers just to throw into the mix of plot-important ones. Drop me a PM or note or email (fanfic at kalany dot celestrion dot net) with suggestions for crazy powers you'd like to see him get. Serious ones are okay too, of course. *grin*

CHAPTER 8



Going On

Remus awoke to abruptly to the sound of Harry's alarm going off. He didn't even pause to throw on a shirt over his pajama bottoms; he simply ran for the door.

He burst in Harry's door, wand in hand, to find the boy leaning over the edge of the bed being violently sick. Crossing the bedroom as fast as he could, he conjured a basin for Harry and handed it to him before vanishing the previously-expelled vomit. He then sat on the bed, steadying the basin with one hand and stroking Harry's hair with the other.

"S-s-sorry," the boy choked out between heaves. "I d-didn't mean to hit the alarm—it was an accident—"

"It's okay, Harry," he said, taking a moment to touch the yellow orb and turn off the faint wailing he could still hear. "You needed me, and I'm here. That's what matters."

When it appeared that the boy was done heaving, he filled a glass of water from the jug on the bedside table, and conjured a damp cloth. He handed the latter to Harry first, letting the boy wipe his nose and mouth, before taking the basin from him and giving him the glass. He then promptly had to give the basin back as the boy began heaving again.

The second time they repeated this, the water stayed down, and Harry leaned shakily back against the pillows. Remus vanished the contents of the basin, hit it with another cleaning spell, and set it near the bed in case it was needed again. "Are you feeling better?" he asked gently. "Do you need anything else? More water?"

Harry shook his head, then paused and nodded. "I think I probably just puked my potions back up," he said ruefully. "I don't know if I should take more or not."

Remus considered. "I wonder if Severus is still awake," he said thoughtfully.

"Yeah," Harry said grimly, "he is, but you aren't going to be able to get ahold of him." He grimaced. "That's what set off the, uh..." He waved at the basin. "Voldemort gave his Inner Circle a pair of Muggles to... play with, as a reward."

Remus paled, feeling sick himself. "And... you—witnessed it?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah." He looked up at Remus. "Look... if I tell you about it, can we skip the whole vision call thing? I don't think... I don't think I could..."

"Of course, Harry," he said gently, nodding. "The call is only there to make things easier on you. We could wait until morning, if you would prefer."

"No—I'd sort of like to get it over with," Harry grimaced again, "while the basin's still here, if you don't mind. It wasn't very... it was bloody, but not much more. Snape was there for most of it, anyhow. It's just the first part he missed."

"Go on," Remus prompted when Harry paused.

"Give me a moment," the boy said through gritted teeth. "Trying not to..." Remus waited, and after a few seconds he went on, "Voldemort was questioning the pair—a couple,

I think—about some sort of ring. They kept saying they had no idea what he was talking about, so he kept—oh god—”

Remus reached for the basin and held it in front of Harry as he heaved again, then conjured another clean, wet cloth for him. “I wish I knew a way to put the memory in a pensieve without having to make you re-live it,” he said softly. “I’m sorry.”

“S’all right,” the boy choked out, coughing and spitting some more bile into the basin. “My throat’s just sore now, that’s all. Hang on.” He drank some more water, then took a deep breath. “He... tortured them, basically,” he said through his teeth. “If... do you really need to know how?”

Remus shook his head. “No. We shouldn’t, anyway.” *And if we do, I’ll make Albus use Legilimency rather than put you through talking about it. At least then he’ll have to share it.*

“Anyhow, he kept asking them where some ring was, insisting the woman had inherited it—he had a photo, a Muggle photo, of her mother wearing it, at least Voldemort said it was her mother. She kept saying she’d never seen the ring in her life.”

“Did he question the man?” Remus asked.

“Not really.” Harry pinched his lips shut and clutched the basin for a moment, but nothing happened after a bit and he went on, “He mostly just tortured the man, trying to get the woman to talk. He did ask where they kept valuables, and the man said they kept a safe-deposit box in First Bank of Britain.”

