

Unlocking Harry Potter **by sarini**

Chapter One

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It was a quiet dank night. The air was still and there was a slight chill on the breeze combating the heat left from the harsh afternoon sun, a precursor to the predicted storm. Severus Snape and Remus Lupin sat at the kitchen table at number twelve Grimmauld Place, the Headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix. Though Floo access had been restricted, there was always at least one Order member waiting by the fire ever since the fiasco with Potter and Kreacher that June... just in case. The house had been left to Remus in Sirius Black's will, which had activated at Gringotts instantly upon his death, along with a sizable portion of the Black fortune. A small percentage, though still a considerable sum, was left to Fred and George Weasley with a provision that it be used in the pursuit of magical mischief, and a smaller amount went to the Gryffindor Quidditch Team. A respectable pile of gold Galleons was transferred directly to the Weasley vault as the will was read, giving them no chance to turn it down. The rest... properties, money, and random belongings... all of it went to Potter. Still, though, the werewolf was wearing threadbare secondhand robes, as though using the money would be admitting Black was dead. A bottle of Ogden's Firewhiskey sat half empty between them. Another empty bottle lay on its side, already consumed by the time Severus joined Remus at the table.

He was amazed that he sat there drinking with Lupin. The two men were not friends, had never been friends, and most likely never would be friends. They had put aside their animosity, or at least attempted to, for their work in the fight against the Dark Lord Voldemort. Severus studied the werewolf. The man's eyes were empty, dead. He had seen it before, when someone lost their family or loved ones. Lupin's family had abandoned him long ago because of his 'condition.' The only one that had stayed with him was long dead.

He had found friends at school, at Hogwarts, but now they were all dead, or almost all. The only other one left of the four infamous Marauders that terrorized the halls of Hogwarts was Peter Pettigrew. The next time the two men met, though, Severus was sure only one of them would survive. Pettigrew had betrayed his friends. Despite Lupin's current health and Pettigrew's silver hand Severus was betting on the werewolf. He had seen this man angry before and never wanted to witness it again.

Severus despised Sirius Black, even in death. Despite that, looking across the table, he realized that he would give anything to bring Black back. That infuriating mutt's death was killing the man that sat across from him. If it was doing this to Lupin, Severus cringed to think of how Potter was reacting. He had seen the headmaster's office after the battle at the Ministry of Magic. Potter had trashed it, destroying everything he could in his rage, and even Severus had never dared go on a rampage in the headmaster's office or even considered doing so.

Dumbledore of course had just smiled that infuriating small smile of his and repaired the majority of the destruction with a flick of his wand the next day and a twinkle in his eyes. To the shock of the Potions Master, and the rest of the staff, some of the items had been damaged beyond repair. That took more strength than he had ever seen in Potter. Grief brought out both the best and worst in people, and sometimes both together.

Lupin was drinking to forget. Severus was drinking to ease his guilt. He had not been able to save James and Lily Potter fifteen years ago. His information on the attack had gotten to the headmaster too late. He had a hand in Black's death. If he had only managed to act his age and stop tormenting the fugitive, Black might still be alive. Then there was Severus's behavior towards Harry Potter. After

twelve years in Azkaban Black couldn't be expected to act properly, but Snape hadn't even considered what damage that prison had done to his nemesis.

He had killed in his days as a loyal Death Eater, and still did to maintain his cover, but these three deaths, that hadn't even been by own hands, plagued him more than any others. Of course, the first two deaths had resulted in the thirteen years of peace that the wizarding world experienced. The third resulted in an admission on the part of the Ministry that Voldemort was indeed back. He had at least succeeded in saving Harry Potter's life once or twice, as much as he disliked doing so at the time.

Severus tilted the bottle and poured himself another shot. He filled the glass in front of the werewolf and put the bottle back in its place. Were Molly Weasley awake she would no doubt scold them ferociously. She mothered everyone who stepped inside Headquarters, regardless of their age. The majority of the Weasley family was asleep upstairs, along with the Granger girl, as it was nearing midnight.

They were on call, so to speak, but a simple sobriety potion would take care of any problems. As a Potions Master, Severus was prepared for such a need. Two vials of *Sobrie Instante* stood at the ready. He threw his head back and downed the shot of room temperature amber liquid. There was a brief burn in his throat followed by spreading warmth. Lupin poured the next two shots immediately, still drinking two or three to every one Severus consumed.

"Has Harry written this week?" Lupin asked listlessly, surprising Severus with his lucidity.

These days the mention or thought of Harry Potter was the only thing that roused Lupin from his perpetual state of apathy. The boy was all he had left and was shut up at the muggles' house out of reach. If Severus ever needed proof of the inferiority of muggles he had it in the Dursleys. Molly Weasley had related to the Order all the stories of Potter's childhood that she had coaxed out of her youngest son Ron, and it was a given that what Ron knew was only scratching the surface.

The boy had admitted that Potter avoided the topic of his relatives whenever possible. Molly's rant was a blatant attempt to get Potter out of that home and Severus had been disgusted at what she revealed, especially when the headmaster insisted on leaving the boy there for at least a month, without explaining why. Though the end of that month was near, the headmaster gave no indication of releasing Potter from the muggles' care.

Severus's guilt extended beyond the deaths of Harry Potter's parents and godfather. He had treated The-Boy-Who-Lived horribly, seeing only his popularity and fame... and his father. It did help maintain his cover in the eyes of Voldemort and the Death Eaters, but Severus had taken it too far, transferring his rivalry with the father and godfather to the son.

It was childish, and worse it had quickly become vicious and nearly uncontrollable. His reaction to Potter's intrusion on his privacy was enough to get any other professor fired, but Albus couldn't fire him if he wanted Severus to live. He had actually thrown one of his students across a room. To put it simply, Severus was disgusted with himself, and was forced to reexamine his attitude towards Potter over the years.

"Not yet," Severus responded. "We should be seeing Hedwig soon. He's late, but not more than a day." All the members of the order were now familiar with the snowy white owl that Hagrid had bought for Potter. She was pampered by the vast majority of them, especially Mad-Eye Moody in an odd showing of softness on the ex-Auror's part.

"I'm worried," Lupin said. He tossed back another double shot and reached for the bottle. "Those letters aren't like him and I just have this feeling."

"He saw his godfather die, was possessed by the Dark Lord, and used an Unforgivable Curse on a fellow human... if you could call Bellatrix human," Severus stated calmly, having learned of the last in a Death Eater meeting and reluctantly shared it with a shocked Order. "No doubt the Harry Potter we knew in June no longer exists."

The werewolf made a choking sound and Severus did not look up. He probably blamed himself, along with Severus. Chances were Potter was blaming himself too. If the boy were only a few years older he'd have been there drowning himself in the Ogden's with them.

"I used to think it was one of the only advantages of lycanthropy, a great sense of smell, hearing, sight, and that it was nearly impossible to get completely pissed," Lupin muttered as he tossed back another shot. So far he had imbibed probably four times as much as Severus and still seemed rather lucid. "I could always drink James and Sirius under the table, one after the other. They kept trying to outdo me until Lily put a stop to it."

Severus raised his eyebrows. After being forced to work with the man for years, he was only now getting used to him and the casual mentions of his lycanthropy. After the prank that Black pulled in their fifth year at Hogwarts, where Severus had seen Lupin on the full moon and was nearly killed, he had been terrified of the man. His way of dealing with the situation was to treat him with contempt and hatred. Now he was responsible for the small amount of relief the man had on nights of the full moon, the Wolfsbane Potion that allowed him to keep his mind when he transformed. The flames in the fireplace flared and turned green, signaling the approach of someone by Floo. Severus cursed loudly and thrust one of the vials of *Sobrie* at Lupin, drinking the other. Only very few people had access to this fireplace on the Floo Network from only two other fireplaces. All the warmth, comfort, and fuzziness from the alcohol disappeared bringing cold sobriety and reality as the head of Albus Dumbledore came into view. The headmaster spotted the bottles and raised his eyebrows. Severus held up the vial and Albus nodded.

"I need the two of you to go to Privet Drive and check on Harry. He hasn't written yet. The wards are fine, but I am uneasy," Albus stated soberly.

"This late?" Remus asked, a token objection as the man had been almost pleading to do just that for weeks.

"Would you like to go when the Dursleys are awake?" Albus asked his question in reply. Potter would of course be awake. He had difficulty sleeping even before his godfather was killed. Though he had only rarely been caught, Potter frequently was out of his Tower after curfew.

The Order had backed off, not physically guarding number four Privet Drive every moment of the day and night. It was in part to give Potter a little more freedom, and also because they just didn't have the people to spare. The Dark Lord was much more active once his return became public knowledge.

"We'll leave immediately," Severus said, cleaning up the evidence of their drinking marathon with a flick of his wand.

"Don't do anything to the muggles Severus," Albus warned.

Severus snorted. He may despise muggles, and these muggles in particular, but he was not stupid. He had no desire to be arrested and jailed. They were not worth it. The only thing keeping the Ministry from arresting Severus just on principle was Dumbledore and the Order members in the Auror Corps.

"Is there anything you want to give him?" Lupin asked almost hopefully.

Albus sighed, "Just tell him that it will only be a little longer. We should be able to remove him from there in about a week or so, if he wants to be at Grimmauld Place. If not it will be a bit longer."

Lupin looked down and ran his fingers through his prematurely almost greying hair, "We'll let you know how things are as soon as we get back."

"Thank you Remus," Albus said before disappearing from the flames.

Remus turned to Severus and deadpanned, "So Severus, does that mean I can have a go at the muggles?"

"It would be satisfying Lupin, but you can't help Potter from prison," Severus responded with a mild smirk.

Remus snorted and fished a scrap of parchment and what Severus assumed was a muggle pen from his robes. He jotted a note to anyone who woke up and found the kitchen empty. They both grabbed lightweight black cloaks from the coat tree in the hall and walked out the front door to the London streets. With their hoods up to hide their faces they found an empty alley and apparated to Privet Drive.

The street was quiet. It showed no sign that the most famous wizard of their time lived in one of the cookie cutter houses that dotted the street at a regular interval. Each house was identical, down to the white trim and black shutters. The only difference lay in the gardens and the window treatments. The windows of a few houses were still lit, their inhabitants not yet in bed or trying to ward off intruders. Severus reached into a pocket for Albus's Putter-Outer and extinguished all the street lights. The two men made their way along Privet Drive until they found themselves standing in front of number four.

There were lights on in the living room bay window and some of the upstairs windows. The Dursleys were awake. This in itself boded trouble. The Dursley family was known to retire early in general and wake early. Wands at the ready, Severus and Lupin knocked on the front door. It opened to reveal a horse faced woman with a sour expression and deep worry circles under her eyes. It looked like Potter was not the only occupant of the house who was having difficulty sleeping.

"Petunia," Lupin greeted her with a jerky nod. She flinched.

Severus sneered. This woman looked nothing like Lily Potter. "Where is Potter?" he asked. Both men lowered the hoods of their cloaks as they stepped inside, out of the shadows and into the artificial muggle lighting.

"In his room," she snapped with clear irritability. "It's about time..."

The woman was staring at Remus Lupin with a look of horror. She probably recognized him from Lily's wedding, Severus figured.

"What's this all about," a gruff voice approached them, belonging to a man with very little neck.

"Have the freaks finally showed up to rid us of that boy? He's been odder than ever."

Severus ignored the overweight, irate muggle and looked at his companion warily. Lupin had his head slightly tilted up and his eyes were unfocused. He sniffed the air and cocked his head towards the stairs. A faint amber glow came from his eyes and Severus stepped back cautiously. The man was radiating power at that moment. He grudgingly admitted to himself that Lupin did still scare him. Too much of the wolf was accessible to the man, especially that close to the full moon.

"Blood... Harry," the werewolf growled before he shot into the house, moving faster than any human should. In a flash Vernon Dursley was lifted off the ground as though he weighed nothing and pinned against the wall with Lupin's forearm pressed against his throat. The man's eyes went wide in fear. "Where is he? What have you done to him?"

The man spluttered, unable to answer as his wife clawed at Lupin's arm, to no affect. Lupin ignored the woman.

"I would answer him if I were you," Severus said in the cold tone that frightened his Hufflepuff and Gryffindor students senseless. "It is foolish to anger a werewolf."

He didn't think the man's eyes could open any wider, but they did. His face paled, but there was no change in Petunia. She must have known already.

"We haven't touched him," Vernon finally managed in a rough voice. "He shut himself in his room when we got back and hasn't been out all summer. We can't open the door. Petunia puts food through the flap."

Lupin dropped the man and darted towards the stairs. Vernon Dursley rubbed his throat with one hand while slouched against the wall where he had fallen, his wife hovering above him. Severus followed Lupin at a dignified pace, robes and cloak billowing behind him. His expression remained unreadable but inside a chill was creeping up his spine.

He got to the second story hall to see Lupin pounding on a door and yelling for Potter to let him in. Severus pushed the werewolf aside and pointed his wand at the door. *Alohomora!* Nothing happened. He tried a more powerful unlocking charm, and still nothing.

"Don't you think I tried that?" Lupin growled. The man was more alive than he had been in over a month. "I can't force it open either. Stand back."

Severus had just enough time to take a step back and turn his face away when he felt the very small splinters of wood pepper him. He turned back and saw the dust settle where the door to Harry Potter's room had once stood. Severus now smelled what Lupin had detected downstairs. He knew the smell of human blood all too well. It brought back memories of Death Eaters attacks, memories he would rather leave behind forever, but nothing in his experience prepared him for the sight before him.

There was a blue shimmer in the entrance to the room, almost imperceptible. It was a powerful shield, preventing anything, physical or magical, from getting through. Despite the powerful blasting curse Remus had thrown at the door, all the splinters were in the corridor. Severus tried several countercharms and countercurses to no avail.

The power holding the shield was extraordinary. He stepped towards it and felt a tingle on his skin as he stood as close as possible to the magical barrier. The hair on his arms stood up from the magical energy that exuded from the shield. From there Severus could see into the room.

Harry Potter was stretched out on his back on a bed in a pair of oversized muggle jeans, a piece of rope acting as belt. His ribcage stood out and each rib was clearly defined. There were long open slashes up and down both arms and a few on his chest. Blood soaked into the thin mattress beneath him and his skin was deathly pale. His head was turned away from the door and one arm dangled off the side of the bed, blood dripping from it onto the floor. A pocket knife was sitting in the blood on the floor. His wand was nowhere in sight. There was no sight of the boy's snowy owl and his only window was shut and locked.

Severus stepped back with his hand over his mouth, fighting back nausea. Lupin had collapsed and was shaking with sobs. Severus stepped towards him and slapped him hard across the face. His hand stung at the impact but it seemed to hardly faze the werewolf.

"Get a hold of yourself," he snapped. "He's not dead yet, and nowhere near it at the moment. The shield would have fallen and you should be able to smell it, damn you. Get Albus. He's the only one who could break that shield."

Lupin's breathing was ragged as he gazed at Severus in shock before leaping to his feet. He ran out of the house to apparate to Hogwarts. Severus stood outside the shield, wand ready in case the shield fell. Despite what he told Lupin, he was extremely worried. The amount of blood the boy had lost was dangerous indeed.

He would only have a few moments to save Potter if the shield happened to fall. He searched through his pockets for some medicinal potions he had brought with him. The shock was keeping the reality of the situation from settling in. He had grabbed the potions in case he had to save Harry from the Dursleys, not from self-inflicted injuries.

Chapter Two

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The shield held while he waited. Petunia Dursley made her way up the stairs eventually, only to shriek in horror. Severus gave her a vial and insisted that Vernon drink it, thinking as she left that he should have given her a calming potion for herself as well. Severus wondered fleetingly where the cousin was. He did not have long to wonder, as his vigil was interrupted by a frantic Remus Lupin followed by Albus Dumbledore. The headmaster looked as though he had aged ten years in as many minutes.

Albus pointed his wand at the shield and cast a few spells. The shield glowed a bright turquoise blue where they impacted and remained in place. The headmaster stood silent for a moment and placed a hand over his eyes. When he looked at Severus his eyes were glassy with tears, a sight the Potions Master had never before witnessed.

"I cannot break the shield," he said to the shock of the other wizards present. "We'll just have to wait. When he's lost enough blood he won't be able to hold the shield. Poppy is on her way. When the shield drops we'll have fifteen seconds at most to stabilize Harry before we lose him."

"Albus," Severus asked, "why hasn't the Ministry detected this? You should have received a notice the instant he locked that door."

"The Ministry must not know Severus," the headmaster replied. "They wouldn't be able to pick this up if Harry did not use his wand. He has to be holding this shield wandlessly and apparently unconscious."

Severus's mind was reeling. He knew that the Potter boy would be powerful when he grew into his magic and had his power spurts, but never suspected anything like this. He believed for the first time that Potter would be able to defeat the Dark Lord... if he lived long enough to face him.

Poppy Pomfrey came bustling up the stairs, a bag of potions and other medical supplies in one hand. She immediately pulled out a vial and handed it to Lupin, glaring until he drank it. Based on his reaction it was a calming draught. She stepped up to the shield to assess Potter's condition and paled visibly at what she saw. After fetching a small table from down the hall she opened her bag and began pulling out potions and bandages, laying them out in preparation. Her wand was gripped in anticipation.

"Severus," Albus spoke and Severus snapped back to attention. The usual amusement was absent from the headmaster's voice, replaced by deep sadness, "go downstairs and alter their memories. They can't know what happened here if anyone comes looking for Harry. Have them think you and Remus showed up and took Harry away in good health and get them in bed. Find Dudley Dursley and make sure he doesn't know anything."

Severus nodded and went downstairs. He would not be needed when the shield dropped, and did not want to enter that room with Potter in that state. As he neared the parlour he heard voices in the kitchen. He had turned towards that room when the front door opened and slammed shut.

On instinct Severus spun and whipped out his wand to face a potential threat. A teenage boy, nearly as round as he was tall, let out a muffled yelp and froze. Potter's cousin looked to be everything that Potter was not. Severus relaxed his stance slightly and motioned with his wand for the boy to join his parents in the kitchen.

The grotesquely fat boy scurried past Severus, keeping as far away from the wizard as possible, and ran into the kitchen with one hand covering his backside and the other over his mouth. Severus made a mental note to ask about the strange behavior later.

He entered the kitchen and saw the boy quivering behind his father, his double chin rippling. The vial of potion remained untouched. The Dursleys regarded his presence with a combination of fear and loathing.

"That is not poison. It will heal your throat," he said, indicating the vial.

Shaking, Potter's uncle removed the stopper and drank the potion, grimacing at the foul taste. He braced himself as though it would transform or kill him. The bruises faded from the man's neck and his eyes widened yet again as the pain vanished. Severus snorted, *looks like the muggles decided magic is good for something after all.*

"Has the door been locked all summer?" Severus questioned them.

Potter's aunt nodded. She looked decidedly ill, *no doubt from the sight of her nephew lying in a pool of his own blood.* Severus took another vial out of his robes and passed it to her. She drank it and the color returned to her face.

"We cannot have you telling anyone what happened," he said with his wand pointed at them. He had performed this spell many times in his roll as a spy, and had gotten quite proficient at tampering with memories. *Obliviate.* The eyes of the three muggles glazed over.

"Potter has been locked in his room all summer and eating the food you provided. Remus Lupin and I removed him from your home this evening while you were all asleep. The sounds of us leaving woke you, but you did not investigate as you were glad to be rid of him. Petunia recognized Lupin's voice from when her sister was still alive and none of you heard or saw me. You have no concerns about Potter's welfare and would rather he disappear from your lives altogether. You do not expect to see him again until next summer."

He cast a sleeping charm on the three of them and proceeded to levitate them to their bedrooms. He passed Potter's room on the way and refused to make eye contact with any of the people waiting at the edge of the shield. The cousin's room was first and Severus left the parents hovering in the hall as he floated the obese boy to his bed. He left him dressed and on top of his covers.

The parents were changed into their bedclothes with a swish of his wand and an averted gaze. From the dent in the mattress it was obvious which side Potter's uncle slept on. He shuddered and turned to leave the room when a blinding flash came from the hall. He swept his cloak in front of his face to protect his eyes until the light died down.

Severus rushed out of the room. Albus and Lupin were just entering Potter's room as Severus got to the hall. Poppy must have been inside before the light faded. When he got inside the flow of blood was already stopped, the wounds closed and covered with white gauze. Poppy was pouring potion after potion into Potter's mouth, her fingers massaging his throat to force him to swallow. The boy's eyes remained closed.

"He weakened enough for me to break the shield," Albus said as the three men watched the mediwitch work, his hand on Lupin's arm. They did not look at each other.

"Will he...?" Remus began, clearly unable to voice his fear.

"It's too early to tell," Poppy spoke up in a clear clinical tone as she stopped using potions and brandished her wand to cast healing spells. "He's lost a lot of blood. He was already malnourished and dehydrated. He stopped breathing and I don't know for how long. He's breathing again now, but if his brain was without oxygen for long enough there will be damage. He needs to be in the hospital wing when... if," she corrected herself and stepped back, "he wakes up. Nothing else can be done now."

While she was healing Potter, Albus had cleaned up the room. All evidence that Potter had hurt himself was gone. Albus took something out of his pocket, lifted the boy, and muttered something under his breath. The two of them were sucked away by Portkey directly to the hospital wing. Poppy wiped her face and began to pack away her things. She then disappeared with her own Portkey. Lupin stepped forward and picked up the pocketknife that had fallen to the floor.

"It was a gift from Sirius," he said in an emotionless tone.

He opened the different tools; one of them looked to have melted away. He turned it over in his hands before he closed it and slipped it into a pocket. The werewolf then knelt on the ground and reached under the bed. He pried up a floorboard and pulled out a pillowcase. He emptied the

contents of the pillowcase into Potter's trunk: his wand, the invisibility cloak that made rule breaking much easier, a piece of old parchment that looked very familiar to Severus, and a photo album. The trunk and owl cage were shrunk and joined the pocketknife in Lupin's pocket. When they left the room there was no clue that Harry Potter had ever been there.

On the way out of the house Severus noticed the red luminous numbers of the muggle clock. It was now an hour past midnight.

"Happy Birthday Harry," he heard Lupin say as they disappeared into the night, headed for Hogwarts.

The hospital wing of Hogwarts was the same as it had been for the past twenty-five years... at least. Severus and Lupin went immediately to the only occupied bed there. Severus had to run to keep up with the werewolf. There were chairs arranged around the bed, by their comfortable look conjured by Albus. The headmaster was seated in one of the chairs, his elbows perched on the arms of the chair and his fingers tented in thought. He did not acknowledge the arrival of his Potions Master and the werewolf.

Severus saw Lupin's eyes darting back and forth, inspecting Potter as best as he could. The werewolf's nostrils flared, and it was obvious he was physically holding himself back. After a minute or so Lupin got himself under control and relaxed a bit.

Lupin pulled Potter's belongings out of his pocket. He enlarged the trunk and placed it at the foot of the bed. He hesitated, and then opened the trunk to pull out some personal objects. The photo album and Potter's wand were placed on the bedside table. Lupin reached inside the trunk once more, and cursed. He pulled out his hand with a bead of blood forming on the palm. The werewolf just froze, staring at the blood.

Severus took the man's hand in his own and healed the cut. He lit his wand and directed the beam of light into the trunk to see what caused the injury. A broken piece of glass was sticking out from a pile of robes. Carefully uncovering the shard, he discovered the shattered mirror. He pulled out the pieces, laying them gently in his hand so as not to cut himself.

"It's a two-way mirror. All the Marauders had them. Sirius must have given it to him. Why didn't he try...?" Lupin's speech trailed off again.

"Based on its condition Potter realized the same thing... too late." Severus wrapped the shards carefully in an old, tattered shirt that looked much too big for Potter and placed them back in the trunk. He warded the bundle against opening accidentally again. He noticed an enveloped lying in the trunk, unopened. The Ministry seal showed that it contained Potter's O.W.L. results.

The loud tones of Molly Weasley interrupted whatever train of thought Severus had just begun, "Where is everyone? Hedwig finally showed up and I... oh, Harry! What did those monsters do to him?"

The headmaster looked up for the first time since Severus had entered the hospital wing, "Nothing, Molly. This time the Dursleys are innocent... this time."

"Then... how...?" tears were welling in the eyes of the mother of seven, and self-appointed adoptive mother of Harry Potter.

Severus sighed as no one else made a move to help the woman. He guided her to a chair, "Potter did this to himself Molly."

The shock and horror registered on her face instantly. She looked down at the parchment she was holding and slowly held it out towards Lupin, "It's addressed to you Remus. It's thicker than any of his other letters."

Lupin swallowed and took the letter with a shaking hand. He sat down before opening it. If it was possible, his face went even paler as he read the letter. Tears were falling freely from his eyes by the time he finished and the others in the room looked at him expectantly.

"I... I can't... Severus?" he asked, holding out the letter.

Severus took it, cleared his throat, and began to read aloud in a low voice. Were it not for years of correcting Potter's essays the letter would have been unintelligible. Even for Potter, though, the writing was overly large and messy.

"Professor Lupin,

By the time you get this letter and are reading it, it should be too late. Don't bother coming after me. I don't want you to. I know that won't stop you, but I thought you should know my wishes. If I am successful tonight, then Hermione and Professor McGonagall will have the satisfaction of knowing they were right, that divination is a load of crap and Trelawney is a fraud. If I don't succeed, then maybe none of us have control over our lives, maybe all those globes in the Department of Mysteries have each of our futures etched out.

I'm writing to you because I know you'll understand. You, like me, have had any control over your own life stripped away. Yours was taken by a bite in childhood. Mine was taken by words spoken before I was even born. You are now a creature feared by our world and shunned for the one night out of each month that the creature takes control. I am just a weapon to be used by the Order with no chance to hope or plan for the future. Regardless of any dreams I may have had I know that I will not have a chance to fulfill them. I'll never be an Auror, or a professional quidditch player, or have a family of my own.

Before Hogwarts I had no plans for when I grew up. I couldn't see beyond the Dursleys. When Hagrid saved me from my life I felt something, or many things, I had never felt before. I had hope. I was accepted. I was not alone. No matter how many horrible things happened to me at Hogwarts it was still always much better than life with the Dursleys. This past year, though, I found myself cursing Hagrid that he ever found me and brought me into that world of pain. If I had been left as a muggle would Voldemort have risen again?

Now I am alone again. It is not just that Sirius died, and it was entirely my fault. If you have no idea what I'm talking about ask Professor Dumbledore. Do you all even know what you were guarding in the Department of Mysteries all year? Did he keep you in the dark the same as he did to me? He's not in my head anymore, at least I don't think he is, but I still can't sleep. Nightmares from the past, instead of the present, are what keep my eyes open night after night. The words that Professor Dumbledore shared with me that night repeat over and over in my head. I won't write them here in case Hedwig is intercepted again. Though I am no longer concerned for my own safety I still care for all of you.

I'm not special. It was Mum that stopped Voldemort when I was a baby, not me. I don't have a chance against him.

The remainder of this letter is my will. I don't own much, but I what I do own is precious to me. Please see that it goes to the right people, even if this paper isn't legal according to wizarding law. I would ask Hermione, but that would ruin my plans.

I want Ron Weasley to have my Firebolt. I think he was more excited than I was when I received it, and more mad with Hermione when she told Professor McGonagall about it.

My invisibility cloak goes to Ginny Weasley, as she has the most years left at Hogwarts.

All my books go to Hermione Granger. Anyone who is reading must already know why. I also want her to take care of Hedwig since Hermione doesn't have an owl of her own.

The map and the album Hagrid gave me with pictures of my parents are for Remus Lupin, the last true Marauder.

I don't know what is in the vaults that Sirius left to me, but the contents of both my vaults should be divided equally and given to the Weasley family, Hermione, and Remus Lupin.

The rest of my belongings can be distributed as Remus Lupin sees fit. Anyone who sees Wormtail or Tom Riddle can give them a killing curse from me. I no longer need to see Wormtail captured alive.

Tell everyone I'm sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't save Sirius. I'm sorry I'm not strong enough to kill Voldemort. I'm sorry I'm not strong enough to save myself. I'll see my parents and Sirius soon, and maybe I'll finally get some sleep.

Harry Potter"

Severus Snape, who prided himself on never showing emotion, choked out the last line of the letter and let it float to the floor. He stared at the sixteen-year-old boy lying on the bed and tears fell from his eyes for the first time in over thirty years. As they all sat in silence, contemplating the words of the unconscious young man and praying for him to wake, several owls flew into the hospital wing, bearing packages and letters, Harry Potter's birthday presents.

Chapter Three

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"We need to call the Order. Molly, please allow all your children and Miss Granger to attend this meeting. We will gather in the Great Hall in the morning," Albus said with no sign of his usual cheerfulness, no evidence of the power that even Voldemort feared, finally breaking the silence. Severus took the last remaining chair for himself. He never expected to be watching by the bedside of James Potter's son. He almost regretted making the potion for Lily when she had trouble conceiving, but she had begged him and then begged him not to tell James. It was this and his promise, more than the life debt he owed to James, which made him watch over the younger Potter. Sleep did not come that night for any of the three men or two women watching over Harry Potter. The boxes and envelopes were stacked on top of Potter's trunk. Molly left around dawn to make sure the residents of Grimmauld Place got fed, and to bring them all to Hogwarts.

There was no change in Potter when it was time to head down to the Great Hall. His arms and legs were strapped to the bed and the headmaster cast a spell to alert him of any change in the boy's condition. Every member of the Order's Inner Circle had to be there for this meeting.

It was unusual for the members of the Order to gather at Hogwarts, as their presence anywhere in great numbers attracted attention. The Ministry knew the Order existed but did not know who the members were, though they must have suspicions. Voldemort, however, knew firmly who several of the members were. It was also unusual to walk into a room with that many members and be greeted by silence. Though the majority of them were not privy to why Albus called the meeting the tension in the castle was palpable. Even Peeves was silent, waiting with all the other ghosts.

The Weasley family and the Granger girl were some of the last to arrive. As Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, and Hermione Granger were not yet licensed to apparate alternate transportation had to be provided. With the Ministry regulations on Portkeys and the vulnerabilities of the Floo Network, a series of Floo jumps combined with some broom flying and a final walk from Hogsmeade had made up their trip. With the presence of the youngest Weasleys and Granger the absence of Potter was glaringly obvious.

Severus briefly studied the students' faces before Albus started the meeting. Molly had certainly mentioned something of Potter's current condition. Their eyes were red and puffy as though they had been crying and Granger leaned against the youngest Weasley boy. The close proximity of their Potions Master usually elicited glares, especially after Potter's Occlumency lessons the previous school year. That morning their eyes passed over Severus without acknowledgement.

Albus had rearranged the Great Hall to accommodate the meeting. The customary house tables were gone, replaced by a large round table with comfortable chairs. Though most of the members had just eaten breakfast there was an assortment of pastries, muffins, scones, juice, teas, and coffee. Severus had not eaten but he did not think he could stomach food just then. He poured himself a cup of Earl Grey tea and sat down.

"I am sorry for bringing you all here at such short notice, but something happened last night which could change the course of the war dramatically," Albus paused and took a deep breath. Severus could not recall a time that the headmaster had looked that old. "You know that the Ministry record of the prophecy that Voldemort was trying to take from the Department of Mysteries was destroyed before he or any of his Death Eaters could hear it. What you do not know is that the content of that prophecy was known by me and, as of that night, by Harry Potter."

Severus blinked in surprise, but did not allow his shock to register on his face. The shock that he felt was reflected by the faces all around him. It was clear that Potter had not mentioned his knowledge of the prophecy to his friends.

"I will not share the exact wording of the prophecy or the precise interpretation. I can tell you that it concerns Voldemort and Harry Potter, and that the ultimate outcome is uncertain. Harry tested the

prophecy last night and attempted to take his own life. He is in the hospital wing and his condition is uncertain. We were lucky that Remus and Severus went to the Dursleys to check on Harry last night and were in time to alert Poppy and myself or we would have lost him."

There was a combination of crying and dull, unbelieving looks around the table. Granger was hyperventilating and Ron Weasley looked panicky as he fumbled, trying to help her, but getting in his own way. Charlie Weasley, who was putting in a rare appearance, pulled Ron away, pushed him toward the twins, and calmed Granger. Apparently Molly had not told them everything. Lupin was holding his head in his hands.

Minerva McGonagall had lost her iron composure and had an arm around Ginny Weasley as they both wept. Severus was thankful that Hagrid was away on a mission and not at the meeting. The half-giant had a tendency to overreact, especially where Potter was concerned. Severus noticed that only the Inner Circle of the Order, with the addition of Granger and some of the Weasleys, was there. Neither Voldemort nor the Ministry could find out about this situation.

Albus suddenly glanced towards the entrance. He took something out of his pocket, touched Pomfrey's shoulder, and the two of them disappeared. Where there had been silence only interrupted by the sounds of weeping moments before, there was chaos. Nearly all the members were on their feet and talking at once. The only ones who did not move were Lupin, Potter's two closest friends, and Severus himself. Seeing no end to the cacophony Severus stood and raised his wand. He issued a loud bang combined with a flash of light.

"Now that I have your attention," he started. "No doubt something concerning Potter came up. It could be a turn for the worse or the better. Lupin," the man jumped at the sound of his name, "and I will check and one of us will report back to you. Everyone else stay here," he looked pointedly at the children in the room. "Your presence upstairs could cause more harm than good."

Severus swept out of the room, followed closely by the werewolf. He walked through the corridors quickly; not bothering to make sure the other wizard was keeping up. Lupin's werewolf strength would keep him going long beyond the endurance of a normal wizard, even with the full moon that evening. Severus mentally berated himself for nearly forgetting. He summoned a house elf as they made their way to the hospital wing.

"What can Pliny do for Professor Snape?" the tiny creature in its Hogwarts tea towel squeaked. Maintaining his fast pace forced the house elf to run alongside him as Severus spoke, "In my private lab there is a potion prepared for Lupin. It is on the rear counter in a large flask. It should be the only one there and has his name on it. Fetch it and bring it to the hospital wing."

The elf disappeared and Severus grumbled. He would not be responsible for Lupin becoming a danger to all of them that evening. He had no doubt the werewolf was unaware of the approaching moon in the state he was in. The sounds coming from the hospital wing were not encouraging.

At the door Severus paused. He shot out an arm to stop Lupin from entering. Potter was having convulsions and Albus was subduing him while Poppy fought to pour a potion down his throat. Anything she managed to get in his mouth was spat back out immediately. She quickly gave up and summoned a syringe. Intravenous introduction of medication was rare in the wizarding world but was occasionally necessary. Albus held an arm still and the needle was slid in. As soon as the plunger was depressed the convulsions ceased.

Poppy busied herself replacing the bandages that had been tossed off and checking the wounds in the process. Severus dropped his arm and Lupin staggered forwards. He dropped to the floor beside Potter's bed and took one of Potter's hands in his, pressing it to his forehead.

"Please Harry, Puppy, I can't lose you too, please," the anguished plea was barely heard.

The elf appeared by Severus's side and passed over the potion. Severus waved the flask under his nose to make sure it was the correct one. He placed a hand on Lupin's shoulder.

"Drink," he ordered.

Lupin looked up and took the flask. He grimaced and emptied the flask in one pull. The Wolfsbane Potion was perhaps the bitterest one Severus made.

"Remus, take the bed next to Harry's and get some sleep. You will need it before tonight," Albus ordered sternly. "Severus, bring the Weasleys and Miss Granger up here. They can visit him for a short time. Tell everyone his condition is unchanged. Anyone who wishes may stay in the castle for the time being and then I want you to catch up your sleep."

Severus nodded and left to follow Albus's command. He was on his way back to the hospital wing with a large group of Gryffindors when he felt a familiar and dreaded pain on his left forearm.

"Damn that man!" he cursed and turned to the closest redhead. "Arthur I've been summoned. Please make my excuses."

Without waiting for an answer he took off for the edge of the wards as quickly as possible. He swished his wand and his robes transfigured into the Death Eater uniform. He followed the pull of the Dark Mark and apparated to the Dark Lord's side. A quick glance at his surroundings assured Severus that he was in the Riddle house and the new headquarters he had heard gossip about were not completed. The Dark Lord's timing was worse than ever.

"You do not look well Severus," the cold voice that was so close to a snake's hiss sent shivers along his spine.

Severus knelt and kissed the hem of the long black robes, "I did not sleep Master. I was brewing healing potions to restock the hospital wing before classes start."

"Mmmmm. The brats do have a tendency to deplete Pomfrey's stores."

"Yes Master."

"Tell me Severus. When are they moving Potter from his relative's care?"

"I believe they may have moved him last night Master. I overheard Dumbledore speaking to Molly Weasley this morning," *if you could count being part of the conversation as overhearing*. "I still cannot discover where they are living now."

Severus remained kneeling, his head bowed. It was much safer than looking into those red slits called eyes. Eye contact made Legilimency easier.

"Why did you not inform me earlier?" the Dark Lord asked quietly.

Severus barely restrained himself from flinching. The quiet tone was seldom less dangerous than his yelling, "This was my first opportunity Master. Dumbledore insisted on one of his nonsensical chats this morning. I made my excuses when you called. He is quite used to me abruptly ending those inane conversations."

"Does he suspect you?"

"I do not believe so but it is difficult to tell. The man is infuriating," Severus said truthfully. Albus did infuriate him on a regular basis.

"Who is filling the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor this fall?"

"I am not sure Master. I have seen the werewolf Lupin frequently, but the parents would object to his appointment," Severus spoke the name with disgust that surprisingly he now had to force. "There are several Aurors that are friendly with Dumbledore, but now that the Ministry has acknowledged your glorious return they will not be allowed to teach. The Ministry will not dare to interfere with Dumbledore now, so the parents and Governors may be forced to accept Lupin with no other competent applicant."

"Keep me updated Severus," Voldemort warned.

"Yes Master."

"There are several potions I need. Wormtail has a list for you. You are dismissed."

"Yes Master. Thank you Master," Severus despised groveling before this hate filled half-blood.

"And Severus..." the cold smile could be heard in the tone, "be more punctual with your reports. *Crucio!*"

The parting curse hit Severus unexpectedly. It was held for only a few moments, but long enough to leave him winded and sore. It was a testament to his endurance for pain. Years ago the curse held that long would have left him barely able to walk. On his way out he snatched the parchment with the potions list from the rat by the door. The lack of sleep made the lingering pain from the curse much worse than it normally would be, despite his years of experience with it. Though still very young by wizard standards Severus felt he was getting too old for this.

He looked over the list before leaving the Riddle house in case there were any supplies he did not have at Hogwarts. They were all basic potions, mostly for healing, except for Veritaserum. Severus made a mental note to brew the counter to Veritaserum, an invention of Severus's that no one save Albus knew about, which had to be imbibed more than one hour before questioning under the truth serum. That potion was one of the only things that kept Severus's position as a spy for the Order from being discovered. It lasted for twenty four hours and Severus made sure to drink some each morning whenever Voldemort had a stock of Veritaserum on hand.

Severus concentrated hard for several minutes before apparating to the edge of the Hogwarts wards. It required all his strength to avoid splinching himself after the events of the past thirty or so hours. He would have to get some Pepper-Up Potion from Poppy. As he walked back to the front doors of the castle an owl swooped down and flew into the open window of the hospital wing. After several minutes Severus made it up to the hospital wing, cursing the shifting staircases once he got there. Ignoring the large number of redheads there to see his weakness he collapsed on a bed, drinking the potion that Poppy immediately offered after a quick check of what the vial held. Normally he would go to his dungeons and stay as far away from Poppy as possible, but just then he didn't really care.

He felt the smoke drift out of his ears as some of the weariness left him. As he shifted he noticed that some of the potions he had brought to Surrey were still in his pockets. He sat up and drank some pain reliever. The pain in his muscles and joints faded to a mild irritation and he sat up straighter. Lupin was sound asleep on the bed next to Potter's, most likely with at least three potions in his system.

"The Dark Lord was asking after Potter. He was furious that Potter had been moved without his knowledge and is probably planning something new," Severus said.

It didn't matter that all the Weasleys were listening. Nothing he said was surprising; even Ron Weasley could have guessed. Just then he noticed that Albus was not paying attention, but instead was focused on a letter that the owl Severus had seen delivered. For a moment he thought that he could see a touch of the legendary twinkle come back to the headmaster's eyes.

"We found it," Albus explained.

The older Weasleys looked up in surprise. Severus just nodded. At that moment Order business was not at the forefront of their minds, especially as Harry's information had been crucial in that particular search. The younger Weasleys just looked a little confused.

Seeing that no explanation was forthcoming the Weasley siblings and Granger turned back to Potter, whose chest slowly rose and fell. It was the only sign of life that The-Boy-Who-Lived showed. Severus left Potter to his friends and adoptive family to brew potions for the Dark Lord. After the Pepper-Up Potion he wouldn't be able to sleep for several hours.

Chapter Four

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"Hello Snivellus," Black snarled as the three seventh year students happened upon each other in the deserted charms corridor.

"Black, Potter," Severus replied with a sneer, his wand out and ready. Years of rivalry with the Marauders had his reflexes finely tuned. He pointed the wand at Black, who was well known as the most volatile of the Marauders.

Potter was leaning casually against the wall, twirling his wand in his fingers, looking confident and calm. The seventeen-year-old wizard was remarkably more mature than he was at fifteen, but still had a touch of arrogance as he was the sole heir to an ancient, powerful, and wealthy family, "What shall we do today Padfoot?"

"We should try something new Prongs. After all, we do need a test subject for some of those charms we developed and Peter is still recovering from last time," Black replied with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

Severus was not afraid of them any longer. The rivalry had toned down somewhat after Black nearly got expelled in fifth year for his prank that almost killed Severus. Anything they did to each other now was more irritating than harmful. There was also the extra training the Slytherin's uncle had started the summer after fifth year. While decidedly unpleasant, it increased Severus's ability to deal with the Marauders.

"Aw Padfoot, but now he knows what's coming. Unsuspecting victims are so much more fun," Potter whined.

"We could always leave it for another time, when he's least suspecting it," Black acquiesced.

"Watch your back, *Snivellus*."

With that parting comment Black turned and walked towards Gryffindor Tower. Potter winked and smiled. Severus smiled in return and raised his eyebrows in silent question. Potter nodded just barely and followed his best friend. Severus left for the Slytherin common room, smirking at the comedy of the situation. Black didn't know his friends nearly as well as he thought.

James Potter entered the room in the dungeons under his invisibility cloak. Severus could smell the aftershave he used, hear the soft footfalls, and sense the presence of his powerful magic. There was not another wizard alive whose presence felt quite like that of James Potter. He smiled and turned, his robes swirled on the air and settling around him. He walked to where he knew the other boy stood and reached out to remove the cloak. James came into view as the shimmering material floated to the ground.

James reached for Severus and pulled him into a heated kiss. Severus felt all his bones turn to jelly as he melted into James. Potter kissed better than anyone Severus had ever known. Severus held James close to him with one hand on the small of his back while the other brushed through James's unruly hair and rested on the back of his neck.

The kiss broke when they were both desperate for air, "How did you get away tonight?"

"Told them I was studying," James breathed and twisted a strand of Severus's hair around his finger.

"Needless to say, Sirius won't get anywhere near my rooms. Remus has research to do and he roped Peter into helping him."

Severus laughed softly, "They are too easy."

Potter bent down and picked up his cloak, "Come to my room."

Severus raised an eyebrow.

"What's the good of being Head Boy and having a private room if it's not used for private things?"

James pouted sexily, knowing exactly what effect he had.

Severus gave in and took the cloak, wrapping himself in the light magical fabric. He followed James out of the room and watched in amusement as James interrupted various couples and sent them

back to their common rooms with points subtracted from their Houses. After watching the years of pranks, and often being the victim of them, it was interesting to see James as a disciplinarian. Severus wondered with a grin if James appreciated that he was punishing students for the same thing he himself was doing. The swaggering and superior attitude that used to infuriate Severus now turned him on.

They reached the Head Boy suite and James spoke the password loud enough for Severus to hear it, as he had changed it earlier that day. James reached behind him and pulled the Slytherin in after him, divesting him of the cloak once they crossed the common room, went up the stairs, and the door closed.

"Lily won't be stopping by tonight?" Severus asked as James fiddled with his cloak clasp, a silver snake with emerald eyes that was a gift from James.

"We have an Ancient Runes essay due tomorrow that she started about two hours ago," James said, lifting his mouth away from Severus's neck briefly. "Sirius has been a bad influence on her."

Severus closed his eyes as James slowly, teasingly began to unbutton his shirt while kissing, licking, and nibbling on his neck. He reached up to remove James's robes and bent his head to the soft flesh of the Head Boy's neck.

"Good," Severus moaned and smiled. "I have you all to myself tonight."

Severus woke up sweating and... *aroused*? What was he, fourteen? He tried to digest the dream he had just had. This was the first time he remembered having a non-nightmarish dream in many years. It had seemed so real, like a clear, vivid memory, like stepping into a pensieve. There was no way.

He hated James Potter, had always hated James Potter, and would continue hating the man's memory in peace. Severus contemplated brewing a Dreamless Sleep potion just in case his dreams continued this disturbing trend. He shuddered at the thought of him and James Potter... together. He felt almost ill at the thought.

The thoughts of James Potter led to Harry Potter. He could honestly say he no longer hated the boy. From everything he had learned that summer Potter was more like Severus than either of them would want to admit. The boy was probably more like Severus than he was like his deceased father. Severus had also been raised by relatives who were less than pleased to be assigned that task. Most of the enmity between Severus and the Marauders was because he and Black had known each other since they were small children. Severus had gotten along well with Black's cousins who tried to turn Black dark but were never successful. He still remembered the Howler that had arrived at the Gryffindor table the morning after their sorting and the crushed look on Black's face. Severus knew he could have taken a different approach in Potter's Occlumency lessons. He would have to try again once Potter woke up. The Dark Lord could not find out how powerful, yet how very fragile Harry Potter was.

With thoughts of the Potters still running through his head, Severus got dressed and headed up to the great hall for breakfast. There was only one table set up, and it was crowded with redheads and a solitary brunette. Severus was the first staff member to arrive that morning and so he found himself eating yet another meal with the Weasley clan. It was as though he had been sorted into Gryffindor. Careful to avoid any food that had been within reach of the Weasley twins he ate quickly and silently. When the chatter at the table, which was significantly less exuberant than usual, was stilled he looked up.

Albus entered the hall with Minerva at his side, still showing a slight limp from her run in with the Aurors during exams. Albus shook his head at the silent question in the eyes of each person at the table. There was no change in Potter's condition. Albus and Minerva sat by Severus and they were soon joined by Filius Flitwick and Pomona Sprout. To keep the protections of the castle strong the

Heads of House only left the grounds for brief periods of time. It was part of their job description and something that helped him considerably with the Dark Lord.

Severus ate quickly and did his best to distract his mind from the dream that had woken him. That it had felt more like a memory than a dream was disturbing to say the least. The spy's dreams usually focused on the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters, his conscience's subtle or not so subtle reminders of the atrocities Severus had committed.

Severus heard a sigh from somewhere in the sea of red hair.

"Did we ever tell you about the time Malfoy pretended to be a dementor Bill?" Potter's Weasley sidekick asked, freckles standing out on the pale face.

Severus did not want to listen to another round of stories about the Gryffindor wonder boy and got up to visit the hospital wing. Potter's presence was much more tolerable when he was unconscious and with every inhabitant of the castle in the great hall someone needed to relieve Poppy so the nurse could get some food herself.

Poppy was the only conscious person in the hospital wing, though she was looking rather worn herself. Lupin was tucked in a bed, pale and sickly looking, bandaged, battered, and bruised. The morning after a transformation was supposed to be painful. It looked as though the wolf had expressed all the grief Lupin was feeling. Severus briefly considered if there was a potion related to Wolfsbane that could help with that.

His analytical Potions Master's brain began immediately listing ingredients that might have an effect on Lupin's current state. Severus had never seen Lupin during or the morning after a transformation. As a result he had never considered how lycanthropy affected the man aside from the monthly appearance of a mindless wolf and the benefits during other parts of the month. His attention drifted to the next bed. Potter was on his back in the same position he had been in for the past two days.

"No change," Poppy said. She was looking rather stressed herself as she fussed over her most recurrent patient. She finished with Potter and fussed over Lupin as well, sighing.

"Get some sleep Poppy. Tired people make mistakes and there is nothing you can do for Potter or Lupin now anyway," Severus said. He stopped her when she opened her mouth to object. "I will stay here for now, and I am sure Molly Weasley will be up after she finishes breakfast. How many surrogate mothers does the boy need right now? Someone will wake you if you are needed." Poppy gave him a stern look but retreated to her quarters. She must have been extremely tired to give in so easily. Poppy never took orders from anyone except Albus, and those she only took reluctantly. The hospital wing was her domain.

Severus watched as Potter slept. The gauze bandages wrapped both his arms and covered his chest. Though wizarding medicine had made incredible advances such severe injuries could not vanish overnight. Potter would have scarring from the cuts for the rest of his life, added to the myriad of other scars on his body, though they would fade over time. The potions Poppy was giving him were already starting to fill him out a bit more. There was color to his face and it was looking less hollow than before, but oddly thinner than it had been.

For a moment Severus thought that the bone structure of Potter's face was different. The boy had been a perfect double of his father, with the exception of the eyes and height, and James Potter's cheekbones were not that high. Severus blamed the thought on his lack of sleep. There was no mistaking that unruly mop of hair, though. Every Potter male, and most females, for centuries had that telltale hair.

"I failed him," a voice spoke from the door.

"If so you were not alone Albus," Severus said. "I acted as though he was his father. I let those feelings interfere with my teaching."

The headmaster sat down on the other side of Potter's bed, facing Severus. The man's normally smiling face now reflected every one of his years.

"You too need to sleep Severus. You look as if you haven't for days," Albus urged.

"When have I ever slept well Albus?" Severus asked bitterly.

"I cannot help but feel I have failed you as well Severus," the headmaster said with a sigh.

"My failings are my own fault Albus. I chose my path. You have done for me more than anyone else would have," Severus responded, though neither gaze left The-Boy-Who-Barely-Lived. "Albus, the prophecy... will he survive this?"

Albus Dumbledore sat in one of the chairs he had conjured the night Harry was brought to Hogwarts, "That I do not know Severus. If the prophecy is true Harry's actions will not kill him... but they may have left him easy prey for Voldemort."

Albus rested a hand on Harry's forehead and smoothed back his hair. Severus had noticed that quite a few people had that habit. Granger and Molly Weasley in particular fussed over Harry's hair. No matter what they tried, though, it was the same mess the next morning.

"Nothing you can do will flatten it," a soft voice said from the next bed. Lupin had woken, though he didn't move. "Lily spent hours trying on James but nothing she did worked. She called it the Potter Curse."

Severus snorted. James Potter had been known to mess up his hair even more than it naturally was to attract the girls, and the boys if the rumors Severus remembered were true, who swooned over him as if he was the second coming of Merlin. Harry Potter, though, was very self conscious and had been seen trying to flatten his unruly mop on more than one occasion.

A moment from his dream the night before came to Severus and he knew exactly what it would feel like if he tried to tame Potter's hair.

Severus had had enough intimate thoughts of James Potter for one day and left the hospital wing for his labs. He could experiment with the Wolfsbane Potion for almost a full month before trying a new formula on Lupin. A ghost of a smile appeared on Severus's face as he began composing the first trial in his mind. If any of his students happened upon him at that moment they would surely have been frightened out of their wits. Severus Snape rarely smiled.

Chapter Five

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They sat in the common room of the Head Boy and Girl's rooms. This year it was decorated in Gryffindor crimsons and gold, as both of them were Gryffindors. The Slytherin badge on Severus's robes clashed with the plush deep red armchair he was sitting in, his muscles tense. He was holding a letter he had received from his uncle, one of his only living relatives. His parents had died in the service of the Dark Lord years ago. Now his guardian was expecting him to take the Dark Mark when he graduated in a few months time. Until only recently Severus had accepted that fate without question. Now he knew it wasn't the path he wanted to take, but he was reticent to discuss the matter.

"Sev, please, don't do it," James pleaded.

"What choice do I have," Severus spat viciously. "The Dark Lord is getting stronger every day. I am a Snape and a Slytherin. If I don't join him I may as well slit my wrists right now before my family does it for me. It would be much more pleasant than what they would do. We knew this day was coming."

"We'll think of something, somehow," James tried.

"No, we won't," Severus answered realistically, not looking James in the eye. "You will marry Lily, become an Auror, and continue the Potter line. I will become a Death Eater and someday they will force me to marry for the Snape line. Our paths were laid out for us before either of us was born." James walked over to Severus, knelt in front of him, and cupped his cheek with one hand, "I can't lose you. I won't fight you. I love you."

"I love you," Severus gently kissed the other young man and attempted to distract him.

"Go to Dumbledore, please, he can help," James said desperately, not falling for Severus's diversionary tactics.

Dumbledore was a sore spot, and rarely brought up when they spoke. Severus sneered, "He didn't help me when your mutt tried to kill me."

James stood suddenly, all the normal playfulness gone. He looked like the fully qualified powerful wizard he would be in only months, "Go to him Sev. We've been over that a million times. If Sirius had been expelled Remus would have suffered for it more than anyone else. The Ministry would have *executed* him, for Merlin's sake. Dumbledore did the only thing he could do."

"He'd never believe me," Severus persisted. He had lost all faith in the headmaster that morning at the end of fifth year.

"*Try him*," James insisted, pacing, always moving. "We can have Lily drag you up to his office or something. She's brings *someone* up there at least once a month."

The scene shifted. Severus found himself in an ornate room with an overly excited James Potter. James normally had enough energy for three adult wizards, but now he was almost literally bouncing off the walls. The James he saw was a few years older and had an ornate gold band on his left ring finger that he had a habit of twisting when he was supposed to be sitting still. Severus was rubbing his forearm, where the Dark Mark eternally itched. He was leaning against a wall, calmly watching James with a small, fond smile.

"It worked Sev! The potion worked! Lily is pregnant!" James pressed himself against Severus with a passionate, bruising kiss. It was all Severus could do to stop himself from ripping off James's robes right there in the great room and taking him on the rug in the center of the floor.

A soft chuckle came from the doorway, "If I didn't know how much he loved me I'd be jealous. I take it he told you?"

Severus turned to look at Lily Potter who seemed to be glowing despite her messy hair and flannel nightgown, "Yes. Congratulations Lily." He stepped over and swept her up in a hug, swinging her feet off the ground and spinning in a circle. He then turned back to James and said with disdain, "Of course it worked. I brewed it."

Lily stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek fondly and smiled brightly, "Congratulations are due to you as well. It really is too bad you have no inclinations towards women. I think James is getting the best deal here."

"At least you don't have to take care of all that energy on your own," Severus responded with a smirk. "Have you told the Marauders yet?"

"No," James said, still grinning like a fool. "We had to tell you first. Albus doesn't even know yet. We made Poppy swear not to say a word."

Severus snorted, "He probably knows anyway."

"He never found out about us," James teased playfully. He put an arm around Severus and kissed Lily. "Albus is brilliant, but not omniscient."

The scene shifted again. The room was the same, but Lily was at least six months along. Her eyes were bloodshot and she was sniffing, both hands on her abdomen. James looked as though someone had sucker punched him. All the energy that would usually be pouring off him in waves was gone, as if he had been heavily sedated.

"What is it?" Severus asked in fear as he stood in front of them. His heart pounded in his ribcage as he considered the possibilities of why he had gotten the urgent owl from James. He went straight to Lily and knelt in front of her, his hands joining hers. He felt a kick, "Is it the baby?"

"Albus was just here," James explained in a monotone. "There was a prophecy about a child and Voldemort. It's either Harry, or Frank and Alice's child."

"What did it say?" Severus asked, a knot forming in his gut.

"Voldemort will mark a child as his equal, and one day one of them will kill the other," Lily said and then repeated the exact wording of the prophecy.

"One of them will kill the other," Severus repeated in awe with a tinge of fear. "Our child might be able to kill him," Severus looked at his arm. His child might be able to free him from this servitude and life of duplicity, or might die trying, his child not even born yet.

"We're going into hiding. Frank and Alice are, too. Albus offered to be our Secret Keeper, but he's doing it for them. A Death Eater overheard part of the prophecy Sev. He knows a child will have the power to kill him, but not that it will be one or the other of them eventually. Severus, we can't... you..." James couldn't finish what he was saying.

Severus felt himself pale as he repeated the exact wording of the prophecy in his mind. The Dark Lord would be after the Potters and their son, his son. His position was suddenly more dangerous than ever. Not long after his initiation, and after several arguments with James and Lily, Severus had gone to Albus and offered to be his spy.

He could not avoid being Marked, but he would be damned if he actually served the Dark Lord. Now, with his unborn child in danger, he would have to work harder than ever to keep up his facade. He still hadn't fully mastered Occlumency though, and the Dark Lord was a master Legilimens. The next time he was summoned it would be obvious that something was wrong... and the Dark Lord would discover everything.

"Lily, you can legally memory charm anyone you see fit?" Severus asked in a detached tone, coming to decision.

"Yes. All the Obliviators have been given pretty much unlimited power, what with all the attacks on muggles," she said slowly, realization clearly dawning on her face. "No, Sev, you can't be suggesting..."

"I am suggesting exactly that," Severus took his Potions Professor stance and tone to hide his own uncertainty. "The Dark Lord would gladly kill for the rest of that prophecy. I am a danger to you and the Longbottoms... and our son. Erase it all... the prophecy... us... everything. We never should have used that potion or even continued this relationship before I mastered Occlumency. When you come out of hiding you can reverse it. We will all be safer this way," he said calmly, his mask of

indifference rising. Severus could not show how much it hurt to suggest this. He felt as though he was cutting out his own heart with a dull blade.

James was not fooled. He stood up and gently caressed Severus's face, "We will come back for you. I promise we'll come back."

The two men embraced and held each other as though for the last time, neither one able to hold back tears. Their kiss, their last kiss, was desperate and passionate, filled with more emotion than any one person could contain. Severus pulled away before he lost his nerve. He knelt down and kissed Lily's swollen abdomen. He felt his son stir inside, unaware of the troubles outside his small world, and pressed his cheek against the smooth skin. Lily smoothed back his hair in a motherly gesture of comfort. The movement of the infant, his baby Harry, filled him with longing. If all went well he would be able to throw aside his mask and help Lily and James raise their son. If it did not... Severus did not even want to consider the possibility. He looked up at James and mouthed 'I love you' before turning to Lily and nodding. He closed his eyes and steeled himself.

She pointed her wand at him with a practiced ease, her hand steady despite the tears tracing a path down her cheeks, *Obliviate*.

"Bloody hell," Severus gasped as he sat upright. His sheets were clinging to his sweat drenched body. He leapt out of his bed and threw on a dressing gown over his pajama pants. The dream was too real to ignore.

He grabbed his wand and disabled the wards surrounding his personal lab. He knew he had made a potion to help Lily Potter conceive, but what if he made a potion other than the one he thought. It was much easier to modify a memory if you made the new one closely resemble the old. Every detail of his dream was vivid in his mind and replayed over and over. He ran his finger along the spines of his potions books as he searched for the one he needed.

Once found, he pulled it off the shelf and began leafing through it furiously. There were notes in the margins all through the volume, recording his thoughts on each potion he brewed and possibilities for improvements. He came to the section he was looking for and it was mostly devoid of markings. As a Death Eater and a professor for teenagers, fertility potions were not often called for. He found the one that his memory told him he made, and the margins were blank. Severus knew he had never brewed that potion. With a feeling of dread his shaking hand flipped ahead a few pages and saw notes in red ink.

Severus sank down in a chair when he read the name of the potion, *Genitorum Pariter*. That was the only proof he needed that his dreams were accurate memories of the past. The memories he did have were so complete, so detailed. Lily had always been brilliant with charms of any kind and Severus guessed that she must have modified the memory charm somehow to allow him to regain the memories on his own. Severus recalled a day in Hogsmeade, just seven weeks after Harry was born. The promise Lily had extracted from him made much more sense now. He never knew why she wanted him to vow to protect her child.

After staring at the page for a few minutes he recovered enough of his wits to light a fire in his fireplace. He threw some Floo powder in and called the headmaster loudly.

"What time is it Severus?" Albus asked with a yawn as he stepped into the lab.

"Never mind the bloody time," Severus said. "I want you to check me for a memory charm."

"Severus, why would you think you've been charmed?" Albus asked patiently, his eyes twinkling despite the fact that he was just summoned from sleep by his abnormally anxious Potions Master.

"You do realize I would need to know who cast the charm."

"It was Lily Potter," Severus said flatly.

"Lily would never –"

"She would if I told her to!" Severus exploded.

Severus looked at the headmaster and saw the thought process going on in his mentor's mind. Not many people could read Albus's face, but Severus had spent over sixteen years watching the man closely. It was rare that Severus presented Albus with a situation the man was unprepared for. Albus held Severus in his gaze, more penetrating than Voldemort could ever hope to be. He then held up his wand and spoke a few words. Severus felt a strange tingling sensation.

"Do you want me to remove it?" Albus asked him, looking slightly shaken at the possible ramifications. "You know what can happen..."

Severus closed his eyes and nodded, preparing himself for the onslaught of images and thoughts. There would be several years of memories changed in his mind, including a great portion of his spare time as a student at Hogwarts. There had been cases of people who had their memories returned after several years that were not able to reconcile the two sets of memories and were never completely sane again.

The erased years came rushing into his mind all at once, leaving him reeling and choking for breath. Severus lost his carefully constructed mask and tears filled his eyes for the first time since the day the charm was cast. He had known love, incredible soul-consuming love. For fifteen years he had cursed James Potter, the intensity of his hatred matching the intensity of his erased love, and now he wept for him.

"Severus?" Albus asked, concern lacing his voice.

"I'm a father, *his* father," was all Severus could say through his sobs.

"Who?"

"Harry, I'm Harry's father," Severus choked out before he collapsed to his knees, his arms wrapped around his chest and his head down.

Albus reached down and pulled Severus back to his feet. He gathered his Potions Master into his arms and held him like a lost child. All those years Severus had been protecting, and, he reluctantly admitted to himself, abusing his own son. He felt like he was eighteen years old again, telling Albus he had no choice but to join the ranks of the Death Eaters and offering to spy for him. The only thing that had made Albus trust him initially was that Lily and James had vouched for him. At the time Severus knew that Albus suspected they had simply come to an understanding. Now he could see that Albus was beginning to see the truth.

"Severus, did you and Lily...?" he began. He released Severus and stepped back to look him in the eye.

Severus shook his head and grimaced, "No, never. It was James, always James." Albus's eyes widened momentarily in a rare moment of surprise and Severus continued, "Harry had three parents, all of whom had defied the Dark Lord three times at the time of his birth."

Albus looked at Severus sharply, "You know the wording of the prophecy?"

Severus nodded, "James sent for me immediately after you told them. Lily performed the charm that afternoon."

"How was Harry conceived?" Albus asked with clear curiosity.

Severus said nothing and handed the opened potions book to the headmaster. Albus carefully read the instructions for preparation and use of the potion. His eyebrows lifted at several points. Albus was a Potions Master himself, though few considered that amongst his other titles and accomplishments. Severus watched him while trying to digest some of his renewed memories. It would take some time. Chances were there would always be some level of confusion on which ones were real. When he was done Albus laid down the book and looked up at Severus with sympathy in his eyes. They communicated wordlessly.

"I need to go see Harry," Severus said, remembering in a flash how they had found him that night at Privet Drive. He felt a twist in his gut. To lose Harry now, when he had just discovered... the very thought made him physically ill.

"Are you sure you are ready for that?" Albus asked.

Severus was already on his way out the door. He knew that Albus followed him and reset the wards on the private lab. They walked to the hospital wing in silence, Albus allowing Severus the time he needed to process his thoughts.

When they got to Harry's bed the physical changes Severus had noticed began to make more sense. The high cheekbones were a Snape feature. Harry looked like a combination of James, Severus, and Lily. He reached out and touched Harry's face gently. An instinct deep inside him confirmed that this was his son, his flesh and blood. Severus took out his wand and cast a spell to detect any charms placed on Harry. There was indeed a charm placed immediately after Harry was born, suppressing any physical traits he may have inherited from the Snape line, and it was beginning to wear away.

There was also a very recent charm, concealing the back of Harry's right hand. Severus removed it to see the words etched into Harry's flesh, in Harry's handwriting. He felt a protective surge, felt paternal for the first time ever. This boy was his son, his heir. None of the Slytherins had received detention with Umbridge, but he had still heard the rumors in the staff room. Severus ground his teeth in rage at the woman, the Ministry, and even at Minerva McGonagall for not interfering as Harry's Head of House and stopping it. He controlled his rage, pushed it away for release at a more suitable time, and returned his attention to his comatose son.

"At least he didn't inherit my nose," Severus said softly, a tone that would shock anyone who knew him.

Severus took one of the chairs that sat next to the bed of his son. He grasped one of Harry's hands, lowered his head and cried, trusting Albus to guard his privacy for this moment. He told the unconscious Harry the short story version of what he remembered, promised to make amends for his own behavior in the past. Along with his memories had come a whole parcel of emotions that he thought himself incapable of feeling, leaving him overwhelmed. The erasure of the only love Severus had ever felt after the age of seven when his parents died had left him a cold and empty shell of a man. He would never be that man again even if he had to act the part for most of the world to see.

Severus squeezed Harry's hand and gasped when the hand just barely squeezed back.

Chapter Six

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Harry Potter had been unable to face his peers at the end of his fourth year in the aftermath of Cedric's death and Voldemort's return. The end of his fifth year had been much harder. He had withdrawn into himself when he left Albus Dumbledore's office and presented his friends with a mask of what he thought they expected. In truth he had been incapable of feeling after the rage wore off.

The first thing he had done when he returned to the Dursleys' was to take all his belongings to his room and shut the door. He wished with all his will that he could lock the world out, and something strange had happened. Harry's hands had started to glow. He thrust them out, palms facing his door, and a beam of golden light shot out and hit the door. Moments later his aunt had tried to get inside his room unsuccessfully. Harry had locked the door.

He waited patiently for the owl from the Ministry of Magic to come, once again expelling him from Hogwarts. The owl never came. He waited to be notified of a trial for using an Unforgivable Curse on another human, but that owl never came. He waited for the Aurors to come and drag him off to Azkaban. They did not. Either the Ministry no longer cared what Harry did, or they didn't know.

He did not care which one it was; he was just thankful they were leaving him alone. Remembering the threat to the Dursleys at the train station Harry scratched out a quick note and sent Hedwig to Mad-Eye Moody. When his aunt slipped a tray with some food through the flap in his door he ate a few string beans and some bread; all that he could stomach. Some more of the meal went into Hedwig's cage for when she returned. The remainder was disposed of out the window.

Harry flopped onto his bed and stared at nothing, the words of the prophecy echoing in his mind. He closed his eyes and saw Sirius falling into the veil, himself cursing Belletrix and then begging Dumbledore to kill him when Voldemort possessed him. Harry's eyes snapped open and his breathing was ragged. He couldn't close his eyes if he didn't want to see that again.

The weeks passed without much change. Every couple of days Harry sent out a note. He ate less and less of his food, but tossed the remains of each meager meal out the window late at night for the birds and neighborhood cats after keeping a bit for Hedwig. He had no contact with the Dursleys and ignored the letters that came from his friends. They had all been hurt, and it was his fault for letting them follow him into danger.

There was no summer homework, a brief break for the summer after O.W.L. exams. When his exam results came Harry just stuffed the envelope into his trunk. He didn't care what they said. No matter how well or how poorly he did his future was already mapped out for him; fight Voldemort, try to kill Voldemort, die trying. After all, what could a teenage do against that monster? Harry held no illusions of his chances.

He slept as little as possible, afraid of reliving his living nightmare over and over. Harry's scar continued to burn, and he continued to vaguely sense Voldemort's emotions, but he ignored it. He no longer had visions in his dreams, most likely blocked out by Voldemort. Once, he thought bitterly that Voldemort had managed to teach Harry Occlumency by taking away his feelings. Harry's mind definitely felt empty.

Hours would pass without Harry being aware. He analyzed the prophecy, looking for any way he could get out of it. Harry only could think of one escape and he thrust it to the back of his mind. He didn't want to try that... or did he? The first time he considered trying it he rejected it immediately. It would only leave the problem of Voldemort to someone else. The thought kept coming back, and Harry took out the knife that Sirius gave him. The knife was slipped into his pocket, where it waited. Late one night, when he knew he was losing what little energy he had left and his scar was like a branding iron to his flesh, he knew it was then or never. Soon they would take him back to Sirius's house and he couldn't go there. He wrote to Remus and explained himself. Hedwig flew off with the

note and Harry returned to his bed. He concentrated on that glow he had felt in his hands and it came back quickly.

The shield he cast was one he had read about in the books Sirius had given him for Christmas, its power dependant on the power of the caster. He guessed it would be enough to keep the muggles away. He unfolded the only blade left and pressed the sharp edge against skin. The knife was cold, his skin hot, and the cut flooded Harry with sensation. He wasn't sure when he lost consciousness. Harry awoke filled with the bitter taste of shame and self-loathing. It seemed he could kill anyone except Voldemort and himself. He blinked his eyes, thankful it was dark. Someone had put his glasses on, so he could see when he woke up he guessed. Harry tried to move and found he was tied to the bed. He moved his head around. He was alone in the Hogwarts hospital wing. Briefly thankful that they hadn't taken him to St. Mungo's, Harry drifted back off to sleep.

When Harry next woke he heard crying. He was about to open his eyes and comfort whoever was so upset when the person began speaking. Harry recognized the voice immediately and was shocked into inaction. The professor that Harry thought hated him more than anything was crying over him. He listened carefully to what Snape was saying. If Harry had any energy at all he would have pulled from the man's grasp in shock at what he heard.

As Snape spoke, Harry began to understand. His mother had cast a memory charm on Snape, and an appearance charm on Harry. When she and his father, or one of his fathers, died the truth died with them. The Professor Snape who was speaking to him now was quite obviously a different man than the one who had taught him for five years. That Snape would never apologize, let alone cry. This did explain, at least, where Harry got his wicked temper.

Snape finished and Harry felt him squeeze his hand. Harry summoned what strength he had, which wasn't much, and squeezed back. He began to open his eyes but shut them again quickly.

"Too bright," he tried to say. What came out was more of a croak. His throat was dry and sore.

"Dim the lights Albus," Harry heard Snape say immediately.

A straw was pressed to Harry's lips and he sucked instinctually like a newborn child. The first drink of water was absorbed by the tissues in his mouth, leaving nothing for his throat. He pulled at the straw again and felt the cool water trickle down his throat and soak into the starved tissues. Just that little bit was as much effort as he could make.

"Thank you," he whispered hoarsely. His eyelids were heavy. He would close his eyes for just a minute.

Harry opened his eyes again and guessed that it was early morning. There was much more light coming in the windows than there had been just a moment ago. Snape and Dumbledore were both wearing dressing gowns. Harry guessed that no one had ever seen Snape wear a dressing gown outside of his rooms before. He shifted in his bed, surprised that nothing hurt apart from the tingle on his forehead. He looked up at Dumbledore and Snape and saw the relief in their eyes.

The shame he had woken with flooded his mind and he was unable to stop the tears from flowing. He shut his eyes and tried to curl up in a ball, forgetting the restraints. When he found himself unable to move thoughts of a dark graveyard came unbidden to his mind, and Wormtail with the dagger held up high, glinting in the moonlight. He started to panic and became almost hysterical as he fought against the straps.

Someone cursed, and Harry's limbs were suddenly free. He pulled his legs up to his chest and wrapped his bandaged arms around them. He was shaking, overcome with the emotions that he had buried deep inside, that he thought were dead. He felt grief, guilt, rage, and shame. Strong arms pulled Harry into an embrace and rocked him. A deep voice whispered comforts. Harry grasped the robes of the man and pressed himself into the hug, desperate for the physical contact despite his normal reluctance to let anyone touch him.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," he repeated over and over, his voice rough from disuse, until the man managed to quiet him with soft words.

Harry heard another gasp and he guessed that Madam Pomfrey had walked into the wing, "When did he wake?"

"Just now Poppy. I was on my way to find you," Dumbledore said.

Harry did not want to open his eyes again. His mind went back to the end of his fourth year, when Mrs. Weasley had held him in the same bed he lay in now. This hug felt the same, paternal and protective. He was safe here.

"Severus, kindly unhand Mr. Potter. I need to examine him for any lasting ill effects," Madam Pomfrey said irritably.

Harry felt himself gently pried out of the hug and lowered to his bed. Without the human contact he started to feel empty and alone again. Before the feeling could take firm hold a hand grasped one of his and warmth spread through him. He was almost shocked into a panic, though, when the implications of Pomfrey's words hit him. His evil git of a Potions Master had been comforting him, and it had felt good? The words Snape had spoken in Harry's half-aware state came back to him. Severus Snape had an affair with his father, and they had both contributed to a potion which his mother had taken to conceive him.

The one emotion taking control now was anger. Once again, control over his own life had been taken out of Harry's hands. He had been manipulated, lied to, abused, given the shock of his life, and tossed aside. Had they expected him to be nice and docile? Was he supposed to accept Professor Snape, of all people, as his family with open arms? The rage that had been simmering since the previous summer came to a boil.

"Could my life get any more complicated?" he yelled, surprising himself at the volume he achieved.

Harry opened his eyes and registered the shock of his professors and Pomfrey but was not done.

"Did you even read my letter? Does anyone care what I want or what I feel or am I just some bloody weapon to all of you? I don't know what's happened in the past... however many days I've been here and frankly I don't give a bloody damn. Get out."

There was no response from anyone in the room. Harry was thrown off momentarily by the look of hurt in Snape's eyes but he forced himself to ignore it. The Potions Master had hurt him enough already and he'd be damned if he'd let it happen again. Harry's skin was tingling and he could feel a build up of magical energy waiting to be released. If these people did not listen they'd get one hell of a surprise.

"All of you get out now," he repeated in low whisper accompanied by a glare that rivaled any of Snape's.

Professor Dumbledore caught Harry's eye and nodded. Harry noticed that Snape was a shade paler than normal as he stared at Harry. Dumbledore directed Pomfrey out of her hospital wing with Snape following. Harry was left alone. He could hear Dumbledore and Pomfrey arguing outside his door.

"Headmaster, there could be damage to his nervous system, his mind. We need to test his reflexes, his magical abilities. Patients have awoken from coma unable to perform magic again!" Pomfrey hissed.

Harry could no longer hold back his fury. He felt the magic whip out of him and all around him, much worse and much stronger than when he had blown up Aunt Marge. Glass shattered. The other hospital beds were tossed across the room and landed in disfigured humps of twisted metal. The hospital wing looked as though a particularly violent tornado had ripped through it, leaving a small circle of order and calm surrounding Harry's bed.

Madam Pomfrey stopped arguing mid-sentence with the headmaster when the window into the ward shattered. She stared inside in shock.

"I don't think we have to worry about Harry's magical abilities, at least not the lack of them," Dumbledore said calmly before popping a candy into his mouth.

Did nothing surprise that infuriating man? Harry thought viciously. Harry could probably get out his bed, demand to be made Minister of Magic, and cast all three Unforgivable Curses on house elves without fazing the headmaster. He growled and pulled the blankets over his head. The sudden expenditure of so much magic had exhausted him. Harry fell into a deep sleep.

Sirius turned to look at Harry before he fell into the veil. Time slowed and Harry could hear the words Sirius spoke as though they stood only inches apart, "You killed me Harry."

Harry tried to run for his godfather, tried to tell him he didn't mean to, that it was all an accident, but strong hands held him back.

"It's all your fault Harry," Professor Lupin told him as his fingers dug into Harry's arms.

Harry ripped himself away from the werewolf's grasp and ran, chasing after Belletrix LeStrange. It was her fault, not his. If he could just get to her, maybe Sirius and Remus would forgive him.

When he reached the atrium it wasn't Belletrix LeStrange that stood by the Fountain of Magical Brethren. Cedric Diggory had his wand pointed at Harry's heart. The boy was paler than he normally had been and his eyes were empty, void of all emotion.

"You made me take the cup with you Harry. You killed me," Cedric said before shooting a curse that Harry dodged.

Harry rolled and when he looked up his parents were standing above him. He reached out to them, but they took a step back. They were pale, and their eyes flat. They were like ghosts, but firmer, more real.

"We died because of you Harry," James Potter said. "Severus gave up his memory, our love, for you."

"I died so you could live, and what for?" Lily Potter said. "You killed your friend, your godfather."

"No!" Harry protested. "No, I didn't mean to!"

Dumbledore's eyes did not twinkle as he glared at Harry from across the desk, "You didn't mean to Harry? I'm afraid that won't save you. The Aurors are coming to take you to Azkaban." He popped a lemon drop into his mouth but didn't offer any to Harry.

The headmaster's office door swung open and Snape led Kingsley and Tonks inside. They looked at him coldly and ropes appeared around his torso, binding his arms to his sides. Tonks took his wand and snapped it. There was a spark and Harry felt like someone had reached inside his chest and torn out his heart. Snape smirked, having finally accomplished what he had wanted for years.

"Please, no!" Harry pleaded with tears streaming down his face. "It was an accident! I didn't mean to kill anyone!"

He looked desperately around the room. Not even Fawkes moved from his spot on his perch. The phoenix hissed at Harry.

"At least my actions save lives," Snape sneered at him.

Harry heard screams in his head. The dementors made him relive the night his parents died over and over. There were new memories added in though. Sirius fell through the veil and a green light hit Cedric. Harry begged Dumbledore to kill him. The dementor passed by his cell and Harry continued to beg through the screams that threatened to overcome him.

His door opened and Voldemort stepped in, his red eyes glowing with hate, "You made it easy for me boy. I enjoyed torturing your so-called friends, as I will enjoy this."

All Harry could see was the green light before darkness took him.

Harsh white light surrounded Harry and he felt arms wrapped around him.

"Please, do what he says," Harry pleaded. "It's my fault, my fault. Let the pain stop. Let him kill us. Let me go to Sirius."

"Harry? Harry!" the voice sounded on the edge of panic.

"Calm down Remus," Dumbledore's voice said. "It's a dream. Voldemort is not here."

Harry was slow to grasp his surroundings. He opened his eyes and glared at the werewolf sitting beside his bed, "I trusted you."

Remus shrank back and let go of Harry's hand, "Harry, I... the letter didn't come until after we got here."

"Does it matter?" Harry asked with his glare still fixed in place.

"No," Remus straightened up and held Harry's gaze with his own. There were healing cuts on his face. "I promised Sirius I would protect you."

"Harry...", another voice spoke, familiar yet strange.

Harry's glare shifted to the person on the other side of his bed. The Potions Master had changed. He was speaking softly. Harry felt his anger swell. Where was *this* Snape when Harry was sleeping in his cupboard with only spiders for friends? He had heard no reason why Snape was memory charmed, why he abandoned Harry.

"What gives you the right to call me that? A potion?" Harry snapped. "A few memories change and the past five years don't matter anymore?"

The Professor Snape who Harry knew came back, "No Potter, a potion does not give me the right."

The man stood and stalked out of the hospital wing, robes billowing behind him, glaring at the Weasleys and McGonagall who entered as he left.

"Harry!" Ron cried out simultaneously with Hermione, the relief in their voices like a knife in Harry's heart. He had managed to hurt them again.

Harry's best friends ran to him and Hermione hugged him tightly, "Don't you ever do anything like that again."

"You scared us mate," Ron said from the chair he commandeered.

Harry felt his emotions drain away. It took too much energy to care. He slumped back against his pillows as Hermione sat down. There was an awkward silence and Harry turned to Ron.

"Snape was sitting there," Harry said plainly.

Ron jumped up with a yelp as if the seat had burned him. Hermione, Remus, and Dumbledore all laughed at him and the tension left in the room lifted. Ron sat back down in a chair that was a bit further from the head of Harry's bed.

"So, er, mate...", Ron stammered, looking uncomfortable and uneasy.

Harry closed his eyes, "I DON'T want to talk about it."

There was a silence in which Harry refused to open his eyes.

"So Ron, how are the Cannons doing?" Remus asked.

Ron was easily distracted by his favorite subject. Harry sighed and opened his eyes. He pretended to follow the conversation and even forced a smile now and then, but the smiles never reached his eyes. He drifted in and out of sleep as they talked.

Chapter Seven

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Dumbledore had recast the charm that Lily had cast on Harry when he was born. Snape and Dumbledore were the only ones who knew. They told him about his changes in appearance and offered to lift the charm for him to see but Harry turned away and said nothing. The last thing he wanted to see was Severus Snape reflected on his own face. James Potter may not have been perfect but he was much better than the mercurial Potions Master that had made Harry's life a living hell for five years.

The second day he was awake he was allowed to leave his bed with assistance, and could still only barely make it to the lavatory. When he was back in bed it felt as though he had run twenty kilometers. His muscles were shaky and weak and sweat was beading on his forehead. Madam Pomfrey instantly began talking about strengthening potions and nutrient supplements. Over the space of a few days he progressed to taking short walks, accompanied by a professor, out of the hospital wing. He was already itching to be released.

Ron and Hermione were allowed to visit for short time periods. He was glad that their visits were restricted. There was a constant look of anxiety in their faces that he couldn't stand to see. He was thankful when only a few days later Dumbledore told the Weasleys to return to Grimmauld Place for the rest of the summer holiday, as the Order needed them there. Harry was not ready to talk with his friends about anything that had happened to him in the past year and there was nothing else to talk about.

Snape had returned to his normal behavior around Harry, only toned down a bit. On those rare occasions that the man was in the hospital wing while Harry was awake he was snide and short tempered. Harry ignored him, ignored everyone. He couldn't even work up the emotional energy to glare in response.

Remus spent countless hours in the hospital wing with Harry. He was still recovering from his transformation the night before Harry woke and Madam Pomfrey fussed over both of them. He gave Harry a small smile and sat down by his bedside. Ignoring the fact that Harry wasn't responding to a word he said, this former teacher of his began telling Harry stories. Though he tried not to pay attention the tales drew him in. He was giving Harry what he had always craved, a normal family, at least as normal as wizards got. He told him about the early Potters, druids, and how they survived the Anglo-Saxon invasion and the Romans.

"Eat just a little soup Harry," Remus commanded softly. "If you don't build your strength back up Poppy won't let you leave this room. I've spent enough time in here to know you want out."

Harry obeyed mutely, unwilling to admit even to himself that Remus had given him something to think about that didn't depress him further. There were even moments while he spoke when his heart did not cry out for Sirius, despite the connection between the two men. He suspected the soup was laced with all sorts of potions, but he couldn't eat even half of it. The bread remained untouched.

He said with an evidently nervous overtone, "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you Harry all those years. Sirius... he cared about you Harry, and not just because you're James's son. He got confused sometimes but he loved you for being you Harry."

Harry held his gaze and examined his face. He seemed to be telling the truth and Harry wanted to believe him. After closing his eyes and sinking into his pillows, he spoke for the first time since the day he had woken, "Tell me more."

Remus told him about the more recent Potters. There had been more than one Minister of Magic in the family. Most of the wizards and witches in the family had followed the path that seemed predestined for Harry. The first Auror corps was founded by the Potters in the fourteenth century, hundreds of years before the first muggle police forces. The family had amassed quite a bit of

wealth which all fell to Harry, the only surviving Potter. Harry drifted off as Remus was getting into the mid-nineteenth century.

When he woke up he was still there, but Snape was there as well. Harry kept his eyes closed and listened to their conversation. Pretending to sleep was a talent he perfected by the time he was six. He knew that eavesdropping was wrong but didn't care. He knew that eventually he would be forced to confront this new development in his relationship with Snape. When that time came he wanted as much information as possible.

"I can't believe James never told me," Remus was saying sadly. "He told us everything."

"We didn't tell anyone," Snape said in this new soft tone of his. "Only Lily, James, and I knew. Not even Albus figured it out."

"I still can't get past this," Snape snorted and Harry realized this was probably difficult for him as well. "Not that... I mean... we knew that James experimented... okay, more than experimented. That was no secret, but we thought it stopped when he started seeing Lily, when she became his friend." "You know that he wrote to Lily the summer after our fifth year," there was a pause, "and she started to see him in a new light. He visited the Evans house several times that summer and one of the things they talked about was me. James was writing to me as well.

"At first I wasn't sure how to react. He was furious with Black. He didn't want to burden you any more than you already were. Pettigrew never reacted well to his... other interests... and there was tension between them. His first letter was an apology for all the pranks. I wasn't going to respond but my uncle... he saw the letter and thought I might be able to turn the Potter heir.

"When I realized that the prospect didn't appeal to me things changed. Under my uncle's watchful eye I cultivated a friendship. That bastard was never aware that it went beyond friendship. We kept things secret as much for their protection as for mine, though initially it was just for mine.

Remember, we had no idea who the spy was, only that it was someone close to the Potter family. I'm pretty sure Pettigrew was forced into initiation before I was. His task was simple. He had to keep up his reputation as a mediocre wizard, and get inside the Order. It was already too late for him when he was ordered to betray his closest friends."

Snape snorted, "I only learned recently that he had been passing information since the end of fifth year. That night changed everyone it touched."

Remus sniffed, "I... I stayed away from everyone except James, and then Lily." His voice sounded haunted, "It was at least halfway into sixth year before I let them all join me on the full moon again. I was the last one to forgive Sirius. Even then I never really trusted him again until these past few years. That was why I believed..."

Harry's scar flared up and his sharp intake of breath was clearly heard in the deafening silence that had filled the room. All of his muscles tensed in response to the pain. A warm hand wiped his brow and sent the strangest sensation through his scar. No one had ever touched it before when his connection with Voldemort was active. The hand felt like ice on the lightning bolt, numbing. Harry was able to push the connection away some, to dull the pain.

Harry opened his eyes and saw the blurry outlines of only two people. His glasses were slid into place and only Remus came into focus. Snape was gone. Harry felt sweat drip down his forehead and fall into his eyes, stinging them. He took off his glasses and wiped his face with the edge of his sheet.

"We can get you a washcloth," Remus said in a teasing tone. He returned his attention to Harry and his voice became deadly serious, "Is he still there?"

Harry shook his head, "It never lasts for long now. I think he's just reminding me that he's out there waiting for me," Harry whispered the next, "like I could forget."

Remus sat down on the side of Harry's bed. Harry knew the questions were coming and he couldn't look Remus in the eye. He turned his head and stared at the wall.

"Has he been doing that to you all summer?" Remus asked quietly.

Harry didn't know why he was answering questions now. Maybe it was just easier than hiding it all. He nervously twisted the sheets around his hands, "Yes. It's never really stopped since fourth year. He hasn't been in my dreams again, but then he doesn't really need to be. They're bad enough already." Harry closed his eyes and pulled himself into a sitting position. He tried to sink into his pillows. He felt the fingers of his left hand rub the back of his right hand with a feather-light touch. So far as he knew they hadn't seen the scars there yet, "I've pushed him out a few times. It's possible he hasn't been able to get into my dreams. Just now he was angry, very angry."

Remus summoned a house elf and asked it to get Snape and Dumbledore and bring them to the hospital wing. It was then that Harry noticed Snape wasn't even in the room anymore.

"Why did he leave?" Harry asked darkly.

"Severus never stays when you wake up," Remus answered in that soothing tone he had. "Harry, you have to understand, Severus didn't just change because his memory was restored, or because of what you did. It started before that."

Harry opened his eyes and crinkled his brow in thought, "What do you expect me to do, forget five years of torment?"

"No Harry, I don't expect that," Remus spoke in resignation and gently stopped Harry's unconscious actions with his hands and held them both in his. "Just give him another chance."

"I've been doing just that for years," Harry frowned. "Do you think I just hated him the instant we met? All through first year I tried to figure out what I had done to make him hate me the moment he first saw me. I even thought he was trying to kill me. For three years after that I tried not to hate him, despite how he treated me. I knew Dumbledore trusted him and I tried to as well.

"He never gave me a reason to trust him, never mind actually like him, and this last year he blew it. I gave up trying. Those *lessons* of his only made it easier for Voldemort to get inside my mind. And then I saw what my father did to him and I empathized with the bastard." Harry felt stinging in his eyes again only this time it was tears. He hated crying, hated weakness. "I'm much more like him than I am like my, well, like James... and I have no idea how that makes me feel. I've never had a father," Harry said bitterly, "and I don't need one now."

"But do you want one?" Remus asked as moved from his chair to sit on the bed with Harry.

"Of course I do!" Harry snapped loudly. "And I had... but it's my fault he's gone. I shouldn't have gone to the Ministry... and he'd still be here," his breath was hitching, "but what was I supposed to do? None of you were there for me and I was so confused and alone. I've always been alone."

Remus had moved to Harry's side during his rant and pulled him into a tight hug at the end, "You don't have to be."

"I don't know any other way to be," Harry said through his deep breaths. He was stiff and unsure in the hug but Remus either didn't notice or ignored it.

Remus didn't answer. He just rocked Harry like a small child, "I miss him too, Harry, and I don't blame you. There were too many factors involved for the blame to lie on any one person's shoulders. We all could have done things differently, Sirius included, but the past cannot be changed no matter how hard we wish it."

"If it wasn't for me, none of this would have happened," Harry argued.

"It is not your fault you were born," Snape spoke from the door. Harry twitched in Remus's arms. He hadn't known other people were there and wondered how much they had heard. "If you wish to assign blame for that blame me for making the potion, James for having the idea, and Lily for bearing you. If it hadn't happened, though, you know that very little would have changed."

Harry flinched, "Neville."

"Indeed," the Potions Master said darkly, "and he never had the potential you have. The Longbottoms have always been intelligent, but never particularly powerful."

Harry was again reminded of the vicious professor and glared at the two wizards standing in the entrance, "Neville is more powerful than you'll ever accept. If you didn't take such pleasure in frightening him perhaps his confidence would be high enough for that power to show. As for me... I'm nothing special." His voice dropped to a whisper, "I'm just a freak."

Snape bristled and glared back at Harry. Remus loosened his hold on Harry but stayed by his side. Harry's resolve dissolved. He broke eye contact first and shook his head. He looked down at his hands and saw that Remus was holding them still again.

"What is everyone doing here?" Harry asked in irritation. He suspected they would never leave him alone again.

They advanced into the room and sat in the chairs around the bed. Dumbledore was the one who spoke up, "When were you first able to push Voldemort out of your mind?"

Harry looked up at the headmaster, who did not turn away. He fought back tears of relief, not willing to show the man how much his simple acknowledgement meant. If he was stuck at Hogwarts again he couldn't take being thrust away again, "I'm not sure. I don't even know if I am. The past eight weeks or so are kind of a blur. It all blends together. What day is it anyway?"

"It is the seventh of August. There is a little more than three weeks until classes resume. We need to test your barriers Harry," the headmaster sighed. "It is more important than ever that you master Occlumency, not only for your sake."

Harry stiffened, "No. I can't do that. Not again. No."

Dumbledore reached out and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, "None of us have a choice in this Harry. The consequences of failure at this are unthinkable."

"Aren't the nightmares I get now enough?" Harry pleaded quietly as he felt a small tremor begin. "I can't go through that again."

