

For Thine Is The Power: Raw Scenes and Snippets

Teresa Jacobson

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This is the raw scenes file for *For Thine Is The Power* which is available at .

CHAPTER 1



Immediately after suicide attempt

1.1

When Poppy left, the two men were left staring at each other, Harry's bandaged body between them. 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 only 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 continued.

"We would now 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 man solemnly. "You have made mistakes—but would another of us have done better?" He clenched his fists. "My God, Albus, I closed him in that bathroom—knowing he was upset, unbalanced. If you should cede your position, how doubly I? I have done quite a bad job at being his godfather, and it's only been a week!"

Albus's shoulders fell as he sighed heavily. "Whatever am I going to tell Molly and the children, Remus?"

"I don't know that you need to tell them anything." The man began pacing. "They are not related—they have no real right to know."

"The Order will need to be told," the headmaster said in a reasonable tone. "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 bag. The Hogwarts house elves might be able to get the blood out—they were 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 to balance that with the need to keep an eye on him? That is the question...”

Remus stared in shock at the paper he held in his hand. *No—It cant be—* But that was Harry’s name at the top in black ink. Could it be some kind of cruel prank gone terribly wrong? *Sirius might have found it funny—even James...* But if *Harry* had believed it to be true. . . . “Albus, is this what I think it is?” He was marginally aware that he had cut the man off mid-word, but as Remus was the only other conscious one in the room, and had no idea what the man had been saying, it hardly seemed important.

“If you believe it to be a Paternity Parchment, you are correct.” Albus’s voice was resigned.

Remus lifted his eyes from the writing with difficulty. “This. . . this is what was in the vault, isn’t it?”

The Headmaster looked torn. “I. . . my boy, please understand, I don’t wish to violate Harry’s privacy. . . .”

“I’m his new Godfather—under Wizarding law, I’m practically his parent,” Remus said impatiently. “But, more importantly, are you sure this is not some kind of cruel joke on Harry?”

“I checked the seal myself before we used it,” Albus replied. “Even with Lily’s help—and I cannot believe she would give it—I cannot see James successfully forging such a thing. Still, I plan to verify it as soon as discreetly possible.”

Remus stared back down at the parchment and its list of highly impossible names. “It does. . . explain so much, doesn’t it? Yet—how could this be possible?”

Albus glanced at the figure in the bed. “Harry was not particularly expansive on the topic—I know there was a spell-encoded letter, and a chest of more writings. He did mention Lily had left a letter for Severus—he was quiet upset about it; apparently he had learned of the. . . Halloween incident.”

Several puzzle pieces fell into place for Remus at that moment. For a second he wondered how he could have missed it—James and Lily must have deliberately misled him, or he might have suspected earlier—but why should he, when Harry looked so much like James? “It was Halloween,” he said distantly. “I don’t know how I never suspected.” He focused on Albus again, who looked both confused and curious. “That Halloween, when we rescued her and James from the Death Eaters—she was raped; I saw one of them climbing off her as we arrived. I had always assumed, though, that it was just the one—but it must have been the lot of them. And nine months later, to the very day—” He looked over at Harry. “They must have put spells on him to change his appearance. I wonder if they’ll eventually wear off. It has been nearly. . . .” A thought struck him then, and he saw on Albus’s face that the same realization had just occurred to him. “Oh Merlin. Halloween. No wonder they wanted him told. Oh, poor Harry.”

“It does make one wonder, though,” Albus said thoughtfully, “why they specified

fifteen if it were just about Halloween. Sixteen would be more logical, would it not?" He stroked his long beard thoughtfully. "Unless..."

"Unless they did more than just alter his appearance," Remus finished. "Oh, dear Merlin. No wonder Harry was discomfitted. He must feel that his entire world has been turned upside-down, and I know I'd be terrified, in his place."

"Indeed, anyone would be," Albus agreed. "It also explains his reluctance to speak about it—it would seem half-mad, even with the Parchment, wouldn't it?"

Remus sat down heavily on the end of the bed. "How on earth will we protect him, come Halloween? Unless he somehow becomes You-Know-Who's equal in power between now and then—" He broke off when he saw the expression on Dumbledore's face. "What is it you know that I do not?"

"I am much more worried about the potential for targetted attacks and a similar sort of mayhem," Albus replied obliquely. "Voldemort used Harry's blood in his resurrection ritual, negating many of Harry's protections, but he still has access to enough of his parentage that—when he learns of this—"

Remus blanched. "We'll have to teach him how to check his mail, his food..."

The Headmaster nodded solemnly. "Madame Pomfrey said he will likely sleep for some hours. I should go down and speak to Molly and the others before they break in the door." Remus winced at the reminder, and Albus shot him an apologetic glance. "Will you—will you sit with him, summon me if he wakes?"

"Of course!" Remus assured him, taking the other man's place by Harry's side. He set the crumpled Parchment carefully on Harry's bedside table, and settled into Dumbledore's seat. "I'll Patronus you if he wakes."

"Thank you, my boy." Albus rested his hand on Remus's shoulder for a moment, and the werewolf smiled up at him. The old man sighed. "I believe I would rather face Tom wandless than Molly just now."

"Speak to Severus—he could probably arrange that, if you want," Remus replied. The slight smile about the edge of his mouth betrayed what would otherwise be a terrible insult.

"Alas—I believe that, as much as I would prefer to give Tom an early birthday-present, the wiser choice is to face Molly." He glanced at the boy in the bed and sobered. "Patronus me immediately, won't you?"

"I will," Remus assured him again.

Albus sighed again, patted his shoulder again, and left to face the dragon.

He was somehow unsurprised to open the door and find Miss Weasley, the youngest Mr Weasley, and Miss Granger sitting just outside. When he opened the door, they scrambled up, trying to peer inside; he closed the door behind him before they could get into position to see anything. "Miss Granger, Mr Weasley, Miss Weasley," he greeted them. They had a right to hear this from him as much as anyone. "Will you please accompany me?"

Mr Weasley shot Miss Granger a look that suggested he thought he was in trouble for something, but the young witch did not acknowledge it. Instead she finished standing and nodded to Albus. "Of course, sir."

She followed him down the hallway, the other two following her belatedly. Albus heard Ronald whisper to her, “Why are we following him? We didn’t do anything wrong! And Harry’s back *there!*”

“Honestly, Ron,” he could just make out her reply, “he’s not deaf, you know. Ad he’s the *Headmaster*—isn’t that enough?” Mr Weasley must have shaken his head because she continued after a pause. “Isn’t it obvious? They aren’t going to let us in to see Harry yet, and he’s one of four people who knows how he really is—and the only one who *might* tell us if we ask politely! We’re much more likely to find out what we want to know if we follow him!”

“Screw Ravenclaw,” Miss Weasley whispered. “You should have gotten sorted into Slytherin!”

“Don’t insult her!” Ronald snapped, just as Hermione replied, “Thank you, Ginny. I’ll take that as a compliment, I think.”

“You have a point, though,” Ginevra said lowly. “Ron, she’s right. Stop spluttering. It makes you look like a fish.”

Predictably, this only increased the spluttering noises. “I do not look like a fish!” Ronald finally protested.

“Shh!” Hermione hissed at them. “How many times do I have to remind you—he’s *not deaf!*”

The bickering between the siblings decreased in volume, although Albus caught bits of exclamations here and there. Reaching the kitchen, he put his head around the corner and found Molly Weasley—predictably, baking. “Molly,” he said to her. “Could you and Arthur join me in the office, please?”

She spun around, her face going white. “Arthur!” she yelled. “How is Harry?” she asked in a more normal tone.

Albus was saved from having to respond by the appearance of her husband. “What is it, Molly?” he asked, then spotted Albus. “Headmaster!”

“Could you and Molly join me in the office, please?” He gestured for the pair to precede him, then nodded to the three children trying to look inconspicuous. “You too, if you wish.”

Ronald and Hermione exchanged a look Albus was far too familiar with after seeing it many times in the hospital wing or on the quiddich pitch: Oh dear, Harry’s done it again. Hermione, however, looked quite thoughtful and grew silent, her hands beginning to toy nervously with her sleeve and cuffs. *Does she suspect?*

When the seven reached the door to the ‘office’—actually a small reading room Albus had cleaned out and appropriated for confidential Order business—the two Weasley twins were standing outside, looking as if they could not decide whether to hope to be included or overlooked. Loathe to break Harry’s privacy further, he simply nodded to them. “Gentlemen. If you will excuse us?”

Whether it was some lingering respect for his office or the presence of their parents, he could not be sure, at least without Legilimency; however, they did stand aside and did not attempt to enter when he shut the door on the. Not trusting those two to remain respectful,

he warded the door and room before turning to the assembled witches and wizards. The five were watching him with varying expressions of alarm. Quickly he expanded two of the three existing armchairs into a sofa and loveseat and took the remaining chair himself. “Molly, Arthur, please sit.” He waved at the loveseat. As the two adults settled themselves, the children took the hint and dropped onto the count, Ronald in the middle.

“Albus. . . how is Harry?” Arthur asked him again as soon as they were seated.

Stalling for time, Albus glanced over at the children again. He was somewhat surprised to see Miss Granger cluthing Ronald’s hand with one hand and a section of her skirt with the other. So she had guessed. “Arthur. . . Molly. I wanted to discuss just that with you privately before I brought it before the inner Order. I felt—feel—you have the right to know first, being the closest people Harry has to foster parents.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Miss Granger relax slightly at his use of the present tense. However, Molly was speaking impatiently to him. “Yes, yes, Albus, but *how is* the boy? What happened?”

“I regret to inform you that Mr Potter attempted to take his own life this afternoon,” Albus told her—told them all—solemnly.

1.2

Remus sat in Albus’s vacated chair, hands folded in front of him. He distracted himself for a moment by examining the short, clipped nails; frowning, he picked a sliver of wood out 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 boy for being upset. How would anyone react to finding out they were the son of the dreaded Dark Lord?

He was suddenly reminded of a Muggle movie he had seen some years before, and smirked. At least Harry hadn't lost any body parts. He doubted even modern wizarding healing was up to making him a bionic hand. His lips quirked, imagining Harry using it against Voldemort. "*Tom... I am your son...*" He was just picturing Voldemort screaming "No!" and apparating away when the boy on the bed stirred.

"Harry?" Remus bent over the bed.

"Mum? Dad?" Harry's voice was weak and thready. Remus's heart clenched to realize the boy believed himself to be dead. "Sirius?"

It took Remus a moment to clear the lump in his throat enough to speak. "No, Harry," he said gently, hating equally the tone of hope in the boy's voice and his having to dash that hope. "It's Remus. You—you lived, Harry."

"Oh." If Remus had hurt to hear hope in that voice before, oh, that flat tone was worse—a hundred times worse.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Harry." He did not know the words were coming until they flew out of his mouth.

Green eyes opened then, peering in his direction. "For what?" The boy sounded genuinely confused. "I figure, in this whole mess, you're probably at the least fault."

Remus blinked—he would have to ask, later, what on earth the boy meant by that. Remembering his promise, however, he drew his wand; with a short incantation a silvery dog was running through the walls in search of Dumbledore.

Harry blinked nearsightedly at him. "What was that?"

"I promised to alert Albus—the Headmaster—as soon as you woke," Remus replied.

"Oh." The voice was flat again; the green eyes closed.

1.3

Remus set his cup of tea down in its saucer and turned the page of the book he was reading. Absently he picked up the cup and took a sip, eyes scanning the page. His feet crossed where he had them propped up on a conjured ottoman.

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 myoptically. "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."

"You wouldn't feel that way if..." Harry 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 the boy. "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 the boy's 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 seemed 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. Will that calm you?"

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 sorr 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 nothign 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 spell on you to keep all the stuff you’d inherited from them suppressed. It’ll 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.’”

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 rather was 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. "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 earlier 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 masturing 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 and 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 been having visions.”

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.”

1.4

Something was buzzing. Yawning, Harry found his glasses and stuck them on his face, then looked around for the source of the noise. After a moment he located it as coming from an old-fashioned alarm clock on his dresser. *I’m pretty sure that wasn’t there yesterday.* After another moment he identified the thing on the front of it as a folded piece of paper someone had spell-o-taped to the face.

Climbing sleepily out of bed, holding to the chair for balance, he first found the button to turn the alarm off before removing and opening the note. He recognized the slightly messy handwriting from his third year at Hogwarts.

Dear Harry,

I apologize for the rather rude awakening, but both Albus and myself have been called away, and it was the best way I could think of on short notice to make sure you took your potions on time. I’ve already set out your doses for the day. Snape should be up sometime this afternoon with new potions. Ask him about the dosages for those, he knows the schedule for the new ones 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 go 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 eye fell on the chest they’d brought back from the vault. Rising, he went 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. He pushed the lid open and started flipping through the contents. It didn’t take him long to locate the enveloped 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 spoke the keyword.

Allowing the letter to fall closed, Harry pursed his lips. Yes. Snape deserved to read that, he decided. 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. Should he take a blank one with him when he spoke to Snape?

A knock sounded at the door, and hastily Harry stuffed the letter and parchment into his pocket, and the rest back in the trunk. Shutting the lid, he called out "Come in!" just as the door opened.

Ginny stuck her head in. "Breakfast's ready downstairs. Come down when you're ready, but if you don't hurry, Ron may eat all the bacon." Her head disappeared and the door closed. After a moment, Harry hurried after.

1.5

When Harry awoke the next morning, he was somewhat surprised to find his bedroom devoid of other people. He had expected to find someone watching him. Then a heartbeat later, he chastized himself for thinking like a Muggle. *Ten to one they've got all sorts of monitoring charms on me,* he thought with a hint of anger. *You knew they wouldn't trust you, even after you promised. They never have before.*

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. Carefully he swung his legs over the side of the bed, waiting for his knee to stop screaming. When he was able to sit with both feet on the ground without a twinge, he cautiously began to stand. *Ah, there it is.* The familiar ache finally put in an appearance, but much decreased from the day before.

Harry began by hobbling carefully over to his wardrobe and 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. Instead he pulled out an older, larger shirt of his—well, Dudley's—and one of the 'new' hand-me-down robes and trousers.

With a start he realized that Regulus's clothes were no longer just some stranger's clothes. They were clothes that had belonged to his—one of his fathers. That was certainly an odd thought!

He hung the clothes over his left arm and headed for the bathroom. Someone had cleaned up in here, he was certain; the surfaces were all universally sparkling clean and there was a faint smell of detergent lingering in the air.

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 get dressed.

Once he was dressed, 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 had done, he decided, as that he had 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 did happen to that old... house elf?* he wondered.

Well, there was nothing for it. He'd have to go downstairs for breakfast if he wanted any.

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 snatch food.

It's my own bloody house, though! 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 go 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 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 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!

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 accurately picked out his

favorites and gave him none of the foods he detested.

Slowly conversation around them resumed, but it had a half-absent, stilted air; experimentally, Harry glanced around the room and watched eyeballs skitter away from his gaze. 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.”

“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 didn’t know the man’s 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 by the rudeness more than the question. Before he could answer, Mrs Weasley boiled out of her seat.

“Appaloniuss Horus Gage, we agreed we would not ask the boy that question! Have you lost your mind?”

“You agreed!” the man 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 our 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 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!”

“Surely you all deserve to know if I don’t! Who knows when the boy may put you in danger if he’s unbalanced!”

“The boy deserves some privacy!” Another Order member Harry didn’t recognize climbed to his feet.

“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.

“I don’t care!”

“Then leave! If you can’t respect the boy, leave!”

“Maybe I will! I’m sure what I know would be of interest to someone!”

Faces around the table paled, but before any of them could draw breath, a very familiar and equally unexpected drawl came from a corner. “Leaving aside the issue of your

threat of treachery, Gage—which I assure you, we will take seriously—” The man’s face paled. Snape stepped forward and continued. “The fact remains that you are a guest in the boy’s home, where you have uttered not one, not two, but several deadly insults to the boy. He would be well within his rights to challenge you to a duel to the death.” Snape was standing next to the man now. “Look at him, Gage. He has dueled Voldemort in worse shape—and won. Do you really want to test your chances? Or will you come with me—quietly?”

“You know,” another member of the Order spoke up as Severus guided the man out at wand-point, “not that I, you understand, condone his attacking the boy, but if we are 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?” Nymphadora Tonks lept to her feet. “Harry would never risk another’s life if he had a choice!”

Within seconds the Order was back on their feet, yelling and screaming at each other. Through it, Harry sat there 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 sudden silence stretched on. *Oh God. What do I tell her?*

But Mrs Weasley was staring at him in 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. “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 know how much we’d miss you?”

Suddenly it seemed as if half the room was yelling at him for his selfishness while Mrs Weasley continued to sob. The other half, including his friends, continued to sit there openmouthed.

Resentfully, Harry 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 and rolled over onto his back.

A knock on his door startled him. Groaning, he rolled off the bed and limped in sock feet to the door. Yanking it open, he prepared to yell at whoever it was, but was surprised to see Ginny standing outside. “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 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’d start 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. “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.

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... torn away? Something you’d lived with your whole life, something you never thought to question?”

Ginny leaned 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 murderer Sirius Black was innocent was quite a shock. All my life we’d been told about him—he was a little like the boogey man, I think, or a boggart. Then suddenly, boom! One day he’s your wrongly-convicted godfather instead. 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. But what those two did have in common was that they left me feeling unsure of things for a while—wondering what would change next, like what I knew to be true wasn’t stable. Is that how you feel?”

“Mm... not really.” He 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 hurriedly 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 wryly. “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 to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

“But what I can’t figure, though, Gin—and this is what really gets me—if I’d use a friend or family member if it’d bring down or even weaken Tom. . . does that make both me and my parents good, or evil?”

They’d settled down to friendly chatting about school and quiddich when someone else knocked on the door.

“I’ll get it,” Ginny said before Harry could react, springing up and opening the door wide. “Hello, Ron. Hi, Hermione.”

Ron pushed past his sister, face still flaming red, but by his murderous appearance, not with embarrassment. “I could *kill* those. . . those. . .”

“Good morning to you, too, Ron,” Harry said. “Do come in. You too, Hermione.”

Apparently the 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. “Argh!” she growled. “I cannot believe 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!”

“Can you imagine the field day Malfoy’ll have at school this year when he hears about this?” Harry said bitterly. “Never mind everyone else hounding me. 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, Harry,” Hermione said quietly. “Are you. . . if you ever want anyone to talk to. . .”

“I know just where to find you,” Harry said. “Thanks. You lot are a good bunch of friends.”

1.6

None of the three noticed that the fourth had dropped off until he began stirring and moaning. Ginny looked frightened; the other two glanced at each other knowingly.

“Vision or nightmare, do you reckon?” Ron asked thoughtfully.

“Hard to tell,” Hermione 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 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—Orderish.”

Hermione paused, the pads of her fingers nearly touching the yellow orb, then shrugged. “Again, it won’t hurt to try.”

But even after waiting some minutes, the call remained unanswered. “Should we try the regular vision alert?” Ginny suggested, watching Harry press one hand to his scar even in his sleep.

Ron waved the others 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 quietly at her glare. “Ginny, you and I should both 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.”

No sooner had she poised her quill than Harry gave a 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 previous 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."

1.7

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 forwards 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. Looking along the table, he found Mrs Weasley staring at him with pursed lips; 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 spoke.

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 the occasional soft grunt. 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 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, 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. The moment he was reasonably out of the room, he heard conversation start up behind him, and felt his temper rise. Leaning 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. One of the portraits 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. 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.

1.8

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 duelling 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 acknowledgement 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.”