“What about names?”

Harry shook his head. “If he said the woman’s, I missed it. He did call the man ‘your darling Bob’ at one point.” He grimaced again. “I’d say I could identify them, but... I really couldn’t. Their faces were... pretty unrecognizable by the time I got there.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Remus told him gently. “Even that much will be a big help in locating their families.” He thought for a moment. “Was there anything else that stood out?”

“There were ten Death Eaters summoned,” Harry said after a moment. “I think he must be re-populating his Inner Circle. That’s what he called it, the Inner Circle; I could hear the capital letters in his head. I’m not sure who they were, except for Snape, but there were a couple who took off their masks or hoods, so I might be able to pick them out from a photograph.” He shrugged. “I’m sure Snape knows, though, so I don’t know it matters. He did tell them all that some junior Death Eater had captured the couple for sport, though, so he must suspect one of them is the spy.” The boy gazed off into space for a moment, then added, “And... it smelled like nutmeg and cinnamon, before the blood covered it.”

“Thank you,” Remus said again. “Do you need anything more before I go speak to wake up Poppy to ask her about your potions?”

Harry shook his head. “Thank you, Remus. I’m sorry about the alarm—I really did mean to touch it twice, but my hands were kind of shaking, and...” He shrugged.

“It is, truly, not a problem,” he assured the boy again. “Is your stomach more settled now?”

Harry got a pensive look on his face, and then nodded. “Yeah. I think so. Not so

sure how it'll like the potions, but it's okay just sitting here."

"All right," Remus said. "Then let's get you into some clean pajamas before I go wake up Poppy, and you can sit in the chair while I find someone to change the sheets. The vanishing spell does wonders for the smell, but it does tend to stiffen fabric."

Harry nodded again. "That would be nice," he said quietly.

Remus found some clean pajamas, then gave them to Harry, who slipped into the loo to change. While the boy was doing that, he lit a fire in the grate, and searched the ornamental containers on the mantelpiece until he found the one with floo powder. "Hogwarts, Headmaster's office," he said clearly, sticking his head into the flames.

Albus was still sitting at his desk, fiddling with some bit of silver gadgetry, when Remus stuck his head through. He looked up—or rather, down—at Remus in mild alarm, rising to come to the fire. "Remus. What brings you to my grate at this time of night?"

"Harry had a vision," Remus said succinctly, "and vomited up his potions. Could you wake Madame Pomfrey and ask her to please come tell us what to do? We're not sure if he should take more or not, and he says Severus won't be available."

"He vomited them up?" Albus looked rather more alarmed. "Is he all right? Do you need her to come through? Does he have any spell damage?"

"No," Remus said, "I gather it was. . . somewhat bloody, and rather nasty, but not. . . otherwise damaging. However, would you mind sending a couple of house elves over? We need to change Harry's sheets, and I'd rather not have to wake up Molly at this hour."

"Of course," Albus said with a nod. "I'll send a couple of elves over while I fetch Poppy, and have her floo you as soon as she gets here."

"Thank you," Remus said. "Good night, Headmaster."

"Good night, Remus," the man replied, and he withdrew his head from the flames.

True to Albus's word, a pair of house elves in Hogwarts tea-towels materialized with pops as soon as his head had cleared the mantle. They had the sheets changed and the bed made before Harry emerged from the bathroom, waiting around only long enough to take the dirty pajamas from the boy before vanishing with another pair of pops.

"Poppy will be floo-calling in a few minutes," Remus said to the boy as he blinked at the space in which the elves had stood.

"Snape's not back, then?" Harry appeared concerned, and Remus worried for a moment—*Is it possible that he's fixating on Snape as a replacement father-figure? That could end. . . badly: the man is a Death Eater and a spy; not only is he not the most fatherly figure around, but his life expectancy is not outstanding.* Then he blinked and rebuked himself. *Harry's just a good boy; of course he's worried about Snape. He worries about everyone.*

"No," he said, "but the Headmaster's waiting up for him."