Snape flinched, the only sign of emotion, "Last year's failure is mine as much, or more so than it is yours. I saw your lack of progress and did nothing of any use to correct it. Different methods will be used to teach you this time."

"Who is teaching me?" Harry asked with a sense of dread.

"Severus is still the best candidate," Dumbledore said firmly. Harry knew better than to object to that tone. "There will be a third party of Harry's choosing at all lessons so long as he wishes it."

Harry looked blankly at the headmaster. He knew that it would be different now, but he was still wary. No matter what changes he saw he couldn't forget the Snape he knew.

"Is your mind clear Harry?" Snape asked. Harry just looked at Snape and then nodded. "I will not be looking for memories that upset you. *Legilimens*."

The spell was spoken softly and Harry felt the intrusion on his mind, like a tingle. No memories surfaced. The probing grew stronger and Harry pushed against it. He closed his eyes in concentration. Then, suddenly, like a dam bursting, images flashed through his mind.

He remembered his first time on broom... his Patronus that drove away a hundred dementors... the first time Sirius hugged him... the time Hermione hugged him their first year... the hug from Mrs. Weasley after the third task... Christmas at Grimmauld Place... being held just days ago in that paternal way.

He nearly panicked. Harry didn't want Snape to know how that had felt, that he yearned for the contact again. He thrust away with his mind and heard glass breaking.

He heard Dumbledore murmur *reparo*. When Harry opened his eyes two faces were smiling at him. He couldn't see Snape's expression, as the man was massaging his temples with his head down. A brief instant of concern was pushed away by stubborn indifference. Harry refused to care about the man who helped father him.

Snape looked up after a minute, "That was much better. You pushed me out without magic. What triggered you to do that?"

"If I wanted you to know I wouldn't have pushed you out," Harry declared insolently.

Snape raised an eyebrow, "That wasn't enough last year."

"A lot of things weren't enough last year," Harry snapped back, and then swallowed back the anger. The smiles faded from the faces around him. He continued uncertainly, "I – I didn't want to stop the dreams, but now I don't know if that was really me... or if it was Voldemort. There were times when I knew something was there, like a snake inside me waiting to uncoil, but he could have been there so many times without me knowing."

"Harry, I put off discussing this for too long," Dumbledore said sadly.

Harry closed his eyes tightly. There was no way he was getting out of this. He tried to change the direction of the conversation for enough time to gather his thoughts. There were things he had to know, "How are the letters to the first years addressed?"

"Potter...," Snape warned.

Harry glared at him, "It is not just idle curiosity. I have my reasons."

The headmaster chuckled, "It is done by an enchanted quill Harry, the same quill that has written out the addresses for over one thousand years."

"You never knew the address on my first letter?" Harry ventured with a guarded tone. The headmaster shook his head calmly and a tiny sliver of relief wedged its way into Harry's mind. "Why did Hagrid say you thought he would have trouble finding me?"

Dumbledore smiled and his blue eyes twinkled at Harry, "After Minerva had to sign over fifty extra letters and use all the school's owls in an attempt to reach you we discerned your relatives were overreacting a bit."

"You call hiding in a broken down shack on a tiny island with a loaded shotgun and only bananas and potato crisps for food overreacting *a bit*?" Harry gaped.

"Nice try Potter," Snape said, though Harry thought the man was a bit disturbed at what Harry said.

"You're not avoiding the subject that easily."

Chapter Eight

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It was one of the most difficult conversations Harry had endured, right up there with his trial at the Ministry. Belletrix Lestrange. Just thinking about her had made Harry feel as though his veins were filled with fire. When Remus flinched away from Harry, Snape had thrust a cup into Harry's hand with a stern glare that made Harry react automatically and drink the extra strength calming draught. Remus and Dumbledore worked together to coax out of Harry his reactions to particular incidents. Snape found the details Harry left out. He admitted that his nightmares were still there every night, though they must have already known from watching him sleep. He had no idea how often he felt Voldemort's emotions. There was constant pain in his scar that he had just learned to live with. When the detentions with Umbridge were brought up Harry tensed. Though the concealing charm on his hand was still there when he woke, Harry discovered that it had been removed at least once. He did learn that Umbridge was still in the mental trauma ward of St. Mungo's and not expected to leave any time soon. The news brought some deep satisfaction to Harry. That made two Defense professors in Mungo's after messing with Harry and his friends. Dumbledore had convinced Fudge to reverse his Educational Decrees and lift the quidditch ban against Harry, Fred, and George. Once again the headmaster was getting owls almost daily from a frantic Minister of Magic.

"What will happen to the Inquisitorial Squad?" Harry asked darkly. He was relieved that he could play quidditch again, but everything else going on overshadowed the good news.

"They are all on a Ministry watch list," Dumbledore told him. "As their actions were directed by the Acting Headmistress no legal repercussions could be taken."

"I guess the Wizengamot can't cite Nuremberg," Harry's angry look was interpreted correctly by Snape, who then smirked in a very familiar way. It was the same look of satisfaction Harry used to see whenever he got caught for breaking the rules.

"Never fear, they were punished quite severely outside the judicial system," Snape said in the tone that made Harry automatically feel guilty and defensive. He was conditioned from years of horrid potions classes. "The Dark Lord was rather displeased with the amount of negative attention they drew to themselves. I also understand that it took over a week to sort out the combination of hexes on Mr. Malfoy and his friends."

"That wasn't me," Harry replied. In reaction to the raised eyebrows of all three wizards he continued, "They tried to attack me from behind in front of a compartment filled with DA members. It's not my fault they had horrible timing."

"Ah yes, the DA," the headmaster twinkled at Harry. "I am rather flattered by the name Harry."

Harry blushed, "It was Ginny's idea, because that was what the Ministry feared most. None of us were very happy with the Ministry."

Remus tried to restrain from laughing but was not very successful. Snape's unreadable expression did not change. The headmaster just smiled and continued, "I am sure your friends will wish to continue the group this year. If you agree I would like to make it an official extracurricular activity, though perhaps it should return to its original name. You would have a staff member overseeing things but they will not interfere."

"I, um, I'm not sure just yet," Harry squirmed a bit in his bed. "Can we wait until classes start to decide?"

Harry looked down under the piercing gaze of the headmaster, "I will not require you to lead, or even be a member of the group Harry, but in the current climate something of the sort is important for the students. They do not only need the extra practical work on defense. Any activity that brings together members of the various Houses as the DA did last year rather than pitting them against each other will only help in our efforts against Voldemort."

Harry bit his lower lip and just nodded. He didn't want to consider classes starting again, never mind the DA or quidditch. After all the problems from the previous year he wasn't sure he even wanted to see all the other students. Harry was confused when Dumbledore asked Remus to leave, but let Snape stay behind.

The action was partially explained when Dumbledore began speaking about Lily and James but Harry interrupted when the prophecy was mentioned, "Why is he still here?"

Snape answered in a sad distant voice that shocked Harry, "James and Lily told me before you were born... on the same day Albus told them. I hadn't perfected Occlumency yet. I..."

Harry then understood and their words overlapped. He had wondered what the reason was, "That's why you...?"

Snape nodded slowly and made eye contact with Harry. Harry swallowed and felt a lump in his throat. There seemed to be no end to the list of people who had sacrificed their lives for him. Voldemort would certainly have used Snape to get to Harry if he could have. He still would, and the possibility frightened Harry. He wondered what Snape was feeling, what it was like to have to reconcile two personalities, two lives. Was he now mourning James Potter? It occurred to Harry that Snape had spent sixteen years, almost half of his life, with those false memories.

"I don't know if I can do it," Harry looked down at his lap and said quietly.

"Harry?" Dumbledore questioned just as softly.

Harry twisted his sheet nervously between his sweaty hands. If he could have ripped it to pieces he would have.

"I'm only sixteen," Harry said as his breathing quickened. "I couldn't even escape a few Death Eaters with my friends. I couldn't cast Cruciatius right. How am I supposed to kill Voldemort, 'greater and more terrible than ever he was'?"

Snape and Dumbledore both looked at him for an explanation to his wording.

"Trelawney predicted it," Dumbledore's eyes showed comprehension and Harry turned to Snape.

"During my exam in third year she made a true prophecy that's been completely fulfilled."

"Harry," Dumbledore began, "the full magical potential of any wizard is not evident until late in puberty. As a third year you were able to conjure a corporeal Patronus, something that many adult wizards have difficulty with. That alone was an indicator of great potential. Sixth and seventh year students have great leaps in their abilities. You have already shown your first. I could not break the shield you cast at Privet Drive until after you had lost a significant amount of blood. We came closer to losing you than you could imagine."

Harry was surprised. He hadn't known his shield was that strong.

"You will be able to kill the Dark Lord," Snape said firmly, "and everyone in the Order will assist in training you for that task and will be there to help you."

Harry studied Snape carefully but could not read the spy's face. He knew the answer to his question but had to ask anyway, "Have you ever...?"

"Yes," the Potions Master responded. "I am not proud of it but I have been responsible for many deaths, some just so I could maintain my cover for the Order."

Harry shifted uncomfortably. He had never really discussed these things with anyone, "Some part of me knows that I killed Quirrell, and then there was the basilisk and Riddle's memory, and I've seen... but I don't think any of it has really prepared me."

"Killing does not get easier with time Harry," Dumbledore said sternly. "When it begins to, that is the path to becoming like Voldemort. It should always be difficult and painful to kill"

Harry nodded, "When will I start training?"

"You are not ready for the physical aspect yet as you are not fully recovered. Severus will work on Occlumency with you immediately. I imagine you are getting rather bored in here?" Dumbledore asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"There are only so many times you can read *Quidditch Through the Ages* without going crazy," Harry snorted, thinking how shocked Ron would have been at the statement.

Harry almost choked in surprise at the sad smile that comment elicited from Snape, "Your father would have disagreed."

"The staff will pull together a selection of books that may be helpful for you to read. They will help to prepare you for your training," Albus said before standing. "I must leave now. There is much to be done before classes start."

Harry winced, "I'm sorry for taking so much of everyone's time."

Albus reached down and cupped Harry's chin, gently lifting his head up. He looked directly into Harry's eyes, "There is nothing to apologize for. You never have been a burden to me."

The headmaster left the hospital wing and Harry felt tears prickling in his eyes. Dumbledore's touch and tone unlocked something in Harry's mind and he remembered the end of the conversation they had in his office after the battle at the Ministry. Just afterwards he had still been too angry and upset to allow the words to sink in, but now they came back to him and his guilt over his actions increased immensely.

"Harry, the headmaster is right, no matter how often I may have said otherwise," Snape said as Harry watched Dumbledore leave.

"It's not that. It's... I always disappoint everyone. Last year," Harry sniffed, trying to hold back the emotions. He had cried too much already, "he told me why he waited so long to tell me the prophecy. He had intended to earlier but in all his plans he never counted on... caring for me. Sirius was great, but Hermione and Mrs. Weasley were right. He was reckless and more like a teenager than an adult. The headmaster was more of a father than anyone else ever has been. That's why last year hurt so bloody much when he... and now I've..."

Harry's breath caught and he couldn't finish. He looked away, suddenly remembering who he was talking to. Tears were prickling his eyes. Harry had cried more in a few days than in over ten years. He couldn't separate them in his mind, the Professor Snape who had treated him like a lower life form and this new Snape who was nice to him sometimes.

"I owe you an apology Harry," the new Snape said. Harry could hear nervousness and wondered if Snape had ever been nervous before. "I've been... horrible to you. In my capacity as a spy I cannot afford to show you any favor in public, but I took it too far. You know that your mother was very good at Charms, right?" Harry nodded. "She was an Obliviator for the Ministry. Her memory charm was so thorough that I hated James with the same intensity as I had loved him. I transferred those emotions to you."

Harry could feel the pain in Snape's voice. He considered that Professor Snape and his... father... Snape could actually be parts of the same person. Harry turned back to look at him. The hair was still lank and greasy looking, the mouth set in a hard, straight line, and the skin ghostly pale. The eyes had changed, though. They no longer flashed with hatred when they looked at Harry. There was something more in them, more alive than they had been before.

"At the end of my fourth year I thought understood you somewhat. I knew you were a spy and I experienced firsthand what Voldemort is like," Harry tried to decide how to continue. His words would probably hurt Snape but he had to get it out.

"Last year though, was the absolute worst year of my life, even including the time before Hogwarts, and that is saying a lot. When I needed support the most, Dumbledore wouldn't even look at me or speak to me. There was Umbridge, and Voldemort was in my head... and you made it even worse. Then I invaded your privacy, which I had no right to do, and suddenly I didn't even really have my father or Sirius anymore. They were even worse than you and Malfoy.

"When I talked to Sirius about it he said that they were just stupid kids. He said they picked on you just because you existed, like that was justification! For a moment I thought my childhood wouldn't

have been any better if they had lived. At least with the Dursleys I could dream of some perfect life with my imaginary perfect parents. My dream shattered."

Harry saw a sight he thought that possibly no one else had ever seen. Through his own silent tears he saw tears dripping down the face of Severus Snape. Quickly though, the raw emotion left his face, but the *feel* of it was still there. The Potions Master took out his wand and concentrated. He said what sounding like a variation on the summoning spell and a very familiar object appeared on the table beside Harry's bed.

"I will not lie to you Harry," he said in a monotone, his every word clearly controlled. "Even before the memory charm Lily cast on me, your godfather and I were never even civil to each other, ever since we entered Hogwarts. It was a miracle if we ever spoke without holding each other at wand point. After fifth year your father changed. James grew up from an irresponsible bullying prat to a strong and sensitive man within the space of a single night. He professed later on that Black had grown up as well, but I never saw the proof. To Black, I was just a symbol of the type of family and life he left. "If I had not caught you in my pensieve and pulled you out this is what you would have seen,"

Snape's hand rested on the edge of the bowl. "What happened that afternoon was humiliating, but not nearly as bad what occurred later." He paused, "Pensieve memories are usually viewed from the outside to give a different perspective. I have used the spell which will allow you access to my thoughts, feelings, and point of view. Whether you view it or not is your choice."

Snape got up to leave. Harry gulped and nodded at him. He had a good idea of what memory Snape was referring to. The Shrieking Shack incident was at the end of their fifth year. Snape reached out as though to touch Harry but hesitated and withdrew his hand. Before he left Snape turned, his expression unreadable, "How was your Hogwarts letter addressed?"

Harry got out of bed carefully and opened his trunk. His muscles and joints were still stiff. He fished through it until he found a crumpled parchment envelope. It had the address on the front and the Hogwarts crest on the back. He took it out and handed it to Snape, "My uncle burned the letter, but left the envelope where he knew I would find it while cleaning... just to torment me."

Snape flattened the parchment and his gaze darkened, his jaw tightened. The Professor Snape that Harry was so familiar with resurfaced, "I should have done more than erase their memories."

Harry's eyes widened, "Y – You met them? What was erased?"

"Your relatives," Snape spat the word as though it tasted like one of his worst potions, "have no idea what you did the evening before your birthday. This was the only letter addressed this way?"

Harry snorted, "When they saw that, they thought they were being watched magically. They moved me into Dudley's second bedroom then." Harry saw Snape's expression get even darker. He almost mentioned the bars on the windows but decided that would only make things worse.

The envelope crumpled in Snape's fist and he spun and stalked out of the hospital wing. His robes billowed out behind him and the mood of his professor was surprisingly a comfort to Harry. He almost laughed when Remus rushed into the room with a worried look. He changed from worried to stern when he saw Harry sitting in bed, not as upset as he probably expected.

"He's not mad at me," Harry explained. "I wouldn't let him anywhere near Privet Drive for about twenty years if I were you, though." Remus looked confused and Harry wondered why. Remus must have known how bad the Dursleys were. "He found out about my cupboard," Remus's face adopted a grim expression. Harry yawned and stretched, "I need a nap."

Harry was glad he had decided to review his textbooks from his previous five years of school before moving onto the new material. He accepted now that the prophecy was true and that he was going to have to fight Voldemort, but that didn't mean he had to like it. In truth he had not been happy with the course his life took with the exception of a precious few years, and even those were tainted by Voldemort and Death Eaters.

It was good that he was only reviewing information he had already learned. He was constantly distracted by the soft silvery glow of the pensieve sitting on the table beside him. Years ago he would have leapt at the chance to see any memory that involved his father and the Marauders. Now, though, he did not want to see Snape's pain. What a change from earlier years when he would have given anything to see Snape hurting. Harry shifted uncomfortably in the bed and stared at the bowl of silver liquid.

He suspected he was leaving the hospital wing soon, but he didn't know where he would be sleeping. There was no chance he would get to be alone somewhere. Dumbledore, not to mention everyone else in the castle, was probably still afraid he would try to hurt himself again. Harry could tell them their fears were unnecessary, but it would not do any good. Knowing how the headmaster did things he guessed he would be moved down to the dungeons with Snape, especially now that they had managed to actually talk to one other without fighting.

Finally the draw of the memories was too strong for him, his curiosity overpowering his reluctance. Harry growled in defeat and set down his book on the pile of texts on the chair next to his bed. He picked up his wand from the nightstand and got out of his bed. He leaned over the bowl and stirred the liquid with the tip of his wand. He felt a slight daze as he was pulled in and let his barriers drop.

Chapter Nine

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Severus was looking for revenge. He had been humiliated one too many times by the infamous Hogwarts Marauders, the bane of his existence. What was the war outside to him when he was fighting one within the school? He discreetly followed Black through the corridors, keeping out of sight through a series of dodges behind suits of armor, tapestries, or lingering around the bends of the corridors. The insane layout of the school made for easy stalking.

Black was walking with a third year student, the other beater of the Gryffindor quidditch team. "The entrance is simple really," Black said a bit too loud to be talking just to the idiot next to him. "Just use a long stick to prod the large knot at the base of the tree. The branches freeze and you can see the entrance to the tunnel.

"Never go in at night," Black said in a stern voice that imitated McGonagall. "The passage leads to the Shrieking Shack. I've seen what gives the Shack its name and I wouldn't face that again without at least ten Aurors behind me, or preferably in front of me. Promise me."

The silly third year, Dickson, Dickens, something like that, looked at Black with adulation in his eyes, "I promise. I'll only use the other tunnel at night."

Severus repressed the snort that threatened to escape. It was obvious from his exaggerated tone and frequent glances over his shoulder that Black knew Severus was there. It had always been difficult to sneak up on the Gryffindor prankster, especially that year when it became nearly impossible. Severus was only making sure the third year didn't see him, though he wasn't sure why he bothered. That kid really was an idiot.

Severus was extra observant for the remainder of the day. He spent the entire day in rooms that had windows with a view of the Whomping Willow. It was around dusk when he saw a figure creep across the grounds and disappear under the tree. He wasn't one hundred percent certain but he thought it might have been Lupin, the most tolerable of the fifth year Gryffindors.

A few hours after dark had settled over the grounds for the night Severus exited the castle out a side door and made his way to the violent tree. The long branch that the other figure had used to still the thrashing branches was lying just outside the tree's reach. The tunnel entrance was glaringly obvious once the tree was frozen. He was probably walking right into a prank, but he would be ready.

Down in the filthy underground passageway Severus could hear the noises coming from the infamous Shack. He had never heard them before, the screams and crashes that had led the villagers to believe the Shack was haunted. He hesitated. This could all be just another Marauder plot to humiliate him, or Black could have been telling that acolyte of his the truth. Black was a formidable wizard and had that ridiculous Gryffindor excess of courage. Did Severus want to face something that Black wouldn't without a squad of Aurors? He immediately dismissed the possibility. Black was good, but he would never have survived the encounter... unless he had Potter and a surplus of luck with him.

Severus reached the trapdoor that he assumed was the one leading into the Shrieking Shack. The noises sounded like they were just on the other side. Hesitantly he opened the trapdoor and entered the Shack, following the noises up the stairs to a door at the end of a hall. He reached out his hand, but spun around with his wand drawn to face the running footsteps and panting coming towards him. It was Potter, red-faced, out of breath, and looking... scared? When was James Potter ever scared?

"Snape run!" Potter ordered. "Get out of here!"

Severus sneered at the Gryffindor, "Getting cold feet Potter? Is this prank really that good?"

"For Merlin's sake, it's not some stupid prank!" Potter insisted, his wand still not drawn. "You have no idea what's going on here!"

"I guess I'll just have to find out for myself," Severus said calmly. It unsettled him that Potter hadn't drawn his wand. The Gryffindor was just silently pleading with him. It made Severus feel a surge of power, almost euphoria, to be the cause of that beseeching look. He reached out for the door and heard growls on the other side.

"NO!" Potter pulled back at Severus and Severus flung him off.

He heard a thump as Potter hit the wall of the hallway and then a strange popping sound. Just as Severus opened the door a large stag leapt past him and collided with a snarling mass of fur and teeth. There was a loud crack as their skulls met. Severus gaped in horror, shaking and unable to move, as the mystery that he had pursued for years, first at Lucius Malfoy's order and then for his own curiosity, was answered and all the clues pieced together in that instant. The Marauders' big secret was that Remus Lupin was a werewolf.

Fear like he had never felt before gripped him as the stag lost ground and was nearly pushed back into the hall. A warm, wet feeling told Severus that he had lost control of his functions. The stag kicked with its front legs, swung its antlers, and finally managed to force the werewolf into the mess of a bedroom. With a kick of its hind legs the stag shut the door as it held the werewolf at bay and Severus was safe. His knees gave out and he fell to the floor.

Severus's pulse was racing and he was nearly hyperventilating. He had come mere inches from either death or a fate worse than death, a life of pain as an outcast dark creature. Slowly he turned his head away from the door, wand still gripped in his shaking hand. Potter was gone. Had he fled like a coward when he saw the werewolf? If he had where had the stag come from?

Severus remembered the popping sound he heard before the stag charged past him and another realization dawned on him. Perfect Potter was an illegal animagus. Severus cursed, his Slytherin ambition taking charge for a moment. He finally had the ultimate blackmail material and he couldn't use it, not after bloody Potter had saved his life. No pureblood wizard could ignore a life debt. That was deep, ancient magic at work.

Severus was never sure how he got back to his dormitory that night, nor of what had happened to the soiled robes he was wearing. In the shower the next morning he had rubbed his skin raw, trying to get rid of the stink of fear that he felt was still on him. It was early on that Saturday morning when he stepped out the corridor intending to get breakfast, a mask of calm firmly in place to hide his lingering fear, and found his Head of House waiting for him.

"The headmaster wishes to see you," she snapped.

"Do you know what about Ma'am?" he asked with a blank expression.

"If you do not know it is not my place to inform you," she replied, which meant in Slytherin language that she did not know and was not happy about it.

Severus wondered how the headmaster knew what had transpired the previous night as he followed her without another word. He had a grudging respect for the elderly wizard. The man was a master manipulator and was the most powerful wizard Severus had ever met. Unfortunately, Severus knew they would soon be on opposite sides of the war.

They entered the office to find Black and Potter sitting before the headmaster. Severus guessed that Lupin was in the hospital wing. Black looked very pale and Potter very angry.

Severus sneered at both of them and took the only remaining seat in the room... a plush armchair between the two Marauders.

"Thank you Professor Spectre," Dumbledore said with that infernal twinkle in his eyes. "I will see you at the noon meal."

"Severus has the right to my council for whatever trouble he is in," the Slytherin Head of House objected.

The twinkle left Dumbledore's eyes and a shiver went down Severus's spine, "That will be all Cassandra. I assure you that Mr. Snape is not in any trouble."

Severus could feel the power flowing off the headmaster. Once the Astronomy professor was gone an uncomfortable silence filled the circular room. The headmaster held out the tin of lemon drops that were offered to anyone who had the misfortune of coming within arm's reach of the man. Potter was the only who accepted, out of reflex it seemed more than anything else.

"Perhaps one of you can explain to me exactly what happened last night," Dumbledore said gravely, peering at them over his half-moon spectacles.

Potter looked at Severus and raised an eyebrow. Severus was startled that Potter was offering him the chance to tell the story first. He had assumed that Potter would protect Black, no matter what the situation, though the look in his eyes said differently. Seeing that neither of the other two students was going to speak Severus began the tale with the words he had overheard Black saying the previous afternoon. He altered his telling of the events just slightly for some reason that he couldn't figure out.

"Where did the stag come from?" the headmaster questioned Severus.

After waiting a beat Potter spoke up, "Transfiguration, sir."

Inwardly Severus was amazed. Potter had misled the headmaster but he had told the absolute truth. The animagus transformation was the most difficult transfiguration possible.

The twinkle flashed for a moment before disappearing again, "I understand Mr. Black, that you know precisely why the Shrieking Shack is dangerous on nights of the full moon," Black nodded almost imperceptibly and looked down at his feet. "What you have done is extremely malicious and reckless. Do you understand the repercussions that would befall Mr. Lupin should anyone enter the Shack whilst he is there?"

Black looked to Potter, who only glared back, and returned his guilty gaze to the headmaster. The old man held his eye firmly.

"I do, sir," he replied in a small voice Severus hadn't heard since they were caught at mischief as small children.

"You are indeed lucky that Mr. Potter is your friend. He stopped at least three lives from being ruined last night at great risk to his own life," Dumbledore stated. The praise did not take the angry look from Potter's face. "As no one was injured last night," Black looked up in relief, "your punishment will be minor in comparison to what might have been. Eighty points are subtracted from Gryffindor for endangering the lives of your fellow students and you are now under probation Mr. Black. Any infraction that brings you back to my office will result in suspension. If you ever do anything this dangerous again you will be expelled immediately."

Black visibly gulped and Severus would have smirked at the Gryffindor's pain had the images from the night before not been haunting his thoughts. At least one of the Marauders was dragged up to Dumbledore's office every month. Black held the school record for involuntary visits to the headmaster.

Dumbledore gazed at the other two students, "Mr. Snape I would have thought that by now you would know not listen to a word Mr. Black tells you." The headmaster sighed deeply, "I am sure this incident will finally teach you that lesson. Despite the fact that you were out of bed and off school grounds after curfew I will only subtract ten points from Slytherin. You will not mention to anyone what happened last night or what you saw. You will keep Mr. Lupin's secret and never even hint at it or use it to tease him."

Dumbledore gave him an icy glare and Severus nodded, knowing the headmaster was deadly serious. Though he was upset at being punished for Black's prank he knew he was getting off lightly for his own infractions.

"I am very proud of you James. Last night you showed you are a true Gryffindor," Dumbledore was the closest to smiling he had that morning. "I am awarding twenty points to Gryffindor for your

actions, though you should have gone to a professor first. Your parents have custody of Mr. Black as of last summer, correct?"

"Yes, sir," Potter responded, his expression still stormy despite the praise. The entire school knew Black had run away from home. It was a subject of much amusement in Slytherin House, into which Black's younger brother had been sorted that year, that Black's mother had burned his name off the family tree.

Dumbledore continued his conversation with Potter, "Have they been made aware of Mr. Lupin's condition?"

"He told them after his father died sir," Potter replied.

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully, "I will be speaking with them this afternoon on an unrelated matter. They will be informed of the situation."

From the look on Black's face Severus guessed that was a worse punishment than a month of detentions, which could not be given as there was only one more night before they left for the summer holiday. The three fifth years were dismissed. They walked down the steps from Dumbledore's office wearily, as none of them had gotten much sleep, and paused by the gargoyle guardian.

"James, I..." Black had a pathetic pleading look on his face.

Potter spun on his heel to face his closest friend with barely controlled fury flashing in his eyes. He had never even looked at Severus that way before. Severus then knew that Potter had been holding back his anger all that time in the headmaster's office and it was being released. Severus could physically feel the raw power Potter exuded. The Potter line had produced some of the most powerful wizards in existence, and James Potter was on his way to continuing that tradition. Potter hissed at Black, "Don't speak to me. You went too far Sirius *Black*," he emphasized the surname. "Do you even know what you made me do last night?"

Black gulped and shook his head. His eyes were opened wide with fear.

Each word Potter said next was individually emphasized, "You made me hurt Remus."

Black's surprise and horror must have made him forget the first thing Potter had said to him, "But Dumbledore said..."

"He doesn't know," Potter growled. "I healed it before Pomfrey came, just after sunrise. I had to fight him to push him away from the door. He could smell human. I was with him until he calmed down and then I had to wait in the tunnel in case that idiot who can barely tell the bludgers from the quaffle showed up too."

What Severus was witnessing was amazing. Now he knew why Potter was so mad. Potter and Black had practically been attached at the hip since their second day at Hogwarts after Black got the Howler from his mother about being sorted into Gryffindor. Ever since it was obvious to the entire school that Lupin was not in the best health Potter and Black had been very protective of him. Black looked even more upset than before and he was not fighting the tears that were falling.

"We are going to the hospital wing and you are going to tell Remus what happened," Potter demanded.

Black's whole body tensed and Severus thought he was about to argue until Potter glared at Black with such intensity that Severus could again feel Potter's anger. Black's shoulders slumped in defeat and he began to shuffle off towards the hospital wing.

Potter turned to Severus before following Black, "I'm sorry. Please don't..." the Gryffindor looked upset and lost, completely unlike the self-absorbed Potter Severus was used to, "right now Remus doesn't have any idea of what happened. Werewolves don't really remember what happens when they transform. He would never hurt anyone."

"Just go Potter," Severus sneered. "I promised Dumbledore I wouldn't say anything and I keep my promises. I still think you're an arrogant fool."

Severus turned and stalked back to the dungeons. The whole meeting had transpired in a sort of daze and now anger was welling up inside him. Only now was he processing everything that had happened since the afternoon the day before. Black had known Severus would encounter a werewolf and the fool had still sent him to the Shack.

That was almost murder and Black had gotten away with what was essentially a slap on the wrist. He could have been expelled or sent to Azkaban. The sight of the wolf came back to Severus, the yellow eyes, the sharp teeth, the claws, and he felt sick. He just made it into the nearest boys' toilet and into a stall before he retched up everything in his stomach, thankful he hadn't had breakfast yet.

The image faded and Harry swayed on his feet. There were tears in his eyes yet again and his stomach was queasy. He eased himself onto his bed and curled up into a ball, willing sleep to come though he knew it would not. He hugged his knees to his chest and wondered why Snape had shown him that memory. Harry had known the general story before, but not exactly what had happened and how.

The emptiness in Harry's heart cried out to him. He needed that space filled more than ever right then, but there was no one to fill it. The only person he had let in all the way had died for him.

Chapter Ten

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Steam rose from the Hogwarts Express to greet the returning and new students as they arrived at platform nine and three quarters for another year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Severus was particularly pleased to be boarding the train that year. His uncle had been much more vocal on his expectations of Severus to join the ranks of the Dark Lord. Severus had expected it, and knew it would happen, but was a bit frightened at the prospect. He hated muggles and mudbloods, but he was not a killer and did not want to be one. The Dark Arts were fascinating, but so much of it was just... wrong somehow.

He was still uncertain about the letter that felt much heavier than it actually was in his pocket. Severus suspected that Lily Evans had been responsible for Potter's first letter to Severus that summer. Potter had finally managed to cultivate a friendship with the girl who had seen him as an immature show-off for five years. The whole school knew he had a crush on her but he always acted like a fool around her. Apparently, that summer he had shown up near tears on her doorstep after a fight with Black and they had talked for hours. Just days later, Severus had gotten an owl from the Marauder.

Now Severus was headed towards the last compartment on the train where Potter had said he would be in the most recent letter. Severus's uncle was practically drooling over this unexpected truce and potential friendship. The Snapes would rise high in the ranks of the Death Eaters if they could bring a Potter into the fold. Unbeknownst to his uncle though, Severus did not want to recruit Potter. He did not even want to become a Death Eater though he was resigned to that fate. He hated muggles, and disliked muggle-borns, but did not want to become a murderer.

Severus's trunk was shrunk to the size of a small suitcase. He would enlarge it on the train so the Hogwarts house elves could bring it to his room. His uncle had shrunk it for easier carrying, as it had Severus's new cauldrons inside. For the first time the man had shown pride in his nephew. Severus had received the highest grade in history on his Potions O.W.L. and the Dark Lord was in desperate need of a new Potions Master. Severus's apprenticeship had already started, but this was solid proof of his abilities.

He took a deep breath outside the last compartment and looked in the door. Inside was a sight that would have greatly surprised any students that was not aware of the changes over the summer. Lily Evans was sitting on one side of the compartment, her feet propped up on the seat. She was laughing softly and smiling at James Potter, who sat across from her. Potter was leaning back in his seat with his long legs stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankle. He was twirling his wand in one hand and telling Evans a story that involved charming Peter Pettigrew's textbooks to whisper hints to him, which the rest of the Marauders pretended they couldn't hear. He gave off a relaxed aura even as he constantly shifted his position.

They both looked up when the door opened and Severus stepped in. Evans smiled at him and Severus tensed. No matter how many times he called the girl a mudblood she would always treat him well. She never gave up and it irritated him beyond words. Potter looked a bit nervous and unsure of himself, something that was probably an entirely new feeling for him.

"Hi, um, Severus," Potter said with a guarded smile.

Though they had begun addressing each other as Severus and James in their letters it had never been spoken, and Severus still thought of the Gryffindor as Potter. He nodded, "James, Evans." Severus put his trunk on the overhead rack and enlarged it to normal size. He sat down next to Potter, as there was no way he would sit next to a mudblood. After a few moments of silence Evans stood.

"Well, I have to get to the prefects meeting," she said. She leaned down and gave Potter a quick kiss on the cheek. Inwardly Severus cringed. He hated public displays and affectionate gestures of any

sort. Added to that was the fact that he had no interest in girls. "I'll let Remy know you're on the train." Severus heard the complicated locking charm Evans put on the door. It would take a couple minutes for anyone to get in or out. He was impressed despite himself.

Severus and Potter were left alone. Severus decided on a safe subject, "So are you and Evans together yet?"

"No," Potter sighed and glanced at the door with longing. "Right now we're just friends, though she knows I want more. I don't really mind getting to know her first, though it's a first for me."

Severus sneered in disgust at the thought. He distracted his mind by looking over Potter. The Gryffindor had clearly had a growth spurt over the summer, as had Severus. He had never really allowed himself to look at Potter before and now he understood why more than half the female population of Hogwarts giggled whenever the Gryffindor chaser walked by. Potter was extremely attractive. He was not wearing his robes yet so his legs were encased in slim trousers. He was wearing a lightweight short-sleeved shirt that showed off his tan. Severus's thoughts were broken when Potter spoke.

"I don't understand the problem you all have with muggle-borns," James said while sounding a bit irritated.

Severus noticed the other boy was changing his position almost constantly. Potter just couldn't sit still. Severus looked him in the eye and frowned. The difference in beliefs and upbringing was a huge obstacle to any kind of friendship they might develop.

"Our culture is dying," Severus said icily. "Every year more and more of them come to Hogwarts with no knowledge of our world. Every time one of them gets their letter another muggle family and their muggle friends know about us. Pretty soon they'll all know and none of us will be safe."

Potter arched his eyebrows, "Do you know how fast the muggle population is growing? Even if we admitted five hundred muggle-borns each year for the next ten years only a tiny percentage of muggles would find out about our world. Our culture is dying because we're letting it die. Half the purebloods in our school don't know the old traditions anymore. We don't teach the muggle-borns anything about them.

"That leaves maybe a third of the wizards and witches coming of age each year that are familiar with our traditions and a good portion of us don't practice them. When was the last time you went to a Summer Solstice celebration or lit a fire at Beltane?"

Severus cringed, "You have me there, but we're diluting our blood. There are more squibs than ever!"

"That's because there are more witches and wizards than ever," Potter countered. "Look Severus, Lily is muggle-born. She also happens to be very powerful and smart. If she marries a wizard any child of hers will be brought up in a wizarding home and will carry on that power. Her family is about as muggle as they come. Though she doesn't practice our traditions I'm willing to bet she knows more about them than half of your House."

The two of them just looked at each other uneasily. That summer Potter had written mostly about his problems with the Marauders, his regret for all the pranking and bullying he had done, and Lily. Severus's letters had usually responded to whatever Potter wrote without revealing too much about himself. Though the subject of the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord had been touched on Severus had been very careful. His uncle had kept a close watch on him all summer. The man was desperate for advancement under the Dark Lord.

"James," Severus began, "we were raised to believe different things. We should just drop it."

Potter sighed and looked out the window, "My father is an Auror."

Severus knew where Potter was leading and had prepared himself for it. He snorted in response, "Anyone who reads the Daily Prophet knows that."

"I know what your uncle is," Potter said carefully, not really accusing his uncle, just hinting. "What will you do when we graduate?"

"I will continue to apprentice under a Potions Master until I earn my Mastery," Severus said firmly. His apprenticeship was already started with a high ranking elderly Death Eater. The arrangements had been made the summer after his second year. Whether he wanted it or not Severus would have the Dark Mark on his arm in less than three years.

"I'll be going into Auror training. They've changed it because of the increase of Death Eater activity. Until a few years ago it was three years of training. Now it's an intense one year and then you're thrown into the war," James explained slowly.

"It feels so far away," Severus mused while he took in every detail of James Potter's restless body.

"Two more years at Hogwarts, then a year more of training, and then we could be on opposite sides of a battlefield."

Potter turned back to look at him with deep sadness in his eyes. He put a hand on Severus's shoulder and Severus's breath caught at the contact, "I don't want to fight against you anymore."

"I'm not particularly eager to fight you either," Severus replied honestly.

Severus had sat fairly close to Potter when he entered the compartment, and now when they faced each other their eyes were only inches apart. They slowly leaned together and their lips brushed softly. A tingle raced up the Slytherin's spine.

"Severus," Potter breathed. The dark eyes were sparkling in the dim light and the Gryffindor's breath was heavy.

Severus needed no more encouragement. As he shifted the angle he was sitting on the seat and leaned forward Potter's hand tightened on his shoulder. Severus put one hand on Potter's waist and pressed their mouths together again. The second kiss was completely unlike the first. The first had been tentative and cautious as they each silently asked permission for the transgression.

The second kiss was needy and passionate, full of darting tongues, gently scraping teeth, little bites, and exploration. At some point Severus was pressed back into the seat back and Potter's hands started tracing the outline of his body. Severus reached under the shirt Potter wore and kneaded the muscles of his back. Potter had certainly learned something from all his exploits. The Gryffindor was an amazing kisser.

Potter's hands gripped Severus's upper thighs and Severus moaned into the other boy's mouth. His arousal was getting uncomfortable as he considered all the things Potter could do to him with those hands, that mouth. Severus adjusted his position and Potter's body responded. Potter pulled Severus to his feet and backed them up to the compartment door. Severus aligned his body with Potter's and pressed against him so he could feel how excited Potter was.

Severus slipped his hands down to Potter's hips and pulled. Their hips moved together, rubbing and grinding. Potter reached inside Severus's robes and gripped his backside. A rumbling groan escaped from deep in Severus's throat. His mind began to cloud and before he knew what was happening Potter had spun them around and dropped to his knees.

The Gryffindor muttered a silencing charm on the compartment before pulling down Severus's trousers and pants together. Severus gasped at the sensation when the warm mouth wrapped around him. Looking down, Severus saw Potter pull back and his tongue flick out. Potter had himself in hand and was stroking as he fellated Severus. The sight was all it took for Severus to shudder and cry out. Potter moaned around him as they finished together.

When Severus woke he fervently wished he were still asleep. His hand rose to his lips as he remembered their first kiss, his first real kiss. There had been a few meaningless fumbles, but nothing like that. Severus had been a bit clumsy and awkward at first, having had almost no sexual experience. James never commented, though he had claimed to pretty much being a male slut for at least two years before that train ride with Severus. He once told Severus that his first encounter

was at age twelve after his first quidditch victory with one of the team's beaters, a fourth year. His excess of experience made up for Severus's inexperience.

After the initial onslaught of images and feelings from Albus's counter to the memory charm the memories had settled down and muted somewhat. What Severus was left with was the firm knowledge that he had loved James Potter, deeply cared for Lily Potter, and the three of them had successfully hidden their arrangements for just about four years. The details could be pulled up but were most vivid each night in Severus's dreams, though in no particular order. Something would occasionally trigger a memory and Severus would let it come, unless he was in class or at a meeting and used Occlumency to block it.

Reluctantly Severus dragged himself out of bed and made his way to his bathroom. His quarters felt depressingly empty as he looked around. There was no life in them. He would have to change things now, especially with Albus sending Harry to stay with him once Poppy let him go. It had been the perfect bleak surroundings when his bitter thoughts had dominated almost every waking moment, but now...

The shower was scalding hot, exactly how Severus liked it. Early in the summer before his sixth year he had discovered the trick to getting rid of the greasy look his hair tended towards, but abandoned the time-consuming process once he had no reason to look good, no one to look good for. He washed his hair thoroughly, working the shampoo into his scalp. The conditioner was watered down and rinsed out almost immediately. Once out of the shower Severus cast a series of charms that would keep his hair clean all day, no matter what potions fumes rose out of his cauldrons. James had never complained about his hair but had obviously appreciated the effort Severus took for him. "James," Severus said the name fondly.

He inspected his body in the mirror. It was very different from that of his sixteen-year-old self. He was taller, as he had continued to grow until he was in his early twenties. His body had hardened as well and there was a liberal sprinkling of scars from his early time as a Death Eater. Voldemort had eventually decided that Severus was much more valuable in a lab than in the field. There were lines on Severus's face, making him look slightly older than his true age. Despite the stresses he had lived through Severus had somehow managed to avoid grey hair. He had no idea how Harry would grey. The Potter side was a complete mystery. Severus had never met a Potter that went much beyond his age. In the past century they had all died young.

Severus indulged in fantasy for a few moments. He closed his eyes and wondered what his life would be like if James and Lily, or at least just one of them had survived. The memory charm would have been removed after the attack, after Harry destroyed Voldemort for a time. Severus would have been able to help raise his son. The three of them would have prepared Harry for what lay ahead in a rebuilt Potter Manor at Godric's Hollow.

He stopped playing 'what if,' knowing that he could destroy his mind that way. Of course, that was if having two conflicting sets of memories didn't drive him insane first. There were times when one set of memories would hold dominance over the other, only to switch to submission. Severus guessed that the control he held over his mind from years of Occlumency practice was his saving grace. When he exerted control he could choose which personality to portray, determine which memory was true. In public and around the other Hogwarts staff he was Professor Snape, sarcastic and bitter. With Harry or Albus, and often in private now, James's Sev took over.

Harry was still sleeping when Severus reached the hospital wing. From Poppy's reports Severus knew that Harry got very little sleep, and what he did get was plagued by nightmares. Even as he watched Harry was tossing and turning on his bed, muttering words Severus couldn't decipher. Severus was morbidly amused at how less than a year ago he would have been almost eager to do what he was about to do, but now he hesitated. Did Lily know how the charm she had cast

seventeen years ago affected her son's life? Severus pushed away the human and caring Sev and drew his wand. He pointed it at Harry. *Legilimens!*

There was almost nothing... blackness with a sad undertone... a trickle of inconsequential daily images. The intrusion into the mind felt normal and unblocked, though Harry's mind had to be closed. It was the mind of a Master Occlumens. If Severus did not know from what he could see that Harry was dreaming he would think the boy was in an undisturbed sleep. He broke the spell and stared at his son in amazement, wondering how this change had come about. Months of teaching had accomplished nothing but somehow he had learned in a few weeks what normally took years.

The muttering grew louder and switched to whimpering. Severus knew what would come next. Depending on the particular dream Harry would cry out for any of a number of people, or begin berating himself, or beg for forgiveness. Not wanting to hear or see his son in such pain Severus acted on instinct. His wand still out and trained on Harry, he cast a strong cheering charm on the sleeping boy.

Gradually the thrashing stilled. The whimpering and muttering stopped and a peaceful smile lit up Harry's face. Severus hadn't seen that smile since Harry was fourteen, and only rarely then. He stood and watched in silence, unaware of the smile on his own face that mirrored Harry's. Severus almost jumped in surprise when a hand touched his shoulder.

"His mind is blocked Albus, completely," Severus said in confusion. "I couldn't get into his dream. How...?"

Albus sighed deeply, "I have my suspicions, none of which are very comforting. It is obvious how Harry is reacting to the loss of Sirius. I think the pain was too much for him, especially added to everything else that happened to him last year and the revelation of the prophecy. He shut down his mind in an effort to cope, and the shields he used to escape his own feelings are still there, blocking everyone else out."

Severus furrowed his brow in thought. Albus had given only a partial explanation for everything they had seen, "How is he still channeling the Dark Lord's emotions?"

"I am afraid that takes no effort on Voldemort's end," Albus said gravely. "It is the link formed by the curse. It triggered pain in Harry's scar as early as his first year here, but only started transmitting emotions after the rebirth."

Severus nodded. It made sense, as emotion was the key to tracking thoughts with Legilimency. If he had considered that the previous year he would have known how much Voldemort was affecting Harry. The best Occlumens became cold, unfeeling shells of their former selves. It was ironic that he would now have to encourage Harry to feel in order to strike a healthy balance.

"The cheering charm was an excellent idea Severus. We should have thought of that earlier. I will be sure to tell Madam Pomfrey," Albus twinkled at him and smiled brightly.

Chapter Eleven

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"Harry's training is not going nearly as well as expected," Albus said sternly as he stared down the Order members in the room. "Why is that?"

Those present consisted of what was becoming known as the 'Harry Circle.' Most of them were members of the Inner Circle of the Order, with the exception of Hagrid, who could not always be relied upon to remain silent when needed. Charlie Weasley was there, though he often missed meetings as he lived in Romania.

This group was made up of all the Hogwarts staff members in the Order, including Firenze now that he was back from feeling out other centaur clans for assistance in the war. All the Weasleys in the Order, the four eldest members of the family, were present, as well as Remus Lupin. This group was meeting more and more often on matters concerning Harry Potter. Even they, though, were not informed of the discovery concerning Harry's parentage. Only Severus, Albus, Lupin, and Harry knew.

Lupin, who had been working with Kingsley and Tonks to teach Harry defense, spoke up first, "He lacks motivation. He follows instruction but takes no initiative. When he practices the spells we teach him he does fine, but when we have him duel his reaction times are slow. He gets hit when he shouldn't and it hardly fazes him." Lupin looked sad, "He's just not recovering. He still blames himself and won't hear differently. There's nothing more we can do, nothing I can do. I've failed him... again."

"Stop beating yourself up Lupin," Severus said scathingly. "You are all forgetting, *again*," he stressed the word, "that Potter is no more than a teenage boy. You cannot expect him to just return to his normal irritating self after living through a year of hell. He is resilient, but he is still human. Give the brat a break. Send him on a vacation. I doubt he's ever been on one in his miserable life."

Several glares were aimed at Severus in reaction to his choice of words and tone. Though he spoke harshly Severus knew that Albus and Lupin would take his words as they were intended. For a week they had watched Harry act with no more emotion than a zombie and stood by to see if he'd snap out of his apathetic state. They couldn't afford to continue waiting.

Severus's analytical mind, honed from years of potions research, deduced that Harry was acting as he had at the Dursleys' earlier that summer. He knew that Harry did not yet trust him fully, or accept the new situation, so there was very little he could do to help. So long as he continued to act the way he was Poppy would keep him in the hospital wing, fearing another suicide attempt. Severus knew perhaps better than anyone else there that the hospital wing was not a good place for emotional healing.

"Harry cannot miss the beginning of the term, and I would prefer that he spend the time in a magical environment. There is more protection for him that way," Dumbledore looked thoughtful. "He would also need to be disguised."

"A hair growth potion will help for a start. Anyone who sees that mop on his head instantly thinks 'Potter';" Severus commented scathingly.

Filius spoke up from his raised seat, "A complex concealment charm could hide his scar for a short time."

"Muggle contact lenses will take care of his glasses and change the eye color," Lupin recommended.

"You won't let Harry stay at the Burrow but you're actually thinking of sending him on holiday?"

Molly Weasley objected and Severus inwardly cringed at her annoying tone.

"Severus is right Molly," Albus said in a sad tone, no twinkle in his eyes. "In my efforts to protect Harry I forgot that his body is not all that needed protection. If I had listened to Minerva fifteen years ago we may not be in this situation."

"Besides, nothing has been decided. We do not even have any suggestions for where Harry could go. The Burrow is out of the question. Harry is too closely connected to your family. One of the main reasons he cannot go there is that his presence in your house is obvious."

Severus was intrigued. He made a mental note to ask Minerva what Albus was talking about. Talking to the headmaster would get him nowhere. Minerva, however, was straightforward and candid in their discussions when the two of them weren't teasing each other or complaining about the other's House. Severus allowed himself a slight smirk. The Scottish woman was especially candid when complaining about Albus's manipulations.

He listened carefully as they tossed around ideas for a retreat for Harry. None of them sounded the least bit helpful. Spending a week at Grimmauld Place would only push him further into depression with the reminders of his godfather. Lupin's cottage would be no better. Severus was of the opinion that the week should be free of anyone closely linked to Black. He was about to voice his opinion when the look on Charlie Weasley's face froze him. It was the same smile that indicated the Weasley twins were planning some mischief.

"You have an idea Weasley?" Severus said coolly. Somehow they all knew who he referred to, even when he called every Weasley by their surname. He supposed it was the degree of animosity in his voice. It had a tendency to increase as the Weasley in question got younger.

"Harry can visit with me in Romania for a week," the youngest member of the 'Harry Circle' suggested.

"You want Harry to go to a dragon preserve?" Molly Weasley almost shrieked. Lupin looked equally distraught. Inwardly Severus was protesting just as loudly. Harry couldn't protect himself in a friendly practice duel. How would he fare against dragons? Most of the faces around the table reflected what Severus was feeling.

"Be calm Molly," Albus spoke softly. His voice had the effect of a calming draught on the whole room, enough so that Severus suspected the headmaster knew some arcane form of voice magic.

"Explain your reasoning Charlie."

"Hogwarts doesn't hold the best memories for Harry right now, least of all the hospital wing," Charlie began slowly. "The fast pace at the preserve will force him to snap out of his funk unless he wants to get eaten by a Chinese Fireball," seeing the horrified looks he spoke in a firmer tone, "which no one there would allow to occur. With the number of Weasleys out there I can pass him off as a distant cousin," the dragon handler's face lit up and his smile widened, "a muggle or squib cousin."

"Every handler is also trained as a healer. All of Harry's associations with dragons are fairly good. The grin on his face when he caught the golden egg was brilliant, and then there was his first year when... oh shit."

Molly rounded on her second son and furiously demanded, "What on earth was Harry doing with a dragon in his first year and how do *you* know about it?"

Severus was quite anxious to hear the answer himself and could tell that even Albus didn't know. Before Charlie could explain, though, Hagrid burst into tears.

"It's all me fault" the half-giant bawled.

"Do you mean to tell me that Draco Malfoy was telling me the truth?" Minerva interrogated the stocky Weasley and the Care of Magical Creatures teacher.

Severus searched his memory for the incident in question and came up with a night that Malfoy, Granger, Longbottom, and Harry were all caught out of bed after curfew in their first year. He never found out why and had passed it off as silly childish games at the time. Now, however...

Charlie was comforting Hagrid, who sat next to him, "You didn't make them do anything Hagrid. Harry and Hermione were acting of their own free will and Norbert is fine."

"Norbert?" Albus asked in an amused eye-twinkling tone.

"Norbert is a Norwegian Ridgeback that Hagrid hatched in his cottage," Charlie explained. "Ron wrote and asked me to pick it up before it burned down the cottage... or the school."

"That was a dragon bite?" Poppy asked incredulously.

The majority of the table sat in shock as the story was explained to the satisfaction of everyone involved at the time. Severus just scowled to mask his inner amusement. Harry was certainly more like James than he knew. That was exactly the sort of stunt the Marauders would have pulled, smuggling an illegally bred dragon out of the country. By the end of the story Lupin was laughing heartily, something the Order had not heard in a long time, or ever for some of them.

"He's James all over again," Lupin declared as he settled down. "I vote for Romania. Let's send Harry to visit Norbert."

"I trust the loyalties of the other handlers are not in question?" Severus brought the conversation to the necessary questions.

"They are all more concerned with their dragons than anything else," Charlie asserted seriously. "At worst they're neutral, or will be until You-Know-Who tries to include dragons in his army. Then they will be firmly on the side of light. I've been dropping some subtle hints and testing the waters. When the time comes they will be with us. Using the dragons in war could bring them to the brink of extinction."

Charlie smiled widely again, "Romanian laws also work in our favor. Underage use of magic is common, so if Harry is in a sticky situation he doesn't have to worry about Ministry involvement. We can even work in some dueling practice if things work out well. They're not quite as... organized or restricting as we are."

"He'll need new clothing," Molly finally relented. "Those rags the muggles provide for him are ridiculous."

"I think we can trust Tonks with that assignment," Albus commented, his eyes twinkling more than ever.

"I'll help her," Bill Weasley spoke up for the first time that night with a slightly panicky look on his face.

Severus was thankful for that. He wasn't surprised that Albus and Tonks got along extremely well. They were both a little crazy. Knowing Tonks she would go overboard and buy Harry all sorts of inappropriate attire. Severus could just picture his son dressed like he was going to a muggle rock concert with brightly dyed hair and several piercings.

It took a few days to set everything up to Albus and Severus's satisfaction. It felt odd that the headmaster was consulting him more and more often on any issue that had to do Harry Potter. The clothing that Tonks and Bill Weasley purchased was sent with a large supply of the contact lenses to Charlie in Romania. Obtaining the lenses had been a tricky exercise, especially avoiding letting Harry know. Eventually Albus had created a duplicate pair of glasses while Harry was sleeping and taken them to a muggle optometrist.

Two weeks before the term was to start Severus and Lupin entered the hospital wing with a Portkey in hand. Harry was sitting in bed reading. He had been pretty much immersed in his books unless someone told him to go for a walk or to practice spells. It was an enormous change from the Harry Potter that had to be forced to study by Granger. He didn't look up as they entered or do anything else to acknowledge their presence.

The scar was already missing. Filius had cast the concealing charm before Harry woke that morning. Severus held out a potion and Harry drank it without comment. He finally reacted to something when his hair started growing until it reached his shoulder blades.

"What the..." a slightly deeper voice than they were used to complained.

"It's a surprise," Severus said calmly and held out a tie for the hair.

Harry pulled back the hair obediently and gave the two men a look that demanded an explanation. Severus smirked and cast a switching spell that replaced the famous round glasses with the contact lenses. Harry blinked and felt for the glasses that were now in Severus's pocket.

"What is going on here?" Harry nearly yelled, finally showing some emotion.

"That would ruin the surprise," Severus said in a mischievous tone.

"Catch!" Lupin shouted as he tossed the Portkey, shaped like a snitch, at Harry.

Always the seeker, Harry's hand automatically darted out and snatched the gold ball out of the air. He opened his mouth to demand explanations but the Portkey activated and whisked Harry away to Charlie's wizard tent in Romania. The only sound in the hospital wing was a strangled snort. Severus turned to look at Lupin to see what the strange noises were. The werewolf was failing miserably as his attempt to hold back his laughter. He gave up and had to sit on Harry's bed before he fell over.

"You... you sounded... just like James," Lupin laughed. "I never thought I'd see the day. Severus Snape the Marauder!"

Severus was caught between a disgusted sneer and a reminiscent smile. He eventually settled for keeping his face impassive, thankful for the acting skills he developed early in life, "I never have been, and never will be a Marauder, even if I bonded with one."

Lupin stopped laughing and looked painfully at the empty bed, "Do you think it will work?"

"It has to," Severus said sadly. "The way he's been, he wouldn't have a chance against the Dark Lord, not to mention all his Death Eaters and my House. We can't send him to St. Mungo's or allow anyone access to his mind."

"He'll be fine Sev. He's a strong kid," Lupin tried to comfort them both.

Severus felt a painful tug on his heart and snapped at the werewolf, "Don't call me Sev!"

He stalked out of the hospital wing and quickly turned a corner. He leaned his forehead against the cool stone and fought against the rush of emotions.

"What should we name him Sev?" James asked.

Severus smirked. James was the only one who got away with shortening his name, and, by extension, Lily could as well. His family had never considered doing so and his classmates wouldn't have dared. That night Severus and James were curled up together in front of a roaring fire with the Floo network connection blocked. Lily, now obviously pregnant, was knitting muggle style. She said she liked the feel of creating something with her own two hands. From his love of brewing potions Severus understood what she meant.

"The only relative I ever liked was my cousin Harold," Severus said sadly. "My uncle raised him to be the perfect Death Eater, but he was always kind to me. He died in the same raid as my parents."

"Harold James Potter," Lily suggested with a smile. "How does that sound?"

Severus could feel James smiling behind him. There had never been any question about the baby's surname. The child would officially be a Potter and Severus found he didn't mind. Though proud of his lineage, the world did not need any more Snapes. He pried himself out of James's arms and knelt beside Lily. He placed a hand on her abdomen.

"Hello in there Harry," he said to the bulge. "We can't wait to meet you."

Severus made his way to Minerva's office once his thoughts were under control. He hadn't meant to snap at Lupin, but his reaction was automatic. No one ever called him Sev, except for James and Lily. They were the only ones he was Sev for. He reached the Transfiguration corridor, knocked on the door of the Deputy Headmistress's office, and walked in without waiting for a response.

"So Minerva," Severus said without preamble, "just what was Albus talking about when he mentioned he should have listened to you fifteen years ago?"

She looked up at him and cocked an eyebrow. When she had been his professor, Severus had found the woman intimidating. Now that they were colleagues her stern looks did not work on him.

"You have changed Severus," she observed astutely, leaning forward, "dramatically. Don't think you can fool me. Something is going on that Albus has not seen fit to inform me of. Quid Pro Quo Severus, tell me what you and Albus are hiding, and I will tell you why Albus is feeling guiltier than any of you suspect."

Severus smirked. He would have had to tell Minerva eventually anyway. She had no idea the shock she was in for.

"Tell me Minerva, what do you remember of my last two years as a student here?" he settled into a chair and conjured up a cup of tea.

This was going to take a while.

Chapter Twelve

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"Bloody hell!" Harry cursed when he landed with a thump in an unfamiliar bedroom. "What in the name of Merlin is going on? Where are those bastards?" He added a few choice curses he learned from Fred and George.

Laughter alerted him to the presence of another person in the room, "You have been spending too much time with the twins Harry. Mum would wash your mouth out with soap if she heard all that." "Charlie?" Harry snapped his head around and asked, confused. "Where are we and what the hell am I doing here?"

"They didn't explain?" Harry shook his head. Charlie's eyes narrowed, "In that case curse all you want. Severus and Remus were supposed to tell you before they sent you. How did they get you to disguise yourself without explaining?"

Harry scowled, "They teamed up me. I never thought I'd see the day. It was almost like Fred and George were there."

"Remus I can understand, but Severus?" Charlie looked astonished and Harry just shrugged. He could explain it all some other time maybe. Charlie smiled at Harry, who was still in an undignified lump on the floor. He gave him a hand up. "Welcome to Romania Harry, or should I say Ryan Kelly. We all thought you could use a change of scenery. You are now Ryan Kelly, my very distant muggle cousin, who wants to major in zoology at university and work at the London Zoo. The Zoo has a section for magical creatures if you didn't know. A few muggles and squibs there work in both sections, sort of liaisons."

Harry felt his jaw drop open, "I'm at the dragon preserve?"

"Yup," Charlie nodded. "Prepare to take the role of a novice dragon handler. Some of the work we do here doesn't require magic." Charlie threw him some clothes that Harry didn't recognize. "Get dressed, we're expected out by Section Two in an hour. It takes a while to get there and I assume you haven't eaten?"

All Harry could do was nod. To say he was overwhelmed would be an understatement. He looked down at the clothing and realized it was brand new, "Where did the clothes come from?"

"Bill and Tonks went shopping a few days ago," Charlie grinned. "Be glad Bill was there. Tonks wanted to buy you an obscene amount of leather."

Minutes later Harry was dressed in close fitting faded jeans, a short sleeved black shirt, steel-toed black work boots, and a mustard colored lightweight but tough suede jacket. He sat down at Charlie's kitchen table and mutely ate the small serving of scrambled eggs in front of him and a solitary piece of toast. Charlie looked him over carefully before they left.

"Take off the jacket for a minute Harry," Charlie ordered. When Harry did Charlie fastened something to his forearm. "Wand holster," he explained. "Everyone here thinks you're a muggle so be careful. Don't let them see your wand unless it's an emergency. I'd hate to have to obliviate them all."

"Shouldn't I just leave it here then?" Harry asked dully.

"Are you insane? I want you armed at all times," Charlie said firmly. "Albus and Remus would have my head if I let you get hurt. I don't even want to think of what Snape would do," Charlie shuddered. "He's been oddly protective of you."

Harry's mind was still reeling from suddenly finding himself in the Romanian Dragon Preserve. He was afraid it would be like the worst Care of Magical Creatures lesson ever. He decided that if he was stuck with Charlie for a week he wanted to be able to talk freely. Anyway, Harry had no idea what he said in his sleep during his nightmares.

"Er, Charlie?"

"Yeah?" Charlie turned.

"There is an explanation for that. You see... Snape... he...," Harry wasn't sure how to explain so he just barreled ahead, "he's my father."

Harry was glad they had finished eating because Charlie probably would have choked if there was any food in his mouth. As it was his jaw dropped open and his face turned Weasley red.

"He's... but... James," Charlie stammered.

"James is too, and yes Lily is my mum," Harry paused and felt that confusing pain surface until he pushed it back down. "It's a long story. Can I explain later?"

Charlie just nodded. The older wizard stood silent for a moment, digesting the information, and then nodded his head, "C'mon, we're running late. You can tell me after dinner."

Harry had never worked harder in his life, not even at the Dursleys'. The work at the preserve was exhausting, but exhilarating and fascinating. The handlers that staffed the nursery taught him how to care for newborn dragons on his first day. He remembered Norbert as a newborn and made sure to keep his hands out of biting reach at all times. He couldn't forget how Ron's hand had swollen. Even so he had a couple of close misses and one or two non-misses.

The majority of the work at the preserve was done without magic, as dragons were almost unaffected by the majority of spells. So long as Harry kept his wand hidden no one would find out he was actually a wizard. It was a relief to be treated like a normal person, not the famous, or infamous depending on the public's mercurial mood, Harry Potter. After the first introductions not a soul gave him a second glance. There were no stares at his forehead, no cautious looks expecting him to go crazy at any moment, and best of all, no questions about Voldemort.

At the end of the day Harry was ready to collapse. All his muscles ached, even a few he hadn't known existed before that day. He now understood why Charlie was in such good shape. Years of that work would make anyone look great. Harry had even gotten his first dragon burn. He hadn't known that the drool from the Chilean Diamondscale was acidic. The burn had been healed and his jeans repaired but it left a small shiny scar on his left calf.

The handlers all lived in wizard tents, so they each had a small house to themselves, but ate most of their meals together. After dinner that night Harry lounged in front of Charlie's fire with a mug of hot chocolate, his body melted into the soft sofa cushions. If he never had to move again Harry would be happy.

"So, what's this about Snape Harry?" Charlie asked. "I've managed to wrap my mind around the concept, but I can't figure out how or why?"

"You've had time to think?" Harry looked up in surprise. He realized that he had spent the entire day without thinking about this new thing with Snape, or about Sirius, Umbridge, the Ministry, or the prophecy. He couldn't allow himself to be distracted when he was surrounded by infant dragons that could cut or burn him.

"It takes some time, but you learn how after a while," Charlie grinned.

Harry sighed into his mug, "The how is easy. I mean, it's Snape we're talking about here. He's a Potions Master."

"Okay, so they used some potion," Charlie said. He looked concerned, "What happened Harry? When did you find out?"

Harry grimaced, "Snape didn't know either until right before I woke up, and he was telling me everything when I woke, thinking I was still out. My mum Obliviated him." Charlie looked horrified and Harry drank some of his hot chocolate. "I should probably start at the beginning. I don't know everything, really. I, um, I haven't let him... talk to me. I just..."

"Don't worry about it Harry," Charlie said soothingly. The redhead moved to the seat on the sofa next to Harry's. "I'm sure he understands that you have a lot to think about."

As Charlie was a Weasley, and not Percy, Harry was instantly more relaxed around him than most other people. There was also something about Charlie that made Harry trust him. He nodded and

told Charlie the little he knew about his conception and birth. He told him about the memory charm and discovered that he didn't know how Snape found out about it. That was something he'd have to explore another time.

Charlie snorted when Harry was done, "Everything does happen to you." Harry looked at Charlie in confusion. "The twins didn't know what to do with Ron during your fourth year. They wrote to me for advice. I'm a bit of an empath so everyone in the family comes to me with their problems. It's what makes working with dragons so easy for me. I can sense their emotions, though they're... different than human ones. That was the longest letter I've ever gotten. Fred and George were close to hexing Ron and not removing whatever they did until he apologized. I convinced them to just give him time."

Harry smiled, imagining the combination of hexes that Fred and George would have come up with, "Thanks, although that would have been fun to see. It turned out me almost getting eaten by a dragon did the trick."

Charlie laughed, "I'm sure they could still arrange something if you asked. Those three see you as another brother."

"Do you?" Harry asked curiously. He'd always felt close to the Weasley family, but he wasn't sure if he felt that close.

Charlie shrugged, "I don't know you as well as they do. I know Mum would adopt you if she had anything to say about it, but I guess that's really out of the question now."

Harry blinked. "Yeah," he said in wonder. The future implications of his relationship with Snape hadn't occurred to him, though he would probably still have to go back to the Dursleys. "I have a family, a father. Even Snape can't be as bad as the Dursleys."

"If they're bad compared to Snape I never want to meet them," Charlie said fervently.

Harry gave the redheaded wizard a light smack on the arm, like he would with Ron, "You said yourself Snape has changed. It's weird, though. I don't know how to act around him. No one ever..." Harry swallowed and just forged onward. "Your Mum was the first one to ever hug me... like a parent does. Hermione was the first-ever hug I remember."

Charlie slung an arm across Harry's shoulders and gave him a quick squeeze. Harry leaned against his best friend's older brother and let his mind drift. He was too tired to pull away from the physical contact, or even to really care all that much. He was only vaguely aware when the mug of hot chocolate was removed from his hand.

His sleep was still plagued with nightmares, despite the exhaustion of working with the dragons.

Harry woke out of a vision of Sirius yelling at him to act more like James and save him to a hand brushing back his hair and a deeper voice speaking to him. Harry reached for his glasses but didn't find them. He was disoriented until he recognized the voice.

"Sorry," Harry apologized automatically, cringing slightly.

"Nothing to apologize for Harry," Charlie said in the dark. "I doubt you actually want the nightmares."

"Why don't they just give me Dreamless Sleep or something?" Harry asked desperately.

"It can't be used long-term Harry," Charlie explained. "The side effects get pretty nasty. They tossed around the idea for awhile before deciding it was better for you to work through them."

Harry snorted, "They could have mentioned something to me about it."

"You didn't ask until now," Harry could swear he heard the smile in Charlie's voice.

"I shouldn't have to," Harry complained. The bed squeaked as Charlie stood up. Harry knew he wouldn't be able to fall asleep again easily. He never did after a nightmare. "Stay?" he asked hesitantly.

There was no answer for a moment. Then the bed protested again as Charlie climbed in. He settled down next to Harry and tucked an arm around him. Harry breathed a little easier and nestled against the dragon handler. Charlie's breathing quickly deepened and settled in a regular pattern.

Harry could feel Charlie's heart beating against his back. He felt secure, safe, and drifted back to sleep much more easily than he expected.

They settled into a pattern for the rest of the week. Every day Harry worked in a different part of the preserve. He was surprised when Charlie left him with the other handlers and only checked in once or twice during the day. Harry had expected to be guarded constantly. They switched his wand holster to his right leg so he could take off the jacket, and often his shirt as well, when he was working in the sun. Non-dragon hide clothes didn't make much difference when working with dragons and dragon handlers hated the skinning of dragons for clothing. Dragon claws and fire got through anything else like a hot knife through butter.

Dinner was eaten with the rest of the handlers in a common tent and followed by hot chocolate or tea and talking in front of Charlie's fire. The cot Charlie had conjured for himself while Harry was there was abandoned and Harry fell asleep in Charlie's arms every night. His nightmares were still there, but they weren't nearly as bad and he fell asleep much more quickly afterwards. His scar continued to hurt and he was often aware of Voldemort's mood, but it wasn't bad enough to draw too much attention. Tonks visited after a few days to make sure everything was going well.

Towards the end of the week Harry was getting moody again. They were sending him to Grimmauld Place for the last week before school started and Harry did not want to go. It was easy and refreshing to talk to Charlie. Harry knew he could trust him, and Charlie didn't know Harry very well. He just listened and gave an honest opinion. His words weren't clouded by the overprotective concern Harry was used to or by a preconceived notion of who Harry should be.

"What's wrong Harry?" Charlie asked two nights before Harry was supposed to leave.

"I don't want to leave," Harry admitted, starting to feel anxious. "I can't go to Grimmauld Place again, not so soon. Merlin knows what I'd do to that portrait... or Kreacher," he spat the name out like a bad taste in his mouth.

Charlie flinched, "There's no need to worry about Kreacher Harry. He, um, punished himself for betraying his master."

Harry's eyes widened, "What...?"

"You don't need to know Harry. He's dead and it wasn't pretty," Charlie said darkly. His face relaxed, "We might be able to work something out if you want to stay."

Harry nodded, "Do you think I could write to Dumbledore?"

"Sure," Charlie responded. "I think someone's supposed to pop in again tomorrow to see how things are going anyway. They can deliver your letter."

"Thanks Charlie," Harry whispered, "for everything."

"Hey, I'm just doing what I do best," Charlie's grin reminded Harry of the twins.

Instantly suspicious, Harry asked warily, "What?"

"Taking care of wild animals," Charlie deadpanned.

Harry tackled Charlie and they rolled to the ground in a heap, wrestling and playfully fighting.

"See?" Charlie gasped out. "I was right."

Needless to say, Charlie had much more experience winning wrestling matches and had Harry pinned quickly. Harry's only experience was from being beaten up by Dudley and that didn't involve fighting back. Charlie had showed him a few tricks that week but Harry still couldn't beat the taller, heavier redhead. The practice in fighting had led Harry to feeling more comfortable in the affectionate gestures Charlie used frequently, like mussing his hair or one-armed hugs.

"Are you sure you were a seeker?" Harry asked teasingly. "I thought we were supposed to be lightweights."

"Hey!" Charlie objected. "I just put on a lot of muscle since Hogwarts. I was built perfectly for a seeker."

"Sure," Harry said with every bit of sarcasm he could muster. "I guess I'll just have to take your word for it, and Wood said you could've played for England."

"I could still beat you to the snitch any day," Charlie declared.

"Care to make a bet on that?" Harry grinned.

Charlie deflated and collapsed next to Harry, "Nah, I've seen you fly. I wouldn't want to take money from a child."

Harry smacked Charlie's arm and Charlie smacked back. The hits soon progressed to another wrestling match and something clicked when Charlie almost had Harry pinned. Harry flipped the redhead and used his knees to keep Charlie's legs from moving. His hands held Charlie's arms above his head.

"I am not a child," Harry said firmly, "and I could beat you into the ground any day of the week."

"I know," Charlie said with a grin.

Conflicting thoughts fought in Harry's head. In just one week he had become closer to Charlie than anyone he knew, aside from maybe Ron and Hermione. The two of them just clicked. Charlie was clearly related to the twins, in looks and personality, though he had clearly matured much better than they had. During the week Harry had found himself sneaking looks at Charlie whenever he could, trying to figure the redhead out. Harry bent his arms and leaned forward slightly, willing Charlie to give him some sort of sign.

Charlie lifted his head just off the ground and it was enough to close the distance between them. Harry felt lips touch his and he let go of Charlie's arms. Harry's weight forced Charlie back down and Harry pressed into the kiss. Charlie opened his mouth under Harry's and he explored the offered cavity. Hands pulled at Harry's shirt and it was soon discarded, Charlie's shirt to follow quickly.

Harry had never felt this sensation of flesh against flesh. His only kissing had been the botched attempt at dating Cho. The muscles in his back were kneaded by rough, callused hands. Harry had also never had the problem of his trousers being too restrictive before, as Dudley's hand-me-downs had enough room for at least one more person to crawl in with Harry. He adjusted his hips and felt a similar hardness pressed against him that only served to excite him further.

Charlie rolled Harry onto his back and kissed along his jaw line and down his neck. Harry's hips instinctively pressed up and were met by a pleasant pressure. Harry traced his hands down Charlie's spine and he felt the man shiver against him. His hands found the waistband of Charlie's trousers and traveled beyond to slip inside the back pockets and grab the cheeks. He pulled the man's hips tighter against his.

The moan that vibrated against Harry's throat brought out a moan of his own. Harry took his hands out of the pockets and traced the waistband around to undo Charlie's buttons and then his own. After some awkward struggling, in which Harry's trousers caught on his wand, two thin layers of fabric was all that separated them.

They rolled again so Harry was on top and he inspected Charlie's almost naked body. The man was somewhat stocky, with hard muscle that covered his frame. Several shiny burn scars decorating the sun darkened and freckled skin. Harry traced the scars with his fingers as Charlie's eyes roamed over his form. Harry had many more scars. There was the basilisk bite, quidditch injuries, the dragon and the spider from the Triwizard Tournament, and the mark from Wormtail's knife... and his own. Harry had a few scars with unknown origins, but the majority of the rest of them were the handiwork of Dudley and company.

"Harry... how?" Charlie looked concerned.

Harry silenced him with a kiss, "Later."

Chapter Thirteen

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It was Bill that apparated into the tent the next evening after dinner. He arrived while Charlie was continuing Harry's fighting lessons. They had only occasionally branched into magical combat. From Dudley, Harry had learned how to escape quickly, but not how to fight back. Harry managed to kick Charlie's feet out from under him and pinned him. He got off and held out a hand to help Charlie to his feet, but was pulled down to the ground. Charlie proceeded to tickle Harry, with some kisses added in for good measure, but a loud crack made them jump up to their feet.

"Er, hey Bill," a topless Harry managed. He looked over to see Charlie was bright red and chuckled at the sight.

Bill looked back and forth between them and raised an eyebrow, "Do I even want to know?"

"Probably not. You've got lousy timing big brother," Charlie replied, still red faced.

"I have perfect timing. Would five minutes later have been better?" Bill questioned with a sly smile. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and leaned up against the wall nonchalantly.

"Okay, your timing doesn't suck," Charlie conceded as the red brightened. "What's the latest news from the home front?"

Bill left his wall and sank into the sofa where Charlie and Harry joined him, "Funny you put it that way.."

"What?" Harry asked, all playfulness gone. He slipped his shirt on over his head. He wasn't entirely comfortable with Bill knowing what was going on, or thinking he did, but it could have been worse. Harry and Charlie hadn't even gone beyond heavy petting yet, as Charlie was letting Harry set the pace.

"The attacks have started again. You're kind of young to remember Charlie. Hell I'm a bit young to remember much, but it's just like before," Bill explained. "The Dark Mark is on the front page of the Prophet every morning. A bunch of us have moved into Grimmauld with Remus... Mum, Dad, the twins, Ron, and Hermione are all there. Fleur's back in France to help protect her family. She's apparating back and forth almost daily to keep her job at Gringotts."

Harry jumped up and began pacing like a caged animal, "I shouldn't be here."

"Just where do you think you should be?" Bill asked with the learned patience as the eldest child of seven. He would be a natural father someday. "You're sixteen Harry. You have years of training to go through before you can even think about getting involved."

"Then I should be training!" Harry insisted vehemently. "Instead I'm here playing with dragons and fooling around while people are dying! I'm already involved in this war whether I like it or not."

"Harry, there's nothing you can do about it," Charlie got up and stopped Harry's nervous pacing by placing a calming hand on his back. Harry suspected that part of Charlie's empathy allowed him to transfer emotion, as Harry always calmed under his touch. He could feel his rage fading.

Harry took a deep breath and ran both hands through his hair, "But there is. I can stop him. I'm the one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord."

"Harry?" Charlie asked quietly. Bill was silently examining Harry's face.

"Merlin he hasn't told you," Harry whispered, his face changing from anger to disbelief.

"Who hasn't told us what?" Bill questioned.

"You're both Inner Circle, right?" Bill and Charlie exchanged a glance and nodded. "The prophecy... I have a power Voldemort doesn't have, and the power to defeat him, and..."

Charlie rubbed Harry's back in soothing circles, "You don't have to tell us Harry."

Harry shook his head. Someone he could talk to had to know, and he couldn't bear to tell Ron and Hermione. He repeated the prophecy word for word, "...Neither can live while the other survives."

Charlie's soothing rubbing changed into a fierce hug. Harry returned it, holding onto the second oldest Weasley as tight as he could. A very long conversation followed in which Harry found himself

divulging most of what he had shared with Charlie over the week, and more. Charlie and Bill hadn't known half of what he had done at Hogwarts, despite the involvement of their little brother.

"Damn," Bill whispered in amazement. "Stay here until classes start Harry. Headquarters is a zoo right now anyway. No one there has any spare time and you can't use magic in England unless you're at Hogwarts. Charlie can start your training here. He's a pretty good dueler himself and he can teach you a lot. I'm going back to get some answers from Albus."

Harry fished out the letters he had written before breakfast, asking for another week in Romania and giving his course choices for the year. Remus and Snape had sent the envelope with his O.W.L. scores along with the clothes. Charlie had finally persuaded him to open it after a few days with the dragons and Harry had been shocked by the results. He had a fleeting thought that Snape would now be proud instead of furious with Harry's Potions score and hoped he would accept him in his class.

"This one is for Dumbledore. This is for Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and the twins. Stick around and burn it when they're done reading. I've written things that I wouldn't dare to send by owl. These two are for Remus and Snape. It doesn't matter who gets which one. Please make sure they're all in the house at the time when the letters are read, though," Harry finished with a wicked smile.

Bill nodded, "Revenge by post, got it. You had something to do with this?" Charlie whistled and tried to look innocent. Bill shook his head and smiled, "I swear Fred and George got it all from you."

"Hey, you're the one always playing with curses!" Charlie countered.

The two of them snapped back and forth good-naturedly until Harry hexed them both. Bill took the arm-locker hex off his brother and Charlie returned Bill's nose to its normal shape and size. Bill left retaliation to Charlie and apparated for London.

"Oh, and watch out for the wrath of Molly Weasley," had been his parting remark, "if this ever gets out," he motioned from Charlie to Harry and back again. "She does still see Ron as her baby boy, and no doubt Harry as well."

Once Charlie recovered from the threat of his mother he grinned at Harry and Harry suddenly regretted the hexes, "Should I be looking for a place to hide?"

"Lesson number one, beware all redheads," and he pounced as Harry darted away.

While Bill had been talking to Charlie and Harry a Death Eater meeting had been coming to a close in a strangely adapted cave somewhere off the coast of Northern Norway, though Severus shouldn't have even known that much. Voldemort had essentially carved a palace out of the system of caves with conjured furniture and decorations.

Each prominent Death Eater had been encouraged, a polite way to say ordered, to donate a house-elf to the cause. Severus considered just informing Granger of the situation the house-elves lived in and letting her loose near the Dark Lord. Her fury would be rather amusing to observe and the Dark Lord's initial reaction would be priceless.

They were in the room that Severus had dubbed the Throne Room. The Dark Lord was majestically perched on what could only be called a throne on a dais with the Death Eaters forming three semi-circles below him. Their rank determined their position in the room. Severus was in the foremost and smallest semi-circle, a position considered a great honor, as were all the free Death Eaters who attended the resurrection and several that were broken out of Azkaban. New initiates were in the back of the room.

Of course, the Dark Lord's first actions in setting up the caves had been to make them unplottable and protect them under Fidelius; that trick worked for both sides. Otherwise, Severus could have led a few squads of Aurors to the site, collapsed the entrance, warded the place, and left the bastard to rot. He thanked Merlin for the existence of Occlumency when he heard his name. His thoughts could easily get him killed.

"Severus, is there any further news on the location of the brat?" the Dark Lord questioned.

Severus stepped forward and gave a half bow, "No, my Lord. I visited the Burrow," distaste evident in his tone, "for any sign of the Weasley family. It has been emptied of all essentials and all personal effects. They haven't been living there for at least ten months. I believe they are at Dumbledore's headquarters Master. Arthur Weasley could not afford to move his family on his own," hopefully deflecting any anger towards others with mention of the Order's headquarters.

"Yes, the Black house," the Dark Lord hissed. "Why is it this remains hidden Belletrix?"

"The house-elf has not responded to any summons Master," the borderline-insane woman responded. "No matter how I try I cannot locate the house. It must be under Fidelius, Lord, and my cousin must have drawn up a will that left the house to one of his associates."

"The old fool would not make the same mistake twice," spoke the hiss again. "No doubt Dumbledore himself is the Secret Keeper this time. It shall not matter for long. I will have the Potter boy. But first, it is time for the wizarding world to once again learn the meaning of the word fear," he beckoned his Death Eaters to step closer.

Severus cursed as he entered the foyer of number twelve Grimmauld Place. They still had not managed to remove the portrait of Black's mother and she was shrieking about blood traitors and abominations of the flesh again. He already had a splitting headache, his temper was flaring from the meeting, and he simply refused to put up with that woman any longer. He roughly pushed aside Tonks, who had been trying to wrestle the curtains shut. He pointed his wand at the portrait and uttered a string of Latin words that alone were harmless but linked together could prove deadly. When he was done all that remained of the portrait and curtains were a scorch mark on the wall and a pile of ashes on the floor.

"What was that?" Tonks asked in awe.

"That," Severus snapped, "was why knowledge of the dark arts can prove rather useful and why you should never aggravate me when I have a headache."

The young Auror gulped and nodded before darting towards the kitchen, only to run straight into Albus as he left the room and fall to the floor again. The headmaster saw the look on Severus's face, took in the spot where the portrait once hung, nodded, and returned to the kitchen. Tonks and Severus followed him.

"Not to worry. Severus just took care of an old problem for us," Albus explained to the gathering. There were some uneasy glances in his direction. The wards had probably indicated the use of dark magic in the house. Severus sneered and took a seat. He helped himself to the mulled wine that Molly provided for the meeting and took a mental attendance of the meeting. As with most of the meetings, it was Inner Circle only. The Dark Lord could learn a lot from Dumbledore, but the bastard liked to show off his power and brilliance. Severus drained his wine goblet and poured another. It was another good night to drink himself into oblivion, especially as he knew he wouldn't be summoned again.

"We are just waiting for one more before we begin," Albus said while twirling his beard. "Charlie will obviously not be joining us tonight."

Before Albus was finished speaking Bill Weasley stalked into the room with an entrance worthy of Severus himself. His interest was peaked at the stormy expression on the face of the Weasley who usually exhibited the most restraint of all the redheaded family. A stack of parchment was thrown on the table and Severus recognized Harry's chicken scratch on the top letter.

"Merlin's balls, Albus!" Bill exclaimed to the shock of his parents. "Why didn't you tell us how bloody important Harry is?"

Most of the faces around the table held looks of interest that were directed at Albus. Albus's expression hadn't changed. Severus looked at Bill with a raised eyebrow. The redhead gave him a tight smile and nodded back. Severus would have thought he was seeing things had Bill not just

returned from Romania. The brothers must have had quite a conversation with Harry. Severus returned the nod.

"I assume you are late due to an interesting talk with Harry?" Albus asked.

"Charlie and I came just steps away from having to physically restrain him from coming back here and searching out Voldemort on his own," Bill answered, "and I'm beginning to believe he could do it."

Severus smirked as more than half the room physically reacted when Bill said the Dark Lord's name. Dumbledore and Harry were getting more and more converts every day. Though he would usually be worried if Harry wanted to track down Voldemort it was a reassuring sign that the boy was returning to his usual Gryffindor self.

"He is getting better, then. I would be worried if he reacted to recent events any other way," Albus said calmly. "I must ask you, Bill, to keep the prophecy and any other information Harry shared with you to yourself. It is Harry's place to share these things if he so desires. All I will add to what I have said before is that Harry may be more powerful than any of you suspect. Now, what have you learned Severus?"

"The Dark Lord intends to empty Azkaban and set the dementors loose in wizarding settlements," Severus stated. "He also has new plans for Potter, though he did not share them this evening." Fear gripped the room. Less than half of the people in the room could perform the Patronus Charm and those that could cast the charm might not be able to fight off dozens of dementors.

"Does he have an attack planned?" Albus asked gravely.

Severus grimaced, "Two days."

"Blasted Fudge!" Tonks cursed. "He still insists those filthy creatures are loyal."

"Could we discreetly move the prisoners?" Lupin asked with a faraway look in his eyes. Severus recognized the look. He was planning something. In recent years he had come to appreciate that look rather than dread it.

"You mean for us to orchestrate a break-out ourselves?" Arthur responded.

"Not a break-out, an unauthorized transfer," Lupin explained patiently. He was a natural teacher.

"We move them, not even all of them, just key figures, to a secure location. We may not be able to keep the dementors out of Voldemort's hands but we could keep some of his key supporters. It would be horrible for him to get Malfoy, Lestrangle, and McNair, not to mention some others that are in there now. The Ministry can not hold onto them, so we will."

There were nods all around the room, even though such an action was much more illegal than anything the Order had considered before. Of course, the Ministry was more incompetent than ever before. Severus looked over to Albus, whose eyes were twinkling with determination. It had taken quite some time for Severus to catalogue the different twinkles for different moods. This one showed he approved of Remus's plan. Albus often let meetings run like that. The members would argue something out themselves and then Albus would speak up at last minute.

"Where would we put them?" someone asked.

"There are dozens of places in Britain that could be easily secured," Remus answered with an absent wave of his hand, dismissing the question. "Hell, there are cells beneath this house. Where do you think I transform every month?"

"You... here?" an undignified squeak questioned.

"Oh for Merlin's sake," Severus snapped. "The Wolfsbane Potion makes him perfectly safe. He could transform in the kitchen and hurt no one."

Heads swiveled in his direction. It was very unusual for Severus to defend anyone in the meetings, let alone a former Marauder. The previous year had even seen him and Black holding each other at wand point across the kitchen table on more than one occasion, usually when Harry was

discussed. They would probably write it off as defending his potion skills rather than Lupin, though. Severus scowled at them.

"If you can come up with a solid plan Remus," Albus broke the silence, "have it done by midday tomorrow. Otherwise we will warn Fudge at the last realistic moment. If he thinks he has almost no time in which to act it may urge him into action."

The meeting ended with an atmosphere of unease. Bill handed the letters, save one, to Albus, Remus, and Severus on his way out, extracting a promise from Albus to meet in his office the next day.

Chapter Fourteen

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"Headmaster," Severus read aloud.

"Yes, I am still somewhat upset with you. Yes, I am still angry, and sad, and hurting, but I am doing much better. I have no desire to return to Grimmauld Place now or in the foreseeable future. I cannot help but remember that the house was little more than a prison for my godfather, nearly as much as Azkaban was. I do not wish to experience the pain of seeing the house.

"That having been said I request to remain in my current location until classes begin. I am sure transportation to Hogwarts can be arranged, as transportation to get me here was. If nothing else I am sure I could learn to apparate by then."

Severus coughed, "Who does he think he's kidding?"

"Let me see that. He did not write that," Lupin made a grab for the letter but Severus stared him down and went back to reading aloud.

"I apologize for not having selected my classes for the approaching year sooner. I have chosen to continue with Transfiguration, Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Care of Magical Creatures, and Potions and will add Basic Medical Magic, and perhaps an independent study in non-magical combat if that can be arranged. As you managed to get me an entirely new muggle wardrobe I assume my books and a few sets of robes will not trouble you. Anything else I need can be obtained by owl order once classes start.

"Please give the enclosed photograph to Hagrid. Oh, and tell Remus and Professor Snape not to shoot the messenger. In case they did not share my sentiments - I HATE PORTKEYS!

Sincerely,

Ryan Kelly"

"Huh?" Remus asked.

Albus was chuckling at the head of the kitchen table, "His alias with the dragon handlers I assume."

"Shoot the messenger?" Severus questioned.

"It's a muggle saying," Remus waved it off. "I think it dates back to Roman times and archery."

"Albus, I respectfully request that you remove this curse now!" Severus demanded not-so-respectfully as he intended.

"Patience is a virtue Severus," Albus responded with a chuckle. "It should wear off within a few hours. You really should have explained the situation to him."

"A few hours!" Severus exclaimed. "Albus!" Severus called after the retreating headmaster. Lupin chuckled and Severus glared at him, "I suppose you are accustomed to these things."

A grin was the only response. Thundering steps echoed from the stairs. The younger residents of the house had learned quickly, most likely through attempting to eavesdrop on the meeting, that Mrs. Black's portrait had been incinerated. The shouts could be heard even before the door to the kitchen burst open and a jumble of red heads with one brown head spilled into the room.

"He didn't!" one of the Weasley twins proclaimed from the hallway.

"Merlin help us," Severus complained.

The door opened, "He did! That's five galleons for me Fred!"

Ginny Weasley basked in her victory over the twins. The teenagers treaded cautiously around Severus but felt free to banter with Lupin regarding his embarrassing condition. The twins cautiously picked up the werewolf's letter, which bore the one sentence, 'I HATE PORTKEYS', and began casting various revealing charms to determine exactly how the prank was carried out.

"Brilliant," Fred Weasley breathed. He cast another charm on the parchment. "It looks like Charlie helped a bit."

"Simple genius," George Weasley agreed. "He even used concealment charms to hide that the letters were cursed."

Severus was impressed despite himself with their knowledge of curse detection and identification spells.

"How did you five know about this?" Lupin questioned.

"He sent us a letter, too," Ron Weasley replied. "Er, uh, why are you still here?"

"If we could leave, Mr. Weasley," Severus said in his tone that promised death to those who challenged him, "rest assured that we would have."

"Harry did promise we could see," Fred Weasley pointed out to the others.

"You should have known better Remus Lupin!" Granger scolded vehemently. "The last time Harry was surprised by a Portkey he was taken to a graveyard and tied to a headstone for a Dark Ritual to only barely escape with his life! You are staying exactly the way you are until it wears off."

Severus and Lupin both flinched. They had not considered that incident in planning Harry's departure. Both of them had assumed that he would refuse to go if presented with the option. Albus was right, they did deserve their punishment. In retrospect, they got off easy.

Bill Weasley entered the kitchen again and a flash surprised them all, "Sorry about that," he said, not sounding sorry at all, "but I promised Harry a picture. Payback's a bitch, ain't she?" He sat next to Lupin and vanished the camera to a safe location.

Severus glowered while Lupin laughed, "Harry is a true descendant of the Marauders. I thought the days when I had to check all the mail I received from Potters were over."

The Medusa-like snake hair, mermaid tails, green skin, and flippers in place of arms were ignored by the twins upon hearing that statement. Their eyes widened simultaneously as they gazed at Lupin in awe. It was almost eerie just how identical they were.

"Did you say..."

"...Marauders?"

"Spill it Remus!"

"Don't you mean Moony?" Ron Weasley said smugly.

The twins spun in sync and goggled at their little brother, "You *knew*?"

Ron Weasley and Granger both exploded into laughter and Granger said, "You mean Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs, also known as Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew a.k.a. *Scabbers*, Sirius Black, and James Potter?"