1.8.1

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 lept 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 three 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 untying 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 roughly five minutes—he timed it—for Potter to stir. Severus opened his mouth to chastise the boy, 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.

1.9

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 grimmer 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 off 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 hint 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 another hour... he's probably with his friends." He looked up, a wry expression stealing over his face. "I'm sure he wouldn'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'm 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."

But when they turned down the corridor leading to Harry's room and the library, they found Ron and Hermione arguing in low voices in front of Harry's room, the witch gesturing at the closed door.

"Hermione? Ron?" Remus frowned at them, not angry but worried.

The worry grew when they both turned, and immediately looked relieved to see Remus and Albus standing there. "Remus! Professor Dumbledore!" Hermione greeted them. "Do you know where Harry is?"

Remus stopped, blinking at them. "That's what I was about to ask you."

"When did you last see Harry?" Albus asked the pair.

"Er." Ron and Hermione looked at each other. "After lunch, actually, sir." They exchanged glances again.

"No," Remus responded slowly. "Is he in there?" He gestured at the door.

"We don't know," Ron responded. "We thought so, but no one answers when we knock."

Remus looked at Albus, and by the expression on the old man's face, he could see that Albus was remembering the same thing he was. He raised his hand and rapped sharply on the door. "Harry? It's Remus." Everyone held their breath, but there was no response. "Harry? Are you in there?"

After a few moments of further silence, he looked back at the others. "I'm going in."

He tried the handle, and found it to be unlocked; opening the door and sticking his head in, he could see that the room was empty. A quick check of the bathroom proved it was also unoccupied.

“He’s not here,” he said to the others, closing the door again. “Have you checked anywhere else?”

Hermione shook her head slowly. “He’s not in Ron’s room, we just came from there.” She glanced over at Ron. “And—I don’t think he’s in our room, but I suppose we could check.”

“We should also check the library,” Remus said, “and the twins’ room.”

“I’ll run up to our room,” Hermione volunteered. “Ron, you’re the twins’ brother; you can check theirs.”

The two older men made their way to the library. “Harry?” Remus called softly, but no one answered.

“I will check the left-hand stacks,” Albus volunteered softly, “if you will take the right-hand side.”

Remus located the table the children had been doing their homework at, and raised his brows at the books strewn all over it, but did not find Harry. Returning to the front of the library, he was met by Albus, who shook his head. The two teens rejoined them in the hallway, having been similarly unsuccessful.

They all looked at each other for a few moments, before Albus said, “When did you last see Harry, Miss Granger? Mr Weasley?”

1.10

Harry made his way back up the stairs quite slowly, lost in thought. Snape was... well, he was still a greasy git, as Ron might say, but Harry was starting to believe he was a greasy git who was on Harry’s side. Or possibly on Dumbledore’s, but just now the distinction didn’t bother Harry too much.

“There you are! We grew a bit concerned when you missed lunch.”

Speak of the Headmaster... “I’m sorry, sir. I needed to speak to Professor Snape. I did not realize it had grown so late.”

Dumbledore shot a glance at the letter Harry held in his hand, and his eyes widened slightly. “I see,” he said, his voice giving away no trace of the surprise—or had it been alarm?—that had briefly crossed his features. “And how did your talk go?” He took Harry’s elbow and stepped backwards, drawing him towards the kitchen.

“Not too badly,” Harry said with a shrug. *I’m alive. It can’t have been that bad.* “About how you might expect.”

“I shall have to stop in and see Severus before I leave,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully. “I never seem to see much of him during the summers.” *And make sure he hasn’t destroyed anything vital,* Harry read between the lines, mouth quirking with a moment’s amusement.

“Did they tell you I had another vision?” Harry asked curiously, taking his seat at the table.

“No!” the Headmaster responded eagerly. “Do tell. Was it of any interest?”

“It was weird was what it was,” Harry replied. “Thank you, Mrs Weasley,” he said more formally as she set a plate in front of him. “I was thinking about it, earlier, and I think Voldemort might have been dreaming,” he went on, turning back to Dumbledore.

“Oh?” Dumbledore accepted a plate of pudding from Mrs Weasley. “What, pray tell, leads you to believe that?”

“Well,” Harry paused to chew and swallow, “it didn’t all make sense. And it was disjointed—you know how dreams can be? But—I was there,” he said with a touch of embarrassment, loading his fork with more peas.

“You were? As in . . . your physical form?” Dumbledore raised a white eyebrow.

1.11

“A knut for your thoughts, Severus.”

He turned from where he was studying the fire burning in his small grate through a 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.

1.12

“Harry.”

He looked up in surprise to find the Headmaster standing in front of him. “Yes, sir?” How had he failed to notice the man entering? *I’ll have to learn to pay more attention.*

“I heard about the Order members’... collective outburst.” Harry winced. “I have had words with the persons involved, but I wished to apologize for how you were treated.”

Harry bit down the first angry response that came to mind. “I appreciate it, sir.” He hesitated. “Sir... you mentioned, a while ago, that I had the choice of living here or Hogwarts? For the summer?”

Dumbledore nodded. “That I did, my boy.”

“I think I would like to live at the castle, this summer. As long as I can still see my friends regularly.” Harry wanted out of this house as quickly as possible—or, more precisely, out of Order headquarters.

“That can be quite easily arranged,” the old man told him. “There may be some slight restrictions on fire-calls and visits—I fear we cannot trust everyone in the Transportation office just now.” *Percy*, Harry thought. “I do not think it would be entirely wise to move you for a few days, my boy—will that cause you any difficulties?”

“I’ll live,” he replied with a shrug.

“We have some guest quarters you can stay in temporarily, while we fine and improve suitable rooms for you.” Dumbledore nodded as if to himself. “You should think about what of your things you wish to leave here, if any.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you, Professor.”

Dumbledore smiled at him. “It is no matter at all, my boy. I suspect you will enjoy summer at Hogwarts—it is a better environment for a young man than this, and I am glad your parents gave me the lever necessary to shift the Governors’ ‘no summer boarders’ rule.” He sighed slightly, but the smile remained on his face. “If you will excuse me, Harry, I should begin making security arrangements.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest, and closed it again before he could say something rash. “What sort of security arrangements, sir?” he asked cautiously.

“Nothing too onerous, I promise.” Dumbledore’s skin crinkled as his smile grew. “Primarily strengthening the wards again, and preparing to spell the floo grates there and here for another secure linkage. I thought I might also see if there were an Order member who did not mind living in Hogsmeade, to keep an eye on activity there, and I thought we might move some of the smaller meetings to Hogwarts, where we could put them to use beforehand doing security sweeps.”

Harry felt somewhat silly for wanting protest now. “I just—I don’t want them following me everywhere, like they did at—like on Privet Drive.”

“Quite understandable.” Dumbledore nodded. “How that you have your waiver, that seems rather less necessary to me, but—how would you feel about some extra Defence lessons, Harry?”

Harry nodded, eager. “With who?”

1.13

The Order situation came to a head two evenings later. Once more, Dumbledore was at dinner; once more he said “We’ll have an Order meeting after dinner.” Harry glanced over

at him in question, and he nodded slightly. Harry nodded back. *This should be interesting.*

When dinner was done, the non-Order members of the household rose to leave. “Should I move seats?” Harry whispered to Dumbledore, who shook his head.

“You’re fine where you are,” he replied quietly.

Someone tugged on Harry’s arm, and it occurred to him only then that he probably should have said something to Ron and Hermione if he wanted this to go smoothly. “No,” he said to the witch tugging on him, as calmly as he could manage. “You go on.”

She frowned at him, then past him and he realized she was looking over his head at Dumbledore. The older man nodded, and she let go of him, but her jaw was set in a line that said he’d have explaining to do later. He could hear Ron and Ginny questioning her on their way out the door, and Ron shot him an unhappy look over his shoulder. *Great. That’ll be fun.*

He turned from looking after his friends to find the rest of the Order staring at him, their attention having been attracted by his interaction with Hermione. *Of course, it’s not like I’m exactly inconspicuous, sitting at the foot of the table like this.* And, of course, staring at him right down its length, was. . . .

“Harry,” Mrs Weasley said impatiently, “we can’t get started until you leave.”

“Er,” Harry said. He hadn’t quite anticipated Dumbledore not giving them a heads-up either. “Actually, Professor Dumbledore asked me to sit in.”

“What?” The exclamation was general, as heads turned to stare at the Headmaster.

Dumbledore finished casting the wards on the room—which really should signal to the lot of them, Harry thought, that Dumbledore wanted him there; the man was sitting right next to him and could hardly miss that he hadn’t left. “Quite right,” he said, smiling genially. “Harry will be sitting in on our general strategy and intelligence meetings from now on.”

They were *not* happy about that, Harry could see. “Albus,” Mrs Weasley said, frowning darkly, “what are you thinking? He’s only fifteen!”

“To begin with,” the Headmaster said, “Harry might be fifteen, but he will be sixteen in a few short weeks. I might remind you that as Potter Heir, there is every chance that he will be sitting on the Wizengamot a month hence.” *That’s news to me.* Harry wondered why he was always the last one to know these things, and tried not to show too much surprise. “Thus—”

“So wait a month!” Mrs Weasley replied irritably, cutting Dumbledore off. “He can’t legally take oaths until then anyway—”

“Ah, but I will not be asking Harry to take the oaths,” Dumbledore interrupted smoothly, returning the favor. “So, you see, a month makes little difference—”

“You aren’t going to ask him to take the oaths?” Harry couldn’t tell who had said it, although several people echoed the sentiment. “But Albus,” someone went on, “That’s. . . that’s just. . . we’ve never. . . it’s not done!”

“As a matter of fact, I have done,” Dumbledore replied quietly, “but I do not see as it makes a difference either. I will *not* ask him to take them, either now or in the future.”

“But—” Molly objected again. “How do we know he won’t tell our children everything

he learns, and wind up leading them off on another foolish, harebrained mission? He could get *more* people killed! He—”

It was too much for Harry, who abruptly saw red; before he knew it, he was on his feet. “To begin with,” he said coldly, “it was your ‘children’ who insisted on accompanying me, not the other way around; I would have gone alone rather than risk them. Secondly, I might remind you that I had no reliable way of *contacting* you all for assistance; I did the best I could at the time! Finally, I might point out that your *children* fought ten top-ranking Death Eaters to a near stand-still, and I would propose that it is *you* who endanger *them and me* by insisting on wrapping us in so much cotton wool that we do not have the *information* to make reasonable decisions!” His anger mostly spent, he said more quietly, “Mrs Weasley, your children are targets. They are targets, because they *will*, heaven help them, insist on being my friends. For that and that alone, they are in danger every day. You do all of us a disservice by trying to protect them from that reality. I cannot help that they are targets, but I refuse to deprive them of the tools—yes, including information—that they need to stay *alive*. Besides,” he added, “I have already promised Professor Dumbledore that I will protect any information I learn here to the best of my abilities; if you cannot trust that promise, I have nothing more to say to you.”

They were all staring at him open-mouthed, all except for Snape, Remus, and Dumbledore. As he looked around the room, feeling somewhat sheepish, the corner of Snape’s mouth began to twitch upwards, and he brought his hands together twice in silent applause. Unsure whether or not the man was mocking him, Harry just sat down quietly. “Sorry, sir,” he said to Dumbledore after a moment.

“I do not believe I could have said it better,” Dumbledore replied, his own mouth twitching remarkably like Snape’s. “Additionally,” he said more loudly, directed at the Order, “Harry is now our primary source of intelligence about the enemy’s activities, one that has become more reliable of late. He has pointed out to me, rightfully, that he can be of the most help when he knows what to look for and how to prioritize his reports.”

“There’s also the fact that I am the only one of you who spends time, on a regular basis anyway, in the bastard’s head,” Harry added, making Mrs Weasley hiss at him about language. He ignored her. “Can you look me in the eye and tell me that *won’t* be useful when planning strategy?”

No one spoke up for a long moment. “But,” Mrs Weasley said, her tone unhappy but much more deferential, “What about... some of the intelligence is fairly...”

“If you are concerned about Potter being exposed to gruesome intelligence reports,” Snape spoke up, “I can vouch that some of the revels he has witnessed—through the eyes of the Dark Lord—were as bad as any I have ever attended; at least here he will not be forced to participate vicariously.”

That, it seemed, did it for objections, although Mrs Weasley was still looking upset; she was beginning to gaze at Harry in a way that he thought might mean she really wanted to cry on him. *As long as she waits until the meeting is done...*

“Well!” Albus said brightly. “Now that’s settled—Severus, can you bring us up-to-date? There were meetings the last two nights, correct?”

Snape nodded curtly. “Last night was pre-planned; I shall get to that in a moment. However, the night before was merely a bit of . . . sport; one of the junior Death Eaters had captured a pair of Muggles, and the inner circle was invited to . . . play with them.”

“Actually,” Harry said, “that’s not entirely true.” Heads around the table, including Snape’s turned to stare at him, and he flushed. “That’s what he told you, because he didn’t want you to know he’d been . . . interrogating them. It was only after he’d broken their minds trying to get information that he decided he might as well make you all a present of them.”

“Would you prefer to give this briefing?” Snape asked snidely.

Harry shook his head. “I woke up about the time that one guy—the one with the green stripe on his hood—stopped playing with the needles. I caught just the beginning of the bit with the water, but not much of it. V—Tom was pretty pissed off that they were dying so fast. He wanted them to scream more. I think—did he do something to the man? Whatever it was, it woke me up.”

“Ah,” Snape said. “Yes, he grew quite angry, and—well, I can comfortably say that you did not miss anything of interest.” To the rest of the Order, he said, “To summarize, we were invited to kill the pair, but directed to make it as painful as possible. Once they were dead, the Dark Lord ranted for several minutes on the theme of Muggle inferiority before dismissing us.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore said. “Would you care to fill us in on what occurred before Severus arrived?”

“I missed the beginning of whatever was going on,” Harry said. “When I . . . showed up, he was alone with the pair of them. They were already pretty beaten up, and I think the man’s eyes had been gouged out.” The Order began looking rather sick, and he quickly did some mental editing. “Anyway, he thought the woman had some sort of ring, and wanted to know where it was. He had an older Muggle picture that he kept showing her; he said it was a picture of her mother. The woman in the picture had the ring on. She claimed she’d never seen the ring in her life.”

“Could you describe the ring?” someone down the table asked.

“I didn’t get a good look at it, and the photo wasn’t in color. It was somewhat heavy, I remember, and . . . it had a big stone, round or oval or something like that.”

“Then what happened?” someone else asked.

“They were tortured,” Harry said shortly. “They broke the man’s mind, and the woman—I think she just gave up. After he decided he couldn’t get anything more out of them, he was trying to decide what to do with them, and that’s when he summoned the Inner Circle.” To Snape, he said, “I don’t know if you realize it, but it’s got capital letters in his mind. Inner Circle.”

“Interesting,” Snape said softly. “To return to my narrative, the next night . . .”

1.14

“I find it somewhat disturbing,” Severus said as they brushed floo powder off themselves, “that Potter can sit and calmly discuss torturing Muggles with me.”

Albus sighed. "I would rather it were not true," he said, "but until we can find some way of controlling his visions. . . ." He trailed off. "If it makes you feel any better, however, Remus tells me that he spent rather a while being sick when he woke up."

Severus nodded; it did make him somewhat less concerned. *At least he has not lost all sense of . . . human decency.* "Still," he said absently, "I do not think Nott could have discussed. . . what we did. . . so calmly, and he is my rubric for a young man on the edge of psychopathy."

"I know." Albus sighed again. "But I don't know what to do about it, Severus." He glanced up. "I think it does him good to speak about what he sees with someone who does not look at him as if he is. . . somehow stained, simply because he is forced to witness it."

"Good Lord," Severus exclaimed, "I will not be the boy's psychotherapist, Albus. Do not try to go there."

"Very well," the old man said, unabashed. "Good night, Severus. Sleep well."

He growled and swept out the door. *I swear, he will find some way of meddling from beyond the grave.*

1.15

"Look," Harry said uncomfortably, "it's not that I don't trust you." He shifted his gaze from one of his friends to the other. "It's complicated, okay? If one word of this gets out, gets to Voldemort, I'd be dead before you could say 'You-Know-Who'."

Hermione chewed on a fingernail. "You know we'd die before telling anyone anything that could hurt you."

"Yeah, mate," Ron seconded.

"Yes, but . . . you can't talk about this at school, or anywhere anyone might hear," Harry pushed. "Not so much as an allusion."

"A what?" Ron looked confused. "We can't cast illusions?"

"Allusion, Ronald, it means a reference," Hermione said impatiently. "He means we can't even talk about it indirectly."

"I had Professor Dumbledore teach me a ward we can use," Harry said. "Once we're at school, or if your parents give the okay, Ron, I'll teach it to you." He raised his wand. "I'm going to cast it now, all right?" When they had both nodded, he raised his wand and cast.

"So what's this about, Harry?" Hermione said impatiently the moment the grey bubble had stabilized around them.

"When I went to the vault, a few days ago," Harry began, "it wasn't exactly what I was expecting." Hermione's eyes flicked to his left arm, and when she looked back up to find him watching her, she colored slightly. Harry drew the letter from his pocket and held it out. "Both of you take it."

"What's this, mate, a port-key?" Never-the-less, Ron grabbed hold.

"No," Harry responded. "Just a bloody lot of paranoia." He said the keyword, then handed it over to Hermione. Putting his head down, he waited for the fallout.

He could not shut his ears as easily as his eyes, however, and he was forced to listen to his friends' comments as they read. At first, they were simple murmurs, an "Ah," or "Hmm." It didn't take long, however, before Ron was spluttering and Hermione ominously silent. Harry wished he didn't have to be in the same room with them to do this.

Finally he heard the rustle of paper being refolded. "That...that..." Hermione began, anger evident in the way she bit off the words.

"Awful, evil git!" Ron finished for her.

"Wait—who are you talking about, Ron?" she said after a moment. Cautiously, Harry raised his head to see his friends staring at each other in confusion.

"Snape, of course," Ron replied impatiently, managing to sound as though she were a particularly slow child. "That git has the...the arrogance to rape Harry's mum and then spend five years telling Harry how awful his dad is! She he raped her!"

"Well, yes," Hermione said impatiently herself. "The man was—is—a *Death Eater*, Ron. And yes, he has been rather unkind to Harry, But," she went on, causing Ron to mouth "rather unkind?" in a shocked sort of way, "don't you think her response, or at least her tone, was rather...high-handed?"

Harry was feeling rather shocked himself. "I'm not following, Hermione."

She turned to him. "Well, if *I'd* gotten this letter, I'd've been right angry with her. Never mind that she's just got done telling you that she knew you'd be the Boy-Who-Lived, or as good as, never mind that she's just got done telling you that you've got an extra *nine* f-fathers—" she stumbled briefly over the word but kept going, in full rant mode now— "over the usual count. Never mind that you have—at best!—a little over a year to master God-knows-what powers and work out a defense for one of the most insidious kinds of magic ever invented. Never mind all that, but she's *also* taken away any chance for you to distinguish yourself on your own merits during your childhood—but don't worry dear, we love you, and it'll all wear off in time for the OWLs. *Argh!*" Hermione practically screamed the last. "I could strangle her with my own two hands if she weren't conveniently dead!"

Oddly enough, having Hermione angry with his parents on his behalf calmed Harry down about it. "Not that I'm not upset, Hermione," he said after a moment, "because I am. But—I'm also not sure I'd have done anything differently, if I'd ahve been her. At the very least, I can see her logic."

He watched Hermione think that over. "Ew," the witch commented finally. "I am disturbed to say, Harry, that I agree with you—and I'm not sure I like what that says about me."