"That's good," Harry said earnestly. "I'm worried he'll want to question them or something. The Dark Lord doesn't like hearing that he hasn't managed to sway me to the Dark Side yet."

Remus blinked at hearing Harry call him the Dark Lord, but relaxed further. *See? He was just worried about Snape's well-being, like any compassionate young man would.* "Well," he said, "I would give it another five to ten minutes before she floo-calls; would you like some

juice or something in the meantime? The elves changed your sheets while you were in the loo.”

They drank some orange-pumpkin juice—Remus had never quite been able to adjust to the undiluted pumpkin juice the school served, and preferred to cut it with some sort of citrus—and chatting about quiddich until the fire flared green. He stood and went over to the hearth again, kneeling and waiting; it was perhaps a second before Poppy’s head appeared in the fire.

“Lupin,” she said without preamble, “what is the matter?”

“Harry has vomited up his last dose of potions, beginning perhaps—” he glanced at his watch— “thirty minutes ago. We need to know if he should take more or not.”

“Vomited?” Poppy asked sharply. “Did he eat or drink something to cause the reaction?”

Remus shook his head. “Vision,” he answered her. “A rather gruesome one, I fear.”

“Give him half-doses of all but the purple-stoppered vials, the Skele-Heal, and the bright green healing potion,” she said after a moment. “Give him a full dose of the Skele-Heal and the bright green potion, but do not give any more of the purple-stoppered vials until the next scheduled dose. You may, however, give him some standard anti-nausea potion if you believe it would help.”

“Thank you,” Remus told her politely. He glanced over at Harry, who was watching with interest. “Please tell the Headmaster that Harry’s worried Snape might be in bad shape when he gets home.”

Poppy nodded. “I will. Good night,” she said, and withdrew from the grate.

Harry was already over at the potion racks, sorting out vials. “I feel bad,” he said conversationally. “I hope Snape got a nap in before he got summoned. Otherwise, he’s been up for almost forty straight hours.”

Remus grimaced. No wonder the boy was worried about how the meeting went—he’d hate to face You-Know-Who on that little sleep. *Of course, I’d prefer not to face him at all.* “Do you think you can keep the potions down?” he asked in concern. “Perhaps I should fetch some of the anti-nausea potion from the stores.”

“Might be a good idea,” Harry agreed.

Professor Dumbledore was at breakfast again the next morning, and it occurred to Harry to wonder how much of his schedule the man had rearranged in order to be around for Harry.

“Sir?” he said quietly, sitting down next to the man in his seat at the foot of the table. “You know, er... if you’re just here on my behalf, you don’t have to.”

The Headmaster smiled at him. “I know, my boy,” he replied. “Eggs?”

“Er, yes, thank you. But I mean it, sir—I don’t want to disrupt your schedule. I know you’re awfully busy.”

Dumbledore put down the platter of eggs and gazed seriously at him. “You are my top priority,” he said. “Everything else is... trivia. Minutae.”

Harry felt his cheeks grow warm. "If you're sure," he responded dubiously.

"Quite. Besides," the Headmaster said, smiling at him, "I thought you might appreciate knowing Severus got home safely last night, unharmed."

Harry smiled, a small knot of tension uncoiling in his stomach. "I'm glad. Tom was in a real mood."

"So he said." Dumbledore looked him over. "And you? Are you all right?"

"Pretty much," Harry reassured him. "My throat still hurts a little, but it'll be fine. I did, er, want to talk to you about my visions, though."

"Oh?" Dumbledore lowered his fork. "What about them?"

"Does... does it seem to *you* like they've changed?" Harry asked hesitantly. "I mean... it used to just be that I'd get, you know, flashes... and even when I did see stuff, half the time it was from behind Tom's chair or from Nagini's point of view. Now—now it seems like they're usually longer, more coherent, and I'm *always* looking out of his eyes."