"Harry's father wrote the map?" George Weasley exclaimed.

"We lived with two of the Marauders and no one told us?" Fred Weasley demanded.

"Peter Pettigrew was *Scabbers*?" George continued.

"We were all waiting to see how long it would take you to figure it out," Lupin told them smugly.

"Who else knows?" they both asked, shooting looks of accusation at their little sister.

"I didn't know," Ginny Weasley spoke up with a frown, "but none of you have shown me the map, either."

"Oh honestly," Granger said in exasperation and sat down, "how hard was it? Remus is Moony because of his little trouble with the full moon." Lupin's eyes looked amused at the word 'little'.

"Sirius's animagus form was a dog, hence the nickname Padfoot. Wormtail was for the rat."

"And Prongs?" George Weasley questioned.

"James Potter was also an animagus, stag form," Severus explained to the surprise of the five teenagers.

"Ask Harry if you can see his Patronus sometime," Lupin grinned. "It takes the form of the stag."

"Indeed?" Severus asked before he remembered an incident from three years before, "Ah yes, the quidditch match."

"Professor Snape?"

Severus turned to see Hermione Granger looking extremely nervous, with four more nervous, and somewhat angry, teenagers grouped around her, "Yes?"

"Harry told us, sir," she continued, obviously the spokesperson for the group. "He didn't really explain since it was only a letter. He just said you're his father and that you were memory charmed and that James was still his father, too."

Lupin burst into laughter again and Severus demanded scathingly, "What is so funny?"

"He planned all of this! Not only do they get to see the prank, but they've got you captive for all the interrogation they need. Harry didn't have to explain a thing, just dropped one hint!" Lupin continued laughing.

"Shut it, werewolf, or I may just share a certain incident that James told me about from your third year," Severus threatened.

Lupin immediately sobered and turned to the teens, "As the last true full Marauder all pranking power has been bequeathed to me. Do not even think about asking Severus what he is referring to." Five heads nodded solemnly and turned back to Severus, who inwardly marveled at Lupin's influence over them, "Could you explain, sir?"

Severus smirked, "It all has to do with the origin of the name 'Moony'. Remus Lupin had a crush on this Ravenclaw fifth year, so Black decided to..."

"Not that!" Lupin growled to the amusement of the teens.

"Fine," Severus spat. He turned to his current and former students and used his harshest glare. It was still frightening, or perhaps even more so, with the green skin and snake hair. "I had a four year long affair with James Potter, with the full knowledge and consent of his girlfriend who later became his wife. He and I contributed to a potion that assured Harry would inherit all our genes. Lily cast an appearance charm on her infant to repress any Snape traits, as I had to be obliviated to maintain my role as a spy. Not even the headmaster knew. Interestingly, Harry and I have the same blood type, which neither James nor Lily share with us. I am amazed no one noticed."

Lupin shrugged, "He's never needed a transfusion. Only muggles use those and it seems the Dursleys managed to keep him from bleeding profusely until this year at least."

Severus glowered, "They barely even managed that. Have you seen his scars Lupin?"

"I saw them the same time you did Severus," Lupin said with the same degree of anger.

Severus saw that the four youngest Weasleys and Granger were all in some amount of shock ranging from minor, Granger, to almost catatonic, Ron Weasley. He refrained from laughing. After all, it wasn't every day that your least favorite teacher joked in front of you, actually acted nice, and then admitted to having sex with a close friend's married father.

"I would get them some Pepper-Up if I could Bill," Severus snapped and motioned with his flippers. Bill chuckled and waved his wand. The potions floated in from the amply stocked pantry, "Drink up guys."

Ron Weasley's potion had to be poured down his throat but he was the first to speak after taking them, "Harry doesn't look like Harry? Who does he... what does he...?"

"We only saw him with the charm partially worn off," Severus explained, his headache returning. He was going to have to retaliate after all for having this conversation forced on him. "There is no need to panic. He did not inherit my hair or my nose, which looked fine before it was broken multiple times, at least twice by Black. All we know is that his cheekbones are higher and his hands are slimmer. He might still experience a late growth spurt, but many Potters have been short, and Lily was rather petite."

Severus just barely heard what Bill muttered under his breath, "That's not all he inherited."

"Precisely what do you mean by that Mr. Weasley?" Severus glared at the eldest of the Weasley siblings.

He heard Granger get to her feet and start to herd the younger Weasleys out with considerable difficulty, "I think it's time we left."

"But 'Mione!" Ron Weasley protested.

"Uh, nothing?" the curse breaker tried. Severus just continued to glare. He had yet to meet a Weasley who could lie effectively. "It's not my place. You really should ask Harry."

Bill Weasley blushed furiously under Severus's scrutiny. Understanding dawned on him, "If that brother of yours..."

"OUT!" Granger ordered, her wand drawn. The threat made the four others forget the restrictions on underage wizardry and they ran.

"*Silencio!*" Bill pointed his wand at Severus.

Any further words Severus attempted never made it past his lips. He ranted silently, to the bemusement of the werewolf. Lupin just rested his flippers casually in the table and shook the snake hair out of his face.

"I can assure you Severus," Bill said sternly, "that if, and I stress *if*, your deduction is correct that any interactions were initiated by Harry. Charlie has actually gotten him to open up this week, which is better than any of the rest of us could do. Be very careful Severus. I think Harry is coming around and he might let you get to know him, but the wrong thing out of your mouth could ruin this for you forever. Charlie gave me a copy of the picture Harry sent to Hagrid. He thought you might like to have it."

Bill set the photograph on the table and removed the silencing charm. With a flick of his wrist Bill restored both wizards to their original condition. Severus pulled the picture towards him and saw Harry, disguised but recognizable if you knew him well enough, standing outside an enclosure that held a large dragon. Harry was leaning casually against the barrier and waving at the camera. Severus shoved aside the protective paternal feelings that still felt strange, "The dragon... is that...?" Bill nodded, "Norbert."

"Merlin, Hagrid hatched that thing in his cottage?" Lupin had walked around the table to look at the picture.

"It started out about the size of Ron's owl," Bill chuckled. "Of course, it was the size of a large dog by the time Charlie and his friends flew him away from Hogwarts."

"We didn't smuggle illegal objects until fourth year, at least, and that was just some firewhiskey," Remus shook his head and whispered in awe. "Of course, the others were already studying to become animagi in second year."

Remus left, shaking his head, and Bill sat down to speak to Severus quietly before following the werewolf out of the kitchen, "Don't worry Severus. Dad gave Ron and Harry the talk before they went back for fourth year. Harry's a teenager, but he also has some pretty bad issues to work through. He can't remember being hugged at all until the end of his first year and rarely returns the hugs he does get now. You have to be pretty close to him to even get away with that much. He's not a reincarnation of James."

Severus looked up at Bill in surprise, "How do you know about that?"

"There are very few secrets amongst Gryffindors," Bill said with a smile. "We're lousy liars for the most part, or too trusting, and not to mention horrible gossips. Tales of James Potter's exploits lasted into my time. The rumor mill claims it died down suddenly after his fifth year. Most people think it was because he was trying to win over Lily and she was finally weakening, but I think there was a little more to it. Good night Severus."

Severus, at a loss for words, just watched the eldest of seven siblings walk out of the kitchen. He looked down at the picture again and watched Harry show off a shiny patch of skin on one leg, and then jump out of the way of a jet of fire from the dragon behind him.

"I hope you're watching over him James."

Chapter Fifteen

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On September first Harry was fully packed, including a stack of photographs as mementos of his two-week stint as a dragon handler. Just as his hair had always returned to its normal length when his aunt cut it, Harry had woken to his normal short and messy hair. Charlie had been surprised, and then awed when Harry explained nonchalantly that it was normal, but didn't comment further. Harry had a bag with his shrunken possessions slung over his shoulder as he stood in Charlie's living room and waited.

Even in Romania news of the liberation of the dementors had been heard. Harry had found off-duty dragon handlers nervously practicing their Patronus charms on multiple occasions. He itched to give them pointers but knew he couldn't give himself away. Instead, he talked to Charlie, who passed along Harry's knowledge. To Harry's surprise he found himself planning for the DA, though he still wasn't sure if he wanted to be in charge.

On his last night there the handlers had a roaring party, as only those whose every day work was life risking could, and presented Harry with a parting gift. A tooth from a Hungarian Horntail, Charlie had finagled it so it was the dragon Harry had faced in fourth year, had been infused with a series of protection charms, dyed a deep black red with dragon blood from the same dragon, and was set in a thick, neutral colored, intricately braided necklace that had tiny red and gold beaded accents, barely noticeable. The necklace had an unbreakable charm and once tied around Harry's neck it was charmed so only Harry could remove it.

"What time does this damn thing activate?" Harry held out the snitch shaped Portkey that had carried him to Romania.

"Five more minutes Harry," Charlie answered with a smile, "and I'm going with you remember?"

"Yeah," Harry sighed and then scowled. "I still hate these bloody-disorienting-terminat-tonto..."

Charlie was laughing hysterically and cut off the string of colorful multilingual invectives, "You better watch that mouth at Hogwarts. You could be a match for Fred and George by now."

"Well, fire breathing, clawing, acid drooling, easily irritated giant reptiles bring out the more colorful language in people," Harry protested. "I can't help that I learned how to curse in at least five languages."

Charlie ruffled Harry's short-again hair and hugged him. Harry leaned into the hug and sighed.

"Just because you refuse to get into a relationship with that prophecy hanging over your head like the sword of Damocles doesn't mean you should be a monk at Hogwarts," Charlie said to the younger wizard.

Harry put on a mock shocked expression, "Are you saying I should have indiscriminate pre-marital sex with members of both genders in the abandoned classrooms of Hogwarts? Mr. Weasley, whatever would your mum say?"

Charlie laughed, "She'd disown me for corrupting your sweet innocent mind. Hell, no, just remember that you're allowed to have some fun. Leave slutting around to the Patil sisters. I've heard some not so nice stories about them."

"Tell me about it," Harry rolled his eyes. "You should have seen them with the Beauxbatons boys at the Yule Ball. And my mind hasn't been sweet and innocent for at least a year."

"I think I discovered that," Charlie smirked knowingly.

Harry leaned in and kissed Charlie firmly, "What do you say we give whoever's on the other end of this Portkey the shock of their life?"

"Do you want to risk that if Snape is waiting for us?" Charlie inquired.

Harry felt a shiver run down his spine, "Okay scratch that idea. Ready?"

"Ready," Charlie hefted his own bag and reached out to hold onto the snitch with Harry.

The Portkey brought them to Dumbledore's office, where Dumbledore, Remus, and Snape were waiting for them. Harry and Charlie both fell to the floor in a tangle of limbs and clumsily helped each other stand.

"Seekers," Remus shook his head. "Take them off their brooms and they can barely walk."

"Speaking of brooms...?" Harry prompted the headmaster.

"You will find your Firebolt in your trunk at the foot of your bed. Madam Hooch and Professor Flitwick examined it thoroughly and found no damage whatsoever," Dumbledore assured him and placed a small canvas sack on his desk.

"Not to mention hexes or curses," Harry rolled his eyes at Dumbledore's unchanging smile. He indicated the sack, "What's with the sack?"

Remus grinned wickedly, "Those are Dudley's hand-me-downs. As you no longer need them we thought you might find a satisfactory method of disposal."

Harry's wand was in his hand in an instant. He had been practicing with the holster on his wrist. He levitated the bag to an uncluttered area of the stone floor. *Incendio!* The bag burst into bright blue flame and burned away to a few ashes and a black mark on the floor. *Scourgify!* The black mark and ashes were cleaned away.

"Why thank you Harry," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "The house elves could have cleaned that up."

Harry shrugged, "It makes no sense to summon them and make them do the work that can be accomplished with one word."

Dumbledore and Remus smiled brightly at him. Snape just nodded, but Harry thought he saw a very small upturn of the man's lips. He still didn't know what to make of him. Harry put down his bag and approached the Potions Master.

"If you would like, sir," Harry began, "we can talk later."

Snape looked at him without any malice or even dislike that Harry could sense, "The Hogwarts Express arrives at seven. If you come to my office at four that should give you ample time to get settled and leave enough time for a talk."

Harry nodded and turned to the other occupants of the room, "Is there anything else?"

"Your requested classes have been approved," Dumbledore stated. "Have you made a decision regarding the DA?"

Harry chewed his lower lip, "Who will be the faculty advisor?"

"The Defense Against the Dark Arts professor will act in that capacity," Dumbledore stated.

That hadn't really answered his question. Harry narrowed his eyes and looked pointedly at Dumbledore. The old man just sat in his chair and twinkled at Harry. *Damned, infuriating, crazy, old...* Harry's stream of mental insults was broken off when he noticed Remus was grinning like the cat who got the canary.

"Scheisse! Moony's back?" Harry asked excitedly. Charlie cuffed Harry upside the head as a gentle reminder. "Whoops. Sorry, slip of the tongue, won't happen again."

Snape shot a brief glare behind him to Charlie, "I'm sure it will."

"No swearing in class at least Harry?" Remus requested. "It was all I could do to control Fred and George. I will not go through that again."

"I was excited," Harry defended himself. "Anyway, you're the ones that sent me to Romania. I can't help it if dragon handlers are a bad influence."

"Don't look at me!" Charlie protested. "My mouth's not nearly as bad as Harry's!"

"You're just less creative than I am," Harry protested. He turned back to Dumbledore, "I'll discuss the DA with Hermione. At the very least I will participate. I think that a group of leaders would be better than one, maybe a representative from each house? Is there anything else? I want to take a long bath. Have I mentioned how much I HATE PORTKEYS!"

"I believe we got the message Harry," the headmaster chuckled. "Sixth years start apparition lessons in October. The password to Gryffindor tower is 'Puddleglum.' Be prepared to meet the train when it arrives."

Harry grinned and asked Charlie as they left the office, "Should I hang the merman poster in Gryffindor Tower or in the great hall?"

"The tower...," Charlie replied to the scripted question, "or maybe one in each."

"Harry!" Remus chastised from inside the office.

"I could sell copies to the first-years!" Harry suggested, ignoring Remus.

"Harold James Potter!" Snape bellowed.

Harry almost halted at that. That was the first time he had ever heard his full name, but didn't want to make a scene by reacting. He shook it off quickly and Harry and Charlie ran the rest of the way down the stairs and were breathless by the time they reached Gryffindor Tower. Harry eventually got out the password so the Fat Lady could understand it and they stepped inside.

Charlie looked around, "It hasn't changed a bit."

"I imagine there are a few scorch marks from the twins," Harry leaned against a wall and raised his eyebrows suggestively. "I've got five hours of freedom. Just what will I do to fill the time?"

"Teenagers," Charlie snorted. "Always thinking with their..." He was cut off by a pair of lips on his mouth. "Not that I mind. I thought you wanted a bath."

"After," Harry grinned and divested himself of his shirt to reveal a deep tan that highlighted his collection of scars. "I need to get dirty first. Did you ever wonder exactly how soft the carpet in this common room is?"

Charlie left for Grimmauld Place after a late lunch in Gryffindor Tower courtesy of the house elves. He was staying there a few days before returning to Romania. Harry dressed in his school robes and made a futile attempt at taming his hair, much to the amusement of his mirror, before heading down to Snape's office. Harry knocked and waited patiently. He was a few minutes early.

Snape opened the door and stepped to the side, "Come in Harry."

Harry stepped in and looked around uncomfortably. The last time he had been in that room was when Snape had kicked him out and refused to continue his Occlumency lessons. A lot had happened since then but the surroundings still made Harry anxious. He almost didn't notice when Snape opened another door Harry had never seen before and motioned that Harry should go through.

Whatever Harry had been expecting from Snape's private quarters, it wasn't anything like reality.

The furniture looked comfortable and fairly new. Bookshelves lined the walls. The colors were muted and earthy, though there was very little red. Harry walked into the room and cautiously sat in one of the armchairs in front of the fire. Snape sat across from him.

They just looked at each other awkwardly for a few moments before Snape broke the ice, "I suppose if you have any questions..."

Harry thought hard for a moment. He knew the framework of the story, and wasn't entirely sure if he wanted the details. There were a few things, though, that had been nagging at the back of his mind,

"Did you, um, love my, erm, other father?"

Though his expression did not change pain flashed in Snape's eyes, "Yes, I did, very much. He loved both me and your mother."

Harry nodded, "Um, did you and my mother, ever, er..."

"I have never been interested in women in that way, so no, we never did. I considered Lily a very close friend," Snape replied candidly.

"Do you want to be my father?" Harry asked quietly while looking down at his shoes.

"I will be honest with you Harry," Snape began. Harry steeled himself for disappointment. That voice was associated with verbal lashes and screaming, not amiable conversation and comfort. "If

anyone had asked me that question two months ago I would have been able to say that I no longer hated you. To some degree I identified with what I learned of your childhood, both through your Occlumency lessons and Molly's attempts to get you away from Privet Drive. I would still have answered a fervent 'no,' though.

"When Albus restored my memories it should not have had too much of an influence on that, but with the memories came many feelings, feelings I thought I was incapable of. Love was not an emotion I understood, though I had hate in excessive quantities. Now," Harry looked up, trying to keep the hope out of his eyes, "I would very much like a chance to be a part of your life if you will let me."

Harry nodded and tried to keep himself from crying. There had been many times he had cried on Charlie's shoulder and he didn't want to dissolve into tears just then, "I'd like to try that as well, I think."

"Before we decided you needed to get away from here for some time, Albus added a room to my quarters. While you were in Romania I asked Albus to make it a permanent addition. If you ever feel the need to get away you are welcome here," Snape offered.

"Can I see it?" Harry asked.

Snape led him to a room off the combination living room and library. Harry was shocked when he walked inside. The room looked as though it had been removed from Gryffindor tower and attached to Snape's rooms. The Potions Master looked out of place surrounded by all the crimson and gold. His willingness to have that as a part of his personal space meant more to Harry than any words could.

"Thank you, um," Harry hesitated, "what should I call you?"

"In the presence of other students, any other students, and the professors and Order members I will remain Professor Snape. In private... how you address me is your choice," Snape said calmly, though Harry could sense a nervous energy in the room.

"Is... Father... okay?" Harry ventured, unsure of what to say but feeling that some degree of formality was still necessary.

Snape smiled and the change in the man's features was astonishing. He pulled Harry into a tight, brief hug, so quick that Harry didn't even have a chance to respond. Harry had wondered what on earth James had been thinking until he saw the change that a simple smile worked. The smile faded almost instantly and Snape reapplied his normal passive expression.

"While we are on the subject, you are aware of my role for the Order. It would be a danger to your life as well as mine should I alter my public behavior towards you," Snape said sternly.

"I anticipated that," Harry said, though it still disappointed him a bit. "At the end of last year you pretty much ignored me. Could we keep to that? I work much better without insults and hovering professors."

"That should be agreeable for the most part," there was a knock on the door. "That will be Albus to adjust your charms."

Harry's hand flew to his forehead. As his scar had been prickling constantly and occasionally flaring up with Voldemort's emotions, he had forgotten it was hidden. The headmaster entered Harry's new bedroom and greeted him. Harry turned and acknowledged Dumbledore with a nod.

"Thank you for the room, sir," Harry said.

"You are welcome Harry. After I remove the charm concealing your scar I will have to reapply the charm your mother placed on you. Would you like to see the difference before I do?" Dumbledore offered.

Harry considered for a moment before he nodded and saw Snape flick his wand. A free-standing full-length mirror appeared in the room. The headmaster pointed his wand at Harry and Harry

closed his eyes. He felt his skin tingle, but there was no other sensation. He opened his eyes and looked in the mirror. The reflection startled him.

His face was shaped just a little differently. It was a bit more angular, and the cheekbones were higher. His lips were slightly fuller. He lifted his hand to his mouth and noticed that his overall bone structure was just a bit smaller, more delicate, though his height remained the same. His eyes... he almost gave a cry of dismay but remembered the contacts and removed one. He was glad he still had his mother's eyes. His skin hadn't changed tone at all and he figured that was either from all the sun he got or he hadn't inherited Snape's pale skin.

"I assume someone has my glasses?" Harry said irritably.

Snape held them out sheepishly. Harry took them and removed the other contact. With his glasses back on he looked much more like Harry Potter again. The changes were noticeable, but they weren't enough to make him unrecognizable. Harry cast the charm that hid the marks from detention with Umbridge. A small sigh escaped as he turned back to the headmaster and his father.

"Let's make me Harry Potter again," he said with just a twinge of disappointment.

"The charms do not make you Harry Potter," Dumbledore said. "No matter how you look you will always be Harry Potter."

"I should tell you one more thing Harry," Snape said from across the room. "When Lily was four months pregnant we knew you were male. We decided to name you after a close cousin of mine and your father. You were always going to be Harold James Potter."

Harry closed his eyes and felt the tingle again, "Thank you," he whispered. "Earlier today was the first time... the Dursleys never told me my full name. I was always just 'boy' or 'Potter', and 'Harry' at school."

He left the room quickly, without waiting to see the reaction of his father and the headmaster.

Chapter Sixteen

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The whistle of a steam engine, though the train operated on magic and was one of the few legal enchanted muggle vehicles and had no need for fuel, signaled the arrival of the Hogwarts Express at Hogsmeade Station. Harry was a little regretful that he was not on the train, though he knew his presence would have put the other students in danger. He rode down to the station on the thestral-drawn carriages to meet his fellow returning students.

The crowd made him a bit uneasy, as he had been first alone, then surrounded by wide open spaces all summer. The jostling from other students made him want to pull out his wand and start hexing everyone in sight. He stifled the discomfort just as two blurs raced towards him and tackled him in a fierce hug. For the first time, though tentatively and for only a quick moment, Harry hugged his friends back. Harry guessed that action alone was responsible for Hermione bursting into tears.

"We missed you Harry," she wailed and held him tighter.

"Hey there," Harry squeezed her gently. "You're setting a bad example for the first years. They'll think you're already homesick."

"Prat!" Hermione recovered quickly whacked his arm.

"Hey, I missed you too," Harry responded with a laugh.

"I can't believe you got to spend two weeks with Charlie," Ron grumbled. "I've never been to Romania."

"Ron, I...", Harry swallowed. He had flashbacks to the beginning of the Triwizard Tournament and Ron's jealousy.

Ron grinned at him, "I'm guessing I wouldn't have wanted to be there from what the twins were insinuating."

Harry tried to hit his best friend but Ron leapt away from his swing. Harry chased him up the hill the carriages were waiting on and the two of them ran all the way to the school. Ron's longer legs gave him an advantage, but the redhead was still adjusting to his latest growth spurt and tripping over his own feet. Harry had always been fast and had sharpened his reflexes working with the dragons and training with Charlie and therefore managed to gain on Ron and tackled him before the carriages reached the main entrance.

"Hah, got you!" Harry proclaimed victoriously.

"I surrender, I surrender! They were just joking, I swear. Hey, what's going on here?" Ron demanded jokingly at first then realized their positions. "You shouldn't be able to pin me!"

"Yes Mr. Weasley, what is going on here?" a deep sarcastic voice questioned. "This is hardly how prefects should conduct themselves."

The carriages were just slowing to a halt and Harry stood, pulling Ron up after him. He gave his father a clearly faked innocent look, "I'm not a prefect Professor."

"I know that Potter!" Snape snapped. "Five points from Gryffindor for your insolence. For Merlin's sake, straighten your robes before you enter the school. You look like you've been helping Hagrid tame some new acquisition."

Harry cocked his head to the side, "You mean the first years?"

Snape scowled, spun around, and stalked into the school, but Harry could hear stifled laughter.

Ron looked at Harry, impressed, "What happened to Harry Potter?"

"It's kind of hard to wallow in depression and self-pity with three tons of sharp, fiery, temperamental lizard bearing down on you. After my first burn I learned quickly," Harry winced at the memory. "It wasn't my last either."

The two of them walked into the castle with their arms on each other's shoulders, a far cry from Harry's entrance of the previous year. The loud chatter of reuniting students behind them was uplifting and positive, even in the climate of fear the wizarding world had been plunged into.

The Gryffindors had crowded around Harry almost immediately. The press of people made Harry anxious but he suppressed the feeling. News had spread quickly that Harry Potter wasn't riding the train and a mild panic had swept through the returning students who knew Harry. Harry eventually found himself sitting at the far end of the table, as far from the staff table as he could get. He felt a need to be as close to the doors as he could get.

"Hey Potter," Malfoy called out on his way to the Slytherin table, "normal methods of transportation not good enough for you now?"

"Not at all Malfoy," Harry responded. "I just wanted to give myself a few more hours where I didn't have to see your face or hear your squeaky voice. When are you going to hit puberty?"

Hagrid walked up to the Gryffindor table just then, effectively keeping Malfoy from retaliating. Harry guessed the first-years had been delivered to McGonagall. "I got yer picture 'Arry. Framed it 'n ev'rythin!"

Harry beamed up at Hagrid, "I'll stop in and see it after your first class. I have something else for you, too."

The sorting hat put ten students in Gryffindor. Harry was amazed at how young they looked, "Is it me, or do the first years look like they're only eight or nine?"

"It's only partially you Harry," Hermione whispered back. "But then again, some of the third years are the same height as you."

Before Harry could defend his stature Dumbledore stood and quieted the hall.

"Welcome back home to the hallowed halls of Hogwarts," Professor Dumbledore began his yearly speech at the end of the feast. "There are a few announcements before the new prefects show the first years up to the dorms. Some of our older students may need a refresher on these as well. The Forbidden Forest, especially after the events of last year," Harry winced in memory, "is *strictly* forbidden. Any student caught entering the forest without a professor will be severely punished. I must stress that the forest presents even more danger to wandering students than in previous years.

"Mr. Filch has drawn up a new list of items which are not allowed including, dear me, nearly everything you could purchase from Misters Fred and George Weasley. Should you feel a need to examine the entire list it is posted on Mr. Filch's door, or you could simply check a Weasley Wizarding Wheezes owl order form. A few of our professors are not with us this evening. You will meet, or become reacquainted with, our Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor tomorrow evening or in class, as he is currently indisposed. We are offering a new class this year in Medical Magic. Madam Pomfrey will be instructing you as well as performing her duties in the hospital wing. "As many of you are no doubt aware, the Dark Lord Voldemort," there were flinches all over the hall, "has begun attacking again. I can assure you that the school is perfectly safe. If any students have concerns please feel free to talk to your Head of House, our Head Boy and Girl," Katie Bell and a Ravenclaw boy stood and waved, "or any of our prefects. Now for the singing of our school song, everyone pick a tune... and begin!"

"Who's the new defense teacher?" Ron whispered after rushing through the song.

Hermione 'tutted' from across the table and kept singing.

"Why do you think he's not here tonight Ron?" Harry asked with a sly grin.

"I don't know," Ron grumbled, frustrated at being kept in the dark while his friends teased.

"Look to the skies Ron," Harry prompted and gestured up, sweeping his hand in an arc above him. Several Gryffindors had been listening to the hushed conversation and looked up at the enchanted ceiling. The students began to exit the hall and Ginny started gathering the Gryffindor first years with another fifth year Harry didn't know.

"No way!" Dean Thomas exclaimed excitedly. "He's back?"

"Huh?" Ron was still lost.

Harry nodded and leaned into Ron, "Full moon tonight Ronniekins."

"Yes! Professor Lupin's back!" Seamus yelled out, causing loud excited conversation to break out amongst the older students waiting to leave the hall.

"Honestly Ron," Hermione said with a small smile that countered the disdain in her voice, "and you're a prefect."

The Gryffindor sixth years walked up to Gryffindor Tower together, where Harry gave the password, and they all walked in. They discussed the classes they were taking that year and the potential for their quidditch team as it needed several new players. Katie Bell cornered Harry, Ron, and Ginny and informed them that there would be open tryouts for every position. After the team was chosen, McGonagall wanted them to elect a new captain.

In the dorms the sixth year boys were getting ready for bed. Harry remembered their first night back the year before with a twinge of regret and turned to talk to his dorm-mates, "Guys... I was a major prick last year. I'm sorry."

"I wasna much better me'self," Seamus looked down from where he had pinned up a quidditch poster, ashamed.

"It was a pretty bad year for everyone," Neville said as he climbed under his bed covers, the self-appointed peacemaker of the group. "Let's make a pact. We'll always stick together and never let anything like that happen again."

The guys all nodded and shook on the agreement and Harry felt proud of Neville. A year before the shy boy never would have spoken up like that. At least one good thing had come out of the fiasco at the Ministry.

"I found out last year that I don't really know you guys that well," Dean said, looking over his own posters, a mix of football and quidditch, muggle and magic, to make sure they were straight. His own drawings were interspersed, "except for Seamus."

Neville was, as usual, the first in bed. Harry crawled onto Neville's bed and sat next to him, followed by Seamus. Ron joined them, and Dean dug through his trunk before climbing in and closing the curtains. Neville and Seamus lit their wands and Dean held out the bottle.

"Muggle whiskey?" Ron asked in amazement, not bothering to exert his authority as a prefect. He was probably just as interested as any of them. Harry smiled, not one of them would have made the best prefect.

Dean nodded and grinned, "This could loosen a few tongues. I figure after we get through this we'll know each other pretty well."

Seamus eagerly took the first drink and coughed.

Harry took the second, letting it sit on his tongue for a moment before swallowing, passing the bottle, and commenting, "Ogden's is better."

"Harry! When were you drinking without me?" Ron demanded before taking his first swig and coughing after it burned his throat.

"I spent two weeks with dragon handlers, Ron," Harry rolled his eyes. "They're very good at stress release. They have to be." He grinned, "Their parties are wicked."

The bottle made its way around the circle and they all talked about likes and dislikes, their lives before that day, what classes they were taking now, and the other students in their year. Harry mostly talked about his adventures at Hogwarts, only mentioning the Dursleys a few times, and the time he spent in Romania. Ron had given him a few looks when Harry avoided talking about his relatives or the beginning of his summer. The bottle was half full when Dean changed the conversation.

Neville showed all of them his new wand. His grandmother had taken him to Ollivander's the day after school let out and bragged to everyone she knew about how well he did at the Ministry. He confirmed that Dumbledore had spoken to their guardians, with the exception of the Dursleys of

course, and told them everything that happened. Neville was significantly more confident than he had been the year before and Harry felt there was at least one thing he could be proud of.

"Time to get personal," Dean announced. He looked around at the other boys and smiled wickedly, "Who's lost their virginity?"

Ron almost spit out his whiskey as Harry and Seamus both raised their hands. Harry looked at Seamus and raised an eyebrow, trying to ignore Ron's disbelieving expression.

Seamus smiled proudly and said one word, "Parvati."

All eyes were on Harry and he blushed and mumbled, "The twins weren't joking."

"Argh! No!" Ron yelled and plugged his ears with his fingers, squeezing his eyes shut. "Bad mental image. Harry!"

"Who was it?" Neville asked loudly in whiskey-induced boldness with a short giggle.

Harry opened his mouth to speak but Ron tackled Harry and covered his mouth with a hand. Harry had a wicked thought come into his head and he licked Ron's hand. Their roommates watched in amusement as Ron yelped and leapt away from Harry, falling off the bed in the process. He rubbed his arm as he got back on the bed, scowling, and the others laughed hysterically.

The door to their room opened and Hermione stuck her head in as Harry was saying calmly after the laughter died down, "Different Weasley, different taste."

"What is going on in here?" Hermione demanded. "I could hear Ron all the way down in the common room."

Seamus opened Neville's curtains and poked his head out, "We're just hearing about Harry's sex life, Miss Prefect Ma'am! Care to join us?"

"Have you been drinking?" she asked in a disapproving tone and sniffed the air.

"Aw, Hermione," Harry whined and pouted, "there are no classes tomorrow! Have some fun with us, please!" He batted his eyelashes at her.

There was silence at their door for a while before they heard Hermione step inside and cast a silencing charm. She clambered onto Neville's bed and squeezed between Harry and Ron, "Stop gaping Ron. You look like a fish."

"Perfect prefect Hermione in the boys' dorm after hours," Seamus dramatically put the back of his hand to his forehead. "What is the world coming to?"

Hermione smacked him and shook her head when she saw the three-quarters empty bottle, "It's not the first time I've been in here you dolt. And you can hardly call me perfect after last year, or even after second year. I've broken at least three times the number of rules as you have, never mind all the laws we've broken. So what's going on? What's this about Harry's sex-life? I've already heard about Seamus and Parvati. That girl can't keep her mouth shut."

"Well," Dean explained, "Harry here has slept with a Weasley. We just don't know which one yet."

"You did?" Hermione squeaked, "I thought they were joking. Harry!" She hugged him tightly. "You had quite a summer."

"Great," Seamus complained, "so Hermione and Ron already know but we're still in the dark!"

"It's not that hard to figure out," Hermione picked up the bottle, examined it closely, took a sniff at the mouth, shrugged, and took a drink. She wrinkled her face up, "That stuff is nasty." But she still took another sip.

Harry nodded in agreement, "Already told them Ogden's is better. This does the job, though," he took the bottle from her and drank before passing it to Neville. "Distract Ron for a minute 'Mione. I don't want him to pass out in shock or something." He leaned into the other guys and whispered loudly enough that the point of whispering was defeated, "Charlie."

Neville started coughing, Seamus grinned knowingly, and Dean's eyebrows rose, "Chasing for the other team, Harry?"

Harry shook his head, "Both teams."

"And I thought we had all the girls to ourselves for a minute there," Seamus lamented.

"Hermione!" Harry heard Ron yell.

The four boys who had been talking closely turned to see how Hermione had distracted Ron. Even in the dim light they could see that Ron's face was bright red. Harry looked at Hermione and raised his eyebrows.

"Sweet sixteen and never been kissed," she said sadly and shook her head, "such a pity."

It was nearing early morning when Hermione left the dorm and Harry made sure everyone drank plenty of water. When Seamus tried to just go to bed, tugging against Harry as he pulled him towards the bathroom, Harry asked him if he wanted Professor Snape to see him with a hangover. Seamus shook his head fervently and drank enough water to drown a hippogriff.

When Harry thought everyone was asleep he got up and walked over to the window to look out over the grounds. The sky was clear and the full moon lit the grounds brightly, casting long shadows.

"That you Harry?" Ron mumbled.

"Yeah Ron," Harry answered quietly.

"Are you and Charlie, um...," Ron said with obvious discomfort, "dating?"

Harry shook his head, then remembered that Ron couldn't see him, "No Ron, it's not like that."

There was a long pause, "Sorry I freaked out Harry. You know, I always thought you'd end up with Ginny. I kinda hoped you would... but I don't mind, really."

"Don't worry about it Ron," Harry answered softly. "Get some sleep."

"You should too," Ron insisted.

"Can't," Harry swallowed. He knew that the fear gripping him was irrational but that made it no less real. "I just... it's..."

"You could get some Dreamless Sleep," Ron suggested, trying to be helpful.

"It has some bad side effects if it's used too much," Harry explained. "I can't get dependent on it."

"Can I help?" Ron asked hopefully.

"No Ron, I can't ask you to..."

Ron got out of bed and stood next to his best friend, towering over him, "What Harry?"

"When I had nightmares Charlie would hold me. It was better just knowing he was there, keeping me grounded, safe," Harry wrapped his arms around his chest. He looked down and almost whispered his next words in shame, "I'm afraid to sleep."

Ron put an arm around Harry, "We're all here for you Harry. That's what we all swore tonight."

That morning, not long after they had finally gone to bed, the sixth year Gryffindor boys woke to Harry yelling in his sleep and Ron jumping out of bed to comfort his thrashing friend. While Ron was quieting Harry, Neville told Seamus and Dean what had happened at the Ministry of Magic, the darkness and serious mood more appropriate for the tale than the previous atmosphere of drinking and jokes.

Though he didn't know everything he knew quite a bit, enough to get across the connection Harry had with Sirius Black and the innocence of the alleged murderer. Dean cast a tricky charm on Harry to help him sleep peacefully again and Ron joined the others on Neville's bed again as it was closest to Harry's. This time they left the curtains of both beds open. The four boys whispered so as not to wake Harry and made a second pact. They would not let Harry be alone or ostracized that year, not if they could help it.

Chapter Seventeen

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Severus had been a Death Eater for a full year, one full nightmarish year. It was June of 1979 and James had just completed his crash course in Auror training. He and Lily were to be married in July and the three of them had planned a private binding ceremony for Severus and James. It had been much more difficult for Severus to meet with James, and occasionally with Lily just to talk, than it had been during school. Now that James and Lily had their own house, though, it would be much easier, even though it was because James's parents had been killed.

Severus had been tested for his Potions Mastery and passed. As he had a specialized skill that the Dark Lord needed, Severus rarely had to go on raids, but those he did fueled his nightmares. His two permanent assignments for the Dark Lord were to brew any needed potions and to recruit James Potter. He had already been punished several times for his lack of progress in the latter.

It was after one of those punishments, the day after a failed attack that had the Dark Lord in a particularly vindictive mood, that Severus was lying on the master bed in Potter Manor being treated for injuries by Lily Evans, soon to be Potter. James sat next to him on the bed and brushed Severus's hair back from his forehead as he experienced the shakes that were one of the after-effects of prolonged exposure to the Cruciatus Curse. A few more minutes and there would have been permanent damage to his nervous system.

"You can't go on like this, Sev," James said, for once sitting still and speaking softly, his voice taugth with pain. "He's going to kill you when he realizes you can't, or won't, recruit me."

Severus gritted his teeth against the pain. James was right, but there was nothing Severus could do. He disliked the torture and killing that he was required to participate in, but he had no choice. He had the Dark Mark, and he lived on his uncle's estate, as his uncle controlled the Snape vaults. Even if he could afford to move out, there was no reason the Dark Lord would accept for such a move. With the Mark on his arm there was no one who would hire him that he would want to work for.

"Go to Albus, Sev," Lily pleaded softly, "please, for us."

It had taken most of their sixth year for Severus to see Lily Evans as a friend, and now she was one of only two people he confided in. There were even times when Severus could talk to Lily and not to James. Lily gave Severus a potion he had developed for the aftereffects of Cruciatus, though it wasn't perfected yet.

"He has no reason to trust me," Severus objected, his teeth clenched.

James kissed his lips lightly, applying almost no pressure, "He has reason to trust me. The man has known me since I was in diapers. Lily and I will go with you, Sev. *Please.*"

The quiet desperation in James's eyes was what convinced Severus to finally agree to their pleas. The three of them formulated a plan for approaching Dumbledore. They would only tell the headmaster about the relationship between James and Severus if it became absolutely necessary. When the shaking had mostly subsided and his bruises and cuts were healed Severus apparated to the Shrieking Shack with Lily and James. He slipped on the invisibility cloak and followed the Gryffindors to Albus Dumbledore's office.

Despite the length and depth of their relationship there were still many secrets that James and Severus kept from one another. Severus could not share details about the Death Eater meetings, and James did not tell him what Dumbledore was planning. They were all safer that way. Severus knew about the Order of the Phoenix, but no more than that James and Lily were members. He was not surprised that James knew the password to Dumbledore's office. They rode the circular staircase to the headmaster's office and entered after their knock was answered.

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling, as he stepped from behind his desk and folded James and Lily in a warm hug. They each accepted a lemon drop from him, "James! Lily! I did not expect to see you until tomorrow. What brings you here? Mr. Snape, you may remove James's cloak."

If he were not so nervous Severus would have laughed at the look of astonishment on James's face. He looked like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar, "You could see through it Albus, all that time?"

The twinkle brightened, but the headmaster left the question unanswered.

"We are here for Severus," Lily said firmly, setting the tone for the meeting.

Dumbledore returned to his seat behind his desk and the three young adults sat in the seats usually reserved for teenaged troublemakers. All eyes turned to Severus and he took a deep breath. He decided to get straight to the point and rolled up his left sleeve to expose the Dark Mark tattoo.

All trace of the twinkle vanished from Dumbledore's eyes and he studied Severus with a penetrating gaze, "Why have you chosen to see me Mr. Snape?"

"I do not wish to serve the Dark Lord, sir, and never have," Severus said quietly, feeling like he was fifteen once more. "I do not entirely disagree with his beliefs, but I find his methods," Severus shuddered as he recalled the raid from the evening before, "barbaric. I was more or less forced to join a year ago."

"James?" Dumbledore questioned.

"We're not friends, but I trust him Albus," James said steadily, not truly lying. They were much more than friends. "We came to an understanding during sixth year and have talked many times. This possibility was discussed even then."

The headmaster raised an eyebrow. Severus had never seen him caught by surprise, "I take it the other Marauders are not aware of this understanding." James and Lily shook their heads. "Very well, what do you seek from me Mr. Snape?"

"I – I'm not sure," Severus stumbled. He had not thought this far ahead.

Dumbledore sat back and his gaze considered Severus once more, "You are now a Potions Master, correct?" Severus nodded, wondering if Dumbledore knew what all his former students were doing. "Potions Professor Ayre wishes to retire, though he cannot without a replacement. I can give you two options. You may take asylum in this school, though you would not be able to leave for the duration of the war, or I can admit you into the Order of the Phoenix and you will become our spy. Consider your options carefully. I am sure you have seen how Voldemort deals with spies."

Severus was shocked. Asylum would not bother him, as he would have his own potions lab and ready access to supplies, but he would no longer have James. The Dark Lord frequently complained that he could recruit no one close to Dumbledore or Hogwarts. If he took the position as spy, he would immediately jump to Inner Circle status amongst the Death Eaters, surpassing his uncle's ranking. Discovery would mean a slow and painful death... and he would still have to go on raids...

"The Ministry cannot know," Severus slowly, coming to a decision. "I do not trust them."

"For now the only people who will know will be those in this room," Dumbledore told him. "That may change at a later date, but only with your approval. If you are ever captured by the Ministry I may have to expose you. I will have Professor Ayre owl you regarding the position. Are you familiar with the art of Occlumency?" Severus shook his head. Dumbledore thought for a moment.

"James, Lily, I am sure Minerva would love a visit from you. We will be finished here in an hour or so and from now on Severus, I am Albus, not Headmaster, Professor, or Sir." Albus smiled warmly.

The two former Gryffindors stood and gave Severus reassuring smiles, though he could see the concern and fear behind them. They left the room without another word, and Dumbledore began to explain the practices of Legilimency and Occlumency. His lessons started immediately.

A letter arrived by owl for Severus that evening. His uncle was intrigued to see the Hogwarts crest on the envelope and a greedy, calculating look came into his eye once Severus read the contents.

The letter notified him of the opening and requested that he owl Dumbledore if he was interested to arrange an interview. For the first time, Severus approached the Dark Lord without a summons.

"You are beginning to prove more valuable than even I hoped," the Dark Lord hissed. "How will you convince Dumbledore you can be trusted?"

It was obvious that Dumbledore would check for the Dark Mark before hiring anyone, one of the few on the side of the light who actually knew what to look for. Severus allowed himself a small tight smile, "I will confess first and beg him for asylum, my Lord. The muggle-loving fool believes in second chances. He will believe I have reformed."

The Dark Lord got a rare smile on his face, "Reply to the letter Severus, and obtain the position at Hogwarts. You will be greatly rewarded for this accomplishment. Our closest spy is close to the Potters, but not to Dumbledore himself. As one of his trusted professors, you will achieve that distinction and become one of our greatest assets."

Severus snorted as he lifted his cup of morning tea. The Dark Lord had been too eager to get a Death Eater inside Hogwarts. Only a brief inspection of Severus's intentions, something he would not have noticed before his lesson with Albus that day, was used to make sure he was not lying. A deep scan would have assured Severus's death, but Albus had been certain that would not occur. That first private meeting with the Dark Lord had provided invaluable information to the Order, the existence of the spy with connection to the Potters. It had also indirectly led to the death of James and Lily Potter, as the information had affected their selection of a Secret Keeper and made Black distrustful of Lupin.

Severus looked up from his breakfast and scanned the hall. September first had fallen on a Friday that year, so the students had a full day of freedom before classes began. The fifth year prefects would be giving tours to their first years after breakfast and the grounds would be covered with lounging teenagers. On those years the Heads of House kept careful watch for after-hours parties. The absence of homework and reunion of friends often led to trouble.

The Gryffindor table was oddly quiet for the first morning back. There was plenty of noise there, but one group of students was eating silently. Severus tried to figure out what was wrong with the sixth years while appearing not to pay too much attention to the Gryffindor table. Every other table was showing normal House dynamics.

"They're quiet," Minerva said softly, most likely having noticed Severus's glances.

Severus nodded. Every now and then one of them would shoot a concerned look at Harry and then continue with their breakfast, though none of the boys were eating much.

"If they were Slytherins I'd say they're suffering from particularly bad hangovers," Severus snorted. Minerva raised a single eyebrow at him, "Do you know how much alcohol I've confiscated from Gryffindors? I haven't had to purchase any on my own since I became their Head of House. They do have quite a talent for sneaking out of the castle, and surprisingly good taste for teenagers. I must have written to Molly at least five times on that subject alone. The sum of our correspondence would fill several volumes. Gryffindors may be idealistic and ridiculously brave at times but they are far from being pure innocents." Minerva smirked and Severus knew what was coming before she opened her mouth again, "Leave that to the Hufflepuffs."

"Speaking of Gryffindors sneaking out of the castle, whatever happened to Potter's map?" Severus asked. He made an attempt to ignore that his sixteen year old son was potentially hungover.

Minerva knitted her brow in thought, "I think Albus has it, or has a copy of it at least. Crouch took it during Harry's fourth year but he got it back somehow. Remus said something about expanding its boundaries."

"Loathe though I am to say so, the boy should retain a copy for his own safety," Severus admitted. "If he had known completely how it worked in his fourth year..."

Minerva raised an eyebrow at him. She was still amused when he expressed any sort of parental concerns, "I will mention something to Remus. Harry will be made aware that his is no longer the only copy."

Severus nodded and the two Heads of House continued to watch the Gryffindor table at intervals. Severus made sure to wear a mask of disgust. At one point Ron Weasley looked up from his plate and made eye contact with Severus. The Weasley just nodded and returned to his food. Severus almost cursed aloud. He'd never be able to truly intimidate that group again.

Later that afternoon a knock on his office door surprised Severus out of his last minute curriculum changes. He opened his door to see Weasley and Granger in the corridor. He closed his eyes for a moment and did curse aloud. He fathered one Gryffindor and now they were all trying to spend time with him. Lupin's almost constant presence that summer was bad enough.

"Yes?" he asked with clear irritation.

Granger, unaffected, spoke for both of them, "May we come in, sir?"

Severus stepped back and allowed them in. He closed his door and cast a silencing charm out of habit. There was a tense silence for a moment and Granger nudged Weasley. He glared at her briefly but turned to Severus.

"I – I've been thinking, sir," the redhead said nervously.

Severus couldn't help himself. That boy needed to learn to stop opening himself up to perfect insults so often, "That is indeed a new development. Were you thinking about anything in particular or did you just wish to share the momentous occasion?"

Granger was very obviously trying to hold back laughter at the comment, having no doubt said something similar in the past.

The insult sparked the legendary Gryffindor courage and Weasley glared at him, "Harry told me why he can't take Dreamless Sleep. I was wondering if there's a way to combine a cheering potion or charm with a regular sleeping potion. He's afraid to sleep, sir. Charlie helped, he's an empath somewhat, but he's not here. There's only so much the guys and I can do."

Severus raised his eyebrows, the only visible sign he allowed of his shock, at both the idea and the talent Charlie had. Just a touch of empathy was common, but a recognizable amount was rare, though he should have known, what with the profession Charlie had chosen. The idea from the younger Weasley instantly sent lists of ingredients and their typical reactions to each other racing through his brain. He instantly discarded several possibilities. He summoned some parchment and a quill and jotted down a few notes. Absentmindedly, he motioned for the Gryffindors to sit.

"For the most part cheering charms and potions have a stimulant effect," he explained to two dumbfounded Gryffindor teens. Severus was fully in teacher mode. They had probably expected him to snap at them and kick them out of his office, "That makes combining them with a sleeping draught useless. They also tend to act instantly and dissipate quickly. You would need to find a cheering potion without any stimulants that will not react to the ingredients in a sleeping draught, and figure out a way to release the cheering component over time so it does not wear off before the nightmares come."

Weasley's jaw had dropped open and Granger was looking almost longingly at his bookshelves. She realized he was done talking and ripped her eyes away from the books, "You'll try then, sir?"

"Yes I will," he smirked, "with your help." The look on Weasley's face was priceless. "Miss Granger, your grasp of theory is better than that of any other student here, though you will never hear me admit that in public. I am giving you an open pass to the Restricted Section in the library. Research the possibilities and report your findings back to me on a regular basis. You can attach them to your regular homework. I doubt anyone will wonder at the extra length. See if you can teach your boyfriend here anything in the process. Perhaps the motivation will actually encourage him to learn something. Do not abuse this privilege."

Weasley was blushing bright red and Granger looked as if Christmas had come early. He handed her the pass for Madame Pince and marked it as unlimited for a special project. He doubted that the girl's friends would see much of her that term.

"What are you willing to do for him in the meantime?" Severus asked the youngest Weasley boy. Weasley straightened his posture and looked Severus directly in the eye. Only a few months ago the redhead would have been incapable of such an action. With his last growth spurt they were of equal height. The boy would be taller than Severus before the next school year. Severus cursed the Weasley genes.

"We're staying up in shifts to keep an eye on him. As it is I think he'll only get a few hours of sleep a night. We can each lose an hour or two to give him what he needs."

Severus was reminded distinctly of the Marauders. He knew the Gryffindors, apart from the trio, were not as close as those four had been, but they were equally willing to sacrifice for their friend. Severus gave Ron Weasley an appraising look. He supposed the battle in the Department of Ministries had forced some maturity on the boy, now a young man. He nodded and dismissed the two Gryffindors with a look. It was time to see if the adjustments he made to the Wolfsbane Potion had the desired effect.

Chapter Eighteen

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Harry's nightmares continued, but whenever he woke he found one of his dorm mates there to help him back to sleep. It was strange at first, but he gradually got accustomed to it. Nothing was said in the mornings, and they never asked what the nightmares were about, much to Harry's relief.

Though he only had two weeks in Romania, Harry found sleeping alone difficult. He missed his nightly talks with Charlie. Remus would be more than willing to continue them, Harry knew, but Remus was more of a surrogate parent than a friend. There were some things that he couldn't discuss with him, such as some of the other reasons he missed Romania. Then there was Snape. Harry hadn't talked to him since the day he got back and he wasn't sure what they would talk about anyway. That situation was still unsettled.

The first N.E.W.T. level potions class was on their second day of classes. Harry had Care of Magical Creatures on Monday and was scheduled for Medical Magic but no class was held the first week as Madam Pomfrey had been called away on a family emergency. There was a substitute healer from St. Mungo's on call, but he was not available to teach the class. Each student had been given a topic to research instead in anticipation of Madam Pomfrey's return. Harry had visited with Hagrid on Monday afternoon and gave him the tooth of Norbert's that had fallen out while Harry was in Romania. Hagrid had put the tooth on his mantle in front of the framed picture of Harry and Norbert.

The potions class on Tuesday was the first class that the sixth year Gryffindors, with the exception of Hermione who had Arithmancy on Monday morning, had with Slytherins, none of whom were in Care of Magical Creatures. Malfoy instantly started with his insults aimed at Harry, his parents, Sirius, and his friends. Harry managed to ignore him that day, and the next in Charms and Transfiguration. Every time they passed in the hall Malfoy had something to say and Harry did his best to ignore it. The sorting hat had repeated its message of inter-house cooperation and Hermione had urged Harry and Ron to take it heart.

Harry's non-magical defense independent study was held in the Room of Requirement. The room even provided the instructor. Harry found himself going to the room more often than scheduled as the sessions were excellent for stress release. The first week of classes passed without incident, a far cry from the previous year, but with plenty of homework assigned, much as the year before. The whole common room got a laugh when Hermione came into the room already lecturing Ron and Harry about getting their work done, only to find them working on their potions essay. The look on her face had been priceless and, of course, Colin Creevey had been on hand to immortalize the moment on film. Hermione had taken the teasing of the whole House in good stride. Hermione, Lavender, Dean, and Ron were in the potions class with Harry. The five of them walked down to the dungeons together on the second Tuesday afternoon of the term and arrived there before Snape, which was always a good move.

"I guess the remedial potions worked Potter," Malfoy sneered as the Gryffindors entered the classroom, "or did you use your fame to get into the class?"

"Ignore him," Hermione whispered as Harry felt his temper flare. "He's just trying to get you in trouble."

Harry tried to calm himself as he looked for a seat. He was nearing a breaking point with Malfoy's taunts and insults. Unfortunately, he had to walk by the Slytherin to sit down. As he did, the blond Slytherin grabbed Harry's arm tightly, digging his fingers in, and hissed in his ear, "Remember what I promised Potter. I'll get you for what you did to my father."

The forced physical contact set Harry on edge, but he shrugged him off and hissed back, "I didn't do a fucking thing to your father. It was *his* choices that landed him in Azkaban. *He's* the one that bowed to kiss the hem of Voldemort's robes. He's where he belongs with the other murdering filth."

It was reported that when Voldemort liberated the dementors from Azkaban he freed no prisoners. The public belief was that the Ministry relocated some of them before the attack. Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and knew Hermione was trying to get him to walk away, but he ignored her. Two Slytherins behind Malfoy pulled their wands out and Harry vaguely registered that Ron and Dean had done the same.

"You're going to die Potter, you and all your mudblood and muggle-loving friends," Malfoy threatened.

"Should that scare me?" Harry tilted.

"You'd do very well to be afraid of me. What happened to the mutt could easily happen to you," Malfoy narrowed his eyes.

Harry's temper flared, but he was able to fight it back. Malfoy's insults were nothing he hadn't told himself, and hadn't really changed since first year. Harry surprised the entire class, all of them now watching the confrontation, by taking off his robes and shirt rather than hexing Malfoy. The dragon tooth bounced against his chest when he pulled off his undershirt. He pulled his wand from the holster and began using it to point out the scars that stood out against his sun darkened skin.

"This one is a basilisk bite Malfoy, rather painful and usually quite deadly. I'm pretty sure it hit bone before I killed it. This small mark is from the dagger that Wormtail used to draw my blood for the potion that resurrected Voldemort," everyone except Harry, Ron, and Hermione flinched at the name. "Lucius may have mentioned it to you, as he was groveling in the graveyard on his knees that night. This long mark is from another knife. There's a matching one on my other arm. This on my shoulder is from a Hungarian Horntail that you may remember. The here burn is from an Egyptian Horned Lazuli. This fading one on my side is an example of what could happen when I showed early signs of magic."

Malfoy was staring at Harry with wide eyes. Harry knew that he looked like a war veteran with all his scars showing. Somehow his face had remained unmarked except for the one famous scar, and the words on his hand were carefully concealed. He ignored several of the scars and pointed his wand at his forehead, stepping closer to Malfoy.

"Now pay attention Malfoy, because I'll only say this once," Harry continued to speak clearly and calmly and took a step towards the silent Slytherin. "This one, the famous scar known to the whole wizarding world, is from the killing curse. This is the exact spot the curse hit. Voldemort has tried to kill me five times and every time he failed. So sorry Malfoy, but you're an annoyance at most. You just don't scare me you pathetic little insignificant shit."

There was a loud shuffle as Harry's classmates hurriedly stowed their wands and scrambled to find seats. Snape had entered the classroom. As if nothing had happened Harry slowly turned away from Malfoy and walked calmly to a seat next to Hermione, where someone had put his bag and robes.

"Mr. Potter, this is a potions class not a strip club, although if your potions skills do not improve these other talents may come in handy," the Slytherins snickered. "Put on your clothing and sit down immediately. Stay after class to discuss your detention as you will not waste any more of our time. Now if Mr. Potter is done showing off his pathetic physique perhaps we can have a class." Harry just nodded in response to the detention and added a glare for good measure. He put his robes back on without bothering with his shirt. That was tucked into his bag. The class was entirely a lecture and a four foot essay on truth potions was assigned for the next class. Harry was glad he was sitting next to Hermione. Ron would have been trying to get his attention through the whole lecture.

Harry told his friends to leave without him. He didn't want them to be late to dinner, as he had no idea how long he'd be. After class a seething Snape dragged Harry into his office by the collar of his robes, surprising Harry more than he was willing to admit. He hadn't been manhandled by anyone

in a long time. Harry straightened up in the chair he had been tossed onto and looked blankly at Snape, his mind flashing back to the last Occlumency lesson in the spring.

"What was that display about?" the angry Potions Master demanded.

Harry had no idea what he was dealing with, his father, or the potions professor that punished him simply for breathing. He decided to be safe and keep an emotionless mask while he spoke, "Malfoy was spewing his usual routine about how I'm going to die with all my friends. I figured he talks big, but doesn't really know what happens out there, so I showed him."

"What do you think will happen if Draco Malfoy decides to write home and describes that incident?" Snape asked Harry as he paced his office with long strides.

Harry shrugged, "I don't see what harm can come from it."

"Tell me, were any of the scars you pointed out from the Dursleys?" Harry winced in realization of his slip and nodded. He had never intended to let anyone know about those, but he had told Charlie a little, and now his entire potions class had enough evidence to guess from. "Do you want the Dark Lord to know that the muggles abused you?"

"It's not like he'll care," Harry snorted, getting very uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was taking. The word abuse had never actually been used with Harry before and it struck something vulnerable within. "If anything it will protect them... not like they deserve it."

Snape stopped pacing and looked at Harry coldly, "Or it will show him yet another similarity between Tom Riddle and Harry Potter. Foolish boy!" Harry flinched at the similarity to Uncle Vernon in the exclamation. "Do you realize that you may as well have owled the Dark Lord yourself and told him you attempted suicide? Are you aware of why you were in Hogwarts and not St. Mungo's when you woke up? Your impulsive behavior is going to get you killed. Draco Malfoy is not stupid. Do not underestimate him. I know you have a brain. Start using it!"

Harry felt his impassive mask slipping and clenched his teeth against his anger. He didn't say anything, for fear of infuriating Snape further. He felt like he was dealing with Professor Snape at that point, and his emotions were reacting as if the summer had never happened. Snape resumed his pacing and Harry followed him with narrowed eyes. The professor stopped at his fireplace and threw a handful of Floo powder in.

"Lupin get down here!" Snape yelled.

Harry was reminded of a similar circumstance three years before. Moments later Remus stepped out of the fireplace and dusted himself off. His robes were much nicer now, thanks to Sirius's bequest, "Yes Severus? I was just discussing something with Filius. Oh, hi Harry, I didn't notice you there. What's the problem this time?"

Snape didn't respond to Remus but turned to Harry, "Remove your robe."

Harry jumped out of his chair, "What!"

"You had no problem showing your class," Snape snapped.

Harry stared at the Potions Professor with narrowed eyes and crossed his arms on his chest defiantly. Remus looked back and forth between father and son in confusion. Snape broke the staring contest and stalked over to the door that led to his private quarters. He opened it and waved sharply for Harry and Remus to join him. Remus looked at Harry, shrugged, and motioned for Harry to go first.

Harry refused to sit down. He continued to glare at Snape, only something had changed. Snape was still angry, only it was an anger Harry hadn't seen before and he wasn't sure if it was directed at him. "May I ask what is going on here?" Remus questioned from just inside the door.

Snape's glare snapped from Harry to Remus, "Harry decided to inventory his scars for his class before I arrived today."

Remus stepped towards Harry with a look that Harry definitely recognized, pity, "Harry..."

Harry stepped back as Remus moved forwards again. He felt panic start to rise and he snapped at the two adults, "It was an impulse. I will not have this conversation, not now."

"We will discuss this Harry!" Snape said loudly, almost yelling but not quite.

Harry made his way towards the door out into the corridor where all the staff quarters were located.

"Harry, please stay," Remus pleaded. "Severus, calm down. We can talk rationally."

Harry shook his head. He didn't want them to know. He only told Charlie about Dudley and the dragon handler probably guessed there was more but didn't push. Snape and Remus would push.

They wouldn't let him get away with just a little. He couldn't tell them about being locked in his cupboard for two weeks, only let out for school. He couldn't tell them about what had happened when he pushed Dudley away with his magic and Dudley had hit his head on a table.

Harry tried to open the door but couldn't. He saw that Snape had his wand out and had probably locked the door. Not thinking, Harry pulled out his own wand and pointed it at his two professors. They both looked at him in surprise.

"Harry," Remus held his hands out, away from his wand.

"No," Harry interrupted him and held his hand up. He could feel his magic building inside him, matching his mounting panic. "Unlock the door now."

Remus looked to Snape, who seemed to be fighting to control his emotions. Finally, Snape muttered something and Harry heard a click behind him. He frantically pushed the door open and ran out of the room.

As he left he thought he heard a thump and a voice behind him, "Damn it James."

Harry fled from the teachers' quarters. He raced towards Gryffindor Tower, taking the fastest route he knew. All the other students would be at dinner, so the common room should be empty. There would be no one there to ask him questions. Harry stopped just long enough to give the password and raced up to his room. He climbed onto his bed, closed the curtains, and began casting wards. He cast ward after ward until his knowledge was exhausted. There were probably several silencing and locking wards layered one upon another.

Harry pulled off his robes and trousers, his shirt still in his bag. Sitting on his bed in just his boxer shorts Harry inspected his scars and recalled the stories that accompanied each one. One scar in particular on his right ankle stopped him. He would never fly on a muggle airplane, but if he did the pin in his ankle would set off the metal detectors at the airport.

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A fist collided with Harry's jaw and snapped his head to the side. It hurt, but the six-year-old was more concerned with trying to breath. Dudley was heavy, far too heavy to be sitting on little Harry's chest and pummeling the scared boy. His ears were ringing from repeated blows. Before, Dudley had kneeled, or sat somewhere that didn't have this effect. This time, Harry's lungs were not strong enough to fight the whale of a boy on his ribs.

Harry knew that any second then he would lose consciousness. He wondered in a detached fascination if his face was turning blue like in the cartoons that Dudley watched. Harry scratched at Dudley but was losing strength. He started to panic. What if Dudley didn't move in time?

Then the strangest thing happened. Something pushed out from Harry, something wild and exhilarating, and sent Dudley flying. Dudley screamed as he flew down the hall and landed by a table. His head struck the table and the leg cracked. With a great 'whoosh' air rushed back into Harry lungs. He gasped and turned on his side, only barely registering the sound of his Aunt Petunia's shriek.

The shriek brought Uncle Vernon, though, who ordered Aunt Petunia to call for the paramedics.

Uncle Vernon hauled Harry to his feet, Harry's shirt twisted in his meaty fist.

"What did you do to Dudley you unnatural freak?" Uncle Vernon yelled, spittle raining onto Harry's face.

Harry, still gasping for breath, wasn't given a chance to answer. Uncle Vernon slammed Harry to the ground at the top of the stairs and Harry fell. He heard a sickening crack accompanied by a flare of nauseating pain when he landed at the bottom. It was too much and Harry cried out, swimming in and out of consciousness. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had a rushed conversation. Before the ambulance arrived Dudley and the table were moved to the bottom the stairs.

It was a simple explanation. The boys, boys will be boys you know, were fighting and both fell down the stairs. They were ever so concerned for their poor son and nephew... until everyone got back home. The Dursleys' act had been so convincing that the police and child services were never consulted, even with the clothes Harry wore and his obvious underweight frame.

Harry was shut in his cupboard for three weeks, though it wasn't like he could move much as it was. The yelling over the cost of his surgery lasted hours even if it was almost entirely covered by insurance. It was summer, so there were no teachers to ask questions about the bruises and broken ankle. Harry would have been fine. He had been through worse. He had been yelled at before. He had been locked up before. What still made him shiver in fear ten years later was the remembered sound of Uncle Vernon flushing the pain pills away and laughing.

-oOo-

"Harry!" a frantic voice yelled, snapping him out of his daze.

They must have gotten through some of the wards if he heard them. Harry quickly threw some of his clothes back on and crawled under his blankets. He could feel the tingle of the wards falling one by one and feigned sleep. After what felt like an eternity he was roused by hands shaking him.

"Harry! You scared us! What were you thinking?" Hermione's panic was coming through clearly.

Harry sat up and blinked his eyes in the bright light coming in his open bed curtains, "Sorry 'Mione. I just needed some time alone and I fell asleep."

"Where did you learn that many wards?" Seamus asked in wonder.

"Remus and...", he swallowed and looked around, "books from last Christmas."

"Did you have to use them all, mate?" Ron said with a hint of amusement.

"Sorry," Harry said sheepishly. "I wasn't really thinking."

"When's your detention?" Dean questioned.

"Harry has detention already?" Neville asked the group in general. "Again?"

Harry shrugged, "We never got that far. We kind of had a fight and I ran out."

"Empty those pockets, guys," Ron ordered. The sixth year Gryffindor boys started pulling shrunken items of food out of their pockets and enlarging them. "You missed dinner Harry, so we brought dinner to you."

"Thanks, but I'm not really hungry," Harry said quietly.

Hermione glared at him until he picked up a sandwich and began eating. It was all part of the grand 'We'll Take Care of Harry' conspiracy of the sixth year Gryffindor boys and one girl. Their intention was to eventually get the whole tower involved. The other boys joined Harry for an impromptu feast on his bed.

"Hey Harry, let me see that necklace!" Dean requested as he started on a sandwich.

Harry pulled it out and everyone leaned in for a close look. Hermione gasped, "Is that from your Hungarian Horntail?"

"Yep," he replied, fingering the dragon tooth fondly. "It's from Prudence."

"Prudence?" Neville asked as everyone snickered.

"Hey!" Harry replied, sounding offended. "I'm not the one that names them!"

The most embarrassing reaction to his display in potions class had come the next day in the common room, though, when Lavender had asked Harry, loudly, to take his shirt off again. The immediate interest of every girl there, and the quick preparation of Colin's camera, had Harry running for safety. Ron teased him about his new popularity mercilessly.

Chapter Nineteen

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After unlocking the door Severus dropped his wand, collapsed into a chair, and his head fell into his hands, "Damn it James. I don't know how to be a father."

Lupin sat in a chair across from him, "What was the first thing you said to Harry after class?"

Severus left his head in his hands. He had tortured and killed and described the acts calmly to the Order in his reports on Death Eater activities. Now, sitting with a werewolf after his son had fled the room, Severus was ashamed of his actions.

"I asked what he had been doing when I arrived in the classroom," Severus answered.

"Did you sit down with him and ask nicely, or did you treat him like you had caught him breaking into your private potions stores after hours?" Lupin asked with an impatient edge on his voice.

Severus leaned back and rubbed his temples with his fingers. His headache was becoming a permanent fixture, damn Gryffindors, "I physically dragged him into my office and snapped at him." Lupin groaned, "Harry was on the defensive when I arrived, and probably was from the moment you touched him. Whenever you deal with him you have to remember how we *assume* the Dursleys treated him, seeing as he still won't talk to anyone about it, and consider your own history with him. If you touch him in anger you will get nowhere and possibly trigger a panic attack. Whenever you yell, or snap, or generally act like your usual lovely caustic self he will feel like he has for the past five years around you."

"Do I go after him?" Severus asked, wishing desperately that he did not have to turn to Lupin for help, though it was slightly better than the twinkling, useless ramblings, and vague smiles from Albus.

"In *this* castle?" Lupin replied, smiling now, "Only if you want to spend months searching. He's the son of a Marauder, and he had the Map for at least three years, and on top of that he was close to Fred and George. He probably knows more passages and rooms in this building than you do. I'm sure that Albus and I are the only staff members that know the castle better than him."

Severus stood and started pacing again in frustration. He was feeling helpless, something that had not happened since his trial fourteen years ago when his own life hung in the balance, "Wonderful. So if he's gone off to hurt himself again there's nothing we can do about it."

"I don't think Harry will try that right now," Lupin said with a sigh, and then grinned in a way he hadn't in a long time. "Besides, I discovered an interesting ward in the castle's papers."

Severus raised an eyebrow in a silent probe to continue. Lupin had been pouring over the castle's many sets of blueprints and warding papers for weeks to create an even more detailed and sophisticated Marauder's Map. The only member of the staff that had seen his work so far was Albus.

"No student can engage in self-inflicted harm or cause permanent harm to themselves or others on the castle grounds," the werewolf was looking very proud of himself. "It was added in 1577 after a troubled student jumped off the Astronomy Tower. The Charms Professor at the time had known the student very well and designed the ward in memory of him. Tom Riddle got around the ward with a loophole. The basilisk was the one causing the injury, not him."

"That is some comfort at least," Severus stopped pacing.

"Come to my office," Lupin offered. "We can at least find out where he went. He knows everyone is at dinner, so he's probably either in Gryffindor Tower or maybe the Room of Requirement."

"The what?" Severus looked at the Marauder in disbelief.

"Ask Harry some more about it one day," Lupin suggested as they went into Severus's office to Floo to Lupin's office. "It's a strange room and it was very useful last year for the DA. I only heard what the twins know about it, which isn't nearly as much as Harry does. They said something about a

janitor's closet and a room full of chamber pots. I wasn't really paying attention to much of anything or anyone then. *Wolf's Den!*"

Severus grumbled about inane names and sneered in distaste as he called out Lupin's name for his office. He stepped into the room, slightly larger than the last time he had seen it, and saw Lupin hunched over a large table that stood just below chest high and was covered with large sheets of parchment. Several rolled up pieces leaned against the table's supports. He was waving his wand over the top sheet and beckoned Severus over with his other hand.

The parchment was much larger than the Marauder's Map, but looked almost identical otherwise. The title at the top called it Moony's Map. As Lupin's wand moved across the parchment the map scrolled. Gryffindor Tower came into view and there was one blue dot there. Lupin tapped the dot and muttered something. The map zoomed in on the dot and showed the Sixth Year Boys' Dormitory, with a dot labeled Harry Potter in his bed, also labeled. The dot shifted slightly every few seconds.

"See?" Lupin said. "He's in bed, and he's fine. If he was seriously injured the dot would be red. If he was under Imperious, or using Polyjuice, or something along those lines, the dot would be flashing green."

Severus was impressed. He looked at the werewolf in a new light. He knew the quiet man had been the reasonable Marauder, the anchor of the group, but hadn't known how intelligent he was. James and Black had always gotten excellent grades and didn't hesitate to advertise the fact. Lupin never shared his marks with anyone but Severus remembered he was always near the top of their class if not at the very top.

The werewolf was smiling, "I did almost all the research for the original Map. It was how the others distracted me while they were studying to become animagi. I wanted to find a way to tap into the castle's inherent magic then, but I didn't have the access to all this," he gestured at the stacks and rolls of parchments.

"Though I think I still did to some extent. This map is linked directly to the castle's wards and its... thoughts I guess is probably the closest world. The castle doesn't actually think, at least not like you and I do, but it's aware. I think Albus can communicate with it to a degree but I can't get a straight answer out of him."

Severus watched as Lupin made the map zoom back out to show the castle as a whole, and then zoom in on one of the stair halls. The stairs on the map changed as the stairs in the hall did.

"How long have you been working on this?" Severus asked in awe.

"I've been tossing the idea around since we made the first Map," he grinned. "I have some notes I started then somewhere around here. I didn't actually start making this one until three years ago. I had to start from scratch as I didn't have the original Map or these papers and all my notes were... in storage. You almost took it from Harry, but I couldn't part him from it permanently. I confiscated it from him so I could keep an eye out for Sirius and gave it back at the end of the year. While I had it I was able to start recreating the process, as we charmed the map so it couldn't be copied."

Severus snorted, "So that was the map? James never actually showed it to me. Why am I not surprised? Where is it now?"

"I slipped it back into Harry's trunk before he got back from Romania," Lupin was still grinning like an idiot. "I could have asked to use it, but then I wouldn't be much of a Marauder. I told Hermione I had made another Map. She'll be sure to pass it along the instant either of the other two shows sign of sneaking around. Hermione takes her role as a Prefect very seriously, so long as it doesn't interfere with keeping Harry safe or thwarting Voldemort."

Severus shook his head, "You must be channeling Black. Only he would see tricking a group of teenagers as a virtue."

"I may have been quiet, but I was always a Marauder. We still have time for dinner," Lupin prompted. The glint in the werewolf's eye reminded Severus vaguely of James and he wondered, not for the first time, just how close the four boys had been.

Severus grunted and walked out of the office, the werewolf following close behind. They made it to the great hall for the end of dinner and managed to get a quick meal. Albus raised an eyebrow at their late arrival, no doubt having already taken note of Harry's absence from the meal. Lupin leaned over to explain while Severus glowered at the hall. As the last students were leaving, Severus looked up to see a pair of Gryffindors approaching him yet again.

"Professor Snape?" He groaned inwardly. Could he spend ten minutes without Gryffindors? If James and Lily were watching him they must have been laughing their heads off.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" Severus prompted in a tone that clearly stated he had no interest in talking to the girl.

"I was wondering if you could answer a question we had regarding the essay you assigned today," she said in a clear voice.

"Very well," Severus grumbled.

The girl took a few steps closer and put a piece of parchment on the table. She leaned in as if pointing out something out on the paper and spoke quietly, "Do you know where Harry is, sir?"

"Lupin just checked his map," Severus replied, glad that girl had at least thought to disguise the conversation. "Harry was in his bed as of fifteen minutes ago. He is most likely not in a good mood. If you are planning on sneaking food out of here at least be discreet about it."

Granger smiled mischievously. The girl had spent too much time with Weasleys, though if the potential for mischief wasn't there she would have been a Ravenclaw, "Already done, sir."

"If that will be all Miss Granger," Severus spoke in an exasperated tone, "I am sure you are suffering from library withdrawal and I have work to attend to."

"Thank you Professor," Granger said respectfully as she tucked her class notes back in her bag and headed to the waiting Gryffindors, the Weasley boy shadowing her. She left one paper behind and Severus saw it had notes on various calming potions.

Lupin leaned over, "Harry is in good hands Severus. Hermione has never let him down."

"Weasley has," Severus snorted and glared at the retreating Gryffindors.

"Ron learned his lesson and then some Severus," Lupin said in a stern tone. "He got a taste of what Harry goes through at the Ministry, was badly injured himself, and he almost lost his best friend not long after. Most of us still don't know what the brains did to him. Ron is determined to stick by Harry through the end, and he doesn't even know what the prophecy says. He still has a fiery temper, but where Harry is concerned he will control it. No matter what it is Ron will be there."

"He came up with a pretty good idea," Severus admitted. "It might actually help."

Lupin looked at Severus in interest. Severus saw that Albus was listening in as well. The headmaster always managed to find the interesting conversations as though he could sense them. "I'm looking into combining a cheering potion and sleeping potion to help with chronic nightmares," Severus told them. He passed the piece of parchment to them. "I assigned Granger and Weasley to research it in their spare time."

Lupin and Albus both looked impressed. "Molly will be glad to hear that Ron is taking his studies more seriously," Albus commented while looking over the paper. "That boy may break out from under his brothers' shadows yet."

They were the last to leave the hall and the doors closed behind them of their own accord. Severus thought of Lupin's comment that the castle was aware. He had never really thought of it before, having been raised in magical buildings. Albus had always spoken of the castle as though it was alive, but Severus had just written it off as another of the headmaster's eccentricities.

"Damn!" he exclaimed as they were about to part ways to make for their respective offices. "I must leave briefly Albus. I will return shortly."

The headmaster smiled at him, though the twinkle was replaced by concern, "Very well. Remus will substitute as Head of Slytherin House in your absence. Let him know when you return."

Severus nodded and left for the edge of the wards so he could apparate to the Dark Lord. He arrived at the entrance to the caves and walked in past the guards. The fallout of the Azkaban raid had left several Death Eaters incapacitated and depleted the supply of healing potions kept in the headquarters. Severus had replaced most of the potions, and had several more complicated ones brewing in his lab.

He bowed before the throne and backed up three carefully measured steps before raising his head, "Yes, my Lord?"

"Our move against Harry Potter and the muggle-loving old fool will begin soon. The first step is for you to gain Potter's trust," the Dark Lord hissed. "I trust you will be able to overcome the animosity you hold for the boy's father?"

Severus bowed his head fractionally. The Dark Lord had *no* idea, "Yes, Master. I live to serve. Do you wish me to befriend the boy?"

Severus was fishing for details. The more detailed his instructions, the easier it would be to figure out the purpose behind them.

"If that is what it takes Severus," the Dark Lord allowed. "You are to gain his trust at any cost. With his godfather gone he is vulnerable."

"The Slytherin students may present an obstacle to your goal, Master," Severus observed. "Potter is a horrible actor. He may be able to fool his fellow Gryffindors, but my Slytherins are not deceived by him." It might even be possible to find out if any of the students were Marked yet.

"Do not worry about your House, Severus," the Dark Lord assured him. "They will be informed that your actions are at my command. You will receive no trouble from them. Remember to remind me if any of them step out of line."

Severus nodded, "Yes, my Lord." He had ongoing orders to keep an eye out for potential followers in his house. He reported only those that would already seek out the Dark Lord without any assistance.

"The Ministry did not remove the prisoners from Azkaban Severus," the Dark Lord began in a very dangerous tone. "Have you heard anything concerning their whereabouts?"

The Order had eventually decided on some cells deep below the Ministry itself that had apparently been forgotten by the Ministry. Dumbledore was probably one of three or four people in the world that knew the lower levels of the Ministry, far beneath the courtrooms, were there, at least until he shared the information with the Order. The prisoners were contained by some very odd ancient spells that Albus had woven about the rooms. They made it impossible for wizard's magic to be performed within. Dobby the house-elf was directed to watch and feed them, a particular insult to Lucius Malfoy.

"I have heard no word of them, Master. Do you suspect the Order is involved?" Severus asked.

"I do not suspect Severus. There is no other explanation. We need an informant Severus. Wormtail has provided us with a list of members from the original Order," the Dark Lord summoned a piece of parchment for Severus. "Keep a watch for any of these people or their associates. Those that Belletrix recognized at the Ministry are there as well."

Severus glanced over the list of names. There were many names missing, both original and current members. Of course, Wormtail had not been Inner Circle and so had not known the name of every member. Even the members of the Inner Circle didn't know everyone Albus had working for him. It was safer for everyone that way.

"I am at your command, my Lord," Severus bowed and waited for further orders.

"That is all Severus," a skeletal hand waved him away. "Go back to your students before the old fool misses you."

Severus bowed deeply and backed out of the room. He was pleased to have escaped without punishment of any sort. As soon as he was out of sight of the Dark Lord he turned and strode towards the potions lab to check on his potions. He heard screams behind him and thanked Merlin once again that he had avoided the Dark Lord's wrath.

Several more healing potions were bottled and stored before Severus returned to Hogwarts. He was surprised to meet Lupin at the gates to the grounds looking anxious.

"What is it?" Severus demanded immediately as they headed towards the castle at a quick pace.

"I think the connection is growing stronger," Lupin said wearily. "Neville came for Albus and me. Ron had checked the map and knew you weren't here. Harry has started screaming in his sleep again. Albus checked his defenses, and they're firmly in place."

Severus winced, "I was afraid this might happen. Occlumency can only block so much. My own shields do not alter the affects of the Dark Mark at all. Harry's scar represents some sort of bond with the Dark Lord. So long as the bond is in place the Dark Lord will continue to effect him to some extent."

They got to Gryffindor Tower as quickly as they could, taking several passages Severus had never even seen before. No sounds out of the ordinary were heard until they entered the dorm room of the sixth year boys. One of them had erected a silencing shield to keep the rest of their House undisturbed.

Harry was thrashing in his bed and his forehead was beading with sweat. Minerva and Albus were on either side of his bed.

"Poppy?" Severus asked.

"She is still away," Albus replied. "We cannot trust her substitute with this."

"What has been tried?" Severus questioned.

"We can normally calm him down without magic, sir," Weasley said, his face paler than usual, "but it wasn't working so Neville and Seamus went to get the Professors."

"We attempted cheering charms and relaxation charms Severus," Albus added, his face drawn.

Severus pulled out several vials of potions from the special pockets inside his robes. He ordered the students to hold Harry still and one of them took hold of each limb. Severus nodded to Albus and the headmaster tilted Harry's head back and held it in place. Between screams, when the boy was gasping for breath, Severus poured potions down his throat.

The first was a potion designed specifically for the after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse, a recipe Severus had perfected in his early days as a spy. That was followed by as heavy a dose of Dreamless Sleep as Severus was willing to risk. It was enough to knock out a full-grown centaur. Harry stilled almost instantly.

"He can be moved now," Severus said tiredly. The room was eerily quiet.

Chapter Twenty

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Harry woke to a splitting headache originating at his scar in a room that was unfamiliar yet familiar. He reached for his glasses and found them on a nightstand. He blinked and took in his surroundings. His was the only full bed in the room. Both Ron and Remus were sleeping on what looked like conjured cots. Snape was sitting in a chair next to the bed and looked like he had fallen asleep against his will.

It wasn't the first time Harry had felt pain through his connection with Voldemort, but he was usually awake when it happened and it wasn't as bad then. At the dragon preserve he had told the other handlers it was chronic headaches and they had just kept an eye out for the dragons whenever Harry clutched his head in pain.

At the Dursleys he had woken screaming in pain more than once. He suspected that when he had locked the door he had also set a silencing ward of some sort as to his knowledge the Dursleys hadn't been disturbed. This was the first time it had happened while he slept since classes started. It was yet another reason on the list of why Harry didn't want to, or couldn't, sleep.

Over the past few weeks the strong surges had been occurring with increasing frequency. A few times Harry had been forced to stop in the corridor on the way to class to focus or pause in his note taking or practicals. Each time one of his friends would stop with him and distract the other students and Hermione was much more willing to share her notes than in previous years.

He saw his wand on the bedside table and flicked it to find out what time it was. It was nowhere near time for breakfast and he didn't want to wake anyone so Harry just sat back in his bed and tried to keep his mind blank. Sometimes it helped with the pain.

"How long have you been awake?" a scratchy voice questioned him.

Harry blinked and reminded himself of where he was. He flicked his wand again, "About an hour." Harry turned his head as little as possible to see Snape blinking the sleep out of his eyes. The man reached out a hand and touched his wrist to Harry's forehead. The wrist was cool to the touch and Harry closed his eyes. The coolness felt wonderful.

"No fever," Snape mumbled and yawned. "How often has this been happening?"

"A few times while I slept this summer... I think," Harry answered. "I'm usually awake when it happens and it's not nearly as bad then."

"This is why you haven't been sleeping much?" Snape asked in a low, calm tone.

Ron would have reported his sleeping patterns, but Harry found he didn't really care all that much. His friends wouldn't do these things if they didn't care he reminded himself. Harry grumbled, "One of the many reasons."

Harry rolled his head back and kept his eyes closed. The hand moved from his forehead to his shoulder, "What are the reasons, Harry?"

"Nightmares, this, just plain insomnia now..." Harry trailed off.

"A sleeping draught..."

"No!" Harry cut Snape off. "I don't want it. I'm fine." Harry was more afraid of getting trapped in one of the nightmares than of losing sleep.

"You are not fine," Snape said firmly. "The headmaster, your Head of House, Lupin, and I were all brought to your room last night. Your friends have been staying awake in shifts to make sure you get your sleep."

Harry felt both a deep sense of gratitude and extreme guilt, "I should be moved. They shouldn't lose sleep for me."

Snape sat on the bed and gently turned Harry's head to look at him, "They choose this because they care about you. You are not responsible for other people's choices. Black went to the Ministry because he was sick of Grimmauld Place, he felt a need to join the fight, but mostly because he

loved you. By claiming responsibility for his actions and death you cheapen his love for you. It is not your fault that he died."

"It is my fault," Harry insisted weakly. "If I had just listened to you..."

"It might not... probably would not have helped," Snape admitted with a sigh. Harry's emotions were ragged and confused. Snape was being kind and understanding now and Harry didn't know how to react.

"I never practiced," Harry felt tears approaching and was too tired to hold them back. "I wanted those dreams. I needed to know what was behind the door."

"Are you sure that was you?" Snape asked softly, keeping Harry's eyes locked on his.

"No! I don't know if any of it was me! He was there all year and no one helped me!" Harry cried out as the tears broke through and poured down his face. "The lessons only left me exhausted and more open than before. I can still feel him and nothing I can do will stop it!"

Harry accepted the hug from Snape without reservation, his emotions so frayed his need for contact outweighed his distaste. He cried himself dry while his father smoothed back his hair and whispered assurances. When Harry was out of tears, and all he could do was draw hitching breaths and sniff, he extracted himself from Snape's arms and settled back on his pillows.

"You may not be able to stop it Harry, but we will find a way," Snape said firmly.

Harry nodded and looked down at the cots in the room. Remus and Ron were still sleeping soundly. Ron let out a rumbling snore and turned over. The familiarity helped bring Harry out of his distraught state.

"Does anything wake them?" Snape asked in wonderment.

Harry grinned and fingered his wand, "Oh, I know one thing that does."

Snape raised an eyebrow and looked at his son, seeing James in the grin, "Indeed?"

"It is about time they were getting up. Shall I?" Harry asked, feeling a bit of mischief.

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," Snape smirked.

Harry raised his wand and pointed it above the cots. He brought it down quickly and said something under his breath. Remus and Ron both jolted into a sitting position and shivered.

Harry smirked at Snape, "Ice water hex. It gives the feeling without the victim getting wet."

"Did Siri have to teach you *that* one?" Remus grumbled as he felt around for his wand which he found under his cot.

Ron looked at Harry and Snape sitting together on the bed, and turned to Remus, who was casting a warming charm on the redhead, "Harry and Snape collaborating? I think the world was safer when they hated each other. I'll get you for that one Harry Potter."

Harry just laughed in response while Snape summoned a house-elf to get robes and their books and bags for the day for Harry and Ron. They took turns grabbing quick showers and throwing on their clothes before they were ready to head down to breakfast.

"Harry," Harry turned in the portrait hole, one leg in the corridor, and looked back to his father, "I want you back here after classes, and bring your sidekicks with you."

Harry shot a questioning look at Ron, who was waiting in the corridor for Harry. The redhead shrugged and Harry nodded at Snape.

"What was that about?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged, "We'll find out after class."

A large group of Gryffindors was waiting anxiously for Harry and Ron to get to the great hall for breakfast. It appeared that the entire quidditch team, backups included, had been recruited for the 'Take Care of Harry Campaign'. As soon as they walked in Hermione leapt up and hugged Harry tightly. She released him quickly enough that he didn't have to respond to the hug and was replaced by Ginny. And then, much to Harry's surprise, by Lavender and Parvati.

"Eww, I'm going to be sick, Gryffindor love fest, who would actually want to touch that filth," Malfoy exclaimed as he entered the hall and walked past them.

Harry almost retorted but Hermione beat him to it, "Did you hear something Harry?"

Harry saw her sly grin and mimicked it, "Why yes Hermione I did. It sounded like... squeaking? Is there a ferret in here Hermione?"

"You know Harry," Ron commented, catching on unusually quickly. "I think there is a ferret here... a small... white... bouncing... ferret."

"That's it Potter," Malfoy growled, pulling out his wand.

Noting the figure stalking towards them, Harry kept his hands out in the open and saw that Ron and Hermione were doing the same. A hand came down on Malfoy's shoulder and the blond jumped in surprise.

"Put your wand away Mr. Malfoy," Snape hissed. "Ten points from Gryffindor for aggravating Mr. Malfoy."

The Potions Master swept past the students and to the staff table. Malfoy smirked in his small victory and turned for the Slytherin table. The Gryffindors sat and there was vociferous complaining about Snape's prejudice against their house. While the House complained, Harry leaned towards Hermione and let her know about their 'appointment' for later that day.

Classes went remarkably slowly that day. Charms was a continued review of what they had learned in the previous five years, with new readings and an essay assigned for homework. Transfiguration had them finally learning something new. They started on human transfiguration. It was easiest to transfigure into something with a similar bone and muscle structure, so they worked on turning their feet into chimpanzee feet. Harry was having trouble concentrating, and so only managed to transfigure a few of his toes.

"Mr. Potter, please stay after class," Professor McGonagall commented as she passed his workstation.

Harry groaned. He was going to be late meeting Snape. He packed his books as quickly as he could when class was over and hurried up to McGonagall's desk. She gave him an appraising look and cleared her throat.

"How are you feeling Mr. Potter?" she asked.

Harry started to feel angry. Why couldn't she have asked him after his detentions with Umbridge, "I'm fine. I'm used to it. Professor Snape is waiting for us. Can I go?"

"You should have had no trouble with that transfiguration. I expect you to improve by next class. Just let Professor Snape know I delayed you. If he has any questions he can come to me," McGonagall gave Harry a sympathetic look.

Harry nodded and rushed out the door. He wondered if she had any idea what sort of teacher Snape was for the past five years. It wouldn't have mattered if the Minister and the Dark Lord had gotten together to declare universal peace and love and demanded Harry's presence. If it made him late to see Snape he would have had detention and lost copious points.

Hermione and Ron didn't bother to ask what was troubling Harry as they made their way towards the staff quarters. Harry spoke the password to the entrance that Snape never used and let Hermione and Ron in, asking them to let Snape know he'd be in after a minute.

Every time Harry had talked to Snape when he was upset it had ended in an argument. He needed to calm down before going into his father's quarters. He paced in the corridor and took a few deep breaths, but it didn't help. What he needed was someone to talk to, about the attacks that appeared in nearly every *Daily Prophet*, their new articles praising Harry, about the pain in his scar that was getting worse, about his confusion with Snape. Special training had started before Harry went to visit Charlie, but nothing had been said about continuing it now that he was back.

Thinking about everything that was making him mad was not helping. Harry stopped pacing and sat down against the stone wall, leaning his head back. He took a sheet of parchment out of his bag and began writing a letter to Charlie in the guise of distant cousin Ryan. It was probably the longest letter Harry had ever written, and he felt better when it was done. He would send it with a school owl later. Hedwig was too recognizable.

Harry tucked the letter away in his bag and stepped into Snape's quarters. Snape, Hermione, and Ron were drinking tea and waiting for him. The sight was almost surreal.

"Tea Harry?" Snape asked.

"I think I've stepped into the Twilight Zone," Harry muttered.

Snape and Ron both looked at Harry for an explanation, then at Hermione when she started to laugh. She waved them off, "Muggle thing."

Harry sat down and took a cup of tea. He couldn't hold it in any longer and burst out, "Why is everyone so concerned about me now?"

"Harry..." Hermione began.

"Everyone is always asking me if I'm fine, acting like I could break at any moment. If I want to be alone for an hour or two people panic," Harry let his remaining frustration out. He was glad he had written to Charlie or this would have been much worse.

Ron and Hermione both fidgeted in their seats. Harry was reminded of the day he had arrived at twelve Grimmauld Place the summer before their fifth year. They were probably expecting him to blow up at them any moment.

"Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley, perhaps it is time for you to leave. Remember what I told you," Snape ordered.

Hermione looked back and forth between Harry and Snape, her expression one of deep concern, "Yes sir. Come on Ron." She tugged at Ron's sleeve and they left with a nervous nod to Harry.