He nodded to her. "I'm not sure what it says about either of us."

"I do hope I'd have more tact, though," Hermione said angrily. "The sheer—ugh!"

Ron opened his mouth and shut it several times before finally saying meekly, "I don't understand."

She turned to him and said slowly, "Ron...remember last year, those quiddich games y—we lost?"

He turned red, but to his credit, held his temper. "Well, yeah."

"How would you feel if I told you that during those games, I'd cast a spell on you to

make you a crappy keeper—but it’s okay, because it was all for your own good?”

‘I think I’d probably hex you,’ the redhead replied honestly. “You mean—you’re mad ‘cause his mum made him average?”

“Bloody poor job of it she did,” Harry grumbled.

Hermione shot a quick look at him that had him blinking at her in confusion, then turned back to Ron. “Among other things, yes.”

“But what about—”

“Snape?” the witch finished. “Blast it, Ron, it’s been seventeen years! From what his mother says, he felt bad enough about it to change sides!”

“You know, I think I’m going to have a ahrd time keeping a straight face the next time he starts in about my father,” Harry said thoughtfully. “I should work on that. Wouldn’t do to draw suspicion by bursting out laughing at the man.”

Hermione started giggling. “I can just see it!” She dropped her voice to mimic Snape. “‘But then, your father was a worthless ne’er-do-well with an attitude problem—’ ”

“Why yes, sir! He is!” Harry agreed earnestly. “Will there be anything else, sir?” They both collapsed laughign. “But he knows, so he’ll probably be more careful with his words, more’s the pity.”

“Will you and Ron even be in—Ron, what on earth is the matter?”

Ron was sitting staring at Harry, his mouth hanging open. For a moment, Harry didn’t think he was going to answer, but then he said slowly, “Halloween will be fifteen years after. . . you know what.”

“Yes,” Harry said after a moment. “So?”

“It’ll be seventeen years after that lot raped your mum.”

Harry did a moment of calculation. “Yes, that would seem to follow.”

“A rape that resulted in progeny.”

“Well, yes. Where is this going, Ron?” He glanced t Hermione, whose mouth had just fallen open as well. “Great. Now I’m the only one without a clue.”

“Harry,” the witch said slowly, when it became apparent tht Ron wasn’t going to say anything, “did anyone explain about the penalties for rape in the wizarding world?”

“Well, yeah,” he replied. “Remus said something bout them forfeiting property, which I gather is tied to voting? And having to face some kind of hearing.”

“Well. They don’t just have to forfeit property, like a fine,” she explained quietly. “They have to give it to you. And. . . they’re no longer, legally speaking, human.”

“Bloody hell, mate, you’ll be in for probably a quarter of the Malfoy fortune,” Ron choked out.

“Hell.” Harry rubbed his face with his hands. “What on earth will I do with it? Can’t I, you know, give it away or something?”

Both his friends shook their heads. “Not ‘til you’re twenty-one. But I’ll tell you what you can do,” Hermione said gleefully. “You can topple Fudge and his ilk.”

“Er. What?” Harry stared at her.

She nodded. “I think, after Halloween, your influence will be enough to push a vote of no confidence through the Wizengamot.”

“But—will we get someone better?” Harry asked. “Maybe I should just, y’know, threaten him with it.”

1.16

“Good morning, Harry.”

“Sir,” Harry acknowledge the Headmaster. “What can I do for you?” He was never quite sure how to reat the man anymore.

“Fawkes sends his greetings,” the old man continued, settling down next to Harry at the small table.

“Really?” Harry asked, his interest piqued. “You can understand him that well?”

“We’ve spent a great many years together, he and I,” Dumbledore responded with a twinkle in his eye. “So what are you studying, my boy?”

Harry turned the book towards his guardian. “It’s about the nature behind the Dark Arts,” he explained with a touch of a blush. “It looked interesting, and I remembered it was cited in our Defense text from third year.”

“Ah!” Dumbledore smiled. “An excellent book. Banned from publication in the Isles now, unfortunately, or it might still be on our required Defense reading list. An excellent book for studying for the NEWTs.”

Harry blinked. He’d been expecting a rebuke, not an endorsement.

“Knowing the enemy is necessary to effectively protect oneself,” the Headmaster went on, “especially when the enemy is a spell and not a person. Do feel free to discuss it with me, Harry, especially if you have questions.”

“Not yet, sir,” Harry said thoughtfully, “although it does rather make some things the fake Professor Moody said make more sense.”

“Such as?” Dumbledore inquired interestedly.

“Well, he said we could all cast the Killing Curse at him without causing so much as a nosebleed. I thought that was an odd thing to say to a room full of Death Eaters’ sons. Surely at least one of them was training to follow in his father’s footsteps.”

“And now?” Dumbledore prompted.

“I hadn’t realized it required quite so much power,” Harry admitted. “I still think there’s a couple who could manage it, but it makes more sense now. And now that I think about it, I’ve only ever seen a handful of the Death Eaters manage it either.”

“It also requires quite a focus of willpower,” Dumbledore pointed out. “I doubt a fourth year could manage to will a teacher dead that strongly even if he were powerful enough.”

“I guess,” Harry said. “Seems to me, though, that’d be the easy part to train.”

“Speaking of training your will,” Dumbledore said, “I came here to speak to you about resuming your Occlumency training.”

“Snape—” Harry began incredulously.

“With me, not with Professor Snape,” Dumbledore added smoothly.

“Oh.” Harry blinked. “Uh. When?”

“I would like to begin as soon as possible,” Dumbledore said seriously. “Perhaps—alternate afternoons or evenings? After dinner would generally work best for me.”

Harry nodded. “Where, sir?”

“Oh, downstairs, I suppose. I may have to vary the evenings—my schedule during the summers is somewhat chaotic—but for now I suppose we can simply adjourn after supper on the evenings I am available.”

“Okay,” Harry agreed, feeling nervous. “Are—will we start tonight?”

“Unless you have a reason not to, I thought we might begin after lunch, since I am free all afternoon.”

Harry made a face. “I’d rather not, sir, but I want to get some uninterrupted sleep more.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “I promise to make this as easy on you as I can, my boy,” he said softly. “I am aware you had a difficult time of it under Professor Snape, and I would like to make this as easy on you as I can.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said honestly.

They sat quietly for a minute or so. The Headmaster seemed to be studying Harry, who dropped his eyes uncomfortably to the tabletop.

“I will not intentionally read your memories or thoughts without your permission, Harry,” Dumbledore said quietly when Harry did not look up. “But I would like to know—how are you doing?”

It was an uncomfortable reminder of a subject Harry did his best to avoid even thinking about. “Okay, I guess,” he answered uncomfortably.

“Harry, I . . . you . . . if you . . . have urges to . . . hurt yourself—you will tell someone, correct?” Dumbledore asked in a low voice. “My door—literal or metaphorical—is always open to you.”

Until you decide it suits you to be otherwise, Harry thought angrily, reminded of the year before, but then he regretted the thought. “Yes, sir,” he said.

“You will tell someone?” Dumbledore pressed, leaning forwards.

“I will, sure,” Harry assured him, feeling small and wanting to reassure the man.

“Thank you, Harry,” the man said, making Harry flush and blink. He felt stupid for causing that note of combined worry and relief in the man’s voice.

“I do not believe you appreciate,” Dumbledore continued after a minute quietly, “that you are more than just another student to me. And not because you are the Boy Who Lived, or because of the prophecy—or, I should say, not merely because of those things.” He leaned forwards and laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder, who looked up in reflex. “I care about you a great deal, Harry Potter, as do others. Do, please, remember that.”

He rose and left the room while Harry was still trying to come up with a reply.

1.17

Hermione was the next to interrupt him. “There you are. This just came for you.”

Harry took the letter from her curiously, noting the postage on the outside. Below the postage, it bore a stamp reading “MacMillians Mail Forwarding Service.” The letter was addressed to him, but at a box in London. “Mail forwarding service?” he asked curiously.

“How did you think Muggleborns got mail?” She sat down next to him. “It costs money, so lots of the students just use the school owls and make sure to write home often so their parents can write back. But it’s a service where you set up a London box—or any large city, really, they’ve got offices all over—and then they forward on the mail for you. Dumbledore must have set one up for you.” She regarded the letter curiously. “Looks like it’s from the government. Wonder what they could want with you.”

Taking the hint, he tore open the envelope and began reading.

Dear Mr Potter,

Let us begin by congratulating you on your fostership. Your guardianship application is under review, and it is for that purpose that we are contacting you.

During the process of transferring your official guardianship, it has been discovered that the school to which your former guardians claim they have been sending you does not exist, and is thus not an accredited school. I suppose it is thus unsurprising that we have no records of you sitting your O-levels in May with the rest of your age group.

In accordance with the Educational Reform Act of 1993, I fear your current guardian must enroll you in an accredited program or we will be forced to remand custody of you to the state. I have included a handout we give to all students who find themselves in similar situations detailing the law and what it requires for you.

Hoping you are well,

Miranda Jones.

1.18

Harry closed the door to Dumbledore’s makeshift office with a feeling of trepidation. “Hello, sir.”

“Ah, Harry. Right on time. Care for a lemon drop before we begin? No?” The man took one for himself, then put the lot away in a drawer. “Relax, Harry. I promise I will make this as easy on you as I can.”

Harry took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said. “I just...I don’t have good memories of the last time I tried this.”

Dumbledore’s face softened as he smiled. “No. I understand.” He came around the desk and gestured to the chairs he had set up so they were facing each other. “Please. Have

a seat.” He suited actions to words, and Harry joined him after a moment. “Now. I will be touching your mind. Your goal is to repel me.” He gazed at Harry seriously. “We will repeat the exercise until this act, of repelling me, becomes second-nature, and you are able to do so nearly instantaneously upon feeling an intruder in your mind. To make this easier for you in the beginning, I will not be being at all subtle.” He smiled again faintly. “I will, in fact, be doing my best to be ‘noisy’. Do you understand?”

Harry nodded, feeling a faint sense of disappointment. Apparently he was to receive no more actual instruction in repelling the man than from Snape! “Yes, sir. I do.”

“You may find it easier to locate and repel me if you make your mind quiet, clearing your mind of all inessential thoughts and memories,” Dumbledore continued. “This is, for most people, difficult to actually achieve without practice, so I recommend you do so regularly. As it tends to make many people fall asleep, before bed is often a good time to practice.”

Harry nodded. At least he was getting an explanation for some of it!

“Now. Take a minute to clear your mind, as best you are able, then let me know when you are ready.” The old man drew his wand, but waited patiently. That was a damn sight better than Snape too!

Resolutely Harry pushed that thought away, focusing on making his mind as clear as possible. Finally, after what felt like an eternity of pushing down thoughts of Snape and Sirius, he said, “Ready.”

“Legilimens!”

He was sitting in his first charms lesson. “Harry Potter,” Flitwick said, then squeaked and fell off his chair. “Oh my. Are you here, my boy?”

Hesitantly Harry raised his hand.

He was facing an irritated McGonagall. “Perhaps I should turn one of you into a pocketwatch. . . .”

“. . . softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes. . . .”

Realizing what was happening, Harry tried to push out with his mind. Hadn’t the Headmaster said something about ‘locating’ him? He couldn’t figure out what the man meant. After a moment of flailing about and listening to Snape’s speech, he focused on control instead. Deliberately he brought up the most boring memory he could think of that seemed to fit the pattern—his first class with Binns—and concentrated on remembering every detail.

“An interesting defense,” the Headmaster said, “but not one that will work without a great deal more mental discipline and strength. You did not feel me at all?”

Opening his eyes—when had he closed them?—Harry shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Hmm.” The Headmaster stroked his beard slowly. “Instead of trying to completely clear your mind, although we will return to that strategy when you have had time to practice it, instead try focusing on one thing to the exclusion of everything else. Let it fill your mind. Nod when you are ready.”

Harry focused on one of the rosebuds on the Headmaster’s floral-patterned robe. He thought Petunia had a bedspread like that. The rosebud before him was a delicate pink on

a dark blue surface. He focused on the veins, tracing them with his eyes. He nodded. The leaves were such nice shapes, all serrated—

—”Back, Fang,” Hagrid was saying. “Why, hullo, Harry. Come in for a cuppa tea.”

“Hullo, Hagrid,” he said, stepping into the hut and letting Fang lick his hand—

Resolutely, Harry shoved with his mind, but nothing happened.

—”The Inner Eye,” Trelawney said. “You must learn to see beyond! You!” She pointed to Lavender. “How is your love life? I sense a great change coming.”

“Maybe she’ll finally get a boyfriend who lasts more than a week,” Ron muttered to Harry.

The rose was back in front of his eyes. He slumped in his seat.

“Still nothing?” Dumbledore asked. “Hm. Perhaps I must be...louder, so to speak. Forgive me, my boy—I fear I cannot be both gentle and ‘louder’.”

Harry nodded. “I understand.” As long as the Headmaster didn’t start taunting him about his worst memories, he thought he could manage.

“How did it go?” Ron heaped food onto Harry’s plate. “You look bloody awful, mate.”

“Gee, thanks, Ron.” He grimaced as it came out in a snarl. “Sorry. I’m not mad at you. It just went bloody awfully, that’s all.”

“Was it at least better than Snape?” Ron snagged another serving platter.

“I can’t eat all that, Ron!” In self-defense Harry picked up his fork and pulled the plate over. “And I don’t know. In a way, it was worse.”

“Worse?” Hermione leaned over the table. “Are you all right?”

“I think so.” He ate a forkful of food. “With Snape, I could get mad after a while, you know? But Professor Dumbledore... he tried so hard to make it easy on me, and I just kept failing.” Viciously he stabbed at a carrot.

“Oh, Harry.” She reached out and laid a hand on his free one. “I’m sure you’ll get better. It was just the first day, remember?”

“Yeah.” He ate the carrot. “I just really hope there aren’t too many more like it, or I’m going to wind up hexing something.”

“Just as long as it isn’t me.” Ron stuffed a huge bite into his mouth.

“That might be a good idea,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “Not hexing Ron, of course,” she clarified when the redhead began to look alarmed. “But working off some of that frustration, constructively if possible. You could use it as an opportunity to practice your offensive spells. I bet we can find something around here for you to hex.”

“Hm,” Harry said, his mouth full.

“Mum found a writing desk in the attic that Moody says is cursed,” Ron said helpfully. “Maybe you can give it a good hexing.”

“What kind of curse?” Harry asked apprehensively. “It won’t attack me or anything, will it?”

“Nah. Wouldn’t that be fun, though? Some kind of bad luck curse. Who the hell keeps a cursed desk around anyhow?”

“Sure you can hex it to pieces,” Moody said. “Burning’ll lift the curse as well as anything. Might as well get some use out of it.” He leveled both eyes at Harry. “You look like you could use hexing something, son. I think I’ll come along, though, just in case.”

“Thanks, Professor Moody,” Harry said gratefully. “Where is it?”

“Come on. I’ll show you.” He led the three of them up to the attic and through a maze of boxes, crates, and covered furniture. “As you can see, we tried to lift the curse without much luck.”

Someone had drawn a circle on the floorboards with chalk, and inscribed runes all around the inside. Seven unlit, half-burned candles sat in breaks in the runes. In the center of the circle was an ordinary-looking writing desk.

“How do you know it was unsuccessful?” Harry asked, studying the desk. From here it looked perfectly normal, but he had no desire to investigate more personally.

“The runes.” Moody pointed at them with his stick. “If the ritual had took, they’d’ve disappeared.”

“Is it safe to hex things with the runes and stuff there?” Harry asked. He knew next to nothing about runic rituals. Or curses, come to think of it.

“Sure, but if you’re worried—” Moody drew a toe across several of them, smudging them and the circle. “There.”

Harry took a breath and drew his wand, pointing it at the desk. Moody and his friends backed up, leaving with him a healthy margin of error. “What shall I start with?”

They quickly determined that most of the hexes Harry knew had no impact on inanimate objects. To his surprise, *furnunculus* left it slightly blackened and *tarantallegra* broke one of the legs. “Schoolboy curses,” Moody said when Harry paused. “We really need to improve your arsenal, Potter.”

“Oh, I’m just toying with it,” Harry said, smiling slightly. “*Expelliarmus!*” Moody raised an eyebrow as a second leg snapped and the desk canted over to one side. “*Expelliarmus! Expelliarmus!*” The final leg broke with a snap.

“Nice aim, Potter,” Moody said gruffly. “I stand by what I said about vocabulary, though.”

“*Diffindo!*” Several shelves cracked. “*Reducto!*”

It took a minute for Harry to clear his eyes, coughing all the while. *What the hell was that?*

“What the hell did you hit, Harry?” Ron asked, mirroring his thoughts. “Hey—where’s the desk?”

Harry realized he couldn’t see anything because his glasses were coated in something. Taking them off, he wiped them on his shirt and put them back on.

It looked as though someone had thrown flour everywhere. Where the desk had been was nothing but a uniform covering of powder. He turned to look at his friends, who were covered in the same stuff. “I don’t know.”

“Sawdust.” Hermione looked up from examining the powder with a finger. “Harry, I think this *is* the desk.”

“Bloody hell.” Ron examined the area. “Harry, I don’t ever want to duel you, okay? Not, like, seriously.”

A horrid thought occurred to Harry. “Professor Moody? You said the desk was cursed. What about the sawdust? It’s all over.”

“I’ll get someone to fetch Bill,” said Moody from behind them. “You lot stay put, try not to kick it about too much.”

Harry turned around carefully to find the ex-auror standing in a clear patch on the floor. The edge was suspiciously circular. “Shield, sir?”

“Very good, Potter.” He smiled slightly. “Bit of a reflex, although it appears to have come in handy. Now, wait here.”

“Wait—sir? I’m not sure I can stand very long.” As if to prove it, his knee wobbled ominously, and painfully. “Ow.”

“Hrm.” Withdrawing his wand, Moody looked around. “Got any sweets wrappers, Potter?” Fishing in his pockets, Harry shook his head, but Ron produced a handful of crumpled chocolate frog boxes. “Thank you, Weasley.” With efficient wand movements, he transfigured them into three simple wooden chairs. “Should last long enough. I hope.”

Gratefully Harry took one, careful of kicking at the sawdust. “Thank you, sir.” After cautious looks between the chairs and the ex-auror, the other teenagers did likewise.

“Now. Don’t move and kick this crap up. Try not to breathe it in or swallow it either.” The scarred old man stumped slowly away around the boxes.

“Blimey, Harry,” Ron said when he’d disappeared. “How’d you do this, anyway?” He examined a pinch of the sawdust still clinging to his clothing. “This stuff is bloody fine.”

“Shh!” Hermione said suddenly, head cocked.

“Ah, hello Molly,” they heard faintly.

“Moody! Have you seen Hermione and the boys? I can’t seem to find them.”

Harry groaned quietly.

“As a matter of fact, yes, I have. Molly, I need you to fetch Bill. Discreetly, but quickly.”

“What—what’s happened?” she demanded. “Where are the children? Are they all right?”

“They’re fine for now, Molly. Go fetch Bill.”

Still asking questions, Molly’s voice faded; they heard it going back down the stairs, accompanied by Moody’s deeper tones. A light step, however, approached them; Harry frowned, thinking it sounded familiar.

“Ginny!” Ron said grumpily as the redhead came into view. “Go away.”

“Professor Moody implied you’d got into a pickle,” she said with amusement. “Isn’t this where they were keeping that old desk? What’d you do with it?” She frowned. “You look like a pixie got into the flour bin. What happened to you?”

“Harry,” Ron explained helpfully.

Harry groaned. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Didn’t mean to what?” Ginny crouched, examining the powder. “Is this *sawdust*? What the bloody hell did you do to the desk?”