"Hm." Dumbledore frowned thoughtfully at his eggs. "I had noticed a trend, but not quite the one you mention."

"Oh?" Harry raised an eyebrow at him.

"Last year, most of the visions you reported to me did not—quite—match Severus's accounts," the Headmaster explained quietly. "They were a bit more—more different than the point of view could account for, or delayed by a day or two". He shook his head. "Now, they agree with his accounts, frequently down to the small details."

"Oh," Harry said bemusedly, blinking. *I wish he'd thought to mention that to me last year!* "Maybe... maybe I was tapping into Voldemort's... memory or something?"

"It is possible," Dumbledore said with a shrug. "I will be the first to admit, I do not understand your connection very well." They both looked up as Ginny and Fred came into the dining room, yawning widely. "Perhaps we can continue this discussion later after breakfast?"

Harry nodded. "Sure. Good morning, guys."

"Morning," Fred mumbled. Ginny grunted and reached for the teapot.

He waited at the table for Dumbledore to finish chatting with Tonks, with whom he was discussing new regulations on commercial wand-cores. Tonks was in favor of the proposed legislation, on the argument that substandard wand cores caused dozens of accidents a year; Dumbledore was arguing that it would decrease consumer choice by effectively banning some of the more rare and unusual cores. Finally the young auror left to begin her shift, and Harry rose with Dumbledore and followed him out.

"I hope you do not mind, Harry, that I have appropriated one of the studies to use as an office while I am here," the Headmaster said as they left.

Harry shook his head. "Why would I? It's not like I've got a shortage." That reminded him of something he'd been meaning to ask. "Er, that reminds me, though, sir—am I crazy, or was the kitchen down where Snape's lab is now?"

Dumbledore chuckled. “You have not gone crazy,” he replied. “Severus needed a secure location to work, so Sirius and I convinced the house to move the main kitchen upstairs, and put a laboratory down there instead.”

Harry felt a brief twinge at the mention of Sirius’s name, but was completely distracted shortly after. “Wait. You *convinced* the house?”

“Yes,” the Headmaster said, chuckling harder. “It is magical, after all.”

“Right,” Harry responded, rubbing his eyes. “Right.”

“In here.” Dumbledore opened a non-descript door, and waved Harry through. “My office.”

It was small, and slightly over-crowded by several large armchairs and an unoccupied perch, as well as a desk that was covered by paperwork. “That reminds me, sir,” Harry said again, glancing again at the perch. “How is Hedwig doing?”

“Hagrid says she should be ready to return to her duties in a few days, but he’d rather she wasn’t kept in a cage—she needs to strengthen that wing, and he worries she might re-injure it on the bars,” Dumbledore replied, lowering himself into one of the chairs. “We will need to get you an appropriate perch for your room.”

“Would it be better if she stayed at Hogwarts?” Harry asked, sitting down opposite him. “She’s awfully conspicuous; I wouldn’t be able to let her out very often.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “It might be, but Hagrid says he’s had a hard time convincing her to stick around this long. It would seem she misses you.”

Harry smiles. “Well, I miss her, too. I’ll tell her she can go back any time she gets bored, though. Maybe she and Crookshanks can have indoor mousing competitions or something.”

“A thoughtful idea, my boy, except possibly to the mice,” Dumbledore told him approvingly. “However, to return to the original topic, I have several possible theories as to what is happening with your scar link.”

“Oh?” Harry sat forwards eagerly.

“The first is that he changed something when he possessed you this May,” Dumbledore frowned. “Possession does tend to *create* a link between the two parties involved; since you already had one, perhaps it was changed somehow instead. However, as the one possessed, we would expect you to be on the ‘receiving’ end of such a link, which makes it somewhat surprising that you are the one seeing out of his eyes.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “That... makes sense.”

“My second theory only occurred to me after your mother’s letter came to light. I do not know if you are aware of this, but you are Riddle’s blood and magical heir. It is again possible that this changed the link, somehow, when your mother’s spells began to wear off.”