Snape got up from his seat and stood in front of Harry, looking down at him. Once again Harry cursed his stature. Why couldn't he have inherited some height from Snape? "Less than two months ago you tried to kill yourself. Many of your friends noticed something was wrong before then, but no one took any steps to prevent your actions and they feel guilty. Your scar creates a bond between you and the Dark Lord and it is getting stronger. These are very good reasons for people to worry." Harry looked down but Snape lifted his head to maintain eye contact between them, "People make mistakes Harry. You should not have been left alone at the Dursleys, not last summer and especially not this summer. If Albus did not intervene with Poppy you would most likely still be in the hospital wing on suicide watch, even though students cannot harm themselves in this castle. After all, you are known for breaking rules."

Harry tried to put himself in the position of his friends and teachers. He admitted to himself that he had given them cause to worry about him, but he still didn't think they needed to watch his every move. He looked Snape in the eye and spoke firmly, "Professor Dumbledore spoke about the choice between what is easy and what is right. I chose the easy path and I will not do it again."

"As did I Harry. I know now that Albus would have protected us all if James, Lily, and I went to him sixteen years ago. I made my decision in a single moment of fear, without fully thinking it through, much like a decision I made years before that," Snape said softly. They let silence settle over them for a few moments. "Do not shut out your friends. They are only afraid of losing you."

Harry nodded and ventured to ask the question to which he was not sure he wanted the answer, "A - Are you?"

Snape did not speak his answer. He sat next to Harry and pulled him into a tight hug. The Potions Master was very tall, and always wore billowing robes. Harry was almost surprised at how thin the man was under the folds of black fabric.

Chapter Twenty-One

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Severus kept a close eye on Harry in the first months of classes. Though the Gryffindor would never admit it the increasing pain from the connection with the Dark Lord was obvious to anyone who knew what to look for. More and more frequently Severus saw Harry rubbing his forehead or pausing in the corridors as though he was feeling a dizzy spell. His Slytherins were making sly comments constantly that Harry just didn't notice.

When the quidditch season started he was tempted, as was most of the 'Harry Circle', to forbid his son from playing. Harry had Minerva and Fred and George Weasley, who had recently been admitted to the Order, to thank for his continued play. Severus made sure to watch the Gryffindor practices discreetly and found he had little to fear.

Ron Weasley, who had been elected Captain with his sister as his assistant, kept an eagle eye on Harry during practices and always had his wand out. He noticed that the Gryffindor team had a full roster of backups, probably due to the disaster of the previous year, who also kept more of an eye on Harry than the practice, most likely at Weasley's command.

Lupin had started Harry's extra lessons again. Despite the magical outburst in the hospital wing Harry was showing no more power than in previous years. The general consensus was that the pain from his scar was distracting Harry enough so that he could not tap into his increasing power. After participating in some of the lessons Severus was convinced that something else was wrong, though Albus was the only one he shared his concern with. It was clear that Harry was trying, and becoming more and more frustrated as time went by.

The DA had started meeting again, under the direction of Granger and Ginny Weasley. Harry went to some of the meetings, but from what Severus could gather he did not take a leadership role unless Granger or the female Weasley encouraged him and often sat out and did homework or just watched and rested. There were some things that only Harry could teach the rest of the students, as he was the top Defense Against the Dark Arts student in the school.

In a compromise the fireplace in the sixth year Gryffindor boys' room was connected to the fireplace in Severus's quarters for emergency use. If Harry had a particularly bad nightmare or flare up of his connection with Voldemort, Ron Weasley had permission to Floo Severus. The fireplaces were flaring with bright green more frequently than Severus was comfortable with.

The first quidditch game of the season was Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw. Severus watched Harry more closely than he had since the game he refereed the boy's first year. The skill he showed was amazing. He would not be at all surprised if Harry was recruited to play professionally in another year once he was of age. After Gryffindor won with a score of 270 – 40 he stalked back to his quarters, seemingly annoyed at the outcome. Once there he wrote a quick congratulatory note, Flooed to Gryffindor Tower, and left the note on Harry's bed. The next morning the boy had been grinning at the staff table, ostensibly at Lupin but had made brief eye contact with Severus.

"He's turning you soft," Lupin whispered with a silly grin on his face.

Severus scowled at the werewolf but his tone of voice betrayed his true feelings, "James turned me soft. Harry just reminded me."

-oOo-

Severus paced nervously in the Head Boy's room under the invisibility cloak. That had been one of the absolute worst quidditch injuries he had ever seen. All he was able to do was sit and laugh, actually laugh, with all the other Death Eater-to-be Slytherins when what he wanted to do was run onto the field and confirm for himself that James would be okay. The dichotomy of his life was infuriating.

The door opened and the petite auburn haired, green eyed Head Girl walked into the room, "I know you're in here Sev."

Severus tossed the cloak to the floor and strode across the room, torn between grabbing Lily and demanding to hear James's condition and pleading for the information. He got himself under control, "How is he?"

"He's fine," Lily smiled, though it didn't reach her eyes. She had been just as worried he could see. "He has a moderate concussion and several broken bones. He'll be up tomorrow but not very happy. He'll have a wicked headache and lots of aches for a week or so."

Severus nodded and sat down on the bed, resting his head in his hands, "Good."

Lily sat next to him and wrapped an arm around his waist. His arm automatically held her. She rested her head on his shoulder, "What else is wrong Sev?"

"I just sat there Lil, and laughed," his voice was full of self loathing. "He was hurt and I laughed." She held him tightly, "You couldn't do anything else unless you wanted to expose yourself. It won't change what he feels for you Sev."

"Thanks Lil," he leaned into her embrace and wrapped his other arm around her.

-oOo-

"I can't do it!" Harry yelled in frustration. "We've tried for hours! When will you accept that I just can't do it?"

The boy was near tears in his frustration and mounting anxiety. Severus and Lupin had been teaming up against him and dueling in the Room of Requirement. Harry looked about ready to drop where he stood. He had yet to last five minutes against them without getting stunned, disarmed, magically bound, or stuck in a body bind.

"You have the power to fight more than the two of us," Severus said, trying to remain calm despite his instinctual desire to snap back at his son. "You showed it this summer at your relatives," the word was spat with venom, "and in the hospital wing. You should have no problem keeping up with Albus before long. Use it!"

"I can't!" Harry dropped to his knees and he looked near tears. "I don't know how!"

It was just after Halloween and the full moon was the next night. The Dark Lord had celebrated Halloween with by sending nearly every Death Eater out and attacking muggle villages all over the country. The muggle newspapers had reported on the unusually high number of violent deaths that night, calling it a massacre. Severus had luckily been exempt, as his presence at the Halloween Feast was required by Dumbledore. He had spent the night trying not to remember that it was the anniversary of Lily and James's deaths.

Lupin was showing the strain of his approaching transformation but could still out-duel the only hope of the wizarding world. There was something more than pain blocking Harry's magical ability. There had to be. Severus decided to test his theory and take Harry by surprise.

"What was the first accidental magic you performed?" he asked quickly.

Harry blinked and looked up at him in confusion. His hair was clinging to his forehead with perspiration and the lightning bolt scar was clearly visible, red and fierce, "I – I don't know. I can't remember. I've always..."

"What is the first you remember?" Lupin interrupted, catching on.

"I broke a plate," Harry said in a daze. "I must have been three or four. Aunt Petunia thought I dropped it."

"What did she do?" Severus questioned before Harry could think too much about it.

"Cupboard for two days, took my crayons. I had two hidden in my cupboard," Harry looked at the floor, refusing eye contact with either of them.

Severus thought about the need for chairs for a moment and the room provided them. He helped Harry into one and sat across from him. He lifted Harry's face gently to look in his eyes, "Do you trust me?"

"I... I... Why?" Harry stammered.

"Do you trust me?" Severus asked again softly. Harry nodded. "Lower your shields." Panic flashed in the emerald green eyes. "You are having trouble accessing your full power. I have a theory, but I need you to lower your shields to test it."

Harry trembled slightly and a tear rolled down his cheek but he took a breath and nodded. Severus saw out of the corner of his eye that Remus had taken the other seat and stiffened uncomfortably. The werewolf looked concern and uncertain about Severus's actions but was not interrupting. Severus looked directly into Harry's eyes, pointed his wand, and spoke the spell, *Legilimens!* The images flooded his mind, overlapping and rapidly progressing in a jumble of sensations. He could only barely catch a few words and feelings.

'Crash. Worthless freak!' A small body fell against the sharp edge of a coffee table. Shame.

Shatter. Shaking. 'Unnatural boy. You're parents were lazy, no-good freaks just like you!'

Huddled in the dark, crying. Hungry. Dreaming, a flash of green light. Pain.

'You unnatural freak!' Falling. Snapping. Pain. Blackness.

Swinging frying pan and a lucky duck, just in time.

'There's no such thing as magic!'

'Motorcycles don't fly!' Laughter.

Harry Hunting.

Fear.

The shields slammed back into place and Severus ended the spell and sat back, breathing heavily. Harry was shaking silently and tears were cascading down his face. Severus reached up to his own face and felt the dampness there. As Head of Slytherin House Severus had seen many cases of child abuse, but that was almost exclusively physical, and never major. The wizarding world valued its children too much for that. He forgot his intentions for a moment and reached out for the broken boy sitting in front of him. Harry flinched away from the contact at first, but Severus was gentle and persistent. In almost no time the boy was huddled in his lap like a child half his age, crying almost hysterically.

Lupin looked on anxiously, no doubt suspicious of what Severus had seen, but not truly part of what had occurred. He shifted in his seat as Severus soothed Harry and rocked him. Eventually the combination of the dueling practice and the invasion of his mind got to him and he fell asleep.

"Did he have James's cloak tonight?" Severus asked quietly.

Lupin nodded and got up, "Severus, what...?"

"I didn't get complete memories, just flashes, jumbled feelings," Severus held his son closer to his chest. "I would need to be more specific for complete memories, apparently." He scowled, "There were too many."

Lupin's expression clouded as he handed the cloak over and the amber glow in his eyes flashed. The Dursleys were indeed lucky they were nowhere near. Severus carefully wrapped the cloak around himself and his son. It felt the same as it had so many years ago. The last time he had worn that cloak, and actually paid attention to the cloak itself, he was a student in the school.

"Get Albus and meet us in my chambers," Severus ordered as he left the room.

Severus had enough time to ponder the results of his mind scan and make sense of the jumble of images and thoughts on the walk to his rooms. His jaw clenched in anger at the miserable excuses for humans that had raised his son. He used the portrait in the staff corridor as it was closest and he was under the cloak. Once inside he roused Harry just enough to get him into nightclothes and give the boy some Dreamless Sleep.

In the sitting room he threw some Floo powder into the fireplace and called Ron Weasley. The redhead stepped in and Severus was grilling him about everything the boy knew about the Dursleys when Albus and Remus arrived. Severus was amazed he hadn't hexed or broken anything. Weasley

could obviously see how mad the potions master was but for once was sharing in the anger rather than trembling before it.

"I believe Mr. Weasley can leave now," Albus said when the questioning ended and the two extremely temperamental wizards were just fuming.

Severus held out a vial, "Drink it Weasley, calming potion." The redhead reluctantly obeyed. "Harry will sleep here tonight. Make sure your roommates do not fret over his absence."

Weasley nodded and disappeared into the green flames. He had clearly wanted to remain behind but would not argue with the headmaster.

"What is all this about Severus?" Albus questioned with a glance to the open door through which Harry could be seen sleeping peacefully.

"You were wrong Albus," Severus said with his teeth gritted. He thought perhaps he could use a calming potion but decided against it. It would only delay the anger. "You should have listened to Minerva. His inability to access his magic has nothing to do with his scar distracting him, but has everything to do with the Dursleys. He's been blocking it himself since before he could speak in full sentences!"

The other two wizards in the room looked at Severus in amazement at the implications of what he was saying. If Severus was right Harry had shown signs of magical abilities almost immediately after James and Lily had died. He hypothesized that the failed curse had unlocked Harry's potential as well as transferring some of Voldemort's power and abilities into the infant.

"Even if the muggles had cared a whit for him, which they did not, they were not equipped to deal with that and it probably aggravated his situation," Severus cursed himself for having Lily block his memory and never telling Albus. He could have had Lily and James leave a sealed note for Albus if nothing else. Briefly he wondered why they didn't. Certainly they must have thought of the possibility...

"He blames himself for Black's death not only because of the failure at Occlumency, but because his guardians had him convinced he was worthless and unnatural by the time he was four! Everything that went wrong in that household was blamed on him starting the day they found him on their doorstep!" Severus was almost cursing the headmaster.

There was no twinkle in the wise blue eyes. They looked tired and sad, "I have made many mistakes in my life Severus. Unfortunately some of the worst have had a direct impact on Harry." Albus took a deep breath and conjured three cups of steaming tea. He picked up a cup and took a sip. "What kind of block does Harry have on his magic?"

Severus shook his head, "I don't know. It was constructed by a child, who had no idea that magic existed, in fear and in shame. He most likely added to it and strengthened it with each incident of accidental magic, of which there were many. He apparated Albus, before he even got his letter!"

The werewolf almost choked on his tea, "He apparated... and didn't splinch himself?"

Severus nodded, "His cousin was 'Harry Hunting' and he tried to hide behind some rubbish bins. He apparated onto the school roof instead."

"Is there a way to remove the block?" Lupin asked, clearly still trying to get a grasp on the extent of power Harry must have locked away.

Severus exchanged glances with Albus. They communicated without words, a practice established after years of working closely together, and Severus turned back to Lupin, "We could probably break it down forcefully with Legilimency, but he would have to be conscious and relaxed. If he fought us it could be very painful, for all of us."

"If there was a calming influence, someone he trusted..." Lupin's eyes had that faraway look again.

"What?" Severus demanded.

Lupin sighed, "Harry clearly trusts Charlie Weasley."

The twinkle returned in full force and Albus stood to leave, "We can make the attempt over the winter holiday at Grimmauld Place. There Harry can be assured a few nights of solid rest, even if we use Dreamless Sleep for it. I will inform Charlie that he is expected to stay in London for a week at least."

"I still have to have a talk with that..." Severus growled.

"Now Severus, you were not much older than Harry when you started seeing James. We also do not know if anything occurred between them," Albus lectured his employee as though he were a naughty first year.

Severus just smiled wickedly in response, "But Albus, I am Harry's father. It is my job to threaten Weasley with a slow and painful death if he harms so much as one hair on my son's head."

Lupin just looked at Severus and smiled, "As default godfather I would have to agree with Severus. Besides, you saw them when they Portkeyed back here. You couldn't have paid me to go up to Gryffindor Tower that morning. Charlie didn't get back to London until late that afternoon."

Severus glared at Lupin and cursed the day his glares had ceased to work on the Gryffindors he wished to intimidate the most. Even Longbottom, after witnessing Severus tend to Harry, was starting to seem immune.

Chapter Twenty-Two

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He was tired. He was so very tired. It was lucky that Gryffindor had no more quidditch games until the spring. Harry would have fallen off his broom five minutes into any game. He got almost no sleep thanks to Voldemort's increased activity, and when that wasn't keeping him up his nightmares wouldn't relent. Snape was working on a potion to help him, but Harry had no idea how that was progressing.

His school work was suffering as well. His professors were holding him after class and instead of detention he was being tutored. If it weren't for Fawkes, who had taken to accompanying Harry around the castle, Harry suspected he wouldn't have left his bed in weeks. Fawkes knew just when Harry was about to drop and the phoenix song kept him going, along with Energizing Elixirs and Pepper-Up Potions. It had taken several days for the student body to become accustomed to the brilliant bird, as he had previously kept exclusively to the headmaster's office and quarters.

"Potter!"

Harry felt his hand pushed away. He blinked and tried to figure out what he had done wrong. He looked at Hermione, who had stopped him from adding some ingredient to his potion. She was giving him a look that he had come to hate, pity. Fawkes rubbed his head under Harry's neck and Harry felt his fog clear somewhat.

"This is N.E.W.T. level potions Potter!" Snape snapped angrily. "You could kill everyone in this room with your irresponsibility. Thirty points from Gryffindor and get in my office at once!" He turned his glare to Hermione, "Clean up his station when you're done Miss Granger."

Harry didn't have enough energy to react to Snape's harsh tone. Even if he knew it was an act for the sake of the Death Eaters-to-be, it still hurt. He picked up his bag and crossed the room to enter Snape's office while the Slytherins jeered and snickered at him. Harry settled into a chair, his head leaning back, and wearily stroked Fawkes's plumage.

At the end of class Snape stalked into his office, closed the door with a bang, and set silencing and locking wards. He sat down in the chair next to Harry and Harry looked up and blinked at him.

"Do not come to class again until we have solved this problem," his father said firmly. "If it were not for Granger you would have hurt yourself badly today. You are not learning anything. Take the time to get some sleep. We will address the work you have missed when you are able to make it up."

Harry nodded, "Okay," not bothering to mention that he couldn't sleep for more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time without his scar waking him up. None of the standard pain relieving potions did anything, as the cause of the pain was external.

Snape led the half-asleep Harry into his chambers and settled him in his bed. He gave him a goblet of Dreamless Sleep, which Harry had already had too often. It would give him a day, or possibly even two, where he was more than a zombie. Half his week was spent in a daze, the other half in an artificial awareness.

His extra lessons with Snape and Remus had stopped. Harry no longer reported to the Room of Requirement for his non-magical fighting lessons. It was strange. He felt much the same as he had at the Dursleys' in the first half of his summer holiday. The only difference was that he didn't want to feel that way now. He dropped the medical magic class, though Madam Pomfrey assured him he could resume it in his next year, especially if his father tutored him over the summer.

"Seein' as Fawkes 'as been comin' to our lessons, I thought we'd do a unit on phoenixes," Hagrid said. Fawkes puffed his chest out, clearly aware he was being discussed. "Now, phoenixes have got powerful healin' powers, an' they can carry 'eavy loads. 'Arry, do you think Fawkes 'ould demonstrate 'ow 'e can apparate in 'Ogwarts despite the wards? Phoenixes don' really apparate, but it's pretty much the same thing."

Harry stroked the bird's plumage and murmured something to him. Fawkes lifted off from Harry's shoulder and disappeared in a flash of flame, only to return with Professor Dumbledore a few moments later. The class was paying much more attention to the lesson than usual, much as they had when they studied unicorns. N.E.W.T. level Care of Magical Creatures was much more interesting than the lower level class.

"Hello Hagrid," Dumbledore smiled at the class.

"'Ello Headmaster," Hagrid beamed. "We was just learnin' abou' Fawkes 'ere."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled and he handed Fawkes back to Harry. Fawkes let out a string of notes and Harry felt his perpetual fog lift somewhat.

"Do not let me interrupt your lesson," said Dumbledore cheerfully. He leaned over to Harry, "See Professor Snape at lunch time today."

Harry nodded as Dumbledore walked back towards the castle, whistling. He listened to Hagrid detail the magical abilities of the phoenix. He was talking about the limitations of the healing abilities of the phoenix when Fawkes twittered and Harry decided he had to interrupt.

"Erm, Hagrid?"

"Yes 'Arry?" Hagrid paused in his lecture and the whole class looked at Harry.

"Fawkes can actually heal just about anything, even a basilisk bite," Harry corrected Hagrid.

Fawkes preened and Hagrid blinked at Harry, "A basilisk bite?"

Harry nodded, "That was the monster in the Chamber of Secrets."

"Is it still down there?" Hagrid's eyes lit up with a hungry look that Harry recognized from when his friend talked about dragons.

Harry shrugged and Hagrid picked his lecture up where he had left off. After class he had Harry stay for tea, as Harry no longer had a class following Care of Magical Creatures. The caffeine in the tea helped, and it was one of Harry's more lucid days.

"Do you think you could show the class the basilisk 'Arry?" Hagrid asked with obvious excitement. Harry considered it for a moment. All he would have to do was open the chamber, "I don't know if it's still there Hagrid. Why don't you ask Professor Dumbledore about it? Even if the snake has decomposed the skeleton would still be there, and there's a skin it shed too."

Hagrid grinned and the look made Harry smile as well. The half-giant could always lift Harry's spirits. He was relatively happy when he returned to Snape's quarters. Most of the school was in class, so there was no risk of someone seeing him enter the staff corridor. Even if someone did, most students had no idea what was there, and anyone else would probably think he was visiting Remus.

When Snape came in he was actually smiling. Harry had to make sure he wasn't hallucinating, which with all the sleep he had been missing was a definite possibility. Snape held up a vial of cloudy peach colored liquid.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"This," Snape said with obvious pride, "is a temporary solution to one of our obstacles, Good Dreams Potion. You will be testing it tonight. If it works as I suspect the sleeping potion will be strong enough to block the connection somewhat, and the cheering element will ensure good dreams. The severe trauma ward at St. Mungo's will be interested if this is successful, and the Dai Llewellyn Ward."

Harry smiled and got up from his chair, "There's no time like the present."

"You have class this afternoon," Snape reminded him.

Harry lifted an eyebrow, "I haven't learned anything in weeks, and I dropped Basic Healing after last week anyway so I don't have class."

"In that case..."

Harry slept for eighteen uninterrupted hours. When he woke he felt truly awake for the first time in weeks. He raced out of his room and found Snape in the sitting room, looking for a book on his shelves.

He threw his arms round his father, "It worked! I can actually think."

"There are some that may argue you have never been capable of coherent thought," Snape said sarcastically, though there was amusement underlying his tone. He turned and returned Harry's enthusiastic hug.

"I have something special I want to show you tonight," Harry grinned. He couldn't get over how lucid he felt.

"Indeed," Snape stepped back and arched an eyebrow, "and what might that be?"

"If I tell you it won't be a surprise," Harry smirked. He found himself doing that more and more often. He was picking up several expressions and mannerisms from the time he spent with his father. He turned and headed back to his room, intent on a shower before breakfast. He actually had enough energy to eat a good meal. For the first time that year Harry was one of the first students in the great hall. Every Gryffindor greeted him excitedly when they came in, glad to see him without glazed eyes and slumped shoulders. Fawkes had returned to the headmaster.

"Harry!" a voice shrieked.

Harry smiled and turned, "Mornin' Mione."

He found himself enfolded in a tight hug, "He finished the potion didn't he?"

"How did you know about it?" Harry asked in shock. "I didn't know until yesterday!"

"I did some of the research for it, with some help from Ron," Hermione said matter-of-factly. "Of course, I've been working on the cause rather the symptoms for a while now so I didn't know how it was progressing."

"Huh?" Harry asked after taking a swig of pumpkin juice. He had actually forgotten how good food tasted.

"The connection," she whispered and tapped his forehead. "I've been looking for a way to sever or block it."

"Good to have our Harry back," Ron said and clapped Harry on the back as he sat down.

"I'm going to need a lot of help catching up Hermione," Harry said calmly.

The brown haired girl beamed, "I'll start making a schedule right away. We'll have to prioritize. Some classes clearly come after others..."

Harry smiled as she detailed a plan to get Harry back on track. She was cut off when Dumbledore stood and tapped his goblet with his spoon. The hall fell silent.

"For the theory behind the development of a new potion which has clearly aided one of our students and may be a great benefit to magical medicine," Dumbledore paused for effect, "I am awarding one hundred points to Ronald Weasley of Gryffindor."

Harry stared open-mouthed at his best friend as the Gryffindor table erupted into wild cheers and applause, "It was your idea?"

"I... I just suggested..." Ron looked just as shocked as Harry.

Hermione kissed Ron in front of the whole hall and Harry grinned. His two best friends seemed to have developed a relationship of sorts though they weren't officially dating. All day Gryffindors were congratulating Ron and thanking him for the points. Several Ravenclaws came up to him and questioned him about the potion he had helped create. McGonagall even gave him one of her rare smiles of pride and told him she would be owling his parents with the news. Once over the initial shock Ron basked in the glory of his accomplishment. Dumbledore's announcement took some of the attention of Harry's recovery away, much to Harry's relief. He had not been looking forward to the inevitable questioning.

"What is this surprise you have for me?" Snape asked that night in his quarters.

Harry had been given the night off from catching up on his studies. The next day he would start a slow process of re-learning the entire term's classwork, with Hermione as his dictator... erm, teacher. Snape had extracted a promise from her that she wouldn't overwork Harry in her exuberance and send him into a relapse.

"Just come with me, and bring several empty flasks. You might want to change into something you can get dirty... very dirty. I promise we're not going off the grounds, or even leaving the castle," Harry held out his invisibility cloak for Snape to wear, as it would not do for the two to be seen walking through the corridors together.

Snape complied a bit reluctantly and followed Harry through the corridors to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, "You've brought me to a haunted girls' toilet?"

"You'll see," Harry grinned and walked in. Luckily Myrtle was not there. A locking charm and silencing ward ensured privacy. He knelt down by the sink with the snake etched on the pipe and hissed, 'open'.

He turned and saw that Snape had removed the cloak. The man was looking at Harry as though he had forgotten Harry was a Parselmouth. The sinks moved and revealed the opening to the Chamber.

"Hagrid wants to do a lesson on basilisks and I didn't know what kind of shape the one I killed was in. I thought you might like some of it for ingredients," Harry removed his outer robe to reveal a pair of jeans and a shirt that had been roughed up a bit by the dragons in Romania. He shrunk the robe and stuffed it in a pocket before sliding down the pipe.

"This is disgusting," Snape commented as he landed beside Harry.

Harry grinned, "It could use a few hundred cleaning spells. Maybe Dobby could help out with that."

Harry lit the torches lining the walls and led Snape towards the chamber, giving a narration of the events of his second year as they went along. The Potions Master actually laughed when Harry pointed out the spot where Lockhart's memory charm backfired. Snape inspected the shed skin and left it for the time being. They cleared the fallen stone and magically repaired the damage to the ceiling and walls.

Harry paused outside the doors to the chamber and made sure Snape was still with him. The man was taking in every detail with wide, hungry eyes. Harry felt warmth in his chest for giving his father this gift that eliminated any nervousness associated with entering the chamber again. He turned back to the doors and pictured the snakes moving, 'open'.

They walked inside and the torches instantly lit. Harry noticed with shock that the basilisk was exactly as he had left it. The blood on the eyes and in the mouth looked to be still wet even.

"Is that...?"

"That is the basilisk," Harry said with a bit discomfort. He had not expected to find the chamber so perfectly preserved. He then pointed to the statue at the end of the chamber, "and that is Salazar Slytherin in all his glory."

Snape approached the snake reverently and Harry pulled out his dragonhide gloves. He handed them to Snape, who took them without a word and began to inspect the giant reptile. Harry saw the tooth that he had used to kill the journal. He left it where it was, not wanting to touch it unprotected. "Slytherin must have put preservation charms on the entire chamber," Snape said as he completed his inspection. "It's as though the snake was alive just yesterday."

Harry shuddered, "Or Riddle cast them. He set the snake loose when he was a student and framed Hagrid. That's why he was expelled in his third year."

"Is there anything that goes on in this school that you do not know?" Snape asked with mild irritation.

Harry laughed, "I didn't know about you and James, and I didn't find out where the Slytherin common room was until second year. I only found the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff rooms last year."

Snape just shook his head, "It's karma... I had to father a Marauder." He gave a last longing look around the Chamber, "We might as well leave for the night. I'll need some tools, a few assistants, and much more time to harvest this monster."

"Would the fifth, sixth, and seventh year Care of Magical Creatures classes be sufficient?" Harry asked with a grin. "With both you and Hagrid, that would be quite a lesson."

Snape smirked, "It would be nice if those classes did something productive for a change. Now, how are we getting up that pipe? It would take too long to transfigure steps now."

Harry whistled and Fawkes appeared beside them. "Grab on," Harry instructed.

The next evening at dinner Professor Dumbledore stood to give another announcement, "Care of Magical Creatures will be cancelled next week for fifth, sixth, and seventh years. Instead, you will have a special combined lesson on Saturday. Please remain after dinner for instructions."

The students affected immediately started proposing theories as to what they were doing. Harry stood and called across to the Hufflepuff table, "Oi, Justin!"

The boy in question looked up and saw Harry motioning for him. With an intrigued look on his face he got up from his table and walked towards Gryffindor while Harry leaned down and whispered something to Ron. When Harry had Justin, Hermione, Colin, Ron, and Ginny all sitting slightly apart from the other Gryffindors he explained why he called them over.

"All of you except Hermione are in Care of Magical Creatures," Harry began quietly, "and Hermione's been given permission to come to this lesson." She looked up in surprise as no one had informed her yet. "All five of you are being given the option to miss the class without penalty. It's a special class on basilisks and it will be held in the Chamber of Secrets."

All five faces paled. These were the only students left in the school that had been directly affected by the events of four years before.

"You don't have to decide yet, and you can't tell anyone else. The lesson's being kept a secret so half the school doesn't try to join us. There are almost no Slytherins in Hagrid's classes and they would definitely want to go. You should know that there are some preserving charms or something of the sort on the Chamber so the basilisk is in the same condition as when Ginny and I left the Chamber," Harry said with a sigh.

Ginny gripped Harry's arm, "It... it's not..."

Harry rubbed her back, "It's *exactly* how we left it Gin. It's dead. The journal is dead. There is nothing left to hurt anyone unless they do something stupid. Professor Snape, who will be there too, will have some antidote for the venom on him in case someone gets cut or accidentally ingests some.

On top of that Fawkes is only a whistle away."

"I'm going," Justin said firmly. "I want to see the thing that petrified me."

Three other heads nodded and Ginny swallowed, "You'll stay with me Harry?"

"Every minute Gin," Harry assured her.

"I'll go."

Chapter Twenty-Three

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Severus waited outside Moaning Myrtle's bathroom with Harry for the Care of Magical Creatures students to show up. They had spent the night before and several hours that morning directing a team of house elves in cleaning and preparing the Chamber. Once Harry opened it, the elves had been able to secure the entrance and create a set of stairs descending into the Chamber, in addition to enlarging the entrance itself so Hagrid could enter.

The students all arrived in muggle clothes, though the Slytherins and a few others all had robes over theirs, with their gloves, a roll of parchment, and nothing else. Harry passed out muggle pens for taking notes, so they wouldn't need their ink bottles in the chamber. The Weasley girl looked particularly nervous and instantly attached herself to Harry's side.

The first time he had been in the chamber he was in shock and awe. He was thankful that Harry had brought him there without any others present so he hadn't felt it necessary to restrain those feelings. Now he was able to maintain his Professor Snape personality as he led the way into the chamber. There were gasps and whispers as they entered and the basilisk corpse came into view. "It's huge!"

"That's the thing that petrified me?"

"Potter killed that thing when we were twelve!"

Severus turned and glared, effectively ending all conversation. With a flick of his wand he conjured several rows of simple chairs for the students. All of them were gawking at the carcass of the giant snake and the reptilian themed architecture of the Chamber.

"Sit!" Severus commanded and they all obeyed immediately. Severus smirked at the effect he had on them. It was rather satisfying. "Hagrid will begin with a lecture on basilisks. Pay attention and take appropriate notes. When he is finished you will assist in the dissection of the snake and the packaging of various parts to be used in potions."

He stepped back and glared. A slight smirk appeared on his face as he thought that they had probably never had a class with Hagrid like this one. There would be no joking or socializing here, as every student was either fully intimidated by him or, like Harry and his cohorts, putting on a show of being intimidated.

"Alrigh' now," Hagrid said and clapped his hands together, "who can tell us abou' basilisks?"

Severus noted that Harry, the one student who probably had the best information, did not raise his hand. Several others did, Granger obviously among them.

"Hermione!" Hagrid said with a grin. Severus sneered, showing his disgust for using a student's given name in a class.

"Well," Granger began in her know-it-all lecture voice, "the basilisk is known as the king of serpents and can live to be several hundred years old. It is believed that this basilisk was the pet of Salazar Slytherin himself. The magical abilities of the basilisk include..."

Severus tuned out the rest of the lecture. Hagrid would not need to say a word. The oaf could just let Granger teach the class for him. After she detailed exactly what a basilisk could do she began outlining how its various parts could be used in potions. Severus held up a hand and she stopped instantly.

"You need not continue Miss Granger," Severus said with disdain. "That will be the subject of all your potions classes next week and we wouldn't want you doing everyone's homework for them today." She blushed and didn't say anything more. Severus could tell that Harry was trying to keep himself from laughing.

"Very good Hermione," Hagrid beamed. "Ten points to Gryffindor. Now, wha' Hermione didna tell you was the exact effect of basilisk venom on people. The venom numbs the victim and causes paralysis, makin' it easier fer the snake to catch their prey." The half-giant approached the snake.

"As yer can see, this basilisk is missin' a tooth. The teeth tend to be brittle, as their eyes are more than enough ter kill and they usually swallow their prey whole. This one had its eyes damaged though. Fawkes, 'Arry?"

Harry nodded, clearly uncomfortable with the territory the lesson was going into. The Weasley girl shifted in her seat and edged closer to Harry, who wrapped an arm around her and whispered in her ear. She was paler than usual.

"The cause o' death was a stab wound in the roof o' the mouth and into its brain with a rather large blade, a sword?" Harry nodded again and a good portion of the class was staring at him rather than the snake. Severus had gotten the entire story out of him before their second trip down. He hoped that Hagrid didn't ask where Harry got the sword. The tale was a bit too fantastic, even for most wizards. "The broken tooth is the one that bit ya?" Hagrid asked.

Harry nodded again and stood up. The potion had been doing wonders him and the only time he awoke at night was from the surges of pain in his scar. Only one had occurred that week, and that was the only night he had left Gryffindor Tower for his bed in Severus's quarters. Harry pulled on his protective gloves and retrieved the broken tooth. He brought it over to Hagrid and Severus had to stop himself from reacting to the size of it as the half-giant and the closer students did.

Severus couldn't, however, stop himself from discovering how serious the bite had been and stepped forward. "Show me your arm," he commanded quietly.

Harry rolled up his sleeve and removed his wand holster, as it was covering the scar. Severus raised his eyebrows at the size of the scar and glanced up at the tooth. The bite must have hit bone to make a scar that size.

"Your Gryffindor luck is astounding Potter," Severus sneered. "By all rights you should never have survived, but what's a basilisk bite after a killing curse? Return to your seat."

Harry made a show of standing in place and glaring at him. Severus glared back and the tension in the room rose dramatically. Harry eventually spun sharply on his heel and sat down. He was starting to carry himself a bit like Severus did. The way his robes flowed when he did that was very familiar. It was strange that Harry was almost the only non-Slytherin still wearing robes that day.

"Now," Severus ordered the classes, "leave your parchment and pens on your seats. There are knives and various containers in those boxes," he pointed. He flicked his wand and a board appeared. "This is a diagram of the anatomy of a basilisk. The parts that are useful in potions are labeled in red. Wear your gloves at all times. If you have any open wounds see me for healing before you approach the snake. Work in teams and be careful. The venom sacks must be removed whole." After waiting to see if there were any more instructions the students stood and collected the tools for dissecting the carcass. Severus healed a few cuts and kept a close eye on the students working near the head. A few students had hung back and Severus saw that it was both of the Weasleys, Harry, and Granger. He edged closer to hear them.

"You don't have to do this Ginny," Harry was saying in a low comforting voice. The petite girl was leaning against him and her brother was smoothing her hair. "I know how hard it is. I had him in my head all last year. I can still feel him."

"Sometimes I can too," she whispered in a pained voice, "but it's only a memory. It's not really Tom."

"Do you remember where it happened?" Harry asked softly. She nodded and they walked over to stand at the base of the statue. "We killed him right here Ginny. It wasn't just me. I wouldn't have made it without you. You're the reason I kept fighting."

She nodded again and wiped at her eyes. Several of the students were looking up from their work at the four of them.

Severus stalked over to them and whispered quickly before anyone realized what he was doing, "I am going to yell at you. It is only for show Miss Weasley. Do not take offence."

"What are you doing?" Severus sneered at them. "This is a class, not a social hour. If you are not going to work, leave!"

"Yes, Professor," Granger answered quickly while the boys glared and the Weasley girl looked down at the floor. They joined the other students in working on the skin of the basilisk, though the Weasley girl did not once touch the snake. She instead took the role of capping or labeling containers and getting empty ones for the workers.

Severus kept a close eye on Harry over the next weeks. It was possible that there were side effects to the potion that he had not foreseen, but he was positive that none of the ingredients would combine to make it addictive. It was tailored to be a long-term treatment. St. Mungo's had already expressed an interest and Weasley and Granger would each receive a nice sum as 'research assistants'. Both their names would appear in the journal article he would write regarding the potion.

The classes spent more than half the day in the Chamber. Once they emerged in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom it was past the normal lunchtime, but Severus assured them that the house elves would not let them starve and sent them to the showers and the great hall. Harry held back, as he had to close the Chamber to prevent anyone from wandering down there.

"Can we have lunch in your quarters?" Harry asked quietly once they were alone. "I don't want to be bombarded with questions."

"Very well," Severus said. "Carry this box. If anyone sees us I drafted you to bring these new ingredients to my private storage closet."

Harry nodded and picked up one of the boxes of containers now packed with basilisk parts. Severus held the other as they silently walked down to the dungeons. The boxes were deposited in the storage closet and Severus put extra wards on them.

Lunch was fairly quiet as well. Once it was over Severus began tutoring Harry to bring him up to speed in potions. He discovered a serious lack of background work that was essential to the proper brewing of potions and decided to start over again at the beginning.

"What did you expect? I was raised by muggles," Harry grumbled.

Severus raised an eyebrow, "I have come to understand that muggle chemistry is very similar to potions." Harry was silent. "You did take chemistry in your muggle school."

"The Dursleys got mad if I got better grades than Dudley," Harry said in a distant voice and looked to the side of the room. "After a while I just didn't bother to pay attention in school. I didn't see any point."

"Had you no thought for getting away from the Dursleys?" Severus asked, trying to understand such fatalism.

Harry scowled, "Every day. They would never have paid for me to go to university. My only hope was to get some menial job once I was old enough and save up my money, granted they didn't take it away. It always seemed so far away, though. I could never truly imagine life away from them. It was just daydreams."

Severus struggled to remember what Lily would have done in a situation like that. He had never had to really comfort others. He reached out and lightly squeezed Harry's shoulder, "You never have to worry about them again."

Harry looked up, gave him a small smile that was not reflected in his eyes, and nodded. The boy took a deep breath, "So, I've never understood why it makes a difference exactly how you prepare the different ingredients. What does it matter if you cut a root diagonally or just straight?"

Severus launched into the explanation and made a mental note to visit a bookstore soon. He needed to add a basic guide to elementary potion techniques for the next batch of first years. This could explain why the vast majority of muggle-born students who continued onto N.E.W.T level

potions were in Ravenclaw. How had he missed this all these years? He massaged the bridge of his nose and slowly began explaining the very basics of potions brewing.

Many people were surprised when Harry and Severus entered the great hall together for dinner. Harry immediately gave Severus a dirty look and stalked over to the Gryffindor table to join his friends. Severus smirked and distinctly heard the words 'greasy git' from at least two Gryffindors. His quarters felt oddly empty without Harry there. He had grown accustomed to his son's presence in the weeks of his near incapacitation. Never before had his rooms felt so cold. He longed to display the picture of Harry and Norbert, or a picture of Lily and James that Lupin had given him. There was also a picture of James proudly holding Harry as a newborn. Severus occasionally took that picture out from its hiding place and thought of everything he had missed... sixteen years. Knocking on the portrait in the staff corridor brought him out of his funk and he wondered who could be disturbing him. Very few staff members, even Lupin, actually stopped by his quarters for any reason. If they needed to see him they went to his office or fire called him. He threw on Harry's invisibility cloak, which had been left behind after their first trip to the Chamber of Secrets and opened the portrait. He saw Granger standing outside with a thick, ancient looking folio.

"Professor?" the girl called, almost bouncing with excitement.

"Come in Miss Granger," he said and watched her expression change to shock, then understanding. She stepped inside and turned around when she heard the portrait close. She was not at all surprised when Severus appeared from under the cloak.

"I found it!" Granger held out the folio.

Severus raised his eyebrows, "What did you find?"

"Page 306 sir, there's a binding ritual that was used by parents before the advancements of wizarding medicine we have today," Granger spoke in a rush, obviously excited and rather pleased with herself. He imagined that Harry and their Weasley counterpart would recognize this side of Granger immediately. "The bond is created to help heal an ill child and takes precedence over any other bond. It had to be dissolved when the child married, or that bonding ceremony wouldn't work.

"I was working under the assumption that when Voldemort cast the killing curse on Harry he created a magical bond between them. If you use this bond on Harry it should eliminate the one he has with Voldemort. The only drawback..." she trailed off.

"Yes?" Severus asked sharply.

Granger fidgeted, "The child has to be near death for the bond to work. We would have to stop anyone from interfering when Harry has one of his surges and monitor him the whole time. Then when the bond is activated it will drain you and it might... well... it might deactivate your Dark Mark." Severus turned the folio over in thought, "Did it ever dissolve the bond of marriage between the parents?"

"No, but when two parents were living they cast this bond together and all three were linked,"

Granger explained carefully, with a thoughtful look.

"I will look it over and discuss this with Albus," Severus said gravely.

Granger nodded and turned to leave. More than anything Severus desired to be free from Voldemort, but Albus needed his services as a spy, especially if they cancelled out the connection between Harry and the Dark Lord. Severus never truly felt as though he paid his debt to those he harmed before James and Lily convinced him to contact the headmaster, or those he continued to harm in his services as a spy. Then again, if Severus no longer had to serve he could publicly claim Harry as his own.

He stopped her before she got to the door and his voice for once was full of emotion, "Do not say anything to Harry or Weasley about this. I do not want them to get their hopes up if we cannot try this."

"I understand, sir," Granger gave him a brief, tight hug and left her shocked professor alone.

Chapter Twenty-Four

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"The majority of potions that use ingredients from a basilisk are ancient and the formulas exist in very few texts. Luckily for us, one of these is in the restricted section of the Hogwarts library. None of you, however, will be attempting to brew any of these potions. The ingredients are far too rare and valuable to waste on the fumbling attempts of inept students," Severus sneered. "You will, however, write me a four foot essay based on the lectures about basilisks and how you believe they will interact with at least ten other ingredients. You will not use the interaction that I demonstrate today."

He had a flask of basilisk venom, extracted from one of the venom sacks, sitting on the front counter along with a jar of phoenix ash. A small amount of the phoenix ash was placed on a glass tray with a metal spatula. He used a charmed eye dropper to add some venom and stirred with a thin solid gold stirring rod, made specifically for delicate potions.

There was a puff of smoke and the ash glowed bright red before rising to form a ball that contained the venom hovering just above the counter. The glow then swirled red and gold, the colors in constant motion. Gryffindor had not chosen his house colors randomly.

"Who can tell me what happened?" Severus questioned the class. Only two hands were raised. "Mr. Malfoy?"

Malfoy tilted his head so his nose was slightly upturned, "The phoenix has natural healing and protective abilities. The ash detected the venom as highly poisonous and encased it so it could not cause any harm. Because of this, a potion could not contain both basilisk and phoenix elements as the phoenix elements would not allow the basilisk elements to affect the properties of the potion."

"Ten points to Slytherin," Severus nodded at the Malfoy heir, who smirked at the Gryffindor side of the room. As he spoke he felt the burning of the Dark Mark and inwardly cursed. He could not leave in the middle of class and the Dark Lord knew that, and his schedule, perfectly well. "Can anyone think of a situation where phoenix and basilisk elements can be used together?" Only one hand was in the air. "Miss Granger?"

The girl stood and her eyes focused inward in thought for a moment, "If you want to delay the reaction of the basilisk elements of the potion with the rest you can combine the basilisk and phoenix elements separately then add them to the whole. When you wish the reaction to occur either an ingredient that neutralizes the phoenix elements, or a spell that removes them can be used to release the basilisk elements."

The tattoo on his forearm continued to burn, as it would until he answered the summons. It was fortunate that he had honed his acting skills long ago for his role as a spy for Dumbledore or the entire class would suspect him.

"These books," he indicated the stack of tomes on the front table with a sweep of his hand, "will not leave this room. Form groups of five and begin to research the potions that have basilisk components. I want each group to theorize a potion in which phoenix and basilisk elements can be combined and how to use that potion."

Normally Severus would assign the groups, forcing the Gryffindors and Slytherins in the class to work together, but he could not deal with the headaches those pairings would cause on top of the pain from the Dark Mark. He stood and walked amongst the tables, leaning over the students and listening to their conversations. He complimented the Slytherins, though none of them were doing much of anything, and berated the students from other houses. Harry was obviously distracted, his eyes unfocused and tiny beads of sweat forming on his brow. Granger continually leaned over to whisper to him and Weasley was looking anxious.

"It seems Potter cannot even pay attention to his friends when he is doing class work. Ten points from Gryffindor and Potter will stay behind," Severus said, continuing with a teasing tone. "At least with Miss Granger in his group his work will be... passable."

The Slytherins, Malfoy in particular, found this hilarious and laughed while all the Gryffindors in the room glared at him. Severus spent the remainder of the class period examining the progress of each group.

"In addition to your essays, you will continue this project. Dismissed," he waved his wand and summoned all the books, sending them into his office where the wards would detect if they were removed.

Harry lingered as instructed and approached him when the room was empty.

Severus drew him aside and pressed a hand to Harry's forehead. He could feel the scar burning, much as his Mark did. Severus hissed quietly, his tone carrying anger for anyone listening in. It sounded for all the world like he was moments away from hexing Harry, "Go to Albus at once and tell him I have been summoned. Remain in his office. If I am not back by dinner return to his office after you eat in the great hall."

Harry looked at him quizzically for a moment before speaking with obvious effort to concentrate, "He's mad, very mad. Be careful... Dad." Harry checked the room and gave Severus a quick hug before hurrying out.

Severus stood shocked for a moment before remembering his summons. He gripped his left arm and cursed. He had not had to delay this long since before James and Lily were killed and he remembered the penalty for such an infraction all too well.

The hug had surprised him, as had the title Harry assigned him. Their relationship was still stiff and uncertain, but that was proof that Harry was starting to care for him and it was almost enough to block the pain radiating from his one damning tattoo. Severus reached the edge of the wards that protected the school and closed his eyes. He concentrated on the link that the Dark Mark formed and let it guide his apparition.

As he crossed the threshold of the cave complex the guard grinned at him and Severus scowled. These guards, the least intelligent and most useless Death Eaters, were only happy when the Dark Lord was in a foul mood and his attention was focused away from them. He heard screams as he entered and knew that someone had failed in an appointed task.

The curse hit him instantly when he entered the Throne Room and Severus fell to the ground. He felt white hot knives slice open every inch of his skin, setting his nerve endings on fire. By the strength of the curse he knew it was the Dark Lord that had cast it. The only other one that could come even close to causing this level of pain was Lucius Malfoy, and that bastard was safely locked away. He clenched his jaw, refusing to utter a sound that would satisfy the Dark Lord's perverse mind. The curse was lifted after what seemed an eternity and Severus forced the pain to the back of his consciousness.

He stood gingerly, approached the throne, knelt slowly, and kissed the hem of the Dark Lord's robes, "I apologize for my tardiness My Lord. The summons came during a class and I do not wish to give Dumbledore any cause to doubt me." The bastard fully knew this of course. "The sixth year N.E.W.T. class contains many students that would report a sudden departure on my part or any deterrence from my normal behavior."

Severus kept his head down, awaiting the reply to his rather valid excuse.

The Dark Lord leaned down and lifted Severus's head with a single bony finger, "Always the brave one, my Severus, strong and proud, a true Slytherin. Yes, Severus, how are your sixth year students? That is a most interesting class," the Dark Lord observed.

Severus nodded, "Yes Master, it is both interesting and annoying. Any time Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter are in close proximity is like standing unshielded in the crossfire of a duel."

"How does young Malfoy?" the man hissed.

"He is firm in his beliefs My Lord. He has threatened Potter on multiple occasions, desiring revenge for his father's incarceration," Severus replied. "He is hot tempered and impetuous when provoked much like his father was at that age, but that may pass as he ages. He is still a child."

Severus felt a force pushing him to stand. He kept his head lowered respectfully as the Dark Lord continued to question him, "You were assigned to gain the trust of Potter. How is that progressing?" "The boy is cautious, especially after his poor luck with the majority of his Defense Against the Dark Arts professors, but I believe I am beginning to win him over." Severus decided to add some information that was most likely already passed on to the Dark Lord. "There is suspicion that he was mistreated by his muggle relatives. He no longer fully trusts the headmaster and there is no other professor that has the experience to aid him in that respect. With the loss of the mutt he has no adult to turn to."

"What of Lupin?" the Dark Lord leaned closer. "The werewolf's presence in the school gives the boy another potential father figure."

Severus snorted, "The werewolf spent too much time drowning himself in his own grief." That much was true. "He and Potter are not emotionally connected. Potter most likely believes that if he becomes close to the last of his father's friends he will lose him as well."

"Continue cultivating the boy Severus. I have plans for him," the Dark Lord grinned evilly. Severus darted his eyes back down and fought the shiver that threatened. "I understand you have acquired many ingredients from the basilisk that was once in the Chamber of Secrets."

Severus winced. He knew what was coming. "Yes My Lord. Dumbledore cast some odd enchantments which alert him if any of the ingredients, or potions containing them, leave the school grounds. Any experimenting with them must be conducted in my labs at Hogwarts."

"I do not wish for you to bring me any of the ingredients Severus," the Dark Lord hissed. Severus contained his jolt of surprise. He had fully expected to be punished for not being able to supply some of the rare ingredients. "You are far too valuable to risk in such a way. Rather, I am presenting you with a gift, and an opportunity."

Severus looked up, risking the punishment for making direct eye contact to discover exactly what the Dark Lord was talking about. The Dark Lord beckoned and a masked Death Eater approached carrying a large book, bound in snake skin with a large clasp. The book was handed to Severus and he had to restrain himself from opening it and beginning to read immediately. He always had a passion for books.

"You may open the book Severus. I know it is difficult for you to resist," the teasing tone of the Dark Lord was one Severus had not heard in many years, not since before the first downfall.

First, he cast a charm on his hands to keep the oils of his skin from damaging the book, used daily by archivists. He cautiously unlocked the clasp and opened the cover gingerly, turning the first, blank page with the care developed from the handling of many precious volumes. He almost gasped when he saw a written language he had never before laid eyes on.

"It is written in Parseltongue Severus, and has several potions which require multiple ingredients from a basilisk. Salazar's snake was perfectly preserved, was it not?" the Dark Lord questioned.

Severus let a small smile creep onto his face. This book was a treasure, and explained why Severus was summoned during the potions class. "Perfectly, Master. I was able to use some of the venom in class today. The preservation charms were intact and worked exactly as designed. The snake was there as though it had been killed only minutes before I entered, even the blood was fresh. It is fortunate indeed that Potter is a Parselmouth."

"Yes, the connection I share with the boy has been very useful," the Dark Lord paused briefly before lowering his tone to a quiet hiss, not a good sign. "I hear he was ill recently."

"Yes, My Lord. Pomfrey could not discern the cause. She has prescribed a sleeping potion partially developed by Potter's friends as a temporary solution and his health has greatly increased," Severus informed him.

The Dark Lord stood and circled Severus before standing directly in front of him, "You are to keep me informed of any further developments in the boy's health. Do your best to keep him in prime condition Severus."

"Yes Master," head bowed just so and a respectful step backwards.

"Return to the muggle loving fool before he notices your absence," a skeletal hand waved in dismissal.

Severus bowed deeply and backed out of the room. Never turn your back on the Dark Lord. He paused briefly on his way out and listened carefully. Always before he arrived he took a potion that increased his sense of hearing. It caused mild pain when screams became too loud, but was helpful in gathering information.

"Will he brew the potion, My Lord?" Severus did not recognize the voice. That alone was not a good sign. This man obviously had the trust of the Dark Lord.

"Of course he will," the Dark Lord said with disdain. "His curiosity is more than enough. Not only will he brew it. He will test it, and he has only one potential test subject."

Severus did not dare stay any longer. He continued to back away until out of the sight lines of the Throne Room and turned to stride swiftly out of the complex. The pain from the Cruciatus Curse was eating away at his impassive mask but he could make it at least as far as the headmaster's office before collapsing.

Before crossing the Hogwarts wards Severus examined the book for any tracking charms, enchantments, or any other spell that could cause harm to him or to Harry... or the book itself.

There was nothing there. The book was safe to bring into Albus's office. Even if there had been a tracking charm the Hogwarts wards would most likely have disarmed or at least dampened it, but Severus did not survive years of spying by taking unnecessary risks.

When he stepped through the door into Albus's office the first thing he saw was Harry holding out a vial. He recognized the potion he brewed for the after effects of the Cruciatus Curse and grimaced at the obvious knowledge that Harry had felt him being hit with the curse. He downed the vial and put out a hand to grip Harry's shoulder and steady himself.

"Thank you," Severus murmured.

Harry nodded, "He's still mad, but there's some excitement as well."

The emerald gaze was piercing. Harry was learning well from his time spent with both Severus and Albus. Severus handed the book to Harry, who took it carefully and handled it more delicately most other boys his age would. Harry had learned early in life to treat some items as precious and recognize the value of a seemingly worthless object. The boy inspected the covers and binding, which held no inscriptions, carefully before opening the cover. Severus held up a hand to stall Albus's inevitable questioning. He did not want this process disrupted.

"Snake skin," Harry muttered softly as he drew a hand reverently down the face of the book. "Most wizards would suspect this is dragon skin, but it's from a large snake, possibly even a basilisk. It's subtly different from the skin of a dragon, the scales flow differently."

Severus smiled. The trip to the dragon colony had not only brought Harry out of his depression, but had taught him something as well, "Open the book. I have checked it for curses already."

Harry nodded and sat down. He placed the book gently on the blotter of Albus's desk and lifted the cover. He turned the first page slowly, using his left hand to support it as it fell to rest against the cover. Harry leaned forward to look at the inscription on what Severus assumed was the title page and Severus rested a hand on Harry's back. He looked up and saw that Albus was examining the book intently. Soft hissing noises came from Harry's mouth as he adjusted his glasses on his face.

The headmaster raised an eyebrow at Severus, "This is a valuable book indeed. The Ministry would confiscate it immediately if they knew it was in your possession."

Harry looked up at them in confusion, "It's just a potions book, well mostly anyway. It looks like there's a section on charms, and maybe just some ramblings. Sure it was written by Salazar Slytherin, but he was one of the founders. That alone should make it an acceptable item."

Severus blinked. Did Harry realize what he was looking at? Albus chuckled and drew the boy's attention, "Anything written in Parseltongue is considered dangerous dark arts and is on the Ministry watch list Harry."

Harry coughed and looked down at the book again. He turned another page and scanned it quickly before turning yet another page, "Is it all in Parseltongue?"

"Wouldn't you know?" Severus asked.

Harry shook his head, "It looks like English, or actually Old English, maybe Middle English, to me. The writing is stylized somewhat, and the wording strange, but that's not unusual itself. Some of the books in our library that Hermione has read look like this. When I speak with a snake it sounds like English to me. I had no idea what it really was until that dueling club second year."

Severus stared stupidly at Harry for a few moments. How many more gifts did his son have lying dormant just because he didn't know they were there?

Chapter Twenty-Five

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The potion continued to work well, almost too well, in ridding Harry of his nightmares. All his nightmares were replaced with good dreams, very good dreams. Harry had woken more than once exceedingly embarrassed at some of the scenarios his mind had imagined but equally eager to fall back to sleep. He toyed with the idea of writing out some of his dreams and sending them to Charlie, as he was featured in most of them, but a combination of embarrassment and concern over the security of post stopped him.

There was a very awkward conversation with his father where Harry recommended lowering the proportion of cheering potion to sleeping solution. Snape of course asked why, causing Harry to blush and stammer. He eventually asked just what sort of dreams Snape had at his age, especially those that featured James Potter, and fled the room. Eye contact and conversation outside of the necessary was avoided for several days. The next few batches that Snape brewed experimented with the amount of cheering potion until they found an acceptable balance.

From Remus's teasing during dueling sessions Harry learned that his father had been confiding in the werewolf, one of the only other adults privy to the situation. After several duels had been won by Remus bringing up the potion's effect at a crucial moment Harry decided to fight fire with fire and answered Remus's questions bluntly. Remus stood in shock as Harry casually described in detail a dream he never had, allowing Harry to easily disarm him. They called a truce and all talk concerning the sex lives of either of them or anyone they knew was banned from duels.

It wasn't long before Remus broached the subject outside of duels though. Harry was sitting on the floor of the Room of the Requirement surrounded by an odd assortment of broken objects. He had been practicing the use of transfiguration in dueling, only allowed to block Remus's hexes and curses with transfigured objects. Flitwick was planning to join them for the next few sessions to incorporate charms, such as the animation and control of inanimate objects like Dumbledore had done in the Ministry. Harry suspected he would finally put that tap dancing pineapple lesson to use in a practical way.

Remus handed Harry a towel to wipe away the sweat from all the dodging of curses that he hadn't been able to block and sat down next to him, "Harry... I don't suppose the Dursleys ever talked to you about sex."

If Harry had been eating or drinking anything he would have choked as he burst out laughing, "Are you kidding me? I have no doubt that one of their deepest desires is that I never reproduce. They didn't talk to me about anything they didn't have to."

"You see Harry," Remus was clearly uncomfortable, "you're getting to the age where..."

"Stop right there Remus," Harry held a hand up. "Mr. Weasley talked to me and Ron the summer before our fourth year. I probably should have known that there are charms and potions for protection, but I had to go and mention muggle methods like the idiot I am. Of course, that led to me explaining to an overly excited Mr. Weasley and a furiously blushing Ron exactly what a condom is and how they work. I was stammering the whole time and probably blushing pretty badly myself. The twins saved us with a trial version of their own fireworks, and then gave us their own rather... strange... version of the talk later, complete with illustrations from magazines."

Remus was laughing loudly by the time Harry finished, "I guess the Weasleys fully took care of sex education for you." Harry immediately looked down to hide any flush that came to his face, thinking of Charlie's contribution to that education. Remus stopped laughing and Harry felt the mood in the room change, "Harry, did you and Charlie...?"

"I was wondering if anyone would ever bring that up," Harry sighed and then looked up at Remus, keeping his face blank of expression. "What would you do if I said yes?"

Remus seemed taken aback by the question, "... well, there's nothing really for me to do except make sure you're okay with your choices. Severus on the other hand..."

"You would tell him?" Harry asked cautiously. "Hasn't he asked Charlie already? I know you've seen him at meetings."

"Charlie is very busy and does not come to all the meetings, and there are many other things to discuss then. Not all of us can leave Hogwarts, and I think Albus has been purposefully keeping Severus and Charlie apart," Remus grinned.

Harry snorted and shook his head, "He would do that. I don't know what he'll do when he doesn't have my life to interfere with anymore."

"I'm sure Albus will find something to entertain himself with. He managed for over one hundred years before you came along," Remus said, still grinning. "I've talked to Charlie and he's told me that it's your place to share anything from your time in Romania, not his." Remus let the grin fade from his face and looked at Harry seriously. "Harry, you haven't had an easy life. If you're worried about my approval, don't be. Anything that makes you happy is fine with me."

Harry bit his lip and looked at Remus with watery eyes, "Thanks Moony." Harry leaned against the last Marauder, who wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders. "Does that mean I can run off to America and join the circus?"

Remus ruffled his hair, "Aren't you already part of a circus here? I'll only approve if I can get free tickets."

"Deal," Harry smiled, even though he knew Remus couldn't see it but guessed he would know anyway. "The answer is yes by the way."

"I figured as much by now," Remus said no more, just held onto Harry, who for once did not feel uncomfortable in the embrace.

"I have no regrets Remus," Harry said quietly. He felt the words ring true deep within, "not about anything really, not anymore."

The DA was getting better with each meeting. New students continued to show and were taught by the original members. When they all arrived at the Room of Requirement just two weeks before Christmas they found the room arranged differently than they were accustomed to and Harry dressed in muggle clothing – loose, shapeless pants, t-shirt, and trainers.

Harry stood at the front of the room, with Hermione and Ginny behind him. To the original members, it felt like the earliest meetings, with Harry back in charge like the wizarding world wanted, expected, "To this point you've all been learning spells to help you in a duel. In the practice duels we have, and in competition duels the duel ends when either a duelist loses their wand or is incapacitated. In real life the fight can end with your death."

Harry paused dramatically and surveyed the room. Every eye was on him, "As the vast majority of wizards cannot control magic without a wand they tend to panic once their wand is lost. Tonight we're working on things you can do once you have no wand." Harry closed his eyes and concentrated. He asked the room for a set of sparring dummies and opened his eyes when he heard the gasps. "Everyone is to leave their wands in their pockets, holsters, or wherever you carry them. The dummies can fire off some hexes and jinxes but nothing painful."

Harry walked up to one dummy and motioned for everyone to move to one side of the room so they wouldn't get hit. He showed them how to activate the dummy and proceeded to dodge hexes while fighting the dummy physically when he could. He scored a few hits, and finally managed a kick to the head that would knock an opponent to the ground. The dummy, registering a successful hit, shut itself off.

"Okay, one person to a dummy," Harry announced, breathing deeply and evenly, his hands braced on his legs. "Everyone else stand by for countering hexes. Switch out when you're too tired to

continue or the dummy stops. Make sure you pay attention to what others are doing, and what moves work."

Harry walked back to the front of the room and slid down a wall to sit on the floor. He took his wand out of its holster and performed a basic cleansing charm to get rid of the sweat from the fight.

"That was bloody brilliant Harry," Ron sat down next to Harry. Slightly less than half the class was working with the dummies while the others watched.

Harry grinned, "You should have seen the first time I went up against one of these. They're intended for fighting with a wand but they're pretty good for this, too. With my wand in hand I'm fighting two or three at a time. Remus just stands back and comments the whole time, the lazy bum."

Ron laughed, "I wouldn't call him lazy to his face."

"Hm, full moon's in a few days," Harry nodded. He surveyed the room and saw student after student get hit with hexes. Most of them just stopped the dummies, got a friend to cast the counter, and switched places. Some though, like Ginny, took the hits and kept fighting. A few students, mostly muggle-born students, clearly had some experience in the martial arts or just basic hand-to-hand fighting. "It's not a good idea to piss off a werewolf when the full moon is near."

"How are you feeling Harry?" Ron asked with concern clear in his voice.

"Better Ron," Harry sighed. He had always hated questions like that. "We think I can take the potion indefinitely. It doesn't make all the problems go away, but at least I can sleep. Thank you."

Ron shifted and his face started to redden, "Snape figured it all out. I didn't really do anything."

"He may have never started looking into it if you hadn't said something," Harry smiled at Ron's discomfort.

Ron was saved by Seamus hopping their way to get a leg-locker removed. The Irish boy collapsed next to Harry, panting, and sent Ron to battle his dummy. When the night ended all the DA members were sweaty and tired. Accustomed to such practice sessions Harry volunteered to stay behind and clean up. One of the conditions for continuing the DA was that the students keep the room neat. It only took a few minutes with magic. Harry finished quickly and turned to see Cho Chang waiting for him.

"Cho," Harry nodded. He briefly thought back to how nervous he was the year before whenever he saw her. There was still a dull, very dull, pain from how their attempt at a relationship worked out. It was nothing in comparison to everything else that happened that year though, and he hadn't thought about that particular episode of his life in a long time.

"Harry," Cho said and walked towards him. "I wanted to apologize. I didn't handle things well last year."

"Honestly Cho?" Harry responded. She nodded. "I haven't given it much thought. Too much has happened since all that. I was pretty stupid myself."

"Neither of us would have won any awards," Cho laughed bitterly. She stopped laughing and Harry thought she looked lost. "Do you think we can ever go back Harry? Everything is so hard now."

Harry could almost feel the memory of the knife parting his skin. He could hear Sirius's laughter echoing through his mind.

'Is that the best you've got cousin?'

He saw Sirius's face an instant before his body fell through the veil. Then he saw his father standing over his bed in the hospital wing. He felt the only paternal hugs he had ever received, the memory giving him warmth and comfort. Harry saw Charlie soothing a juvenile dragon, grinning at Harry as a callused hand stroked the iridescent scales. He saw Charlie's eyelids flutter closed as Harry entered him.

"I can't. I don't want to," Harry admitted. As much as he wanted Sirius back, he didn't want to give up everything else he had found.

Cho almost started to cry again and Harry braced himself for it. She took a deep breath and composed herself, "I guess there's no point in dwelling on it."

Harry shook his head and stepped forward. They met and he hugged her. Harry was amazed and delighted to discover that he had grown. He had already been a bit taller than Cho but now he had another centimeter or two on her. He smiled at the thought and was distracted when she tilted her head up and kissed him.

The kiss was nothing like their first kiss, almost a year before. For one thing, Harry had a little more of an idea of what to do. It also helped that Cho wasn't crying. She wasn't a bad kisser. Harry didn't feel shivers down his spine, his heart wasn't pounding in his chest, no fireworks were going off in his mind, but it was a nice kiss. When her tongue separated his lips and invaded his mouth Harry took the cue from her and deepened the kiss. He stepped into the embrace and felt her align her body with his. She was soft and curvy.

Harry was startled when a hand snaked into his pants and he stepped back, breaking the kiss, "Whoa. What's going on here?"

Cho's face was flushed and her lips were reddened from the kiss. It was a tempting picture, "I'm taking us back to what could have been."

"I told you I can't go back," Harry stepped back again, uncertain.

Cho walked forward and pressed up against him again, "It's okay Harry." She kissed his neck. "It's no secret that you don't have much experience with girls."

"That's true but..."

She silenced him with a kiss, "Just let me take care of everything."

She reached down to stroke him again and Harry felt himself harden in her hand. Something about it felt wrong, though. As much as he wanted her to continue a part of him equally wanted her to stop. He didn't want a short fling, or one night of fun. If he was going to be with someone he wanted it to mean something. That brought his thoughts back to Charlie. How much had their time together meant?

"Cho stop," Harry stepped back again. He was running out of room to retreat.

"What's wrong Harry?" Cho asked.

"I don't... I'm not..." Harry stuttered. He had once again lost the use of words around her.

Cho glanced down at her watch and gasped, "It's almost curfew! I have to run."

Harry watched her dash out of the room and felt like banging his head against the wall. He had the room bring back one of the dummies and took out his frustrations by dodging curses and punching the dummy. One wasn't working so he called up another. Once he had 'killed' both dummies without magic he settled down and countered the hexes that had hit him. There was nothing he could do about Cho until the next morning. He would just have to talk to her then.

Harry avoided all the questions from his friends when he got back to the common room much later than expected. He was sure he looked a sight. His sleep was uneasy that night, even with the potion. No matter how hard he tried to clear his mind there were too many thoughts racing around inside it.

Early the next morning Harry made his way down to the great hall. He hadn't slept much, but with the amount of sleep he was getting on a regular basis now he wasn't too worried. Cho wasn't at breakfast yet when the hall started filling up. Harry had already forced himself to eat, despite his nervousness. He could feel both Remus and his father watching him but refused to look at them. Ron was talking about some recent quidditch news when Cho finally entered the hall. She walked up to him right away and kissed him on the cheek, effectively silencing his friends, and most of the Gryffindor table, "Morning Harry."

"Morning," Harry stood but did not return the kiss. He felt his palms begin to sweat. "Can we go talk somewhere?"

"Anything you need to say you can say here," she smiled and reached for his hand. Harry held it back and she frowned, "I don't know what you think Cho, but I'm not interested in a relationship with *anyone* right now."

"But you..." Cho's expression was hardening into a glare.

"I did nothing to lead you to think otherwise," Harry tried to keep his voice low as the entire hall was straining to hear their conversation. "I tried to tell you."

She fumed for a moment, clearly trying to come up with some sort of scathing remark, but settled for slapping his face.

Chapter Twenty-Six

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The slap echoed across the hall. The Slytherins instantly started laughing as the girl spun and came face-to-face with Severus. He had left the staff table the instant she had approached the Gryffindor table. All the pieces had fallen together and Harry's clearly bad mood that morning was explained. Every student at the Gryffindor table was showing a look of surprise or glaring at the Ravenclaw prefect, as were many Hufflepuffs and even Ravenclaws to Severus's surprise. Harry's friends appeared to be no less surprised than the rest of the table. Whatever had happened must have been the night before if Granger and the Weasleys hadn't heard the tale yet.

"The Ravenclaw table is over there, Miss Chang," Severus hissed. "Five points from Ravenclaw for striking another student and airing your private disputes. In the future keep your love life private. This little display was most unbecoming for a prefect."

Severus turned to his son, who had simply raised his eyebrows in response to the slap and crossed his arms over his chest. The boy was picking up too many of his mannerisms. They were both lucky the charm disguising his Snape characteristics was firmly in place or the resemblance would be uncanny at times like that. "Come with me Potter."

Severus didn't bother to wait and see if Harry was following him. He knew that the boy would be only a few steps behind him. He led Harry down to his office. Once the door was closed and silencing spells were in place Harry threw down his bag and slumped in a chair. Severus cringed and reminded himself to work on Harry's manners as soon as the more crucial problems were under control.

"You know, most students don't have their parents drag them out of the great hall whenever there's a little problem," Harry grumbled.

"Well we always bend the rules for The-Boy-Who-Lived, what's one more?" Severus replied in a cold tone, following Harry's lead for the type of conversation they would have.

Harry looked up and glared, "It was nothing. It was stupid. I haven't even had a chance to explain to Hermione and Ron. Why am I here?"

Severus raised a single eyebrow, "It is not nothing, or won't be when the *Prophet* reports that little episode tomorrow."

"I tried to take care of it in private, but Cho wouldn't listen. I couldn't lead her on. The story that would have resulted from *that* would have made her a target," Harry explained with a measure of pain in his voice.

"Did you lie to her Harry? Do you want a relationship?" Severus asked quietly. He was not good at this, but he was the only parent Harry had. He at least had to try.

Harry started to laugh. The laugh grew and it took Harry at least a full minute before he had himself under control, "With *Cho*? Are you *insane*? After what she did last year I wouldn't date her again for all the gold in Gringotts. I've got enough problems of my own without dealing with hers. I'll be the savior of the wizarding world like everyone expects but I'm not taking on individual cases."

Severus felt his lips pull into a smile against his will. Harry's sense of humor had something of James in it, but a much more cynical flavor that Severus attributed to the circumstances of the boy's upbringing and battles with the Dark Lord.

"I am glad," Severus replied with a hint of teasing. "Charlie Weasley is a much better choice than that girl. She is quite annoying."

"I'm not dating Charlie," Harry said firmly. "I won't date anyone. No one is going to die because they're dating Harry Potter."

Severus sighed, "Harry, don't put your life on hold indefinitely. You already lost your childhood. Will you give up the rest of your youth?"

"What else can I do?" Harry asked in hard tone that Severus recognized as his own. "You did the same."

"I had no choice," Severus replied tiredly. He sat down across from Harry as Harry sprang out of his chair.

"Cac capaill," Severus raised his eyebrows in warning at the profanity, though he only recognized it for what it was through Harry's tone, but Harry ignored it in his near hysteria. "There's always a choice. You and James and Lily could have gone to Dumbledore. You could have stopped spying. He would have protected you. You could have been there..."

Severus looked down, tempted to snap back but restraining himself. Every time he wanted to yell at Harry now he focused on the memory of the scars and the images that had assaulted him when he scanned Harry's mind. He would never remind Harry of the Dursleys that way.

When he looked up Harry was standing rigidly, his frame shaking slightly. Harry's face was a study in pure unadulterated pain. Severus stood and held the boy but Harry pushed him away. He was far too young to have to face choices like these.

"Do you know how Quirrell died?" Harry asked quietly.

Severus shook his head. Albus had refused to tell any of the staff, or even let them see the body, "No Harry, I don't."

"He *burned*," Harry answered in a haunted voice. "My touch burned him because of my mother's protection. I killed him, and it wasn't an accident. I'm pretty sure Dumbledore thinks I don't remember what happened, but I can still smell it sometimes. I almost died that night but Dumbledore got to me just in time. Death follows me around but won't take me yet. You're already in too much danger. Don't get too close to me."

Severus was shocked at the level of sorrow in Harry's voice and stood, silent, as Harry picked up his bag and left the room for his first class of the morning. Anyone who had Potions that day wondered what had gotten Snape in such a particularly foul mood. An unusually high number of house points were taken. He was quiet at meals, as usual, scowling at the students and surreptitiously watching the Gryffindor table.

Harry seemed the same as he always was, Gryffindor's Golden Boy, the perfect picture of the savior. He laughed and joked with his friends, traded insults with the Slytherins, and talked with the few friends he had made in other houses, probably DA members.

The whole Gryffindor table laughed hysterically at the *Prophet* article 'Playboy Potter' and students from all houses were flirting with him, even Slytherins. Severus stopped pulling Harry into his office and restrained himself from checking in with Lupin. If Harry was waking up from his scar pain he was keeping it to himself again or his friends were helping.

Severus's potion work forced him into contact with Lupin, though. He was determined to develop a combination of potions that would ease the pain of the werewolf transformation and potentially extend the lifespan of werewolves. In his research he discovered that Lupin had lived longer after a bite than any other recorded werewolf. It was amazing the man was still alive, and he was not deteriorating as most werewolves did just prior to death. There was something about it that Lupin was keeping from him but Severus knew how stubborn the werewolf was and gave up prying.

"He actually told you to stay away from him?" Lupin asked, his eyes shut and his breathing carefully controlled, almost like meditation. He was lying on his back, naked on the dirty floor.

Severus was actually sitting in the Shrieking Shack on the night of the full moon to observe Lupin's transformation. There were conjured bars separating them for Severus's peace of mind. No matter what he told the Order, he broke out in a light sweat at the thought of being in the same room as a transformed werewolf.

"He told me not to get close," Severus corrected. "He was talking about Quirrell. Harry told me that he... he intentionally killed him."

Lupin's eyebrows lifted, "He may not be deluding himself on that one. Of all the deaths he blames himself for that is the closest to actually being his fault."

Severus shivered. He had killed and remembered in excruciating detail the first time. It was with *Avada Kedavra* and he was eighteen. Harry was eleven with Quirrell, "Why Quirrell? Why did he tell me?"

"Have you asked him?" Lupin asked, the tension in his voice growing.

Severus looked outside. It was starting to get dark. "We haven't spoken outside of class since."

"Don't let him drive you off," Lupin's breathing was getting harsher. "I tried, more than once, but Sirius and James were too damn stubborn. They were right, too. He needs you, Severus, especially with Sirius gone."

Severus was about to answer when a sharp intake of breath stopped him. He reached in his robes and pulled out a vial with an unbreakable charm on it and passed it through the bars to Lupin, "Try this one."

Lupin drank it down as the muscle spasms began and Severus summoned the vial back to keep it from falling. Lupin's eyes fogged as the analgesic took effect. Rather than use a pain reliever, Severus worked to interrupt the message of pain before it reached the brain. Lupin's body jerked and for a time Severus thought he was successful. Then a bloodcurdling scream was torn from Lupin's throat.

Severus jumped, but he couldn't tear his eyes away. Howls were mixing in with screams and they reverberated through the house. Hair sprouted all over Lupin's body and the claws were tearing at his body, which was twisting in ways Severus hadn't thought possible to recover from. When it was over a familiar wolf sat, panting for a moment in obvious pain before looking up at Severus.

The amber eyes were familiar, but the rest of the wolf had changed over the twenty years since Severus had last seen it. The body was larger, with much more grey fur. It was leaner as well, as though it hadn't been fed properly.

"Lupin?" Severus stood up, looking down at the animal that he instinctually felt should be trying to attack.

The wolf's head tilted up and cocked to the left. The eyes blinked. Severus could see intelligence, human understanding. He took a cautious step towards the bars.

Severus was shaking ever so slightly, and furious with himself for showing such weakness. He knew the Wolfsbane Potion let Lupin keep his mind, but knowing and seeing were two very different things. Maintaining eye contact at all times Severus slowly lowered to his knees. He reached out through the bars slowly and rested a hand on Lupin's head.

"James always said..." Severus swallowed, bringing up the painful memories. They had rarely fought, but when they did Lupin was a popular topic. "He said he always saw you in there, in the wolf's eyes. He tried... he wanted me to..."

Lupin nudged his hand and Severus instinctually scratched behind the ears. He withdrew his hand with a hiss and grabbed his left arm. Severus looked at Lupin and saw the wolf's lips draw back in snarl. A low growl rumbled through the room and Severus's hair stood on end all over his body. He emptied the wide assortment of potions from his robes, stood, and transfigured the old set of robes to the flowing Death Eater style. He used a tricky summoning spell and a white mask appeared in his hand.

Albus had warded the Shack on the off chance that Harry snuck out during a full moon to sit with Lupin. The white mask was tucked in the robes and Severus left by a side door, facing away from Hogsmeade. Just before he apparated away he heard a howl coming from inside.

"*Crucio!*" Severus inwardly cringed. The man standing next to him fell to the ground, writhing in pain. He had been the last to arrive, too late in the Dark Lord's mind. The curse lifted after a time and the man struggled to his knees, apologizing profusely. Severus had no idea what his name was.

"My loyal servants," the Dark Lord's voice carried through the Throne Room. Severus had noted that the gathering was small, not a good sign. "Tsybukin step forward." A small figure stepped out of the circle. "Your information has been proven accurate. You will lead the mission now."

To say Severus was not happy was a dreadful understatement. The Dark Lord had not sent him into the field since his return. Severus was much more useful in a laboratory or at Hogwarts. This could only mean the Dark Lord was questioning his loyalties. Severus followed the small figure outside of the caves and into a clearing that was often used for apparating.

Faces could not be seen behind the masks, so Severus had become an expert at identification by voice. The small Death Eater who was in charge had a gravelly voice with an Eastern European accent, "We shall punish the traitor tonight. Follow me."

Severus concentrated carefully while the man apparated, letting his own apparition follow the magical signature of the other man. It was a difficult thing to do under most circumstances but the link through the Dark Mark made it much easier for Death Eaters.

They appeared on the edge of a forest glade, a small hut with a thatch roof in the clearing. A thin trail of smoke drifted up from the chimney showing the hut was inhabited.

"The traitor is inside," Tsybukin said in a whisper. "Be careful. The Master wants him alive. Masks to black."

Each Death Eater tapped their mask with their wand, changing it from white to black. The white masks were used for terrifying victims, magical and muggle alike, and for hiding identities during meetings. Black masks were used for stealth.

Forward they crept, towards the hut, silencing charms masking their arrival. Severus checked the area for wards and carefully transferred the few that alerted the occupant of any intruders to him. Dismantling them would be just as bad as tripping them. The signature in the wards was distinct and Severus felt a knot twist in his stomach. He did not care for Igor Karkaroff, but had no desire to see the man brutally tortured and killed, the only possible outcome of that evening.

The other Death Eaters entered the hut while Severus maintained the perimeter. It was a full moon and they were in a forest. There was no telling what creatures could surprise them. Flashes from the hut and a yelp told Severus that Karkaroff was fighting back. He smirked behind his mask, not concerned at all if Karkaroff scored a few hits.

After several minutes though Severus knew he had to interrupt or face the Dark Lord's wrath. He quickly altered the perimeter ward to alert him of dark creatures and strode towards the hut. The door flung open and Severus sneered at the sight before him. The Death Eaters were shielding themselves behind pieces of scorched furniture and Karkaroff was shooting curses around a doorway. At least one Death Eater had been injured.

"Igor!" Severus called out authoritatively.

The curses stopped for a moment, "Severus?"

A well aimed blasting hex put a hole in the wall Karkaroff was hiding behind. *Expelliarmus!* Karkaroff flew back and his wand was launched into the air. Severus summoned it and sent magical ropes flying at Karkaroff, binding him from shoulder to foot.

Karkaroff struggled in the ropes while Severus crossed the room in a few long strides. He stood over the former Headmaster of Durmstrang Institute and pulled off his mask.

"S-Severus, please," Karkaroff begged.

Severus sneered, "You were living on borrowed time Igor." He spun and glared at the Death Eaters that were getting to their feet in the outer room. "You imbeciles! I've seen third years fight better than you. You!" Severus pointed a long finger at the small man who was supposedly in charge. "How were you ordered to transport the traitor?"

"P-Portkey," the man was trembling. Inner Circle members were often sent on missions to ensure they were successful and Severus was the only 'known' Inner Circle member that had never lived in Azkaban for an extended time.

"What are you waiting for?" he bellowed. Several of the Death Eaters were quaking. It was probable that at least one was a recently graduated student.

The man stepped forward and thrust something into Karkaroff's hand that was sticking out of the ropes, waiting. The two men were sucked away and the other Death Eaters just stood in place and stared at Severus. He scowled at them and mumbled, "Fools," before apparating away, following the pull of the Dark Mark.

The Severus Snape that stalked through the tunnels was the one that struck fear into the heart of every Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, even many that had already left Hogwarts. The mission had been a test of Severus's loyalty and of the worthiness of the other Death Eaters, most likely recent recruits. He was steaming when he arrived at the Throne Room ahead of the group to find Karkaroff lying at the Dark Lord's feet, still bound. He watched carefully as the others entered and identified at least two based on their gait.

"Severus," the Dark Lord hissed. "You are in a foul temper."

"These fools are incompetent My Lord," Severus said in a controlled tone. It was not wise to speak harshly to the Dark Lord. "There was no plan of attack and the spells they used were ridiculous. Not one of them tried to disarm or stun. They allowed Igor to barricade himself and would have been there for hours if I didn't step in. Flint and Rosier there should have been sorted into Hufflepuff."

The small man that had apparently located Karkaroff was shaking even harder than before and looked in worse shape than Karkaroff, who appeared to be looking beyond his own doomed situation and taking amusement in Severus's scolding of his captors.

The Dark Lord laughed, a grating sound that conveyed no happiness whatsoever, "You are critical of my followers Severus."

Severus bowed his head, "You deserve only the best Master."

A bony finger with a sharp nail ghosted down Severus's face from temple to chin and he fought back a shiver, "This, my young ones, is what you should strive to be. Your arm, Severus."

Severus held out his left arm and felt his sleeve pushed back. He braced himself against the burning of his flesh as the Dark Lord used Severus's Mark to summon the Death Eaters. It was as if the tattoo was being branded into his skin anew. When Severus was released he slipped his mask back on and returned it to its original white coloring. The others who had been on the mission followed his lead and stood gathered together, their mistake.

A few Inner Circle members must have been within the labyrinth of tunnels and came striding purposefully into the room.

"A reminder, my young ones, that failure is not tolerated," the Dark Lord hissed. *Crucio!*

The Death Eaters that had been with Severus all fell to the floor under the pain of the curse. The man who had brought Karkaroff in was watching in obvious fear as he stood by the captive. Severus took his place in the Inner Circle. The remainder of the evening would be a lesson that everyone in the Inner Circle had seen over fifteen years ago. The newly branded servants were about to learn exactly what happened to a traitor.

Voldemort's wand was pointed at Karkaroff, and Tsybukin had yet to move from the bound man's side. *Avada Kedavra!* To the surprise of everyone except those in the Inner Circle Tsybukin dropped, his lifeless body draping over Karkaroff, who was actually laughing silently. His laughter was short lived.

When Severus finally left it was nearing dawn. He was sickened and weary but he still had work to do. He apparated back to the Shrieking Shack to find the wolf curled up and asleep. For a brief

moment he envied Lupin, whose curse tortured but at least did not enslave. His footsteps awoke the wolf, who sniffed carefully before looking up at Severus.

Severus banished his mask and returned his robes to their original state, "Not now Lupin. It's almost time."

The wolf blinked and rose to its feet. It looked out the window and Severus saw fear. Again the howls of pain started as the body twisted. The screams echoed those that were still ringing in the Potions Master's ears from the long hours of torture and he was almost ill at the reminder. He shut his eyes and leaned against a wood plank wall, not bothering to plug his ears. No silencing charm could block the memory of Igor's yells.

"Blood Severus?" a harsh whisper broke through.

He started at the sound of his name. The screams hadn't stopped, but Lupin was back to his irritating human self, naked and beaten on the floor of the Shack. Severus selected a new topical healing lotion, based on the Wolfsbane Potion, along with a pain reliever and banished the bars that separated them. He poured the lotion on Lupin's body in liberal amounts, for once not concerned at the waste of his own work. Bruises and cuts faded away. Gashes closed and became deep pink lines, the precursors to new scars. It was at that moment that Severus noticed that Lupin had more scars than he did.

"Karkaroff... Lupin," Severus said firmly to get the man's attention as he reached for his head. He gently tipped it back and poured the pain reliever down his throat.

Lupin swallowed, "I think you can call me Remus by now."

Severus cringed but did not answer. He summoned the robes that Lupin had removed earlier and dressed the man with a tricky spell that James had taught him, bringing a small smile to the werewolf's lips. The unused potions slipped into Severus's robes with the empty vials and he cast invisibility spells on them both before helping Lupin to his feet for the walk back to the castle.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

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The mail hadn't come. It was strange to make it that far into breakfast without dozens of owls sweeping into the great hall to deliver letters from home, packages, magazines, love notes, and the *Daily Prophet*. Harry looked up at the Head Table for perhaps the hundredth time that morning. The staff was tense and alert.

Something must have happened the night before. He knew Voldemort had been particularly vengeful. The headache that remained as an echo of the pain that woke him was worse than any hangover, any concussion, and Harry had hardly slept that night. The look on his father's face told Harry that he was right. The scowl, sneer, and smirk were nowhere to be seen. Snape's face was like a marble statue, cold and emotionless.

The tension transferred from the professors to the students. The level of noise from gossiping, joking, chatter, and teasing was significantly less the usual. The older students were quickly catching onto the indications of the mood and several faces at the Slytherin table were beginning to look worried. The only thing that could cause such an atmosphere was the war, and many of their parents were involved.

Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Harry exchanged looks of understanding. Neville turned in his seat and relaxed ever so slightly when he received a gentle smile from Luna. Neville had quickly gained a measure of respect that year that no one would have dreamed of until the previous spring. There wasn't a student in the castle, with the exception of Malfoy and his cohorts, who would tease Luna when Neville was near.

"Why is Remus here?" Ron whispered to the others. The five of them were often left alone at the Gryffindor table. Seamus and Dean would join them on occasion but the mood of the hall had them distracting Parvati and Lavender, leaving the others to their talking. Anything important could be shared later.

Harry was the one who answered, "Snape has been working on some potions to help the before and after. Remus must be drugged pretty heavily. I think Dumbledore wanted the whole staff here this morning." He rubbed his scar.

"Something bad happened," Hermione agreed. "It takes a lot to delay the post. In *Hogwarts, A History*..."

The rest of the students had also finished eating and were whispering speculation. Dumbledore stood and nothing else was needed for silence to spread across the room.

"This morning's *Daily Prophet* has an article and images not suited to young eyes," the headmaster said firmly. "The fifth year prefects will escort the first through fourth year students to the common rooms and their post will be brought to them by the upper prefects. Classes are cancelled for the day."

Ginny and Luna both stood to fulfill their duties as prefects and the older students quickly rearranged themselves to surround those who had subscriptions to the paper.

Once over half the hall had emptied out the doors Dumbledore spoke again, "The picture on the front page this morning is rather graphic. The former headmaster of Durmstrang, whom you have all met, was captured and killed by Voldemort last night. His remains were transported to the offices of the *Daily Prophet*. Any of you who do not wish to see this may return to your common rooms and your housemates will bring you your post. The Heads of House will speak with each house after you join the younger students. I will ask that none of you discuss the news with the younger students before then, and that you do not share the images with them."

Every student in the hall remained glued to their seat, looking up at the head table in horrified fascination. Dumbledore sighed and clapped his hands. A screech was heard as the owls flew into the hall. Mail for the younger years was piled at the end of each table. Harry braced himself,

knowing this would be bad. No doubt Dumbledore would receive a huge number of howlers for allowing even just the older students to see the morning paper.

Until that morning all reports from the *Daily Prophet* on Death Eater attacks and the like had shown pictures of the Dark Mark in the sky, or ruined muggle houses. This would be the first that showed a victim, but most likely not the last. To many of the students of Hogwarts the war was about to become much more real.

Gasps were heard around the hall as the paper was unrolled. At least two Hufflepuffs and one Slytherin jumped up and fled the hall. The older Gryffindors crowded around Hermione, Seamus, and Katie Bell. Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and looked over to see Ron. The redhead was drawn up to his full height and Harry was thankful to have such a friend.

Igor Karkaroff, Death Eater, Found Dead

The picture was indeed gruesome. Harry felt his heartbeat quicken. The remains of the former headmaster could only barely be identified as human. Clearly visible was the Dark Mark on his arm and the word, 'Traitor', burned into his chest, glowing the same green as the killing curse. His head was missing, unevenly severed.

"I'm gonna be sick," a seventh year Harry didn't know said before he ran out of the hall.

Hermione left the paper on table for anyone who wanted to see it and wrapped her arms around Harry. She buried her head in his robes and whispered reassuring words that only the three of them could hear. Ron slid closer to them and pulled Harry and Hermione towards him, encircling them both with his long arms.

Harry didn't really hear what Hermione was saying. Every heartbeat pounded in his ears and the word 'Traitor' was glowing bright before him when he closed his eyes. He couldn't look at the professors, couldn't look at his father.

At the head table Remus was sitting next to Snape and they were both watching the varied reactions of the students, but paying particular attention to the sixth year Gryffindors.

"Ah," Remus said knowingly. His eyes lit up in sudden understanding.

Snape raised an eyebrow in inquiry, "Yes?"

"He's not pushing you away for your sake Severus," Remus said in an undertone. No one could hear their exchange.

"Then what is he doing?" Snape asked.

"He's starting to care Severus," Remus was looking at the Gryffindor table, at the three students taking strength and comfort from each other. "He's afraid of losing you too. He was trying to push you away to save himself. If that was you, not Karkaroff, I'm not sure what Harry would do."

Until that point Snape's thoughts had been mostly concerned with how Karkaroff's death foreshadowed his own, with how Harry's scar must have woken him up the night before. He had not considered that Harry would perhaps be imagining him in Karkaroff's place, losing yet another father. The students began filing out of the great hall slowly and solemnly. None of the Slytherins bothered to make nasty comments about the Gryffindors and the Gryffindors ignored the Slytherins in turn.

The staff table emptied at the same time, McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout joining their students for the walk to their common rooms. Madam Pomfrey assisted Lupin once the students were out of sight. Severus had to prepare himself for exactly how to address his students. He had to be satisfactorily scornful for the children of Death Eaters to report to their parents and somehow try to reach those students that had not decided their course.

Harry felt a hand holding him back as the Gryffindors climbed the stairs towards the Tower. He saw McGonagall with a concerned look on her face. He slowed his pace and nodded to Hermione and Ron that they should go on without him. When the other students were far enough ahead Harry stopped and faced his Head of House.

"If you wish to see Severus after the announcement I will take you to his quarters," McGonagall said softly.

Harry felt the prickle of tears but contained himself. All he could imagine was finding Snape's body without the head and the picture slowly changed to Sirius falling into the veil. He nodded, not trusting his voice. They continued and McGonagall spoke the password when they reached the Fat Lady.

"Lothlorien," she said clearly.

All eyes were on Harry and McGonagall when they entered the common room. Every Gryffindor was there, all sitting in the couches and chairs that had been turned to all face the same direction. Harry joined Ron and Hermione on the couch that they had claimed some years ago. The other sixth years and a few fifth years were grouped around them. Hermione took hold of Harry's hand and squeezed it.

"James Aaron Potter," Severus said softly, his personal password for the year that allowed him to override whatever passwords protected Slytherin House.