“Reducto,” Harry said uncomfortably.

“Goodness,” Ginny responded with some surprise. “Well.” She peered at the bottoms of her shoes. “I think I’ll leave you three to your cursed sawdust before I get any on me.”

Ron grumbled something about sisters, but Harry missed it entirely. Ginny’s skirt really showed off her curves from the back. “Ow!” yelled Ron suddenly. “What the bloody hell was that for?”

“Language, Ron,” Hermione nagged him.

“Oy, what’s the big deal? Why don’t you ever correct anyone else?” Ron folded his arms. “My sister just used the same language and you didn’t even glare at *her!*”

“Your sister,” Hermione responded primly, “is not you.”

“Yeah, well, that’s bloody obvious! Ow! So what? And stop hitting me!”

“Not until you start behaving!”

Harry rolled his eyes.

1.19

“Well. What have we got here?”

“Bill!” Ron said happily, breaking off his argument with Hermione mid-sentence. “Wow, you got here fast.”

Harry looked up from where he had been using the tip of his wand to draw in the sawdust. Bill had arrived, ponytail swinging gently as he shook his head. “How do you get yourself into these things, Harry? Well.” He crouched down to examine the sawdust. “You really did a number on this desk, you know that?”

Harry nodded guiltily. “I didn’t exactly mean to—uh—blow it up. Not quite so thoroughly, anyhow.”

“Didn’t think you did,” Bill replied with a smile. “I never met anyone who thought sitting around waiting for a curse-breaker to come rescue them was fun.” He examined a pinch of the sawdust under a large magnifying glass, which had runes carved all around its gilded rim. “Well. There was this one couple I worked with, in Egypt. We used to catch them sneaking together into partially-cleared tombs...well. Never mind that.” He stood and stretched for a moment. “Nice control of the spell, though. Very fine. Very even. And I don’t see any other matter in here—looks like good focus, too. What did you use?”

“Reducto,” Harry answered a bit sheepishly.

Bill blinked at him several times. “Interesting.” He turned to the bag he had brought with him, a small leather bag that reminded Harry of doctors’ bags in old picture-books. “Ron, is Charlie still living here?”

“Yeah,” Ron replied after a moment. “Through next Tuesday at least.”

“Good. He promised me a drink before he left, but what with one thing and another, I thought maybe I’d missed him leaving.” He frowned down into his bag. “You’re sure it was a *reducto*, Harry?”

“Quite,” Harry replied.

“Ah huh. Then...” Bill pulled out a tray with a series of depressions in it, like the watercolor palettes Harry had used in primary. With a small glass rod, he carefully deposited sawdust into each well without letting it touch his skin. Then he pulled a small potions case out of the bag, and uncorking a series of bottles in succession, he carefully let one drop of each fall in each successive depression, into the sawdust within.

The first few did nothing Harry could see, but the fourth caused the sawdust to turn a violent green, and the sixth caused a small bang and a puff of purple smoke. Bill did not appear alarmed by either reaction, but instead calmly took out a strip of paper with an array of differently-colored squares on it and compared it to the green sawdust. “Hm,” he said thoughtfully. “Interesting.”

“Er, what’s interesting?” Ron asked nervously.

“It’s an unusual result—not a bad one,” Bill added. “But you don’t normally see a Klaus-Hauptman Level Two focus pattern without a Pearson-Neiman catchhook enabler. It tends to produce instability if it’s introduced to a rank five detoxifier—hence the bang.” He frowned at Harry thoughtfully. “I wonder if somehow Harry’s spell caused it to destabilize and mutate from a Level Three, or maybe a ring-pattern focus field. It’s theoretically possible for a tuned ring-pattern to destabilize in the presence of a like-tuned power trigger. Maybe your *reducto* just happened to hit on the right modulation.”

Harry just nodded—having no idea what Bill meant at all—but Hermione broke her silence. “What about back-flux from an overloaded auto-feedback ring? Couldn’t that have knocked out the enabler?”

Bill looked up at the girl to Harry’s right with a faintly startled expression. “Could have done,” he replied slowly. “Unlikely—but no worse a theory than the others.” He returned to his bag and rummaged through it. “Either way, the focus pattern is now a weak point we can use to get at it. Rank five detoxifiers are uncommon, but not rare. The trick will be to keep from blowing up you lot too.”

“Er...” Ron said uncertainly.

Bill grinned at his brother. “Don’t worry too much, Ron. It just means taking care to ground you properly first.” He took out a large, ornate bottle with a bright blue stopper. “First, let’s get this junk off you before it sets up housekeeping.”

He pulled the stopper on the bottle and tapped its jeweled ornamentation with his wand in a careful pattern before touching the tip of his wand to the sawdust before him. The bottle slowly began to glow, and then started sucking in the sawdust. As the area near it cleared, sawdust from further out skittered towards the bottle, and finally it began sucking the sawdust off the three teenagers. Harry squirmed and heard Hermione giggle—it rather tickled.

Eventually the bottle gave a sort of burp and Bill stuck the stopper back on. “There,” he said, sounding satisfied. “Now, put these on.” He handed out three necklaces made of small stones with runic carvings on them.

Harry regarded his with a mixture of curiosity and wariness, since it made his hand itch just to hold it. He turned it over in his hands, feeling the skin crawl on his fingers whether they touched it—but oddly, it was not a *bad* sensation, nor even an uncomfortable

one. It reminded him of warm air on very cold skin.

“Go on, Harry, it won’t hurt you,” Bill said reassuringly.

Looking up, Harry saw the others had put theirs on; quickly, he followed suit. The odd sensations intensified as the necklace settled around his neck, but before he could say anything, Bill had sprayed them all with a liquid that smelled faintly of mold and metal. He felt his skin prickle as the drops hit, and then two things happened nearly simultaneously. The first was a feeling of lightness, like shedding a heavy bag or restrictive clothing. The second was a bolt of pain shooting through Harry’s scar and seemingly straight through his head. He cried out and clutched at his head, but the pain receded almost instantly. As it did, the necklack about Harry’s neck cracked; he touched it with a finger and it crumbled where he touched.

“It’s inert now,” Bill said. “Brush it off if you like. It doesn’t matter.”

“Thank you,” Harry told the eldest Weasley son politely as he took off his robes and shook off the remnants of the necklace.

“Yeah, thanks,” Ron added. “I don’t know what we’d’ve done without you around.”

Bill smiled crookedly at Ron. “Oh, I’m sure Moody would have thought of something.” He picked up the jar containing the ex-desk and nodded to them all. “Now I’ve really got to be getting back to work. Ron, I’m sure I’ll see you later. The rest of you too, maybe.” He gave them a last smile and a wave, and disappeared back in the direction of the stairs.

The three teenagers looked at each other for a minute or so. “Well, I guess that’s that,” Ron said finally. “Hermione, the next time Harry takes it into his head to destroy something, remind me to hide behind something, okay?”

“Hey!” Harry protested. “I didn’t exactly intend—”

“yeah, well, you managed it anyways,” Ron pointed out grumpily. He stood and started stomping off in the direction Bill had gone.

Harry stared after him, bemused, then turned to Hermione. “What—”

“Later,” she said quietly. “Come on, Harry. This dust itches. I’m going to have to take another bath to get it off, aren’t I?”

“Augh!” Harry squirmed, suddenly aware of how the back of his neck itched. “Hermione! Did you have to mention it?”

She giggled. “Yes,” she told him. “Now go. I want that bath, and I bet you want one now too.”

1.20

Harry stepped out of his room, sighing in relief. He really did feel much better after a bath and a change of robes. He hadn’t been aware of just how much he’d itched until it stopped itching. *Now where might Hermione and Ron have got off to?* He turned in the direction of the most likely place to start looking for his witch friend—the library—and then yelped as a hand materialized out of a dark corner and grabbed him. He had his wand out and a curse half-formed when the owner of the hand stepped out of the shadows.

“*Constant vigilance, boy!*” Moody growled at him.

“Professor Moody.” Harry did not drop his wand-tip, but kept it up. He never knew quite how to react to the old auror.

“Good, Potter,” the man told him, looking at the wand pointed at him. “Come with me a moment. I’d like to speak with you.”

Warily Harry followed him down the hallway, past the library—where a quick glance confirmed he was right about where to find Hermione—and to a small office. Moody waved him into the room but kept the door open to the hall, a gesture for which Harry thought he was rather grateful.

“Sir?” he asked when Moody continued to stare at him silently.

The older man shook his head as if to clear it. “Potter,” he said slowly, “You must be aware by now that you have a fair deal of magical power.” It was not a question, but he paused like he was waiting for an answer.

Harry shrugged helplessly. “I guess,” he said finally. “I mean, I don’t feel all that powerful, but...”

“But,” Moody said with a nod. “At your age, you simply should not be capable of some of the things you’ve done. I examined that desk before you blew it up, you know. I know it had a Person-Neiman enabler on it—one that you apparently blew right out.”

Again he paused as if waiting for Harry to respond, but Harry didn’t even know what an enabler was. “Er... if you say so.”

Moody chuckled. “You really have no clue what I’m talking about, do you?” He chuckled again. “Look, Potter...” He paused and rubbed his face with one grizzled hand. “Potter, Albus seems to think you’re important. And if Albus thinks you’re important, you probably are—and that makes you important to me.” He paused again, sighed briefly, and went on. “It’s painfully clear to me that you don’t have a clue of your power, and that anything you know about defending yourself, you’ve taught yourself.”

Harry nodded warily. “It is true that I mostly learned what I do know through teaching the DA last year.” He didn’t comment on the bit about power—Moody was off his rocker if he thought Harry was much more powerful than, say, Ginny, but everyone knew the man was a little off his rocker.

“I can’t do much until you’ve finished healing completely,” Moody said with a glance at Harry’s bandages, “but once you’re back at full, I’d be willing to train you, if you’d be willing to endure my methods. Don’t say yes yet, Potter,” he added suddenly. “Give it a good think over. You’re far from healed, yet. You’ve got plenty of time.”

“Thank you for the offer, sir,” Harry said quietly and sincerely. “I’ll think about it for sure.”

Moody nodded abruptly and stumped for the door. “See that you do.” He stopped when he came even with Harry and said suddenly, eyes still on the door, “You’re a good lad, Potter, and you’ve the makings of a fine man. I’d like to see you survive this war.” He left before Harry could figure out a reply, leaving the teen staring after him in bemusement.

It took Harry a minute to get hold of himself again, but when he had, he set off back towards the library, where he had spotted Hermione. “Hello, Harry,” she greeted him as he came up to the table she had her things spread out on. “Feel better now?”

He nodded slowly. “Hermione,” he asked her thoughtfully. “What was all that, about enablers and what-not, earlier?”

“Oh,” she said around the end of her quill, where she was chewing on it as she read her book. “They’re curse components. Different curse component types.”

“Oh.” Harry nodded. “Right, then.”

“Bill was just surprised because it takes an awfully strong curse to knock out that kind of enabler,” Hermione went on absently, still reading the book. “He hasn’t spent as much time around you, that’s all.”

“Er.” Harry stared at her. “I didn’t think I was that... you know... powerful. Or anything.”

That finally got her to raise her head. “You’ve always been a powerful wizard, Harry,” she told him. “I expect you’ll be really quiet impressive when you’re Dumbledore’s age.” He really didn’t know what to say to that, and after a moment she went on. “Besides, what Moody said got you angry, didn’t it? About your spells being unimpressive?”

Reluctantly Harry nodded. “A bit.”

“Well, then. A wizard’s spells are always more powerful when their emotions are running high.” She went back to her reading.

“Oh.” Harry mulled that over. “I guess.” That would explain how he managed to consistently perform better under stress than in the classroom. *I guess I just need that extra emotional boost. Huh.* He started thinking how he could use that to his advantage. *Wonder if Ron would do better if I got him pissed off in class practicals, rather than worried or embarrassed?* Maybe he could figure out how to bait Malfoy... “Hey,” he said suddenly. “What was up with Ron earlier? You said ‘later’...”

Hermione looked up from her book for a moment. “He was embarrassed,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Huh? Harry blinked at her. “Why?”

“Ron idolizes Bill,” she explained. “And then you put him in a situation where he had to be rescued by him. I know it wasn’t intentional,” she went on, “but right now all he sees is that he was embarrassed in front of his really cool big brother, and it was because of you.”

“That’s not fair!” Harry complained. “I mean, for goodness’ sake, we had an adult—an auror, no less!—right there! You’re the one who suggested the idea! How is it my fault and not yours?”

Hermione shrugged. “I never said it was fair. And you’ll note Ron isn’t here hanging out with me either.” She put down her quill and touched his arm. “He’s embarrassed right now. give him a day or two, he’ll get over it.”

“This is stupid,” Harry grumbled.

“Yes,” Hermione agreed, picking up her quill again, and returning to her book. “It is.”

“Arguh!” Harry stood and narrowly kept himself from hitting something. “Argh!” Turning, he limped angrily out of the library. Why did everyone have to make things hard on him?

He barely noticed where he was going until he fetched up in the doorway on the downstairs potions laboratory.

Snape was there, of course, head raising to study the new arrival in his domain. “Potter,” he said with a sneer that looked slightly surprised to Harry. “What are you doing here?”

“Getting away,” Harry told him. “Er, do you have something that needs chopping, maybe?” Snape’s eyebrows rose. “Or crushing, or really anything destructive.” The man’s eyebrows rose further, and Harry felt he needed to explain. “I’ve already tried destroying something with magic, and that ended...rather poorly. So I thought maybe you had something I could cut up.”

Snape’s eyebrows seemed to have risen as far as they could, for they rose no further. Instead, the man’s eyes widened slightly, and after a moment of studying Harry (during which the teen noticed his stirring never faltered) he said, “Indeed. There are California water beetles in a jar on my desk. They need to be crushed into powder and bottled.”

Harry nodded shortly and approached the desk near the far wall, carefully skirting the man’s active work area. Just as Snape had said, there was a large jar labeled ‘*Dytiscus californicus*’ in a careful hand. He picked it up with care and carried it to the table across from the one Snape was using.

“Er—sir?” he said when he’d carried the jar over.

“There should be an instruction sheet on my esk, also labeled with the species name,” Snape replied in a half-absent voice. When Harry glanced over, he could see the man’s lips moving as he stirred. *Better not bother him again. I’m sure I can manage to follow a simple set of directions for crushing beetles.*

A quick survey of Snape’s desk produced a piece of parchment, folded twice over, and labeled with ‘Liga’s, New York, New York: Fine potions supplies since 1772’. Since this was the only item that looked even remotely like it might contain preparation instructions for beetles, Harry turned it over cautiously, and was rewarded with a label in the same careful script: ‘California water beetle (*Dytiscus californicus*) preparation instructions’. He picked it up and unfolded it.

Dear Mr Snape,

We thank you for ordering from Liga’s of New York. Unfortunately, we are unable to fill your order for 200 vials of individual crushed California water beetles at this time. We have included, instead, a standard jar of 250 whole dried beetles of the same species, and you may find appended instructions for preparing them as requested.

Sincerely,

Charlise Russo

Manager

Instructions: Using a standard size marble mortar and pestle, place one beetle in mortar and crush to powder. Brush crushed powder into a six ounce (6oz) vial using a horse or boar-hair brush (a standard pastry brush from your local supermarket may be substituted if neither are available). Use appropriate-size tongs to remove whole beetles from the jar to prevent breakage. Seal jars with wax when finished.

The edge of the parchment near the letter portion had been crinkled, like Snape had crushed it in a fist and then flattened it back out. Picturing Snape's reaction to the letter, Harry suspected that was exactly what had happened.

Well. The first question was, apparently, how big were these things? Russo seemed to believe they would fit in a six-ounce vial after they'd been crushed, but that didn't help Harry too much. Shrugging, he carefully broke the plastic seal on the jar with his fingernail—thinking as he did that Liga's seemed rather more Mugglish than English stores, if they used plastic seals—and unscrewed the lid. Peering inside, he was caught by the appearance of the beetles, even in the dim interior of the opaque jar. As long as his palm was wide, they glittered with greens and blues all along their narrow carapaces.

He put the lid back on after another moment of admiring them and went looking for the implements listed in the letter. The vials were easy enough to locate; there was an entire area of shelving devoted to boxes of vials in different sizes, and all Harry had to do was take down five of the ones marked '6 oz—50 ct'. The mortar and pestle were more difficult, but not by much; Harry located a cleaned porcelain mortar drying upside-down on a cloth and investigated the cupboards nearby. Surely enough, the cupboard directly below held mortars and pestles in all manner of sizes and materials. It took some work to find the marble ones, but once he did, there turned out to only be three sizes: a small one whose cup would not fit even one beetle, a large one the size of a small cauldron itself, and a medium one a little bigger than the porcelain ones they used in class. Harry lifted that one out, mildly surprised at its weight but unwilling to risk a lightening charm lest he damage its (unknown) magical properties.

That left a pair of tongs and a brush. Reasoning that both were long and flat and best stored lying down, Harry began searching drawers, starting where he had found the mortar and pestle. Tongs he found in the fourth cabinet down—and again, he spent a moment staring at a dizzying array of implements before finally selecting an appropriate pair—but brushes. . . . Finally he was reduced to asking. "Sir? Where might I find a horse or boar's hair brush?"

Snape didn't even look up from his work. Harry was about to repeat the question when the man finally said, "Check the back of the top cupboard two to the right of the sink." His voice was highly distracted, making Harry wonder just what he was brewing.

The cabinet in question was full of long boxes, each neatly labeled, but otherwise anonymous. Fetching one of the stools to climb on, Harry carefully clambered onto it and began sorting through the boxes. Soon enough, at the back of the second shelf, he found boars-hair brushes in one, two, and three inch widths. He removed the one-inch brush and clambered back down, breathing a quiet sigh of relief when his feet were on the ground again.

Once his materials were assembled, crushing the beetles was relatively easy work. Their shells were paper-thin and crushed easily, but with a very satisfying *crunching* sound. Quite happy with his assignment, Harry set to crunching beetles in earnest, mentally replacing each with the face of Dumbledore or Ron as he worked, crushing their heads into fine, glittering powder before sweeping it into a vial and starting anew.

Contrary to appearances, Severus Snape was highly conscious of his son's presence in the laboratory. From the moment his son had appeared in the doorway, he had watched him surreptitiously, playing the part of highly-distracted brewer to see what he would do.

To Severus's mild surprise, Harry did not take the tacit invitation to go through his desk, as he knew a Slytherin or even most Gryffindors would have done. Instead, the boy examined everything from a distance, worked out which was most likely that which he sought, and checked his guess. It displayed either a shocking lack of curiosity about another's business, or a surprisingly-high regard for personal privacy. Thinking of the number of scrapes Potter had got into by refusing to leave well enough alone, Severus's money was on the latter, which was really quite curious in a boy his age.

Then the boy was able to locate and retrieve the bulk of the materials he required without any prompting whatsoever. When he asked after the brushes, Severus mentally cursed himself for not reading the instructions more carefully, and held his breath the entire time his son—his *injured* son—was perched on a stool. Yet he could not drop what he was doing and assist without also admitting he had put up false pretenses. . . .

As Harry began to crush the beetles, finally, Severus took the opportunity to study the boy. This was the first time he had been in Severus's presence since allowing him to read that damned letter from Lily. He had heard from others—Dumbledore, mostly—that the boy was doing well; Albus had been intending to start Occlumency lessons with him today. He wondered how that had gone, and if it was in any way to blame for the way Harry glared at the beetles, as if they were his personal foes. He could not help but be slightly grateful for whatever had happened, if it meant his son had voluntarily sought him out.