“Er... okay,” Harry said, not really following. *But then, I know next to nothing about family magic*, he realized. *Or—what was it mum called it? Blood magic? Maybe it makes sense if you know about that stuff.* He made a mental note to ask Hermione. “Any others?”

“Only one, related to the last.” Dumbledore paused, and appeared to be choosing his words carefully. “Before this summer, you were a powerful young wizard, but not... overly so. Now, with your mother’s spells wearing off, I suspect you may already be giving Riddle—

what is that Muggle saying Remus likes to use? A run for his money.”

Harry stared at the man. “You’re serious?”

“Very. ‘... shall mark him as his equal’, Harry; we should have expected it to happen somehow. I am surprised we did not suspect something sooner... In any case, perhaps the shifting balance of power in your... relationship with Riddle is changing the link between you.”

“Well, whatever the cause, what do I do?” Harry asked a little desperately. “Not that I mind being a relatively safe source of intelligence, but I would like to get *some* uninterrupted sleep. Occasionally.”

“We can begin training you in Occlumency again,” Dumbledore offered. “At this point, I am prepared to risk facing Riddle in your mind if it helps you; we cannot afford to have you subjected to terribly much more of the *cruciatius*.”

“I haven’t felt angry when I look at you for a while,” Harry offered hesitantly.

“Yet another sign that something has altered the link between you, although this time a comforting and useful one.” Dumbledore sighed. “Very well. How soon are you prepared to begin?”

“How soon are you?” Harry countered. As far as he was concerned, the sooner he could get some real sleep, the better.

Dumbledore smiled. “I fear my schedule will not permit regular scheduling, but if you are amenable, perhaps we could work on it whenever we both have time? Beginning, say, a few days from now? I must prepare myself somewhat first.”

Harry nodded. “Sounds good to me, sir.”

“I also wanted to speak to you about the Order,” Dumbledore added casually, making Harry look at him warily. “I would like you to consider beginning to attend some meetings.”

Harry’s eyes lit up, but then he realized what the man *hadn’t* said. “But not joining?”

“Not... the way most members do,” Dumbledore replied with a nod. “Wait—hear me out, please.”

“Okay.” Harry folded his arms. “I’m listening.”

“Whatever your feelings about it, you must accept that you have a rather... unique role to play in this war,” Dumbledore began.

“I don’t like it, but yeah.”

“I did not say you needed to like it; I am not particularly pleased either.” Dumbledore sighed. “But it means I cannot induct you into the Order, even once you reach majority, the way I would anyone else.” He held up a hand when Harry frowned and opened his mouth. “The oath of the Order includes the phrase ‘I swear to willingly and without hesitation lay down my life in defense of my fellows or in the service of our cause’. I cannot, in good faith, ask you to swear that oath.”

Harry frowned, but took a minute to think that through. “Isn’t that basically what the Prophecy asks me to do, though? Be prepared to die to bring Riddle down?”

Dumbledore rubbed his face with his hand, then readjusted his glasses. “I don’t believe so, no—not necessarily.” He raised a hand and began ticking points off on his fingers. “First, it says you will be *marked as* his equal. It does not necessarily follow that you must

be his equal when you face him for the last time. Second, it explicitly says you have the power to vanquish him. Third, it only says one of you must die—there is no reason it must be you.” His face hardened; when he looked up at Harry, his eyes were alight. “I fully intend for you to live to see your grandchildren’s children attend Hogwarts, Harry. But,” he went on, smiling slightly, “all that is moot if we lose the war because you swore to jump in front of the Killing Curse for—Mundungus, say.”

Harry grimaced. “That would rather suck for you all, wouldn’t it?”

“As you say,” Dumbledore agreed. “So I cannot ask you to properly join in the first place, but in the second, I must ask you to sit out some meetings.”

“Why?” Harry asked curiously.