"Please speak the new password Professor Snape," a bodiless voice spoke.

"Traitor," Severus enunciated clearly. The passageway to the Slytherin Common Room opened and he stepped inside. His Slytherins were sitting calmly and properly, their backs straight and their eyes fixed on their Head of House. He surveyed his students, his gaze stern. There were some with fierce pride shining in their young eyes, some with fear they were trying to disguise.

"Slytherins are proud," he began. "Slytherins are clever. We do not show weakness. We do not bow in the face of adversity."

McGonagall gave her Gryffindors a soft smile, "If it were possible, I would shield each and every one of you from the terrible things that are happening outside our school, but then I would be failing to prepare you for the world you will face when you leave these grounds."

"As many of you know Igor Karkaroff has died as a traitor to the Dark Lord," Severus said without emotion and paused for effect. The tension in the room was greater than earlier in the hall. Among the Slytherins were those destined for service to the Dark Lord, those who would stay neutral, those who longed to break away from their Death Eater roots, and a very few who would publicly side with the light. While they were in school, though, nearly all were guarded in their opinions. "Take this day to further your studies, to consider your future path..."

"...remember that the victims of these times are not only those who fight on the same side as you," McGonagall told her House. "Mourn for those who die for their beliefs. Consider what forces guide the paths of your opponents. Examine your own choices and weigh your actions. Take today as a day of reflection."

"Do not mourn for Igor Karkaroff," Severus said coldly. "His death was a direct result of the choices he made. Make sure that you choose wisely. The new password into the common room is 'Traitor!'" Without another word Severus turned and left the room. His Slytherins were not accustomed to long speeches from their Head of House. He strode down the dungeon corridors and into his office, from which he entered his private quarters. If any of his students came looking for him one of the portraits outside his office or the Bloody Baron would alert him. He sat back on his sofa by the fire and closed his eyes.

"Should any of you need someone to talk to today your prefects will be on hand, or you are welcome in my office. Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley," Ron and Hermione looked up, "please go to the kitchens and ask the house elves to bring up tea for the House today." McGonagall gave Hermione a slight smile, "Please make no attempts to liberate them today." A chuckle ran through the gathered students, lightening the mood considerably and Hermione blushed. Gryffindors bounced back easily. "Mr. Potter, please come with me for a moment."

The trio followed McGonagall out of the common room and stood with her in the corridor, "I trust the two of you will make suitable excuses for Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Hermione replied. Ron nodded in agreement. The two joined hands and headed towards the kitchens.

As they walked towards the staff quarters wing Harry noticed that he was nearly as tall as his Head of House. He remembered his first year when she towered above him, stern and forbidding. Now she had a slight limp that appeared on rainy days, which were frequent in Scotland, as a reminder of the previous spring. She was more human to him now, as were all the professors, with faults and vulnerabilities like everyone else.

They arrived at the entrance to Snape's quarters in silence and paused outside the portrait guardian. McGonagall brushed back the hair on Harry's forehead and he wondered fleetingly why so many people felt the need to touch his hair all the time, "If you need any of us, we are here for you." Harry nodded, "Thank you." He spoke the password and stepped inside.

Snape's eyes were closed and his breathing was regular. Harry approached the sofa slowly and watched his father for a moment. He was very thin, too thin like Harry was. He looked fragile without his piercing stare and scowl and Harry felt a stab of fear. He had tried not to get close, but somehow he failed. He lied when he told Remus that he didn't need a father. It was probably the one thing he needed above anything else.

He took the blanket, green of course, that was folded over the back of the sofa and tucked it around his father. Harry then went into his room and came back with a pillow and another blanket, this one a deep golden hue. He took off his shoes and his robe, put the pillow on his father's lap, and curled up on the sofa.

-oOo-

Severus walked up the stairs in the Hog's Head to one of the few rooms for rent on the upper floor of the pub. He didn't even want to consider the rumors that might spread if anyone downstairs had recognized him, even with the hood obscuring his face. He knocked on the door and a soft voice told him to enter.

The auburn hair of Lily Potter was recognizable even with her back to him. He shut the door and stood just inside the threshold, "Why did you send for me?"

"You always are direct Severus, aren't you?" Lily turned and smiled at him. There was a small bundle in her arms and as she crossed the room Severus saw it shifting slightly. She held it out and Severus had no choice but to take the child, "I'd like you to meet Harold James Potter, Harry."

Severus felt a sharp jealousy for a moment and wanted to ask, why Harold? If he ever had a son of his own... but stopped his thoughts there. It was highly unlikely that he would ever have children. He inhaled and smelled the scent that instantly identified 'baby' in any human's mind. There was talc... and something sweet and fresh that Severus could not name. He shut it out of his mind.

"Another Potter," Severus sneered and looked down at the sleeping baby. "He is a carbon copy of his father."

"Not quite," Lily answered softly. She bent and placed a kiss on the baby's soft head of messy black hair.

There was a mewling sound and the baby's eyes opened... brilliant green eyes exactly like his mother's. Severus and the baby looked at each other and he had a moment of disorientation. The baby smiled and a pudgy hand reached up and took a fistful of his hair. Lily laughed and pried his hair out of the tiny fist.

"You did not ask me here just to meet Potter's son," Severus scowled at Lily.

Her eyes changed dramatically when they moved from her baby to Severus. She looked very sad, almost heartbroken, "No, Severus, not entirely. I wanted to thank you, for your information. We've gone into hiding, under the new Fidelius Charm."

Severus nodded and shifted the baby awkwardly. He had never held an infant before and was terribly afraid of dropping him, although Lily didn't seem worried about it, "It is all part of my duties." "I wanted to ask a favor of you Severus," Lily placed a hand on his. Her eyes were tearing. He just nodded, not sure what she would need from him. "If something should happen to me and to James, please... please watch over Harry for me."

Severus looked down at the child again. Harry was blowing spit bubbles and gurgling, completely unaware of the seriousness of the moment. He was a Gryffindor in the making.

"I will protect your son, should you and his father not live to do so," Severus answered, not quite sure why he was giving his word to safeguard the offspring of the man who had tormented him for years. Perhaps it was the life debt he owed to Potter, or that Lily had almost always been kind to him no matter what he said or did.

"Thank you Severus," Lily's hug took him by surprise. Her cheek was damp against with his. She drew back and pulled a cloth out of a lidded basket on a table to wipe her eyes. Lily gently took her son from his arms and kissed Severus on the cheek, standing on her toes to reach.

Harry was settled into the basket with a sleeping charm and Lily effortlessly cast several charms on herself to disguise her appearance, "I have to get back now. James will be home soon, and he's bringing the Marauders with him." With a final smile she pulled her hood over her head, picked up the basket, and left.

As Severus watched her leave his arms felt strangely empty. He waited for probably longer than was necessary before putting his own hood up and leaving the pub.

-oOo-

He woke with sudden clarity. For many years he had looked back on that afternoon and wondered what Lily was thinking, why she had chosen him. Severus blinked and began to stretch when he felt an odd weight on his legs. He looked down and saw the dark head, the face more peaceful in slumber than it ever was while awake. He saw the resemblance to the infant he had held.

Harry's arms were hugging his pillow, his head only resting on a corner and pressed back into Severus's stomach. His knees were tucked up against his chest and the deep golden blanket from his bed was half on the floor. Severus couldn't bring himself to wake Harry despite the tingling sensation in his legs. The boy still needed every moment of sleep he got.

Severus smoothed the dark unruly hair, understanding why every other adult close to Harry felt the need to do so, "You can't push me away Harry. I loved you from the moment I knew Lily was carrying you. Nothing you can say or do will change that."

Harry shifted in his sleep and hugged the pillow tighter. Severus noticed Harry's robes neatly folded on a chair, his shoes placed side by side under the coffee table. The glasses that probably needed a new prescription were on the table next to two cups and a steaming pot of tea, a large plate of biscuits, and a small dish of lemon drops which was resting on a folded piece of parchment. Severus wondered how he had managed to sleep while at least two people walked around his quarters.

"Damn you Albus," he muttered under his breath, "you'll never let me live this down."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

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Harry had met with Dumbledore and his father in the afternoon that day that classes were cancelled. They had discussed how he was doing catching up in his classes, okay but he needed much more work, and when he would start up his extra lessons again, during the winter holiday. So far the duels with Remus were the only extra training he was getting. Karkaroff was not mentioned, nor was Harry's mental wellbeing, or lack thereof.

"I noticed that you signed up to stay at Hogwarts over the holiday," Dumbledore commented.

Harry was instantly wary. He knew by then that the headmaster did not make idle conversation or mention anything, however small, without a reason, "Yes."

"Are you aware that you are blocking your power Harry?" asked Dumbledore after popping a lemon drop into his mouth.

The sudden change of topic was most likely related but Harry couldn't guess how. He glanced sideways at Snape quickly, who was no help, and back to Dumbledore, "No. I'm blocking... how?"

It was Snape that answered, though, "It is somewhat similar to Occlumency Harry. You have barriers holding back a significant portion of your power which fail when your emotions are high."

That explained how he wrecked the hospital wing that day, and how he could cast a corporeal Patronus. It was also something of a comfort. Harry had been sure there was no way he was going to be able to kill Voldemort.

"Our intention is to use Legilimency to help you break down those barriers," Dumbledore was speaking again. "The danger is that you have to lower your Occlumency shields for the process and be relaxed and aware. Once your shields are down Severus will help you with the barriers while I make sure there are no intrusions on your mind."

Harry nodded slowly. It made some amount of sense... but... "What does that have to do with whether or not I stay at Hogwarts for Winter Holiday?"

Harry saw Snape smirk in his peripheral vision and guessed that his father was proud of the deduction, but Harry's concentration was on Dumbledore. The headmaster was smiling and twinkling and Harry couldn't decide if that was good or not.

"We've asked Charlie to stay at Headquarters for the holiday so he can assist us in keeping you relaxed throughout the process," Dumbledore answered. "I've had Minerva remove you, Miss Granger, and the Weasleys from the list."

So Christmas was at Grimmauld Place, the last place Harry wanted to be. But it was the only place where he could continue his training, and it was where Dumbledore wanted to work on his barriers so he was there. The house belonged to Remus, and Kreacher and Mrs. Black were gone, but Sirius lingered about the house. The furniture, Buckbeak... every time Harry turned a corner something reminded him of Sirius.

The rest of the term had flown by as Hermione had Harry studying whenever he wasn't eating or sleeping. It had taken over an hour to convince her to let him resume his independent study in non-magical defense and it was worth it. The physical activity provided a much needed break from books and spell practice.

Whenever his scar was keeping him awake Harry snuck to the Room of Requirement under his invisibility cloak for extra practice. Remus did Harry's Christmas shopping for him, or at least took his list and had the Order take care of it. Ginny got Remus's gift on the Hogsmeade weekend before Christmas.

He had also continued his letters to Charlie under the guise of Ryan Kelly. He couldn't be specific about anything going on but the responses were still helpful and it was good to read news about the dragons and other dragon handlers. Occlumency lessons also resumed and the possibility of branching into Legilimency was brought up.

Those nights and during Potions were the only times he saw Snape. They hadn't had time to talk at all, and Harry wasn't sure what to say when they did. There was no time for any translation of the Parseltongue potions book, and Harry sensed that Snape was hesitant concerning that. Exams passed and Harry suspected he did relatively well, considering. His grades wouldn't be spectacular but they would be acceptable.

Hermione and Ron were together one floor down in the upstairs lounge and Harry was pacing a corridor on the top floor. He wanted them to have some time to themselves. Ginny was... actually Harry didn't know where Ginny was. She was probably writing to whoever her boyfriend was just then. Harry had given up keeping track.

The less anyone asked about the twins, the better. They had commandeered a basement room and made it into a potions and experiment lab. Unless you wanted to be a guinea pig for their latest invention that was not a safe room to enter or even ask about. The rest of the household was in their rooms, the kitchen, the library, the front room, or in the parlour setting up the Christmas decorations.

Harry was in the uppermost corridor because there were no ghosts of Sirius there. He had never seen his godfather in that part of the house. There were no portraits on the walls of members of the house of Black, no Buckbeak damage, just plain scenic wallpaper. He was facing away from the stairs and didn't hear the person that came up behind him. When the hand touched his shoulder, though, Harry dropped and kicked the person's feet out from under them. He spun and disarmed the intruder on his private space before he got a look at them.

"Charlie?" he gasped in surprise when he saw the redheaded dragon handler on the floor rubbing his arm.

"You've been practicing Harry," Charlie observed with a wry grin.

"Now you know not to sneak up on me again," Harry smiled. "Thanks for writing back to me Charlie."

"No problem," Charlie shrugged and Harry slid down the wall to sit on the floor opposite him. He tossed Charlie's wand back to him once he was sitting. "So, have you been following my advice?"

"Do you know how hard it is to date casually with this on your forehead?" Harry gestured to his scar in disgust and frowned. "You kiss a girl once and she thinks you want to marry her. I think I've given up on Hogwarts dating."

"Sticking with older partners?" Charlie grinned.

Harry snorted, "You should know. How about you, are you seeing anyone?"

"A dragon preserve isn't the best place to meet people," Charlie responded with a smile and raked a hand through his hair.

"That one's new," Harry took Charlie's hand and inspected the most recent burn, tracing it with his index finger.

"Reginald got cranky. He hatched not long after you left," Charlie explained and shivered under Harry's touch.

"You people are nuts. Who names dragons Prudence, Reginald, Constance, and Ernest?" Harry chuckled and shook his head. Charlie was laughing and Harry looked up with a small smile. "So it's been a while for you too then?"

Charlie nodded. A silent communication passed between them and they met in the middle of the corridor on their knees. During the heated kiss Harry pushed Charlie back against the wall and climbed into his lap, straddling his legs.

"Are you bunked in with Ron again?" Charlie asked breathlessly. Harry nodded and began kissing Charlie's neck hungrily, "My room then."

Harry jumped up and held out a hand for Charlie. Harry noticed he was just about the same height as Charlie, though would always be of a lighter build, even more so without his charms. He must have grown since he left Romania. They slunk through the corridors, keeping an eye out for any

other people, but Molly Weasley in particular, and locked Charlie's door behind them once they got inside his room. Charlie and Harry both set silencing wards.

Clothing was discarded in haste and Charlie tackled Harry onto the bed. It was as if they had only parted days ago, rather than nearly four months. Harry let Charlie take control and gloried in the weight of the older wizard's body on top of his. Charlie worked Harry to the edge before slowly bringing him back down, only to repeat the process. Finally Harry could take no more and they reached climax together.

Harry languidly ran his fingers up and down Charlie's spine, his back slick with sweat. Charlie lazily kissed along Harry's neck and jaw. Neither one wanted to move in the afterglow of their release. Charlie eventually shifted, though, to lay beside Harry. Harry pressed himself against Charlie and the redhead held him tightly.

They talked about some of the things that neither one of them would trust to letters. Harry had mentioned his father and headaches vaguely but filled in the details with Charlie holding him. He apologized for not writing in the weeks where he could barely think, let alone compose a letter. Charlie just kissed him in response.

"Well, I don't need any other Christmas presents," Harry commented and yawned.

Charlie chuckled, "That's good, 'cause you're not getting any."

"Prat! If I had the energy right now I'd hit you," Harry grumped.

"Hmm, I'll have to remember that... best time to tease Harry Potter, after sex," Charlie smiled.

"Watch out, the twins owe me," Harry threatened.

"And how is that?" Charlie asked.

Harry raised himself on his elbows and looked down at Charlie with a wicked smile, "I gave them my Triwizard winnings for their joke shop."

Charlie's eyes, which had been half-closed, popped open and he started to cough, "Fuck! You're their top secret big investor! Mum would have a fit."

"That's why only I, the twins, Ron, Hermione, and now you know," Harry leaned down and kissed Charlie. "We could probably add Bill and Ginny onto the list and make a grand conspiracy of it. Too bad your dad couldn't keep a secret from your mum to save his life." Another kiss.

Charlie reached up and pulled Harry down on top of him. He urged Harry's mouth open and kissed him passionately. Harry shifted so his body aligned with Charlie's and felt Charlie becoming aroused again. That triggered arousal in Harry and all conversation was abandoned.

That afternoon Harry actually managed a brief nap, after thoroughly exhausting himself. Charlie woke him when it was time to go downstairs and join the others for dinner. They couldn't afford to be missed during the meal.

Harry longed for the time in Romania when they could just fall asleep entwined. In London, with almost every member of the Order in the same house with them, they had to attend dinner and breakfast and sleep clothed. For the first time Harry was thankful that Snape hadn't taken a room in the house. It would have been suspicious as he had never spent more time with other Order members than he had to. Charlie cast a litany of cleaning spells, going as far as cleaning the clothes both of them were wearing.

Harry laughed, "Overdoing things a bit?"

"You have no idea what Mum is capable of," Charlie replied as he took down the silencing wards after another kiss and led the way down to the kitchen.

Harry instantly took his seat near the center of the table next to Ron and across from the twins. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that Snape was there and pulled Charlie aside as soon as they entered the room together. Harry's father did not look very happy and Charlie's face was already turning Weasley red.

"Damn," Harry cursed under his breath, "bloody Spanish Inquisition time."

"What was that Harry?" Ron asked, his mouth already full of food.

"You look much more relaxed Harry," Mrs. Weasley commented as she set another platter of food on the table. "What have you been up to this afternoon?"

"I was just talking with Charlie," Harry smiled at Mrs. Weasley. Ron must have made the connection because he started choking on his mashed potatoes. Harry pounded his back, "Slow down there Ron. You should actually get a chance to look at what you swallow before it enters your mouth." Harry couldn't help himself and grinned.

"Chew your food Ron. Well, it certainly worked," Mrs. Weasley said. "I'll have to ask Charlie how he does it sometime."

The twins had listened to the byplay with amusement and were chuckling across the table. The Order members slowly trickled into the kitchen and settled themselves around the table. Whether intentionally or not a seat was left for Charlie next to Harry. The twins were grinning evilly at Charlie's red face.

"Have a nice talk with Snape Charlie?" Fred asked while George snickered.

"It's been a while Fred, George," Charlie nodded at each of them. He didn't rise to their bait and looked directly at them, "Should I ask Mum if she's figured out yet where you got the money for the joke shop?"

Harry grinned as the twins paled and shook their heads simultaneously, "Um, no, no that won't be necessary. Right, Fred?"

"Absolutely right George. Our lips are sealed Charlie," both twins nodded fervently.

"Oh calm down," Harry teased. "I bet I could just announce it right now and..." Harry moved as if to stand.

"No!" the twins shouted together.

The conversation at the table stopped to look at them and Fred and George turned bright red. They both lowered their heads and paid very close attention to their food. Harry shook his head in amusement. He didn't want to risk Molly Weasley's temper any more than they did. After all, Harry was the one that made it fiscally possible for them to quit school.

He leaned towards Charlie, "What did he want?"

"He lectured me, made me feel like I was eleven again" Charlie replied. "He said if I hurt you I'd learn much more about the dark arts than I ever wanted to know."

Harry made eye contact with Snape, who was sitting at the end of the table on the other side and lifted his eyebrows. Snape gave him a stern look and mouthed 'later.'

Harry shook his head, sighed, and whispered to Charlie, "Great, now I get a lecture too. I've already had that talk from your dad."

"Ooh," Charlie winced, "I remember that one."

"Yeah, well you didn't have Gred and Forge there interrupt and then give their own twisted version," Harry whispered. "On top of it all Remus tried about a month ago. Everyone figures that because of the Dursleys I'm completely naive. Muggle grammar school taught me much more than I ever need to know."

Charlie couldn't hold his laughter in by the end of Harry's complaining.

By the number of members there, or by Snape's presence alone, it was obvious there was a meeting that night. That thought was confirmed when Dumbledore entered the kitchen just as the meal was ending. The four students stood obediently to leave the room but Dumbledore held up a hand for them to wait.

"Harry, I would like you to stay this evening," Dumbledore announced.

Harry looked at the headmaster in surprise and two voices, who never usually agreed, spoke together, "Albus."

"Severus, Molly, we've been over this," Dumbledore answered and turned his piercing gaze on the each in turn.

Neither of them said another word. Harry looked at Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. Ron was clearly jealous at Harry's inclusion in Order business and left the room in a huff. Hermione and Ginny both gave Harry sympathetic looks and followed Ron. Harry took the seat he had just left. The missing Hogwarts staff members filed into the kitchen and joined the other Order members.

"Did you know about this?" he asked Charlie quietly. Charlie shook his head. Harry looked across at the twins, "You?" They shrugged.

Once everyone was seated Dumbledore spoke up, "Harry, you have achieved a level of proficiency at Occlumency such that you can be more included in the Order. I cannot allow you to leave Hogwarts for meetings, but you will be kept informed of everything we discuss that concerns you. When you are residing in this house you may attend meetings, but you will not be a full member until after you come of age and leave Hogwarts. Nothing you learn here can be shared with your friends."

Harry nodded. It was more than he had expected, despite Dumbledore's promise the previous spring to never leave Harry in the dark again.

"Whatever you do Harry," Charlie whispered in his ear, "address everyone here by their first name, even my parents and Snape. By including you Dumbledore is saying you're an adult, so you should act like one. Better not call Tonks Nymphadora, though, or she'll curse you."

The meeting was more or less what Harry expected and he didn't have much to say. They talked about Death Eater movements and Ministry politics. Most of the meeting was actually pretty boring. Harry was glad he hadn't been there when Snape told everyone how Karkaroff was killed. He knew his father had to do some pretty horrible things to keep his cover with Voldemort but he didn't need to know the details. His knowledge and personal experience was bad enough.

The one thing that Harry hadn't expected was when the Order talked to him about Voldemort's plans where he was concerned. That sent shivers down his spine. Since Harry had heard the entire prophecy he had based all his thoughts of possible futures on that. He hadn't considered what Voldemort might plan based on the portion that he knew. All Voldemort really knew was the Harry had the power to stop him.

That meant that Harry was going to very powerful, possibly more powerful than Dumbledore. That also meant that Voldemort might see him as a desirable ally, rather than a target, if Harry could be turned... and he knew Harry had cast one Unforgivable already.

Harry wasn't paying too much attention as Dumbledore finished up the meeting. He was staring at the table top and examining the minutia of the wood while thousands of thoughts raced through his mind. Every scenario he had played out before had consisted of some grand showdown between him and Voldemort. Sometimes it was during an attack on Hogwarts, or on the Ministry. Once he had seen them fighting outside the Burrow even though the house had been empty for at least a year.

"Harry," Charlie's breath tickled his ear and Harry looked up to see the kitchen almost entirely empty.

"I told you Albus," Snape was saying, "he's still too young."

"Hm? No, I'm fine, just thinking," Harry insisted. Snape looked unconvinced. "No really, it's just..."

Harry looked around the kitchen and saw they were the only four there. He ran his fingers through his hair, "It says one of us has to die, so I never thought he'd try to recruit me, but he doesn't know..."

Harry saw they were all paying close attention to what he said. "Could we use that to our advantage?"

Harry noticed Charlie's eyes widen, Snape's facial muscles tighten, and Dumbledore looked at Harry as though he presented an interesting argument in a debate.

"No, absolutely not!" Snape was just about ready to explode. Harry recognized the signs well. "I forbid it. I will not allow you to get Marked."

Harry's temper flared. He was going to stand and argue Snape's right to forbid anything but Charlie put a hand on his leg and Harry regained control of himself. Dumbledore made no move to speak, just watched the exchange between Harry and Snape.

"It might not come to that," Harry said as calmly as he could. "I could lead him on... let him *believe* I want to join... and get close to him."

"Harry no," Snape wasn't wearing his blank mask anymore. He sat down across from Harry and looked him in the eye. Harry swallowed when he saw what looked like pleading in his father's eyes, "You don't understand. Every Death Eater is present at an initiation. What you're suggesting would be suicide."

Harry flinched and Snape instantly looked guilty. Harry looked down at the table again, "The prophecy says one of us has to kill the other, but it doesn't say that whoever does that will live. It might be the only chance I get... and if I have to sacrifice myself so he dies I will."

Charlie's hand tightened on Harry's leg and Snape stood up swiftly and crossed the kitchen. Harry looked up but Snape was facing away from them.

"We will do everything we can so that a sacrifice is unnecessary," Dumbledore said. Harry was still watching Snape's back. "Harry... Harry look at me," Harry obeyed and turned his head. "For now I do not want you to entertain the notion of joining Voldemort or leading him to believe you will. Severus will stall him and tell him your relationship is progressing slowly. You will concentrate on training. Right now you are not ready for any confrontation."

Harry nodded and stood up, "I better get to bed now, then. Good night."

"I'll head up too," Charlie stood to follow Harry and only then did Snape turn, glaring at Charlie.

They headed up to separate beds, as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were not aware of the extent of their relationship, whatever that was. That question bothered Harry and he insisted to himself that it was not dating, because that would put Charlie in too much danger. When Harry's scar woke him that night he wandered the house until he found himself slipping into Charlie's bed and falling back asleep in the older wizard's arms.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

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Once Harry and Charlie had gone up the stairs and Severus heard two separate doors close he followed Dumbledore to the fireplace and into the headmaster's office.

"Albus do not even think of sending my son to join the Dark Lord," Severus was a mass of conflicting emotions. He even wished Black was there. The mutt would surely agree with him on this one. "I'll leave the country and take him with me before I let him sell himself like that."

"Severus..." Dumbledore used his calming tone but it wasn't working.

"Don't you see Albus?" Severus wanted to start cursing someone. He was tempted to use Charlie Weasley as a target, but wouldn't want to see Harry's reaction to that. "Harry is almost nothing like James. He's like me. You know what my childhood was like, and he's got my temper on top of it."

"That I've known for years, my boy," Dumbledore twinkled at him and Severus wanted to curse the twinkle out the man's eyes. "What do you think I've been trying to show you for the past five years? Why do you think I kept throwing the two of you together? There were times when I wished Harry had been sorted into Slytherin as it would have forced you to get to know Harry instead of Potter." Severus gave up the idea of cursing Albus and hit the wall instead... hard. Fawkes fluttered his feathers and squawked at Severus. The headmaster had pointed out more times than Severus could remember that Harry was not James, but he had refused to listen.

"Calm yourself Severus," Dumbledore said firmly. "I have no intention of having Harry join Voldemort, now or in the future." Severus nodded and did his best to regain his composure. "We will return to Headquarters tomorrow afternoon to work on Harry's barriers. That gives him a few days to adjust before Christmas, and then we can get to work."

Christmas. Severus cursed. He hadn't exchanged gifts with anyone except the headmaster since before Lily memory charmed him. He had to find a gift for Harry in the next few days, and probably more than one. When he looked up Albus was twinkling at him again. Severus made sure to slam the door on his way out. It was childish, but it felt good.

With the number of Order members living at Headquarters Severus had to use his Professor Snape persona. He arrived while they were eating lunch and was pleased to see Harry joking with his friends and the others at the table. Granger must have calmed Ron Weasley down while the Order was meeting. Harry was sitting between Ron and Charlie Weasley and they were all smiling between mouthfuls. Severus wondered briefly how Molly Weasley managed to feed everyone, especially with the voracious appetites her children had.

"How about chess later 'Arry?" Ron Weasley asked.

"Ew," Granger commented from across the table, "swallow before you talk Ron. Honestly, you have the worst table manners."

"I am afraid Mr. Potter has other plans for this afternoon," Severus stepped out of the doorway and commanded instant attention.

"I do?" Harry asked in confusion.

It was just too tempting, and Severus knew Harry wouldn't take it seriously. He looked down at Harry like he was a potion that had taken on an unexpected foul odor, "Yes, you do."

Harry shrunk back under the glare, and several Order members shot him sympathetic looks, "Sorry Ron."

The youngest male Weasley glared at Severus for good measure and reassured his friend while Severus exchanged a look with Charlie. The dragon handler glared at him and gave him a short nod.

"I will see you in the front room when you are done Potter," Severus looked up and saw he still had the attention of the entire room. "I expect we will not be disturbed. If anyone has need of the fire, use it now or use the kitchen fire when Molly relinquishes it. Do not keep me waiting Potter."

Severus was only in the front room a few minutes when Harry and Charlie walked in. Harry looked nervous, "So we're, um, taking care of the barriers today?"

"It will take you some time to adjust to the changed flows of magic in your body," Severus said more softly than most people in the kitchen would think he was capable of. "We wanted you to be able to enjoy at least some of your holiday."

"And then training starts," Harry raked his hands through his hair nervously. It was similar to a gesture James had, but for different reasons. James brushed his hands through his hair to ensure it was suitably messy. Harry did it as a nervous gesture or an attempt to flatten the wayward raven locks.

Severus drew himself up and focused, "Weasley, we need to set protective wards on this room. I want you to put an Imperturbable on the doors, and then shield the room against fire, shock, and set the strongest silencing wards you know. I trust with your work you are capable of this?"

Charlie nodded and set to work without question. Harry looked at Severus and he could see the question forming in his son's mind. He didn't need Legilimency when Harry's face was so expressive.

"We have no idea what will happen when we get rid of those barriers, and some we may have to tear down by force. It is better to be safe," Severus explained as he started to concentrate on his own internal magic. "Just have a seat and start to relax yourself. Albus should be here momentarily." As he spoke the fireplace flared to life and the headmaster stepped out, "Ah, I see you have begun without me."

Dumbledore held out his tin of lemon drops to Harry and Severus nearly laughed out loud at the suspicious look in Harry's eyes, "Do you lace these with something?"

Charlie's words faltered and he had to start his fireproofing ward again. Severus raised his eyebrows at his son and Dumbledore just laughed, "You are the first to ask me Harry, though I know your father has been tempted to do so many times. This particular tin has a mild calming draught. I thought we all might benefit today."

Harry nodded, took two lemon drops, and closed his eyes as he sucked on them. Severus narrowed his eyes at the headmaster but took a single drop, his first lemon drop ever. Charlie absentmindedly popped one in his mouth as he finished his ward and started on another. Dumbledore pocketed the tin and signaled Severus to start the ward against a pure magical outburst, like the one Harry had in the hospital wing. Soon the headmaster's voice wove in with Severus's and the room was fairly sparkling with magic.

Severus noticed that Charlie had added a few protective wards in addition to the ones he had asked for and nodded his approval. It took a moment before he noticed that Dumbledore had cast a ward against dark magic and he shivered. It was possible that some more powers transferred to Harry from Voldemort could be unleashed.

"How well have you trained your empathy?" Severus asked Charlie.

The redhead looked somewhat startled, "I haven't, not really. There isn't much to train, just enough for some sensory." Charlie shrugged, "I only really use it for work for the most part."

Dumbledore twinkled and Severus knew that no matter what new emotions and memories had been opened up to him he would always hate that twinkle. He attempted to ignore the headmaster and directed Charlie towards the couch that Harry was sitting on, "There is more than you think. I've seen you calm Harry more than once with a single touch, and that is through strong Occlumency shields. If you have the time you should meet with someone to work on that."

"Harry is particularly receptive," Charlie shifted uncomfortably and Severus knew he was remembering the discussion they had the previous day, "or easy to read. He fairly broadcasts his emotions."

Severus turned to the headmaster with an accusing gaze. The man had a tendency to hold his cards too close. Dumbledore just nodded, "It is possible that Harry has some empathy as well. He has shown himself to be very good with animals."

"That information may have been helpful last year," Severus glared. Empaths were especially vulnerable to intrusions on the mind.

"Would it have made any difference?" Dumbledore's eyes changed from kindly old man to piercing and wise. Severus hated that.

"No," he growled reluctantly.

"I'm sitting right here, you know?" Harry chuckled from his spot on the couch and Severus suspected there was a little more than calming draught in those drops. He was having a hard time staying angry himself.

"Stand for a moment Harry," Dumbledore instructed. Harry obeyed and the couch transformed to a large loveseat with ottoman. "Have a seat Charlie and Harry you can sit in front of Charlie. All you need to do is maintain contact and sooth whatever tensions you feel."

Charlie and Harry settled themselves and Severus saw the small smile that danced across Harry's face as he leaned against Charlie's chest. Charlie draped his arms around Harry's waist and Harry settled his hands over Charlie's. Their ease with each other reminded Severus of himself with James but he pushed the distracting thoughts away to examine later. If Harry and Charlie were both empathic...

"Good," Dumbledore summoned one of the high-backed chairs that sat by the fire and set it down next to his own for Severus. "In a moment Harry I want you to drop your shields. I will enter your mind and construct my own shields to keep any intrusions out while we work, and then let Severus in."

"Mm-hm," Harry nodded his understanding and his eyes focused in concentration.

Dumbledore spoke softly next to him, *Legilimens*. After a moment he motioned to Severus who repeated the spell with his wand trained on Harry, *Legilimens*.

There was a hint of resistance when Severus hit Dumbledore's shields and then he was in Harry's mind. He did a quick scan, looking for Harry's conscious thoughts, and found himself standing in a void with Harry beside him. Strangely, it was a Harry without the charm Lily had cast on him as an infant.

"So, how do we do this?" Harry asked, hands in his pockets.

"This is your mind," Severus replied with a smirk. "I'm here to help, not do all the work."

"Whatever," Harry rolled his eyes. "You've already seen these barriers, so why don't we have a look?" Severus took Harry's hand, "Just let yourself follow me. This might feel a bit strange."

He sought out Harry's internal magic and let himself be drawn to it. There was a pulling sensation, something between apparition and travel by Portkey, and the void was filled with pulsating light, leaking through an odd set of blocks.

"Whoa," Harry walked up to the light and reached out to touch his barriers. "You weren't kidding."

"I don't kid," Severus said sternly.

"So it shouldn't be flashing like that?" Harry questioned, his hands running over the uneven surface. Severus recognized children's building blocks, both wooden and some weird shiny ones that locked together, something resembling a spider's web, what looked like scribbling with crayon, and even some vines and other plants as components of the barrier.

"No, it should be shining continuously. What's leaking out is what you use now," Severus explained. Harry turned to him with wide eyes and Severus saw that he didn't wear glasses in his mind, "But... but there's so little of it..."

Severus arched a single eyebrow, "The prophecy does say you have the power to kill the Dark Lord, and each of your parents were very powerful in their own rights. Do you actually think you've already shown power even approaching what Albus is capable of?"

Harry shook his head and swallowed. He continued running his hands over the barrier, "Why is this here? How did I do this?"

"Whenever you performed accidental magic as a child you were punished," Harry nodded. "Each time, did you wish you didn't have the ability to do whatever you thought you were doing?"

Harry nodded and tears started to leak out of the corners of his eyes. He started to shrink before Severus's eyes, to regress in age, "I'm a freak, abnormal, unnatural."

The words were spoken harshly and Severus wanted to argue them but he was mesmerized.

Severus saw the younger versions of Harry he had known at Hogwarts. The de-aging continued and a scrawny boy that was all arms and legs in oversized clothes gradually got smaller and smaller. Bruises grew from faded marks and then disappeared. An assortment of injuries flashed, too many for even a very clumsy child, at least three plaster casts on various limbs. When it stopped there was a toddler looking shyly up at Severus.

"Hi, I'm Hawwy," Harry said in a childish voice. He reached tiny arms towards to Severus, "Up?"

Severus bent down and picked Harry up. He couldn't even be two years old yet. The de-aging process had stopped not long after James and Lily died. He held the child close to his chest and wished he could stay there with his young son, to raise him and teach him.

"I was pretty cute, wasn't I?" Severus started at the voice of sixteen year old Harry. The boy stepped around from behind him and tickled the child in his arms, making him squirm and giggle. "Too bad we don't have a camera in here. All my pictures jump from what Mum and Dad took to Hogwarts. I still don't have any of us."

"I'm sure we can arrange for some," Severus said softly, glancing from toddler to teenage Harry.

"How did you do that?"

Harry shrugged, "Like you said, it's my mind. I think we need him. Hey Harry, want to see some magic?"

The toddler looked to the teenager and grinned, nodding his head exuberantly. The child settled down, though, and the grin faded to a sad, almost desperate look, "Magic not weal. No such ting."

"Uncle Vernon is wrong Harry," teenage Harry smoothed back the hair on toddler Harry's head and tilted his chin up gently. His voice was soothing. "He's mean and he's wrong. Magic is very real, and you are magic."

The toddler was crying silently, "No, I'm bad, bad, bad, fweak, burden, bad Hawwy."

"Show us Harry," Severus said to the toddler. Teenage Harry and toddler Harry took on the same frightened look. The toddler reached out to the teenager, who lifted him from Severus's arms. The two of them were breathing in sync, heavy controlled breaths. "What makes you bad?"

The toddler buried his face in the teenager's robes and the teenager bent down to whisper a bit shakily in his ear, as though he was not convinced himself, "We can do it Harry. It's okay. He'll help us."

As teenage Harry continued to talk to toddler Harry it gradually got darker around them. Teenage Harry bent down and set the toddler on the ground, kneeling behind him with a hand on his back. There was a scream and a flash of green light and second flash, brighter than the first. Both the toddler and teenager reached up to press his right hand against his scar.

The scenes played in front of them too rapidly to truly distinguish one from another and all the while the toddler slowly aged, all the images centered on him. Vernon and Petunia Dursley flashed in and out of the space, screaming at Harry and sometimes slapping or shaking him. Dudley Dursley came at various ages with fists flying. Severus tried to interfere as soon as the memories began to cycle

but was flung back only to be steadied by the teenage Harry, who was looking on with both pain and determination.

An angry fire lit up the teenagers eyes and they nearly glowed with its intensity, "I won't let them, I won't."

Severus stepped behind Harry and put a hand on his shoulder, "We won't let them Harry. You will never be alone in this again."

"You unnatural freak," Vernon Dursley bellowed at a young Harry, maybe eight years old. "What have you done this time?"

Teenage Harry stirred in front of Severus and stepped forward. Dursley couldn't see or hear them but the teenaged Harry didn't seem to care. "I am not a freak! I am not unnatural, or abnormal, or bad! You're wrong! You're wrong! You're the one who's a freak! Look at your pig of a son! Look in a mirror for Merlin's sake! You're so damn normal it's scary!"

Severus looked behind himself and saw that the pulsating light was there. Pieces of the barrier were flaking away and dissolving as Harry ranted at his aunt and uncle and cousin. All the anger and pain he had held back for fifteen years was lashing out at the rapidly changing images. Severus turned his attention back to Harry and tried to comfort him but was pushed back by that same invisible force.

When Harry ran out of words he collapsed to his knees, shaking and sobbing. A mirror version of himself was looking down at him sadly.

"They're gone Harry," the vision Harry said.

Harry looked up at himself and Severus wanted to hug the boy but was unable to reach him,

"They're never gone."

"But they don't have any power over you, not anymore," mirror Harry smiled. "You have a family, and friends, and a world where you belong."

Harry slowly got up from his knees and reached out to mirror Harry, "I'm afraid."

Severus glanced over his shoulder and saw that the barriers were almost entirely gone. All that was left was a fine web, and the light was still pulsing, but Severus didn't know why. It was almost too bright to look at, but Severus could almost make out the orb as a ball of strings of light.

"There's nothing wrong with being afraid, so long as you do not let your fears rule you," mirror Harry smiled and started to change.

Severus felt Harry take hold of his hand again and squeeze, "What's happening? I don't like this."

There was touch of panic in his voice.

Before Severus could answer they were spinning and the pulsating orb of light that was Harry's power orbited around them. They came to a stop with the mirror Harry standing in front of the light. He no longer looked quite like Harry, though. There were too many similarities to name, but something essentially different.

"Tom," Harry growled beside him, a wand materializing in his hand and pointing at his mirror.

Severus would have gasped if he didn't have firm control of himself. The face in front of him he had never seen, but the altered form of it would be the Dark Lord of twenty years in the past. He found a wand in his hand and raised it with Harry.

The mirror boy laughed, cruelly, "No Harry, I'm not Tom. I'm you... or rather I am part of you, your inner Tom if you will."

"I won't," Harry ground out behind clenched teeth. "I am nothing like Riddle."

'Tom' approached them and stood so Harry's wand was just brushing his chest, right above the heart, "But you are Harry, and you know it. You've seen it, how many little things connect you to him."

"Those don't matter," Harry's eyes flashed. "It's our choices that define who we are. It's the differences that matter. I *choose* to be different from Tom. I *choose* to be Harry."

A smile, cold and harsh, stretching the lips thin, slowly grew on 'Tom's face, "It's not that easy Harry, when he won't let you choose, and you have yet to reach that time."

'Tom' flickered and disappeared. Harry's eyes were wide and panicky. He turned rapidly, searching the void, pointing his wand in every direction.

"Where did he go? What did he mean?" Harry asked.

Severus's eyes were still on the light, on the final barrier, that was moving ever so slightly, undulating, "You have one barrier left Harry."

"What is going on?" Harry yelled.

Severus reached out to steady his son, "I've got you Harry. I'm not letting go."

Harry latched onto Severus's grip and Severus felt a calming wave pass over them. *Charlie*, Severus thought. Harry's breathing evened out and he faced the pulsating light with Severus. Harry stepped forward and reached out to touch the barrier like he had before. Severus wondered how he could stand to look directly at it, but perhaps it appeared differently to Harry. It writhed under his touch and shifted, thickening and twisting.

"Oh shit," Harry cursed and snatched his hand back. "This is not good. This is not good."

"Harry?" Severus questioned.

Harry guided Severus to stand behind him with a steady hand, "I think we're about to face my real inner 'Tom'. You sure you want to be here?"

"I already told you Harry," Severus said with fierce determination, "I'm not letting go. I'll be damned if I let anyone hurt you, and that includes you."

"Uh huh," Harry nodded. "I think this is definitely one of my weirder moments."

The web compressed to a single strand and thickened. Severus knew where this was going before he saw the scales appear. He flashed back to the failed dueling club, the first time he heard Harry speak Parseltongue. He looked down and was surprised to see Harry smiling.

"This is nothing," Harry's smile was full of self-confidence. "I killed a basilisk when I was twelve.

There's not a snake I'm afraid of."

"Are you sure you're a Gryffindor?" Severus asked with a smirk.

Harry shrugged, "The hat almost put me in Slytherin. I used to think it was because of him, but now I'm thinking it might be you."

Severus smiled, his heart swelling with pride. Ever since he had discovered Harry was his son he had wondered about his sorting, about the memory he saw of the sorting hat in Harry's second year,

"Either way I am proud of you."

"Good," Harry said curtly. "Now let's get rid of this fucking snake and get the hell out of here."

Severus snorted, rolling his eyes at the profanity. He would have to do something about that too, "Indeed."

The snake was fully formed and rose up above them, curled around the light. Its coils were squeezing, causing the pulses. Harry hissed at the snake and Severus shivered. It hissed back and flicked out its tongue. The hissing went back and forth and the snake lowered its head level with them. Harry hissed out what had to be a command but the snake squeezed and hissed back.

"With me, blasting curse on three," Harry said and immediately began his countdown.

Their wands were side by side, pointed at the giant snake's head. On three they cried out together, *Reducto*, and there was a great flash of light. For a moment Severus thought that Harry's power would consume them both and then he thought no more.

Chapter Thirty

-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-

Severus withdrew from the pensieve and smiled broadly. He kissed Lily on the cheek and James on the lips, "I wish I could have been there."

"You were," Lily said softly. "You were with us."

It had been almost painful to watch, the Marauders all in matching deep gold dress robes, lined up next to James as Albus performed the ceremony. Putting the Marauders in gold had to be a joke, as they were far from pure. Alice Longbottom, Beatrice Collins, and Yvonne Diggory stood, all in crimson, with Lily. It was an entirely Gryffindor wedding party, all the Gryffindors from their graduating year, though one of them was already married to a Ravenclaw. Lily's family was there, her sister looking decidedly unpleasant, the only muggles present. Portraits of the elder Potters, having died while James was in training, were beaming from their easels.

"Are you ready Sev?" James bit his lip and his eyes burned into Severus's.

Severus brushed his hand down James's face to cup his cheek and trace his lips with his thumb, "I'm ready."

They stood facing each other and holding hands. James and Lily had just returned from their honeymoon, though their friends were under the impression that they would be gone for another week. The three of them were in one of the houses belonging to the Potter family, a rarely used cottage in the Scottish Highlands. Very few people even knew it existed and there would be no interruptions unless the Dark Lord called Severus away. It was where James and Severus met while his parents and uncle were still living.

Lily started speaking, her wand tracing a design in the air that Severus knew but did not see then. Her words washed over him in waves of magic such that their spoken form lost meaning. It was the same ceremony Dumbledore had performed for Lily and James, chosen for its permanence and flexibility. Most bonding ceremonies would not allow another bond in one of the participants. This one allowed James and Severus to bond as well, but only with Lily performing the bond... and would work around the Dark Mark.

Severus felt like he was floating as he stared in James's eyes, lost in the deep hazel orbs. He repeated the ritual words at the appropriate places, a portion of him just aware enough of the surroundings to do so automatically. James's voice spoke with his and they blended together, baritone and tenor. Severus's rich dark tones underscored James's light dancing sounds. Lily's gentle mezzo led them and her magic flooded through them. Severus felt the bond between the man and woman as his own formed with James. He could see in the surprised dark eyes that James felt a hint of the Dark Mark, and that Lily was touched by it through James.

The three of them were standing in silence while the magic settled and came to rest around them. Severus stepped forward and sealed the bond in James's arms. He felt Lily's hand on his back in blessing of the moment. James stepped back with an enormous smile and led Severus away from his wife, towards the stairs that led to the bedchambers on the upper floor. Lily smiled at them as they walked away and apparated out of the cottage with a 'crack'.

-oOo-

A soft cool cloth swept across Severus's forehead. He sighed and opened his eyes to see Albus Dumbledore leaning over him. He shut his eyes again in an attempt to hold back the growing headache... and to hold onto the memory. There were several vials in his pockets and he brought out a pain killer, swallowing it like a shot of whiskey and blessing magical remedies as the headache instantly faded away.

"How is he?" Severus opened his eyes again. The room looked fine. He expanded his awareness to check the wards they had cast and found that the magical outburst ward had been activated... and almost broken. Several of Charlie's wards had activated as well.

"He'll be fine," Dumbledore answered with a chuckle, "now that you're awake."

Severus saw a blur shoot towards him and found his arms full of crying teenager. He squeezed his son and looked at Albus and Charlie in confusion, who were both smiling at him.

"You were unconscious for a good hour," Charlie spoke up. "We were all protected from the blast somehow, but you were *in* the blast. Harry's been on the edge of panic since he woke up no matter what we said."

"I'm fine Harry," Severus whispered into the dark hair. He kissed the top of his son's head. "I promised you I wouldn't leave you."

Harry nodded against his chest but didn't say anything. The boy was curled into a ball on Severus's lap and he marveled at small Harry could make himself. The tears abated and were followed by deep, slow breathing.

"He'll sleep for a long while," Dumbledore said with a fond look at the young Gryffindor. "I take it you were successful? Harry wouldn't say much, but the change in him is strong."

Severus nodded and made to stand. Harry would wake with a stiff neck unless he was moved to a couch.

"No," Charlie stopped him with no more than a word. "He'll sleep better if you hold him. He needs it. Last night was bad."

Albus raised his eyebrows in amusement and Charlie blushed. Severus gave Charlie a look of disapproval, "I thought Harry was sharing a room with your brother."

"He showed up not long after I fell asleep," the blush disappeared and Charlie's blue eyes darkened.

"I assure you he was in too much pain to do anything you would disapprove of. I helped as much as I could but he was in and out of sleep all night."

"Did you get enough sleep?" Dumbledore looked sharply at Charlie, concerned.

Charlie shrugged, "We keep odd hours in Romania. I've had to stay up two nights in a row with a sick dragon before. I've learned to deal with it."

Severus couldn't help the laugh that escaped, startling the dragon handler. No matter what Harry had said Severus was willing to bet that Charlie was not quite ready for Sev, "Harry can be about as much trouble as a sick dragon."

Charlie blinked, and then smiled, "Not quite. He doesn't light your clothes and hair on fire when he sneezes."

"Not yet," Albus chuckled. "I have to get back to Hogwarts for the evening meal, and so do you Severus. There are students staying that would miss us."

Severus scowled. A few Slytherins had signed up to stay for the holiday, and Slytherins almost never stayed. These particular students had Death Eater parents or siblings and Severus was willing to bet they were there to keep an eye on the school. Anything unusual, like Albus and Severus both missing a meal, would be noted and reported home, and from there to the Dark Lord.

Albus was already removing the wards from the room and Charlie bent down to lift Harry from Severus's lap with remarkable ease. Harry made the transition easily from Severus to Charlie but Severus felt cold and empty at the change.

"Let him sleep through dinner if he needs to," Severus ordered before stepping into the fireplace. "I am sure your mother would be more than willing to keep some food for him, or even cook a fresh meal when he wakes."

Charlie laughed lightly, "She would insist."

Harry was surrounded by warmth. He burrowed into the feeling and smiled. He hadn't felt warm like that in... well... he couldn't ever remember feeling that warm and happy. The dull pain that constantly pervaded his head was still there, but a euphoric floating feeling made the pain seem distant and unreal.

"Whoa, dial it back a bit Harry," a voice invaded his world and the warmth behind him shifted.

"You're making me high here too."

Harry laughed and opened his eyes. He rolled over and looked at Charlie, "I broke my ankle once, and the muggles had to put a metal pin in the bone, and the drugs in the hospital felt kind of like this. I'm hungry."

"Let's go downstairs then," Charlie said with a smile. "Dinner was over hours ago but I'm sure we can find something."

"I can cook!" Harry announced and rolled onto his back. "I cooked for the Dursleys all the time."

"I'm not sure you'll be able to stand on your own, let alone walk," Charlie was off the bed and standing next to Harry. "There is no way I'm letting you anywhere near fire, you pyro." Harry just laughed in response and Charlie took hold of his hand. "Come on."

Harry sat up and waited for the world to stop spinning like an unbalanced gyroscope. He was lightheaded and everything was fuzzy. Edges came into focus again when Charlie put Harry's glasses on his face. It was a good thing that Harry and Charlie were almost equal in height. Charlie helped Harry down the stairs and into the kitchen, depositing him onto a bench. Their very loud conversation about muggle drugs and the difference between Ogden's and muggle whiskey, and several foreign brands and brews, brought Remus, Hermione, and the rest of the Weasleys into the kitchen after them.

"Charlie Weasley!" Molly Weasley scolded. "How would Harry know what any whiskey or any other alcohol tastes like? Is he drunk?"

Harry laughed and shook his head. He was greatly amused at the looks he was drawing from everyone, "I bet I could do a really good Patronus right now."

"He's not drunk Mum," Charlie smiled brightly. Harry knew that Charlie was feeling some of his euphoria. He was blocking as much as he could, but he couldn't really concentrate on that and kept slipping. "It's magical overload. No magic Harry, anyway your wand's upstairs."

Harry wasn't paying any attention to Charlie. He had turned to Fred and George and was talking to them instead, "So how do you put the charms in the candy, 'cause I think I could bottle a Patronus, and then people who can't conjure them won't get their souls sucked out, 'cause that really sucks,"

Harry laughed at the word play and for once had Fred and George staring at him in silent amazement. "I remember when they almost did it to me and it was all cold and clammy and damn those things are ugly. Have you seen what's under their hoods? No wonder they wear them. Since I'm your partner and all I figure if I cast the charm you could figure out how to put it in something!" Fred and George weren't looking at Harry anymore. Their attention was focused on their mother, who was fuming, moments away from one her famous lectures. They exchanged a look and disappeared from the room with a single loud 'crack'.

Mrs. Weasley left the kitchen and could be heard as she climbed the stairs, "Fred and George Weasley you had better have an explanation for me!"

"I'd better go help," Mr. Weasley jumped up and followed his wife, though most likely to defend his children.

Ginny, possibly the only one not gawking at Harry and thinking practically, put some food that was left from dinner in front of him and Harry started eating much more quickly than usual, reminding himself very much of Ron. He saw Charlie toss some Floo powder into the fire and call out for Dumbledore.

"Are you feeling okay Harry?" Remus asked him, slipping onto the bench next to Harry.

"Never better Moony," Harry said around a mouthful of potato.

"Wonderful Ron," Ginny said with heavy sarcasm. "Now he's eating like you."

"It's not my fault!" Ron protested as he helped himself to a second dinner.

"What can I do for you Charlie?" Dumbledore's head said from the fire.

"Um, Harry's awake Albus," Charlie answered with a little uncontrolled laugh.

"Excellent and how is he?" Dumbledore's head questioned with a smile.

Charlie hesitated and Harry heard Hermione 'hmph'.

"He's high as a kite!" she said loudly enough for the headmaster to hear.

"Oh dear, I thought that might happen. I'll have to send Severus over to check on his shields. He also might have something to help Harry adjust," with a 'pop' the headmaster's head was gone.

"Adjust to what?" Ron asked.

Remus held a wrist to Harry's forehead and Harry swatted it away, "I'm fine!" The faces in the kitchen looked skeptical, except for Charlie who was laughing. Harry had slipped again. "I was blocking my magic and we unblocked it and now it's everywhere and I'm really lightheaded and happy and I've never been this happy before and I'm still hungry and where did everyone go?"

Harry got up to look for more food and succeeded in finding some bread and cheese. He sat down to share it with Ron and looked expectantly at Remus, "Well, where is everyone?"

"Christmas is in two days Harry and they have family. You, Hermione, the Weasleys, and I are the only ones here... and that's probably a very good thing," Remus said slowly, looking at Harry carefully. "I have never seen you eat that much."

"Neither have we," Hermione commented. She helped herself to a slice of bread and some cheese before it all disappeared.

The fire flared green and Snape stepped into the kitchen. Harry jumped to his feet and raced around the table to tackle his father in a hug, "I'm so sorry. I thought I hurt you but you're okay and I was really upset and then I fell asleep and I couldn't tell you I was sorry but now I can and so I'm sorry." Snape just blinked down at him, "Now that I know what Albus was trying to tell me drink this."

Harry drank the potion in the vial without a second thought. He closed his eyes as the euphoric feeling was brought under control. He could feel it brimming beneath the surface but he could hold it back. Along with his restored equilibrium came profound embarrassment. His cheeks started to burn. He sat down and let his head fall to the table, wrapping his arms around it.

"Does anyone have a time-turner?" he asked miserably.

"What did he do?" Snape asked and after a pause added, "...and what is a kite Miss Granger?"

"Muggle toy that flies," Hermione answered with a laugh. "Are you okay Harry?"

"Brilliant Hermione," Harry left his head on the table. "The twins are being lectured as we speak, I'm probably next in line, and I ate half the kitchen. Then there's whatever else I said. What did I say?"

"Not much," Bill replied from his spot against a wall where he had been watching calmly. "Charlie's in line for a lecture along with you. Expect to hear about the evils of underage drinking by the end of the night. Don't worry about the food. You could use a little more weight."

"I don't want to hear another word." Snape groaned and then said in a firm tone of command, "Drink one of these every morning until you can control this yourself. Do not have even a drop of alcohol, not that you should be drinking in the first place, in combination with the potion and that includes butterbeer. Are your shields in place or do you need me to test you?"

Harry lifted his head, still flushed with embarrassment, "I think they're good but you better test them."

Snape glanced towards the door. Harry shook his head. He had already made a complete fool of himself. Everyone there could see this as well. Harry's father nodded and pointed his wand, *Legilimens*. Harry resisted at first but couldn't hold out for long and a series of images flashed through his mind. He saw his sorting, the Slytherin Common Room from his second year, Riddle's memory, Riddle in the Chamber, his second discussion with the sorting hat, and then it stopped.

Snape was rubbing the bridge of his nose and Harry could feel him holding back a very loud and snide lecture, "Work on clearing your mind, especially before you go to sleep. You know what it feels

like so you should be able to get your shields back up and we'll try again in a few days. You can tell me another time how you know what the Slytherin Common Room looks like and I'll just assume Granger and Weasley will be joining you."

Snape left through the fireplace and Harry turned to Ron and Hermione, "Um, sorry?"

Hermione put a hand over Ron's mouth, "It's okay Harry. We can't get in trouble for something we did four years ago."

"We can't?" Ron asked hopefully when she let him go.

"No," Hermione insisted firmly, "we can't and now he might be more impressed than angry."

Bill joined them at the table, "What did you three do this time?"

"Polyjuice," Harry answered and looked at Ginny guiltily. "We thought Malfoy knew who Slytherin's heir was."

Ginny shivered and Bill put an arm around her shoulders. Hermione and Ron both looked at her apologetically.

Harry groaned, "I better go practice. When your mum is done with Fred and George just let her know I'm in the library."

Charlie followed Harry into the hall and stopped him at the bottom of the stairs, "You can use my room Harry. I'll bunk with Ron. You'll have more privacy there."

"Thanks Charlie, but you don't have to," Harry insisted with just a bit of unease. He felt almost like a child for seeking comfort in the middle of night in Charlie's arms.

"It's not a problem Harry," Charlie chuckled. "Is Ron really that bad?"

Harry gave a little nervous laugh and looked down. He could feel all that strange energy pushing to get out. "It's not that. It's just... I'll probably end up there eventually anyway."

Charlie's hand traced down Harry's arm from his shoulder and took his hand. He brushed back Harry's fringe with his other hand and his finger traced the scar. The sensation sent a shiver down Harry's spine. Charlie was the only one who had ever touched his scar like that, "It's waking you every night?"

Harry looked up and nodded, "It's usually not as bad as last night, or as early. I've been getting plenty of sleep."

"Promise me you'll tell someone if it gets worse?" Harry nodded again. Charlie gave him a quick soft kiss. "Go practice. I'll be up in a while."

Harry settled into Charlie's bed and tried to remember exactly what it felt like to have his mind clear and shielded. Every time he thought he was close his mind became filled with thousands of thoughts. Harry growled and hit his pillow angrily.

"Can't something go right for once?" Harry asked no one and everyone in frustration.

Chapter Thirty-One

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There was a loud banging on the door that brought Harry abruptly out of a sound sleep. He pulled his pillow out and yanked it down by the edges around his head, trying to shut out the noise. It was a futile effort. The pillow was plucked off his head and Harry made a grab for it.

"Charlie!" Harry swiped, but the pillow was out of reach unless he got up... which would just kill the whole point of retrieving the pillow in the first place.

"It's Christmas morning Harry and you don't know Ron if you think he'll let you sleep," Charlie grinned, looking like a little kid on Christmas morning... which was pretty close to the truth.

"Fine," Harry grumbled, rolled out of bed and stalked to the door. He flung it open, snapped at Ron, "We're up," and slammed it closed again. The banging on doors continued down the hall.

A jumper came flying towards him and Harry caught it just before it hit his face. He put it on with jerky, frustrated movements, "Everyone wants me to get more sleep, but when I'm actually sleeping will they let me? Of course not!"

"Quit complaining Harry," Charlie was also wearing a jumper over his pajamas. He opened the door and pulled Harry after him, "Merry Christmas."

Harry yawned and followed Charlie down the stairs, "Merry Christmas."

Most of the Weasley family was already in the kitchen when Charlie and Harry got there and Christmas greetings were exchanged all around. Mrs. Weasley had accepted that Charlie helped Harry sleep and that was good enough for her. If she suspected there was anything more going on she didn't say a word.

Harry had somehow managed to avoid any lecture from her, but had no idea how. The twins were close-lipped on the subject of their own reprimands and Harry decided not to pry. Mrs. Weasley greeted them that morning with a smile and a stack of pancakes.

Harry sat down next to Remus, who was blinking wearily into a cup of coffee, "Morning Harry, Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas Remus," Harry poured coffee into his mug and added just a touch of cream and sugar. "How do they do it? I know for a fact Fred and George are not morning people. It's like they're all three years old or something."

Every Weasley was wide awake and talking excitedly, as was Hermione. Remus and Harry were the only two who desperately needed the caffeine to stay alert, or to get there to begin with. As they watched Charlie grabbed Ron in a headlock and rubbed his head with his knuckles. The others watched on and laughed until Ron broke free and tried to get revenge by tickling.

"Christmas does weird things to people Harry," Remus explained. "You probably never had a real Christmas as a kid. I didn't have many either until Hogwarts. Did you ever believe in Santa Claus?"

"Yeah," Harry sipped on his coffee, "but Dudley told me Santa didn't bring anything to freaks, and Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia just laughed." For a moment Harry thought Remus would leave to go curse the Dursleys into oblivion, but he got control of himself quickly. "They're not worth your time Remus. Let's not think about them, okay, not today?"

"Are you just going to have coffee for breakfast?" Ginny, her cheeks flushed from chasing Fred and George around the table, plopped down next to them. She had on a long flannel nightgown, jumper, and slippers. "You should eat something."

"Don't rush me Ginny," Harry replied grumpily. "I'm not awake enough to chew yet. How would that look in the paper? The-Boy-Who-Lived Chokes on Bacon, You-Know-Who disappointed that he was beaten to the punch by salty, crunchy breakfast food, Draco Malfoy quoted, 'Potter never chewed all his food. Everyone knew he was off his rocker. I'll eat when I'm good and ready.'"

Ginny was laughing hysterically by the time Harry was done and Remus was caught with a mouthful of coffee, spraying it onto the table. He cleaned up after himself with a flick of his wand, "Sounds like you're awake to me."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Harry took a piece of bacon, crunched on it, and pretended to start choking, sending another mouthful of Remus's coffee onto the table and Ginny onto the floor.

There wasn't much food left on the table by the time Ginny recovered and Remus cleaned the area of the table in front of him again. The twins and Ron were pushing their older siblings out of the kitchen and towards the parlour to open presents. Remus and Harry exchanged a look and shrugged. They each took a plate, put some food on it, and followed the others into the parlour with coffee cups in hand.

Hermione and Ron joined Harry and Remus on one of the sofas that were arranged in a semi-circle around the tree. Hermione gave Harry a quick squeeze and wished him a Merry Christmas. Harry tried to get in the spirit but there was something missing, and too much weighing on his mind.

"I wish he could be here," Harry whispered to Remus. "I tried to stay at Hogwarts. I was going to Floo to my room last night and be with him this morning. It's my first Christmas where I have a real family I want to be with."

"I know Harry," Remus ruffled Harry's hair and they both ate some pancake slowly while the Weasleys bustled around and got themselves settled. "I'm sure he wishes you were with him too." Harry smiled as Fred and George sat on the floor in front of the tree they started pulling out presents and sending them to their recipients with flicks and swishes of their wands. Before long everyone had a pile of boxes and packages in front of them. Remus looked surprised at the size of his pile. All the Weasleys opened their new Weasley jumper first and Harry and Hermione followed suit. The jumpers they were wearing were replaced by the new ones, apparently a long-standing tradition. After a nudge from the closest Weasley Remus discovered his own lumpy package containing a blue Weasley jumper with a black wolf silhouette on the front.

After the jumpers were on there was frenzy of gift opening, with wrapping paper flying around them like confetti. Harry had never experienced anything like it. The sheer energy that pervaded the room broke through the fragile shields that he was using on his newly discovered empathy and he was infected with the excitement.

Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Fred, and George instantly strapped on the wand holsters Harry had gotten for them. He had sent them to his roommates as well and Luna. His heart dropped, though, when he saw there was no gift under the tree from his father. He then thought perhaps he may have wanted to wait and give it to Harry in person but he wasn't sure.

"Oh my," Dumbledore's comment announced his presence. There was a loud chorus of 'Merry Christmas' from the Weasleys as the headmaster approached the group. He was dressed in red velvet robes and a red pointed hat, much tamer than Harry had come to expect from the old wizard. "I have something for Harry, or rather someone, though I believe Molly and Arthur will need an explanation."

The Weasley parents looked around at their grinning children and discovered they had been entirely left out of something. Harry felt some guilt, as the Weasleys had always tried to make him feel like one of their own and he had kept this from them. He had no choice but to tell his friends, as he never could have lied convincingly to them about something so big.

Before Dumbledore could explain Snape entered the room, "Molly, Arthur, children, Merry Christmas."

Bill laughed, "You're only ten years older than me Severus. I think I hardly qualify as a child."

"I was teaching in your first year at Hogwarts," Snape countered, looking down at Bill sitting amongst empty boxes, torn paper, and a pile of gifts. His expression clearly showed what he thought of that, "You, therefore, are officially a child."

"What can we do for you Severus?" Mr. Weasley asked brightly. "And Merry Christmas," he added, followed by the rest of his family.

Snape raised his eyebrows and smirked, "I am here to give my son his Christmas gifts."

"Going for shock factor Severus?" Remus asked from his seat with a smile. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were both staring at Snape in total surprise.

Harry got up and crossed the room, trying to ignore the reactions of his best friends' parents. He walked up to his father, "Did you get my gift?"

"Yes I did," Snape smiled. "Thank you. I did not have any pictures." Harry had found a spell to copy photographs and put together an album from the pictures he had of his parents and himself. Snape produced a long box from somewhere and held it out for Harry, "There is an explanation that accompanies this. With your propensity for disaster I thought you might want to preserve what you have, as it was a gift from your godfather, in his memory. This is not meant as a replacement."

The Weasleys looked even more stunned than before. Not only was Snape by all appearances Harry's father, but he was speaking of Sirius Black without snarling.

"No way!" Ron's voice exclaimed from the other end of the room.

Harry laughed and quickly took the wrapping off the box to reveal the case for the brand new Supernova II, the latest in broomstick technology. The quidditch fanatics in the room, namely Charlie, Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny, all crowded around Harry to inspect the new broom. Harry left them to it and hugged his father tightly. The broom was fabulous, but the thought behind it was the best gift Harry had ever received.

Snape left Harry and the Weasley siblings to their own devices and joined the headmaster, Remus, and the Weasley parents to explain the past several months. After at least half an hour of broomstick examination and quidditch talk Harry discovered that his father had left him a few other gifts before he went to talk with the other adults. Ron and the twins were still ogling the broom when Harry opened the other gifts. Ginny had left them for whatever it was Bill and Hermione were discussing.

"I think this one's not just for me," Harry grinned and passed a book to Charlie.

Charlie's eyebrows rose in interest as he read the summary on the back of the book and then flipped through the first few chapters, "This looks good."

Feeling It Out: Training Your Empathy was only one of the many books Harry had received. He should have known his father would give him educational materials in addition to the more frivolous gift. The bookshelves in Snape's quarters held a wide selection of reading material on multiple branches of magic and Harry suspected there was much more.

He realized that he didn't know if Snape had a home outside of Hogwarts, and suddenly wondered where he would go for his next summer holiday. Now that he had an actual family, even it was just him and Snape, he wanted to return to the Dursleys even less... if that was possible.

Snapping fingers pulled him out of his daze. Charlie looked concerned, "What were you thinking about there?"

Harry looked over at the Weasleys, Dumbledore, Remus, and his father. Snape looked more relaxed than he normally did around Order members and determined that not being able to acknowledge their relationship might be hurting his father more than him. He was a completely different person around people who knew about them. He longed for a time when he could walk down Diagon Alley with him. Harry was struck with the knowledge that he cared and that it left him vulnerable again. He almost wished that Snape would go back to being the evil Potions Professor but that would be losing him as surely as if Voldemort killed him. There was no real solution and it scared him.

"Just stuff, the Dursleys, Snape, Voldemort," Harry answered quietly. He shook his head to banish the thoughts, "Enough of that. It's Christmas. Did you happen to notice that Professor Dumbledore looks an awful lot like Father Christmas?"

Charlie grinned, that evil grin that Harry had first seen from the twins. As if sensing that a prank was brewing Fred and George practically materialized beside them, Ron in tow.

"We know that grin," Fred rubbed his hands together in glee.

George echoed the grin and Harry was once again reminded how much Charlie and the twins looked alike, "What are we planning?"

Harry looked over and saw that Remus was giving him a wary look. He felt mischievous all of sudden and decided to throw caution to the winds, "I'm feeling my Marauder roots. We're going to need some lemon drops."

Bill left before long, as he had to get to France for dinner with Fleur's family. Dumbledore was the next to go, as he had work to do at Hogwarts before the feast, but not before thanking Harry for the socks.

"You gave the headmaster of Hogwarts socks for Christmas?" Snape looked at Harry as though he had lost his senses.

"It's either exactly what he wanted or a wonderful joke," Harry defended himself and related his tale about the Mirror of Erised in his first year.

"I don't think we'll ever know," Remus offered his opinion, shaking his head in amusement.

Snape had to leave as well, as he had to be at Hogwarts for Christmas Dinner in the great hall. Harry saw him off through the Floo, but first handed him a bag of newly tainted lemon drops.

"Slip a couple to the headmaster for us, please?" Harry put on a pleading expression. He did his best to look innocent and sweet.

His father blinked and stared at him. "Merlin," he whispered. "Sometimes you look exactly like James."

Harry beamed. It was the first time Snape had compared him to his father, his other father that was, and didn't mean it as an insult. Snape pocketed the bag of lemon drops and threw some Floo powder into the fire.

"The Creevey brothers are staying at the castle," Snape commented before leaving, with a sly grin.

"If you send a fast owl you should have no trouble getting pictures of the results." He shook his head, "No one has ever tried to utilize my skills as a spy this way, not even your father."

Harry stood silent for a moment after Snape spun away in the flames and then laughed. He ran off to the parlour, where everyone was still gathered, "Quick, who has the fastest owl?"

Remus pestered Harry for details of the prank but didn't make any headway.

"Remus Lupin," Mrs. Weasley scolded. "Sometimes it is impossible to believe you are a professor and not a fourteen year old child."

He gave her an innocent smile and Harry instantly knew how the Marauders had gotten away with many of their pranks. Remus could look down right angelic when he put his mind to it.

"I raised seven children Remus and that look has not worked for any of them," Mrs. Weasley said sternly, but Remus did not relent. Finally the stand-off ended with Mrs. Weasley putting a plate with a large slice of pie and a side scoop of ice cream in front of Remus with a smile. She ruffled his hair, "Eat up. You are far too thin."

All the other Weasleys, Mr. Weasley included, were looking at Remus with something approaching awe.

"You are our hero," Fred claimed.

George nodded fervently, "Teach us your ways."

They received a gentle cuff upside the head for their troubles from Mrs. Weasley, "That's enough out of you two."

Remus grinned, "I call it the werewolf factor, gets sympathy from women everywhere. We even got Poppy to cover for us once... or twice."

At the end of the meal Harry felt like his stomach would burst, and he hadn't eaten nearly as much as Ron or Charlie had. The twins were helping to clear the table, though flying the dishes lazily across the room may have been more hindrance than help.

"I think it's time we got started Harry," Remus announced.

Harry nodded and followed Remus into the front room. They sat down in the chairs that Snape and Dumbledore had been using only a few days before when they tore down Harry's barriers. Harry nervously took out his wand.

"Okay, tonight we just want to see how you're doing after the other day," Remus said. "You've taken your potion today?" Harry nodded. "Try some simple spells first."

Harry pointed his wand at a small table and tried the first spell he had been taught, *Wingardium Leviosa!* Nothing happened. He tried it again, *Wingardium Leviosa!* Nothing. Harry looked from his wand to the table and back again with frustration.

"What the hell?" Harry looked up at Remus with confusion.

Remus looked concerned for a moment but smiled reassuringly, "Don't worry Harry. Albus said there would be some adjusting. Let's try something else. Try your Patronus."

"I can't levitate a table and you want me try a N.E.W.T. level defensive spell?" Harry said sarcastically.

"Humor me Harry?" Remus smiled again.

He looked at Remus doubtfully, but stood and pointed his wand at the opposite corner of the room. Harry closed his eyes and dug up a happy memory. Once again it was difficult to find an appropriate one. Every memory that had to do with Sirius was tainted with sadness and guilt. The day he had learned he was a wizard was the start of wonderful things, but also of all the pain.

Harry searched through his years at Hogwarts. When he recalled his first task in the Triwizard Tournament his mind jumped to the dragon colony. There was a day there when all the off-duty handlers had been gathered together, just talking and joking. They had accepted Harry for who he was, no idea he was the famous Harry Potter. Harry had even sent them a large box of muggle sweets for the holiday.

Expecto Patronum! Harry staggered backwards under the force of the spell. The stag that leapt out of his wand was at least twice as large as the last time Harry had performed the spell and almost too brilliant to look at. There was an afterglow of that euphoria but it wasn't strong enough to make him lose control again.

Prongs cantered around the room and came back to Harry as there were no dementors to chase away. He stretched out his hand and felt a sensation almost like breath from a wet nose before the silver stag faded and disappeared. Harry turned and saw Remus standing with bright eyes.

"Prongs," Remus whispered, much as Harry had on the shores of the lake at Hogwarts his third year. Harry remembered that Remus had never seen his fully corporeal Patronus before. "It's like seeing a ghost, so real."

Harry nodded, "Remus... I don't get it..."

"A Patronus draws on emotion Harry," Remus was still whispering and staring at the empty space where Prongs had stood. He closed his eyes and lowered his head for moment. "Study empathy with Charlie, Harry. Try to get that under control and keep trying the basic spells. Severus will come to work on Occlumency and focus with you."

Harry nodded. Remus looked terribly sad and Harry could almost taste the deep pain coming off him in waves. He didn't want to be in the same room anymore, couldn't stay if he didn't want to get lost in the grief they shared. Harry used every scrap of will he had to block out what he could and wasn't aware he was moving until he leaned up against the wall on the other side of a closed door, hands braced on his knees.

"The worthless prat," Fred's voice held venom Harry almost never heard from a Weasley. "He sent it back *again*."

There was a snort, "We're better off without him." That one was Ron, "After what he did last year I don't want him back."

They had to be talking about Percy. Harry cringed. He had all but forgotten about the third Weasley son in the midst of his own problems.

"I know what you mean Ron," Ginny said in a wistful tone. "But I just wish he would write or something. I hate what he's doing to Mum and Dad."

"He's never in his life admitted when he's wrong," Charlie said darkly, "not once. There's almost no chance he'll start now."

Harry slid down the wall. This was his fault too, the separation in the family that had practically adopted him. There wasn't a person in Harry's life that he hadn't caused pain. He wanted to get to the bedroom and block everything out, but he would have to walk past the Weasleys to get anywhere.

With his head on his knees and his arms wrapped over his head Harry worked on clearing his mind. None of them were about to leave him, not even for their own safety. If it was the only thing he could do to protect the people he cared about he would get his shields up, keep that bloody bastard out of his head. The throbbing in his head from his scar only served as further encouragement.

Chapter Thirty-Two

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Harry learned later that Remus had eventually left the parlour to find Harry asleep on the floor in the hall. He had gotten Charlie, who was still talking with his siblings and Hermione about Percy, to carry Harry upstairs to bed. Harry read the books his father had given him on Occlumency and empathy cover to cover, impressing even Hermione with his single-minded commitment. He absorbed the material like he had never learned his lessons at school.

"Disgust and... hunger?"

"Yup, Bill tried to cook for us in Egypt." Charlie answered. "My turn. Hmm, exhilaration, fear, and reserve? What the hell was that?"

"That was my first ride on a hippogriff, Buckbeak," Harry answered with a smile Charlie couldn't see. They were sitting on the bed, facing each other with their eyes closed and doing an exercise to develop empathy. They had warded the room and asked everyone to stay off that floor for a while so that stray emotions wouldn't interfere. They didn't tell everyone that Harry was empathic, just that they were working on his focus, "Longing and jealousy... you want to try it too."

"Not fair," Charlie flung a pillow at Harry. "I wasn't projecting."

Harry opened his eyes and brushed back his hair. His fringe was starting to hang in his eyes a bit. Charlie was wearing one of the shirts Harry had gotten made up for him for Christmas. It had a silly muggle saying across the front, *Beware of dragons, for you are crunchy and taste good with ketchup*. Every so often a dragon would walk across the shirt and eat the words, after squirting ketchup on them, which would reappear when the dragon left for its resting place on the back of the shirt. One of Harry's favorites had more of a proverb than a saying; *It is ill done to chain a dragon to roast your meat*. On that shirt the dragon from the back breathed fire across the chest, reducing the words to ashes, and the words rose up out of the ashes like a phoenix. The twins were considering selling the shirts in their store.

"You could probably bring Buckbeak to Romania when you go back," Harry suggested. "He's kind of skittish around Remus and I don't think your mum likes feeding him."

"I'll bring it up and see what everyone says," Charlie smiled and shook his head. "I seem to be adopting all of Hagrid's illegal pets."

Harry laughed. The humor Charlie was feeling was contagious, almost literally in their case. Charlie was almost always in a good mind and it balanced out Harry's worries, "So, do you think we're ready to try this with everyone else around?"

"Let's see what we can pick up at dinner tonight," Charlie suggested. "How's the Occlumency coming?"

Harry turned and stretched out on his stomach, his feet in the air. He grabbed a pillow and hugged it, balling it up and resting his chin on it, "Okay I guess. There's a meeting tonight, right?" Charlie nodded. "We'll probably test it afterwards. I still need to work on my spells. It's so damned frustrating." Harry propped himself up and punched the pillow.

"What exactly are you having trouble with?" Charlie asked, automatically putting a hand on Harry's back and feeding calm into him.

"It's like I'm a first year all over again, but then are some spells, like the Patronus Charm or some offensive spells that I can do easily," Harry tried to explain. "I can stun someone, or hurt them pretty bad, or chase away a hundred dementors, but I can't transfigure a button to a beetle or levitate a piece of parchment. It's all tied to emotion. Any spell that uses emotion is simple, which is also why the Occlumency is suddenly so hard again."

Harry snorted, "I could probably cast a great Cruciatus if someone got me mad enough." He felt Charlie cringe and disgust invaded him like a punch to his stomach. "I don't want to or anything..."

it's just... the curse... you have to want to hurt someone, to want to cause pain, to *hate*, for it to work." Harry rolled over to face Charlie.

"I never told you, did I, about what happened at the Ministry, in the Atrium before Voldemort and Dumbledore showed up?" Harry was afraid. He didn't want that disgust to grow, aimed at him like a powerful curse.

Charlie was battling with his emotions, but what they were Harry couldn't quite tell. Maybe Charlie didn't know himself, "Severus told us. LeStrange told Voldemort during their next meeting after that night, with some sick pleasure apparently."

"I'm not proud of what I did," Harry wanted to look at Charlie but found himself staring at the bedcover instead. "I couldn't cast it correctly then, and if she was right about why, I doubt I ever could under most circumstances. After what she did I wanted to kill her, I was ready to, but apparently I didn't want to cause her pain."

Harry felt the mattress dip as Charlie shifted. He pulled Harry up to lean against him and held him tightly, "It doesn't matter that you said the words Harry. You didn't cast the curse."

"I'm worried though," Harry said even as relief lightened his anxiety. "If I saw her again, and I somehow tapped into her hate, I think I could do it."

"That's one reason you're going to learn to control this," Charlie insisted. "Now work on blocking me."

Harry closed his eyes and concentrated. With the physical contact it would be even more difficult. They worked until dinner and once they had each eaten quite a bit they began a new exercise.

"Ron," Charlie said.

Harry didn't even bother concentrating, "Too easy, hunger, nothing else. Challenge me next time. Remus."

"Tired," Charlie looked at the werewolf across the table, trying not to stare, "pain, full moon is soon. Mum."

Harry looked across the kitchen at the Weasley matriarch. He and Charlie had been probing for emotions in the crowded kitchen all through the meal. He focused... and pulled back quickly. She must have thinking about Percy, or that boggart from the summer before or something like that.

"No," Charlie looked about to protest and Harry interrupted him, making sure he was fully barriered.

"No, you don't want to know right now. Ginny."

"Annoyed and lonely," Charlie sighed. "I think we're all abandoning her a bit much. Ron and Hermione are together and you're either working or with me. Try Tonks."

Harry winced and then focused his senses on the now bright blue long haired petite auror. His eyes widened and he rapidly listed emotions, "Energy, anxiety, happy, worry, ow!" Harry exclaimed at the same time as Tonks as she tripped over something. Several people in the room gave him strange looks. He glared at Charlie, "You're evil."

"You said you wanted a challenge," Charlie grinned.

Harry grinned in return, "Fleur."

Charlie's face instantly wrinkled in disgust. Even if he hadn't wanted to scan her his attention had been directed towards Fleur and Bill sitting together and talking in low undertones, "Ew. You are sick, sick, sick." Charlie gripped his head, "I'm scarred for life! You are definitely part Slytherin."

Harry couldn't stop himself from laughing, "Congratulations, the sorting hat agrees."

"Really?" Charlie arched his eyebrows and looked around the room. "I think Severus is the only Slytherin we have. Most of us are Gryffindor or Ravenclaw, with a few Hufflepuffs for good measure like Dedalus."

An envelope slid discreetly onto the table in front of Harry. He looked up to see his father walking by, headed towards an empty space at the end of the table. Harry opened the envelope and pulled out a slip of parchment.

The elder Creevey was unfortunate enough to have his camera confiscated, though Minerva will intercede and return it, without the film of course, and points were deducted for amusement at the expense of a professor. I thought you might like to share your handiwork with your co-conspirators. "That... that... Slytherin!" Harry whispered in a mixture of awe and guilt at getting Colin and Dennis in trouble. "I should have known he would find some way to deduct points from Gryffindor for this... and he helped!"

Charlie took the letter and started laughing. Harry looked down the table to see his father smirking, no doubt very pleased with himself. Harry pouted and went back to the envelope. He slid out a stack of pictures and grinned. He flipped through them quickly then motioned to the twins. They saw what Harry held and were around the table in record time.

"Colin has got to be journalist someday," Harry laughed.

The lemon drops had worked perfectly. Professor Dumbledore was transformed into a perfect Father Christmas. The tip of his red hat, with an added white fur brim, flopped over and had bells. His robes were trimmed in white fur and there were strands of holly with berries draped around him. He had a wide black belt with a shiny silver buckle. Little bells decorated the newly white fur accented sleeves and hem of the robes. A sack filled to the brim with brightly wrapped boxes rested next to him, not a part of the original plan. Harry figured his father had added it.

The laughter from the four of them was quickly noted, as laughter from the twins usually meant that a prank was in planning or had just been executed. Ron and Ginny quickly joined in and Hermione was torn between amusement and disapproval. Just as the pictures were finishing their rounds of the table Dumbledore entered and instantly discovered the source of the merriment.

"Ah, very well done indeed," the headmaster's blue eyes twinkled in delight. "I believe ten points are due to Gryffindor for ingenuity. I am intrigued on the delivery, though."

Harry made sure his shields were as strong as he could make them, "Oh, we have our own little spy."

Remus nearly choked on his tea but Dumbledore didn't react at all, "I must learn to watch myself more carefully. Turnabout is fair play."

"I have a feeling pranking Dumbledore wasn't such a good idea after all," Charlie whispered to Harry and the twins. The twins just gulped and returned to their seats.

Harry gave the pictures to Ron for safe keeping and the jovial atmosphere of the kitchen quickly turned to serious for the meeting. The way the change worked almost instantaneously for all the members amazed Harry and he spent several minutes just scanning the emotions of everyone present to see if they were all linked somehow. It wasn't like the Death Eaters and the Dark Mark that connected them to Voldemort, but there was something. Harry remembered something Dumbledore had told him that spring, that Order members had ways of communicating beyond the Floo network, owls, or apparating to speak in person. He still didn't know what those methods of communication were.

"The Dark Lord has been very unhappy with the failure of several of his attacks," Snape was reporting. Harry was intrigued. He usually didn't get to hear about what the Order did in the field against Voldemort. "He knows someone is feeding information to the Order but not who."

"Are you sure about that?" Moody questioned Snape.

Harry looked at the retired auror in disbelief. It was rather obvious. Snape apparently thought so too. The glare he fixed on Moody was worse than anything Harry had ever been on the receiving end of, "If he knew, I would be dead."

Moody was going to argue but a pointed look from Dumbledore stopped him. Harry still heard mumbling about dark wizards and Death Eaters as Moody drank from his flask.

"News from the Ministry," Dumbledore changed the topic.

"Fudge is still forming committees and task forces," Kingsley snorted. "He's treating the war like a budget crisis."

Tonks's hair darkened to a deep purple and frizzed, an indicator of her mood, "Like a task force will do anything about Death Eaters. Hell, half the members probably *are* Death Eaters!"

"We really could use Amelia... or Amos here," Arthur Weasley added with a sigh. "I can't get any information on what they're doing. Fudge just doesn't trust me."

Several opinions, none of them positive and several of them rather vulgar, were voiced on Minister Fudge. Harry watched Dumbledore, though, who was in deep thought, ignoring the chattering around him. The headmaster seemed to come to a decision and held up a hand. One by one the Order fell silent.

"Approach Amos Arthur, but cautiously," Dumbledore's voice carried across the silent kitchen.

"Cornelius comes to me for advice once again but he must not know any more about the Order than what he does now, which is almost entirely speculation. Everything that reaches his ears makes its way to Voldemort. Remus?"

"No Albus," Remus looked strangely upset, though Harry couldn't figure out just what the request was that Remus was refusing. Harry stretched out his senses. Remus was feeling... guilty?

"Remus," Dumbledore leaned forward and spoke in a calming tone under which Remus visibly relaxed, "we never told Amelia exactly why Edgar and his family died. She deserves to know." Remus lowered his head and nodded. "If there is nothing else...?"

"The investigation of Little Hangleton is ongoing," Sturgis Podmore, cleared and released from Azkaban following the battle at the Ministry, commented. "There are a ridiculous number of curses and enchantments to break through. We could use a hand Bill if you have any extra time." Bill nodded.

Dumbledore nodded acknowledgement, "That will be all for this evening. Tonks, Kingsley, Alastor, I need your availability. We are starting training."

All heads snapped to Harry. He felt warmth rising to his cheeks at being singled out. It did not last long as various Order members stood and left the kitchen for work, home, or their rooms upstairs. Harry rubbed his forehead. The pain in his scar had been gradually escalating, so slowly that he almost hadn't noticed. His tolerance was growing as well but it was only a matter of time before it became too much. He hoped Hermione would find her solution by then.

"Potter!" His name spoken that way from his father's mouth still made him feel instantly guilty, a trained reaction. "I do not have all evening for you to gather whatever pathetic thoughts rest in your mind."

Harry focused on the pain in his head rather than pushing it away. His jaw muscles tightened, "Yes sir."

They walked into the front room together, followed by pitying looks that Harry would have laughed at if he could, and the door was locked and warded when they got there.

"How are you?" Snape turned and looked at Harry probingly. He took Harry's face in his hands and examined him carefully.

Harry rubbed his forehead, working to get the pain under control again, "Been better. You're worried, determined, and tense. There's more but..."

"I am impressed you were able to read that much," Snape said. His expression told Harry nothing but his eyes were shining with pride.

Harry grinned, unable to stop himself after the praise from his father. It felt like the few times that Dumbledore had praised him only infinitely better, more special, "We've been practicing. We were reading people at dinner tonight. Tonks is... a bit much."

Snape rolled his eyes, "I imagine you would get something similar if you tried to read Albus, only more so."

Harry sat down on the loveseat that had once been a couch, "I hope I never find out. I'm clearing my mind at night, and I've been reading the books you gave me." Harry thought he saw a hint of a smile. "One of them is too complicated by far. It reminded me of the time I was looking at Hermione's Arithmancy text."

"That would be Schopenhauer's work," Snape sat down across from him, feeling a bit surprised. "He is overly verbose and philosophical. It is more of an academic read than a practical guide but he makes some important points. Don't concern yourself with it now."

"Oh, okay," Harry smiled inwardly. Chances were Snape hadn't expected Harry to begin reading any of the books until they talked about them. "So... should we get started?"

The look his father gave him was reminiscent of potions classes. It was the one that told him he had better pay attention or he would be chopped to pieces and used as potions ingredients... but it felt like Snape was just preparing himself for something unpleasant. "We have to get your shields up as quickly as possible. I do not believe the Dark Lord is currently trying to read you... or influence you... but there is no predicting him."

Harry nodded. This he understood well, "I've been working hard. I just don't know if what I've been doing is right."

"Harry, I'm going to be looking for things you don't want me to see," Snape said with mild hesitation. Harry swallowed and nodded. "Push me out of your mind however you can."

Harry looked doubtfully at his wand... and set it aside. He was still having trouble with simple spells and his emotion would be running high, "I'm not... it's still...," Harry stopped, took a deep breath, and continued. "I don't want to hurt you."

Snape nodded and stood up. He was completely closed off. Harry stood and faced him. *Legilimens!* Harry braced himself and tried to clear his mind. He could feel his shielding weakening... the memories starting to sharpen.

Uncle Vernon laughed, "That's my boy!"

Dudley was swept into an affectionate hug while Harry huddled in the corner, nursing what was probably a sprained wrist. It had just been a toy truck... and one wheel was missing... but Harry was playing with it so Dudley wanted it.

Anger welled up inside Harry. At five he already knew that fighting back was useless. If Dudley wanted something he would get it... and Harry would get punched, kicked, or slapped. Harry pushed... and pushed. He felt Snape give some ground, but it was too hard.

Snape withdrew and Harry fell to his knees. He couldn't look his father in the eye. He was a disappointment, a burden. A hand was offered to help Harry to his feet but he wouldn't take it. He stood and closed his eyes, ready for the next attack.

Legilimens!

Chapter Thirty-Three

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Severus wished there was another way. These Occlumency lessons were certainly not going to bring him and Harry any closer. Harry was too stubborn, too independent, much too much like Severus.

He scanned for images Harry did not want him to see, and got glimpses of Harry's childhood. These were not the episodes of accidental magic and the subsequent punishments. These were views of everyday life in the Dursley household with Harry doing the cooking and cleaning as soon as he could see over the countertop and reach the cabinets. It was daily drudgery and put-downs and Harry *knowing* deep inside his heart he was inferior and worthless, just like his parents.

Severus ended the spell. By then Harry wasn't even fighting anymore. He was on the floor, defeated, not speaking, not crying, just accepting. The paternal instinct that had flared to life only months ago wanted to take Harry in his arms and tell him the Dursleys were wrong. The proud Slytherin knew that Harry would view any sympathy as pity, and reject it outright.

So Severus waited for Harry to pull himself together. He sat down in the chair that was beside him and did not speak a word. It took several minutes, but Harry stood and nodded at him, his eyes hard and his muscles taut. Severus stood. *Legilimens!*

He ventured into a subject he had wanted to leave alone, and Harry's shields broke almost instantly.

It was dark, but the sky was filled with bright twinkling stars and the silhouettes of mountain peaks made up the horizon. A large dark shape lumbered by on the other side of a simple low split rail fence. It was the dragon colony in the Romania Carpathian Mountains. Two figures walked along the fence hand-in-hand. Severus saw a strand of the long hair Harry had as part of the disguise had fallen out of his ponytail. They stopped and Charlie gently brushed it back and tucked it behind Harry's ear. He cupped Harry's face in both hands and leaned in for a tender kiss.

Harry stood in front of a stove, wearing only a pair of shapeless lightweight pants, the kind Severus saw students wearing while they lounged on the weekends as more and more muggle clothing trends infiltrated the wizarding world. Harry was cooking muggle style and seemed to be enjoying himself. He hummed as he twirled a long wooden spoon in his hand, like he did with his wand sometimes, like James had done with his wand, and stirred whatever was cooking in front of him. Harry's wand was strapped to his wrist in a holster. Charlie walked up behind him, similarly clad, and wrapped his arms around Harry's waist in a comfortable gesture. He nuzzled Harry's neck and Harry fed him some of the food he was preparing off the wooden spoon for approval.