He is my only son, and the only one I am ever like to have, he marveled again in the security of his Occlumency shields. *I have a son. And if I could wish he were different, not so very much a Potter. . . well. I could also have done considerably worse, given my options.*

Not that he would ever admit it to anyone but himself. And possibly Albus Dumbledore. But only if he guessed right first.

The refrain—*I have a son*—ran through Snape's thoughts as he finished the potion he had been working on and stepped aside to allow it to cool. He thought of Lily's plea—*“Be kind to him, Severus, please, for my sake. And if you cannot be kind, then at least do not be cruel. I know he looks and acts very much like James—but that is my doing, not his; please do not blame him for it.”* Watching Harry crush beetles with a single-minded intensity, Severus was stuck with a sudden desire to find out exactly what was going on in the boy's mind. Clearly the boy was angry with someone—who?

He made his way over to Potter's work area and stopped in front of him, but the

boy did not look up. Finally Severus summoned his powers of innate legilimency and said quietly, “Potter.”

It worked; the boy’s head darted up and his eyes met Severus’s. He forced himself to remain still and unthreatening, hands both visible and relaxed, as Potter flinched back from him. Seeing the reaction for what it was—the instinctive, protective move of an abused creature—Severus was startled by the depths of his own immediate desire for retribution on the people who had harmed his son. *Control*, he reminded himself. This was still Potter; the boy had no need of yet another protector.

But the majority of his attention was taken with the images he had seen in Potter’s mind in those few moments before the boy dropped his eyes again. The face of the headmaster, superimposed on the beetle in the mortar. Anger, gut-churning anger, that knew it was irrational but found itself none the weaker for it. But what turned Severus’s stomach into ice and made his bowels clench was the underlying emotion: a terrible self-hatred, that *knew* the boy himself to be at fault, that saw and mercilessly judged the boy, and saw him to be lacking. Contemptible. *This is what drove him to turn his wand on himself. Is he even aware of its existence?*

“Yes, sir?” The voice that came out of the boy’s mouth was polite and controlled. *Perhaps he is a better actor than I ever gave him credit for.*

In that moment, he decided to see if the boy would tell him the truth. “Whose face is it that you are seeing, Potter?” he asked silkily, trying to keep his voice from becoming unkindly. “Whose face are you crushing with such fervor?”

Potter blinked at him, and for a moment he thought the boy would refuse to answer. But then, he said warily, “Ron, mostly.”

Not a lie, Severus could tell, not entirely. And yet, not the whole truth. How very Slytherin. “And what has the young Weasley done this time, to merit such punishment?” Again he kept his voice light, with a hint of humor, but not sarcastic.

Potter’s face grew even more wary. “Er... nothing, really. Just... stupid stuff. You know, being sixteen.” The boy shrugged. “It’s all stupid, really.”

‘I shouldn’t be upset about it, because I’m not supposed to get upset,’ Snape heard. “I see,” he said neutrally. “I am certainly grateful for this *nothing*, which has led to my beetles being so nicely ground.” He smirked slightly at the confusion in Potter’s eyes. “When you feel you have completed your catharsis, or when you run out of beetles, please let me know, and I will show you how to seal and label the vials.”

“Yes, sir,” Potter responded automatically, still watching him warily. In the boy’s eyes he caught a glimpse of a memory—the boy was helping his aunt with canning, but was not being neat enough for her; in retribution she forced the boy to remove the jars from the boiling water with his bare hands.

He turned away abruptly before the urge to hex something became overwhelming. “I will be working at my desk,” he said brusquely, striding away. He could feel Potter’s eyes on him, but refused to turn.

I do not know what to do with him, he admitted to himself. Of all the children at Hogwarts, why did *this* one have to be his son? Why not... Draco, or Blaise? *It could have*

been Crabbe, he reminded himself. Except, of course, it could not have been; Lily was the only woman he had ever. . . .

He forced himself to peruse his desk. Draft of first week's lessons. . . half-written letter demanding the potions supplier either send him the correct order or refund his money. . . . Well, Potter had taken care of that problem for him, although he would have to inspect the boy's work. Still, he mind demand a partial refund to cover labor and materials. Never mind Potter was doing it; they didn't know that.

He pushed aside some half-corrected papers—during the summers he kept his hand in by editing for one of the smaller Potions journals, an American one that saw his credentials and did not care about his politics—and dug out a fresh sheet of paper. For his private use, he kept a supply of the Muggle stuff; no point wasting his money when a quick trip to Muggle London would net him the same volume for a tenth the price. The Americans would not recognize the insult anyway.

“Professor?”

Snape looked up and realized Potter was standing before his desk, fidgeting. “Yes, Potter?” he growled, slipping the half-composed third draft, and its previous versions, away into a drawer. Potter's eyes followed them with a puzzled look, and Snape fought down the urge to either growl at the boy again or explain.

“You said you would show me how to seal the vials,” Potter replied tentatively.

“Ah, yes.” How could he have forgotten? He stood and made for Potter's work area, the boy trailing behind him. Confused, he looked around. “What have you done with the remaining beetles?”

“Oh. Er. There. . . the jar was empty, so I washed it out and put it to dry,” Potter replied, pointing at a drying rack. Surely enough, there was the jar, neatly washed, with its label removed.

“And the vials?”

Potter pointed to the boxes sitting on the work table. “I wasn't sure what to do with them—leaving them sitting around seemed like it was asking for trouble.” He shrugged. “Figured it'd keep them from breaking.”

Snape pulled the lids off the boxes. Surely enough, inside all but the last one were rows of filled vials. The sixth box had only a few filled vials. Apparently, the Americans were also incapable of counting.

It occurred to Severus in that moment that Potter had, voluntarily, crushed all two hundred sixty-one beetles, rather than stopping after forty or so as he had been expecting. Had the boy been that angry?

He looked over at the child in question, who was biting his lip and shifting his weight nervously. Curious, Snape lowered his Occlumency shields and met the boy's eyes.

—he saw himself, berating the boy for incompetency, for taking too long, for interrupting him. Between rants, he saw flashes of another man and a half-familiar woman, shouting similar things—

The boy is afraid he will be punished for his work, he realized abruptly. “Come,” he said.

He showed the boy where the wax was kept, and the spell to use to soften it and mould it around the vial’s stopper. Immediately the boy began sealing one box full of vials, but seemed nonplussed when Severus removed another box full of wax and began working beside him. He refrained from snapping at the boy for his twitchiness, but only barely.

“You don’t have to, sir,” Potter said abruptly. “You can go up to dinner. I promise not to touch anything.”

Startled, Severus glanced at the clock. Indeed, it was dinner time; doubtless the others had already started.

Potter had apparently caught the motion, as he said in a tone of one explaining, “Mrs Weasley called down about ten minutes ago. I didn’t realize you hadn’t heard.”

“Surely you must wish dinner,” Severus replied, confused. Why hadn’t the boy left yet?

Potter shrugged. “Should have left more time for sealing and labeling these, shouldn’t I? There’ll be leftovers.” With a shock, Severus realized his tone was not sarcasm, as he had first thought, but self-deprecation. *The boy believes I will make him miss dinner in order to finish this task.*

Decisively, he set down his sealing wax. Potter calmly picked it up and set it in front of himself, then slid Severus’s box back into his waiting queue as well. “Will you show me where you keep the labels before you leave?”

Severus blinked, then frowned. “No.” Potter’s shoulders fell slightly, and Severus’s confusion increased. “Come.” When Potter turned away from the table but did not set down the wax, he frowned harder. “Put that down.”

CHAPTER 2



In the near-distant future

2.1

“Lupin,” Snape acknowledged the man standing in the doorway.

“Snape.” The werewolf moved cautiously into the room—not the caution of a lesser entering the territory of a superior, or even one afraid of another’s reaction, Snape noted thoughtfully. No, Lupin moved with the caution of a man who both knew he was in unfamiliar territory and expected the unexpected. *No wonder he is the only one of the three left alive.*

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Snape loaded the question with sarcasm.

Lupin smiled slightly, rather than flushing as he would have ten years before. “I have leaving on assignment. Owls will be able to find me, but otherwise, I expect I’ll be out of reach for some time.”

“I am certain I will survive in your absence, but it is *so* good of you to bring me the good news.”

Lupin’s smile faded. “I don’t down you, Snape. But what I’m here for is... keep an eye on Harry, won’t you?”

Snape raised an eyebrow.

2.2

“What do you have there, Harry?”

The young man in question glanced up at the speaker. “Hogwarts records.”

“Really?” The young woman who had come in settled down in a nearby chair and picked up a book. Opening it, she blinked at the rows and rows of spidery entries. “Wow, really. For what?”

He rubbed his eyes, first taking off his thick glasses to do so. “An idea of mine, which seemed brilliant at the time but now just feels stupid.” He put his glasses back on, picked up the ledger he had been copying from, and began working again. “You’re in the same Muggle program—did you do that population modeling problem?”

“The extra credit one? You know me, Harry. What do you think?”

He chuckled. “Right—Hermione, turn down extra credit? Anyway. What population did you use?”

“Um.” She thought back. “Some African tribe—I can’t remember the name now. Why?” She looked at the notations he was making and her mouth flew open. “Oh. No. Tell me you’re not. . . .”

"I am," he confirmed. "Only it seemed easier in the beginning. I mean, all the records are right here! Parents, parents' magical status, whether or not they chose to attend—what could be easier?" He rubbed his forehead again. "Only I hadn't counted on the part where it requires reading this damn much writing, and all of it bloody small too."

Hermione peered at the ledger entries. "How far back are you going?"

"The assignment said to get at least ten generations if possible, although with wizarding lifespans I'm not sure if Hogwarts was open that far back for some of these families." Harry turned the page. "I also hadn't counted on how many more students there were even a few decades ago."

"Really?" Hermione frowned. "That's odd. I wonder why no one ever mentions it."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know, although I wondered too. But look—here's our class, see? Forty of us were Sorted, although there's only thirty-nine after Su's mum pulled her out. But look here—this is Dumbledore's class."

She leaned over to look and gasped. "Harry—there must be a hundred names here!"

"One hundred and twelve," he confirmed. "I counted."

"Wow." She blinked at the list, then shook her head. "But—that means Hogwarts is under half the size it used to be!"

Harry nodded. "Furthermore, it wasn't always the only large school in Britain." He leaned back. "The more I look at this, the more I want to start digging and figure out what happened. Populations don't just shrink like that for no cause."

They looked at each other for a minute, then Hermione's face broke into a grin. "Want some help?"

2.3

2.4

"Hello, Severus."

Snape glanced up to find the headmaster of Hogwarts standing in his doorway. "Albus. If you are looking for Potter, you just missed him. I believe he is headed for the library."

"Yes, indeed—I passed him on my way here. He tells me he successfully brewed—what was it? Ah, yes, the De-Caffinating Draught." The old man smiled. "But it is you I came to see. How are you, my boy?"

"As well as ever I am." Severus wiped off his hands and moved his potion off the fire. "What can I do for you, Headmaster?"

"As it happens, I was wondering if you would evaluate an essay for me. You received an O on your Transfiguration NEWT, did you not?" The old man produced a roll of parchment and held it out. "I know it is not your field, but I would like your opinion. I fear I distrust my own."

Severus took the roll from him and opened it. "This is your handwriting."

"Yes. I could not bring the original." The Headmaster folded his hands before him. "What do you think, Severus?"

“Have you shown this to Minerva? It is clearly one of her students; I recognize the assignment it is based on.” He continued to scan the text as he talked.

“Not yet. She is still at the Joint European Transfiguration Meetings.”

“Ah. Is that this week?” He reached the end and allowed the parchment to roll back up. “She will want to see this. She will certainly remember a student of this calibre; the writing seems familiar, but I cannot place it.” He tapped the roll thoughtfully with his palm. “If he is able to prove his conjecture—or hers, I suppose—he could easily be published in the Annals of Thaumaturgy. Even as it is, I would encourage him to submit it to one of the smaller Transfiguration journals. Work of this level should not remain unpublished.” He opened the roll again. “I am particularly intrigued by the parallels he draws between conjuration and the Patronus Charm. Successfully proving that link could open up a whole new avenue for teaching those who are otherwise unable to produce a corporeal Patronus.”

“That is what I thought,” Albus said happily. “I am at a loss for how to prove such a thing without a thaumaturge, however.”

“Indeed.” Severus considered the problem, eyes narrowed. “It bears thinking on, at least.” He raised an eyebrow at the Headmaster. “*Do* you know the author’s identity?”

“Ah. I am afraid I lied to you, Severus.” The older man withdrew another roll of parchment from his robes and handed it over.

Severus recognized the handwriting at once; it took a few moments for the significance to sink in. “Are you saying Potter has been plagiarizing?” Even he was shocked; plagiarism was such a Slytherin thing to do.

“No.” Albus shook his head. “He asked me if I’d be willing to read it over; apparently he and Miss Granger disagreed—vociferously, if the voices I heard were any indication—as to whether it fulfilled the assignment, or was even plausible. When I asked, he showed me his notes.” He met Severus’s gaze. “This is, indeed, his own work.”

“Minerva will have her hands full this year, then,” Severus commented, handing both rolls back. “I doubt Potter need worry about the assignment; Minerva would not fail such work if she had asked for an essay on Animagi.”

Albus nodded. “I did tell him I believed she would accept it.”

He could not resist asking. “Did Mr Potter have any ideas on how to *prove* his conjecture?”

“I believe so.” Albus chuckled. “The next two years could prove fascinating, Severus.”

“Indeed,” he muttered, sitting down hard.

“Well. I must return this to Harry. Thank you.”

2.5

Harry frowned at the textbook and then back at the paper before him. Sighing, he pulled out a clean piece of paper and started the calculations over. Once more they came out wrong.

Irritated, he shoved them aside and turned back to his potions essay. He had all the research done, but it just wasn’t coming together. If it were any other class, he’d have asked

for help by now, but he was uncomfortably aware that he would need to manage almost entirely solo this year. “Dammit, what am I missing?” he asked the air.

“Excuse me, Potter?”

He glanced up in shock to find the Potions Master himself standing there. “Sir!” He quickly cleared books off one of the chairs. “What can I do for you?”

“Working on the summer assignment?” Without waiting for an answer he picked up the papers. “Hm. Thorough, at least.”

Telling himself not to look a gift Potions Master in the nose, Harry gestured to the papers. “I feel like I’m missing something obvious, but I don’t know what.”

Snape flipped rapidly through the pages. “Stirring.”

“What?” Harry peered over the man’s wrist. “I don’t understand.”

“All but one is stirred deosil, two for six times and one for twelve.”

“Huh? What? I still don’t understand.” He grabbed his books again. “I couldn’t find anything—”

“You are supposed to know this already!” The professor glared down at Harry.

“I am?” Harry blinked briefly, then reached for his assembled notes. “What term, sir?”

“Not here!” He stopped flipping through the parchments, staring at the man in utter confusion. “Blast it, Potter, it’s in the ministry guidelines!”

“Guidelines for what, sir?” Now he was completely lost.

Snape sat down and rubbed his forehead. “The ministry publishes guidelines for what we can expect Muggle-born students to know coming in,” he said slowly. “You are telling me that you do not know the term ‘deosil’ or the significance of six and twelve?”

Slowly Harry shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Wait here.” Snape returned in a few minutes with a slim volume in his hands. He thrust it abruptly at Harry. “How much of this do you not know?”

Harry opened the volume and began to read. After a page or so he looked up at Snape. “Er, rather a lot of it, sir. And at least some of it is stuff I was taught was false in primary.”

Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. “Would you be willing to read through and write down what you do not know, and what you did not know as a first year? It would appear we have a . . . problem.”

2.6

“Ah, there you are, Mr Potter.”

“Hello, sir.” Harry didn’t bother turning around; instead, he lifted his head as the Headmaster came around the table. “Can I help you, sir?” He was never sure just how to relate to the man these days.

“Just a few minutes of your time, my boy.” The old man lowered himself into a chair opposite Harry with a faint grunt. “I am surprised to see you here alone.”

Harry blushed. “I think Hermione and Ron are, uh...” He stammered to a halt, making the professor chuckle. “And the rest of the Weasleys are at the Burrow, as I’m sure you know.” He shrugged as Dumbledore nodded. “Remus was here earlier, but he’s off doing something else. I don’t mind,” he added quickly. “I get a lot more done this way.”

“What are you doing?” The Headmaster frowned at Harry’s paper. “I thought I knew all the summer assignments.”

Harry flushed again. “Well...Hermione...she pointed out that there’s no rule that says I have to take potions class to sit the NEWT.”

Albus nodded. “Indeed—a fact several Ravenclaws and a few Hufflepuffs use every year, in fact.” He glanced back at Harry’s paper. “But what is this?”

“Well...you’d said I could have as many rooms as I wanted, within reason, including workrooms...” Harry swallowed hard, even as Dumbledore nodded encouragingly. “These are plans for a private potions lab.” He stopped, waiting for the explosion.

“Given the, ah, tensions between you and my Potions Master, this is a good idea,” the old man said thoughtfully, making Harry blink. “May I?” He picked up the drawing. “This isn’t like any lab I’ve seen, however.”

“No, sir.” Harry took a deep breath. “It’s actually modeled off the current standard for Muggle chemistry laboratories.” He pushed the book he’d sent out for across the table. “It occurred to me that the safety considerations are similar, and perhaps I could adapt the ideas.”

“Hm!” The old man stroked his beard. “If it works, perhaps we should renovate the student labs—Poppy and Severus would be delighted to have fewer accidents.” His mouth quirked as Harry stared at him. “Of course, convincing Severus that it works...hmm.”

Encouraged, however, Harry said, “So I can have my lab?”

“If you were living in your ancestral home, Harry, you would have two. I hardly think I can begrudge you a few square feet.” The man winked at him, and Harry relaxed. “However, this segues nicely into what I sought you out for, Harry. I know I told you that you could choose whether to stay here or at Hogwarts, but...well, if you are quite unhappy we can make other arrangements, but it would be rather more convenient if you were to stay at Hogwarts.” Harry stiffened, trying to work out if he minded or not. “Your friends, as I said before, are welcome to visit—only a few times a week, I fear; we don’t want to attract too much attention, but those of us who can apparate to Headquarters will be glad to carry passengers when possible—”

“Why?” Harry interrupted him. “I—I guess I don’t mind, but why?”

“You mean, why am I breaking my word again?” Dumbledore shifted and sighed. “The Order as you know it, Harry, is only the core. The inner circle, as it were. Specifically, they are those members who are committed to the cause and trustworthy enough to have near you.”

Harry stiffened again, then quite deliberately unclenched his jaw. “Is that so?”

“My boy.” Albus reached out, then drew back. “We need to... You know the Prophecy now. If you fall into the wrong hands, you give Voldemort more than just a propaganda coup.”

Harry nodded slowly. "I'm not some weapon to be protected until it's time to use me, though!"

"No, you are not," Dumbledore agreed. "You are a key player in this war, more so than I am." At Harry's protest he shook his head. "Ultimately, I am replaceable—by you, in a few years, if nothing else. If I fall, the Order will go on. You, on the other hand—so long as you live, you are the key to ending this war. And should you die—it is unclear where that leaves us. I should not care to test it."

Harry nodded. "I understand."

"I have no intentions of asking you to stand meekly by while the rest of us fight—whatever Molly may want. But that discussion is for another day," he added, shifting and sighing. "Remind me to have it with you if I forget." Harry nodded, and Dumbledore nodded back. "Now, then. There are Order members that are...rather less trustworthy than the ones you are familiar with. You are thinking that would take some doing," he added with a chuckle, and Harry forced his face back to neutral. "No, it is quite all right—you are, I believe, justified. No, I mean trustworthy in a limited sense. While Mungdungus and Diggle may not be the most reliable fellows, I can trust them not to...to have your best interests at heart, or at least no malice."