“Intelligence,” the man replied simply. “I am already gambling that Riddle can no longer access your mind as easily as he did last term. But there are some plans—things that could get hundreds killed, including yourself, if he knew about them. I am willing to take some chances, but not that one.”

“Oh. Yeah. Okay,” Harry said. “But—I’d be in on some of the stuff?”

“Certainly the intelligence briefings, and some general strategizing sessions. Perhaps more, once you learn Occlumency. At the moment, you are our best intelligence resource next to Severus, and perhaps the best one to gauge Riddle’s reactions.”

“If I knew what to look for, I might also pick up more,” Harry pointed out. “I meant to ask you if you thought you could get Snape to show me some of the Death Eaters—I don’t know, in a Pensieve or something; I can’t imagine they’d let him run around with a camera. Then I could at least tell you who was there, in my visions.”

“An excellent suggestion,” Dumbledore told him, “and precisely the sort of useful input I had in mind.”

“So... why did you say you wanted me to *consider* it?” Harry asked, remembering the start of the topic. “Is there some downside I’m not seeing?”

“Several,” Dumbledore admitted. “To begin with, if Riddle finds out you are attending meetings, he may work much harder to use your link to his own advantage.”

“Possible.” Harry nodded slowly. “Yeah, okay, that’s a bit creepy, and I’ll want to work on that Occlumency. What else?”

“Since I will not be asking you to swear the oath, and since you are still underage, I fully expect many—even most—of the Order members to protest your inclusion,” Dumbledore said with a sigh. “Logically, it is I that they should be upset with, but as we saw yesterday, logic is not always their strong point. Some of them may be... less than welcoming to you.”

“Mrs Weasley will yell and cry.” Harry shuddered. “And, oh god, my friends.”

“Your friends will likely not be pleased either, especially since I will have to ask you to be... sparing... with what you tell them,” Dumbledore confirmed. “Above and beyond the fact that much of it is sensitive information, the more you share with them, the more they become valuable targets themselves.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll do my best,” he said, “but you should know—I’ll tell them stuff if I feel they need to know it. And Hermione can read me like an open book; I’m not sure

how much I can keep from her.”

“I would expect no less,” Dumbledore said with a smile.

“Speaking of telling them things,” Harry said hesitantly, “I was wondering... I’d like to tell Hermione and Ron what my mother’s letter said.”

Dumbledore hesitated, a slight crease appearing between his bushy eyebrows. “All of it?”

“Well—I’d kind of hoped to just show them the letter,” Harry admitted.

“Are you sure you are willing to risk them knowing that your mother was a Seer?” Dumbledore pressed.

“Actually, I was kind of wondering about that, too,” Harry admitted. “‘Cause... I mean, we learn divination. If everyone’s so desperate for a Seer, why don’t they kidnap Madame Trelawney?”

“The difference is that a true Seer can control which portion of the future they see, even to the extent of seeing possible outcomes of others’ choices,” Dumbledore responded. “A Seer—sees; a divinor or prophetess is shown.”

“Oh!” Harry grinned in relief. “That’s all right, then. She said she ‘was shown’ futures. I... sort of got the impression that she didn’t have much choice. I’m sorry if I misled you.”

Dumbledore sighed and relaxed. “That is an entirely different broomstick, then. In that case, I have no objections, although it might be wise to put up some wards before telling young Mr Weasley, unless you wish the entire household to know of Severus’s... involvement.”

“Er, yeah,” Harry said. “I was sort of hoping you could teach me one.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Not a problem, my boy.” He thought for a moment, and then drew his wand. “This one creates a greyish bubble, useful for keeping both sound and sight from others. It is quite obvious, which is why it is not used much, I fear. You must concentrate on the area you want to include inside the ward; the wand movement is *thus*, and the incantation is *imperviato*.”

“Imperviato?” Harry asked incredulously.

“Unfortunately for students of magic, spell creation and Latin conjugation are not always complementary skills,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “Go on. Give it a try.”