Severus had never felt anything quite like it. Harry's shields flared to life and Severus was thrust back into his mind, with Harry pulled in after him. Severus's own shields did little to stop his own memories from surfacing.

Severus woke with a smile on his face. He rolled over and saw a head of dark messy hair pressed into the pillow next to his. He would never figure out how James managed to sleep like he did and not suffocate in the middle of the night. He ran his fingers through the thick hair and snuggled up behind the Gryffindor to get some more sleep.

James was playing with a snitch while Severus worked on his Transfiguration essay. The snitch would race around the room with James's eyes following it, and then the Gryffindor chaser would burst into action, leap up and catch the snitch, only to set it free again a moment later. The fourth time the snitch circled Severus's head he grabbed it out of the air.

"Do you have to play with this thing?" he snapped.

James just grinned, took the snitch, and stroked Severus's cheek, "Of course I do."

"Don't you have work to do?" Severus asked, intending the question to be rhetorical. James always answered regardless.

"I think I do," he scratched his head and then shrugged. "It's Saturday! If I have work it can wait until tomorrow."

James put the snitch back into the box he kept it in and started randomly transfiguring objects in his room. Severus was sure some of them hadn't seen their original forms in years.

"I don't know how you became Head Boy," Severus grumbled. "You could be out playing with the other little children or harassing my Housemates instead of distracting me."

"The other children are busy," James complained with a pout. "Lily and Remus are helping Peter with Charms and Sirius said something about some Ravenclaw girl. Besides," James's warm breath tickled the fine hairs on the nape of his neck and a shiver traveled down Severus's spine, "I enjoy distracting you."

Severus closed his eyes as he felt James's lips trace a path from the back of his neck to his mouth. His transfiguration essay could wait.

As quickly as the images began they ended. Harry was standing in front of him, tears falling freely down his face and onto his shirt. Severus took one step towards him, trying to figure out what to say, but that one step was enough to break Harry out of his stupor. The boy ran out of the room with the quickness and agility he had used to dodge both his cousin and the bludgers.

Severus swore audibly. He put on his Professor Snape mask, as there were residents in the house who were still not aware of recent developments, and prepared to chase after his son. He saw Harry's wand still on the tea table and picked it up. Severus stalked out of the room, his robes billowing behind, very much in the character that convinced first year students he was really a vampire.

A door slammed shut two floors above and Severus started up the stairs. He reached the room that Charlie and Harry were sleeping in and tried to open the door, only to find it locked. The sheer impossibility of the situation stopped him from yelling at Harry to open the door.

"What's going on?" Ron Weasley asked as a group gathered around Severus.

Severus turned and glared the glare he used on Longbottom. The younger Weasleys had not known the revived Sev long enough for the glare to be completely ineffective.

"We'll, um, talk to Harry tomorrow," Granger said quickly and followed the twins and Ron, who had already fled the scene. The Weasley girl gave Severus a hard look before leaving. He was left with the Weasley parents, the two elder Weasley brothers, Remus, and Tonks. Mad-Eye was no doubt observing the situation from another room.

Any thoughts he had of defusing the situation himself were dispelled with the burning of his forearm. The Dark Lord was calling more and more frequently, often just to rant and rave at his followers and have some muggles brought in for torturing. Kidnappings over all of Great Britain were on the rise. The glare he was still aiming at the group before him became quite real and Charlie flinched just slightly. Working with Harry must have made the dragon handler more aware of his own empathy.

He focused on Charlie and tried to broadcast sadness through the anger and pain. He thrust Harry's wand at the younger wizard, "His shields are in place again. He's all yours," and transfigured his robes, conjuring up a mask. The meaning was obvious to everyone there. Severus apparated away from the corridor and arrived at the caves more quickly than usual.

"You are more prompt than usual Severus," the Dark Lord commented as Severus strode into the hall.

"I was outside the wards when you called Master," Severus bowed his head respectfully. There were others entering the room so Severus stepped back to his place in the Inner Circle.

There was quiet while the hall filled with black robed and white masked figures. As usual Severus did a quick head count to assess the strength of the Dark Lord's following and determined there

were somewhere around one hundred total Death Eaters. He thought with a bitter inner laugh that restricting his ranks to purebloods really limited what the Dark Lord could accomplish.

"I am surrounded by fools and incompetents," the Dark Lord raved. Severus stopped the sigh that threatened. It was going to be one of those meetings. "Most of you are no better than squibs! How can you hope to purify the wizarding world if you cannot win a duel against a fifth year Hogwarts student with an incompetent Defense professor?"

Several Death Eaters shuffled from foot to foot. It was not a good sign that the Dark Lord was referring to the Ministry mess. Whenever he started out that way at least five of them were subjected to Cruciatus by the end of the evening.

"The dementors grow hungry. Perhaps I should rid myself of some worthless servants rather than loosing them on the muggles!" if the Dark Lord had any Weasley blood his face would have been bright red. The sheer thought of a Weasley Dark Lord amused Severus and he tried to forget the thought rather than risk laughing. "You are weak and worthless!" Severus was then reminded distinctly of Vernon Dursley and any potential laughter was killed. "It is time my army grew to become an army, not a huddle of pathetic, inferior, disgraces to the name of wizard."

The mood shifted quickly, the room growing cold. Severus suspected the dementors were nearby but stood firmly in place. Several wizards in the lower ranks could be heard moving around, trying to locate the cause of the change.

The Dark Lord stood from his chair and walked towards them, his voice becoming quiet and more snake-like than usual, "You will collect for me the dark creatures of the world, the natural allies to our cause, hunted and restricted by the Ministry of Magic. Bring them here and we will prepare to take our rightful place as rulers of this world!"

Oh fuck, Severus swore to himself. He had known the Dark Lord would gather together whatever dark creatures he could but this was sooner than they had anticipated. The zoos and colonies would have to be notified immediately. The Order did not have enough resources to patrol even the most concentrated areas of dark creature habitation.

Once the majority of the Death Eaters were gone the Inner Circle removed their masks.

"Severus," the Dark Lord hissed. "Prepare healing potions, anti-venoms and burn salves in particular."

"Yes, My Lord," Severus answered.

"Bellatrix," the Dark Lord called. The woman stepped forward, her eyes showing the near-insanity that was a result of her incarceration. "Are the dementors ready?"

"They are Master," Bellatrix answered with reverence and excitement. "They will be needed to capture the dragons."

It just got worse by the moment.

"For the rest of you I have another task," a smile, cold and disturbing, appeared. "It occurs to me that the Ministry may be holding our lost comrades after all. You will do your best to locate them. I want all my followers beside me when we triumph."

Severus apparated to Hogwarts much later with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He strode to the headmaster's office and gave the password, 'Tremor Tarts', to the gargoyle. As usual, no matter what the time when Severus arrived, Albus was waiting for him behind his desk.

"Call a meeting Albus," Severus said without explanation. "I have to go to Headquarters." Severus stepped towards the fireplace, preparing to Floo away, but the fire was extinguished.

"Sit Severus," Albus ordered sternly. "What is so urgent?"

Severus took a deep breath and realized he was much more anxious than necessary. He was acting on his personal feelings... and Harry's. He could not afford to do either or he would get himself killed.

"He is gathering the dark creatures Albus," Severus told the headmaster.

"It is sooner than we expected," Albus stood and looked out his window.

Severus knew the Forbidden Forest was protected by the same wards that kept Hogwarts and Hogsmeade safe, but if there were any students already Marked, however unlikely that was, and they might try to take creatures from the grounds.

"He is sending the dementors to the dragon colonies," Severus felt the pit in his stomach widening again. There was a long pause before the headmaster spoke again.

"Go to Headquarters Severus," Albus turned from the window and lit the fire. "Warn Harry and Charlie."

Severus cursed the twinkle in Albus's eyes as he left for London. Arthur and Alastor were in the kitchen. The two of them made an interesting pair. Arthur was trusting almost to the point of carelessness at times while Alastor's paranoia was often joked about by the current Aurors. Alastor glared at him and Severus bristled. He knew the man's opinion of him, once a Death Eater always a Death Eater, and they clashed often. He was glad for the second time in a few days that he had let Albus tell Arthur and Molly about him and James.

"Severus," Arthur smiled at him, "I take it your meeting is over."

"Yes Arthur, I need to see your son," Severus said without further explanation. He walked past Moody quickly, wanting to spend as little time around the ex-auror as possible.

Arthur caught up with him in the hall, "Are any of them in trouble?"

For the first time Severus sympathized with the man. All seven of his children were involved in this war and he could lose each one of them, "No, but perhaps you should come with me."

Severus continued upstairs with the worried father behind him. He paused outside the bedroom door and knocked. He could have just disarmed any wards and walked in but he had no idea what he would find on the other side, and Arthur did not need that shock. Charlie answered the door wearing the same pajama bottoms Severus saw in Harry's memory. His red hair was sticking up in all directions, but fell into place with a quick brush from his hands.

"Severus, Dad," Charlie blinked in the light from the hall. "What's going on?"

"You need to go back to Romania Charlie," Severus started, and quickly discovered he should have started some other way.

Charlie bristled and glanced back at Harry, tossing in his sleep, "Severus..."

"Damn it Charlie," Severus snapped, "the Dark Lord is going to attack the colonies with dementors. He wants the dragons."

Charlie's deep red paled to a sickly white more rapidly than Severus thought possible. Arthur glanced back and forth between Severus and Charlie and Severus considered the man might not be as oblivious as he previously thought. He *had* raised two Head Boys. There was a chance that the kindly oblivious exterior hid a keen mind, like a less powerful and younger version of Albus.

"I'll wake your mother," Arthur said to his second son. "If you don't say good-bye she'll kill both of us."

Severus followed Charlie into the room and made his way to the bed while Charlie started packing. He sat down and tried to still Harry, but he was tense and damp from sweat, "Has he been like this every night?"

Charlie hesitated, "Yes. He doesn't want anyone worrying about him. He promised he would say something if it gets bad."

"Harry," Severus shook his son gently. It didn't take much to wake him.

Harry groaned and opened his eyes. He felt around for his glasses and Severus handed them over, "What are you doing here?"

Severus explained and added for Charlie, "Only his Inner Circle knows."

"Severus, if we're too prepared when they come, you..." Charlie stopped his packing, dropping a pile of shirts on the floor.

Severus flicked his wand and the shirts neatly folded themselves and floated into the trunk, "The dementors have been missing for over two months. Anyone with half a brain is prepared for them to show up. I can take care of myself."

Harry followed their conversation with the mild fogginess of the half-awake Severus saw. Charlie's trunk closed with a thud and Harry's head snapped up. He threw back his blankets and jumped out of bed, throwing himself into Charlie's arms. Severus looked on as Charlie whispered something to Harry, resigned to the knowledge that in some ways he had lost his son before he ever found him. Severus stepped to the doorway to make sure Harry and Charlie could say good-bye with some privacy. When he saw Molly coming down the hall he levitated Charlie's trunk and made sure it brushed Charlie's leg on its way to the door. The twins ran past their mother, though, dressed very oddly, and bumped into the trunk, sending it crashing to the floor with them. Oddly they paid almost no attention, juggling some small glass orbs between them.

"Before you go Charlie..." one of the twins started.

"...we have to test these," the other finished.

The twins stood and one of them held out an orb, the other his wand. The orb floated in the air, something gaseous swirling inside it. The orb disappeared but the gas remained and the twin by the gas started laughing hysterically.

"Cheering charm," the calm twin pronounced. "Fred and I were thinking about what Harry said, but neither of us can cast a good Patronus. We had started something similar for the store but changed directions a few days ago."

Molly and Arthur looked at their most trouble-making children in amazement. Severus knew from Minerva's headaches in staff meetings and the twins' exit from academia that Molly and Arthur most likely blamed every grey hair on them.

Charlie ended the cheering charm and gave each member of his family a tight hug. Bill came up with Ron, Ginny, and Hermione to see Charlie off.

"Keep working on those globes," Charlie said to the twins. He hugged Harry and Snape heard him say quietly, "I'm coming back." He smiled at the group gathered in the hall and walked down the stairs.

Harry reached out and took one of the orbs from Fred and George, "Do you have any empties?" One of the twins nodded. "Let's get to work." Harry gave Severus a quick, one armed hug as he followed the twins to their basement experimentation room, "Thanks."

The mood was solemn as everyone else who had gotten out of bed to see Charlie leave went back to their beds. Arthur remained, as he was still on kitchen duty, and stopped Severus at the base of the stairs.

"Severus," Arthur looked like he was having hard time deciding what precisely to say, "Harry and Charlie... are they...?"

Severus looked at the older man sharply. He knew how much Harry valued the Weasley family and would not be responsible for causing any friction between them, "According to Harry they are not dating. Both of them have empathic abilities. Because of that they share something that very few people can fully understand."

Arthur smiled as he looked Severus squarely in the eye, "You are very good at dancing around a question, aren't you Severus? Charlie is the only one of our boys who has never brought a girl home to meet us. Molly is convinced that all our children will bring us a house full of grandkids someday, but I don't see that in Charlie's future. He'd rather bring home injured wild animals. That's how we got Errol," Arthur went into the kitchen without waiting for a response.

"What have you done to me James?" Severus whispered. "I'm collecting Gryffindors."

Chapter Thirty-Four

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"Okay Harry sorry about that, the glass is really fragile, 'cause we couldn't get the charms in with a stronger ball," Fred explained.

George continued, "Just press the tip of your wand to the ball and cast the charm."

Harry nodded. The three of them were in the lab, the twins' self-requisitioned room of experimentation and destruction. There were scorch marks, stains, and various sized and shaped holes on the worktable. The stone walls and floor were in fairly good condition, as the twins most likely had more detentions scrubbing floors than Harry did. They were on opposite sides of the work table and another of the glass orbs was suspended in front of Harry. He held out his wand and pressed the tip against the orb. *Expecto Patronum!*

The eruption of silvery light from his wand was contained by the ball for a moment, before the ball exploded and showered the three of them in glass fragments for the fifth time.

"And that is why we wear protective clothing," Fred grinned after he lifted the mask he wore. "What do the muggles use these for George?"

George looked doubtful, "I can't be right. I mean, I know muggles are weird and all, but I could swear the guy said weddings."

Harry took off his own mask and stared at the twins. He burst out laughing at the identical confused looks, "Welding, not wedding. It's attaching metal to metal using fire. These protect the skin and eyes."

"Oh," Fred took off his mask altogether and inspected it. He put it down, took out another orb, and levitated it. "Unbreakable charm?"

"Nah," George responded. "We tried that, remember? Maybe a larger ball for a more powerful charm?"

Fred nodded thoughtfully and George pointed his wand at the orb, enlarging it significantly. Fred looked up at Harry, "Let's try again. If it works we'll keep making it smaller until we break another."

Harry nodded. They all donned their masks, which completed an outfit of coveralls, some of Hermione's knitted hats that the twins nicked from the common room, dragonhide gloves, and boots. Harry touched his wand to the enlarged orb, *Expecto Patronum!*

There was another rain of glass and Harry's boots crunched when he stepped backwards. He took off his mask again and set it down on the table, "Maybe something other than glass, something flexible?"

George and Fred looked at each and through a series of raised eyebrows and head tilts seemed to come to a consensus. Fred looked back to Harry, "Might work. Shall we try rubber?"

"Don't mind if I do," George responded with a wide grin that made absolutely no sense to Harry. He took out another orb, of which they seemed to have an unlimited supply, and screwed up his face in concentration.

Fred smiled at Harry, "George takes care of transfigurations. Charms are my department. Potions we brew together. Snape never split us up in class because he couldn't tell us apart. It was easier at yell at both of us at once."

Harry chuckled. Despite the seriousness of what they were working on Fred and George had been endeavoring to make Harry laugh all night.

"Got it!" George exclaimed. He made an odd movement with his wand and said something under his breath. The orb stayed the same size but turned a slightly different color and lost its shine.

"Masks on!"

Harry put his wand against the orb, took a deep breath, and concentrated. He was getting a bit tired from casting the Patronus Charm so many times. Fred and George had wanted to see it several times before they started, then made several adjustments in a series of charms that were on the

orbs to allow the spell inside. This would be his thirteenth corporeal Patronus of the night and his scar was throbbing with pain. *Expecto Patronum!*

The three of them watched as the sphere bulged, bright silvery light shining from it. After a few seconds Harry reached out and took the ball in his hand. It had stretched, but wasn't breaking. There weren't even any cracks forming.

"Now to see if the Patronus will still work," Fred said, his eyes lighting up with excitement. He took the ball from Harry and brandished his wand.

"Wait!" Harry exclaimed.

"What?" George asked.

Harry bit his lower lip, "Shouldn't we test it against a dementor?"

"Well, normally, yeah, but where are we going to get one?" Fred asked.

Harry pointed his wand at the air, *Tempus!*

"Blimey, we've been at it all night," George remarked.

"It's midway into breakfast time," Harry said. As if on cue their stomachs rumbled. "I think I can get us a practice dementor. We'll just need Remus or Moody's help. Come on."

When they got upstairs, still wearing their protective clothes, Moody and Mr. Weasley were eating breakfast. Remus was starting on his first cup of coffee, and Bill was on his way out for work.

Mrs. Weasley turned in surprise as they came out of the door behind her in the kitchen, "Have you three been down there all night?"

Harry nodded and made straight for the table. He sat next to Moody and poured himself some coffee, "Have there been any boggarts hiding around here lately?"

Fred and George looked at Harry in sudden comprehension and sat down, looking at Moody eagerly. The magical eye spun upwards and he shook his head, "Not a one."

"Why do you three want a boggart?" Mrs. Weasley demanded.

Fred held up the glowing ball and Remus perked up, "Harry's Patronus is in there?"

Fred and George both grinned widely and Harry nodded, "Do you have one Remus?"

Mrs. Weasley came over from her cooking and stood behind Moody as he took the ball and started examining it, his magical eye fixed in place for once.

"I have one for my second years in an old trunk," Remus got a crafty look in his eye. "I can switch the boggart lesson with the sphinx lesson and have Filch keep an eye out for a replacement if we destroy this one. I'll head over to Hogwarts after breakfast and bring it back for you. Are you sure about this Harry?"

Harry shrugged, "We have to test it, and I don't want to hand these out and then find out they can't drive the dementors away."

Fred and George were discussing which duplication spell would work best on their latest invention when the rest of the house started trickling for breakfast. Once Hermione heard what they were talking about she joined in, leaving Harry to Ron and Ginny. Remus left after his coffee, apparently as eager to try the Patronus as Fred, George, and Harry were.

"So what is that thing everyone's fascinated with?" Ron pointed to the silvery ball of light. The containing rubber couldn't even be seen.

"My Patronus," Harry responded after swallowing a mouthful of porridge.

Ron swallowed his bacon, with a look in Hermione's direction, "Huh? I thought it was a stag."

Harry picked up the ball and handed it to Ron, "Careful with this. It's the only one and I'm exhausted."

Mr. Weasley looked at Harry with concern, "How many times did you cast that?"

"Twelve I think," Harry yawned and stretched, "maybe thirteen."

"Thirteen," Fred and George confirmed.

"Molly," Mr. Weasley called, "bring Harry some Replenisher."

At Harry's confused look Ginny leaned over and explained quietly, "When you've used too much magic in too short a time you can get kind of depleted. Replenisher brings your levels back to normal."

"Wait Mrs. Weasley," Harry perked up, "don't. I have to try something."

Harry jumped up and ran into the front room. It was still warded against outbursts and more things that Harry didn't know. He pointed his wand at a book, *Wingardium Leviosa!*

The book shot off the table, smacked the ceiling hard enough for some small chunks of plaster and dust to rain down, and fell with a thud. Harry grinned and thought back to a conversation he had with Charlie before they got to sleep the night before. He had locked the room without his wand on him, not even noticing what he did with how upset he was. He pointed at the book, wand in his pocket, *Wingardium Leviosa!*

The book rose off the table and followed Harry's finger around the room. He was bringing it from the window back to its table when the door opened and Hermione stuck her head in, "Harry, I... oh!"

Harry set the book down and ran to Hermione. He grabbed her in an excited hug, "I did it! It's working again! I think there was too much trying to get through and it got all blocked up. I used so much magic last night that I'm depleted. There's not as much trying to get out. I can feel it!"

"That's wonderful Harry!" Hermione's eyes lit up and she sounded as excited as he felt. "Ooo, I wonder if you don't need a wand at all anymore. They channel magic for us but if you have too much maybe the wand gets sort of clogged. We have to let Professor Dumbledore know, and Professor Snape."

Harry grinned and nodded. If they were successful with the boggart there would be a lot of good news today, "What were you here for?"

"Oh! I almost forgot!" Hermione's hand flew to her mouth. "Remus is back. He wanted to know where you were going to try the Patronus ball thing."

"We should probably use the lab, just in case," Harry said, looking around the room.

The rest of the household was at breakfast by then and examining the Potter Portable Patronus, as Fred and George had dubbed them. It had been duplicated several times already. Harry frowned at the name but it didn't make any difference. Everyone there joined Harry and the twins in the basement lab to test their creation.

"We should use a duplicate," Harry suggested. "If they work then the original definitely does."

Fred and George nodded in sync, "Someone cast a shield and everyone get behind it!"

Fred stood by the trunk, ready to open it, and George had the orb levitated, ready for activation.

Harry stood in front of the trunk to face the boggart. Fred held up a hand with three fingers raised. He put them down one at a time and opened the trunk when the last finger was down.

A dementor rose out of the trunk and the temperature in the room dropped. Harry tried to keep his mind clear as the chill invaded his body and the dementor started to take effect. He vaguely heard George cast the vanishing spell behind him and then a silvery Prongs leapt past him and the dementor stumbled.

He heard from behind him, "*Riddikulus!*"

George forced the boggart back into the trunk and Fred slammed the lid shut. Both of them were grinning so wide Harry suspected it hurt. His own cheeks felt a bit strained. Someone thundered up the stairs and Harry heard the fireplace flare into life. He was suddenly very tired and a cup was thrust into his hands. Harry drank it and felt a surge of magic rip through him like an electrical shock. He heard the cup drop to the floor but didn't feel himself hit the stone.

"Harry," a hand was lightly slapping his cheek, "Harry wake up."

Harry giggled. That euphoric feeling was back.

"Oh no, not again," Harry heard Ron groan.

"Concentrate Harry," his father told him sharply. "You got your shields back up before. You can hold this back."

Harry took a couple of deep breaths and concentrated on his magic. He could almost see the great shining light that had been restrained and bound. Snape was wrong. He shouldn't hold it back. That would just be putting up barriers again and that was the problem in the first place. It should flow, Harry thought, like the blood in his veins. As he pictured the comparison it started to become so. The magic was all through him and on him.

"I didn't hear her screaming," Harry said in realization and relief. He looked up at his father's confused face and saw he needed to explain, "My mum. The boggart dementor... I had my mind shielded..."

His father had a single eyebrow raised, the only sign he would show of his approval and pride. Over the past several months Harry had discovered that Snape's face appeared to be emotionless but if you looked closely enough, knew him well enough, you could decode the slight turn of the lips and quirks of the eyebrow.

Harry sat up and found that someone had conjured up a cot for him. The workroom was filled with activity. Whoever had gone upstairs after the experiment had brought back several Hogwarts professors and it seemed like an impromptu Order meeting was taking place... only Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were there as well.

George, Hermione, and Professor McGonagall were flipping through books and Harry heard something about the transfiguration of the glass to rubber. There was the shimmer of a shield behind which Fred, Ginny, and Ron were throwing whatever curses they could think of at the orbs. On occasion an orb would have a reaction to the curse thrown and Prongs would leap out. Fred would then make a note on some parchment from his pocket. Tonks, Moody, Remus, and Kingsley were each casting their Patronus into empty orbs.

"I guess it wouldn't be a good idea for the whole world to know my Patronus," Harry commented, wondering what form the charm took for the others.

"No, though most people using these will not know exactly where they came from," Snape agreed. He scrutinized Harry, "Have you taken your potion today yet?"

Harry shook his head and stood carefully, not sure if he would get a head rush from the unbound magic, "I think I might have it figured out. I was so drained earlier it didn't matter. Can I show you something?" Snape nodded. Harry shivered. The cold from the dementor was not entirely gone.

"First, I need some chocolate."

Harry went over to George and whispered in his ear. George slipped his one of the orbs below the worktable and Harry pocketed it, and then led the way up to the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley was getting lunch together and Harry figured that Mr. Weasley was in bed. A bright smile from Harry got him a large chunk of Honeydukes chocolate and a motherly hug.

Once they were in the front room Snape shook his head, "Does that smile get you anything you want?"

"No," Harry responded and grinned ruefully, "but sometimes it helps."

"Your father used it mercilessly," there was a fondness in Snape's tone that Harry would have never expected to hear from the man, especially connected to James Potter.

The mention of his other father reminded Harry and he pulled the orb out of his pocket, holding it out for Snape, who took it and inspected it carefully. "You just use a vanishing spell on the sphere holding the charm whenever you want to release it. I... I just thought you might like to see Prongs."

Snape's head snapped up and though he didn't show it Harry could feel a mixture of gratitude and sadness, "Thank you."

Harry smiled and sat down ungracefully. He caught the mild cringe from that action and attempted to straighten up and sit correctly, "What exactly does a wand do?"

"If you want to know in great detail you should speak to Ollivander or Albus," Snape carefully pocketed the Portable Patronus and sat down with Harry. "Generally speaking, wands focus and magnify our magical power. You've seen Albus perform minor bits of magic without his, like summoning the house elves or dimming the candles in the great hall. I'm not sure the extent of his wandless ability. It is wise to never let others know exactly what you can do."

Harry nodded and thought about it for a moment. He wondered when wizards had started using wands, or if they ever did more than a few spells without them. He tried to remember the sign above Ollivanders, *Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.* A visit to Ollivander might explain a great deal. Harry noticed that Snape was watching him carefully, but waiting for Harry to continue the conversation. He remembered the duel between Dumbledore and Voldemort, how both of them were casting spells without saying a word.

He held out his hand and concentrated, trying to direct the flow of magic to that hand, and thought as hard as he could, *Accio Supernova II*. His new broom came from his room through the door that was open just a crack and into his hand. Harry beamed and looked at his father, who was smiling as broadly as the man ever did.

"I shouldn't be surprised," Snape almost laughed. "With what Lily and James could do it is no wonder that you can do extraordinary things. It isn't often that a Head Boy and Girl wed. In fact, James and Lily may have been the first in centuries, if not ever."

Harry felt a surge of pride, but also was reminded of a question that had been bothering him, "Does heredity really effect us so much? Look at mum and Hermione, or for that matter Neville. According to the pureblood superiority nonsense Malfoy is constantly spurring out Neville should be much more powerful than Hermione. He's a decent wizard," at the skeptic look on his father's face Harry frowned, "with the exception of potions, where you had him so scared he could hardly breathe let alone brew a proper potion, but he's nowhere near as good as Hermione, or Justin Finch-Fletchley." "They are all prime examples of why heredity is important," Snape said with a smirk and Harry looked at him in confusion. "At your age I agreed with what Draco Malfoy says fully. James and I had several heated debates on the subject, but it was Lily who finally convinced me. She brought muggle genetics studies and recessive traits into James's argument."

Harry's curiosity was fully peaked. He had wondered many times over the past few years why Snape had changed his mind and turned against Voldemort. He leaned forward and listened to his father eagerly.

"Lily eventually got a muggle biology textbook to teach me all about genetics in her fervor to convince me, much like Miss Granger willing to go to any lengths once she had a mission," Snape's smirk widened so it was almost a smile. "I will not go into that in depth, as it would most likely bore you and I have no wish to be compared to Binns." Harry laughed at the reference to the History of Magic professor. "Basically, when people who are too closely related have children, traits linked to recessive genes are more likely to become dominant. This happened in European royalty. Queen Victoria spread hemophilia through her children and weakened the royal families of Europe considerably.

"A similar thing is happening to the wizarding world. The Malfoys may consider their pale coloring aristocratic, but they are highly susceptible to the sun and must use a potion daily to protect themselves from severe burning. The Crabbes and Goyles are getting stupider with each passing generation. The Potter line has stayed vital by marrying muggle-born or mixed blood witches and wizards, as have the Weasleys, Boneses, Patils, Finnigans, and a number of other families."

"Mostly Gryffindors," Harry commented.

"Yes, don't interrupt. It's rude," Harry nodded. "Witches like your mother and Miss Granger are easily explained. Your mother theorized that magic was carried on a recessive gene. Ages ago, and often now even, pureblood families that have squib children will disown them once they reach eleven and

are not admitted into one of the wizarding schools. These squibs join the muggle world, marry muggles, and have muggle children who carry the recessive magic gene and pass it to their children but do not show magic themselves. Somewhere along the line two muggles with squib ancestry will marry and have children with the potential for a muggle-born witch or wizard among them."

"So both of Hermione's parents would be descended from squibs," Harry's father nodded, "and if she traced her families back far enough she would find wizarding names?"

"Yes," Snape gave Harry an approving look. "You carry the pure Snape line, mostly pure Potter line, and squib Evans line."

Harry smirked, "I'm even more pure than Voldemort than I thought." Snape raised a single eyebrow and gave Harry a piercing look, his method of silently asking a question. Harry looked at his father incredulously, "You don't know? His father was a muggle and abandoned his mother when he found out she was a witch. She died giving birth to him. He was raised in a muggle orphanage. I figured all the Death Eaters knew. Wormtail knows from the resurrection ceremony. Hell, he was using his father's house as his headquarters!"

"Language, Harry," Snape had a vague, crafty look in his eye. "This could be useful, very useful."

"He certainly doesn't practice what he preaches," Snape shot his son a confused, for Snape anyway, look, and Harry waved his hand in the air. "Muggle saying, he's a bloody hypocrite. I can't believe Dumbledore never told you."

"You are not the only one who suffers from the lack of information with Albus," Snape's tone was bitter. "Minerva may be the only one who hears most of what Albus discovers, and I've heard her bemoaning his vague explanations and riddles."

Harry snorted, but was comforted that he was not alone, "It's no wonder most of the wizarding world thinks he's mad."

A searing pain shot across Harry's forehead, like the time he burned his hand on the stovetop, and he clenched his jaw and held his head tightly. He heard vials clinking and his head was tipped back. Harry forced his mouth open and a potion slid down his throat. There was some immediate relief, but it just took the edge off. There was a definite plus in having Snape for a father, a ready potions supply.

Harry hung his head forward and took deep steady breaths, "He's so angry. Someone must have fucked up real bad."

Snape's hands were cool on his arm and back as he guided Harry to lie down. It was then that Harry remembered he had only slept for an hour or two the night before, and none of the sleep was good. A blanket was tucked around him and a bolster from one of the couches cushioned his head. Snape held a cool cloth against Harry's scar and dimmed the lights in the room. He stood to leave, but Harry grabbed at his sleeve.

"Please," Harry spoke through the pain, still making his entire head throb.

"There's no way I'll sleep. Stay. Tell me about Mum and Dad." When he saw Snape settle into a chair Harry closed his eyes.

Chapter Thirty-Five

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"Where is that bloody idiot?" Severus growled impatiently.

Lily Evans just smiled amiably, "It's James Severus. He probably snuck out to Hogsmeade with Sirius and lost track of time. He'll look at his watch, curse loudly enough to get them caught, then come running back and apologize profusely."

Severus sneered. Of all the things he could be doing, sitting around with a mudblood was the last he would want, "Thank you Evans. You may have all day to sit around and wait for him. I have things to do."

"So little time, so many Hufflepuffs," Lily drawled teasingly. "They'll be there to torment in the morning."

Severus fumed and crossed the room to where he left his bag. He had homework to do and if James was going to make him wait he was going to get something done. Evans when James was there was acceptable, but when James was not around he had no desire for her company. He pulled out his Charms book and a fresh roll of parchment to begin his essay.

Half an hour later there was no sign of James and Severus had gotten almost nowhere on his Charms essay about complex warding. There was a theoretical point where he was just stuck. He glanced over his shoulder every so often and saw Evans sitting on a desk and practicing transfigurations. 'Pop.' The desk next to her became a full mirror. 'Pop.' The mirror was a beaver that thwacked its tail against the floor. 'Pop.' The badger turned into a Hagrid-sized goblet of pumpkin juice.

Severus turned back to his essay, each successive 'pop' grating on his nerves. For maybe ten minutes there was silence in the room and Severus threw down his quill in frustration.

"What is it?" Evans walked up to his desk and asked.

Severus glared, but she didn't react at all. That was perhaps the thing about her that bothered him the most. Even James reacted to his glares. Evans acted like he was just smiling blankly or not even looking at her. He finally gave in. After all, she was the best Charms student in the castle, "It's the essay for Flitwick..."

Just as they were finishing up his essay the door to the room opened and closed with a bang that could only be caused by James Potter. He swung off his invisibility cloak and practically skipped across the room.

"I knew it! I knew if I left you two together alone for long enough Sev would give in!" James declared proudly. Severus was suddenly furious. How dare he...! He felt one of his deadliest glares forming. "James Potter," Lily exclaimed before Severus could say a thing. "Of all the dirty, underhanded, ridiculous..."

"But Lily," James gave her his puppy dog eyes look, "I just wanted you two to be friends."

"Well it worked James Potter," Lily said with a smile that Severus recognized as a Marauder sign of trouble. She really was spending too much time with them, "and it serves you right."

She bent down and kissed Severus gently on the lips. He was stunned and when she stood again he could see that James was equally stunned. She had only ever kissed James on the cheek or forehead before, never allowed his lips to touch hers. Severus recovered long before James did and smirked.

"That was positively Slytherin of you Lily," Severus complimented her revenge.

James blinked and collapsed into a chair, still speechless, with Lily and Severus laughing hilariously at his expense.

Severus woke with a smile on his face, something that was happening more and more frequently. That incident had occurred during the winter holiday of their sixth year, one of the many turning points in Severus's life. Lily became his first non-pureblood friend that day, and quickly one of the

closest friends he had ever known. She had a way of quickly gaining the confidence of anyone she knew, and a talent for diffusing his worst moods.

"He got it from Lily," Severus sat up with a start. Lily had always known when his bad moods were beginning, and always knew what to do. He wondered if anyone had known that Lily was an empath, if she had even known herself.

By the end of the winter holiday the Weasley twins had nearly perfected their Potter Portable Patronus. No matter how many times Harry had argued the twins refused to change the name, and pointed out that they wouldn't be selling them in their store so no one would know the official name anyway. The barrier they had run into was making the orbs stealthy. Anytime they changed the color of the rubber it did something to the rigidity and they either couldn't be activated properly or weren't strong enough to contain the Patronus.

Severus and Minerva had agreed while talking before an Order meeting, to the great surprise of everyone listening to their conversation, that if the twins had dedicated themselves to their school work as much as they did to the jokes and other experiments they would have been at the top of their class. The two of them had averaged around four hours of sleep a night while they worked on the Portable Patronus.

Molly in particular had been stunned and had made the twins' favorites for dinner each night. She had always claimed that playing jokes would get the twins nowhere, and they were swiftly becoming the most successful of her children. They had certainly made their talents invaluable to the Order, providing their wares at a discounted rate.

Before Harry worked further on his dueling training, Granger was given the task of catching him up on his schoolwork. If she ever became a professor Severus pitied her students. She had Harry working every moment of the day when he wasn't eating, sleeping, or helping the Weasley twins. How she did it was beyond him. One look and Harry and Ron would stop talking and bury themselves in their books.

Harry's extra training began in earnest. Severus had suggested that Harry use a fake wand in his classes and around his classmates until he figured out how to properly channel his power when using his true wand. The fake wand, another creation of Weasley and Weasley though this one didn't turn into a rubber chicken or swordfish when Harry used it, was an exact duplicate of Harry's wand, even down to the small dents that were a result of the battle in the Department of Mysteries and the five plus years it had been in use.

Albus had somehow convinced Fudge that the castle needed extra protection, and as a result Tonks and Kingsley were often seen wandering the halls. The true purpose of their presence was to work with Harry. As he had missed the apparition lessons with his classmates Kingsley taught him after hours. He caught on quickly enough that Kingsley seemed shocked and they moved onto creating Portkeys, charming brooms, and messing around with the Floo Network. Tonks helped him with disguise and concealment.

Severus kept a close eye on Harry. What Charlie had told him about Harry's scar pain and sleeping patterns had disturbed him much more than he let on. Severus did not mention it to Albus, as Harry hadn't even wanted Severus to know. The headmaster probably knew anyway, as he had the staff reporting on Harry's grades, which were slightly low for him, at staff meetings and sent Severus to observe Harry's training frequently. It was several weeks into the term and Harry had hardly spoken to him.

Reducto!

The wall that Remus had conjured to block Harry's curses exploded into stone fragments, leaving behind a large cloud of dust. Both sides of the duel took advantage of it and threw several curses through the dust in hopes to reach their targets.

Harry and Tonks were paired up against Remus, Kingsley, and Moody. Harry needed to learn not only to fight multiple opponents, but to fight with a partner or in a group, protecting each other and relying on each other for aid.

Tonks shielded both of them while Harry fired off a rapid succession of curses. A disorienting curse hit Remus and was quickly countered by Kingsley. Moody sent several stunners towards Harry and Tonks which were all blocked while Remus recovered.

Harry wasn't looking anywhere near Tonks when she was hit by a mild pain curse. He instantly cast the counter though and Severus smirked. Harry was using his empathy to track Tonks, though the Auror was probably not even aware he was doing it.

The duel had lasted over forty-five minutes when Harry stumbled, though no curse hit him. As he was fighting with Tonks, tripping over his own feet wouldn't even be noticed by his opponents.

Severus watched closely and saw it was a feint. Harry had discreetly switched to his true wand.

Stupefy!

Harry didn't speak the curse but Severus could tell by Harry's expression that he was concentrating hard and watched as Remus, Moody, and Kingsley all fell to the ground. Tonks looked back and forth from them to Harry in some amount of awe. The awe would have increased if she knew Harry wasn't actually using a wand for the majority of the duel. He could still only use his wand for particular spells, mostly ones that were linked somewhat to emotions or used a great deal of power.

Harry staggered to his knees with his right hand pressed against his head and Severus leapt into action. Harry said, mostly to Tonks, "Had to... end it."

Severus went quickly to Harry and ordered Tonks to revive the others. He tried to give Harry a pain killing draught but he pushed it away.

"Drink it," Severus ordered. "No one is questioning your bravery."

"Not that," Harry half whispered through short, deep breaths, still refusing the potion and clutching his head. "Took two today already. Wait... four hours."

It took all of Severus's control not to yell, knowing he would have to find some way to express his displeasure without reminding both of them of the Dursleys. He knew that Harry had promised Charlie he would go to someone if the scar pain got too bad, and instantly began to wonder what Harry's definition of 'too much' was. He had half a mind to write to Charlie and bring the dragon handler to Hogwarts to scold Harry for him. There was no telling where Charlie was, though, as he was traveling from dragon colony to colony with the twins, delivering the orbs in their near-perfected form and warning the handlers. A few friends of the twins were charged with watching the store in their absence.

"How many hours of sleep are you getting each night?" Severus demanded.

Harry shut his eyes and sat down, massaging his forehead with both hands, "On average... about six."

"Are you brewing pain killers yourself?" Severus asked harshly, wishing that there weren't outsiders watching. Harry nodded and Severus ground his teeth. "How often are you taking them?"

"Two or three a day," Harry replied with a sharp edge to his voice, most likely from fighting pain.

Severus cursed. The potions could build up over time, and another month or two of this could start to have permanent effect on Harry's body. If it got any worse he would have to deny Harry the pain reliever potions and use that ceremony Granger had found. No better option had come to light despite hours of research conducted by the determined Gryffindor.

"From now on you will get your potions directly from Madam Pomfrey," Severus held his son's eyes in his gaze as he spoke. "As you insist on brewing potions outside of class you can do so in detention. What are you picking up from the Dark Lord?"

Harry hissed in a breath, "Pleased... with something."

Severus considered the possibility that Harry's empathy was the reason he could identify Voldemort's moods through their link. Harry's training and strengthening of his empathy might be having as much effect as the growing strength of the bond. At least with Harry getting pain potions from Poppy they could track how much he was taking.

"Harry," Tonks approached them, perhaps sensing that their conversation was over, "how long have you been able to cast spells without speaking them?"

All four of Harry's trainers looked very interested in the answer. Severus repressed the smirk that formed beneath the surface. Harry had taken him aside especially to show him and ask about it... and not told Remus Lupin. Every so often Severus felt somewhat jealous of the werewolf, though he would never admit, for having a definite place in Harry's life. Severus was still not sure exactly where he stood.

Harry shrugged, "I guess I only really noticed over holiday, but I might have been doing it longer, like with the Parseltongue. It was over a year before I knew I was speaking another language."

Severus shook his head and nearly scoffed. Harry spoke of these things, that many wizards would pay fortunes to be able to do, so casually, as if they were not rare talents or special in any way. No, Severus thought, it was not that he didn't think of them as rare, it was that he didn't want them to be rare, didn't want the extra attention and yet another thing that separated him from his friends.

"I'm taking Harry back to his tower," Remus said with concern laced through his voice. He gave Severus a look that clearly said, 'be careful.' With Harry reacting so strongly to his scar there was every chance Severus would be summoned.

The two of them left, Harry leaning just slightly on Remus, and Kingsley began setting the room to rights. Tonks in general did more harm with her cleaning charms than good.

"How is his training progressing?" Severus asked Moody.

"You saw for yourself," Moody snorted and crossed his arms, though keeping his wand arm ready. He would never trust Severus. "He was playing with us. With a stunner that powerful, even when he's clearly in pain, he could have had us out anytime."

"It's time to move on," Kingsley added. "His reflexes are excellent, probably from all that quidditch," *and his cousin*, Severus added mentally. "He has a better knowledge of dueling spells than any sixteen-year-old I've ever met. He needs to learn the offensive spells he can't find in his textbooks or the library here."

"You think he should be taught dark magic?" Tonks questioned skeptically.

Kingsley nodded, and Severus wondered about the man. He hadn't been in the Order during the previous war and Severus barely knew him. "He will have to fight it, so he will have to know it."

"Who do you propose teaches him?" Moody asked, his magical eye keeping track of Severus.

"Is there any other option?" Kingsley's lips turned up just slightly at the sides. "Who can teach him what to expect from Death Eaters better than Severus?"

As if on cue the Dark Mark began to burn and Severus tensed. Moody, of course, noticed and commented scathingly, "Run off to your Master Snape."

Severus seethed, "Kingsley, please inform Albus."

He turned and swept out of the room. When he followed the pull of the Mark he could tell that it was leading him to some destination other than the Norwegian caves. When his eyes adjusted to the darkness he could tell there were very few called. It was to be a mission then, not a meeting.

"Severus, so good of you to join us," the Dark Lord was in an excellent mood, as Harry had earlier predicted. This was at least confirmation that Harry's readings were accurate. "When was the last time you encountered the dementors?"

"When Black," Severus spat his name, "escaped they were guarding the edges of the Hogwarts wards. The mutt still managed to get by them somehow."

"They do not bother you greatly, then?" the hissing voice questioned.

"No Master," Severus responded with a bow of his head. "I am able to shield myself against the worst of their effects."

Belletrix Lestrange appeared by his side, "We are ready Master," and disappeared again.

Severus took the cue to mask himself. There were a few there who were trembling, no doubt from the mention of the dementors. As Harry had discovered over the holiday a fully occluded mind can resist the foul creatures much longer than those unshielded.

"The dementors will go in first and weaken the wizards," the Dark Lord announced. "You will follow to cast the Imperious. We need several of the wizards under our control to handle the beasts." The Dark Lord disappeared and Severus felt the pull of the Dark Mark again. He apparated and found himself at the Dark Lord's side, "You will stay here with me Bellatrix and Severus and observe. We shall see how well my young ones work without one of my chosen among them."

They were standing on a mountain peak, and no doubt made an impressive silhouette, three unmoving figures with cloaks blowing in the winds. Below them were several lower peaks and a stretch of valleys. There were tents, the only source of light under the clouded sky. Every now and then fire would flare and a dragon was visible.

Severus knew immediately where they were. He had seen these mountains in Harry's mind, the Carpathian Mountains, and below them was the Romanian Dragon Preserve. Possibly, somewhere down there, was Charlie Weasley, and Fred and George Weasley, hopefully ready for the attack. Belletrix held an arm high above her head, and brought it sweeping down. The dementors rushed past them, hundreds of the disgusting creatures, their dirty robes brushing against the three figures that did not move in reaction.

"Your arm, Severus," the Dark Lord hissed.

He held out his left arm and the sleeve fell back to expose the Dark Mark. The burn was powerful as the Dark Lord pressed a finger to the Mark. Severus felt his muscles tighten against the pain, but nothing else gave him away. A group of perhaps ten Death Eaters appeared around them.

"Remember," the Dark Lord said threateningly, "I want prisoners. Do not kill the dragon handlers." This group of Death Eaters was not stupid. They knew that was their cue to follow the dementors, but Severus did not watch them as they took off on brooms. He watched as the valleys were lit up with fire. The dragons had sensed the intruders and were flaming, burning those dementors that got too close. The alarm was up and the valleys were suddenly filled with brilliant silvery light, the light only made by a powerful Patronus.

Severus did not need Harry's empathy to know that the Dark Lord's mood was shifting from pleased and triumphant to furious. The dragons were taking flight and the attacking Death Eaters turned back, not willing to take on the dragons and dragon handlers together. The dementors were repelled and a much smaller number than had been released returned to their earlier gathering point.

Dragon fire, one of the only things that could actually kill a dementor, had taken out many of the foul creatures.

The mission ended almost immediately after it began and the Dark Lord was fuming. He disappeared and Severus, well versed in the Dark Lord's intentions after years of service, followed immediately with Bellatrix. The wizards returning on brooms would see them go and, if they valued their lives, apparate immediately to the cave complex.

CRUCIO!

Belletrix fell to the floor, writhing and shrieking in pain. Severus braced himself for the potential pain to come. He had no part in the failure of the mission, but the Dark Lord was not logical in his wrath. Predictably, Severus was the next to fall, though he did not scream or make any noise beyond that of his body hitting the floor of the cave.

When the curse ended he stood, and Belletrix was standing beside him. The wizards who had been the mission attack force trickled in, looking somewhat amusingly like a quidditch team that had lost an important game with the brooms they were carrying.

"I do not tolerate failure," the Dark Lord's red eyes were aflame. Each of the wizards fell under the Unforgivable Curse in turn. "I want to know what went wrong, and I want to know now."

"M-my Lord," one of the shaken wizards spoke. Severus did not recognize the voice, "T-their P-p-patroni were all the s-same, a s-stag, a wolf, and a c-c-cat."

"That is not possible!" the Dark Lord stood from his chair and bellowed at the Death Eater who spoke. "A Patronus is specific to the wizard who casts it! That large a group cannot have only two forms! Find out what happened there immediately." The last sentence was spoken in a quiet threat. The lower Death Eaters retreated hastily, not wanting to be punished further, leaving Severus and Belletrix alone with the Dark Lord.

"Potter's Patronus is a stag, Severus," hissed the Dark Lord. "He is at the school tonight?"

"He should be, My Lord," Severus answered with head bowed, "but as you know he has a tendency to ignore the rules put in place for his safety."

"I want to know what he had to do with this Severus," the Dark Lord was dangerously angry. "It is time you used your influence on the boy. Bring me everything he knows about tonight."

Both Severus and Belletrix were subjected to another round of the Cruciatus Curse before the Dark Lord dismissed them.

Chapter Thirty-Six

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Severus went straight to Albus's office upon his return to Hogwarts. He was not surprised to find Moody, Kingsley, Tonks, and Remus waiting in there for him. With the mood the Dark Lord was in Severus was worried about Harry, but he could not go rushing to his side, not with Order members unaware of their relationship there. He entered with a smirk and sat down in a free chair, though his whole body was crying out from the pain of the punishment he received.

"Well what are you so pleased about?" Moody snapped.

Severus loved it. The former Auror was so easily manipulated, "They worked."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled and Remus brightened visibly. The others did not pick up what Severus was referring to quite as quickly, but looks of satisfaction soon filled the room.

"How well?" Remus, ever the Marauder, was the first to react.

"The only casualties in Romania were dementors, destroyed by dragon fire," Severus announced.

"The only way he will get dragons is in the wild. The handlers should all be on alert. He will try to kidnap some by stealth. Without McNair he has no one qualified to be in charge of dragons."

"You saw?" Moody asked, constantly suspicious.

"I was called to observe," Severus remarked dryly. "He was quite obviously displeased. Your aunt, Nymphadora, is rather uncomfortable at the moment."

Tonks looked rather happy with that comment and didn't bother to correct the usage of her first name. Albus handed a potion across his desk, identifiable to all of them. It was the one Severus used for the after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse. It was a deliberate move, to take the potion with Moody present. Severus drank the potion and passed the empty vial back to Albus.

"Are you okay?" Tonks questioned with actual concern.

Severus lifted an eyebrow, "Returning from the Dark Lord in one piece is always preferable to the alternative."

Albus leaned over his desk and gave Severus his soul piercing look, "Is there anything more?"

"He wants to know about the Portable Patronus," Severus said calmly. "Potter's form was recognized. The Dark Lord already knew it took the form of a stag, doubtless from Pettigrew."

"Tonks, are there any of the earlier versions remaining?" Remus asked.

She thought for a moment, "Only if Harry has one. The twins have the original, but they still need it for making duplicates to work with. I'm not sure where they are now..."

"They were with Charlie in Romania, trying to perfect the Portables," Albus answered. "Check with Harry first. If Voldemort is angry..."

Remus sprang to his feet, "Harry!"

"Severus, go with Remus to check on him," Albus ordered, much to Severus's masked relief. "If Harry has one of the orbs you can bring it to Voldemort."

Severus and Remus left the headmaster's office together, headed towards staff quarters where the Floo to the Gryffindor sixth year boys' room was still active. They were silent as they walked the corridors, Severus scowling and Remus smiling brightly. Both of them were masking their worry. Inside his quarters Severus let the scowl drop and Remus's anxiety showed, "Don't bother asking Harry for one of the orbs. I have one." Remus raised his eyebrows and Severus swallowed. "Harry gave it to me... so I could see Prongs again."

Remus was certainly the most perceptive of the Marauders. He rested a hand on Severus's arm, "I'm sorry Severus."

The grief he often felt now was far away, overshadowed by his concern for Harry as James would have wanted. He did not answer the werewolf, or even look at him as it would only spark the pain of his loss, but threw some powder into the fireplace and left for Harry's room.

"Professors!" Severus and Remus had nearly collided with Ron Weasley on their arrival. He looked harried, "I was just..."

"We know," Severus cut the boy off. Harry's bed curtains were closed and there was no sound coming from behind them.

"Imperturbable Charm," Weasley explained. "I was the only one awake and I didn't want to disturb the others. There's an extra silencing charm too."

Weasley flicked his wand to remove the Imperturbable Charm and opened the curtains. The violent tossing and turning seemed strange with no sound. There was sweat on Harry's face and when they passed the silencing charm they could hear loud moans and cries.

"I tried casting a few calming charms and cheering charms but they didn't work," Weasley said nervously.

Severus reached to still Harry, but drew his hand back as a shock was sent through him several inches from Harry's skin, "Damn!"

"Severus?" Remus went to the other side of the bed and sat down, also reaching out.

"Stop," Severus commanded. "He has a defensive shield up. You can't touch him... and no simple spells will get through."

Remus looked up and met Severus's eyes. This was not good. It was too much like Privet Drive, like the shield Harry held there while unconscious and bleeding to death.

"Isn't there something you could do?" Weasley asked, pleading with his eyes.

Severus and Remus continued to stare at each other, knowing there was almost nothing that could be done, "I could try to break the shield..."

"...but that could do more harm than good," Remus finished.

Harry still had not woken and Severus made a split second decision. If anyone had the right here, he did, "Go get Granger Weasley."

"But the staircases..." Weasley reminded him.

This brought a bitter laugh from Remus, "Don't tell me you haven't figured it out yet." He was met with a blank stare. "Siri and James knew by fourth year. Fly your broom up to her door, and fly it back down Ron."

Weasley's eyes widened and he grabbed the nearest broom, Harry's Supernova II, and mounted it there as it would be faster than running down the stairs. He returned only minutes later with Granger clinging to him with her eyes squeezed shut.

"I hate flying," she said as she got off the broom shakily. She saw Harry thrashing on his bed and instantly went towards the bed, but was held back by Weasley.

Severus stood and held her shoulders firmly, "Go to my quarters and bring back the folio. It is on the desk in my study off the living room. If we are going to try to help him I want that nearby."

The girl's eyes widened and she nodded, Weasley giving her an odd look. She must not have told him about the ritual she found, as Severus had requested. Remus was giving the same strange look. Granger shot Weasley an apologetic gaze before disappearing through the fire.

"Weasley, go down to your common room and call the headmaster through the fire. Tell him to come through at once," Severus commanded. Weasley nodded and left.

Severus got up and cast sleeping charms on the boys in the other beds. They might know that Severus had some concern for Harry's wellbeing but they could not know the extent of it.

"Is that really necessary Severus?" Albus questioned as he followed Weasley into the room.

"I have it sir!" Granger came through the fireplace with the folio in hand and handed it to Severus, who passed it to Albus.

"It may be Headmaster," Severus said grimly as Albus opened the folio to the marked page.

Albus gave Severus a stern look, "You realize what might happen if you use this Severus."

"Damn it Albus," Severus snapped fiercely. "Which is more important, Harry's life or my position as a spy?"

The headmaster raised his eyebrows at the outburst and everyone in the room, those that were awake that was, looked at Severus in astonishment at his outburst, "I do think you need me to answer that question Severus."

"Severus?" Remus interrupted the staring match between the Potions Master and the Headmaster, "the shield?"

Severus took a deep breath, nodded, and pointed his wand at Harry. He muttered a ward unweaving spell, borderline dark arts, under his breath and the shield around Harry became visible and started to flicker. He continued to chant and there was a loud 'snap', like a thousand rubber bands stretched to their limits and released at once. Severus stumbled as the energy left him.

There was a moment when Severus thought Harry had taken a backlash from breaking the shield, but his son started tossing again and his yells became audible. The headmaster and Remus instantly went to Harry's side and started administering potions to control the pain from the link with Voldemort.

"Are you okay sir?" Severus blinked and looked down to see Granger studying him with concern. He wavered for a moment, exhausted from his night with the Death Eaters and the concentration it took to break Harry's shield, "I am fine Hermione."

It didn't even occur to him that he had used the girl's first name until after Granger and Weasley had led him to a seat next to Harry's bed that Severus could have sworn wasn't there when they entered the room. By the feel of it, it was one of the headmaster's conjured armchairs. He looked over to the bed and saw that Harry was sleeping peacefully again. Severus stretched out a hand and took hold of Harry's. Remus was sitting on the bed, on the other side, rubbing circles on Harry's back.

"Severus," Severus looked up at the headmaster and felt like he was seventeen again, "I want to see you and Harry in my office first thing tomorrow to discuss this."

Severus nodded. The headmaster was holding up the folio, "I haven't told Harry about it." The expression on the headmaster's face made Severus feel instantly guilty. The formidable wizard was decidedly unhappy, not at all pleased with Severus's deception. "He would never let me do it if he knew about it."

Albus sighed and stood straight, looking very authoritative, "That is a matter for tomorrow. You need to sleep Severus. Go back to your quarters." He turned to the rest of the conscious occupants of the room. "Miss Granger head straight back to your room. I take it you can explain this to Professor Lupin and Mr. Weasley tomorrow." Granger bit her lip and nodded before ducking out of the room.

"Mr. Weasley, please send Harry to me when he wakes in the morning. Remus?"

Remus stood and walked around the bed to follow the headmaster out of the tower. They left the customary way, through the portrait of the Fat Lady. Severus watched Harry sleep for a few more minutes, wanting to make certain that nothing more would happen.

"I'll wake you up if he needs you," Weasley said from the end of Harry's bed. Severus turned and gave the redhead an appraising look.

Physically the boy looked like a cross between his older brothers Bill and Percy. His hair was getting shaggy, hanging past his ears, and he was growing into his body, not as gangly as he had been for years. Severus looked the boy in the eye and discovered that Weasley did not look like the dunderhead Severus had labeled him as in his first year. Six years as Harry's best friend had made the youngest Weasley boy grow up faster than any of his siblings. Severus knew he could trust Weasley to look after Harry, that the boy would protect Harry with his own life if it was needed.

"Thank you Ronald," Severus nodded and stood. He crossed to the fireplace, smirking. Perhaps Weasley was not so grown-up after all. He stood gaping like a fish as his Potions Professor left through the fire.

Severus sighed when he got back to his room. If he went to bed just then he would only get a few hours of sleep, and there was too much running through his mind to sleep well. Rather than tossing and turning and staring at his ceiling, Severus downed an Energizing Elixir and went into his private potions lab.

He checked on the latest batch of Wolfsbane Potion for Remus. It was simmering on a low flame and would remain so for another... ten hours. Severus took out his notes and spent the next several hours working on a supplement to the Wolfsbane that would hopefully ease the pain of the transformation. He closed his eyes to remember the exact process.

It would need to be a pain reliever stronger than any other with no muscle relaxant properties... or perhaps a delayed release of the muscle relaxant. Severus began writing his newest theory and lists of components and reactions. He took down the definitive text on werewolves and searched for the section on silver. Why did that element have the effect it did on lycanthropes?

The next time Severus looked up from his papers and checked the hour it was nearly time for the start of Sunday breakfast in the great hall. He cast several cleaning charms on himself and changed his robes in what was most likely a futile attempt to avoid Albus's disapproving comments on his sleeping patterns before stepping into the corridor for the long walk up to the headmaster's office.

"Professor," a voice said not far from the portrait that guarded Severus's office.

"Mr. Malfoy," Severus replied in a silky tone. "Is there a reason you are loitering outside my office, or are you just waiting for your bodyguards to escort you to the great hall?"

Malfoy's face showed no reaction, "I had a few questions for you sir."

"Very well, come inside," Severus opened the portrait again and Malfoy followed him into his office.

"Wait one moment. I was on my way to a meeting with the headmaster." Severus lit his office fire and threw in a handful of powder, "Headmaster!"

"Yes Severus?" Albus's head appeared in the flames. "Good morning Mr. Malfoy."

"Good morning," Malfoy replied politely but somewhat sullenly.

"As you can see I will be somewhat late headmaster," Severus said.

"We will not begin without you," Albus replied happily. "Have a pleasant day Mr. Malfoy."

With that taken care of Severus extinguished his fire to prevent interruption and sat at his desk. He looked across at Draco Malfoy with a seemingly bored visage and waited for him to speak.

After several moments Malfoy broke the silence, "Do you know where my father is sir?"

Many people in the school, staff and students, believed that Severus had some special relationship with the younger Malfoy, like a mentor or substitute father figure. Malfoy was no more than a prefect in his house, seeker on his quidditch team, and gifted potions student. That did put him above most of his house, but none of his students were on familiar terms with him. Severus had kept in touch with other free Death Eaters in the years that the Dark Lord was no more than a wanderings spirit, but his reputation as an anti-social, irritable wizard who spent more time over his potions than in the presence of others kept him somewhat apart. He had been to Draco's naming ceremony and had seen the young man a few times while he was growing up, but most of his dealings had been with Lucius.

Severus gave Draco a piercing glare, "I do not know precisely where Lucius Malfoy is at the moment, though I can tell you he is still incarcerated."

Draco was not nearly as skilled as Severus at hiding his emotions. The boy showed relief, anger, and frustration. Spouses of convicted Death Eaters were always watched carefully and Severus had no doubt that every Knut Narcissa and Draco spent had to be accounted for immediately if the Ministry asked. They would both face constant scrutiny until the war ended, one way or the other.

"Sir, I know you're..." Malfoy began in a reckless way that Severus had never seen in the usually calculating Slytherin before. At the beginning of that year Malfoy had acted the same as always. In the recent weeks though, following the winter holiday, the boy had been quieter than usual. If some

of Lucius's associates hadn't approached Draco about taking the Mark, Severus would give Gryffindor one hundred points.

Severus stood at his full height and glared down at the sixteen-year-old, "Do not even finish that thought Mr. Malfoy. The walls of this castle have eyes, ears, and I would not be surprised if your thoughts are not sacred. Do you understand me?"

Malfoy's eyes widened just slightly and his pupils were dilated as he nodded affirmatively, "Yes, sir." "Mr. Malfoy, you are nearly an adult, and with Lucius unavailable the reputation of the Malfoy name is *your* responsibility," Severus kept his glare fixed on the boy's face. "Consider carefully, young Malfoy, what you want wizards two hundred years from now to say of the Malfoys." The boy's minor fright faded and was replaced with careful thought. "I have given you all the time I can this morning." Malfoy stood and started for the door but turned back, "Sir, why do you answer to Dumbledore?" "You are a Slytherin Mr. Malfoy. Think like one," Severus kept his face impassive but the disdain in his voice was clear. Draco was not a fool. He knew a dismissal from his Head of House when he heard it.

On his walk to the headmaster's office Severus considered his words to Malfoy. He had repeated something that James had asked him many years ago. The Snape name was not held in high acclaim. It was of no use in political or social circles... and Severus didn't give a damn. The Potter name had taken a beating the previous year and was now back in the good graces of the wizarding world.

James had been arrogant, as Severus had always told Harry, and he had been a proud man. Were he alive he would not have stood for the slander his son had faced... and the world would have listened to the charismatic man. It was Severus's job now he supposed, to see that the Potter name was everything James had wanted it to be.

Harry and Albus were waiting for him and drinking tea. Breakfast was laid out but had not been touched. Severus gave Harry a quick inspection and noted the slight darkness rimming his eyes, the pale cast of his skin. Voldemort's violent mood swings were taking their toll on the young man. He sat down and poured tea for himself.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

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Harry blinked. That was not at all what he was expecting. An owl had brought him a letter in the dorm before everyone else was even awake. Charlie had written to him right after the attack on the dragon preserve to reassure him that no one got hurt, at least none of the handlers. Harry had expected to hear about the success of the twins' latest invention from Dumbledore, not a parent and child bonding ritual.

He read over the ritual again. The pain in his scar that morning had been enough to tell him that his night's sleep was not good. The idea that Snape would do this... for him... Harry didn't know how to react. For all the progress they had made they were still awkward unless Harry was in severe pain. Only then did all their inhibitions fall away and allow them to relate as Harry supposed a father and son should. Perhaps it would be different if they could show something other than extreme distaste for each other in public.

He studied both Dumbledore and his father carefully. There was a great deal of tension in the room. Once Harry had thought that Dumbledore knew everything, but now he knew that the man knew just enough to *seem* omniscient. Dumbledore had only found out about Snape's intention to perform this ritual the night before, when it might have been too late to object.

"This is the only way to break the connection," Harry said quietly, not as a question.

His father looked at him with an unreadable expression, "Miss Granger is still researching."

"How long has she been at it?" Harry asked Snape.

He sighed and looked upwards as if calculating in his head, "Four months."

Harry shook his head. They did not know Hermione. "Then this is it." Both Snape and Dumbledore raised their eyebrows and Harry nearly laughed at the similarity of their expressions. He wondered how much of a father figure Dumbledore had been for Snape, and guessed that made him Harry's honorary grandfather. It felt good to imagine that relationship.

"Hermione knows that library better than Madame Pince by now. In two months she would have been through every book that had any hope of a solution. When she gave you this," Harry held up the folio, "she had eliminated any other possibility. If there was something else she would have told you then. She's only been going through what she's already read in hopes to find something she missed, and I can guarantee you she didn't miss anything."

Dumbledore looked disappointed, "What is your opinion on the ritual Harry?"

"I think it is not only our best option," Harry rubbed his scar, "It is our only chance."

Snape's gaze was unsettling and Harry shifted in his seat, "How so?"

"My scar does not just hurt from his emotions, it hurts from his presence," Harry was getting frustrated. Shouldn't they have thought of this already? Snape looked surprised. He must have not known, or forgotten that aspect of the bond. "I can barely see and move, never mind think, when he's near me. If we don't kill that bond, I'll never be able to kill *him*."

"You are right of course," Dumbledore sipped his tea slowly. "The bond you share with Voldemort is interfering with your sleep and your studies. Your grades are slipping Harry. The time to act is now, before you fall too far behind to catch up again."

Harry nodded, "I'm going to cut back on the pain relievers. This has to nearly kill me before the ritual will work, right?"

Dumbledore looked grave as he nodded and Snape's face was taut. Neither of them said a word. Harry took a scone off the large silver platter on Dumbledore's desk and tried to prevent crumbs from littering his lap, unsuccessfully. Snape noticed and shook his head in disapproval. Harry looked at him as if to say, 'well, I was practically raised in a barn... actually a storage cupboard'. Snape waved his wand and the crumbs disappeared.

"Madam Pomfrey can put a monitoring charm on you," Dumbledore said. "You will sleep in your father's quarters. If you feel a particularly severe surge during the day go immediately to the hospital wing."

"It says it eliminates all other bonds for the child..." Harry looked at Snape somewhat hopefully.

"Will it...?"

Harry saw Snape's right hand twitch, as if to rub the Mark on his left arm, "We will not know until after."

Harry looked down and bit his lower lip, "I know we need you... as a spy... but if it does... I'd like that. I don't want to see you on the front cover of the *Prophet*... like Karkaroff."

A strong hand brushed through Harry's hair and squeezed his shoulder, "Regardless of the outcome I will do my best to prevent that." Harry turned his head to the side and looked at Snape. The man snorted and Harry almost thought he saw a smile, "I have avoided that fate for more than twenty years. I think can manage a few more."

Harry smiled at that. He was starting to understand when Snape was being flippant or sarcastic. He often made light of the dangers he faced, probably to make it easier to face them.

"So... now we *want* Voldemort to get angered," Harry chuckled and heard a soft laugh from the headmaster. "Do we know how much he can feel from me?"

"Our guess is that he is not affected," Dumbledore answered. "Your empathy may be the only reason you can identify his emotions, and once he had your blood in his veins he could touch you with no pain." That mildly triumphant look was back, that Dumbledore had shown for a moment when Harry described the resurrection ritual and its results. "In using your blood, he did strengthen the bond between you to some extent, but he also eliminated that which allowed him to easily gain information from it. He miscalculated."

Harry and Snape both raised their eyebrows at that. Ever since that day Harry had wondered what was actually *good* about Voldemort's ritual. The food disappeared and Harry guessed the meeting was over.

"I was wondering if you could look over my essay on the properties of unicorn hair," Harry said to his father.

Snape actually did smile then. Harry had discovered that his father was almost eager to impart knowledge once Harry showed some interest, "Did you bring it with you?" Harry held up his bag and the invisibility cloak. Snape smirked, "Give me the cloak. The staff entrance is closer."

In the Potions Professor's quarters Harry knit his brow and tried to grasp the concept Snape was explaining, "So... the hair of a juvenile unicorn, before it turns white, is not as potent because young unicorns are more trusting." He looked up from his parchment, "But I thought that they were more pure than adult unicorns. Wouldn't that make their hair *more* potent?"

Snape shook his head, "It is not the purity of the unicorn that changes as they grow older, but the knowledge of the world. The purity of a juvenile is a naive purity. The purity of an adult is made stronger by witnessing the impurities of the world around them."

Harry nodded slowly. That made sense, "Okay, I think I get it. Would unicorn hair, or tears or blood, have a similar reaction to basilisk venom as phoenix tears?"

"Explain your reasoning," Snape looked smug and Harry felt like cursing. He never gave a straight answer in these tutoring sessions.

Harry took a deep breath and tried to organize his thoughts, "The phoenix and the unicorn have some similar magical properties. They both are seen as completely light creatures. They both provide ingredients for healing potions... and they don't have to be killed to obtain the ingredients. The tears, or hair, or feathers, or blood, or whatever have to be given willingly." Harry shivered as something flashed through his mind, *The flesh of the servant, willingly given.*

"Harry?" Snape prompted softly.

Harry's eyes focused again and he looked up at his father's concerned face, "I was just thinking... Wormtail."

Snape nodded, "You may have something. For the most part unicorn tail hairs or body hair is used in potions. As they are nearly impossible to obtain, the tears and blood are in no potions that I can recall offhand. The hair could not bind any basilisk elements the way that phoenix tears can."

"Why are they so hard to obtain?" Harry asked. "There are several unicorns in the Forbidden Forest." Snape gave him a hard look, "Just how many times have you been in that forest?"

Harry laughed, "Once in first year... on detention with Hagrid, once in second year with Ron when we met Aragog the acromantula." Harry looked up, trying not to watch his father's face but the amusement with a touch of chagrin was easy to feel. "In third year I was just in the edges that night of the full moon. Hagrid showed me the dragons before the first task and Victor and I were at the edge when Crouch showed up." Snape snorted.

"Last year was the most, though. We had a lesson in the forest where the thestrals are fed, Hagrid introduced us to his 'little' brother," Harry rolled his eyes, "during a quidditch game, and Hermione and I led Umbridge in hoping we might get some help. I haven't been in once this year so that makes... eight times."

Harry risked looking at his father then. Snape was shaking his head and... laughing?

"I think James would approve," Snape said with what Harry knew was amusement. "I appreciate your restraint this year though. The forest is less safe than ever." Harry nodded and Snape looked at him as though he wasn't sure if to continue. "Unicorn hair can be obtained willingly rather easily. Witches have the most luck, as they are tolerated more. The purity of a wizard or witch is important, though, when trying to obtain the blood or tears." Harry felt a blush forming. They were venturing into fragile territory. "As unicorns tend to live in places such as the Forbidden Forest, having a child get the ingredients is dangerous... and there are very few adult wizards or witches that remain virginal... or are willing to admit to such."

"Ah," Harry responded. "I see."

"Yes," Snape said succinctly. "Include your theories in your essay. Original thinking is much more interesting to read than regurgitated facts. Feel free to share that with Miss Granger for her next essay."

Harry's father got up and fetched a few books, effectively ending that conversation, much to the relief of both of them. Harry felt a little guilty letting down his empathy barriers around Snape and pretty much reading him continuously, but if he didn't he would never know what his father felt. They worked silently for a few hours and Harry wrote two more drafts of his essay, finally ending with one he thought might achieve an 'A' or even an 'E' if he was lucky.

He started packing his things up to go down to the great hall for lunch and then out to the pitch for the first quidditch practice of the term. It was still cold out, and the early February wind was biting, but Ron wanted to get a head start.

"Wait a moment," Harry turned and saw Snape looking up from his book with a calculating expression. "Can you pick one person of a crowd to read yet?"

Harry nodded but was a bit guarded, "Large crowds can be tough. The great hall is right out, way too many people. Why?"

"I want you to keep tabs on Draco Malfoy," Snape said firmly. "Have you seen a change in his behavior?"

Harry considered it. There had been a slight change since he had told Malfoy off in that potions class early in the year. The traded insults and barbs continued, but didn't cross an invisible line that had been drawn. Lately though...

"He's been quieter," Harry said, still thinking carefully, not really focused on anything in the room. "He still insults us whenever he sees us, but he doesn't whisper with the other Slytherins as much." He looked at his father and saw that he was nodding, "Did something happen?"

"Most likely," Snape replied. "I knew at his age that I had no choice but to take the Dark Mark and that I didn't want it. There are many students in this school who are most likely in the same position."

"You think he doesn't want to follow in his father's footsteps?" Harry asked, a little disbelieving. He had heard nothing but Dark Lord praise from Malfoy for years.

"It is a possibility." As if he knew what Harry was thinking Snape continued, "To everyone's eyes and ears but James and Lily's I was a perfect candidate for the Mark. Your godfather was convinced I was purely dark."

Harry smirked, "That's a bit of an oxymoron, isn't it?" Snape smirked back. "I'll see what I can do. I only have a few classes with him now. I guess I'll see you tonight."

Snape nodded, "Your roommates?"

"Neville, Dean, and Seamus must suspect something by now," Harry gnawed on his lower lip. "I trust them... I really do. There are a lot of things they've known that could get me in trouble. The rest of the tower doesn't even know about my scar and Seamus is a hopeless gossip."

"You are considering telling them?" Snape looked intrigued, but also wary.

Harry felt torn, "If you didn't have to spy... would this still be a secret?"

There was a painful silence. Harry examined his feet, not daring to look up in fear of getting his hopes ripped apart. All he ever wanted was something normal in his life... and everything was about as far from normal as it could be. It struck him that he really was raised by the Dursleys. He wanted exactly what they did, to be normal, but their definitions of the word just varied.

"If I could Harry," Snape said softly from just a few feet away. *How does he move that quietly?* "I would acknowledge you proudly on the front page of the *Prophet*."

"Really?" Harry looked up into his father's eyes and saw them slightly moist. The feeling rolled off him... sadness and longing. *Proudly*, Harry thought and his heart rate picked up a bit, *He's proud of me!*

"Really," Snape replied. The sadness and longing faded and Harry felt amusement again from his father. "We have to work on developing your Slytherin side. Your mind and emotions may be shielded but your face shows everything." Harry tried to mimic the emotionless look that Snape always had, but only succeeded in making the Potions Master laugh. "Go to lunch. We'll work on it another time."

Quidditch practice was brutal and freezing. Ron and Ginny had the team running drills until their hands were numb with the cold. Harry could only remember feeling like that on the fly to Headquarters before fifth year and that rainy game in third year. They were in the air all afternoon and each and every one of them headed straight to the showers when they finally landed and were allowed to leave.

"Ginny, Ron!" Harry called after them after they had all put their brooms away. He tilted his head to indicate he wanted to talk to them apart from the rest of the team. The three of them lagged behind and walked towards the castle together. A fine mist was starting to fall. "How does dinner in the kitchens sound tonight?"

Ron just shrugged and Ginny gave him a questioning look, "Any particular reason?"

"I wanted to talk to you two and Hermione about some things," Harry said vaguely.

"I'll get 'Mione," Ron altered his course for the library instead of the showers. "Meet you down there in," he glanced at his watch, "an hour?"

Harry and Ginny nodded and continued towards the tower. "Have you heard from Charlie lately?" Ginny asked him.

Harry looked at Ginny, remembering the she was the Weasley who always knew what was going one before anyone else, "Not much. With the build up to the attacks on the colonies he's been pretty busy. Was there anything good in the *Prophet* this morning?"

Ginny shook her head, "Same as always. You're still the Savior, Fudge is urging everyone to support the Ministry, and muggles are disappearing."

Harry closed his eyes and lowered his barriers to make sure they were alone. He stepped a little closer to her and whispered, "I did get a quick note this morning from him and the twins. Romania was attacked last night. It was a complete failure. Everyone is fine and the Patronus things worked perfectly. All three of them were there. Charlie told me to pass it on to you and Ron."

"Is that what you wanted to...?" Ginny asked, a little wide-eyed. Three of her brothers had been in a battle while she slept peacefully in her dorm.

"It's just part of it," Harry sighed. "Things are getting... complicated. I'll explain to all of you at once." The shower felt amazing, the hot water chasing away the chill that seemed to go all the way to his bones. If Harry didn't have anywhere to be he would have stayed under the hot water for hours, just turning into a giant prune. After he dressed he made his way down to the kitchens alone, figuring that Ron and Ginny would both use their respective prefects' bathrooms.

"So what do you guys think?" Harry asked cautiously.

Ron shrugged, a common response from him. He rarely offered an opinion before everyone spoke unless he felt passionately about something. Ginny and Hermione exchanged glances. Ginny spoke, "You know Seamus and Dean better than I do. Neville might be a bit freaked, but I don't think he'll have a problem."

Hermione nodded, "They've already seen that Snape cares about you. If they didn't already know about you and Charlie they might suspect... but that might make it even more likely..."

"*Hermione!*" Ron and Harry exclaimed together. Harry could sense the disgust he felt at the thought echoed in Ron. Ginny was laughing. Harry wrinkled up his face, "That's... that's just... ew, gross!"

Ron nodded fervently in agreement.

Hermione smiled and pecked Ron on the cheek, "James didn't think that."

"That's it," Harry said decisively, "I'm definitely telling them tonight. Urg! Hermione! I think I need to be Obliviated now."

Harry held his head in his hands while the others, even Ron, laughed at his expense.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

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This time around Harry was getting just barely enough sleep, but he was in nearly constant pain from his scar that distracted him in class, in his private lessons, and even while just talking with his friends. The failure of the attacks on several dragon colonies was reported in the *Daily Prophet* and a good portion of the school cheered upon reading the news. After months and months of reading about nothing but deaths, the victory on the side of light, even if no Death Eaters were captured, was celebrated widely both within Hogwarts and without.

Seamus, Dean, Neville, and Luna, who had been included in the revelation as she was dating Neville and had been at the Department of Mysteries, all reacted differently to Harry's revelation. Seamus burst out laughing and started teasing Harry, asking if he was going to grow his hair long and stop washing it. Dean looked at Harry with his head tilted just slightly and immediately asked about a glamour charm. He had continued studying art every summer at home and had a good eye for details.

Neville looked torn between yelping in fright and congratulating Harry. He knew what it was like to grow up without parents. In the end he stuck with congratulations. Luna smiled vaguely and asked Harry if he knew about the sea creature that resembled an iceberg to muggle eyes and had apparently been responsible for the sinking of the Titanic as it had a taste for various metals. It was classic Luna and so didn't faze the rest of them.

There hadn't been more time to talk before the DA began arriving so Harry just shot a meaningful look at Hermione. She nodded back and Harry mouthed 'thanks.' She and Ron would explain why Harry wasn't sleeping in the Gryffindor sixth year boys' dorm room.

A cool damp cloth wiped across his brow and Harry whimpered.

"This isn't going to work," a pained voice said, just the vibration of the voice enhancing the ache in Harry's head.

"We don't know that Severus," that was Remus, Harry thought as he slowly became more aware of his surroundings.

"He's in pain Remus!" Snape hissed. "He's been in pain for weeks and Poppy's charm hasn't even come close to the levels needed."

Harry opened his eyes and saw them arguing in whispers next to his bed. His father was stroking his forehead gently with the cool cloth, alleviating some of the pain but not nearly enough.

"He's right," Harry said softly. Both heads snapped towards him and their expressions softened. "It's not working. No one ever died from a headache. We need a new plan."

"Harry," Remus's eyes were red-rimmed and he looked wrung out. Harry wondered idly how close the full moon was. "There's nothing else we can do."

Harry lifted his eyebrows and winced at the pain it caused but still had enough presence of mind for humor, "And you call yourself a Marauder."

Remus goggled at Harry, and then Snape, who was laughing lightly, "He has a point Remus. Those words alone would be enough to spur James or Black to find a solution, even if it meant research."

Harry sat up in bed and cradled his head, massaging his temples, "The castle will be practically empty on Easter holiday. We can do the ritual in the hospital wing with Pomfrey and Dumbledore there just in case."

"Just how do you propose to make the ritual necessary?" Snape's scathing tone was covering up fear that Harry felt clearly through both their shields.

Harry looked up at his father and his other father's last friend. He knew they would never think of his idea as an option and was a bit reluctant himself, "How did I end up near death last time?"

"No Harry," his father said adamantly.

"I'm not suggesting..." Harry sighed in frustration and rubbed his scar. "Look, can I have a potion or something before my head splits open?" A vial was pressed into his head and Harry drank it, and then waited for the pain to subside a bit. "I wouldn't be doing it myself, or like I did at the Dursleys! Madam Pomfrey can take care of it and monitor me the whole time. She can tell you exactly when to start and stop things if she needs to."

Snape looked defeated as he slumped in a chair, his head down. Harry had never seen him sit without his back perfectly straight before. Remus sat on the side of the bed and pressed a hand on one of Harry's. Harry reached out the other hand for his father. He smoothed back the long black hair and noticed that it wasn't actually greasy, and remembered that it hadn't looked that bad for quite a while. It was glossy and smooth, like a horse's tail.

"It has to be done... Dad," Harry said softly. "I'll never defeat him like this... and I... I don't want to die anymore. I couldn't do that to you."

Snape looked up at him and Harry saw that he had been hiding moist eyes, though tears were not falling. Harry only barely noticed that Remus had released his hand and left the room.

"Harry..." Snape paused and seemed to be considering his next words. He sighed and didn't say whatever it was he was considering, "I'll talk to Albus in the morning. Get some sleep."

Harry leaned back against his pillows, "I'm probably up for good now." Snape made no move to leave the room. "Do you have a house?"

The look Snape gave him told Harry he was missing something again, probably some wizarding thing he would have learned as a child if his mother and father hadn't died, "I had Snape Manor razed to the ground when my uncle died and I sold the land. Hogwarts has been my home for more than seventeen years... but you have several houses."

"What?" Harry tried to absorb the news and was left just feeling confused.

Snape sighed, "You are the sole heir to the Potter fortune Harry. Even without the land and houses and the money from Black you have enough gold in Gringotts for several generations of Potters to live comfortably without ever lifting a finger."

"But Hagrid said the money in my vault had to last through my seventh year, and to be careful..."

Harry tried to remember exactly how big the pile of gold in his vault was.

"That is just *your* vault Harry, the one James and Lily opened when you were born," Snape looked at him curiously and Harry detected some astonishment. "Surely you knew that James came from a powerful pureblood line."

"What would that mean to an eleven year old raised by muggles? I didn't even know what pureblood was." Harry asked, still stunned. "Even now I can't really fathom... I had nothing, *nothing*, when Hagrid rescued me from the Dursleys. It was too much to take then. I couldn't possibly imagine there was *more*. I haven't even been to Diagon Alley in over three years. Mrs. Weasley did my shopping for me."

Snape just raised his eyebrows, "We will make a trip to Gringotts this summer." Harry looked at him with a mixture of surprise and hope. Snape adopted his indignant, aristocratic expression, "I am not sending *my* son to live with muggles."

Harry shook his head and looked down, "I have to, if only for a month or so. Dumbledore's wards protect them too. They might be complete bastards... but they're still family. I'd much rather be here with you but I can't."

"If they touch one hair on your head..." Snape was looking very mad.

Harry grinned wickedly, "I think between us we can persuade them to behave."

The anger started to slip away and a smirk formed, "It's almost too bad Black is gone. That would probably be the only thing we could ever do together without hexing each other."

Harry started to feel a little guilty. With everything that had been going on since that summer he hadn't spared many thoughts for Sirius. Winter holiday had been tough, but other than that... "Is it okay that I just forget sometimes, and not think about what happened to him?"

"You cannot mourn forever Harry," his father responded. "You will never truly forget him, but you are allowed to move on and live your life."

Harry nodded and they changed the conversation to Harry's training. Snape told Harry that Dumbledore would be taking a more active role soon, as he was the only one with advanced enough dueling skills to approximate what Harry would face.

Valentine's Day was on a Sunday, the day before having seen all the upper year students in Hogsmeade. As one of the only one of his friends not dating anyone, Ginny was with a fourth year Slytherin to the surprise of most of her House and Harry and Hermione had to paralyze Ron to keep him from making a mess of things, Harry had gone to the village with some of the DA members who were also unattached.

Once Harry got past the pompous attitude that reminded him of Percy, Ernie Macmillan was actually good company. Susan Bones and Katie Bell joined them, along with Lavender and the Patil twins. Lavender and Parvati had announced not long ago that all the boys at Hogwarts were immature and they didn't want anything to do with them. Of course, Harry, Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville hadn't helped much when they instigated a water fight in the common room and thoroughly soaked both girls.

The group got several intrigued looks from the others in the small village. Katie had been very close to Angelina and Alicia and discovered when the two graduated the year before that she barely knew the other girls in her year. She ended up studying for her N.E.W.T.s most of the time but whenever she socialized it was with other DA members or the Gryffindor Quidditch Team.

Harry enjoyed that Valentine's Day much better than the previous one and couldn't hold in his laughter when he saw some poor guy with Cho Chang in Madam Puddifoot's.

Harry was actually in a good mood the morning of February fourteenth, which vanished as soon as the owl post arrived. Owl after owl swooped into the great hall, and easily more than half of them dropped an envelope, and even several packages, in front of the highly embarrassed Boy-Who-Lived.

Witch Weekly had gotten hold of a picture of Harry practicing for quidditch that fall with his shirt off and published it in the *Wizard Heartthrobs* section just before Valentine's Day. Harry Potter was the darling of the wizarding world again. The picture was close enough to show his musculature, but not enough to show his scars. Harry had been thoroughly shocked to see it was him that the girls were all drooling and giggling over.

The appearance of the magazine had Harry hiding in his dorm as much as he could for the entire week. His friends and enemies alike teased him mercilessly. When Harry finally saw the credit under the photography he hexed Colin's skin green and his hair orange, and threatened to break his camera if he ever saw it again... in front of the whole common room. The teasing stopped immediately when word got around the school that Madam Pomfrey was unable to reverse the hexes and Colin had to wait for them to fade over the space of two weeks. Harry had a feeling she didn't try very hard.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with all this?" Harry leaned back as several envelopes slipped off the pile and into his lap. This was just the type of thing he *hated*. It didn't help that Remus was laughing up at the staff table and even Snape seemed to be having trouble holding back.

Dumbledore's twinkle had reached nearly blinding proportions.

Ron stood up and looked over the pile, "Need a hand mate?"

"What do you think?" Harry said sarcastically as another teetering pile of parchment slipped to the floor.

"Oi, Gryffindors!" Ron stood up on his seat as Harry attempted to bury his now crimson face in the highly scented pile of pastel parchment. "Harry needs our help!"

Whatever food was still on the table was quickly shoved to one end and the Gryffindors crowded around Harry's mountain of Valentines. Even when the other students were leaving the hall, the majority of Gryffindor stayed behind and opened letters and packages, laughing and sorting into various categories. There was a pile of candy, of stuffed animals, and of other tokens of affection. The pile of photographs was guarded by a thinned-lipped Hermione, clearly disapproving of the numerous witches, and some wizards, who had sent Harry questionable self-portraits. All the singing cards were incinerated when their high tones began overlapping and competing for dominance.

"Fan club getting to be too much to handle Potter?" Malfoy sneered as he walked by.

"Jealous Malfoy?" Ron taunted. Harry smirked at the blond Slytherin. Once opening all the Valentine's had become a Gryffindor House activity his embarrassment had started to fade and he began having some fun.

"As if," Malfoy snorted indignantly. "I could never be jealous of a four-eyed freak."

"Whatever Malfoy," Harry waved him away and went back to opening his mail. He noticed that Ginny had slipped one letter to the side and given Harry a pointed look. He found himself looking forward to opening that letter in some privacy later.

Harry distributed most of the stuffed animals amongst the Gryffindor girls, especially the first and second years. He had kept one that was a large, floppy black dog. Almost all of the candy was set up in the common room for anyone who wanted some. (The sixth year boys saved aside a stash for their dorm room though.) Hermione reluctantly handed over the photographs and Harry gave his roommates first access to them. He had a feeling that most of them would end up circulating through all seven floors of boys' dorm rooms and probably to other Houses as well. What were these people thinking, sending these pictures to Hogwarts?

A few very organized members of the House had kept a detailed list of who sent Harry what. There were several obviously expensive gifts that Harry immediately sent back with school owls, along with notes telling the givers thanks, but he couldn't accept such lavish gifts. When he, Ron, and Hermione had bumped into McGonagall on the way to the owlery she expressed her approval of his decision.

Ginny and Hermione had been in charge of distributing mail to be opened, not wanting potentially sensitive mail to fall into the hands of a gossip like Lavender or Parvati. All the Valentines from people at Hogwarts were put aside unopened for Harry to look at later, along with the letter that Ginny had tucked aside while Malfoy was acting out his normal role of Harry Potter's school-yard nemesis.

"So mate," Seamus rubbed his hands after curfew that night and gave Harry an insinuating look, "let's see how many Hogwarts girls sent pictures."

Harry laughed as the Irish boy made a grab for one of the envelopes. Harry held the box holding them out of reach, "Calm down Shay. Were you that impatient with Parvati?"

The others all laughed as Seamus blushed and stammered. Harry put the box back down and grabbed a chocolate frog. The five boys were sitting on Neville's bed again, which Dean had widened to make more room for all of them, the letters, and the candy. His roommates each grabbed a letter. Most of them were from younger girls, second and third year, and even three from first year girls.

"Hey!" Ron exclaimed. "Why did Hermione send you one?"

Harry grabbed it and opened the envelope, "It's just a friendly Valentine, Ron. I'm sure whatever she sent you was much more romantic than, 'Happy Valentine's Day, Love, Your Best Friend, Hermione!'" Ron's cheeks flamed, "She's not... we're not..."

"Shagging like bunnies?" Dean waggled his eyebrows at Ron.

Ron spluttered, unable to articulate even his own name at that point. Harry took pity on him and motioned for the other guys to stop laughing, "If you're not dating, what are you two doing?"

"I don't know!" Ron said miserably. Harry realized that he hadn't had much time for his friend's problems in the midst of his own. "We kiss and... stuff... and we spend time in Hogsmeade together... but she's as obsessed with homework as ever..."

"And you haven't gotten up the guts to actually ask her to be your girlfriend," Seamus finished for him and shook his head at the redhead. "What will we do with you Ron? Did you at least get her a gift today?"

"I sent her some chocolates with Pig," Ron nodded, still sounding dejected.

The other four exchanged glances. Ron had never been the best with figuring out gifts for people. Nearly everything he gave was from Honeydukes or Quality Quidditch.

"This is what you've got to do," Dean put his arm around Ron's shoulders. "Get the girl some roses, go find some poetry in the library, and make her feel like the only woman on the planet."

Ron looked at his roommates with wide, questioning eyes, "You think that would work?"

To most everyone's surprise it was Neville that answered, "Hell Ron, you know she wants you. She's probably ready to hex you for not saying anything yet!"

"Nah," Harry laughed. "She's known how clueless Ron is for years. She's waiting for us to hit him over the head so he sees what's right in front of him, and she's probably about to hit me over the head so I'll wake up and hit Ron over the head..."

Harry avoided a retort from Ron when Seamus gave a loud bark of laughter, "Listen to this one guys...!"

Chapter Thirty-Nine

-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-

Later, when all his roommates were asleep, Harry snuck out of the room under his invisibility cloak. Ginny had slipped a plain looking envelope into Harry's pocket while the Gryffindors carried the assortment of parchment and presents up to the tower after breakfast. Despite the cold air, or perhaps because of it as it would keep everyone else away, Harry settled atop the tallest tower in Hogwarts to open the only Valentine he actually had wanted to get.

Harry remembered fondly that he first met Charlie where he was sitting just then. He never would have guessed then what his relationship with the dragon handler would become. Of course, the precise definition of their relationship was a complete mystery to Harry. Both of them had full reign to see whoever they wanted, but Harry found he wasn't all that interested in dating anyone at Hogwarts. There just wasn't a chance of finding another student who could actually *understand* him.

He had a suspicion that Charlie wasn't seeking out other company either. Harry shoved those thoughts aside, as he had vowed not to be in a relationship with *anyone* until Voldemort died. It was just too dangerous for him, and especially for the other person involved. He opened the envelope carefully and took out a long letter, along with a card.