"You have people in the Order who want to hurt me?" Harry asked incredulously. "Well, besides Snape, I mean."

"Of course," Dumbledore answered him calmly. "No one but the two of us knows your importance as anything other than a figurehead and a target. And have you never heard the saying 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend?' These are not Order members the way the Weasleys are, or even Diggle is, mind you," he explained further. "But—perhaps it will be easier to think of them as allies, or...auxiliary members."

Harry nodded slowly. "I suppose I understand."

"Well. Our usual meeting place has been compromised, and we have a few members who really must be...relocated...after they make their reports. This is the only location we have that we feel is safe for everybody—except you. Not while they are here."

Harry looked down at his book. "Which is why you're packing me off to Hogwarts."

"Which is why I am requesting that, in the interests of the safety of everyone involved, you return to Hogwarts for the near future," Albus corrected kindly. This time he did place a hand atop Harry's restless fingers. "If you truly object, Harry, I will find another way."

"No," Harry said hastily, "I'll go. I don't mind. I just wanted to understand, that's all."

"Ah." Dumbledore nodded to him. "Perfectly understandable." He glanced back down at the sketch he held. "Convincing Hogwarts to produce this during the summer may take a little while—"

"No rush," Harry said, again hastily. "I figure I can do most of the enchanting and stuff with a little research. Mostly it's just variations on things I know how to do anyhow." He bit his lip. "I thought maybe I might use the Room of Requirement in the meantime?"

"Of course!" Dumbledore said happily. "You are welcome to use any of the public areas of Hogwarts as you please, within reason of course. I merely wished to be sure you did

not expect such a room to be instantly available on your arrival.”

“Of course not!” Harry replied, horrified. “I didn’t know it was possible at all. I just figured I’d draw out what would be perfect, then choose whatever came closest.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Hogwarts is magical, my boy. Given sufficient time, she can produce any room we can describe to her—within reason, naturally.”

Harry blinked. “You mean—Hogwarts is like one huge Room of Requirement?”

“Oh, no!” Dumbledore assured him. “Most of the first few floors, and perhaps the first level or so of the dungeons, are quite fixed. We can change things, of course, but it takes quite a concerted, conscious effort—like modifying any building. Beyond that, Hogwarts can only produce rooms, not fixtures, paintings, or even furniture. That is all up to us.”

Harry relaxed. “You said ‘in the summer’ earlier,” he said thoughtfully. “Would it be easier to wait until term?”

“Not in any real sense,” the old man replied. “Hogwarts merely has more energy available to her during term, so any changes take less long. This time of year, depending on what other workrooms you desire, it may take as long as two weeks for them to all show up. During term, it might take as little as a day—four days at the outside.”

“Where does the energy come from?” Harry wanted to know. He pictured Hogwarts as a huge bloodsucking—magicsucking leech and shuddered.

Dumbledore chuckled again. “Nowhere terrible. All living things exude magic. Magical beings exude more. Magic is given off in every failed spell as well. Moreover, beings give off more magic—leak more, if you will—when they are emotional and when they are quite active. Pack several hundred magical teenagers into one building, and there is enough leakage that rearranging a few rooms is trivial.”

“Huh.” Harry considered the notion. “Well, if you’re sure...?” He shrugged when Dumbledore nodded. “There are a few other rooms I’d like. What do you need, and by when?”

“When matters little,” Dumbledore replied. “And as for what...” He tapped a finger on the sketch Harry had made. “I can give Hogwarts as much or as little direction as you feel necessary. At the least, I need to know number and size of rooms. And don’t worry about square footage,” he added. “Hogwarts has it to spare. She’ll be happier having it used than lying idle.”

“In that case...” Harry’s eyes narrowed. Perhaps he could request that library, after all... “When did you want me to move?” he asked suddenly, realizing Dumbledore was still sitting there. “Did you need me to go now?”

Chuckling, the man shook his head, and Harry let himself relax slightly. “No. Tomorrow night, or the next morning, will be soon enough.”

“You’re sure, sir?” Dumbledore had hinted lives might ride on this. “I can leave sooner if you need me to. It’s really no trouble.”

Dumbledore hesitated, and Harry nodded to himself. “It is true that the earlier we can safely remove our... well. Are you quite certain of your offer, my boy?” He leaned forwards. “Once the person in question arrives, you will not be able to return until either he leaves or I am convinced of his loyalty, which could potentially take some weeks.”

Harry considered. “If I forget something, or need to speak to someone here, can I floo-call?”

Dumbledore nodded. “I plan to secure one of the floos here and one at Hogwarts for your use, my boy. You must not use it *too* frequently, lest the Ministry become suspicious, but... a few calls a day to your friends will be more than possible.” He tapped his thumb on his beard thoughtfully. “In fact... if we arrange it in advance, you may be able to visit here, say... once a week or so, for perhaps two or three hours at a time, if you wish to visit or retrieve, for example, books from the library.”

Harry turned red. *How does he know about—*

Dumbledore smiled at him. “I approve, Harry. I would have spoken to you before now if I did not.” Again he leaned forwards, eyes intense. “The Dark Arts are nothing to fear if you understand them, and even the Darkest of the Arts has its uses. The Light is not about technique but intention. Remember that, my boy.” He paused, then added, “However, do not *practice* any of them without my approval and oversight. They are a slippery slope to all variety of bad ends if not carefully monitored. Furthermore, it is wise of you to keep your interest concealed; the average witch and wizard—even, or perhaps especially, in the Order—will not understand.”

Harry nodded. “So—I can keep reading about them?”

Dumbledore nodded back. “I would, however, appreciate it if you allowed me or Severus to see the books you have chosen—either before or after you read them, it matters none—and discuss the contents with me. Not,” he added, holding up a hand as Harry frowned and opened his mouth, “because I wish to discourage you from reading anything you find, but because many books on the subject contain errors or outdated information, and I want to be sure you understand that.”

“Okay.” Harry nodded again, slowly. “I understand. Is the discussion bit required, or just suggested?”

“Merely suggested, although I insist you discuss it with me if you wish to put anything in these books to use.”

Harry could not honestly imagine wanting to use the Dark Arts, but he agreed anyway. “Yes, sir.” He stood, gathering his books and stuffing them into his bag. “If that’s all, sir, I’d like to go pack so you can get this person out of danger.” Halfway to the door, he paused and turned back. “Er... sir?”

Dumbledore looked up from where he had been paging through a book on non-magical herbs. “Yes, Harry?”

“Could you tell my friends where I’m going and why?” Seeing Dumbledore’s eyebrows rise, he rushed on, “You see, they’ll yell and carry on if I tell them, but they won’t dare yell at you, and by the time they track me down, they’ll have calmed down.”

“In that case, I think I can manage that.” Dumbledore put down the book and stood.

2.7

It took Harry several minutes to return to his books, but his renewed studying did not last. He had read barely five pages when a voice said “There you are, Harry!” Ginny slipped around a bookshelf and took the seat Dumbledore had recently vacated. She took another, closer look at Harry’s face and asked, “Is something wrong?”

“Hello, Ginny,” he said politely. “No—not *wrong*, I suppose. Professor Dumbledore was just here. I’m moving back to Hogwarts, fairly shortly, I suppose.”

“You are?” she asked him, surprised.

“They’re bringing someone in—someone, I gather, they don’t trust around me.” He shook his head. “I have a hard time imagining someone they trust enough to bring to Headquarters, but not enough to allow near me.”

“But—” Ginny appeared flabbergasted. “Harry, you own this place! It’s your house now!”

“And?” he asked her blankly. “It’s still Order headquarters.”

2.8

Harry ensconced himself in the Hogwarts library and picked up the top book off the stack he’d just set down. “Mugwort, mugwort... ah, there we are.” He inked his quill and began to write.

Several stacks of parchment later, he was frowning at a pair of recipes he’d copied out, and flipping through the book in front of him, when he heard someone clear his throat behind him. “Mr Potter, what an unexpected place to find you. Are you *reading* those, or merely looking at the pictures?”

“Hullo, Professor Snape,” Harry responded warily, somewhat embarrassed at being caught studying potions. “I was just studying some.”

“Hm.” Snape picked up one of the books and raised an eyebrow. “Potions, Potter? Surely you are not laboring under the mistaken belief that you will gain entrance to my NEWT class.”

“No, sir,” Harry admitted, surprised at the ease with which he was able to say it. “But Hermione pointed out that taking the class isn’t necessary to sit the exam.” He shrugged. “I figure the worst that happens is I fail the exam.”

“Or blow yourself up in the attempt,” Snape muttered darkly. Glancing at the stack of parchment in front of Harry, he plucked the top piece off and held it up to read. “What is this, Mr Potter?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Harry grumbled. At a sharp look from Snape he said more normally, “I found these two potions, one in my notes and one in the sixth year book. They’ve got all the same ingredients, added in the same order, and I can’t work out why they don’t both produce a mild pain-relieving potion.”

Snape looked at the parchment in his hand, then back at Harry, who averted his eyes out of habit. “You would be correct, Potter, if they were both made in the same way, with

only clockwise stirs, and if the licorice in the second potion were chopped instead of sliced.” He set the parchment down.

Harry picked it up, frowning and feeling increasingly frustrated. “I don’t understand, sir. I can see they aren’t, but I’m still unclear on how those changes produce these potions. It really seems as though the sliced licorice should render it inert, or at least, almost so. I can’t see how they end up with a working potion at all!”

Snape sneered at him, and Harry clenched his jaw. “Did you pay no attention your first year, Potter? Counterclockwise stirring enhances the magical absorption while helping to cancel the physical effects.”

Harry gaped at him. “It does?” He blinked. “Does it do that in all the potions? Counterclockwise stirring, I mean?”

“Of course, Potter!” Snape snapped irritably.

“But—that means—” Harry dug frantically through his notes. “That explains—but then—” He pulled out a stained piece of parchment. “That explains so much, sir. I honestly had not realized that before.” He made a note on the parchment and shoved it back down in the stack. “That does... but sir, even then, wouldn’t you end up with...” He tilted his head, studying the two formulas. “A caustic and... a mild antacid? How on earth do you wind up with a pimple remover and an ulcer cure?”

“Some of the difference in effect comes from the arithmantic qualities of the stirring, but also from the patterns used.” Snape pointed to the parchment. “You will note that in one potion, the licorice slices are added in groups of three, which...”

“Ah, there you are!”

Both Snape and Harry started at the voice. “Headmaster,” Snape acknowledged tightly.

“Severus, when I sent you to find Harry for dinner, I did have in mind you bringing him back.” Harry watched in fascination as color crept up Snape’s neck and ears. “I’m afraid the elves are quite distraught.”

“I apologize, Headmaster,” Snape replied smoothly. “We will be along immediately. He swept the parchment into a pile and shoved the lot at Harry. “Leave the books,” he ordered as Harry began to stack them. “You will need them later.”

“I will?” Harry stopped midmotion, staring at the man.

“We cannot have Harry Potter blowing himself up because he does not know which way to stir,” Snape replied with a sneer. “Entertaining as it might be. I shall undertake to remediate the situation after dinner.”

“Excellent!” the Headmaster put in as Harry was trying to pick his jaw up off the floor. “But let us adjourn to that dinner before the elves decide to abandon us in pique. Severus?”

To Harry's shock, the man was actually tolerable after dinner. He had Harry look up several potions recipes, then compare them using only what he knew. Each comparison, Harry realized quickly, was intended to illustrate a different effect in potions making.

"The difficulty with stirring," the man was saying drily, "is that the arithmantic significance of the number of stirs must be considered in context of not merely the magical influences within the recipe, but without as well."

"You mean, like... phase of the moon?" Harry asked.

"Precisely." Snape's nose twitched as he grimaced. "At your level, you will only encounter potions whose arithmantic requirements are relatively simple and obvious, but for complex potions—beyond NEWT level—it can take significant work to determine precisely how many times to stir." He sighed. "Luckily for the working Potions Master, the arithmantic influence over the results lessens as the number of stirs grows. Even so, there are potions which require its effects that cannot be made at certain times or by certain people—for example, there is one potion which must be stirred five or seven times during the new moon, but must be stirred an even number of times by a man. Consequently, only females can make it during the new moon."

Harry frowned. "That sounds very complicated, sir. How does anyone ever figure that kind of thing out?"

Snape smirked. "Research, Potter. Trial and error, together with a great deal of study." His smirk grew. "Still, formulations that lessen the arithmantic demands are always popular."

"I can see why," Harry muttered. "Can you recommend a book describing these sorts of... situations, sir? You may not be aware, but I have not taken arithmancy."

Snape picked up the parchment he had been using to note down references. "Cudgeworth's book has a decent chapter," he said after a moment of perusal, "but if you are not already familiar with the subject I would recommend Dunning's primer." He picked up and inked a quill and began to write. "His book assumes no foreknowledge at all, so it may repeat concepts from other classes—I certainly hope some of the material is familiar to you from my classes—but repetition never hurt a student." He set down the quill but continued to hold the parchment, dark eyes looking Harry over. "Potter, do you actually intend to read these books yourself, or do you mean to foist the job off on Granger?"

"I intend to read them myself," Harry answered, stung. "Although," he added honestly, "once Hermione finds out I've got that list, I doubt I can keep her from copying it with anything less than the Unforgiveables. And once she does, and starts reading them, I'll discuss the books with her."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "And you expect me to believe this sudden excess of scholarship?"

Harry sat back, brow furrowing. It had honestly not occurred to him that a few months before, he would have done anything to get Hermione to read and summarize the books for him. What had changed, and when?

I think I can blame this one on darling Mum too, he finally concluded. He had noticed that he could read faster and with better comprehension in just the last week. And who

knew? Maybe a taste for scholarship was among those traits she'd 'suppressed' in her quest to make him average.

Snape had apparently tired of waiting for a reply, because he sneered and tossed the parchment down. "Well, if you wish to bribe the girl for false scholarship, and she is amenable, far be it from me to stand in your way." He gathered his robes as if to stand.

"I was considering the question, Professor," Harry said hastily. "I had just about concluded that I wouldn't believe me either." Snape settled down again at that, his lips pursing in a way that Harry thought might be either interest or consideration. Either way, it wasn't anger, so he went on. "I think—I think it might have to do with Mum." There—that was hopefully both vague enough and not too vague. Egads, he was getting as paranoid as Moody!

Snape's eyes, however, widened. "I see," he replied thoughtfully. "Have you observed any other effects?"

"Well, I can read faster and better," Harry offered, "which might help to explain the book thing. And I think I'm hungrier, although that might just be a growth spurt. And..." He flushed. "I think my hair's a little flatter." He shrugged. "I've still got a few weeks until my birthday, thought. God only knows what'll happen then."

"Indeed," Snape observed neutrally. "Have you had much cause to spellcast recently?"

"Er, no," Harry said in mild surprise. "My workroom isn't done yet, and I didn't feel like bothering anyone about using their classrooms. Why?"

"Any change in your magical aptitudes will most likely show up before other effects," Snape said absently. "It is interesting that you are noticing a change in reading comprehension. That requires a quite complex charm, and suggests that few changes are impossible. We should track you closely, especially as term nears. It could prove disastrous if some change gave away the game prematurely."

2.9

"There you are, Potter." The Potions Master's voice startled Harry out of his reading. He glanced up in time to see the man pick up one of the books laid out on the table. Surprise showed briefly on the saturnine features, but was quickly replaced by a sneer. "Surely you do not expect to get an Outstanding on your OWL." He glanced through the potions book, looking faintly amused.

"No, Sir," Harry admitted with an ease that surprised himself. "Rather the opposite. But Hermione pointed out to me that I don't need to take the class to sit the NEWT. I figure it's at least worth trying."

"I see." The man set down the book and regarded him coldly. "And what do you plan to do for practical training? I assure you, you will not pass without demonstrating at least some minimal practical competency."

"I know." Harry withdrew a folded piece of paper and pushed it across the table. "I've already asked Professor Dumbledore if we might be able to reinforce one of the rooms near mine to be a lab. Those are the plans."

Snape unfolded the parchment and took a brief look at it. Sticking it in his pocket he said, "I see. I was sent to bring you down for dinner."

2.10

The next morning at breakfast, the good mood was ruined.

Eating in the Great Hall in summer was downright odd. When he arrived, he was the only one there; he paused and wondered if he was in the wrong place. Maybe they ate in their quarters or in the kitchens in the summer?

"You are in the right place, my boy," Dumbledore's voice said behind him. "most of the teachers prefer to take a late breakfast during summer. Even those who arise early rarely arrive before nine in the morning."

Harry looked up at his headmaster. "should I come back later? I don't want to be a bother—"

"No, no," Dumbledore assured him. "The house elves are always upset that no one wants their food until nine. They take it as a personal insult, I fear."

Harry shook his head. House elves were weird. "If you say so, sir."

Dumbledore chuckled again. "Come, my boy. Let us make the elves happy and break our fast." He gently took Harry's elbow and steered him into the Great Hall.

The long tables where the students normally sat had been pushed back slightly to further clear the central aisle; the head table had also been pushed back from the edge of the dais so that chairs could be placed down both sides. Dumbledore led Harry to one end, indicating he should take the last seat on the far side. Harry complied, and the headmaster settled into the seat next to him. "This way, no one can bump you accidentally," he said to Harry. "Not all the staff is . . . well, let us merely say that I should not like to test their recall of your infirmities."

Harry nodded. "How many staff members stay at Hogwarts over the summer?" he asked.

"Most of the staff are here on and off, supervising classroom updates, attending staff meetings, and the like," Dumbledore replied. "Only a handful live here full or near-full time. I, of course, am usually here, although the bulk of my days during the summer are spent elsewhere. In addition—"

With a slight popping noise, an elderly house elf materialized in front of them. "What do masters wish for breakfast?" she asked in a tone of dignified excitement.

"My usual, please, Jenny," Dumbledore said to her.

"And for young master?" she enquired, turning to Harry.

He was caught flat-footed. No one had ever asked him what he wanted for breakfast before. "I—uh. . . I'm not sure—" He thought hard, but was having a hard time even recalling what was normally on the table at Hogwarts. "Er—can't you just—bring me something? Anything, you know, breakfast-y."

"Master wants us to decide?" Jenny asked uncertainly.

"Yes, please," Harry told her firmly.

“As Master wishes,” she murmured, and disappeared with another small pop.

“Where was I?” Dumbledore asked. “Ah, yes. “In addition, Sybil lives here full-time, as does Argus. They are both, however, in the habit of taking their meals in their rooms. Severus spends most of his time here or at Headquarters, but he does usually breakfast here. Poppy is usually here, as is Minerva; Pomona comes by every few days to check on her plants, and of course Hagrid is here most of the time as well. Let me see. . . Filius likes to visit his nieces in Dover over holidays, but he pops ‘round regularly.”

Harry nodded mutely, blinking at the sudden flow of information about his teachers.

“Sinistra spends most of her time at Oxford during the summers, but she comes by regularly to use our workrooms. The rest are in and out, depending on their schedules. I think this week, Professor Vector is in Milan for her conference, for example.”

Harry was distracted at that moment by the appearance of food on the table. The Headmaster had a full English breakfast, complete with blood pudding. Harry, on the other hand, had. . . .

“Er, what is this?” he asked finally.

Dumbledore laughed. “I did warn you, they get bored.” Never-the-less he leaned over for a better look. “I believe those are crepes, my boy. And. . . fresh fruit. Oh, and breakfast rolls.”