He read the letter first, getting a detailed description of the attack on the Romanian Dragon Preserve. Fred and George had returned to England and were entrusted to send the letter from Hogsmeade so that it couldn't get intercepted. It had also been charmed so they couldn't peek before sending it. Harry read all about their trips to the various dragon colonies all over the globe. Charlie was as busy as Harry suspected. Some of the dragons had been injured in the attack and they were being nursed back to health. Several new dragons had arrived, many of them juveniles that had been found without their parents. A few handlers had also disappeared, but none that Harry knew personally.

Once he finished the letter Harry pulled out the card. Inside was a picture of Harry and Charlie from the party the dragon handlers had held for Harry that summer. They were sitting on top of a long table. Charlie had his arm across Harry's shoulders and they were both holding up steins of lager in a toast. They both drank from their steins and smiled brightly at each other. The inscription on the card was simple.

*Harry,
Happy Valentine's Day
Miss you,
Charlie*

Harry smiled. His card had been similar, and he had cornered Hermione in the library one day to help him set a barrage of curses on it should anyone other than Charlie open it. Before he could spend too long looking at the picture, or tormenting himself with wondering exactly what he was doing with the second eldest Weasley sibling, Harry heard footsteps and the door to the top of the tower started to open.

Harry tucked the card and picture in his pocket with the letter and pulled on his invisibility cloak. He checked to make sure his fake wand was in place. The door opened and another student joined him. When he stepped out of the shadow of the door Harry groaned, a bit louder than he intended, thus announcing his presence.

"Who's there?" the other sixth year boy had his wand out and pointed in Harry's general direction. Harry had his own wand in hand in a second, if only for show, and tossed back the hood of his cloak, "Fuck Malfoy, can I get a moment's peace in this school?"

"Potter," the Slytherin sneered, "as a prefect I have every right to give you detention for being out of your common room."

"Go right ahead," Harry sighed and took his cloak the rest of the way off. "So long as you leave me the hell alone I don't give a rat's ass what you do."

Malfoy glared at him, "So high and mighty Potter. The Dark..." Harry's own glare intensified, nearly equaling what Snape used to aim at him, and Malfoy's faltered. The Slytherin lowered his wand and leaned back against the door, his head hitting it with a 'thud', "Look Potter, I'm just not up to this tonight. If you insist on staying up here do you think we can forgo with all the usual crap?"

Harry took a step forward and studied Malfoy carefully. He opened up his empathy and sensed that the other boy was... distraught... confused... strained.

"I think I can manage Malfoy," Harry said softly. "Let's make a deal. For the next hour or so there's no war, no dark lords, no House rivalries, no surnames."

Malfoy blinked at him in surprise. Harry had definitely stunned the blond. "That actually sounds like a nice change Po-, I mean Harry."

Harry smiled and tucked his wand back into his holster. Malfoy's disappeared up his sleeve as well. It was the idea behind the agreement more than the words themselves that was important. "So Draco, what brings you out in the cold after curfew?"

"I've got a lot on my mind?" Malfoy responded. He was wary and somewhat off balance. Harry felt just a bit guilty for having the upper hand. With his empathy he could sense the emotion behind everything the Slytherin said. That didn't mean he wouldn't use every advantage he had though.

"And you?"

"I needed some privacy," Harry answered honestly. "I didn't want to share *all* my mail with the rest of the school today."

Malfoy raised his eyebrows and Harry detected honest curiosity, "Got yourself a girlfriend Harry?"

Harry shook his head and sighed, "I won't endanger anyone's life that way, but I do like having a private life of some sort."

"Nothing's private in your life," Malfoy snorted.

"You'd be surprised," Harry smirked, as he had picked up from spending so much time with his father. "I have my share of secrets."

"You're different," Malfoy observed with a calculating gaze. "You look almost... Slytherin right now."

Harry could feel a twinkle forming in his eyes to go along with the smirk, "I *was* almost a Slytherin, but the hat and I decided differently after a while. I've just been exploring that side a bit lately."

Malfoy raised his eyebrows in genuine surprise, "I wonder..." He didn't finish the thought, but he didn't need to. Harry had wondered the same thing himself many times. "Harry, I..." Harry sensed an internal struggle. "Swear a wizard's oath Harry. Nothing we say tonight goes any further, not even your sidekicks can know." Malfoy was desperate.

"I swear it, so long as you do the same," Harry looked Malfoy in the eye. Malfoy had grown taller than him that year. "I swear not to repeat anything you tell me tonight without your express permission."

"I swear not to repeat anything *you* tell me tonight without your express permission," Malfoy repeated his words and held out his hand. They shook on the agreement and Harry felt a surge of magic sealing their pact.

"Whoa," Harry felt his eyes widen. "That was..."

"You felt it?" Malfoy said, astonished. Harry just nodded, still tingling all over. "I've always known you'd be powerful," Malfoy said. Harry felt a little bitterness, and maybe regret? "I knew the first time we met, on Diagon Alley that day."

"I remember," Harry said with a sigh. He had been so young and naive then. "I was so confused. I had no idea what you were talking about, any of it."

Malfoy looked confused, "But you..."

Harry shook his head, "I didn't even know magic was real until that day. My relatives," Harry couldn't help the sarcasm that laced that word, "swore they'd 'stamp it out of me' when they took me in. I was treated no better than most wizards treat house elves until Hagrid saved me."

"Your scars..." Malfoy trailed off, "Bastards." Harry nodded agreement. Malfoy looked out over the grounds. Harry could feel the turmoil, the longing, and didn't interrupt while Malfoy was thinking.

"Did you know the Slytherins have been ordered to back off you somewhat?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted. "I take it you know something about a prophecy?"

Malfoy snorted, "You-Know-Who's obsessed with the damn thing. I think everyone who's related to one of his servants knows. Father had me keeping my ears open all last year in case you slipped."

"I..." Harry felt something in his throat catch. "I didn't know... not until it was too late... and then Siri..."

"Mother mentioned something about it. He was her cousin," Malfoy sounded apologetic and Harry took a few deep breaths to get himself under control. "Tell me something Harry. Is the Dark Lord really a half-blood?"

Harry nodded, "His real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle, Jr. It's an anagram," Harry took out his wand and showed Malfoy, just as Riddle had showed him. "His mother was a witch and his father a muggle. He left her when he found out, before Voldemort was even born, and she still named him after his father. She died in childbirth and he was raised in a muggle orphanage."

"How do you know?" Malfoy was looking for some truth Harry realized. If Voldemort was such a hypocrite, then it was possible that everything Malfoy had been taught was a lie.

"He told me," Harry said plainly and Malfoy looked startled. "Actually it was his sixteen-year-old self preserved in a diary that your father slipped into Ginny's cauldron so it could possess her and start the whole Chamber of Secrets thing our second year." Malfoy just blinked. Harry focused and felt tremendous confusion from the Slytherin.

"I suspect he's actually less than half-blood now, with how he was resurrected," Harry voiced a theory he had formed after his talk with Snape about bloodlines. "He used his father's bones, my blood, and Pettigrew's hand. He didn't call his Death Eaters until after it was over. I doubt any of them really know what he is. If they want to rid the world of everything muggle they should start with him."

"My father was there that night wasn't he?" Malfoy asked. Harry was surprised. He figured the Slytherin knew everything that had happened, more or less.

"Yeah Draco," Harry said firmly with a bit of disgust. "I saw Lucius crawl on his hands and knees to kiss the hem of Voldemort's robe and beg forgiveness. I don't know what you plan on doing when you graduate Draco, but if you take the Mark be prepared for pain. I saw him Crucio your aunt just because Neville dropped the prophecy last spring. He tortures his followers about as much as he does his enemies, maybe even more since they're around him more."

Harry's voice was impassioned and vibrant. He could feel Malfoy wavering, uncertain. "Voldemort abandoned your father there that night. He sent twelve Death Eaters to trap me, and there were only six of us. Six students, two of them in fourth year and one of them Neville, and we survived against twelve Death Eaters for at least an hour before help came. Voldemort didn't show up until the end, and he ran from Dumbledore and the Aurors that started Flooing in."

Harry's scar pain had been steadily increasing that night. Just the way the pain hit him had become an indicator of the reason behind it. Slow building was generally associated with Voldemort being pleased. When Voldemort was furious it hit Harry swift and hard. The pain potions Harry was using at full dose again weren't working quite as well. He suspected that his body had started to build a resistance, but he only had a month to go before that part would all be over... hopefully.

Malfoy seemed to be digesting what Harry had said. Harry could see why Snape had wanted Harry to feel out Malfoy. There had never been a question about where Harry would stand in this war that

was escalating. There were a bunch of Slytherins that had grown up pampered in the aftermath of the first war, raised on Death Eater ideals but not having to lift a finger, and they could be persuaded.

"Do you think you'll win?" Malfoy asked Harry, some hope behind his words.

"Yes," Harry answered with certainty, "I know I will."

"How can you be so sure?" Malfoy was skeptical.

Harry looked directly into the gray eyes and intentionally projected his emotions strongly, "Imagine a world where Voldemort has triumphed. The Ministry would be gone. St. Mungo's would be gone. Hogwarts would be destroyed. Every pureblood who opposes Voldemort, along with every half-blood and muggle-born, will be dead. More than half the population of our world... exterminated. It won't stop there. Once he has Britain he'll want more. He'll take Beauxbaton, Durmstrang, the American schools, the Asian schools. The muggle governments will fall. Our world won't be secret anymore. If he has his way he'll turn the world into a slaughterhouse."

Malfoy looked paler than usual and Harry continued to drive his point home, "He gets pleasure, literally, from torturing people, regardless of their ancestry. He's a sadistic megalomaniac. If he succeeds in this ethnic cleansing that the Death Eaters claim as their goal he won't stop. Tell me Draco, do you like the wizarding world? Do you really think people like Hermione, Justin, and Dean deserve to die excruciating deaths because of what their parents are?"

Malfoy shook his head. He looked like he might be sick at any moment. He had paid rapt attention to Harry's picture of a Voldemort victorious future.

"That's why I know I'll win Draco," Harry said in a soft, strained voice, "because I *have* to, because of what will happen if I fail. You're smart and powerful. You have a strong presence and the ability to influence people. Do you want to use all that as the *servant* of a sadistic half-blood with a grudge against his father? Do you want to use it to destroy the world you have the ability to lead someday?"

"No," Malfoy half-whispered, his face blank, and then stronger, "No." Harry could practically feel the Slytherin's heart pounding in his chest. He knew Malfoy felt lost, disillusioned. His world was crashing down around him. Harry knew that feeling well. "Do you really think all those things about me?"

Harry nodded, "I don't particularly like you, or what you say about me and my friends, but I know intelligence and power when I see it. If you wanted to make our world a better place you could do it the smart way, the Slytherin way. Use that cunning the sorting hat says you all have. You saw last year the kind of power Fudge can wield. He's an imbecile and a coward and he lets his fears rule his actions. If someone powerful was in his place, someone with a conscience and who knew how to get things done, they could really make changes."

Malfoy looked at Harry suspiciously. Harry was looking up at the sky, not needing to look at Malfoy to know how he was feeling. "You don't want me to be Minister. What if I made a law that no one with muggle blood could attend Hogwarts, or get a Ministry job?"

"You're not that stupid," Harry said casually in response. He could feel himself starting to sweat a bit as he fought to hold back the pain.

"Why?" Malfoy was curious now, and a bit flattered.

"I had a talk with someone not long ago about genetics and bloodlines," Harry prayed that Malfoy would be easier to convince than Snape was at his age. "If there was no more muggle blood in our gene pool the wizarding world would disappear. It might take another thousand years, but there would be no more magic. Do you know what happens if first-cousins marry and have children?"

Malfoy nodded in the corner of Harry's vision. "Is there a pureblooded witch or wizard in this school that you are *not* somehow related to?"

"No," Malfoy answered. "We're all related, even the Weasleys are cousins however many times removed."

Harry nodded, "I know. I saw the Black family tapestry. Your mother has a sister who was disowned because the man she married was a muggle-born. Your cousin is an Auror, and a damn good one at that... clumsy but good."

"You've met her?" Malfoy looked at Harry in amazement.

"She came to the Ministry to try to save my ass that night," Harry told Malfoy with a smile that just thinking about Tonks brought to his face. "If you want, I can get her to come here and introduce you to her."

Malfoy nodded slowly, "I think..." He swallowed slowly. "I think I'd like that."

"Just let me know when and I'll see what I can do," Harry gripped the parapet so hard his knuckles were turning white.

"What's wrong?" Malfoy noticed Harry's death grip on the side of the castle. Harry was almost shocked to feel concern emanating from the other boy.

Harry looked down and shook his head... and saw black robed figure crossing the grounds towards the gate. Snape had been summoned. Harry crossed to the other side of the tower, drawing Malfoy to where he couldn't see his Head of House leaving for a Death Eater meeting. About halfway across the stones the pain flared and Harry stumbled. He fell to his knees and cursed viciously.

"Harry?" Malfoy was close to panic of some sort. If he wasn't actually concerned for Harry he was concerned for what could happen to him if something happened to Harry when they were alone, "Potter!"

"Just... just don't hex me or anything," Harry gritted his teeth. "It could be bad for both of us." Harry knew he could lash out when he was like this, and this momentary truce with Malfoy might not protect him.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Malfoy demanded, closer to being the way Harry knew him.

"He's really happy about something," Harry said with a harsh laugh that he couldn't stop. The laughs kept coming and he tried to clamp down his barriers, hold it off. He had left himself wide open to sense Malfoy and he couldn't shut himself down now.

"Fuck," Malfoy cursed softly in dawning realization. "You need Pomfrey... or Dumbledore."

The door swung open then, and a very irritated Remus Lupin strode onto the tower, "What are you two doing up here in the middle of the night? Ten points from Slytherin and Gryffindor both."

"Lup...", Malfoy started and swallowed, "Professor... he's... he's..."

"I know Mr. Malfoy," Remus said sharply. He kneeled down in front of Harry and gripped his shoulders. "Block it Harry. Shut him out."

"Can't," Harry felt a tear running down his cheek, his eyes wide and frightened as the cruel laughter was forced out of him, "too late." He shut his eyes against the pain and tried to concentrate.

There was the tinkle of glass as Remus brought a vial out of his pocket. He tilted Harry's head back forcefully, "Make yourself useful Malfoy and hold him!" The potion was poured in his mouth and Harry thought he swallowed at least half of it, the rest dripping down onto his robes. The pain faded a bit but it wasn't enough. "Let him go now," hands released his head. "Harry I'm sorry." Even through the pain and the insane joy Harry could feel anguish from the werewolf.

He knew why when an open hand impacted hard against his cheek, shocking Harry back to the moment. Harry was breathing heavily as he fell to the ground, catching himself with his hands. He struggled and got his barriers into place, blocking the worst of the emotion fed through his scar.

"Thank you Remus," Harry said with effort. His cheek stung and would bruise if it wasn't healed soon. He looked up and saw that Remus's eyes were bright and pained and full of guilt for striking Harry. Harry reached out and touched his cheek, "Don't Moony. You had to. You're nothing like them... I know."

Remus nodded and looked up at the Slytherin standing behind Harry. Harry could tell Malfoy was bewildered, but there was sympathy and... guilt was there as well. Harry felt Malfoy examining the past five plus years.

"Mr. Malfoy..."

Harry cut him off, "This all comes under our agreement Draco. Everything you heard and saw tonight..."

"I know more about a wizard's oath than you Harry," Malfoy said with only a touch of the usual disdain. "If I repeated any of this I'd be forsworn and in your debt. I don't like you... but I don't hate you either. I am a Malfoy. No... I am *the* Malfoy." The pride in his voice was strong and unmistakable. "If Father had remembered what that means perhaps he wouldn't be rotting away in prison somewhere. He wouldn't be a branded slave. Malfoys do not serve. Malfoys have honor."

Remus was looking up at the young aristocrat with respect. Harry could feel that he was impressed, "Twenty points to Slytherin Mr. Malfoy, for thinking for yourself. Go back to your dorm before I reconsider detention for both of you."

Harry looked back, wincing at the effect twisting his head had, and saw Malfoy almost literally swelling with pride. He looked down at Harry, "I'll contact you about that meeting."

Harry just barely nodded and watched Malfoy sweep through the door with a stride that would have impressed Snape. He let himself collapse to the ground, lying on his side with the cold of the stones against his scar, a wonderful contrast to his burning forehead. Remus was still kneeling down by him and picked Harry up with what felt like no effort at all.

"Dad's cloak," Harry said against Remus's chest. Remus nodded and summoned the invisibility cloak, handing it to Harry.

Remus carried him down the spiraling steps and to the staff quarters. Harry spoke the password to Snape's quarters and they entered, headed for Harry's bedroom. Harry was grateful for the soft mattress of his bed. There was a tingle as a healing charm eliminated all evidence of the bruise forming on his cheek.

"What on Earth did you say to him?" Remus asked, his voice tinged with awe.

"Told him what would happen if the half-blood dark lord won," Harry muttered, emotionally and physically exhausted.

"The meeting?" Remus questioned.

"Tonks," Harry said, "she's his first cousin, his only."

Remus seemed almost surprised as he responded, "So she is. I nearly forgot Andy and Narcissa were sisters."

"Dad got called," Harry said a little fearfully. "Saw him leaving... Malfoy didn't see... wait with me?"

"Sure Harry," Remus's voice was soft and soothing. He held Harry's hand and Harry squeezed when the surges came.

"Don't let me sleep," Harry nearly pleaded. "It's worse when I'm asleep."

Remus helped Harry sit up and sat down on the bed next to him. He held Harry as Harry bit his lip and squeezed Remus's hand.

"Would Sirius be mad?" Harry asked the only one who could answer a question that had been tormenting him for months. "Would he be mad about Dad, and Malfoy, and that I'm not like James?"

"He probably would be," Remus admitted sadly, "but without reason, and without the right. Sirius was kind and caring and brave, and also reckless and cruel and confused and judgmental. His childhood was worse than yours Harry, and he saw Slytherin, and consequently the Snapes and the Blacks and the Malfoys and Voldemort and the Death Eaters, as the source of his pain.

"There was a very good reason James never told him about Severus. Someday, it's possible that Draco Malfoy and Ron *could* get past their family names and get along, but that was never possible

for Sirius. Most of his scars couldn't be seen. James and I knew that better than anyone. I'm still not sure if Peter ever understood."

"Sometimes," Harry's muscles tightened and he felt his eyes burn but not all from pain. His hands formed into fists, "I get mad at him... for coming to the Ministry... for what he did your fifth year... for comparing me to James. I miss him so much... but Mrs. Weasley and Hermione were right."

Remus's hold on Harry tightened, "It took me months to even begin to forgive Sirius for that night, and I never trusted him again until just recently. I blamed him for James and Lily not only because I thought he was the spy, but because what he did... when he sent Severus to the Shack... it tore the Marauders apart. There were other things that changed our friendship, but that was the big one. The trust was gone, and after we graduated I isolated myself rather than making things uncomfortable. I still saw them... but I distanced myself so I wouldn't get hurt again."

"It's not your fault Remus," Harry said, knowing what was coming next, recognizing the guilt and self-effacing that he often felt.

"I owe you an explanation Harry," Harry tried to object but Remus wouldn't let him. "You weren't delivered to your aunt and uncle until the night of November first, the night after James and Lily were killed. You spent that day here at Hogwarts. Madam Pomfrey examined you that day, and Hagrid watched after you. I heard that Minerva spent the day as a cat, watching your aunt and Dudley. She tried to stop Dumbledore from leaving you there.

"Sirius spent that day tracking down Peter. Halloween was a full moon, but as soon as I heard what happened I came here to hear it directly from Albus. Werewolves lose strength as they age Harry and I could probably arm wrestle Hagrid and win still. I've lived longer after the bite than anyone with my condition ever has. It took Hagrid, Albus, Frank, and Alastor to hold me back from going after Sirius. Hagrid tried to physically restrain me while all three of the others combined were barely enough to stun me. They had to try twice."

Harry was gaping. He had never heard any of this before, never been told what happened in those days with the exception of the confrontation between Sirius and Wormtail.

"My temper is fierce, but can be short-lived," Remus wasn't looking at Harry. His eyes were closed and his head tilted back as though he was viewing the memories on the backs of his eyelids. "When they woke me all the fight was gone. I was crushed, empty. Just like that, almost my whole pack was gone or had betrayed me. Albus let me see you, our only pup, and told me I had to say goodbye. He promised you would be safe from all the Death Eaters who wanted revenge so long as you were with Petunia. I had met her, and knew she was spiteful, but I never dreamed she would treat you the way she did. So I trusted Albus and I ran away."

"Where did you go?" Harry asked in a hoarse voice. The pain was still immense but the story Remus told was gripping.

Remus sighed, "I ran to a friend who had once offered me a refuge, though I didn't really understand what he offered at the time. I learned from him, and researched, and tried to convince myself that I never had a pack, that I never had the three best friends I could ever hope for, and by extension that you didn't exist. After six years or so I left and just traveled around, not really taking care of myself. I could spend the whole day in a library and then take the books home and read all night. I didn't come back until Albus hunted me down the summer before your third year. He brought it all crashing back down on me."

"Why did you come?" Harry thought he knew, but he needed to hear it.

"I came because of you Harry," Remus said quietly, "because through James you are part of my pack. I came to protect you from Sirius, to see you for myself after twelve years." Remus suddenly smiled mischievously, "Severus doesn't understand yet, but when he bonded with James he became part of the pack as well. He's been family since before you were born."

They both fell asleep, sitting on the bed fully dressed, and Harry writhed in his sleep from Voldemort's glee. Harry woke when Snape got back in the early hours of the morning. It was harder to wake Remus, who left half-asleep and incoherent for his own bed.

"What was it?" Harry asked, slightly queasy from the amount of time his scar had hurt. His head swam and the whole world was off-balance. "Why was he so fucking happy?"

"It was his birthday," Harry's father answered, not bothering to mention Harry's language. Harry could feel the disgust and anger and shame as if they were his own. "Belletrix got him a present, some small muggle children to play with."

Harry cringed and felt the rejection his father was flooded with. Snape turned to go and Harry cried out after him, "No! Stay!" He reached out and found his father's hand and pulled him down to the bed, cuddling up to him like a small child who needed comfort, or perhaps like the parent to comfort the hurting child. Either way, Harry knew it was what they both needed.

Chapter Forty

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Severus did a double take, watching the Gryffindor table in masked amazement. Weasley and the other boys that shared a room with Harry were keeping his attention diverted while Granger poured a vial of potion into Harry's goblet. Then a member of the Gryffindor Quidditch Team, which was playing against Ravenclaw in just half an hour, came to talk to Harry and Ron and started to drag them away. Yet another quidditch player grabbed Harry's goblet and pushed it into his hand. Harry downed the juice in one go without even looking at it, potion and all, and ran out to get ready for the game.

Granger saw Severus watching and tapped the empty vial with her wand. Severus felt something appear in his pocket and drew it out. The potion was a combination energy enhancer and pain killer that could be used daily and wouldn't react with any of the potions Harry was already living off of. "Did you see any of that?" Severus said under his breath, seemingly glaring at the departing Gryffindor quidditch players.

"Hm?" Remus responded in his vague way of saying he did but wasn't about to acknowledge it.

"They're drugging him," Severus passed the vial under the table. "Minerva's whole bloody House is in on it."

The Head of House in question overheard, as she was sitting on the other side of Severus, and groaned, "Now what are they doing?"

"Quite the conspiracy," Remus was laughing. He tossed the vial over Severus's head and Minerva snatched it out of the air as adeptly as a seeker, though she had been a chaser in her day. She read the label and looked at Severus and Remus inquiringly. Severus glared down at his food, keeping up his reputation for disliking pretty much everyone that lived and breathed and didn't wear green and silver (and most of those too). "Hermione put it in Harry's drink while Ron and some others distracted him, and then your beaters made sure he drank it. The 'Take Care of Harry' campaign has expanded past his roommates and Hermione."

Minerva smiled a feral smile and Severus was reminded distinctly of her animagus form, "Why Severus, was it you who always told me that Gryffindors had no subtlety and couldn't execute a well thought out plan if their lives depended on it?"

Remus's laughter approached raucous, no doubt thinking of all the detailed plans made by the Marauders. Severus scowled at him, "Oh shut it werewolf. Everyone always knew you were a Ravenclaw in disguise. Without your brain the Marauders wouldn't have accomplished half their harebrained schemes."

"Why Severus was that a compliment?" Remus covered his heart in feigned surprise. "Remember this moment clearly Minerva, the day Severus Snape complimented both the past and current generations of Gryffindor in one conversation."

Minerva joined in the laughter at his expense and Severus grumbled and got to his feet, "I am going out to the pitch. When you two decide to act your age I will see you there." He stalked out as if he was after a Gryffindor that had set fire to his office, thought that hadn't happened in years, but not before transfiguring Minerva's goblet into a saucer of cream.

Severus despised anyone getting the better of him, and so his bad mood was not entirely a false front as he left the castle for the quidditch pitch. The sight of the Weasley twins crossing the grounds from Hogsmeade floating several large packages in front of them did nothing to help his mood.

"Professor Snape! Such a pleasure to see you!" one of them yelled as she crossed towards him.

"I can assure you Weasley," Severus snapped, "the feeling is not mutual."

The twins took position on either side of him to walk towards the pitch and the one who had not spoken yet chimed in, "But it is! I'm pleased to see you as well."

Severus glared straight ahead, causing a second year Hufflepuff to yelp and run towards the stands, rather than choose a twin to aim his displeasure at, "As you so wisely chose that you are not suited for academia and left the premises of this school, may I inquire as to what you are doing here and what you are carrying?"

Identical grins crossed their faces, "As you know, the Gryffindor Quidditch Team received a rather substantial endowment recently. The benefactor requested that we, as former team members, take care of spending a portion of said endowment as per his instructions."

"And now that we had a bit free time," the other twin took up where his brother left off, "we were able to get the specifics of each team member from their red haired captains, and do a bit of shopping."

"So we really must run, as there is not much time before the game begins," the other said.

They jogged forward and then turned and grinned, "See you in the stands Severus!"

"I'm cursed," Severus grumbled. "No sooner do we get rid of them then they all start coming back." Severus heard a snort next to him and saw that Draco Malfoy had joined him quietly, "The Weasley invasion continues."

"Indeed Mr. Malfoy," Severus remarked, remembering Remus's account of how he had found Harry and Malfoy the night of the Dark Lord's birthday. Harry had refused to say a word about it, saying only that if Malfoy looked like he wanted to talk that he would give permission. Severus had raised an eyebrow at the mention of a wizard's oath but pushed no further. He was proud of Harry for taking the traditional agreement so seriously despite his upbringing.

"Have you noticed sir, that all the Weasley offspring are rather well-off?" Malfoy asked with an almost undetectable tone of reflection.

"A Gringotts curse breaker, a dragon handler, Junior Undersecretary to the Ministry of Magic, and two," Severus snorted disapproval at this last, "*inventors*. Their parents' lack of funds does not seem to have hindered them."

Malfoy was quiet as they approached the Slytherin section of the stands, "Something about you is different sir. You spend a great deal of time with Lupin."

"It is not my fault, nor my choice, that the bloody werewolf has decided I need... a friend," Severus scoffed and sneered.

"Gryffindors have a way of doing that," Malfoy echoed the sneer.

Severus raised an eyebrow, "Associating with a Gryffindor Mr. Malfoy? Your father and mother would hardly approve."

Malfoy stopped and turned to face Severus. His gaze was cold and hard, "Father is hardly in the position to pass judgment on *my* choice of associates. They, at least, will not make me a target of the Ministry. As for Mother, she has been at the chateau for months and most likely will not return. I have half a mind to sign it over to her and recast the wards on the Manor."

The entire conversation was taking place at a level just above a whisper. Students passed by but none of them would dare pause long enough to hear even a small portion of what Severus and Malfoy were discussing.

"Mr. Malfoy, as you insinuating not long ago I may not be sympathetic to this line of reasoning,"

Severus glared at his pupil. "Precisely why are you informing me?"

Malfoy dropped his harsh look and gave a slight, casual shrug, "I'll be seventeen next week sir. Maybe I don't give a shit. Maybe I want the Dark Lord to know I won't be branded by him willingly. Maybe I think you are not all you appear to be. Pick one Professor." Malfoy gave Severus a few moments. "The game will start soon and I need to assure I have a good seat to see Potter pummel Chang."

Colin Creevey, the Gryffindor that until recently had followed Harry nearly everywhere he went snapping picture after picture, had been drafted as the new Quidditch Commentator to replace Lee

Jordan. The position traditionally went to a Gryffindor, and Severus had overheard Minerva saying that she assigned Creevey to keep his camera in the tower during games. When Severus took his seat he saw, much to his combined dread and amusement that the Weasley twins had flanked Creevey and were talking quietly to him, the fifth year's head snapping back and forth like he was watching a fast paced tennis match.

"Welcome one and all to the Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw Quidditch match," Severus saw Minerva make her way towards the announcer's spot as one of the Weasleys began addressing the crowd.

"Before we introduce the teams we must introduce ourselves to the first year students in the crowd. I am former Gryffindor Beater Fred Weasley."

"And I am former Gryffindor Beater George Weasley, taking the day off from the management of our shop, Weasley Wizarding Wheezes, supplying you with all you joking and magical mischief making necessities."

"This is not the place for advertisements!" Minerva chastised her former pupils. "Let Mr. Creevey do his job!"

"Right you are Minerva," Fred said cheerfully and Severus could almost see the steam rising from the Gryffindor Head of House. He smirked. The day was looking up.

"Ooo," Remus sat down next to him. "Those two are going to pay later."

"Indeed," Severus felt his eyes light up in anticipation. "I must ensure a front row seat to that show." Remus grinned his Marauder grin, "Padfoot and Prongs used to get her intentionally. She ranted at them for over an hour once. It was beautiful."

"And here they come!" Creevey's voice boomed over the noise of the crowd. "The Gryffindors led by Keeper and Captain Ron Weasley, Chaser and Assistant Captain Ginny Weasley, Chaser Katie Bell, Chaser Euan Abercrombie, Beater Jack Sloper, Beater Andrew Kirke, and Seeker Harry Potter," the crowd, or most of it anyway, exploded into cheers as the team circled the pitch. Whispers broke out all around at the sight of the team, though. From what Severus could tell they had new uniforms... and everyone except Harry was riding a Firebolt. "Hey!"

"Sorry 'bout that Colin," Ron Weasley's voice took over, no doubt having learned the spell from his brothers. Severus saw that the new Gryffindor uniforms all had a pocket for their wands in their shin guards. "This will just take a minute everyone."

Weasley flew over to the Gryffindor stands while his team hovered by Fred and George. Harry was grinning widely, as were the twins and Ginny Weasley. All attention was on the Gryffindor Keeper and Captain though. Weasley hovered in front of Granger, who was looking at him wide-eyed in the front row of spectators. He took out his wand and conjured a single red rose, handed it to her, and started to recite... "All that I know, of a certain star..."

"Is that Browning?" Remus asked in amazement.

"Robert Browning," Severus agreed, "writing to his wife. Weasley actually went to the library voluntarily, and without Granger."

Granger was blushing bright red by the time the poem was finished and Weasley cancelled the charm that projected his voice throughout the stadium. He leaned over the whisper in his ear and was answered when she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him fervently. Every girl Severus could see was sighing and watching with longing, even his Slytherins, wishing they were in Granger's place.

Weasley rejoined his team grinning like an idiot and received congratulatory slaps on the back from his whole team, male and female alike.

"Before I announce the Ravenclaw team," Creevey said nervously, "Professor McGonagall has asked me to inform you that, while Ron Weasley's display was moving, this is not to be the start of a new trend and anyone who attempts to do the same will have detention cleaning the goal posts and

stands without magic." Every quidditch player in the crowd and in the air winced. "And now the Ravenclaws!"

The game started and the Gryffindors were clearly at their absolute best. Weasley wasn't letting a single goal get by him, and the chasers were working together like they could read each other's minds. Harry and Chang were circling the pitch above the players alternately scanning for the snitch and watching each other. Severus shook his head. If Harry was a Slytherin he'd be using his empathy to track Chang, but clearly had it blocked to level the playing field.

"As you can see," one of the Weasley twins took the announcements over again and Minerva fumed, "the Gryffindor team is riding all new brooms, Firebolts all, with the exception of Seeker Potter who received a Supernova II for Christmas this year, the lucky git. The team came into an unexpected inheritance from a former player, a beater Professor?" Minerva glared.

The other twin picked it up, "That's right Fred, starting his third year I'm told, though he requested that he remain anonymous."

Remus snorted, "More like they don't want half the school to faint in shock if they announce his name."

"Because no Gryffindor could ever become a Death Eater," Severus mocked and sneered at the pitch as Gryffindor scored the first goal of the game.

"And the seekers are diving!" Creevey announced, taking control of the announcements back, and stood up in excitement, peering down. "I don't see the snitch myself, so perhaps... oh Merlin, that's gotta hurt! Potter pulls up with seconds to spare and Chang doesn't make it! Madame Hooch has called a timeout to check the Ravenclaw seeker for injuries."

The game picked up again but it was obvious that Chang was a bit distracted and was unable to keep up with Harry. Severus remembered exactly why he had hated watching James play. It took all his skill to keep his face impassive whenever a bludger came close to Harry or he did some tricky maneuver that would have had Severus falling from the sky.

The entire crowd stood and gasped when Harry dove straight down, the chasers from both teams being forced to abandon the quaffle as he barreled between them. Chang followed but had no chance of gaining on Harry. She was not nearly as willing to assume the chasers would get out of her way, or to take a perfectly vertical dive, and rode an inferior broom.

Just below the playing level Harry made a sharp turn and leveled off with the snitch in his fist, held high for all to see.

"Gryffindor wins 200 to nothing!" Creevey's voice nearly cracked in his excitement as he jumped up and down, cheering with the rest of his house.

Severus saw the Weasley twins whispering and trying to leave the staff section of the stands discreetly and he decided to block their path, "*Accio alcohol!*"

Four bottles of Ogden's came from the pockets of the twins' robes and landed neatly at Severus's feet and the two former Gryffindors exchanged a guilty look. Minerva chose that moment of course to leave and saw the twins getting caught in the act.

"Molly *will* be hearing about this," Minerva said sharply. "As you are adults and no longer students we can no longer confiscate this, but it will be held until you leave the school grounds." She used a banishing spell and sent all four bottles to her office. "You may retrieve this from me at a later time. If I find you have instructed my students on a method to leave the castle and obtain more you *will* suffer my displeasure."

Both boys paled, knowing that Minerva intended to return it at the next Order meeting, where their mother would be witness. They nodded, however, and ran towards the current students.

"How many times does that make for those two alone?" Severus smirked and Minerva.

Minerva pursed her lips, "That would be the third time I've caught them with alcohol on school grounds and Rosmerta had to refuse to serve them multiple times."

"She almost never refused Sirius and James," Remus said from behind them. Minerva raised her eyebrows at him. "They started flirting with her during our first Hogsmeade weekend and were getting drinks by fifth year." He laughed at the expression on Minerva's face. "What in the name of Merlin is Malfoy up to?"

Severus and Minerva both followed Remus's eyes to where Draco Malfoy had stopped one of the Ravenclaw chasers, fifth year Savannah Fawcett, who went by the nickname Anna. Severus cast a charm which was borderline dark that allowed him to eavesdrop on the conversation, most likely the charm behind Extendable Ears. Minerva gave him a disapproving glance while Remus chuckled. "Malfoy," Fawcett said coolly. "What do you want? I have to head to the showers."

"You played well today," Malfoy said with a charming smile. "Next weekend is a Hogsmeade trip. Would you like to join me?"

"Bloody hell, he's asking her on a date," Severus mumbled. Minerva looked shocked.

"Isn't she muggle-born?" Remus asked, with his brow furrowed.

Minerva shook her head, "Half-blood. Her father is an American pureblood, mother muggle-born. Her maiden name is Collins, Remus."

Remus coughed, "Bea?"

"Shh!" Severus hushed them.

"Why should I go with *you*?" Fawcett asked suspiciously.

Malfoy didn't react to her tone, but continued to look every inch the well-bred Slytherin,

"Appearances are not all they seem. You do not need to answer me now. I'll ask again Tuesday." He lifted her hand, bowed slightly, kissed the back of her hand, turned and left her behind a bit bewildered.

Severus ended the charm and smirked. Remus nudged him, "So?"

Severus gave him a disdainful look, "Please refrain from such friendly gestures Remus. She hasn't said yes or no. He said he would ask again on Tuesday."

"What's Tuesday?" Minerva asked automatically.

"Draco Malfoy's seventeenth birthday," Severus let his smirk approach a smile. "On Tuesday complete control of the Malfoy vaults and properties goes to Draco."

The Order had been fully informed of the suspicions Remus and Severus had that Harry was convincing the younger Malfoy to reconsider his path. Both Minerva and Remus looked speculative and Remus nodded, "Tuesday should be interesting."

Chapter Forty-One

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Easter holiday was almost upon them. Harry sat at the Gryffindor table the morning of Draco Malfoy's seventeenth birthday and surreptitiously watched the Slytherin table. The next weekend was a Hogsmeade trip, and the weekend after was Easter. Harry was one of three people staying in Gryffindor tower, and the other two were in second year. They would never notice his absence while the ritual was performed.

The Slytherins were all fawning over Malfoy, who was soaking up all the attention with a royal air. When owl post arrived a flock of owls headed for the Malfoy heir, as Harry was counting on. One of them was a school owl with a letter from Harry, charmed for security and secrecy. To the other Slytherins it would look like an anonymous love letter, a little revenge for Valentine's Day. To Malfoy it was an arrangement to meet Tonks the next night in the Room of Requirement.

"Oo," Pansy Parkinson shrieked, "I wonder who it's from!"

Malfoy snatched back Harry's note and shot a glare to the Gryffindor table, where Harry wasn't bothering to hide his laughter.

"What's so funny?" Ron asked, or at least that's what Harry assumed he asked from the mumbles around a mouthful of eggs.

Harry pointed at the Slytherins, "I think Malfoy got a little love letter with his birthday gifts."

Several other Slytherin girls had joined Parkinson in speculating over the secret admirer and Malfoy continued to glare while Ron joined in Harry's laughter. The glare turned into a smirk when Malfoy opened a thick packet of parchment and stood on his chair to address the hall. Every table fell silent and Harry noticed that the staff made no move to stop Malfoy.

"As most of you aware I have just come of age," Malfoy announced imperiously to the accompaniment of cheers from his House. "Due to current political circumstances..."

"Meaning his dad's in jail," Ron whispered to Harry.

"...I am now officially *the* Malfoy and would like to announce that Lucius Malfoy is officially no longer a Malfoy." The cheers silenced instantly as the Slytherins stared at Malfoy in shock as Malfoy clapped his hands once, sealing his statement. "As is per my duty as *the* Malfoy, I will continue the contributions to both Slytherin House and the Slytherin Quidditch Team." Malfoy pulled back both his sleeves and displayed his forearms, sans Dark Mark, and continued his speech.

Harry sat back with a small smile as whispers broke out amongst the students who understood what the gesture meant, everyone wondering what was next. "I will also be making sizable contributions to various charities and Non-Profit Organizations, including the Victims Fund, and St. Mungo's Research Division."

Jaws dropped all around the hall and Dumbledore was twinkling brightly. Snape was scowling.

"The Victims Fund is for disabled combatants and orphans from the first war against Voldemort," Hermione informed them quietly.

Neville had paled, "Mungo's Research Division is looking for a cure for the effects of prolonged Cruciatus."

Malfoy sat down and continued eating as if nothing had happened with an almost unnoticeable small smirk, but the hall remained silent. Harry examined the faces around him. Every Gryffindor and Hufflepuff looked beyond confused, and the Ravenclaws looked like they had been presented with a baffling Arithmancy equation. The younger students were all taking their cues from their older counterparts and didn't make any noise. The Slytherins were trying to retain blank expressions but Harry saw several of them exchanging nervous glances.

The silence had to be broken. Harry looked up at the staff table and saw Dumbledore still twinkling, Remus and McGonagall smiling along with the other teachers in the Order, and several teachers trying to get information from the smiling ones. Dumbledore winked at Harry and Harry nodded. He

stood, and started clapping, whistled and pumped a fist in the air, followed almost immediately by Dumbledore.

Ron and Hermione looked at Harry like he was crazy but he hissed down at them, "I'll explain later." They shrugged and stood with Harry to join him. That was all it took for first Gryffindor, then most of the hall to follow his lead. Harry sat down again once the applause had been picked up by more than three-quarters of the school. Malfoy just looked up from his food briefly to catch Harry's eye and give him a slight nod, which Harry returned.

"What the hell was that all about?" Ron demanded as the three of them walked to Potions together. Hermione was looking at Harry, also expecting an answer.

He grabbed them both and ushered them into an empty classroom, throwing up wards to make sure they weren't interrupted or overheard, "We only have a few minutes or we'll be late so let me explain without any comments, okay?"

Hermione elbowed Ron in the ribs when he opened his mouth, "Of course Harry."

"I bumped into Malfoy late one night and he was..." Harry stopped, trying to figure out exactly what he could say. "I swore an oath..." Ron's eyebrows lifted and Hermione looked contemplative when Harry saw Malfoy passing. "Just hold on a second."

Harry flung open the classroom door and hissed, "Malfoy!"

Malfoy held up a hand to the Slytherins who were with him and signaled to them to keep walking, "Potter?"

Harry sighed, frustrated, "What can I tell them now?"

Malfoy peeked around him and smirked, but let the smirk fade a bit when Harry sent waves of frustration at the Slytherin, "Oh fine Potter, basics only, no details."

"Thanks, and Happy Birthday," Harry rolled his eyes and shut the door as Malfoy turned and walked away. He sighed and faced Ron and Hermione again, "We talked, and I got the impression that he wouldn't join Voldemort, or try to rid the world of muggles and muggle-born wizards and witches any other way. We both swore we wouldn't repeat any of the conversation to anyone without permission. As you could see from this morning I was right."

Hermione nodded, "He pretty much declared his allegiance to the light at breakfast."

"Malfoy?" Ron choked. "Harry please don't tell me you're friends with that git!" Ron's eyes were pleading with Harry.

"I'm not," Harry said firmly. "I still think he's a pompous prick and he's been a bastard to all of us for years, but if he wants to oppose Voldemort I'll welcome him. We don't have to be mates with *everyone* on our side."

"Harry's right," Hermione said with conviction. "From now on we shouldn't make any trouble with Malfoy unless he instigates. Let's go before we're late."

They left the classroom with Ron mumbling about Malfoys and no fun. Harry patted him on the back just before they entered the potions classroom, "Don't worry Ron. I'm sure there are still plenty of Slytherins who despise us and deserve to be hexed into unrecognizable piles of goop."

Ron perked up and the three of them walked towards their places in the classroom. As they passed Malfoy's desk Hermione nodded at him, "Malfoy."

"Granger," Malfoy nodded back. The same was repeated with Harry and Ron, and many of the students in the classroom looked confused. Malfoy didn't acknowledge any questions though, and Snape sweeping into the classroom stopped all conversation. In that lesson the usual amount of points was lost from Gryffindor, but Malfoy did not earn a single point for Slytherin despite his perfect potion.

Malfoy had sent Harry his schedule the day after they talked to arrange the meeting with Tonks, and Harry had responded immediately as his next lesson with her was the day after Malfoy's birthday.

Harry waited for Malfoy outside the Room of Requirement. Tonks was supposed to teach him charms to change his hair, but he owled her and told her they would have a guest.

"Malfoy," Harry said mildly as the blond Slytherin approached.

Malfoy nodded and looked aloof but Harry could sense nervousness, "Potter. Where are we meeting her?"

Harry tilted his head towards the door and led the way in. For his lessons with Tonks the Room resembled a small sitting room with a few loveseats, a low table, and a nice fireplace. Tonks was sitting on one of the loveseats with her face screwed up in concentration. Harry grinned and held a hand up to Malfoy. Seconds later Tonks's hair was long and purple, she had a pert, upturned nose, and her fingernails were sculpted and painted to match the hair. When she opened her eyes Harry started laughing.

"I'll expect you to give my eyes back when you're done with them," Harry teased.

"Harry!" Tonks jumped up and squeezed Harry in a big hug. "So, who did you bring me?" Tonks watched Malfoy in and her eyes opened wide, looking Malfoy up and down, "You have got to be Narcissa's son."

"Draco Malfoy," Malfoy held his hand out politely.

Tonks raised her eyebrows at Harry but took Malfoy's hand. Rather than shaking it though, she pulled him into a hug, making the Slytherin look at Harry in shock, "Nice to meet ya 'cos." She released Malfoy and he settled into one of the seats, looking very proper. Harry and Tonks took the other seats.

"So," Malfoy looked a little scornfully at Harry and Tonks. Harry had one foot up on his seat and Tonks was sitting folded into the lotus position. "The Black's disowned your mother for marrying a muggle-born?"

"Yup," Tonks responded, "burned her right off the tapestry. She was the first Black not in Slytherin for over twenty generations. She was a Ravenclaw. Harry's godfather one-upped her though when he got sorted into Gryffindor."

"He got burned off when he ran away right before his fifth year," Harry added as he adjusted to sit a little more properly. His movement brought some amusement from Malfoy.

"I heard you disowned your father," Tonks grinned at Malfoy. "Nice move."

Malfoy quirked an eyebrow at Harry and he held his hands up, "Hey don't look at me! I didn't even tell her who I was bringing tonight. Either of you hungry?"

Tonks nodded energetically and Malfoy shrugged. Harry closed his eyes and concentrated, asking the room for snacks and butterbeer. When Tonks exclaimed 'Alright!', Harry opened his eyes and grabbed a butterbeer off the table.

"Help yourself 'cos," Tonks said when Malfoy didn't take anything.

Malfoy opened a butterbeer and tilted it in their direction before drinking, "So, what's your first name?" Tonks choked on a mouthful of butterbeer and Harry burst out laughing. Malfoy looked back and forth between them, "What am I missing here?"

"Please let me tell him, please?" Harry pleaded. Tonks glared at him and Harry readied his wand.

"Come on Nymphadora," Harry jumped up and dove in back of his loveseat to dodge the hex shot his way, "it's not that bad!"

"Harold James Potter," Tonks yelled. "I've told you never to call me that!"

Harry shot a hex over the chair, aiming for the indignant anger he felt, *Furnunculous! Silencio!* Tonks huffed and Harry heard her sit down forcefully. When Harry looked over his seat she had her face scrunched up again and the boils disappeared. She was back to the spiky pink hair and warm brown eyes as well.

"Tonks hates her first name," Harry explained without removing the silencing hex.

Malfoy felt like he wanted to laugh but Harry guessed he wouldn't until he was more comfortable around them, "I can see why. I guess I'm lucky that sisters have different tastes." Tonks kicked Harry and pointed at her mouth. Harry just grinned at her and picked up a chocolate chip cookie from the table. "Are you going to remove that hex?"

"Eventually," Harry shrugged. "She once left me with tail all night so I think I'll make her wait awhile." He glared at Tonks, "Not everyone can change their appearance at will."

Malfoy cocked his head to the side, "She's a metamorphmagus? I didn't know that was one of the Black recessives."

"Mmm hmm," Harry swallowed the last of his cookie. "You should see her do Snape's nose. It's hilarious." Malfoy raised his eyebrows again and Harry grinned at Tonks, "I'll take the charm off." She scrunched her face up and the cute little nose was replaced with a long crooked nose. Malfoy almost smirked. Harry thought it was a cross between a smirk and a smile. Harry laughed and flicked his wand her way, *Finite*.

"I'll get you for that Harry," Tonks pouted. Harry just smiled innocently at her. Their lessons often degenerated into the two of them flinging hexes at each other.

Malfoy looked at Harry at something that approached a sneer, "Speaking of. Thanks to you Potter my whole House is on my case about my mystery lover."

Tonks giggled, "What did you do this time Harry? You should have seen what he did to Remus 'cos. I heard all about it from the twins, and then there was Christmas when he and the boys..."

"Tonks!" Harry gave her a pointed look. She grinned sheepishly and stopped talking. Harry sighed, "I had to disguise the note I sent him about meeting you so I charmed it to look like an anonymous love letter to anyone else who read it."

"That's a good one," Tonks smiled. She eyes, brown again, brightened, "We should send some anonymous love letters to You-Know-Who. I'd love to see old snake face's reaction to that!"

Harry shook his head, "You are insane."

"And you love me for it," Tonks leaned forward and kissed Harry on the cheek.

"So was Harry's secret Valentine from Tonks then?" Malfoy's eyes looked mischievous. Harry glared at him. Revenge had been exacted.

"Harry got a secret Valentine?" Tonks grinned and bounced in her seat. "Tell me Harry, please?"

"No!"

"Please, please, please!" Tonks pleaded. She was like a dog that got hold of a particularly meaty bone, not about to let it go.

"Forget it Tonks," Harry's glare intensified. "I'm surprised the twins didn't tell you about that one too, but if you don't already know you are *not* finding out."

Tonks pouted, "You're no fun."

"Yeah, sacrificing someone up to Voldemort by spreading it around that they had a thing with The-Boy-Who-Lived is my idea of fun," Harry replied with biting sarcasm.

Tonks flinched and Malfoy looked mildly impressed. "Sorry Harry. I was just happy for you."

"Thanks," Harry smiled just a small smile of apology. "So, I figured Malfoy here could probably help with tonight's activity."

Malfoy looked wary, "I am not agreeing to anything until I know what's happening."

"He's a smart one." Tonks rubbed her hands together, "Harry gets to learn all about hair altering transfiguration and charms tonight."

"Like anything could work on that mop," Malfoy smirked.

Harry groaned and leaned back in his chair, forgetting all about sitting straight and properly, "I should have known you two would end up teaming up against me. Just remember, Fred and George still owe me big!"

Tonks immediately swore on her honor not to do anything permanent and Malfoy looked at Harry in surprise. Harry knew he was wondering exactly what Harry had done that the Weasley twins owed him a favor. Harry smiled. He was getting a lot of mileage out of that threat. He rubbed his forehead absently.

His scar hurt and he was having trouble sleeping as a result, but for some reason he wasn't as tired as he expected to be. It probably had something to do with whatever the Gryffindors had been slipping into his drinks at every meal.

The three of them spent the next two hours messing around with Harry's messy black hair, only to discover that almost nothing they did worked to alter it. They could grow it out and shorten it, but it wouldn't thin, get thicker, change color, or neaten. The Room had supplied a full length free standing mirror to help them out. At the end of the night Malfoy and Tonks were both looking at him as though he had just apparated inside Hogwarts, which was impossible according to Hermione and *Hogwarts, A History*.

Harry just shook his head, "I should have known. Aunt Petunia would love this."

"Huh?" Tonks said at his comment.

"Whenever she gave me a haircut when I was little, and they were absolutely horrendous cuts, my hair would always grow back by the next morning," Harry explained, his nose wrinkled up as he remembered how his aunt would butcher his hair.

Tonks laughed and Malfoy shook his head, "That is not normal accidental magic."

"Not normal for most of the world," Tonks pointed out, "but yet another in the long list of strange talents of The-Boy-Who-Lived."

"I hope you've been practicing your shields Tonks," Harry growled.

Tonks smiled at Harry and waggled her eyebrows, changing her eyes back to his again and Harry started flinging curses. Malfoy, with quidditch trained reflexes, quickly set up his own shields and sat back, sipping on butterbeer, to watch Tonks and Harry duel, using the whole room. Tonks lost when Harry animated the mirror and used it to reflect her curses back at her.

Malfoy cancelled his shield with a casual wave of his wand and stood, "It was nice watching you play, children, but it's time for me to be leaving." He gave Tonks, who was sitting on the floor and breathing hard, a short bow, "It was a pleasure to meet you cousin. Please send my regards to your mother. It was... an interesting experience Potter. If you shorten your hair just a bit you might look less like you slept in Hagrid's vegetable patch and more like the head of an ancient line of wizards." Malfoy left the room with a flourish of his robes and Harry turned to Tonks, "Was that a compliment?"

Tonks shrugged, "I don't speak Slytherin. Shorter hair would look cute for that mysterious Valentine of yours."

"Tonks!" Harry groaned.

Chapter Forty-Two

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Severus had been surprised to see Draco Malfoy walking to Hogsmeade with the Ravenclaw chaser he had been talking to after the game on his arm. Severus never had to chaperone Hogsmeade trips, claiming the need for laboratory time without a myriad of students traipsing about. It assured that the Dark Lord could not ask Severus to take advantage of one of the trips when the students were slightly less protected.

The power struggle that had erupted in Slytherin after Malfoy's announcement in the great hall was amusing to watch. The morning of the Hogsmeade trip there had been an article in the *Daily Prophet* about the various generous donations the new scion of the Malfoy line had made.

There was another article claiming that Malfoy and Harry had made amends after their years of hostile attitudes towards one another and were planning to join forces in the fight against You-Know-Who. Severus was almost looking forward to the next Order meeting and the comments that the articles would generate, but *not* to the Dark Lord's reaction.

Malfoy and the Fawcett girl were instantly a much watched couple. Severus was forced to treat Malfoy, and the Slytherins that were following him, with much less favoritism than previously. While it might be good for the students to know their Head of House supported them there were already too many students who knew his position.

When Harry told his roommates and the Lovegood girl, who Severus was still amazed could brew a perfect potion almost every time while seemingly never paying attention, about their relationship he had to tell them he was also a spy on the Dark Lord. After all, they needed some reason that Severus didn't acknowledge Harry.

Easter was approaching too quickly in Severus's opinion. While he was looking forward to what would hopefully cancel out the connection between Harry and the Dark Lord, he was not looking forward to the method. Remus had dropped by to tell him about Harry bringing Malfoy to one of his lessons meet Tonks. Apparently the meeting had gone well, about as well as a meeting between a Slytherin and two Gryffindors could go anyway, and Malfoy was actually corresponding with the non criminal remainder of his family.

Harry's lessons with Severus were focusing on critical thinking, manipulation, and acting. He had started Harry off on logic puzzles and word games, which he picked up surprisingly fast. Harry had complimented Severus on the obstacle he had created to guard the Sorcerer's Stone and admitted that he had to rely completely on Hermione to solve it. Granger and Weasley were soon admitted to these lessons, as the three of them worked amazing well together. Weasley had a surprising talent for strategic thinking and actually won several chess games against Severus.

Granger hugged Harry so tightly Severus thought they might have to mend a few ribs before they started. The girl was almost crying, "You be careful!"

"For Merlin's sake 'Mione," Weasley pried her off Harry and slapped Harry on the back. "It's just one week. You'll see him soon enough."

Weasley was also a much better actor than either Harry or Granger, possibly due to having five older brothers who got into varying amounts of trouble on a daily basis. They both knew that Harry and Severus would be attempting the ritual as soon as the train was gone and both were probably extremely worried. Severus knew that Remus had promised to go to Grimmauld Place and tell them in person how it went as soon as he knew.

Harry, Poppy, and Albus were waiting in the hospital wing when Severus walked in. He opened the folio to the appropriate page and laid it on a table set for just that purpose.

Harry took a deep breath, "Okay. Do I need to be conscious for this?"

"No," Severus shook his head. "You are a minor, and my child, so I can perform the bond independently."

"In that case," Harry looked at Madam Pomfrey, "I think I'd prefer to sleep through this. Last time when I... well, I didn't really *feel* it, and I'd rather not this time either."

Poppy nodded, but cast a worried look towards Severus. He sat down on the side of the bed. Harry had changed into the pajamas that Poppy supplied for patients and was propped against pillows with a sheet and blanket tucked around his waist.

Severus took one of Harry's hands and held it between his, "Are you sure you want to do this? We can still hope to find another solution."

Harry nodded, "I talked to Hermione. She's been through the library three times and this is the only thing she found that has a chance." Harry rubbed his forehead with his free hand. The scar was an angry red, as it had been for months, "I just want to get it over with."

Severus stood and nodded to Poppy and Albus. Albus began erecting a series of shields around the private hospital room they were in. Remus was in the main section and would take care of any students that came in unless it was an emergency.

Poppy cast a sleeping charm on Harry, and then a numbing charm on his arm. She made an incision and attached a tube to Harry's arm which would drain blood into a waiting receptacle. The monitoring charm was activated. She had left it in place from earlier but deactivated it so she wouldn't have to cast it again.

They waited and all three watched as blood flowed out of Harry's arm. Poppy looked mildly ill and it made Severus feel a bit guilty. She was sworn not to hurt anyone, and was now draining a student of his blood. It was in hopes to heal a debilitating problem, but it still went against everything she stood for. After what seemed like an eternity and an obscene amount of blood she nodded.

Severus squeezed Harry's hand, held in his left hand, as he started the incantation. He traced a series of runic symbols over Harry with his wand and they hovered, glowing fiery bright before sinking down and into his son. Severus touched his wand to his own heart and his head, drawing more runes, before repeating the movement on Harry.

"It's fading," Severus heard as he continued the incantation and wand work. He saw that the lightning bolt scar was no longer bright red, but a dull pink instead.

His heart lifted at the sight and he continued, almost at the final stages of the bond. It was a blood bond, only possible to perform on direct blood kin, and requiring an exchange of blood as part of the bonding process. That alone qualified the ritual as dark magic, and Albus had to suspend one of the castle wards for the duration of the ritual.

Severus sheathed his wand as he continued to chant and held out his hand. Albus placed a dagger, hilt first, against his palm and Severus grasped it. He turned Harry's hand over in his. The blade of the dagger, razor sharp, was first drawn across his palm and blood immediately blossomed from the cut. He hissed as the deep incision made its presence known, but moved on to Harry's hand. With both cuts made Severus pressed their palms together. His heartbeat seemed to magnify so he could hear it clearly along with another, fainter rhythm. Harry's heart. The faint beat got stronger and Severus could feel Harry's heart pulling the blood from his own body, tugging on his heart. Severus began to feel a slight dizziness but continued the bonding.

There was a glow in the room, or perhaps just in his own vision. He thought Harry was shining with a golden aura, bright and strong, with a tinge of Gryffindor crimson. He finished the words and dropped to his knees, unable to let go of Harry's hand.

"I'm done," he gasped out. Severus heard Poppy reverse the flow of blood, sending it from the receptacle back into Harry's body. Severus let his head fall down on the bed against Harry's leg. Hands tried to help Severus stand but he shook his head, "Not letting go."

The room tingled with magic as Albus released his shields.

"Let them both sleep," Poppy said firmly, back in her place as healer.

"Sleep," Severus said in a daze. He was only vaguely aware of his body being levitated and lowered onto a soft mattress, either a bed floated in from the next room or Harry's bed widened to accommodate them both.

"Dad," a quiet voice pervaded his fog, growing in insistence. "Dad."

Severus smiled. The word 'Dad' felt so good to hear. For so many years he had expected to never hear anyone call him that. He opened his eyes and saw Harry smiling down at him.

"I like it when you smile," Harry said.

Severus sat up. It felt like ten bludgers had crashed into his skull, "Did it work?"

Harry grinned and brushed his fringe back. The scar was noticeable, but faint, "Not a twinge for hours, no headache, no shooting pains, no unexplainable laughter or anger. You?"

Severus felt his left arm. There was still a slight burn from the Dark Mark, which would be a constant reminder that the Dark Lord was alive until Harry killed him, "It's still active."

"Can I see it?" Harry asked in an almost whisper, as if he was stepping over a forbidden boundary. Severus had seen Harry's smile fade at the knowledge that the link of the Dark Mark was not severed.

Severus looked at Harry directly and saw the green eyes filled with concern and anxiety. He held out his left arm and Harry took it in his hands. Severus saw a scar from working with dragons presumably as Harry traced the tattoo with his forefinger. Severus could clearly see the wand holster Charlie had bought for Harry and the fake wand it was holding. It was odd, as Harry almost always wore long sleeves.

"I almost expect the snake to move, to speak to me," Harry said as he released Severus's arm.

"If it was a true tattoo it probably would," Harry's eyes widened and Severus was reminded yet again that Harry had been raised by muggles. "The Dark Mark is a brand, not a real tattoo. It can't be removed by any known means."

Harry's eyes took on the look that Severus recognized when James was challenged with some impossible task. It was determination. Severus sighed. He looked around and saw that they were alone. He was in his own bed, next to the one Harry had been in for the ritual, but Harry was fully dressed in muggle clothes. He wore a pair of jeans that fit almost too well and a black cotton shirt that read, 'Seeker', across the front in gold outlined in blue. A snitch was fluttering on the shirt and would zoom from spot to spot.

"How long have I been sleeping?" Severus asked, changing the subject. He didn't want Harry getting any ideas.

Harry looked instantly guilty, "Two days. Poppy said you were fine and she could wake you any time but Albus insisted you needed your sleep." Severus raised his eyebrows at the casual names he used and Harry seemed to know exactly what he meant and rolled his eyes.

"Poppy says I've been here so many times I've earned the right to use her given name. Remus said he was allowed sometime in his fourth year. The headmaster insists that I call him Albus whenever there are no other students around. He said he changed my diapers so I don't have to call him Professor."

Severus snorted, but then rubbed the bridge of his nose, "He would say something like that."

"I'm just wondering how many adults I know that have seen me starkers," Harry complained with his arms crossed on his chest. Severus laughed, as it was a good bet most of the staff that had been there at the time were included in that. "Poppy said you might have a headache."

"Might?" Severus replied scathingly. He watched Harry twist with remarkable flexibility and grab several vials off a bedside table and pass them over. Severus carefully inspected each one before drinking them. He then noticed that he was in Poppy's hospital issue pajamas, "I am going to flay that woman."

Harry grinned, "Your robes are next to you. I'll go let her know you're awake."

The way Harry bounced off the bed amazed Severus. He hadn't seen Harry move with such abandon since well before the Dark Lord returned. The last he time could remember was before Harry's name was pulled from the Goblet of Fire. Once the door was closed Severus stood and stripped off the distasteful blue and white striped cotton pajamas.

He was grateful for the feel of the fine cloth of his own garments. He had started wearing trousers under his robes after the incident in his fifth year, suffering his uncle's displeasure but not budging from his position. A quick cleaning charm would do for the time being in lieu of a shower. He strapped his wand in place at his side and crossed the room only to meet Poppy at the door, Harry grinning mischievously behind her.

"Get back in bed Severus!" Poppy demanded. "I am not done with you."

Severus glared, "I will not stay in this forsaken domain of yours one second longer than necessary. I am perfectly capable of looking after my own health and need no further assistance from you."

Poppy grumbled but stepped aside and allowed him to pass. They had the same argument every time Severus wound up in her care, even when he was a student. Harry was just barely containing laughter from the look on his face and the waves of happiness and amusement that Severus felt bombarding him. He wondered if the bond left him open to Harry's empathy more so than he was before. Harry fell into step beside him and Severus saw he was barefoot.

"Do you own shoes?" Severus asked in a hiss.

Harry shrugged, "I like going barefoot. I almost never wear shoes in the summer. The trainers the Dursleys provided never fit well, so I grew to be more comfortable without."

"Mr. Potter!" Poppy called after them. "I did not say you could leave yet!"

"What he said," Harry called before running out of the wing like a dragon was on his heels.

Severus let out a chuckle and sped up his walk, escaping before Poppy could trap him in and use him as bait to get Harry back. It looked like Harry hated being in the hospital wing as much as Severus did.

On the walk to his quarters Severus glared at several students, sending a pair of second year Gryffindors dashing in the other direction. He was smirking when he walked through the portrait opening and found Harry laughing and describing their exodus from the hospital wing to Remus, Albus, and Minerva.

"I am overrun with Gryffindors," Severus complained before pouring himself a brandy, not offering drinks to anyone else. Everyone there knew perfectly well how to conjure their own.

Harry continued laughing, "It's your own fault."

Severus lifted an eyebrow, "Is it?"

"Hm, let's see," Harry tapped his chin in mock thought, "you bonded with a Marauder, fathered a Gryffindor, and spy on the Heir of Slytherin for a Gryffindor."

"Point taken," Severus grumbled as he swirled his drink.

"Do you know what time it is?" Minerva asked as he took a sip of the brandy.

"No Minerva," Severus replied, "though finding four Gryffindors in my quarters is reason enough for a drink. Is there a particular reason you are all here?"

A twinkle in his eye was added to Harry's grin and Severus found himself wishing he had not asked that last question. Albus's twinkle, disturbingly similar to Harry's but much stronger, was bad enough, "As the ritual was successful it is time to step up Harry's training. I will be dueling with him. Minerva is going to begin teaching the animagus transformation. You and Remus are going to teach him more offensive spells in the Forest, as the castle is warded against much of the magic you will be using."

"You want Harry to use dark magic," Severus stated, not pleased. He used it himself when he needed to, mostly as a way to maintain his cover, but never thought he would teach anyone else, especially his son.

Harry looked at him sharply, grin and twinkle gone, "Precisely how do you suggest I kill Voldemort, by using the jelly-legs jinx and giving him boils? I'd rather not learn how to kill anyone but if I have to kill the bastard I'm going to be prepared."

Severus closed his eyes and shook his head. He raised his glass and drank, only to find that Albus had replaced his brandy with pumpkin juice, "That was evil Albus." The headmaster gave him an innocent look that Severus did not buy for one instant. "When do we start?"

"Lunch is in one hour," Remus spoke up for the first time. "Harry's just about caught up on his homework. He'll finish his essay for Minerva this afternoon and we'll take him out tonight."

Remus knew the Forbidden Forest better than anyone Severus had ever seen, even Hagrid.

Between his heightened senses and Harry's empathy they avoided all centaurs and acromantulas, and anything else that might want to make a snack out of them. They stopped in a large clearing that was just outside the majority of the castle's wards, as some of them could not be expanded to cover Hogsmeade without violating several laws. Remus assured Severus and Harry that the clearing was far enough away from the thestrals to avoid attracting them if blood was spilled.

Remus was in charge of keeping watch and warding their practice area while Severus taught Harry. Severus was impressed at the ease with which Harry picked up complicated spells. He seemed to have more trouble with simple work than complex work, furthering Granger's theory that his magic got bound up and blocked when he only called on a little of it. Most of the work was done with his true wand, as it was emotion based and took a good quantity of power.

When Harry wanted to learn something his concentration was focused and exclusive. Severus was tempted to demand why Harry couldn't work that diligently in class that well but knew he wouldn't like the answer so he restrained.

"*Araneum Incendiary*," Harry shouted. Severus, who was under a flame freezing charm, was instantly held in a webbing of fire. Harry ended the spell and smiled. He had gotten it right on his second try. The first had produced a web, but it hadn't held Severus bound.

"Perfect," Severus said. "Now try it without wand, silent."

Harry sent his wand up his sleeve with a thought and looked intently at Severus. Severus was not even aware of Harry casting the spell until he was trapped in the woven threads of fire again. The tickling sensation from the freezing charm in contact with fire was rather interesting. He could see why Wendelin the Weird liked it so much and guessed that no student had written about the sensation itself in their third year essays for Binns.

When the web was gone he ended the freezing charm, "That's good for tonight."

Once they back on the school ground, all three under a Disillusionment Charm to avoid notice, Harry spoke up. They had taken a very circuitous route back as Remus suspected the centaurs were aware of their presence.

"Is Voldemort asking about how well we're getting along?" Harry asked him.

Severus sighed, "Yes. I continue to tell him I am making progress, but you're stubborn and naive. Convincing him of *that* doesn't take much."

Remus laughed and Harry must have been scowling but with the charm Severus couldn't tell. "I was just thinking, maybe you should tell him you're teaching me, not practical because of the castle's wards but theory."

Remus stopped laughing immediately and the tension was palpable. "We will do no such thing without consulting Albus. I personally refuse to inform him you are learning dark magic unless it becomes necessary to protect your safety."

"Just think about it," Harry said with a strained voice. Severus wondered exactly what was going through his head. "I worry about you."

Chapter Forty-Three

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The remainder of Harry's Easter Holiday had been spent working. Dueling against Dumbledore was the single most exhausting activity Harry had ever engaged in, and that included quidditch, sex, and 'Harry Hunting'. As short distance apparition was a key part to the dueling style that both Dumbledore and Voldemort normally used, the lessons were held in the Shrieking Shack. While Hogwarts itself was covered by an anti-apparition ward, that ward could not be extended to cover Hogsmeade, as it would be a violation of liberties.

"I truly am amazed your father succeeded at the transformation, though his motivation was strong," McGonagall, though she said that as the headmaster insisted on being Albus and Pomfrey insisted on being Poppy she might as well be Minerva, told him as they began Animagus lessons. "The initial stages require meditating to discover your form. There are potions and spells that can bypass the meditation, but they are rather painful and you will not find them in any of the books of our library." "They did have the Black library," Harry pointed out.

"Hm," McGonagall clearly disapproved, but then picked up her story. "James had enough energy for six wizards. The only times I ever saw him sit still were at memorials." A small smile appeared on her face, "Classes clearly weren't important enough."

Sitting still was not a problem for Harry. He did find that he had much more energy now that the scar pain was gone and he was getting full nights of sleep, but he wasn't a fidgety person, most likely because of the Dursleys. Harry spent quite a bit of his time sitting cross legged on his bed, the one in staff quarters as his dorm was empty and it was nice to have company, trying to find his inner animal.

"Concentrate on that which makes you, you," McGonagall had said. "There is bravery and determination, talent and power, a certain amount of shyness. You are a natural flyer. I would not be surprised if you took an avian form, though that will make the final steps more difficult."

Harry snorted cynically, "Then I have no doubt that's what will happen."

McGonagall had just smiled in response and gone over the various steps that led up to the transformation. She expected they wouldn't actually identify his animal until the fall, when they would start working on the transformation itself. He wasn't making much headway yet, but McGonagall urged him to be patient, and Harry was determined to succeed, even if it was just to prove that he could.

The lessons that confused him were those with his father and Remus. There was something internal that said dark magic was wrong, learning it was wrong, using it was wrong. But there was a draw there as well. From what Harry understood all dark magic was emotion based, and mostly on negative emotions, though the official definition was broader.

Snape said that the gift of empathy would make him that much stronger when using dark magic, though he said so with obvious unease. That had also disturbed Harry. His father did not want him learning this, but taught it anyway at Dumbledore's command. They were working up to the magic Harry would need to kill Voldemort, or at least to survive against him.

Harry had a theory that he could use other emotions to change the effects or powers of dark spells, but didn't bring up his thoughts quite yet. He wanted to have a firm grasp of the spellwork before he started messing around with it.

Snape, after several arguments with both Dumbledore and Harry, had reluctantly accepted that Harry would be spending part of the summer with the Dursleys. Harry could see he was planning something for the remainder of the summer, but didn't ask. The anticipation of a surprise at the end of the summer was enough for him.

The bond had worked in the best way possible... for the Order. Harry's connection with Voldemort, as far as they knew, was severed completely. He still had the talents he had absorbed with the

curse, such as speaking Parseltongue. The Dark Mark was still active on Snape, so the Order didn't lose their spy, but Harry was not happy with that. He wanted to demand that Snape stop spying, that something, someone, just once, was for Harry alone and not the war.

He was brooding and he knew it. Remus joked that they now knew where Harry's sullen, temperamental side came from. James and Lily had both been stubborn and fairly quick to anger, but didn't stay mad for long periods or concentrate on the negative aspects of life. Harry and Snape could both get in a funk and stay there for days, if not weeks or months. Harry figured he had spent his entire fifth year, and the summers before and after, in the funk to end all funks. Snape had him beat though with his sixteen years long bad mood.

"Hey mate!" Ron slapped Harry on the back and collapsed next to him on the sofa in front of the fire in the Gryffindor common room. Harry felt the rest of the cushions rise and fall as Ron strained the springs.

"How was your holiday?" Harry asked, staring at the fire. Students were pouring in through the portrait, returning from their homes.

"Meh," Ron shrugged. "How about you?"

Hermione came in then and joined them, but sat with much more grace than Ron had, which was good as she sat on Ron's lap and could have caused grave injury otherwise. She leaned over and gave Harry a quick hug before settling back against her boyfriend.

"You know it worked," Harry began, "and we still have our information source."

"Oh Harry, I'm so sorry," Hermione sympathized softly.

"Huh?" Ron was lost yet again.

"He's already lost two fathers," Hermione explained as quietly as she could, which was very quiet as her mouth was right by Ron's ear. "How would you feel if your father was spying?"

Ron's face flushed, in embarrassment at his misunderstanding, but Harry just waved it off, "Don't worry about me. I have things that I *have* to do and I can just focus on that." Harry practiced the acting skills that his father was trying to impart to him and gave them a bright smile, "So, did Ron finish his homework?"

Hermione gave an exasperated huff, "Eventually. Fred and George distracted him for most of the week, getting him to sample their latest jokes." She turned her head just slightly to chastise Ron, "You'll never get through Auror training without developing a work ethic."

"I have a work ethic!" Ron protested.

"Yeah," Harry agreed with a smirk, "do as little work as possible."

Ron shuddered, "It's scary when you do that mate."

Seamus and Dean joined them then, explaining that Neville was off somewhere with Luna. Parvati and Lavender came and sat with them. They asked where Ginny was, with little trouble-making smiles, and Ron glowered while Hermione told them about Ginny's latest boyfriend, a seventh year Ravenclaw, Ben Montgomerie. The conversation degenerated into teasing Ron mercilessly.

"Potter," a voice called coolly.

Harry looked up, "Yes Malfoy?"

"Got a moment?" The relationship between the two of them was a source of mounds of gossip for the school. They were certainly not friends. There was just too much history and too many differences to resolve with a few conversations.

"Sure, I'll see you guys later," Harry nodded to Neville and Ginny, who had been headed towards the DA with him a week after the holiday had ended. Harry attended mostly because he was expected to. The end of the year was looming and he often used the time to study for exams.

"DA meeting?" Malfoy asked with a hint of curiosity.

Harry nodded, "You interested?"

Malfoy sneered, but Harry could detect just a touch of intrigue in there, "Please Potter, I don't need you and Granger to teach me how to defend myself."

"Suit yourself," Harry shrugged. He'd made the offer. Pushing would only make things worse. "So what's on your mind?"

"There has to be a better solution Potter," Malfoy led them towards an empty classroom and sat on a windowsill, taking up the conversation they always had from the part that Harry could tell frustrated the blond most. "Dumbledore would just open our world up to everyone just barely above the level of squib. Do you see how much muggle culture has invaded the wizard world?"

"I can't really say," Harry responded honestly. "I don't really know anything about wizard culture beyond what I've picked up along the way and I spend most of my time trying not to get killed by Voldemort's latest scheme. Maybe if muggle-borns weren't just thrown in to sink or swim they wouldn't bring so much of their world with them."

"What do you mean?" Malfoy asked. Most of their conversations were along these lines, touching on politics and their society. They both had managed to recognize that they were going to have considerable political power once they left Hogwarts and would have to either work together, or constantly be butting heads, or leave the country. Harry had learned the hard way that being on the wrong side of Draco Malfoy was politically dangerous.

Harry sat at a desk and leaned back, propping his feet up on the window sill next to Malfoy, "I got my Hogwarts letter and went to Diagon Alley the same day. I looked through some of my books, but it was all rather fantastical. Next thing I know I'm on the Hogwarts Express and everything is different from what I'm familiar with. The only muggle-born students who come here prepared end up in Ravenclaw... or almost do like Hermione."

Malfoy frowned, "No one told you anything?"

"Hagrid explained about Voldemort, but only because of who I am," Harry said. "My relatives had told me that my parents died in a car crash and that's how I got my scar." Harry ignored the shocked expression and smiled fondly in memory of the night he met Hagrid, "Hagrid's reaction was brilliant." He sat up and took on a more serious attitude, "Why do you talk to me about these things? Why not someone from your own House?"

Malfoy snorted, "Yes Potter, I should talk to other people who have no idea what a television is, or why muggles need electricity. Then there's the probability that half the people who say they're still my friends are reporting back everything I say and do to their parents, and therefore eventually to the Dark Lord." Malfoy looked at him intently, "Who else from Slytherin have *you* been talking to?" Harry couldn't stop the look that crossed his face, as if he'd been caught, but he quickly erased it, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Malfoy smirked victoriously, "Right Potter, and I am the Queen Mother. You walk differently, you talk differently, you've been trying to improve your posture and speech, and then there's your face. You could never hide your emotions before. I've been watching you for more than five years Potter. I probably know you better than your sidekicks do." Harry glared and sank back in his seat. Malfoy leaned forward with a glint in his eyes. "So was that secret Valentine from your other secret Slytherin?"

That time Harry couldn't do a thing about the horrified expression on his face. He nearly choked on the thought, "Oh, that's... ew... I just... urg... not you too!"

Harry didn't think he had ever seen Malfoy laugh like that before, with such ease and comfort. That was the laugh he probably used around his friends, not the one he had used whenever he was mocking Gryffindors.

"Potter you're priceless!" Malfoy clutched his sides. "You never would have survived in Slytherin." Harry just grumped and crossed his arms in front of him. Malfoy looked up at him and smirked, "So,

nothing's going on between you and Snape then. That's somewhat comforting. As you said, the thought is..." Malfoy made a face and shuddered.

"Why Snape?" Harry narrowed his eyebrows.

"Remedial Potions last year Potter?" Malfoy asked as though Harry was a fool. "I'm not that gullible. You're not very good at Potions but you're not that bad either, at least not when Snape leaves you alone, and we don't distract you. The rest of the school bought it, but I know you and Snape better than that."

"Thanks... I guess," Harry was getting uncomfortable with this conversation.

"This is the way I figure it," Malfoy said as if explaining some basic theories to Harry. "I know Snape has the Mark, my father told me as much, but I'm not sure he's loyal. He's either trying to get you to switch sides, which is a ridiculous idea, or he's working for Dumbledore as more than just a professor."

"You should be asking him, not me," Harry said, now fully guarding his expression, thoughts, and feelings.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows, "Too dangerous Potter. If he was loyal he could deliver me to the Dark Lord on a platter. I can't fight the Imperious like you. My father did more than just fight for the Dark Lord. He funded him too. I've taken that away, and he can not be very happy with me right now."

"What if I don't know?" Harry asked. "He could be loyal and leading me on, pretending to work for Dumbledore to get my trust, or maybe I'm spying on him for Dumbledore, the stupid innocent student who needs help to fight Voldemort. Why should I trust you?"

"I'm a target now Potter, as much as you are," Malfoy said coldly. "I may not be fighting against the Dark Lord, but I will not fight for him. If I die the Malfoy fortune goes to my mother, which means it goes to her sister and the Dark Lord."

"Come with me Malfoy," Harry stood and started walking out the door. He immediately turned into a shortcut that Remus had shown him, not on the map. He was sick of playing these games with Malfoy. He preferred the straightforward Gryffindor method to the Slytherin insinuations and indirect dance of words.

"Where are we going?" Malfoy asked suspiciously.

Harry turned back and smirked, "You want to know everything that's going on, you can talk to your Head of House yourself."

Harry felt Malfoy stop in his tracks behind him, "I'm not sure that's the best idea."

"You're the one that brought it up," Harry turned and raised an eyebrow. "If you think I'm spending so much time in his company I could just drop a few hints and ensure that he drags you into his office. I'm sure it would be much better for you to go willingly." He ended with a challenging smirk and raised eyebrow.

Malfoy's jaw dropped, "You... you're..." He schooled his face into an impassive mask, "I may have been a bit rash in my judgment. You could have survived in Slytherin... with luck."

"That is one thing I have an overabundance of," Harry snorted as he continued to lead Malfoy through passages and back corridors, most of them not used by the majority of the castle's inhabitants. They ended in the dungeons just around the corner from Snape's office, and Harry knocked before giving Malfoy the opportunity to back down.

"Well, this is not an everyday sight," Snape sneered down at them when he opened the door. Harry was standing with his back straight and arms crossed, looking at Malfoy expectantly, who was standing silent and defiant.

"Oh for Merlin's sake," he pushed Malfoy forward into Snape's office. "Maybe you'll be able to understand what he says sir. I only barely speak Slytherin."

Malfoy glared at Harry, clearly not happy with him, and Snape also glared, but Harry could feel a touch of laughter. He had been able to sense his father's moods much more easily, through both of their barriers, ever since the bond had been performed.

"Do you have something to say to me Mr. Malfoy?" Snape asked silkily.

Malfoy continued to glare at Harry, "Get out of here Potter. It's bad enough you dragged me in here." Harry smiled, "Well, my work here is done. I suppose I'll head back to the DA and see what they're doing tonight. I think Hermione is teaching them how to recognize a Death Eater. I look for the black cloak and white mask myself, dead giveaway. Oh, and Malfoy? Talk about whatever the hell you want."

Malfoy was certainly puzzled as Harry left, and Harry was glad he'd thrown him a bit. Maybe it would loosen him up and the talk with Snape would actually do some good. Harry was feeling a little mischievous as he left the dungeons, and thoughts of the Marauders popped into his head. Harry doubled back and cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. He deserved a little fun now and then. "The potion you will be brewing today is complicated, requiring absolute precision. Any small mistake," Snape looked pointedly at Harry, who was, as far as everyone there was concerned, looking a little sick at the thought of a complicated potion, "could be disastrous." He tapped the board behind him with his wand and the instructions for a potion appeared. "You will be working individually, and must have a flask of the potion to hand in..."

The speech was interrupted by something that never happened in Potions class. Non-Slytherins were snickering, doing their absolute best to hide the fact. Some of the Slytherins were laughing outright. As Snape turned slowly to look at the board Harry could feel the anger building, but it was combined with what was definitely amusement. That just couldn't be shared with the class.

Snape spun back to his class and Harry was reminded of an Icelandic Ironchest that had gotten a scale rot infection at the dragon preserve, "Who did this?" There was no answer. "If the perpetrator does not come forward within five minutes the entire class will serve detention with me tonight." On the board, the potion they were supposed to be brewing was not there. In its place was instructions for:

Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs are Proud to Present the Marauders Magical Grease-Removal Goo, Guaranteed to De-Grease-ify the Greasiest Stain

Below was a recipe for a rather complicated shampoo. Hermione gave Harry a horrified look. It was obvious to anyone who knew who Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs were, only four people in the room, that the only progeny of the group had to be responsible.

The class sat in an uncomfortable silence, the only sound the ticking of the clock. Harry turned as the door opened and Remus poked his head inside. He saw the board, his eyes widened and he gave Harry a hard look for just a fraction of a second, "I'll come back at a better time."

Remus started to close the door when Snape barked, "Lupin!" Remus came back into the room. "Did you have anything to do with this?"

"Now Severus," Remus shook his head, "I have not played a prank on you since we were fifteen, and were I to do so now I would hardly implicate myself, now would I?" Remus turned and walked out the door, but paused before leaving, "The headmaster wanted Harry for something, but I suppose it can wait."

Remus closed the door and Harry detected waves of amusement coming from the corridor. Snape glared full strength at the entire class. He then summoned a flask from his office, "Potter! Gather your things and leave. Give this to Lupin."

The flask landed in front of Harry and he didn't need another thought. He grabbed the flask and his bag and dashed out the door to where Remus was laughing in the corridor, almost doubled over. Harry tapped him and passed over the flask. Remus drank it and made a face.

"That is, hands down, the vilest thing I have ever consumed," Remus glared at the empty flask.

"Worse than polyjuice?" Harry asked incredulously.

Remus looked at him with a stern expression that didn't fool Harry for a second, "I have never tasted Polyjuice, and you should not know what it tastes like either." He paused, and smiled, "Now why would you play a prank and frame me for it?"

"Did you like it?" Harry grinned and his grin was mirrored on Remus's face. "It was my tribute to Padfoot. He always wanted me to be more like you four were. Don't worry though it was just a one-time thing."

Remus just shook his head, "It better have been. I won't ignore it if you do anything in my classes."

Harry took out some parchment and scribbled a note on it, then tapped it with his wand. It would appear in his father's hands momentarily. "What was that?"

"My confession," Harry responded. "I couldn't let the whole class get detention. Hermione would never forgive me. So, does the headmaster actually want me or was that an excuse to get me out of the line of fire?"

Remus's grin widened, "Go up to your room and change into muggle clothes, then head out to Hagrid's. He needs a bit of help with something." Harry raised his eyebrows and nodded. He started up to the tower but was stopped by Remus, "And Harry?" Harry paused. "Ten points to Gryffindor for bravery."

Harry laughed as he ran up dozens of stairs to the portrait of the Fat Lady. He gave the password, *Skara Brae*, and ignored the Fat Lady, "Shouldn't you be in class?" Harry dumped his bag, pulled off his robe, and found suitable clothes from the assortment that the Order had gotten him that summer. He ended up with faded jeans, black work boots, and a long sleeve dark green t-shirt with Celtic symbols in a metallic red on the sleeves, back, and pocket of the shirt.

"Charlie!" Harry exclaimed as he got near Hagrid's hut. He ran to the other wizard and shared a tight hug. He then saw Charlie's companions, "Anya! Jean Pierre!"

"Should we know you?" Anya asked, giving Harry a curious look.

Charlie cuffed Harry on the back of the head, "Smooth Harry, real smooth." Harry grimaced and adopted an apologetic expression. "Well, the kneazle's out of the bag. Anya, Jean Pierre, this is Harry Potter, AKA Ryan Kelly."

Harry laughed at their dumbfounded expressions, but they weren't long lived. Jean Pierre, much taller than Harry and Charlie, swept Harry up in a bone crushing hug and swung his feet off the ground, "Mon ami, it's good to see you! So you are a wizard after all!"

Anya claimed the next hug, "You had us all fooled." She hit Charlie on the arm, "You could have told us after he left, Pizdabol!"

"Not that I didn't miss you or anything, but what are you guys doing here?" Harry questioned.

Charlie pointed, and Harry saw seven crates next to Hagrid's cabin, "Their mother is missing and they're injured. We found them trapped in a cave in Wales. Luckily, one of the locals was a wizard and recognized their cries. He stopped the muggles from investigating and getting hurt and contacted the Ministry, who contacted us."

"They're not well enough for the trip to Romania," Anya explained further, "so we stop here until they can go on. Charlie has told us about Hagrid's fondness for dragons, and his classes can learn about them. We could use an extra hand waking them. Crating them was bad enough."

Jean Pierre shook his head and pulled up his sleeve, showing Harry a partially healed gash on one arm, "Almost bit my hand off."

"Hagrid, could you get Poppy?" Harry asked. Jean Pierre started to object but Harry silenced him with a sharp glare. Hagrid had already started the walk up to the castle, with a longing glance at the crates. "Do you really expect to wake up injured juveniles with your arm like that? Poppy will heal it in a flash."

Anya and Charlie laughed, "No one has ever shut him up like that before."

Harry smiled and brushed his fringe back, "Yeah, well, I've been getting lessons on developing my Slytherin side."

Madam Pomfrey came back with Hagrid not much later and started grumbling about how if four dragons hadn't been enough, they had to bring seven, and injured ones at that. She then insisted on staying until the dragons were settled, in case she had to reattach any limbs. Anya and Jean Pierre were sufficiently cowed, as was anyone who spent enough time around Poppy.

They opened one crate at a time, carried the sleeping dragon to a heavily warded paddock which was cordoned into seven areas, and one of them woke it while the others soothed the animal. Each dragon was roughly the size of a house cat at the time, though they would grow fairly quickly. They immediately worked on healing the worst of the injuries, but dragons do not respond well to magic, including healing charms and potions. Muggle methods were required for quite a few of them.

The last crate held the worst injury. This one must have been close to the cave-in and had broken a wing. When they woke it no amount of soothing got through the panic. The dragon swiped and tried to breathe fire at them, but young Welsh Greens were not able to do much more than smoke and send out hot air.

"Shh, I know it hurts," Harry said in as soothing a voice as he could manage while jumping out of the way of a sharp claw. "We're trying to help. We'll make the hurt stop." The dragon quieted down, and Harry noticed that everyone else had backed off and were looking at him oddly, "What did I do now?"

"Harry," Charlie said in a voice tinged with awe. He could feel the same emotions coming off of Anya, Jean Pierre, and Hagrid. "You were speaking in Parseltongue... and she understood you." Harry felt his jaw drop. All seven dragons were looking at him intently and he swallowed back a little hesitancy. He looked one of the dragons in the eye and tried to imagine a slithering snake, "Don't be afraid. We want to help you feel better. We'll take care of you."

Harry could feel the anxiety that was running high in all seven juveniles start to fade. One from a neighboring paddock stretched out its head and nudged Harry's hand. He rubbed the young male between the eyes and felt the comfort it gave the young dragon. Harry then introduced Charlie, Anya, Jean Pierre, and Hagrid, and the five of them were able to work with almost no resistance from the dragons, as Harry kept a running commentary to tell the dragons what they were doing. He swore everyone there to secrecy, not wanting this latest talent to get out. Not only did Harry want to avoid the attention it would garner, but the last thing they needed was for Voldemort to discover *he* could talk to dragons too.

Chapter Forty-Four

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Dragons.

Severus groaned when he found out. Harry had been clearly excited as he burst into Severus's quarters to shower and change into clothes more appropriate for dinner, talking a mile a minute about the seven injured dragon infants. He had been excused from his afternoon session with Albus to help with the dragons.

The dragon handlers were each offered rooms inside Hogwarts for the length of their stay, but only Charlie, the only Hogwarts graduate in the group, accepted. When Albus told him to stay in the room reserved for whenever there was a Gryffindor Head Boy Severus felt like cursing the twinkling headmaster into oblivion.

He was just making it easier for Harry to spend his nights with the second oldest Weasley. It wasn't that Severus didn't approve of Harry dating, but this wasn't dating according to Harry. Their relationship was too open and undefined for Severus's peace of mind. He just didn't want Harry to get hurt.

The other two handlers set up a tent just outside the paddocks that held the injured dragons to be there in case they were needed, and probably also to protect both the dragons from curious students and the curious students from the dragons. All three of them ate at the Gryffindor table, not surprising as Charlie's youngest brother and only sister were both there.

If nothing else, Severus had to credit Harry's growing acting skills. The Gryffindor gave away no indicator that there was more than friendship between him and Charlie, and Severus was looking. Of course, it didn't help that Albus was twinkling every time he looked towards the Gryffindor table, or whenever Harry or Charlie was brought up in conversation.

"You've been on edge lately Severus," Albus commented in his office. Severus had already declined the lemon drops that Albus offered to everyone he encountered, and now turned the tea and biscuits down as well. "Tell me Severus, how is Harry?"

Severus glared at the headmaster. The man was usually cryptic, but occasionally got straight to the heart of a matter, "He has been preoccupied. I have not seen him outside of lessons of late."

Albus nodded and drank some tea, "Dragons can be time consuming." Severus grunted. "Of course, dragon handlers can be equally time consuming."

Severus refused to comment. There was just the clinking of tea cup against saucer and the soft sounds that Fawkes made. A few of Albus's silver instruments that were strewn about the office, which made Remus very nervous whenever he entered, would sound a soft whistle or a quiet click. The second hand of one of many clocks in the office ticked the passage of time and the former headmasters and headmistresses snored lightly, feigning sleep. Every now and then one of them would peek from behind their supposedly closed eyes.

"He's a teenager Severus," Albus reminded him, as if that fact could be easily forgotten. "There are not many ways in which Harry is allowed to be a normal teenager. Do not begrudge him those moments, however few there are. You cannot protect him from everything, and he will get rather upset with you if you should try."