They didn’t look like any crepes Harry had ever seen, but then, he supposed his experience was limited. Shrugging to himself, he picked up a fork and dug in. The elves had yet to serve anything inedible, and he had told them to pick for him. Now he should trust their taste.

He had managed to demolish that plate and was working on a plate of what appeared to be flowers, but seemed to actually be some sort of cut meat, when the first of the others arrived.

“Good morning,” Dumbledore said to his right. Glancing up, he saw (scene unfinished in writing)

2.11

Author’s note: I didn’t have the book with me when I wrote this scene, and obviously this can’t be canon as F&G have their storefront by the end of OOTP. Oops. Oh well.

“Hello Harry.”

“Fred! George!” Harry smiled at the twins. “I haven’t seen you around for a while. Where have you been?”

“Looking at properties, my dear investor.” Fred sat on the table, shoving a few of Harry’s books aside. “We found a lovely storefront in Diagon Alley. We’re signing the lease next week.”

“Wow! That’s great!” Harry grinned. “I take it business is going well, then.”

“Fantastic,” George put in. “It’s a risk, of course, opening up in the Alley with the war and all, but we think it’ll be worth it.”

“We’ll take precautions of course,” Fred went on. “We’ve already arranged for insurance. And we’re working on wards that’ll keep Death Eaters at bay without interfering with R&D.”

“And we’ve got some ideas we’re working on for if we do get attached,” George picked up the metaphorical ball.

“Sounds like you two have everything well in hand,” Harry commented. “Will you still be living here?”

“Not full-time,” George replied. “Mum just about went spare when we told her we were thinking of moving out, so we worked out a deal—we’ll spend weeknights here, and weekend nights there.”

“The shop comes with a small flat, you see,” Fred explained. “We figure we’ll need to open earlier and close later on weekends, so we’ll probably want to sleep there. But this way Mum gets to see us loads so she feels safer.”

“But we actually wanted to talk to you about something,” George said, shooting a glance at his twin. “You see, we figure we’ll probably hear stuff through the store.”

“We’re not exactly in the respectable part of the Alley,” Fred put in. “Not Knockturn by any means, but not Fortescue’s either.” He shrugged. “We figure it means we’re more likely to hear things.”

“And we need a way of passing that sort of thing on to the Order,” George said. “Most of it can get sent to Mum, but some of it—”

“Let’s just say we’d like to have plausible deniability,” Fred said.

“I get the gist,” Harry replied, nodding. “So you’d like me to pass on stuff you tell me.”

“Well—”

“There’s a bit more.” Fred and George exchanged another glance. “We’ve been working on this project, trying to put some of our pranks to practical combat use.”

“You see, we can owl you products without anyone thinking anything is odd about it,” George said. “Some of them, we’d like you to test out if you can. But eventually, we’d like you to pass them on too.”

Harry nodded again. “No problem, guys.”

“Thanks Harry.”

“You’re a real mate.” Fred clapped him on the back and jumped off the table. “Don’t forget to have some fun this summer, eh?”

2.12

“Professor?”

Severus Snape did not glance up at the soft voice, keeping his attention focused on the cauldron before him. “Potter,” he acknowledged. “What brings you to my dungeon?”

“Were... were you serious about letting me use your laboratory, sir?” Harry rearranged his sweaty hands on the handle of his cauldron. “I... I could use somewhere to work, sir.”

“I was, indeed, quite serious.” The long fingers dropped a slice of something pink into the blue liquid, which emitted a faint puff of blue smoke. “What potion did you intend to work on?”

“Er. . . the hair removal solution, sir.” He paused. “If that’s all right?”

Dark eyes unexpectedly fixed him from behind the fall of lank hair. “I suppose we should be grateful you do not yet require it, Potter.” Harry blinked—was that an insult? Smirking, the man indicated a nearby work station. “You may use that one.”

Nodding, Harry put his cauldron down on the table indicated and began setting out his ingredient jars. Snape had turned back to his own potion when Harry realized he had a problem. “Er. . . sir? I don’t—I mean, I didn’t bring—I need a knife, sir. Is there—”

“Middle drawer, second set left of the door.” The professor looked up at him again, and Harry flushed. “Cutting boards, rulers, and other such implements are in the same area.”

Harry gave him a quick nod and crossed to the cabinet in question. “Thank you, sir.” Returning with a stack of implements to his work station, he began his preparation. On Hermione’s advice, he had used colored inks and highlighting to color-code the directions, which he had copied neatly in large letters from his book. As he chopped and sliced, simmered and stirred, he admitted to himself that it did help. *You know*, he thought as he waited for the mixture to come to a boil again, *I could afford a set of those fancy color-changing quills Hermione is always lusting after. Maybe I should invest in a few if it makes brewing this much easier.*

“Decent,” said a voice behind him, “but the scales are somewhat uneven. You need to take more care with your knife work.”

He peered at the pile of shredded mermaid scales beside him. Squinting at them, he could see Snape was right—they were uneven. “You’re right,” he said in surprise. “But—” He stopped himself.

“But what, Potter?”

He gritted his teeth. “I don’t understand why they need to be even, sir. I thought it mattered more than all the pieces be real small.”

“*Really* small,” Snape corrected, “but good.” Startled, Harry almost dropped his stirring stick into the cauldron. “It is necessary that they dissolve rapidly, hence, they must be small. However, the more even the pieces, the more even the dissolution rate, and the more even the reaction. The more even the reaction, the more effective the final product. In this case, an uneven reaction can throw off the next reaction and produce an unnecessarily caustic product.” He smirked slightly. “If you ever require a product to clear hair blocking a drain, however, I recommend trying this potion with deliberately-unevenly chopped scales. It is more effective than any other product I have tried to date.”

“I don’t tend to have too many problems with that, sir,” Harry said, smiling and gesturing to his short—if messy—hair. “But I’ll certainly keep it in mind.” He shifted stirring hands and began to slide the scales in carefully. “Interesting about the caustic thing, sir.” Tipping in a small bowl of honey, he began stirring the other direction. “I don’t understand how that works. Wouldn’t it just slow down the reaction between the scale

solution and the honey?”

“Yes.” Snape actually sounded pleased. “But the slower the reaction, the more time the initial portions have to interact with the stirring and the lye—”

“—and if I stir more slowly, it’s not vigorous enough to induce the reaction at all.” Harry sighed. “Damn.”

“Amazing, Potter. You may have a hope of becoming competent yet.”

Harry just about choked. Instead, he took advantage of his instructor’s momentary good mood. “But what about adding lemon zest? Wouldn’t that counteract the caustic...ness?”

“While it would, indeed, counter the causticity of the resulting solution, the zest would also interact with the...”

Nearly an hour later, Harry regarded his completed potion thoughtfully. It was a lovely shade of lavender instead of blue, but the book assured him—when he read it through again—that the hue change had to do with the uneven scales. It was the opacity and the lightness that had him worried.

“Problem, Potter?”

He looked up to find Snape returning from the storeroom with a large box in his hands. “Er, I’m not sure,” he admitted. “The book says the proper solution should be a deep translucent blue. I have a light, opaque lavender. I tracked down the hue shift to the uneven scales, but—”

He broke off as Snape set down the box and peered into the cauldron. “Did you deviate from the instructions in any way?” the man asked neutrally after a moment.

“Well—” Harry hesitated, but the black eyes did not waiver on his. “I added some lemon juice, you know, like we talked about, for the causticness. And...”

“Causticity. And?”

“Well, the last step—I couldn’t figure out why it had me adding so much alcohol. It seemed like all it would do is make the mixture weaker, and smell bad to boot. So I figured it must have been a misprint.”

“A misprint?” Snape raised an eyebrow, making Harry flush hotly. “No, it is not a misprint. Without the excess alcohol, however, the formula becomes equivalent to that sold commercially—an enterprise in which the textbook author has a stake.” He shoved the box at Harry. “I am certain someone of your acquaintance must have need of hair remover.”

Harry looked in the box and was astonished to find stacks of cosmetic jars. “You mean—”

But Snape had left.

“There you are, mate.” Curiously Ron lifted one of the jars. “What’s this?”

“Hair remover.” Harry looked between him and Hermione, who had followed him in. “Want some?”

“Blimey, you’ve got a lot of it.” Ron unscrewed the lid of the jar he’d taken, and sniffed. “That smells loads better than the stuff Mum makes. Where’d you get it?”

Hermione leaned over Ron’s shoulder. “Ooh, it does smell nice.” She closed her eyes and sniffed again. “More...lemony...than the stuff I use. I like it.”

“I made it,” Harry answered Ron’s question. “Snape okayed it,” he added, somewhat annoyed, when Ron looked at the jar with alarm. “Even suggested I jar it and give it to friends.”

“Honestly, Ron, Snape wouldn’t let Harry poison us!” Hermione said with exasperation when Ron did not appear convinced. “If you don’t want it, I’ll take it!”

“I’ve got plenty,” Harry told her. “I made a full cauldron of the stuff. Think Ginny would like some?”

“Does it work?” asked Ron.

Harry held out a forearm with a conspicuous bare patch. “Couldn’t resist trying it, in fact.”

“Huh.” Ron grabbed another jar off the top of Harry’s box. “Don’t be surprised if my brothers come around too. The stuff Mum makes for us is foul.”

“About that.” Harry picked up the potions text. “Does she use the recipe out of here?”

“I don’t know. Probably. I know she still uses her copy.” Ron pocketed the two jars he’d grabbed after checking that the lids were on tightly. “Why?”

“Snape says the author of the text has an interest in cosmetics and deliberately altered the formula in the book to smell bad and be less effective.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “And he told you all that? The right formula, too?”

“Well.” Harry shrugged. “Not in so many words.”

“What exactly does that mean?” the witch asked slowly.

“We...we got to talking about the potion,” Harry responded, peripherally aware of Ron’s mouth dropping open. “And from what we talked about, I was able to figure out the modifications on my own.”

Now both of them were staring at him as if he’d just announced he was quitting Hogwarts to become a used car salesman. “You.” said Hermione finally. “You worked out how to modify it.”

“Yes,” replied Harry, beginning to get irritated. “It wasn’t that hard. Not after Snape talked me through the reactions I didn’t understand.”

“Blimey, mate,” Ron said. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you call anything about potions ‘not hard’ before.”

Harry shrugged uncomfortably. “Come to think of it, it was the most productive two hours I’ve ever spent with Snape.”

“Well, I think that’s great, Harry,” Hermione said firmly. “It’s great to see you doing well at it—maybe studying for your NEWT won’t be so bad after all.”

Both boys groaned.

“Now that I consider it, that was likely the most productive two hours I have ever spent with Potter.”

“I am pleased to hear you two are getting along better, my boy,” Dumbledore responded happily. “More tea, Severus?”

“Yes, thank you.” He watched the Headmaster pour. “He seems to be remarkably willing to set aside past...altercations. I had anticipated that my demand would result in him avoiding practical work altogether for the time being.” He sipped delicately. “But not only did he seek me out, but he was also willing to engage me in intellectual conversation.”

“Harry is a remarkable lad,” the Headmaster said, a twinkle in his blue eyes.

“His mother wrote that she had ‘suppressed his innate talents,’” Severus mused. “Furthermore, she apologized for it.” He tapped his finger thoughtfully on his cup. “What if she deliberately made him mediocre at potions? Or, perhaps, in academia as a whole? Certainly he showed more promise this afternoon than I have ever observed before.”

“Were you looking before?” Albus countered with a smile. “Certainly it is possible. If anyone could have, it would have been Lily.”

“Perhaps we should consider a special training regimen,” Severus suggested. “Given his...situation...it might be wise to give him advanced defense instruction, as well as the Occlumency you are already working on. Furthermore, if he shows improved abilities in other subjects as well, summer training—especially if we keep portions of it secret—would give us a means of deflecting suspicion.”

“An excellent idea, my boy,” Albus agreed. “Who would you suggest?”

“The trainers would need to be discreet and absolutely trustworthy,” Severus thought aloud, “and either already Order members or willing to join.” He pursed his lips in contemplation. “Ideally? Yourself, Minerva, Moody, and Madame Pomfrey.”

“Madame Pomfrey?” Albus looked surprised.

“The boy is constantly being injured on his little adventures, and his friends do not fare much better. Some basic healing instruction seems like a simple and effective means of helping to keep the lot of them breathing.”

“Interesting.” Albus made a note on a scrap of parchment. “I shall have to speak to her.”

Severus’s eyes narrowed. *Why, that devious old—* “You’d already thought of this,” he accused. “Training Potter over the summer.”

“Yes,” Albus admitted freely. “But not for the same reasons, at least, not all of them. And I had not considered Poppy.” He set the note in a drawer. “What did you think of Harry’s little club? The DA?”

Severus sipped his tea while he collected his thoughts. “On principle,” he began, “I disapprove of secret student clubs, especially those closed to a fourth of the student population without regard to individual...positions, and most especially clubs that blatantly violate posted school rules.” He sipped again. “However. Under the circumstances, it served a pressing need for the other three-fourths, and contributed to keeping morale up even among those not involved, in a situation that could have been devastating to the children’s emotional well-being. Furthermore, if rumor is to be believed, Potter achieved more with them in less

time than any Defense teacher we have hired. Lastly, their role in keeping Potter alive—and out of the hands of the Dark Lord—is not to be underestimated.” He raised an eyebrow. “Altogether? An effective group, if sadly illicit and elitist.”

“Interesting,” Albus said again. “That matches my impressions, although I confess I had not expected any Slytherins to be interested in joining.”

“I believe some might have considered it, if it had been an option,” Severus said carefully. “It is difficult to say whether they would actually have participated, but I know several of the children from unaligned families felt slighted that the choice was refused them entirely.”

“That is something that should be pointed out to Harry,” Dumbledore replied, “although I doubt he actively set out to exclude Slytherins. Rather, I believe they made an effort to only include those known to be reliable, and they simply do not have much personal contact with Slytherins outside of Mr Malfoy and his group.”

Nodding, Severus said, “A fact I shall endeavor to point out to the children in question if I have the opportunity. That lack falls on their shoulders as well as Potter’s.”

“I have been considering asking Mr Potter to continue the club—under another name—this coming year,” Albus continued. “Would you object?”

Severus considered the question, slowly eating a biscuit as he did. “Given a few conditions, no,” he said finally.

“Which are?” It was Albus’s turn for caution.

“First, that he allow all Houses to join. I appreciate the necessity to exclude the potential followers of the Dark Lord,” he said when Albus sat forwards and opened his mouth. “However, there are those in my house who do not support him, and I insist that a way be found to include them if they are interested.”

“What else?”

“Second, that a trained adult be present at all sessions that involve active spellcasting. You know how many revision-related accidents we have a year. I am, quite frankly, shocked that no students were seriously injured during their meetings last year.”

“In that, we are agreed. I do not believe that condition will pose any problems. Any more?”

Snape considered. “I believe a teacher should review, and approve in advance, any lessons that involve the use of potentially crippling or fatal spells. And I would—off the record; if we discuss this at an official staff meeting I shall argue against it—I would like to see participants sign a contract saying they will not use these skills for the Dark Lord, and will require a similar promise of anyone they teach.”

“Which would solve the most likely objection to the Slytherins.” Albus nodded. “All very reasonable. I’ll certainly discuss them with Harry.” He poured more tea for both of them. “I also wished to discuss Harry’s Occlumency lessons with you.” Severus tensed. “Is there anything you can tell me that might help me? Things that made it better or worse when you were working with him?”

After a moment, Severus shook his head. “The boy’s results were exceedingly erratic. Every time I believed I had found an approach that worked, he would get worse again.” He

tapped his fingers on his cup. “Making him angry did not seem to yield results, although the boy was never truly calm in my presence and so I have little with which to compare it.” He shrugged. “You may have more success there. My only consistent observation was that he would get first better and then worse over the course of a session.”

Albus nodded. “As have I. It is odd. Thank you.”

“For what?” Severus asked bitterly. “I was of precious little help to either of you at the time, and I cannot see as I am any more help now.”

The old man leaned forwards. “You tried, Severus. That is all I can ask of anyone.” He smiled. “You detested the boy, and yet you tried. For that, you do indeed deserve thanks.”

Severus shrugged uncomfortably and changed the subject. “About the latest meeting with the Dark Lord. . . .”

2.13

Slowly Potter’s presence in the dungeons grew routine, until, on the afternoon following Harry’s debacle at lunch, Snape barely even blinked to see the boy in his lab. He had added the boy to the room’s wards the previous week, telling himself that it was such a nuisance to be interrupted to let the boy in. This was, however, the first time he had availed himself of the implied privilege without Snape present.

“Potter,” he said in greeting, shutting the door behind him.

“Professor.” Harry looked up warily from the pile of leaves he was shredding. “I’m—I’m sorry about coming in without you, sir—”

“Did I not say you were to avail yourself freely of the laboratory?” Severus cut off the apology, although he admitted to himself he was gratified to receive it.

“Well—yes—” Potter was frowning now, hands still absently shredding the leaves. “But. . . I guess I didn’t think you. . . .” He shrugged rather than complete the sentence.

“Didn’t think I what?” It was an irritating habit that Snape hoped to break the boy of eventually.

“Didn’t think you meant it,” Potter admitted. “I figured you were tired of getting up to let me in, and were being sarcastic about it.”

Severus almost winced—indeed, at the time, he had been being sarcastic; the boy was sometimes too accurate. “In any case, the privilege is yours so long as you do not abuse it. What are you brewing today?” He took off his outer robes and hung them from their accustomed peg, then took down one of the battered work smocks and tied it over his inner robe.

“I thought I’d give the itch-relieving draught a go,” Potter replied, voice painfully neutral. He set aside the shredded leaves, which Snape now—on closer inspection—recognized as immature mandrake leaves, and reached for a small bowl containing woody stems. Those would be ash saplings. Picking up a small knife, the boy began separating the bark layers and slivering the inner wood. “Madame Pomfrey gave me a list, last week, of potions she can use in student-grade qualities, and this was on it.”

Severus's eyebrows rose. First, he was surprised and gratified that Potter had thought to go to Pomfrey; even when his students produced acceptable work, they too-often discarded the bulk of their potions—from habit, he supposed. He tried to break the NEWT classes of it, as they frequently made quite valuable potions. That Potter had already considered the possible practical uses for his creations was a point in the boy's favor.

But more surprising to Severus was the choice of potion. The itch-relieving draught was quite difficult to brew—it had been on the practical for his Mastery exam, in fact. He doubted Potter would ordinarily attempt it, so why? The only other distinguishing characteristic he could think of was that it was in the class of potions that could be brewed successfully by Muggles, assuming they could get access to the magical ingredients. He put the choice of potion together with that morning's scene, and came up with a very ugly sum.

"You are not a Muggle, Potter," he said as if it were self-evident. *What nonsense has the boy gotten into his head about magic this time?*

"No?" Potter asked, in a voice almost as cynical as his own. "Could have fooled me this morning."

"The failure of a few spells—"

"A few?" Potter's laugh had a tone of hysteria in it. "Professor, I spent all morning trying to get spells to work. Any spells. I'm only here because I walked out on Professor Flitwick."

"One cannot simply wake up one morning a Muggle," Severus said calmly.

"I was under the impression that most of the world did, every day," Potter replied with a slight smirk.

"You know what I meant, Potter!" He forced himself back to calm. "One does not simply lose one's magic. Perhaps it is merely... temporarily inaccessible."

"Whatever," Potter muttered, but before Snape could snap at him, he said more loudly, "In any case, Professor, it seemed wiser to brew a non-magically-dependent potion. Whatever my magic is up to, it is inarguably unreliable at the moment." He finished his preparations and lit the flame under his cauldron.

Indeed, Snape could not figure out how to argue with that. "I will give you a list of NEWT level potions that are magically-indifferent," he said instead. "It is indeed useful to be aware of what one can and cannot safely brew when one is magically depleted or otherwise incapacitated."

"Thank you, Professor," Potter said politely. "That would indeed be quite useful."

Severus focused on his own preparations, knowing both that the boy needed time, and that the first stages of the itch-relieving draught were the most difficult. Once Potter had passed the critical stages, however, he could not resist asking the question that had been bothering him. "Have you tried any of the magic-detection artefacts?"

"The what?" Potter sounded startled and confused, but Severus kept his eyes on his own work.

"Artefacts that detect magic, Potter. There are a number geared towards revealing power level. They are frequently used in these sorts of situations to diagnose the problem."

"This sort of thing happens a lot?" Now the boy definitely sounded curious. Severus

risked glancing up from his own work and found the boy frankly staring at him. “Why didn’t anyone mention it?”

“Because the most common trigger does not apply,” Severus returned dryly, “and I doubt many are aware that it occurs in other situations as well.”

“What do you mean, doesn’t apply?” The boy did not sound angry, merely mystified, as if he could not imagine such a situation.

Snape smirked. “Pregnancy, Potter.”

“Oh.” Predictably, Harry turned quite red. “Er, why—I mean, uh—”

2.14

“I’m not a liar.” Harry kicked a chair with his good foot. “I’m not!”

“Interesting that such an accusation hurts you worse than being called an attention-seeking glory hound.” Harry whirled to find Snape standing in the doorway. “Or—how did he put it? An arrogant brat with less brains than a puff-skin and less courage than that.” The dry tone had Harry frowning. “And yet, you focus on the accusation of lying. Why is that, Potter?”

Harry shrugged. “It all hinges on that, doesn’t it?” he pointed out. “If I’m telling the truth, then everything else falls apart.” He waved a hand. “But I could care less what idiots say about me. People have been saying most of that stuff for... well, since I arrived at Hogwarts.” He glanced up and caught the faint smirk on Snape’s face. “But if he thinks I’m lying, he won’t believe me when it’s important. And that—that could be disastrous.”

“Mm.” Snape regarded him, eyes narrowing, for a few heartbeats. “I suspect there is nothing you can do to convince the man. Allow others to take your side for a spell, Potter.”

Harry shot the man a disbelieving look, wondering if he should check the man for Polyjuice. Snape, comforting him? Giving him advice? He shuddered. How his life had changed in the last month! “I know,” he replied. “I just wish... I wish I had proof, dammit. You can—” He stopped himself before he got himself in real trouble.

“I can *what*, Potter?” Snape’s voice was low and dangerous.

Damn. “I was going to say something, sir, that was poorly thought out and possibly could be construed as insulting,” Harry said stiffly. “Since I did not intend it in that manner—”

“Oh, just spit it out, Potter.”

“Sir. You can just show them your arm if your source is questioned.” Harry winced.

“Hm.” Snape grunted, and Harry braced for the tongue-lashing. “The difficulty I face, Potter, is rather like your own—while it is clear that I do, indeed, have an ‘in’ to the Death Eaters, I must convince them I am being truthful—not unlike your current situation. However, you are correct—my source, at least, comes with visible proof of its existence.”

“I’m surprised Bishop hasn’t moved to have me checked for the Mark yet,” Harry said bitterly.

2.15

“Albus tells me you are interested in learning the animagus transformation.”

Harry glanced up, startled, to find his Head of House standing before him. “Yes, ma’am,” he replied after a moment. “I am.”

“You realize that there is no guarantee that you will ever be able to complete the transformation, and if you do, it will likely take years.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said again. “Professor Dumbledore seems to think I’m powerful enough to manage it, at least, and I’d really rather like to chance to try.”

She pursed her lips. “Well. I am willing to tutor you, if you are willing to learn.”

“Thank you, ma’am!” he said instantly. “I was... well, I’m glad.” He turned the book he’d been reading towards her with a blush. “I hope you can explain it better.”

“Peterson’s *On Becoming an Animagus?*” she read curiously. “Well! You must be interested, Potter, to get through half of Peterson!” She smiled, and he relaxed. “When I was studying for the Transfiguration Mastery exam, Peterson was what I used to get to sleep. I do hope I can do somewhat better.”

“I didn’t think it was that bad,” Harry replied, surprised. “I just have a very hard time figuring out what he’s talking about. Right now he’s going on about something about what determines the animagus form, but... he’s totally lost me, ma’am.”

“Ah!” She took a seat beside him. “There is an ongoing debate as to whether a wizard’s animagus form is an inborn trait or whether it is influenced by a person’s experiences. On the one hand, there are no records of anyone’s animagus form changing significantly, and many people have forms that seem on the surface to have little or nothing to do with their experiences, or even personality. On the other hand, others have forms that *would* seem to be influenced by their lives.” She smiled slightly. “For example, I know one woman in America whose form is the spitting image of a parrot she had as a child.”

“Oh!” Harry said. “So that’s why he was going on about imprinting.”

She nodded. “There are three major schools of thought. The first holds that a person’s species form is fixed from birth, but extensive contact with a member of that species, especially young in life, can alter the specifics—short or long hair on a cat, for example. And it is fairly common for minor markings on one’s form to change, which is a point in their favor.

“The second school believes that it is possible for a person’s species to be influenced, but that said influence is strongest in early childhood and wanes as the child grows. They point out that most animagi transform often enough that the influence from their current form would outweigh other influences—especially since most people do not become animagi until relatively late in life.

“The last school says that a person’s species can be influenced up until the point a person first transforms, but at that point, the form is somehow ‘locked’ into their magic.”

“What do you believe, ma’am?” Harry asked when she had finished the short lecture.

“I am personally somewhere between the first two,” she replied. “I suspect the species can be affected, especially in early childhood, but not greatly. Thus someone might become

a caracal instead of a lynx, but not a dingo.”

Harry nodded slowly. “What about the other stuff Peterson was talking about? I understood it had to do with magical strength, but that was as far as I got.”

McGonagall nodded to him, her eyes crinkling slightly as if she wished to smile at him but could not quite bring herself to do it. “It does. There is a power requirement to have a form above a certain size relative to your own natural body size. Historically, most wizards average in the five to fifteen pound range; certainly under a stone is normal. It is believed that there is a similar requirement for extraordinarily small forms, but those are quite rare, and the threshold proposed is really *quite* small. Powerful wizards are also likely to have forms that are higher up the intelligence scale, and are likely to be higher up the food chain as well.”

“So the more powerful you are, the more likely you are to end up as something large and ferocious,” Harry summarized. “Is that a good summary?”

“In so few words, yes,” she said, the smile materializing. “I would note that ‘ferocious’ and ‘predatory’ are not always the same thing, however; I doubt you would wish to be near an angry rhinoceros, regardless of its dietary habits. Additionally, there is also evidence that the two—size and predatory status—are not independent; that is, a mildly powerful wizard is likely to be large, or a predator, but not both.”

“But—” Harry stopped, not wanting to be insulting.

“Personality can and often does seem to override all of those, although usually only in the negative direction: that is, to make a wizard’s form smaller or less ‘ferocious’, as you put it.” Her smile quirked, and her next words showed she knew what he had been thinking. “Take my form, for example: going by magical power alone, my form would be predicted to be between thirty and fifty pounds. Instead, I am eight to nine pounds; ten if the mousing has been good.” Harry would swear she winked at him. “The housecat form is, simply put, more suited to me than a larger one.”

“So more magic only makes those things possible, not... a certainty,” Harry said.

“Exactly,” she replied, her tone applaudatory.

“So where do I start?” Harry couldn’t wait to find out what he would be.

“The first step is to determine the general nature of your form,” she said, her smile softening. “There are several potions that will give you some insights; I will give you the book with the instructions. Some people claim the Patronus is a clue, but it can be heavily influenced by experiences which would not affect the animagus form. In your case, I know for a fact that your father once drove off a rabid dog while he was playing with you as Prongs. It is not unreasonable to suspect that the experience—even if you do not remember it consciously—affects what you see as your protector.”

“So you don’t think I’m a stag.” Harry couldn’t decide whether to be pleased or sad. On the one hand, it didn’t feel right for him, but on the other, he wouldn’t have minded that connection to his father.

McGonagall shook her head. “While it was perfect for James, you do not strike me as the stag sort, Mr Potter.” She cocked her head at him, and Harry could practically see the whiskers twitching. “I would predict something feline or avian. An eagle, perhaps, or

one of the medium-sized cats.”

“Hm.” Harry thought he’d rather be an eagle, but being, say, a jaguar could be fun too. “So. What do I need to know to brew these potions?”

2.16

He was the first one to arrive to breakfast the next morning, and he spent several minutes paused in the threshold of the Great Hall, wondering if he had come to the wrong place. Perhaps they ate in their quarters over the summer holidays. He could go in and sit down and wait, but then he risked looking stupid if no one else came. Or he could go back upstairs and risk missing breakfast. Perhaps he should just go down to the kitchens and beg food from Dobby. . . .

“You are in the right place, my boy,” someone said behind him. “It is simply that most of us take a late breakfast during the summer holidays.” The Headmaster smiled at him when he turned. “Go on in, at any time of day or night, and the elves will be delighted to bring you something. During the summer, the usual meal hours are eight, twelve-thirty, and quarter after seven—not that any of us keep to them strictly, you understand.”

Harry nodded to show that he did understand. “Sorry for being so early, then, sir,” he said. It was only half past seven. “I’m used to rising early, summers.”

“Oh, it is no problem at all,” Dumbledore replied, eyes twinkling gently. “Shall we go in? I assure you, the house elves will be delighted.”

Together they made their way through the large hall to the head table. The four House tables stood in their regular places, but were shrouded in long cloths, the benches pushed out of the way under them. Only the head table was left uncovered; it had been shoved back somewhat, and chairs placed around both sides. Dumbledore took a seat near one end, and Harry the one next to him.

Within seconds, the tables sprouted toast, kippers, porridge, and all other manner of breakfast foods. Harry began serving himself at once.

When he had cleared his plate twice, and was beginning to slow in his consumption, the Headmaster spoke again. “The Magical Law Enforcement department owed me last night. They can no longer reasonably delay interviewing you.”

Harry looked up warily, but his mouth was full, and he could only manage a cautious grunt.

“They will be sending someone—they did go to great trouble to mention it was someone we could both trust—to interview you later today. Merely preliminary, they assure me.”

The glorious breakfast turned into a great lump in Harry’s stomach. He didn’t want to talk about his uncle or his summers with anyone—least of all, some stranger. “What—when are they coming?” he managed to ask.

“Directly after lunch—about quarter after one in the afternoon.” Dumbledore leaned towards Harry. “You do not need to answer any questions you do not want to, Harry. And if you become uncomfortable, you can stop. You are the victim, and they know it.”

Harry nodded. “What—what if they bring up S-Sirius? Will I get in trouble for not turning him in? Should I keep quiet about him?”

CHAPTER 3



3.1

Troubled, Harry wandered, finally finding Ron in the other boy's room. He leaned on the door frame, watching the redhead, who was buried in a book about chess. *I never thought I'd see the day*, he mused. *Ron, engrossed in a book*. "May I come in?" he said finally.

"What? Oh, sure, Harry." Ron put the book down and reached for his chess set, which was in the middle of a game. "Did you need something, mate?"

"Hermione found it." Harry sat down on the corner of Ron's bed.

"Found what?" Ron glanced over, freckled face wrinkled in confusion, before returning his gaze to the chess set.

"The ritual." When Ron looked no more enlightened, he elaborated. "Wormtail's ritual."

Ron's face cleared briefly, before being replaced by a look of concentration. "And?"

"And we were right, I'm the kingpin in the whole thing." Harry leaned back against the wall. "What are you doing with that chess set, Ron?"

"Trying to find a way to beat the gambit Professor Dumbledore used on me last week," the redhead replied. "I think the key is in the pawns, but I can't find it." He frowned at the board as he reset it to an earlier position.

"Well, we were right on another count. there is a way to partially undo it and make Riddle vulnerable again," Harry continued the earlier conversation thread after watching Ron move chess pieces about for a few minutes. "I don't even need to be near him to do it."

"Sounds great, mate," Ron said absently. "Will it kill the bastard?"

"Well, no," Harry admitted. "But it will make him vulnerable." He spread his hands. "Without it, I'm the only one who can kill him, and if he kills me, he gets all our power combined."

"Sounds scary," Ron commented. "So...what does it take? Anything I can help with?"

Harry took a deep breath. "No, not really. And all it requires is a short spell—just two words."

"So what's the problem?" Ron frowned at a bishop, touching it thoughtfully.

"It's getting the spell to work that I'm worried about," Harry responded quietly. "I've never tried casting it, and there's really no way to practice. Besides, it...well, it sort of requires a sacrifice. Just from me, and one I'm willing to make but..." He shrugged. "I guess I'm just scared."

“Why?” Ron removed his hand from the bishop and glanced up at Harry. “I’ve never seen you back down from confronting the bastard before.”

“You’re right,” Harry said softly as Ron turned his attention to his rook. “I should just get on with it, huh?”

Ron nodded, hand reaching out to move his rook two spaces over.

Harry drew his wand, pointing it at himself, and took a deep breath. He willing his hand to stop trembling. “*Avada ke—*”

Ron’s head snapped up on the first syllable. The chess set went flying as he powered to his feet. “No!” he yelled, throwing himself at Harry as he uttered the penultimate syllable. His hand closed on Harry’s, forcing the wand up and away from the other boy’s body, even as he finished the incantation.

“—vra.” The spell went off, the sickly green bolt riffling Harry’s hair as it passed, scorching a hole into the wood paneling. In the next heartbeat, Ron had landed on Harry and had torn the wand out of his hand.

“That was the bloody Killing Curse!” he shouted. “Blast it, Harry, you could have been *killed!*”

“I know.” Harry lay still under the other boy, not fighting him or even moving other than to speak. “I know, Ron.”

“You cast the bloody Killing Curse,” Ron whispered, horror dawning in his features. “At *yourselves*. Harry, what—why—”

“I told you, it requires a sacrifice,” Harry said tiredly. “If I die, at the hands of someone other than Voldemort, he becomes vulnerable. Mortal.” He gazed calmly past Ron’s ear at the ceiling. “It would have worked.”

“But you would have died!” Ron shouted.

“One life for many.” Harry met his eyes. “Wouldn’t it be worth it?”

3.2

Severus was, as usual, in the lab when he heard footsteps on the stair. He frowned—none of the people who usually visited like him *clomped* like that. “Potter?” he called as a guess. The boy’s changing body did occasionally render him awkward.

“Er—no, sir.” The youngest Weasley male appeared in the door frame as Severus looked up. Severus’s mouth instantly thinned with distaste, although it was muted somewhat by amusement at the obvious trepidation on the boy’s face. Clearly here was one child who was properly afraid of him.

“Why have you invaded my laboratory, Weasley?” Severus growled at him, and got the satisfaction of seeing the boy’s face pale another shade.

“It’s... about Harry,” the boy managed to get out, then, most astonishingly, “May I come in?”

“When is it not?” Severus sighed, then, realizing the boy was still standing outside the door, growled, “Will wonders never cease. A Weasley, displaying manners. Yes, you may

come in; there are stools on the other side of the table.” The insult worked; the boy pinked up enough that Severus was no longer afraid he might pass out. “Now, what about Potter?”

Weasley came in, but did not take one of the offered stools, seeming to prefer standing well away from Severus’s lab space. “It’s... he cast the Killing Curse, just now. Successfully, I think.”

Severus paled, his fingers going numb. “At *whom*, boy?” he demanded sharply.

“Himself.”

Severus dropped the stirrer. Standing, he took a breath—if he did not breathe, he would pass out on the stairs—

“He missed,” Weasley said hurriedly. “That’s why I don’t properly know if it worked—or would have worked—”

“He is alive?” Severus interrupted. He knew it was an inane question, the sort he ridiculed his students for asking—*Of course he is alive, Mr Snape, unless you mean to imply that the fearsome Boy Who Lived keeled over dead from fright from a missed Killing Curse.* But he still had to *know* for certain.

“Yes.” Ron nodded. “He says he won’t do it again, at least, not without warning first.” Severus relaxed marginally. “I just... I thought I should tell someone. Someone—adult. You know.”

“And of all the adults in Potter’s life, you thought of me?” Severus raised an incredulous eyebrow.

“We’re... you’re nearly the only one here,” Weasley said. “And... you remember how the rest reacted last time. I... I figured between... that... and the Killing Curse, they’d lose it.”

Severus sat down again, hard. “Indeed, Mr Weasley.” Casting the Killing Curse at a human was exceedingly difficult—most Death Eater recruits had to practice for weeks, even months, to be able to casually kill Muggles. Casting it at yourself... was *supposed* to be nearly impossible. “What makes you believe he cast it successfully?” he queried the boy.

“Well, there was a green bolt—looked like the Curse to me.” For a moment, Severus reflected that he would have ridiculed nearly any other student who had uttered those words. But Weasley had been in Crouch’s class and at the Ministry—he likely knew what a Killing Curse looked like as well as Draco did. “It made a hole in the wall when it hit, too. It was a pretty big one, but I got most of it closed back up.”

Severus stared at the boy. “A hole. How big?” he asked softly.

“Um... pretty big.”

“*How* big?”

The boy made a gesture with his hands, and Severus closed his eyes briefly. There was no question—with a hole that big, that was a man-killing Curse. Although that did give him another question. “How did he *miss*?”

“Er—what do you mean?”

Severus prayed for patience to anyone who was listening. “I presume Mr Potter pointed his wand at himself when he cast.” Otherwise this was attempted murder, and they had a radically different problem—

“Well, yes.” Weasley sounded as if it were obvious.

“How in Merlin’s name did the boy *miss*, then?” Severus growled.

Weasley flushed. “I, err. . . I sort of jumped on top of him.”

“You jumped on top of him.” Severus stared at the boy.

“And. . . uh. . . I sort of grabbed his wand.”

Severus rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Did it occur to you, Weasley, that if Potter’s curse had misfired, you could have been killed?”

“Well. . . yeah,” the boy admitted, surprising Severus. “Afterwards, anyway.” Ah. “But I would have done it anyway. I mean, he’s *Harry Potter*,” he said to Severus’s disbelieving gaze. “We need him a lot more than we need me.” He really could not argue with that—especially when the boy stated it so matter-of-factly.

CHAPTER 4



Removed stuff

He frowned. “What’s so special about Halloween, sir? Lily mentioned it, too.”

Dumbledore seemed nonplussed, but Remus nodded slightly. “Harry, what do you know about the penalties for rape in the wizarding world?”

“Er. Nothing, really,” he replied, a bit confused. “Why?”

“Rape is considered one of the more heinous crimes a person can commit, and the penalties for it are...older than almost any other Wizarding law,” Remus began, then stopped and sighed. “To make a long lecture shorter, there is a magical, sealed record—somewhere in the Ministry; I don’t know how it works. Come Halloween, it will open itself, and the penalties will be applied. The men involved will forfeit property and they will have to face a hearing to determine whether or not they will be allowed to retain their jobs and any positions of authority.”

“Oh. So—I can expect this to be the front page of the Prophet on Halloween,” Harry said glumly. “Wonderful.”

Remus nodded. “I’m afraid so, Harry. It is the law; there is nothing we can do about it. We would, if we could.”

“S’okay,” Harry said with a shrug. *I’ll just have to deal with it, like every other wonderful event of my life.*

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.

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.