Severus sighed, but nodded and acquiesced. Most parents of teenagers had a dozen years to prepare for all the problems that were associated with raising them. Severus had only had a few days, and of course had one of the most difficult teenagers alive, with more problems, personal and external, than any student Severus had taught.

"Did you discipline him for the incident in your class?" Albus asked, knowing perfectly well what the answer was.

Severus kept his glare on as it did not affect Albus anyway and reflected his mood perfectly well, "You know I did not. His confession note was sufficiently pathetic that I let the issue go, either for

the skill at manipulating me or for the reasons we've already touched on." Severus smirked, "I did give the class an extremely difficult pop quiz when he left."

Albus looked at him over his glasses, "You could have fixed your board in a few seconds."

"Yes," Severus agreed, still smirking, "but where would the fun be in that?"

For Harry's sake he backed off, scowling at the Gryffindor table in general, rather than Harry and Charlie in particular, in keeping with his cover. During Harry's private lessons, both in developing the skills of manipulation, cunning, and acting and in the dark arts, Severus kept the conversation light, avoiding the topic of Harry's personal life as much as possible.

With Remus keeping guard they began dueling using dark curses. Severus would cast the dark magic while Harry defended against it, using whatever he thought necessary. In these practice duels Severus could see that the sessions with Albus were paying off.

The quick thinking on his feet and razor sharp reflexes that had already saved Harry's life time and again were supplemented with advanced spell work, short distance apparition, and eclectic techniques. When Harry began facing Severus without a wand, and without speaking his curses, the sixteen year old began winning the duels outright, with Severus not pulling any of his punches or holding back the power of his spells at all.

Harry spun and disappeared behind his cloak, only to reappear on the other side of the clearing in a heartbeat and throw a volley of curses towards Severus.

"Damn," Severus cursed, as he blocked all but one, a leg-locker hex. He ended the hex with a quick *Finite*, but then Harry was already gone. Short distance apparition was virtually silent, the noise of apparition coming from the body snapping itself back together. Over such short distances as Harry was using in the dueling, there was almost no necessity for the body to 'recall' the shape it was supposed to be. Most wizards would experience a bit of disorientation when apparating and so could not use it in dueling, but Harry seemed to be among the few that overcame that hurdle. Harry appeared to the side and dropped something on the ground, disappearing before it hit. Severus flicked his wand to stop whatever the object was, but not in time. He quickly shielded himself as the clearing filled with a bright purple fog, most likely another Weasley Wizarding Wheezes invention, that was held in by the wards on the clearing. He heard laughter at the edge of the clearing where Remus was both watching and keeping an eye, and ear and nose, out for possible intrusions. It was the laughter of two voices.

"Exactly what does this do?" Severus snapped.

The laughter increased, "If you let down your shield you'll find out!"

"Harry!" Severus snapped. There was no answer. "How long does it take to dissipate?"

"A few hours," the voice was much closer. Harry came into view with a Bubblehead Charm in place. That probably meant the fog had to be inhaled, not come in contact with skin. Harry tapped the shield and grinned before backing up out of sight. "You're supposed to bite down on the capsule though."

Severus cast his own Bubblehead Charm and dropped the shield, just before a curse came his way. He deflected the curse and heard it hit the shield that protected Remus and the trees defining the clearing. Harry could easily track him despite the fog if he opened up his empathy and Severus would have to be even more alert than usual.

Curses flew his way from several directions. Harry was apparating all around the clearing and casting curses whenever he appeared. He admired the strength and speed of the casting, especially as there was no warning. Severus was quickly feeling like the student instead of the teacher.

There was a way out, but it would take himself down along with Harry. Severus cried out loud, canceling all charms within their warded area, *Finite Incantatem!*

"Fuck!" Harry cursed, his voice strangely high pitched.

Severus was about to remonstrate Harry for his language, when he found himself floating upside-down and rising slowly. Harry had apparently been prepared, or was just reacting quickly, as Severus felt the warding on the clearing dissolve and a cord wrapped around his waist. The fog, no longer held in by the wards, rose and disappeared. Severus saw that Harry had tied them both off to trees.

Once the fog was gone Remus walked into the middle of the clearing and stared up at them, laughing. Unlike the last time someone had floated Severus upside-down his robes stayed where they belonged, defying gravity. Harry was glaring at him, his arms crossed as they floated on opposite sides of the clearing.

"What was that?" Severus found his voice was high-pitched as well, as though he was pinching his nose and raising his normal speech a few octaves.

"High Helium Hiding Gas," Harry answered. Severus closed his eyes and counted to ten to avoid hexing Harry. It most likely wouldn't work anyway. The helium part did explain a few things, though. "It's only supposed to be used inside, makes it possible to walk on the ceiling. It'll go away gradually.."

Harry's voice was losing the squeaky high pitched tone, deepening as they floated downwards and turned to stand upright. When his feet touched the ground Severus flicked his wand and banished the now loose cord that had kept him from floating ever higher.

"So, um, lesson over?" Harry asked sheepishly, trying unsuccessfully to hide his grin and banishing his own tether.

Severus glared, "No more product testing for the twins on me."

"I swear," Harry held his hands up, palms out in surrender.

"That is another subject entirely," Severus said harshly and pointed at Harry. "Watch that mouth of yours. You're not too old to get it washed out for dirty language."

Harry's eyes widened, "I.."

"I *am* your father," Severus reminded him, thankful he could at least still tower over Harry since his glares had lost most of their effect.

Harry shut his mouth and nodded, "Yes, sir."

Remus interrupted then, "We should go. I think we're about to have visitors."

Severus nodded and gestured for the werewolf to lead the way. They wound their way through trees, not taking any clear path but relying on Remus's knowledge of the forest and sense of direction to take them back to Hogwarts.

The dragon handlers were there with the slowly healing but quickly growing dragons for almost three full weeks. Hagrid was in high spirits, mooning over the dragons and discussing them with anyone who would listen, for the entire length of time. Severus made an effort to avoid the half-giant even more than he usually did. He had no desire to talk about the overgrown lizards any more than necessary. Harry's prattling on about them was bad enough. Severus detected that Harry was hiding something, but didn't pry. The boy was allowed some secrets after all.

Draco Malfoy presented an interesting night of discussion for the Order. The night Harry had all but forced the two of them to sit down and talk Malfoy had revealed the substance of his conversations with Harry, including the one on the tower on the Dark Lord's birthday, and Severus had been very proud of his son.

"He's a Malfoy," Molly Weasley pointed out unnecessarily. "We can't trust him."

Remus looked at her intently, his quiet voice carrying in the room and demanding attention, "There are those who have said the same about Severus, and Sirius. The name does not the wizard make." Severus raised his eyebrows. The werewolf was defending him? Alastor Moody was scowling, as he was one that frequently voiced his doubt on Severus's loyalty.

The arguments continued for the good part of an hour before Albus interrupted, "Severus, what are your thoughts?"

"Potter seems to trust his word," Severus sneered for appearances, as though what he said wasn't much of an endorsement as far as he was concerned. "Draco Malfoy is a spoiled, arrogant, self-serving, bigoted brat." There was general agreement around the table, and Remus, Albus, and Minerva all looked at him with at least one eyebrow higher than normal.

"He is also very intelligent, cunning, and politically minded. As most of you know, Potter has a tendency to wander the corridors of the castle after curfew. He and Malfoy bumped into each one night, and rather than hexing each other into unconsciousness they talked.

"Potter was very persuasive, and reinforced many of the doubts already forming in Malfoy's mind," Severus scowled. "That was only two days before Malfoy's seventeenth birthday and you all know what happened then. Lucius has been disowned and Narcissa is exiled to Southern France.

"Draco Malfoy is doing his best to turn the Malfoy name into one to be respected rather than feared... though he might not object to some fear," he smirked, always a Slytherin. "He is contributing to charities that are clearly anti-Death Eater. He even has a girlfriend with a muggle-born Gryffindor for her mother who he's been dating for well over a month now."

The last bit of information was the one that converted most of the Order. It was well known that the Malfoys had never 'sullied' themselves by even associating with anyone less than pure wizard blood for three generations back, or with any Gryffindors. The general consensus of the Order was to keep an eye on Malfoy, and perhaps offer him a place once he left school. He would be a valuable ally. Charlie had not attended that Order meeting even though he was on the island at the time. There was still one dragon at Hogwarts that needed care. The other six had flown to Romania with the two other dragon handlers essentially herding them on their brooms. The remaining dragon had broken her wing and would not be able to fly until it healed fully.

Severus had watched Harry and Charlie caring for the dragon from afar in the early morning. About the size of a small pony by then, the dragon seemed to react to Harry's touch, to lean into him and rub her head against his chest. Even as small as they claimed she was she was still quite large and Charlie had to steady Harry from behind.

Severus recognized that Harry had a gift for working with the dragon, something completely unrelated to his status as The-Boy-Who-Lived or fighting dark wizards, and it brought no media attention. Harry was going to be drawn to it like a thestral to blood.

As much as he would prefer that Harry take up a less dangerous profession, like joining the aurors or playing professional quidditch, he had a feeling that neither held the attraction they may have had in previous years. Harry was vociferous on his distaste for the Ministry and hated publicity.

"No way," the sound of Harry's voice perked Severus's ears up from the staff table. He sounded almost furious, "No fucking way!"

It was one of those moments when everything quieted down right before one person said something rather embarrassing. Harry colored as he seemed to realize that the whole hall had heard his outburst and was staring at him. His breathing was heavier than normal and Severus felt a crackle of energy. Minerva began to stand, most likely to reprimand him for his language, but Albus put a restraining hand on her arm.

Harry stood with a crumpled piece of parchment in one hand and stalked out of the hall. His friends exchanged glances, but Charlie got up immediately to follow him, after which Hermione and Ginny both stopped Ron from going too. Severus waited for the hall to return to its normal level of noise, before slipping out quietly through a back door. The Gryffindor versus Slytherin game was in an hour, so Severus had a good idea of where Harry had gone.

The sharp sound of slamming locker doors confirmed Severus's guess. He stopped at the entrance to the Gryffindor changing room, debating whether his presence would be wanted or not.

"Harry," Charlie said firmly between slams. "Harry... stop that already... and tell me... what's wrong." The slamming stopped after a particularly loud crash, "Read this."

Severus waited. He knew he was eavesdropping where he didn't belong... but that had never stopped him before and he was a spy after all. He completely ignored that it was the same behavior that almost got him killed when he was fifteen.

"I don't see what's wrong," Charlie sounded a bit confused.

There was a thud, like Harry had hit his head one of the doors he had slammed shut, "Don't you see? They don't want me. They want The-Boy-Who-Lived, not Harry. Without this scar... there's nothing about *me*..." Harry sounded almost near tears by then. "I don't even see why you want me." Severus winced. That last was said so quietly he almost didn't hear it. He knew Harry's self-esteem was fairly low, especially after what he had seen in Harry's memories, but didn't know it was that bad.

Charlie laughed lightly, "Look in that mirror Harry. Can't you see how beautiful you are?" Severus could hear sniffing. "Even if you weren't gorgeous Harry, I wouldn't care. I don't care about your scar, or your fame, or your money, or your heritage. I care about you and what's in here."

"Really?" The desperation in Harry's voice was painful.

There was no answer to the question, only the light crash of a locker door being impacted by a body. Severus left, not wanting to hear what had to be coming next. He closed the door, and put a strong locking spell on it that the younger Weasleys would probably need Granger in order to open, alerting Harry and Charlie to the incoming quidditch team.

"Thank you," Severus said quietly, almost painfully, when Charlie joined him in the stands not much later.

Charlie blushed Weasley red, "One of the companies that makes quidditch gear offered him a modeling job."

Severus snorted, "He hates having his picture taken."

"Yeah," Charlie grinned, looking down. "The whole team is having a good laugh about it right now." The stands filled quickly, packed to their fullest as the Gryffindor and Slytherin rivalry always made for an interesting game. Minerva sat between Severus and Charlie, as the two Heads of House always sat together for those games, the better to jibe each other with the other teams' faults and boast of their own teams' triumphs. For years Severus had the upper hand, but had lost it when Harry joined the Gryffindor team in his first year. He readied himself for the game, thinking up several new ways to taunt Minerva and get her ire up. It was very satisfying, and they both enjoyed the rivalry between their Houses thoroughly.

Chapter Forty-Five

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Charlie's mouth claimed his and Harry was transported to a state of bliss. Companies looking to cash in on the fame of The-Boy-Who-Lived were forgotten. Hell, Harry could care less about quidditch just then. Let the Slytherins play for the Cup against Ravenclaw. There was always next year.

"Never doubt Harry," the deep, throaty whisper and warm breath in his ear sent all the blood pooling between his legs, "that *you* are what I want."

Harry closed his eyes and let his head fall back again, making a metallic thud against the locker door, as Charlie kissed down his neck, left a trail of kisses along his chest as he unbuttoned Harry's shirt, and came to a stop kneeling in front of him. Charlie was moving quickly, not taking the usual slow pace that would drive Harry almost out of his mind, as there would soon be six other people looking to get into the room they were in.

It was hurried and fast, rough and sweet, and Harry came explosively into Charlie's mouth, biting his lower lip to keep from crying out. All his bones had become gelatinous and it was a miracle he was still standing. Charlie made sure Harry was clean before coming up for another kiss. The taste of himself on Charlie's tongue was nearly enough to excite Harry all over again, but the knocking on the door didn't let those thoughts progress.

"Harry, how the hell do I get in?" Ron shouted, clearly frustrated.

Harry grinned into Charlie's neck and then turned his head towards the door, "Have you tried turning the handle and pushing? I generally find that works!"

Charlie laughed at his brother's expense and Harry could practically see the shade of red Ron's cheeks were sporting, "It would work if you hadn't locked the damn door!"

Harry raised his eyebrows at Charlie, who shook his head, "I actually left it open, I think." Harry's eyebrows shot up further and his eyes widened. Ron would have killed him if he had walked in on them. "Well, I wasn't expecting a quickie before the game."

"Just go unlock the door while I get dressed," Harry grinned. He thought for a moment, "See who locked it?"

Harry pulled his quidditch gear out of his locker and quickly changed into the robes while Charlie worked on the door. He was slipping on his shin and wrist guards when the door opened and the rest of the team poured in. Ron looked slightly ill as he walked up to Harry.

"Please, please, please tell me you weren't..." Ron begged softly.

Harry laughed, "What Ron? Did you think I was bugging your brother before a game?" Ron turned a rather interesting shade of green at that and Harry clapped him on the shoulder. "Calm down and get changed Captain. The door was still open when we came in here. Someone else locked it."

Ron turned and opened his locker as Charlie joined them, the shade of Weasley red that denoted mortal embarrassment. Ron took one look at his brother and went to change where he couldn't hear what they were saying, "It was Snape."

"He..." Harry shut his eyes tight and shook his head. "Damn it all, he's seen enough as it is."

"Seen?" Charlie whispered, the red fading to a paler shade than was usual for the dragon handler.

Harry was still trying to banish the images from his mind that had surfaced, "Occlumency practice. It was the only way to get my shields back up... and it worked... only too well. I got an eyeful myself." Charlie shuddered, "Okay... I'm going to join him in the stands and pretend this conversation never happened. Good luck."

"Thanks... for everything," Harry smiled, feeling much better than he had thirty minutes before.

Charlie leaned in close, "You can return the favor later if you want."

Harry smacked Charlie's arm, "That's not what I meant and you know it!" He glanced around and saw the rest of the team was already gathered on the other side of the lockers, "But I might just take you up on that tonight."

"Harry get your ass over here!" Ron shouted.

Harry joined the team for Ron's last minute tactics and pep talk. Charlie waved at them all, "Break a broom guys!"

"Harry's done that already!" Ginny called back as her brother left and turned back to Harry, "What was that all about this morning?"

Harry could feel heat rising on his cheeks, "Um nothing.."

"Bullshit Harry," Ron said while Katie glared at him and cuffed his head for swearing in front of the second year on the team, who was just laughing at their antics. "If it was nothing you wouldn't have run out of the hall like that."

Harry still had the letter in his pocket, as it had fallen to floor and he hadn't noticed until his locker was already closed. He handed it over to Ron and buried his head in his hands. He heard Ron's loud laugh, followed by a squeal from Ginny, and various laughs from the rest of the team.

"Ooo Harry," Ginny exclaimed with a dreamy look, "that would be wicked!"

Harry looked up and was tempted to ask Ginny if she had been hit on the head by a bludger recently, "Wicked? It's ridiculous! There's not a snowball's chance in hell..."

"Oh but Harry, you'd look so good," Katie said with her eyes closed and a sigh.

Harry just gaped at them, unable to articulate.

"Um guys?" Ron was getting clearly irritated, "We have a game to play here? Or would you like me to forfeit it so you can plan Harry's modeling career?"

Various pieces of spare equipment flew at Ron, who, being their Keeper, was thankfully able to block them all. He glared at his team, and then began a pep talk to rival Oliver Wood. Katie and Harry, the only two remaining from that earlier team, exchanged a glance and sat back together.

"Is it just me, or do these Captains get worse every year?" she whispered.

Harry nodded, "I think it's Ron's aspiration to beat Wood's record by the time we leave. Angelina didn't have long enough to try."

"Well, he's got the locker room part down," Katie laughed.

"If you two are ready?" Ron asked grumpily, glaring.

Harry and Katie straightened up and nodded vigorously, before breaking into a fresh bout of laughter. They both stopped at the same time, though, and looked at each other horror. It was Harry that voiced the thought going both their minds, "Dear Merlin, we've become Fred and George."

Colin's voice could be heard clearly in the staging area and the Gryffindors flew out in tight formation, circling the pitch while their names were announced and taking their places facing their Slytherin counterparts.

"Nice broom Malfoy," Harry commented with a tip of his chin towards the broom.

Malfoy nodded, "Firebolt X. I'd never beat a Supernova on a Nimbus."

Harry grinned, eyes glittering with determination, and his grin was mirrored, "Good. I like a challenge."

"In that case, loser buys a round of Firewhiskey, last Hogsmeade weekend," Malfoy held out his hand.

Harry shook it, as the captains below were shaking hands, "Looking forward to it. Just so you know, I prefer Stróice an Diabhal brand. No one makes whiskey like the Scots." He licked his lips subtly.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows and they shot by each other as the quaffle was thrown and the snitch and bludgers released. The wind ruffled their robes and they circled in opposite directions, not marking the other but instead searching for the snitch on their own. Harry noticed a definite change

in Malfoy's playing. He seemed to have gained some confidence along with the other changes in his public persona. Harry smirked and set himself for a tense game.

Both seekers were pushing their brooms to their limits, doing a sort of elaborate dance in the air while searching for a glint of gold. Both made attempts at feints, but neither succeeded in drawing the other in. Harry couldn't help the grin that remained on his face throughout the play. This was quickly becoming the best game of quidditch he ever played.

There was a glint of gold near the Ravenclaw section of the student stands and Harry saw Malfoy notice it the same as he did. He took a quick glance at the score as he flattened his body along his broom handle for the best possible aerodynamics. They had been on opposite sides of the pitch, but equidistant from the snitch, and were soon knee to knee and shoulder to shoulder, bumping and trying to throw the other off course.

"Quit now Potter," Malfoy taunted. "You don't have a chance!"

"Get your galleons ready Malfoy," Harry countered good-naturedly. "I'm going to drink you under the table!"

The snitch was quick and devious that day, leading them on a chase that disrupted spectators and other players alike. The bludgers were flying fast and furious and both of them had to veer off more than once, rolling and dodging the vicious balls. Both seekers had a hand stretched out, hitting the other and nearly clasping the white winged, gold ball. Harry was just a fraction ahead. He could feel the feathers on the tips of his fingers...

...and the snitch darted back and to the right, into Malfoy's waiting hand.

Both seekers stopped abruptly and stared at each other. Malfoy's face was one of astonishment and Harry wished he had a camera at that moment. Instead he would have to beg Albus to allow him to preserve the moment in a pensieve and share it with the blond Slytherin some day in the future.

"Well who caught the snitch already?" Colin's voice yelled out.

The seekers both turned and saw what had to be the whole school looking on in hushed expectation. The score was at Gryffindor 200, Slytherin 10.

"Morons," Malfoy commented with a snort, whether directed at his own teammates or the Gryffindors Harry didn't know. He turned to Harry and grinned, and Harry grinned back. "So who wins the bet?"

"I'll buy the first round," Harry said magnanimously. "You get the second."

"Deal."

Harry pounded Malfoy on the back, nearly knocking him off his broom in the Slytherin's distracted state, "Good game," and flew away, circling below him.

Malfoy thrust his fist up in the air triumphantly and circled the pitch above Harry.

"I don't believe it!" Colin exclaimed. "The Slytherin seeker catches the snitch, but Gryffindor wins 200 to 160! Gryffindor will be playing for the Quidditch Cup!"

Ron flew up next to Harry, "What the hell happened?"

"We were both there, the snitch turned at the last second right into his hand," Harry shrugged. "It could happen to anyone. That was probably the best Malfoy has ever played, and if it wasn't for that I certainly would have caught it. He knows that."

Ginny had joined them and heard the story. She shook her head, "Bloody hell. You okay Harry?"

Harry nodded, "Hey, Krum doesn't catch the snitch every time. Good job Ginny."

"Good?" Katie flew up to them. "We were bloody brilliant!"

The Gryffindor team flew a victory lap before heading into the locker rooms to change and head up to the tower for the party that Seamus and Dean had to be organizing as they showered the sweat of the game away. The Gryffindors left the locker room to find that the Slytherins were walking out at the same time. The only one of them that looked at all pleased was Malfoy.

"Good luck against Ravenclaw next week," Harry called out. "I want another chance to beat your ass!"

"I don't need luck Potter," Malfoy quipped. "Some people have talent."

Harry shook his head and grinned, "Just keep telling yourself that Malfoy, and someday it might come true!"

The other Gryffindors surrounded Harry and herded him up towards the tower, not giving Malfoy a chance to get the last word in.

"What is with you two?" Ron asked, looking somewhat disturbed.

Harry sighed, "Oh give it a rest Ron. He's the only one out there who even has a chance of beating me. The only way Ravenclaw will win is if their chasers pull off what we did today. Cho hasn't improved at all in the past few years. I'd prefer to actually be challenged to win the cup. The Slytherins were off their game today."

"But Malfoy!" Ron protested.

Ginny decided to put her two Sickles in, "Has he said a thing to you these past few months Ron? Has he taunted you or Hermione even once?"

"No," Ron said reluctantly, shaking his head.

"Then give the prick a chance!" Ginny exclaimed. "If Percy can turn on us, Malfoy can turn on his family." She looked around and whispered, "You get on with Snape okay now, and he was just as bad if not worse."

"But he..." at the warning glare from Harry, Ron stopped and nodded his surrender.

They followed the rest of the team into the common room and were met with cheers. A large banner with several roaring lions proclaimed, "Gryffindor for the Cup," yelling the slogan over and over while the lions roared and ran around the lettering.

The party started slowly, with music playing from a student's wireless set. The game had gone on into lunch time, and the Gryffindors ate in the common room. Chess sets, cards, and Gobstones were broken out and games started all around the room. A fresh supply of Weasley Wizarding Wheezes was brought down from the sixth year boys' room, along with some from Ginny's stash. The party lasted through dinner, provided by the house elves, and well past. Charlie and Harry left several times to check on the healing dragon, until Hagrid told them not to skip out on the party at all. He promised to send for them if Gwendolen, the newly christened dragon thanks to Hagrid, needed them.

It was after curfew, and most of the younger students had gone to bed, when Dean took over the role of bartender from a fourth year who had been handing out butterbeer and pumpkin juice. He handed a bottle of butterbeer, already opened, over to Harry with a wink. Harry took a swig... then looked at Dean curiously.

Dean leaned over the bar and whispered, "Shot of Ogden's in the bottle."

Harry drained his bottle, held up four fingers, and Dean handed over four more bottles. Harry held them by the necks and distributed them to Ron, Hermione, and Charlie, who were sitting on a couch in front of the fire. Harry took the seat on the floor in front of Charlie and watched as Hermione and Ron reacted to the drinks. Ron grinned when he tasted his, and Hermione's eyes went wide.

"Harry!" she hissed. "We're still underage."

"You were the one taking swigs of whiskey on Neville's bed the first night back," Harry got to his knees and said just loud enough for the four of them to hear.

"Hermione!" Charlie clasped his chest in fake shock. "I thought you wanted to be Head Girl! What would McGonagall say?"

Hermione's face was bright red, but with typical Hermione determination she drank back half her butterbeer in one pull, "What McGonagall doesn't know won't hurt her... or me."

"Yes!" Ron jumped up from behind Hermione and headed towards Dean, pounding his fist on the 'bar', "Another round my good man!"

"Right away sir!" Dean mimicked Ron's exaggerated tone and passed over four bottles, with a fifth for himself, and the sixth for Seamus who was leaning against the transfigured bar and flirting with everyone, male or female, who came up for drinks.

Three drinks later the common room had almost completely cleared out. The sixth year boys, Hermione, Katie Bell, and Charlie were all that were left. The seven of them surrounded a table nearly filled with empty bottles, and Dean kept mixing the drinks.

Katie had balked at the first tampered bottle he gave her, as she was the Head Girl and should have given them all but Charlie at least a dozen detentions for underage drinking, but relented after a good dose of peer pressure and pleading, and because Hermione was there drinking as well. There wasn't a girl in the school willing to follow rules where Hermione Granger abandoned them.

It was well past curfew when they were still gathered around the table. Harry knew he wouldn't get very much sleep that night anyway. With Charlie there to help him and the pain from his scar gone, Harry had been alternating nights taking the Good Dreams potion. He knew he had to work out the issues that prompted the dreams, and that night was going to be a potion free night.

Hermione eventually dragged Ron up to the boys' room, followed by catcalls from Seamus. Harry leaned over to Charlie, "You mentioned something earlier about a favor I owe you?"

"Well, I'm headed up to bed!" Charlie immediately got up and announced, silencing the giggles from Neville and Seamus with a glare. Dean had fallen asleep with his head amongst the empty bottles.

Harry watched Charlie walk up the stairs and stood and stretched, "Bedtime for me as well."

"Yeah Harry," Seamus snickered, "bed, but not sleep!"

Katie took one look at Harry's coloring face, her eyes darted to the stairs the back, and, "Harry! You and Charlie?"

Harry glared at Seamus, who was still sober enough to flush at the rebuke, and whispered to Katie, "Not a word, unless you want to put his life at risk, hear me?"

Katie wasn't Head Girl for nothing. Her eyes narrowed and she nodded. She stood and hugged Harry tightly, "You'll get to live your own life someday Harry." Then she smiled and shook her head, "All the good ones."

Harry shot her a questioning look, but she just smiled and shooed him away. He heard Seamus as he headed up the stairs though, "Not quite Katie my dear. Our Harry butters his bread on both sides."

That was all Harry needed to hear. He quickened his pace up the stairs, speaking the password to open the room reserved for Gryffindor Head Boys, but occupied by Charlie while he was visiting. Charlie was waiting right inside the door and picked Harry up when he walked in, crossing the room and depositing them both on the bed.

Harry kissed Charlie forcefully and flipped them over so he straddled the older wizard, determined to keep his promise and pay his debt.

Chapter Forty-Six

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It was a bad sign... a very bad sign. The guards outside the caves had been happy to see Severus, which meant the Dark Lord was in a bad mood. When Severus arrived in the Throne Room the *entire* Inner Circle was present, which included Malfoy, McNair, Nott, Avery, Rookwood...

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Severus inwardly cursed, and then chastised himself for using vulgar language. He was spending too much time around Harry. He was supposed to be teaching the boy manners, not picking up bad habits. Of course, if any situation called for swearing...

"So nice of you to join us Severus," a tittering laughter went around the circle and Severus's blood turned to ice in his veins. *Crucio!*

The Unforgivable pain curse was cast more harshly than for just the standard punishment. The Dark Lord had the ability to vary the amount of pain caused, and this was by far the worst Severus had ever received. Severus gritted his teeth and worked his hardest not to cry out even while his muscles betrayed him and he thrashed on the ground. The cave floor was uneven and the sand grated into small cuts made by the rock. The curse was let up and Severus forced himself to stand. He noticed he no longer had his wand.

The Dark Lord stood and walked down to him. The circle closed around them and did not leave Severus's space open. That act was the final sign that Severus's spying career and most likely his life were over.

"You have always been a strong one Severus," the Dark Lord caressed Severus's face and he stood firm and still, not willing to give the satisfaction of a reaction. "Of course, you must be strong to think you can betray me. I am disappointed in you Severus, truly disappointed. You served me so well, only to fall to the wiles of that old muggle loving fool and his precious protégé."

The Dark Lord circled Severus, yet Severus did not move. The bastard could strike him from the back for all he cared. He was already dead, and he would die with dignity. He apologized to Harry mentally. His son was about to lose a father for the third time in his short life, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He had long ago returned his emergency Portkey to Albus for fear of detection, or of using it prematurely in a moment of panic and blowing his cover.

"You can still redeem yourself, my boy," the Dark Lord hissed in his ear, low enough that the others did not hear. Severus merely cocked an eyebrow. "Bring me your son."

Severus started laughing. He just laughed... and laughed... and he understood Karkaroff... he understood Black. Of all the people to think about when he was about to die it had to be that flea-ridden mutt. He knew right then why Black had been laughing as the Aurors dragged him away. There were times in this life when all you could do was cry or laugh... and Severus chose to laugh. A bony hand flew through the air and slapped Severus across the face harder than anyone had ever hit him. His laughter stopped as the acrid taste of blood seeped into his mouth. He spat at the Dark Lords feet and there a rustling of angry movement from his former... colleagues... at the disrespect. "You filthy mudblood," Severus said in his most superior, demeaning tone with his harshest sneer. Longbottom would have wet himself. "You are not worth the dust on his cloak." The Dark Lord was seething and Severus could only continue. If he was going down it was going to be in spectacular fashion. He smirked, "Do you know how long I've been Albus's spy? A few months, a year you think?"

Severus laughed again and the red snake-like eyes were fixed on him. He kept his mind fully occluded as he felt Voldemort probing, "I *never* wanted your loathsome Mark. I was fucking James Potter when we were sixteen and I fell in love with him long before my uncle forced me to join you. Lily conducted our bonding ceremony a week after his bonding ceremony with her."

A lashing curse hit his back but Severus ignored it, ignored the blood running down his back and his legs. He was hit again... and again... and again.

"They brought me to Albus when we were eighteen and he has known everything I heard, which is much more than you think I have. Harry Potter has not two, but three parents who had defied you three times by the time of his birth." Severus was yelling so loud his voice was echoing in the cavern tunnels. "The prophecy is right. He is powerful, more powerful than me, more powerful than you, more powerful than Albus, more powerful than anyone I have ever seen."

A silencing charm hit him and Severus settled for staring at the bastard defiantly. He ignored the Death Eaters who were glaring at him in disgust. There were no masks then, with only the Inner Circle there. Normally a spy uncovered would be slowly tortured and killed before every Death Eater, but the Dark Lord could not afford for the lower ranks to hear all that Severus had shouted, to know that one of the Inner Circle had done such things. They most likely didn't even know that the prophecy existed.

The Dark Lord turned his back on Severus and returned to his throne, "Take turns with him, but leave him alive. Severus still has one more job to do for me."

He stayed on his feet as long as he could. Malfoy was first, his childhood friend and protector. Lucius had taken Severus under his wing when he was sorted into Slytherin and kept him safe from the Marauders to some extent. It was after Malfoy graduated that they got truly bold and the hexing and pranking escalated. Lucius was a sick bastard, and it wasn't long before Severus was on his knees and his old friend stepped back. Of course, the first thing Lucius did was remove the silencing charm. They all wanted to hear Severus scream.

Belletrix was next, the sadistic bitch. She taunted as she tortured, as Harry knew well. He kept the image of Harry, of Lily and James in his head. The Dark Lord wanted him left alive. Of course alive did not mean whole or sane, but there was still a chance he would return to his son, even as a vegetable. He tried to keep himself from screaming, but he lost that battle as well. He kept his mind sealed, though. He would not betray his son.

Every wizard or witch, Belletrix the only one, in the circle had suffered something as a result of Severus's spying. Nearly all of them were now convicted felons, unable to show their faces in public for fear of recapture. Not one of them had a problem taking it out on Severus. He could only partially open one eye when there was a soft, almost undetectable 'crack' followed by loud gasps, the quietest apparition Severus had ever heard. He saw bare feet before his face, and the curses had stopped. His breathing was labored under cracked ribs.

"The next one to so much as breathe on him dies," Harry's voice rang out clearly and with deadly seriousness.

"Harry," Severus barely managed through his bruised lips and throat. One of the curses had simulated strangulation and was only released just before his larynx was crushed, "no."

Harry either did not hear him or ignored him. Severus felt a slight tingle and knew that Harry had cast a healing charm on him, wandlessly and silently. He was able to open both eyes, but did not move otherwise. His wounds were there but no longer bleeding profusely. The Dark Lord had stood and every wand Severus could see was pointed at Harry.

The boy was clad in pajama bottoms only, and from the red mark on his neck it was probably lucky he was even wearing that much. Whereas the sight of a mark like that would have riled Severus in any other situation it provided a bit of comfort just then. At least one person had to know Harry was missing.

"Harry," the Dark Lord smiled. "How lovely, I was just requesting your presence as I could not invite you directly. Our connection is no longer. As you can see, your father was less than cooperative."

"Aw, did you miss me? Let him leave, alive and no more harmed than he is now, and never harm him again, directly or indirectly," Harry demanded, his wand pointed at the Dark Lord.

The Dark Lord laughed, "Why would I do that?"

"To get me in return," Harry smirked. He had learned that smirk from Severus and Severus felt his heart plummet. "That is what you want, isn't it?"

"No, Harry!" Severus yelled, or at least tried to. "Get the hell out of here!"

"You are not part of this conversation Severus," the now amused Dark Lord 'tutted' at him. *Silencio!* "Do not interrupt."

The Dark Lord hissed, and Harry hissed back. Severus tried to stand but one of the Death Eaters conjured ropes to bind him. He struggled, silenced and bound, to stop Harry, but Harry was concentrating entirely on the Dark Lord and Severus only succeeded in aggravating his already serious injuries. They hissed back and forth, negotiating in Parseltongue. The Dark Lord was looking pleased and Severus felt his heart wrench in his chest. Harry nodded, and knelt beside him.

"Tell me the remainder of the prophecy," the Dark Lord demanded.

Harry did not look up and left his back to the Dark Lord, "Not until he's gone."

Another healing charm was cast, and Severus noticed that Harry was speaking his spells and using the wand. Harry took off his watch, the one that had been a gift from Black, and pointed the wand at it, *Portus Severus Snape!*

Harry was clever, Severus noted. He did have Slytherin qualities, but that self-sacrificing Gryffindor tendency was ruling. Severus would be unable to grab Harry and take him with him. Of course, had Harry done anything else the Dark Lord would have killed them both immediately. The watch was slipped onto his wrist and Harry removed the ropes that bound him.

Harry hugged him and whispered in his ear, "I'm sorry Dad."

"Nooooo!" Severus yelled, to no avail. He could barely move from the position he landed in on the kitchen floor of number twelve Grimmauld Place, still yelling. There were tears streaming down his bruised and lacerated face, stinging where they hit open wounds. He had no doubt his robes were in shreds.

"Severus!" Several voices spoke up in concern at once. "Snape!"

"I have to go back," Severus tried to stand, but his legs buckled, something in there broken. One eye was swollen shut and every word he spoke was like fire in his throat. "I have to get back."

"Severus you are in no shape to go anywhere," Albus's soothing voice did nothing to calm him.

"That bastard has my son!" Severus roared, having lost his precious control over himself long ago. In any other situation he would have been amused that half the Weasleys paled while the others turned bright red. Remus wasn't there and Severus remembered it was a full moon that night.

Shaking hands poured a potion down Severus's throat and he recognized the combination pain killer and stimulant that he had brewed for the Order's supplies, one of the most powerful potions they had, followed by several healing potions. Harry had healed only a small portion of the damage,

"Where Severus, where are they?"

It was Charlie Weasley that had come to his aid and Severus noticed that the red haired wizard was still in his pajama pants and a shirt, barefoot like Harry.

"His headquarters," Severus knew he couldn't apparate without leaving half of himself behind and the other half arriving Merlin knew where. He leaned fully on Charlie and was pulled to his feet and practically carried to a chair. "He offered himself, in exchange for me." Severus then yelled at the headmaster, "Albus how in hell did he get there? You swore you wouldn't let him!"

Charlie handed more medicinal potions to Severus, "He apparated Severus. I thought he was having a nightmare. One minute he was there... the next..."

Severus ignored the chatter of the Order members, who were probably just figuring out that they were talking about Harry and that Severus had called him his son. Severus couldn't even raise the vials to his lips but Charlie took care that for him.

"You can't apparate on Hogwarts grounds," Severus said by rote. It was an established fact. He felt like time had slowed. Nothing mattered except Harry.

"You can't survive the killing curse either, but Harry did that," Charlie responded.

Albus shot sparks out of his wand and all talking ceased, "We've been searching for Voldemort's latest headquarters ever since he established them, with no luck. Our attempts to break his Fidelius Charm have all failed, even with one of the creators of the charm working on it. We can only hope that Harry will find a way to escape and come back to us."

The Order erupted into talking again, arguing whether anything could be done to help Harry and questioning Severus about Lily and James. Severus ignored all the questions, feeling utterly helpless. The Weasleys interceded and explained how Severus had bonded with James Potter. Severus noticed for the first time that Granger and the youngest Weasleys were there, most likely via Portkey from Hogwarts.

Charlie had fallen into the seat next to Severus, holding his head in his hands. The young wizard was still shaking, and if Severus had any strength left, or felt he could move at all, he would have found a way to comfort him.

Severus was furious with himself and with Harry. It was *his* job to protect Harry, not Harry's job to protect him.

"I'll find him," Charlie said too quietly for everyone to hear and the room silenced as he stood up and said more clearly, "I'll find him." There were tears falling unheeded from his eyes.

Severus, refusing to believe that Charlie could do what he could not, snapped, "What makes you think you can do that?"

Severus had only seen the Weasley temper truly at work in Molly and Ron. It was just as effective from Charlie, "I love him!"

There were a few scattered smiles at the outburst, mostly from Charlie's brothers and sister. Molly looked the most startled of anyone present and Arthur laid a hand on her shoulder, whether to reassure or restrain Severus did not know. Severus bowed his head.

"Go Charlie, bring Harry home," Severus said in a whisper, defeated.

Charlie hugged him gently, conscious of the injuries, the only person aside from Harry and Albus to do so in years, "I'll bring him back Sev, I swear."

Severus did not argue the shortening of his name. He supposed if anyone living had the right Charlie Weasley did. Albus pressed something into Charlie's hands and said a few quick words, none of which Severus caught. Charlie disappeared and Severus looked up to see Albus standing in front of him.

"We need to get you to Poppy," the headmaster said in another attempt to calm the now ex-spy.

Severus glared, all he could do as he could not move any part of his body with the exception of his head... and that just barely, "I am not going anywhere until I know Harry is safe."

It was a contest of wills and for the first time Severus won against Albus Dumbledore. The headmaster activated the fireplace and called to his office. An anxious Minerva answered and Albus told her to send Poppy through.

There was nothing to do anymore except wait, and Severus saw the Order members one by one come to the same conclusion. Tonks and Kingsley stood and said they were going to the Ministry to figure out how the prisoners were freed and see if Dobby had survived. Several other Ministry employees followed to help them.

"Would you be more comfortable in the parlour, sir?" Granger said softly, though there was tension in her voice. She was probably moments away from tears.

Severus looked up to see all of Harry's friends standing around him. Ron and Bill Weasley each had a hand out to help him. Severus nodded and they each took an arm and held him up between them, slowly walking him into the other room. Granger moved ahead of them and widened a couch while

the twins transfigured pillows. The Weasley girl brought in a sheet and blanket and the six of them had him settled and waiting for Poppy.

"Charlie will bring him back," Ginny Weasley said confidently, looking as though she was reassuring herself as much as anyone else.

"Out! All of you!" the domineering voice of Poppy Pomfrey ordered and was instantly obeyed. "Of all the... Severus Snape you are the most stubborn man alive. Why you could not come to my infirmary..."

"Voldemort has Harry, Poppy," Severus said hoarsely. It was the first time he had spoken the Dark Lord's self proclaimed name.

The rattle of glass vials was the only sign that Poppy gave of her reaction to the news. When it stopped she returned to bustling about him, checking his vital signs and healing injuries. He checked each potion she gave him before swallowing them, and heard an insulted huff each time. It was routine for them. She cast more healing charms than Severus had heard at one time.

"No," he thrust the vial of Dreamless Sleep back to Poppy. The majority of his injuries were healed. Some of the ones caused by darker curses would have to heal with time, but he was essentially healthy, though completely drained.

"You need to sleep Severus if you are going to heal," Poppy insisted.

Severus struggled into a sitting position on will power alone and fixed Poppy with a steady and especially stubborn glare, "I will sleep when I see my son."

She stormed out of the parlour, complaining all the way that he and Harry were two of a kind and she should just refuse to heal the both of them in the future if they weren't grateful for her expertise and then they could see how they fared.

Albus entered the room, looking worn and old, as he had on Harry's birthday. For all his interfering and secrecy Albus did love Harry, "How are you Severus?"

"I will heal," Severus replied coldly. "Let me go back Albus. All I need is an Energizing Elixir..."

"Are you more powerful than Harry Severus?" Albus interrupted him as he conjured a chair and sat down.

"No," Severus replied, "but he has no idea what he's doing there! He promised himself to the Dark Lord Albus!"

Albus sighed, "Severus you were not my only spy." Severus gaped at the old man, his argument stopped in its tracks. "You are known to the Order because of your position at Hogwarts and your trial in the last war. You would be under constant scrutiny by the Ministry if you were not known as my spy there."

"But... who?" Severus was listing various Death Eaters in his mind and rejecting almost all of them out of hand. Of course, a spy had to be trusted to be a spy.

A small smile appeared on the headmaster's face, "Harry has done many noble things in his life Severus. One in particular put a certain illegal animagus in a life debt to him. If he can save Harry, he will."

"Pettigrew?" Severus spat the name in disgust. Ever since that summer he had to restrain himself from ripping the pathetic wizard apart with his bare hands whenever he saw him. Black was lucky Severus had lost his memories.

"Get some sleep Severus," Albus held out the vial of Dreamless Sleep that Poppy had tried to give him. "I swear to you that when Harry is found someone will wake you."

If nothing else, Severus knew that Albus Dumbledore had never gone back on his sworn word. Severus took the vial and drained it, asleep before he even finished the potion.

Chapter Forty-Seven

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Harry straightened from where he knelt after his father disappeared, leaving only stains of blood behind. The instant he was on his feet he was hit with a quick disarming hex which he let take his 'wand'. The wand flew out of his hand and he was forced to step back but he stayed on his feet, resisting the force that wanted to toss him back against the circle of Death Eaters.

"We cannot let you keep this I am afraid or allow another to get hold of it," Voldemort deftly caught the wand and snapped it in two, then again into four pieces. It sparked red and gold with each break. "You have quite a tolerance for pain."

Harry shrugged and said nonchalantly, "You can compare notes with my cousin sometime. He'd love to... if he didn't shit his pants at the sight of you first."

A muffled chuckle ran around the circle and Harry scanned them quickly with his empathy, looking for the weak spots in the group, finding the strongest ones there and the weakest.

"Pathetic muggles," Voldemort spat. "You will have your revenge."

Harry raised an eyebrow while keeping the rest of his face expressionless, a very Snapeish move, "All of my revenge?"

"I believe that was per our agreement," the Dark Lord acquiesced with a nod and majestic wave of his hand.

There was a rustle in the crowd. The Inner Circle did not like to hear that. More than one of them had mortally offended Harry Potter at one point or another, not always at Voldemort's command. Harry smiled, and allowed some images past his shield, hopefully making it seem weaker than it was. He saw Lucius Malfoy with the diary and Ginny lying near death in the Chamber. He saw Sirius fall back into the veil and then Belletrix Lestrange taunted him. Peter Pettigrew admitted to handing his parents to Voldemort.

Harry looked Voldemort directly in the eye and Voldemort nodded.

"I *will* need a wand first," Harry pointed out calmly, though he was feeling anything but calm. "Hand-to-hand can be satisfying but nothing beats a good Cruciatius." Harry searched the faces and found Belletrix Lestrange. He grinned maniacally, "I've learned quite a bit in one year."

"You will have your father's," Voldemort said with satisfaction, holding up the wand in question but not relinquishing it yet. "First things first Potter, or is it Snape?"

"Potter," Harry replied almost lazily. Voldemort waved his wand and the glamour that altered Harry's features faded away, along with the one on his hand.

"That is no longer necessary. The rest of the prophecy," Voldemort prompted. Harry started laughing. He laughed loudly. Voldemort swept towards him and grabbed his chin with sharp fingers that dug into Harry's flesh, "Do not play games with me boy."

"Sorry," Harry said without really meaning it. "It's just... Albus has been fucking with you for years! There *is* no more to the prophecy. Trelawney, the bug-faced flake, just repeated what she had said before your Death Eater was kicked out of the bar. I saw it all in Albus's pensieve when I got back from the Ministry."

Harry was released and he stumbled back slightly but regained his footing quickly, "Where is the Order of the Phoenix?"

"You know where they are, you just can't find them there," Harry replied and then shrugged. "I'm not their Secret Keeper. I can't help you there."

"You are my guest for the foreseeable future you realize," Voldemort put a hand on Harry's shoulder in what could be considered a fatherly gesture. Harry restrained his shudder.

Harry snorted, "I doubt Albus would let me back into Hogwarts after our agreement is fulfilled. I only have a year of schooling left. I am sure you and your *loyal* servants could complete my education

and then some... or you could always send me to Durmstrang. Victor Krum mentioned that the snowcapped mountains are quite lovely."

Voldemort laughed. The sound was chilling and nauseating. Harry found no humor in the situation whatsoever. He knew there would be a chance to escape. He just had to find it, and use it... to stay alert and ready. If he was attentive he would survive un-Marked.

"There is no time for an initiation tonight, and we are lacking certain... necessities," Voldemort addressed the entire room with a maniacal grin. "Tomorrow night Harry Potter will join us, and then we will be unstoppable. Show him to a room, and make him comfortable Lucius, Augustus. Do not anger me."

The two wizards stepped forward and each put a hand on one of Harry's shoulders. Harry didn't move, knowing he may never have another chance.

"If I may first?" Harry requested, projecting an image of Belletrix Lestrange.

Voldemort chuckled, "Of course." He motioned and Malfoy and Rookwood backed up.

Harry walked towards the Lestranges and saw Pettigrew standing there too. It was better than he could have hoped. They would have no idea who he was after. When he got close he burst into action, calling on his lessons in the Room of Requirement.

He spun, his bare foot connected with Lestrange's temple, and the woman crumpled to the ground, motionless. Harry ended his spin with both feet planted firmly and his hands in fists. Several of the Death Eaters looked impressed, mostly those who had encountered him before but not done anything particularly offensive. Pettigrew had terror seeping through his pores.

"Satisfying, as I said," Harry said. He glared in her direction, "I'll finish with *that* later. Malfoy?

Rookwood?" Harry prompted imperiously and beckoned them forward with a single finger.

He looked towards Voldemort before he left what his father called the Throne Room. Voldemort looked pleased. There was a very self-satisfied and evil smile on his face. Perfect.

Malfoy and Rookwood led the way. They were both definitely uneasy. Once they were out of earshot of the Throne Room Malfoy stopped them and turned. He didn't look too bad, considering he had been incarcerated only hours before.

"Listen to me Potter," Malfoy hissed viciously. "The Dark Lord may want you on his side, and the politics alone make you worth it, but you're nothing more than an impertinent brat, no matter how powerful Severus claims you are, and you would be wise not to forget it."

Harry narrowed his eyes. He silently stunned Rookwood. Malfoy couldn't tell that Harry had done a thing and he looked at his fallen comrade with confusion.

"*You* listen to *me*, Lucius," Harry hissed in return. "Your Master promised you to me, for that little Chamber of Secrets episode, so don't test me. *Silencio! Petrificus Totalis! Legilimens!*"

Harry had been on the receiving end often enough that he knew what to do though he had only just started learning how to invade someone else's mind. He probed Malfoy's mind and found the way out of the caves. *Fuck, fuck, fuck*, he swore to himself. He would have to go back through the Throne Room. He figured something like that would happen. Voldemort wasn't stupid.

Harry pulled back and Malfoy was both winded and frightened. Harry smiled and patted his cheek, "Enjoy your punishment Lucius. I wouldn't want to be the one that let Harry Potter get away." He punched Lucius once, most likely breaking his jaw, and just for fun added a dark curse that ensured it would have to heal without the aid of magic, "That was for Ginny and Sirius. *Stupefy!*"

Malfoy dropped, still stiff as a plank, next to Rookwood. Quickly, Harry snapped both wands, pocketed the pieces, and then grabbed Rookwood's cloak, as he was the shorter of the two, and started back towards the Throne Room. He kept to the shadows as much as he could and considered going back for a pair of shoes but he was quieter barefoot. At the edge of the Throne Room he peeked in and saw that the rest of the Inner Circle was still there, and Bellatrix was conscious again. Harry grinned. He'd be able to get her again if he was lucky.

Harry pointed and silently cast stunners at several of the Death Eaters. Voldemort was instantly angry, and Harry started to get very nervous. It was easy facing the maniac when Voldemort wanted to recruit him and there was little chance of injury or death. Very soon though Voldemort would be after his blood again, and Harry knew his chances of survival weren't that good while he was in Voldemort's domain.

He had a golden opportunity right then, a chance to kill Voldemort, but Harry restrained himself. He wasn't finished training yet. He had no idea if he could cast the killing curse successfully, let alone whether or not it could kill Voldemort. He would have to escape and try to kill the bastard another day.

The standing Death Eaters were visibly nervous, looking around for a cue for what to do. Harry stepped into the room and was halfway across before he was noticed. A warning curse flew by his shoulder, bright red, and he stopped in his tracks. He took a deep breath and started concentrating on building up his magical energy and focusing it. He would only get one shot at this.

"Rookwood!" Voldemort bellowed. "Where's Malfoy?"

Harry turned and thrust out his hands towards the Death Eaters and Voldemort, sending a shock wave of pure magic in their direction and commenting calmly, "He's taking a nap."

Accio Snape's wand!

Harry ran as fast as he could, cloak billowing behind him, not bothering to check how many of them had managed to get to their feet, and snatched his father's wand out of the air as it flew towards him, tucking it into his holster. He had never used the wand and would probably get better results wandless. He allowed his empathy to open up fully, to sense where other Death Eaters were. He heard footsteps behind him and knew they were after him, felt rage and even betrayal from them. He heard shouts and curses fly his way. He ducked and dodged but still was hit by several. His necklace tingled as it absorbed some of the force of the curses. He mentally thanked Merlin that none of them thought to try to stun him and did his best to ignore the curses that did hit, though he did stumble a few times, and maybe those were stunners negated by the charms on his necklace. As he came within sight of the exit the guards looked in. Harry pointed a hand in their direction and prayed this would work, *Imperio!*

He winced, but figured that with the number of Unforgivable Curses cast there no one would notice one more, "Do not let anyone leave after me! Stop them in any way you can!"

They looked dull and mindless as he raced by, just as he remembered from fourth year. His feet hurt from running on the sandy, sharp cave floor and when they hit the snow he knew it wasn't going to be good. He was already at least fifty yards from the entrance to the caves when he heard yelling. The guards were down.

He considered trying to apparate but had no idea if he could get through the wards again. He didn't want to know what would happen if he didn't. The blood loss from the curses that had hit him made it even less likely that he would succeed. He didn't even know how he had gotten through the wards in the first place. A voice was amplified into the darkness and Harry cringed. Voldemort with a Sonorous Charm was ten times worse than normal.

"I hope you have fun Potter. Have you looked at the sky tonight?" There was maniacal laughter, cut off when the spell was ended.

Harry looked up and shivered in the cold, surrounded by trees. It was a full moon and he was bleeding. He started moving more slowly. If he ran he wouldn't be able to sense when anything got near. Harry had no idea what was in the forest, and he wasn't taking any chances. He snapped a branch off a tree as he passed it by for a weapon and heard a howl. Chances were Voldemort didn't give his werewolves the Wolfsbane Potion. Harry thought about Remus. He was stronger and faster than Harry. He could smell when students were out of bed as he wandered the corridors at night.

The scent of Harry's blood would be like a beacon to any wolves in that forest, along with many other creatures.

The next howl was closer, on his right, and was answered by another on his left. Wolves were pack animals, and werewolves might hunt like a pack. Harry started to sense an animalistic emotion... anger... pain... hunger... thirst. Thirst? Harry spun and found himself face to face with a tall pale cloaked figure. His eyes darted up and down. The figure wasn't breathing and Harry's breathing got even more erratic. He dropped his branch. *Oh shit*, he thought, *can this get any worse?*

"Well, what have we here?" The voice was icy cold and the figure paid no attention to the howls growing nearer.

Harry backed up slightly and heard growls very close to where he was standing, though he couldn't see any wolves. He looked around quickly and jumped, grabbing the branch above his head, almost crying out as pain ripped through his arm where a curse must have hit earlier. Something sharp grazed his leg and tore his pajama pants, splitting the skin deeply. Harry clenched his jaw against the pain, swung up, and climbed onto the branch. He almost laughed as he remembered fleeing from Ripper the same way. He'd take Ripper over this any day. Three wolves below him jumped and snapped, ignoring the pale figure... that was gone.

Harry looked up, and saw nothing but tree branches and late night sky, the full moon round and bright. Something smooth and cold brushed the cut on his leg and he spun around, losing his footing and slipping off the branch, his arms cart wheeling to find something, anything to grab hold of. The pale figure had reached out a hand and grabbed his shoulder, held him steady, letting him get his feet under him again, with what looked like no effort at all.

One long finger slipped out of the mouth, the lips almost as pale as the skin, "You were not infected by the werewolf."

Harry was almost relieved, and then remembered he was at the mercy of what could only be a vampire, "Um... thank you?"

"What brings you here?" the pale figure questioned him and laughed lightly.

"Dark Lord problems," Harry said with a shaky voice. Either the vampire was playing with him, or it wasn't going to kill him. "He wants me dead or on his side and I'd rather stay alive and free."

The vampire swiftly reached down and brushed the gash on Harry's leg again, almost too fast for Harry see his movements. He put his finger in his mouth and Harry shivered, "You are quite powerful. Why does the Lord Voldemort wish you dead?"

Harry reached a trembling hand up to his head and lifted his fringe, revealing his famous scar, "He's been trying for years."

"Harry Potter," the vampire's eyes traveled up and down his frame, as if quietly assessing him. "Not all creatures of the night, young Potter, are what you call evil. I have lived in these woods for a millennium and only recently have they become infested with more creatures than they can feed. The werewolves obey me, but only on this one night of each month, and not out of choice. I will be leaving here soon and finding a new home.

"I seldom interfere in the affairs of wizards Harry Potter," the vampire paused, as if considering its options. "The Dark Lord is not aware of my presence here. You may join me, if you will, or go on your way."

Harry's eyes widened and his jaw dropped, "I... well..." he looked down, "what about the wolves?"

"They will not harm you. I cannot say the same for the other creatures you may encounter," the vampire motioned with his hand and the werewolves sat and watched. "I shall be truly interested to see if you leave here alive, young pup."

The vampire released him and Harry fell. He landed with a thud that knocked the wind out of him and jolted his already injured arm and leg. He looked up and saw the vampire gazing down at him, watching silently, with what seemed to be vague interest. Harry got to his feet and cautiously

skirted the wolves. They growled and whined, and seemed to be straining against whatever power the vampire had over them, but left him alone. Harry gave one final glance back and the vampire was still in the tree, watching him impassively. They held eye contact for a few short moments and Harry felt as though his mind was completely unshielded and plundered before he broke away. He ran, knowing that there was every possibility the vampire was lying, or might change its mind and decide to kill him after all. It was still thirsty.

For a long time there was nothing but Harry and the trees and snow and sky. The wound on his leg had stopped flowing, and he left it for a time. He was tired, and didn't want to use what energy he had on a healing charm.

A screech froze him in place and he searched for its source. There was a feeling of... anger... prowling... not far away. It had a territorial sense to it and was not human. Harry went through the dark creatures he knew and tried to figure out which ones would screech. He cursed Lockhart, who was supposed to have taught his class about dark creatures. Tension... anticipation... Harry almost panicked. It was near. A quick movement caught his peripheral vision.

Harry spun, *stupefy*, and a mass of feathers, claws, and sharp beak hit him. The claws pierced his shoulder through the cloak, the beak scraping his face, and he was forced backwards. He let himself drop and used the momentum to push up as he rocked back and toss the creature. He sprang to his feet unevenly and instantly shot another stunner at the creature, unnecessarily. In the dark he couldn't quite make out what he had fought and he wasn't going to stick around to check. He couldn't focus clearly anyway. Somewhere he had lost his glasses and blood dripped into one eye.

There was no way he could apparate now, even if he was outside Voldemort's wards. He would splinch himself if he tried. Harry stumbled, looking for shelter, his head pounding and his stomach revolting. Breathing was more difficult with each passing moment. He cast a quick warming charm on his stolen cloak but that did nothing for his feet, which had gone numb long before. He sat down and severing charms were sufficient to tear several strips off the bottom of the floor length cloak. He wrapped his feet and cast warming charms again, on the cloth around his feet, his pajama pants, and the cloak that now fell only to his knees.

It got suddenly much, much colder where he sat, and the despair and helplessness he was feeling magnified ten-fold. Harry just wanted to cry, to give up as he felt what he finally realized were the effects of dementors drawing near. He tried to find a happy memory, any happy memory, and focused hard. He thought of his father, smiling with pride, of Charlie, and his gentle yet somehow rough touch, of Ron and Hermione smiling and joking. Both hands were held in front of him to ward off the soul-sucking creatures.

Expecto Patronum! Prongs galloped out from his left hand, but what truly shocked Harry was Padfoot bounding out from his right. The two protectors chased the dementors away and then cavorted together as they returned to him. Harry just stared blankly as they both nosed him before fading.

He collapsed into the soft cover of snow, almost completely spent. It was so tempting to just curl up in the snow and go to sleep. That was certain death, but it was a quiet and painless death... and he was so very tired. Harry felt his eyelids begin to droop. He fought them open twice before a roar filled the night and his eyes popped wide. He knew that sound. Harry stood and waited, concentrating, fighting the dizziness that came from magical and physical exhaustion. There was the roar again. He followed the familiar sound.

"Brilliant Potter, just brilliant," he mumbled to himself. "You're lost in the cold and dark woods and hear a dragon. What do you do? You go looking for it of course."

Harry stumbled into a clearing and rolled to only barely avoid a jet of fire from a female Welsh Green. His injuries sent fiery bolts of pain throughout his body.

"Easy girl, easy," Harry hissed in Parseltongue. "I'm not here to hurt you. Why are you here in the cold and snow? You belong with the grass and the sun."

The dragon roared and Harry felt anguish in her cry. The Welsh Green was more upset than any dragon Harry had ever seen.

"Shhh, did they take you away from your babies?" Harry didn't know if he could be soothing enough in Parseltongue but he tried. "I think I met your young ones. Good wizards found them and brought them to my home where they were healed. They got bigger, much bigger."

The dragon was silent and lowered her head to sniff at Harry. He tentatively reached out a hand and stroked her between her eyes, marveling at the feel of her scales. She was smooth and soft and warm against his almost numb with cold hand.

"You miss them don't you? My father misses me right now." Harry shivered and sneezed. Marvelous, he was getting sick too. The dragon stretched out her wings and tried to fly, but something was holding her back. Harry's eyes widened. It was a ward that dragon handlers used but it was set with much more restriction. The dragons in Romania could fly from peak to peak, but couldn't leave the valleys that made up the preserve.

"All but one of your young ones were taken south. They're with other dragons, and wizards who love them and care for them. The other is still hurt, but getting better with help from my friends. Her wing was broken," Harry pulled his hand back and pulled his cloak tighter.

The warming charm was starting to fade and Harry's legs gave way, sending him painfully down on his knees into the melting snow. The dragon gave another anguished roar. She rose up and stretched her wings again. A forearm came towards Harry and he drew inward, preparing for the swipe, too tired and cold and dizzy to fight back, but her claws didn't strike him. They curled around behind him and drew him in. Her wings folded in and pressed Harry against the warmth of her belly. He had only a moment to marvel at the oddity of his situation before unconsciousness claimed him.

Chapter Forty-Eight

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"Severus!" He jolted awake and looked anxiously at the headmaster, who still looked drawn and worried. Severus could only think of one thing.

"Harry," Severus demanded urgently. "Where is he? What happened?"

"He's alive Severus," Albus answered and Severus realized that through the bond he would know if Harry had died, would feel his death. "He's sick and hurt and I don't know how bad he is, but he is alive."

"Romania," an unfamiliar female voice said. Severus looked up and saw a girl dressed like a muggle, but with a rich, embroidered hooded cloak. She had a thick accent but spoke English well. "Charlie sent me with his Portkey to get you. It is bad, but I think Harry will be okay."

"Who are you?" Severus demanded, belatedly realizing when she lowered her hood that he had seen her before at Hogwarts.

"I am so sorry," she smiled, quite dazzlingly, and held out her hand. "My name is Anya Melenchik. I work with Charlie. It was quite a shock to see that Ryan is really Harry. I cannot tell you much about his condition as Charlie made me leave to get you as soon as they got there."

Severus shook her hand and noticed the burn scars. He stood and hissed. There were wounds on his chest and back that weren't healed yet, and he felt pain in his chest, lungs... everywhere, really. Anya reached out to steady him. Despite her slim, delicate appearance she was quite strong.

"Albus?" Severus asked, fearing what the pains that should have been healed meant about Harry's condition. If the bond was being called on...

"You should not be teaching for several days anyway Severus," the headmaster smiled and twinkled. "I will return tonight and then take care of your classes. I think I can handle your students for a time. I *am* a Potions Master myself"

Severus nodded. He drew himself up and walked to the kitchen. It was crowded with Order members. The looks they directed towards him were varied. He saw pity, which made him sneer automatically, curiosity, and just relief on several faces. Moody was suspicious as always.

"I need a group of five or so to go to Romania with Severus to protect him and Harry," Severus held back the glare that he wanted to direct at Albus, who had walked in behind him with the girl. He might not need the protection but he would take the entire Auror Corps to protect Harry if he could. There was a hard tug at his heart and Severus didn't want to even consider what it might mean. Every voice in the room volunteered and Albus just twinkled. *Oh fuck it*, Severus thought and glared at the old wizard. They didn't have time for this. Harry was dying.

"Quiet," Severus snapped and everyone obeyed. "Bill, Fred, George, Alastor, and Tonks are coming with Miss Melenchik and me. The rest of you can figure out how in hell this happened. Albus?"

The headmaster held out a shiny smooth bright yellow circle, about the size of a pie, and Severus guessed it was another muggle toy or something. He and the others going to Romania put a hand on the thing and there was a tug behind his navel.

Anya landed gracefully on her feet and started walking immediately, "Follow me. Our hospital tent is this way."

"We've been here," either Fred or George commented and the twins darted ahead, wands out and ready, eyes looking for any threat, communicating with small gestures and looks. They would have made decent Aurors.

Moody's magical eye was spinning in its socket and his good eye was fixed on Severus, "Why me?"

"You're beyond paranoid, and Harry could be in danger," Severus was using nearly all the energy he had just to keep walking at the fast pace. "I can put up with your accusations and insinuations if it keeps Harry from being attacked."

"Chyort voz'mi!" Anya cursed, stopping to stare to their left. She looked back at them, "Come with me!"

There was a commotion Severus had not noticed before. He was off his game in this single-minded focus to get to Harry. Several wizards and witches had their wands aimed at a large, and evidently angry, dragon. When Severus saw Charlie among them he instantly looked for Harry, but could not find him.

"Charlie!" he yelled out in a commanding tone.

"Severus, thank Merlin," the redhead ran over to him, eyes bloodshot and face pale. "Maybe you can do something."

"Where's Harry?" Severus asked.

"She won't let us near him," Charlie answered, running a hand nervously through his hair.

Severus grabbed Charlie's sleeve, resisting the urge to curse him. The idiot let a dragon near Harry?

"What?"

"She was *protecting* Harry when I found him. For some reason she followed me and Norbert here, carrying Harry the whole way, but won't let anyone near him." Severus felt the heat from a jet of flame that forced all the dragon handlers to leap back. "We can't stun her, or she might fall on him. I'm guessing Harry found her, and talked to her, and she... well... she adopted him. She's acting like a nesting mother."

"For an orphan that kid's got an awful lot of parents," Moody commented with a snort and Severus couldn't help but agree with the scarred man.

Severus stared at the enormous reptile and searched the ground. He found Harry on the grass underneath her. If she placed a foot wrong he would be crushed. Severus couldn't see Harry closely but his own breathing was labored.

"How does he get into these crazy...?" Severus finally took in everything Charlie said and stopped mid-sentence. "Did you say he *talked* to her?"

"Yeah, um...," Charlie blushed. "We had those young Welsh Greens at the school, and Harry was helping us with them, and we found out that dragons understand Parseltongue. Harry can't understand what they say, but he can talk to them. He didn't want a big deal made out of it."

Severus pushed that aside for another time. The dragon had quieted and was sniffing the air. The dragon handlers were still tensed, wands ready to stun if she moved away from Harry. She took a step forward, and all the wizards backed up. Charlie tugged on Severus's robes but he stood still, and found himself in the front row of the wizards. The large head of the dragon continued to sniff and lowered. She looked at the wizards carefully and roared.

"She's upset... sad... frightened," Charlie said at his side. Several others nodded.

Severus took a determined step forward. He had already been prepared to die for Harry the night before. He was still willing. The dragon sniffed again and brought her head down to look directly at Severus. She sniffed him... and backed up. Severus stepped forward... and she backed up again.

"Govno," he heard from Anya. "She smells it. She knows his papa."

"Go Severus," Charlie urged him.

Severus walked forward, and with each step forward he took the dragon backed up. When he reached Harry he bent down to pick him up and stumbled. The dragon sniffed again. Severus saw his wand in Harry's holster, took it out slowly, and pointed it at Harry. He cast a weightless charm, and the same general healing spell that Harry had used on him. Then he was able to lift his son, and back up towards the assembled wizards and witches. Harry was a mess.

There was a stretcher waiting, and the dragon settled down as Severus handed Harry into the care of the healers. She was almost entirely a beautiful emerald green, Slytherin green, the same green as Harry's and Lily's eyes.

"Is she a Welsh Green?" Severus asked, still dazed and feeling tingling warmth from his wand. He had thought it forever lost and it was like finding an old friend.

Charlie nodded as they followed the stretcher, surrounded by busy wizards, "Yes, she's... Merlin! She must be the missing mother! Deiter, see if you can bring her to the Welsh Green juveniles! She might be their mum!"

A stocky man with honey blond hair and blue eyes, a true Aryan, nodded and grabbed a few others to head back towards the dragon that was now calmly lying on the grass.

Harry looked a sight. Inside the hospital tent was a room that almost duplicated the hospital ward at Hogwarts. Harry was on a bed and the healers were removing a cloak that looked like it was Death Eater style, pajama pants that had been torn down one of the legs, and black fabric that was wrapped around his feet.

"Smart kid," Severus heard from one of the healers. "Warming charms on everything, though they've worn off for some time. He might have lost his feet otherwise. There's some frostbite... pneumonia setting in... our necklace worked!"

"He didn't need the warming charms after he found that Welsh Green," Charlie spoke up. "She was cradling him."

The healers all looked up at Charlie in surprise but quickly turned back to work and Severus felt he was missing something important. A hand touched Severus's shoulder and he looked back at Albus, who was holding out a cup.

"Pepper-Up Severus," Albus said. "You need it."

He drank the potion and felt an energy renewal as steam shot out his ears. There was a similar hiss of steam from Charlie and Severus saw Bill talking to his younger brother in a low voice. He was cut off with a glare from Charlie. Bill just smiled and gave Charlie a half-hug, leaving his arm around his younger brother.

"Charlie," one of the healers called out, looking anxious.

Charlie gave Severus and Albus a look and the three of them joined the healer by Harry, "What is it Jeremy?"

The healer gestured to a gash on Harry's leg. He looked very uncomfortable, "There was hair Charlie." He looked at Severus and Albus, "We'll have to test his blood." He held out the hair. Severus took it. It was of medium length, dark, and coarse. He had felt similar hair before and then remembered that the night before was a full moon, "Does Remus know anything?"

Albus shook his head, "Poppy won't tell him. There's nothing he can do until he wakes up later today regardless, and he can't come here."

Severus nodded and handed the hair back to the healer, "Take a sample of his blood and give it to me." He spoke in a voice accustomed to command.

"Charlie?" the healer, Jeremy Charlie had called him, looked for confirmation.

"He's a Potions Master Jeremy," Charlie responded, "and Harry is his son."

The healer nodded, grabbed a vial, and held it to the cut on the leg. He whispered a spell and the vial filled. Jeremy capped it and handed it to Severus, pointing to a door, "The lab is through there."

"Thank you," Severus said tensely and turned to Moody. "Get one of the twins. I'll need a competent assistant."

"Dad?" a weak voice spoke, sounding truly pathetic.

Severus thrust the vial at Albus and roughly pushed a healer out of the way. Harry's glasses were gone so he wouldn't be able to recognize anyone, "Shh. I'm here Harry."

Harry coughed and whimpered, "Hurts." He sounded like a small child, not a powerful wizard.

"I know," Severus brushed back the hair on his forehead. There was a fever, "What attacked you?"

"Not infected," Harry said with obvious effort. "Vampire said so, tasted it."

Harry's breath was labored and Severus felt tears finally prickling his eyes. "What were you thinking?" he demanded quietly.

"We're both okay," Harry protested weakly.

"You call this okay?" Severus nearly growled, his earlier anger coming back. "The instant they let you out of here you're grounded."

Severus heard a chuckle behind him and Harry smiled. A hand lifted slowly from the bed and touched his unshaven cheek, "missed you too Dad." Harry's eyes closed and his breathing was even. Severus brushed Harry's hair back again and slipped the watch back onto his wrist.

One of the healers touched his back and Severus hissed in pain. The woman gave him a stern look, "If you're injured you should be in a bed yourself."

Severus drew himself to his full height. There was muted laughter, most likely from the Weasley twins. He towered over the woman and glared full force, "I have taught twenty sixteen year olds to brew Confusion Concoctions in worse condition! Either heal my son, or leave!"

Albus took the startled woman and guided her away, "He's all bark and no bite child. Would you like a lemon drop?"

"Albus!" Severus said in a warning tone. *All bark and no bite indeed.*

Charlie finished talking with one of the healers and headed his way, "We can go to my tent. Someone will come for us when they're done. He won't wake again for a while."

Severus instantly recognized the rooms from Harry's memory and pushed the thought out of his head. Harry hadn't wanted him to see that, never mind keep remembering it. Charlie brought Severus a glass and put a bottle of Ogden's Firewhiskey on the table in front of them. The dragon handler drank a shot.

"Precisely how did Harry get introduced to Firewhiskey?" Severus asked as he poured his first drink. Charlie grinned, "You can blame Jean Pierre for that one. He thinks everyone should know *how* to drink by the time they can legally do so."

Severus snorted and tossed back a second drink. He set down his glass and leaned back, hands holding his head. If he drank anymore he would fall asleep immediately, "Does Harry know that you love him?"

Charlie looked sad, "I don't think so. I haven't hid it. If he scanned me he would know... granted he can identify the feeling for what it is. Chances are everyone here knows now, if they hadn't guessed earlier. Hiding such things around here is impossible."

"How does Harry feel about you?" Severus questioned.

"I doubt he knows," Charlie was quieter than usual. "When I've scanned him his feelings are mostly hidden. What does come out is confusing and jumbled."

"What are you going to do?" Severus looked at Charlie intently.

Charlie smirked, "What are my intentions towards your son?"

"Something like that," Severus admitted, looking down at his drink. This was highly unfamiliar territory. Threatening Charlie had been easy. Talking to him like... a potential son-in-law? That was truly bizarre. He was still trying to get used to being a father.

"I'll wait," Charlie's smirk vanished and he sighed. He rubbed his eyes, probably in fatigue. "He still has a year of school left, and he won't get into a relationship while Voldemort is still alive. So I'll wait and when he kills that snake faced bastard I'll be there for him."

"You think he'll win," Severus stated, not a question.

Charlie raised his eyebrows, "This makes what... six times Voldemort has tried to kill Harry and failed? All my Galleons are on Harry."

Severus laughed and rubbed his forearm. The way it was throbbing he must have slept through a summoning. There was a sudden lightness throughout his entire being. He never had to answer the call of the Dark Lord again. Every Death Eater alive would be trying to hunt him down to kill him, but

he was alive at that moment and had no intention of letting them win. Harry managed to avoid all of them for years.

"I'm free," Severus whispered. He pulled back his sleeve and stared at the Dark Mark, feeling Charlie recoil slightly. There was a stabbing pain that made him flinch, but no more. It was nowhere near as bad as even a weak Cruciatus Curse. "That's all he can do to me now."

"Harry's going to be happy when he wakes up," Charlie smiled and leaned in to get a good look at the tattoo.

For the first time Severus didn't mind the tattoo being on display. It was getting gradually easier to breathe and the pain in his chest was fading. His mind had wandered back to Harry in the hospital bed and he sat up straight as though he had been prodded in the back with a branding iron, "Did he say a vampire told him that a werewolf didn't infect him?"

"Um, I think so," Charlie said slowly and shared Severus's disbelieving look.

"He has a lot of explaining to do," Severus grumbled.

Charlie laughed, "What else is new?"

Chapter Forty-Nine

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The healers had been reluctant to let him out of bed, but a Snapeish glare and a solemn promise to take it easy convinced them. They all knew him from the previous summer too, which didn't hurt. After walking a few hundred yards Harry was willing to admit that the healers were right. He didn't really belong out of bed. He was panting already from the exertion. He didn't envy them the storm they would face when his father and Charlie came by to check on him in an hour or so. There was something Harry had to do though, and he was the only one who could do it.

A few simple questions had told him that the Welsh Green that had saved him was in the next valley over. It wasn't a terribly far walk, but the inclines were tough. He crested the mountain on a path that led from enclosure to enclosure and saw the valley stretched out below him. There was a roar and a large green blur swept from one of the peaks to the area just in front of him, followed by several other smaller green blurs.

He was wearing temporary replacement glasses, charmed to his prescription but not very well as the healers were not optometrists. Everything was a little fuzzy around the edges and it was an interesting effect.

"Hi," Harry hissed in Parseltongue. "I'm much better now. Thank you."

A fully grown dragon had never nuzzled him before and it was a unique experience. Her snout was bigger than his torso. Harry smiled and stroked her scales. The juveniles were about the size of Shetland Ponies by then and they crowded around him, nudging him and swiping at him with their wings and the pads of their forefeet, claws retracted. Harry was amazed. They were treating him like they did each other, like a sibling, but much more gently as he didn't have the built in armor they did and was still injured.

Once they had all greeted him they settled down and the juveniles rested their heads on the ground, looking at him intently. Harry sat down, leaning against what he supposed was his new sister, and the mother sat down and watched over them.

"Other wizards call me Harry... Harry Potter," Harry hissed at them. He closed his eyes and began to tell them his life story. He stumbled over a few places where he found Parseltongue just didn't have the words and had to explain several things. He felt one of his 'siblings' move closer to his feet. Every now and then one of them would nudge him and he would explain whatever he was talking about in detail.

He could sense the emotions of the dragons as he told his story, but kept his empathy mostly barriered. The mother was in an almost constant state of anger and he found himself assuring her several times that he was fine. There were some noises from the young dragons when he talked about how his parents died and he could feel the pain they remembered from their mother being taken away.

The air got cooler as he talked, he had never said so much in Parseltongue before, but the warmth of the dragons was more than enough for him. A sense of tension rippled through the dragons.

"So this is where you are," a voice spoke in English not long after Harry was getting to the end of his fifth year at Hogwarts. He opened his eyes and saw Charlie with his father and several other dragon handlers.

Snape looked dramatically out of place amongst the dragon handlers in his black robes that were almost formal in style. The handlers wore almost exclusively muggle style casual clothing for the ease of movement it offered. Robes were much more likely to catch on something, like a dragon's claws. Cloaks were for traveling and robes were for formal occasions or visits to exclusively wizarding sectors of a city.

"Hey," Harry smiled, but didn't move. He explained to his new dragon family who all the wizards were, and that they were good wizards. He switched back to English, "I was just getting to the Department of Mysteries."

"You have quite an audience," Charlie was virtually broadcasting amusement.

Harry stretched and stood up... *damn that hurt...* and turned around. His jaw dropped. Every dragon in the colony, maybe thirty all told, adults and juveniles, had to be gathered around the valley, resting on various peaks as well as the mountain side and in the valley itself. He turned back to the other wizards.

"I was just, um," Harry was a bit bewildered, "telling them about me. I've got about a year to go. I just told them who you all are."

The amusement spread from Charlie and was emanating from nearly everyone there. Snape was torn between anger, frustration, and amusement himself.

"Sorry I disappeared," Harry ran his hands through his hair. "I had to let her know I was okay, and no one else speaks Parseltongue."

The dragon handlers who weren't at Hogwarts with the juvenile Greens and hadn't heard about that discovery looked at Harry in shock.

"You can talk to them?" Deiter asked with a muttered bit of German that Harry didn't pick up.

Harry nodded, "They understand me, but I have no idea what they say. I have to go on their emotions, like Charlie and all of you."

"If you ever need a job..." one of the handlers left the rest unsaid. Harry would be hired by any dragon colony instantly, for once not just because of his name.

Harry smiled. It was nice to be valued for his skills, "I kind of have a few things to do first, but I might just take you up on that."

There was a sense of impatience and Charlie must have picked up on it as well, "You better finish story time Harry. Mind if I stay?"

Harry smiled and motioned for Charlie to join him. The red haired wizard stepped into the grouping of dragons a bit hesitantly and Harry hissed to them that Charlie was a very good friend to all of them. The dragons began to calm down and Charlie calmed with them, the other handlers looking on in astonishment and a little envy. All of them had at least a touch of empathy or they never would have survived in the field they chose, literally.

Rocks and patches of grass were suddenly occupied, as none of the handlers wanted to miss observing this extraordinarily unusual dragon behavior. The handlers were all learning one of the very basic facts of life in the wizarding world: If you are around Harry Potter, expect the extraordinarily unusual.

"Dad?" Harry spoke a little uncertainly. "You can come in too."

Harry's father gave him a skeptical look, but was urged on by all the handlers. As he made his way into the enclosure the dragons sniffed and a feeling of acceptance passed through the Welsh Greens. Snape was nuzzled by the juveniles as he passed, welcomed as Harry's father.

"What in Merlin's name...?" Snape asked with a touch of his customary sneer.

"They like you," Charlie laughed lightly. Many other laughs joined his.

Snape gave them both a disbelieving look, "A family of dragons likes me?"

"You're part of their family too," Harry shrugged. He took his father's arm and brought him over to where he had been sitting before.

The three of them settled down against the same female dragon, who wrapped her wing around them. Harry leaned his head on his father's shoulder and felt Charlie take his hand. It was comfortable enough to fall asleep and he was rather tired. He could just close his eyes and...

Charlie squeezed his hand and leaned over, "Don't you go falling asleep without finishing your story."

Harry smiled and started hissing again. He told them about the battle he fought in the Ministry of Magic and felt waves of support from his dragon family. He could vaguely sense bits of anger and displeasure from the other dragons. He told them about Sirius, and one of the far off dragons roared when Sirius died in the tale.

Harry waited, as no one would hear him over that, and picked up his story again. The mother dragon was terribly sad when Harry talked about his summer and many of the dragons were actually amused when he mentioned he was at the colony pretending to be a muggle. Most of them had already recognized his scent.

When Harry finished his story he wriggled and turned to lean on his father a bit more. An arm wrapped around him and he could feel Charlie sending out comfort and warmth next to him. A great roaring started up from the dragons all around the valley. There was no way he could have fallen asleep with all that noise.

He opened his eyes and all the dragon handlers were slack-jawed. Anya kept looking from Harry to the dragons and back, "I think they're talking about you."

Harry and Charlie both nodded and Harry let Charlie speak, "They're... disturbed... and a bit distressed. There's some determination I think. Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry let his empathy open wide and was flooded with sensations. "Wow... that's... well... I think I'd call it righteous indignation."

Deiter was nodding, "You've been adopted by a dragon... so you *are* a dragon... and they don't like what's happened to you. I've never felt anything like it." The other handlers were all agreeing.

"They're not alone," Snape said a bit sharply and Harry flinched. The mother dragon let out a roar and Snape tensed, along with Charlie and all the other handlers.

"I did something really dangerous," Harry hissed in explanation. "He's mad that I risked my life to save his, not mad at me." He switched back to English, "she's not mad at you Dad."

"Now that you have removed yourself from medical care you have quite a bit to explain," Snape said sternly.

Harry sighed, "I've never liked that part."

Charlie laughed and stood up, "I think vacation time is over Harry. You've missed nearly a full week of classes."

Harry scrunched up his face. He had allowed himself to forget about getting back to school and his friends and just... be with the dragons, "At least I'm best friends with Hermione."

"No doubt she already has a color coded schedule for catching you up on all the work you've missed and preparing for exams," Harry's father sneered, though Harry could tell he thought it was somewhat funny.

Harry left his dragon family reluctantly, making sure to give them each a hug, or stroke them between the eyes, which they seemed to like best. He promised them he would be back, though it might be after he finished school for the year.

Rather than his normal explanation in the headmaster's office to just Albus, Harry had to tell the whole Inner Circle about his rescue mission and escape in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place and face their questioning afterwards. Tonks and Kingsley were officially representing the Ministry in questioning him. He told the story as plainly as he could. He didn't miss the smile from Remus when Harry told them about his kick to Belletrix Lestrange's head. He kept his eyes down when he admitted to using the Imperious Curse, not wanting to know any of the reactions. He kept himself fully barriered against their emotions throughout.

For some reason it was easier to tell the Order than he had expected, much easier after he had told his entire life story to the gathering of dragons, which he didn't share with the Order. The fewer people there were who knew about that the better. All the handlers present at the time had sworn a

wizard's oath of secrecy. When he finished Charlie picked up and told them about finding Harry and the Welsh Green mother with Norbert's help and the scene at the dragon colony.

"Harry," Dumbledore gave him a piercing look, "were you aware that whatever agreement you made with Voldemort was binding?"

Harry shook his head, "I wasn't." There was a muttering in the kitchen and Harry felt a smirk form. He really was picking up too much from Snape, "I agreed to join him. In exchange he would release my father without further injury and never harm him again and give me Peter Pettigrew, Belletrix LeStrange, and Lucius Malfoy to do with as I would."

The majority of the Order members looked at Harry in shock. He hadn't told the terms of the agreement during his report. This Harry Potter was not the one they were familiar with, who had sat through meetings next to Charlie without speaking a word. This was not the Harry Potter who had recklessly led all his friends to The Ministry of Magic on a rescue mission only to need rescuing himself. This Harry Potter was almost an adult.

"You agreed to join him?" Mrs. Weasley asked with pained disapproval.

Harry looked at his father and saw an answering smirk. He had immediately understood. Charlie had a small smile on his face so he was probably reading Harry the whole time, "I never said *how* I would join him." A few faces began to show comprehension and respectful approval. Mad-Eye Moody in particular looked like he had gotten one up on Voldemort himself. "My intention at the time of agreement was the same as it is now. I will join him in a duel to the death..." Harry paused for effect and narrowed his eyes, "when I'm ready to kill the bloody bastard."

Harry's proclamation was met with a stunned silence. Though most of those at the table truly expected Harry to kill Voldemort some day they would never have voiced it. Only a handful of them knew the prophecy that Harry knew, that gave him no choice in the matter.

He did sound much more confident than he really was. Harry had more doubts than he could count. He didn't think he'd ever be able to actually kill Voldemort, or that anyone would. He didn't like waiting for the right moment, knowing that every moment he waited more people died, even if the Order agreed with his decision and, he could sense, respected him for it, for using clear judgment rather than acting rashly.

But then Snape started to laugh, and the sheer oddity of it had many of the Order members wondering if he had been under the Cruciatus Curse perhaps one too many times. Then Charlie and Bill joined in, and then Fred and George. Remus's laugh was loud and contagious.

"You have got to tell Ginny about Malfoy," Fred said with a bright grin, "the one that let Harry Potter get away."

"I've dreamed of doing something like that to Bella for years Harry," Remus wiped away a tear. "You'll have to tell your mother Tonks. Andy will love it."

Harry's father smiled at him, "James and Lily would have been proud Harry."

Harry smiled at that and turned to Fred and George with curiosity, "How did you get it to spark?"

"What?" the twins asked together, feigning ignorance.

"The fake wand," Harry answered with another smirk. "When Voldemort broke it, it sparked."

The twins grinned and many Order members looked confused. Fred answered for him, "Well, you did ask us to make it as real as possible. We figured if Fudge ever decided to go after you again he might succeed, and then your real wand wouldn't get snapped."

"Why were you carrying a fake wand?" Tonks asked. Despite being one of his instructors she had not been told about his power troubles.

Dumbledore called the meeting back to order, leading them back to discussing Voldemort and the potential repercussions of Harry's latest adventure. Several questions were left unanswered, like whether Harry had his regular wand hidden somewhere on his person. Charlie had brought it to

Romania and given it to Harry to have for show if nothing else. Harry heard about the cells that had been holding the Death Eaters captured at the Ministry.

Dobby had luckily not been there when they were freed, as he was at Hogwarts preparing their meals. He had returned to find the cells empty, investigated as best he could, and got back to Headquarters just after Snape had seen Madam Pomfrey and Dumbledore. Hermione had restrained the house elf from punishing himself, to the apparent amusement of most of the Order members that were still there at the time.

"Voldemort has relocated his headquarters," Moody announced. "We found the caves with the information Charlie gave us from where he found Harry, and the information we already had from Snape... and a little help."

Harry watched his father nod, "Voldemort would not stay in the same place once it had been compromised. The instant Harry apparated into the Throne Room he would have determined to move. He would have had at least three backup sites already selected."

"Hey mate," Fred whispered before Harry left.

George slipped another fake wand up Harry's sleeve, "We made ten or so for you, but don't use that as an excuse to let dark lords break them all."

"There *are* other demands on our time," Fred grinned.

Harry and Snape both went back to Hogwarts from the Order meeting with the rest of the Hogwarts staff that had attended. By the time they got there it was past curfew and Ron was the only one of Harry's roommates who heard him return.

Ron jumped out his bed with his wand drawn the instant the door opened. When he saw who was framed by the light leaking up from the common room he lowered his wand and ran to Harry, nearly knocking him over with the force of his hug. Harry was still healing but he ignored the pain the hug caused, "Don't ever disappear on us ever again mate."

Harry returned the hug and smiled, though Ron couldn't see it, "It wasn't intentional believe it or not. I was sleeping when I apparated and probably couldn't get through the wards again if I tried. I think Hogwarts was helping me and let me through."

"The castle was helping you?" Ron asked skeptically.

Harry shrugged, "Remus keeps talking about her as though she's alive and has a mind of her own. He said that's the only reason the map works, because the castle likes him and makes it work. With all the protections on the castle something like the map should never have been possible to create in the first place."

"Next time Hogwarts can send us with you and maybe you won't be mostly dead when you come back to us," Ron couldn't wipe the grin off his face. Harry sensed both relief and deep concern from his friend, none of the bitter jealousy that had almost destroyed their friendship more than once. Ron stepped back and held Harry at arm's length, looking him over carefully, "You do look like him... just a little."

The glamour... Harry had almost forgotten it was removed in the caves. He felt a little relieved to look how he was supposed to, and be accepted, but cast the glamour that hid the Umbridge detention scars on his hand.

"So tell me all about the Slytherin versus Ravenclaw game. Who are we playing for the Cup?" Harry smiled and got into bed. Ron's eyes lit up as he sat down on Harry's bed and proceeded to detail the game accompanied by grand hand gestures. He would keep Harry in suspense until the last possible moment. Harry prepared himself for another night with very little sleep.

Early the next morning he had Hermione send out an owl with a special request.

Chapter Fifty

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Severus had almost refused Harry's idea, but Albus approved and Harry had pleaded. In the end he gave in, and almost relished the chaos he knew would be provoked in only a few moments. He was alerted to the approach of the owl post when Remus's head snapped up, always the first to know the owls were coming. A plain looking barn owl dropped a rolled up newspaper in front of Severus and he tucked a few coins in the pouch on its leg.

SEVERUS SNAPE, DEATH EATER, SPY, HERO, FATHER

BOY WHO LIVES RISKS LIFE TO SAVE NEWLY DISCOVERED PARENT FROM YOU-KNOW-WHO

Below was an almost full page picture of Severus and Harry standing side-by-side in the Three Broomsticks, the relation between them obvious. Harry still had a bandage on his cheek in the picture from what he said was the beak of some unknown dark creature in Voldemort's menagerie. Severus looked to the Gryffindor table and saw that several of the Gryffindors had very smug looks on their faces. Harry had told even more people, apparently, and they had done the impossible by keeping it a secret in Hogwarts.

Harry was still limping slightly. The gash on his leg from a werewolf claw had torn muscle and was healing slowly, though it had only been two weeks. He looked up at the staff table and smiled widely at Severus, who smiled back, probably causing further shock throughout the great hall however small a smile it was.

Severus had already seen the full text of the article before it went to print, insisting on approving it first. Rita Skeeter had come through, though Harry refused to tell Severus why she was at Granger's beck and call. Harry's best friend had shot threatening looks at the reporter throughout the interview, extracting a pledge from her that the story be reported truthfully. Severus was forced to admit that there was another Gryffindor that had Slytherin qualities.

The full article stretched for over three pages of print, and had several pictures of Severus and Harry, both alone and together, and a copy of the picture Severus had of James holding the newborn Harry. It told almost his entire life story, beginning with his unlikely friendship that started with James the summer after fifth year. The only reason it gave was that James had 'a falling out' with his friends and had been convinced by Lily to apologize for his past misdeeds, most of which were towards Severus.

Several of the Slytherins looked horrified, and some disgusted. The stunned look on Malfoy's face was priceless. It would be another power struggle in the House, those who supported their Head of House against those who opposed him. Severus had hopes that, with luck, some of the undecided students in the House, and possibly even some of those who had been supporting the Dark Lord, would be persuaded to join the light, or at least stay out of the war altogether.

Towards the end of the article Severus saw that they had reprinted the picture of Karkaroff, showing the fate he escaped, and somehow got a picture of Severus and Harry, both sporting several injuries. There was also one piece in the paper that Severus had kept a secret from Harry, holding Skeeter back after Harry and Hermione left, claiming mysteriously that they had to meet someone. Severus hadn't even wanted to ask, and was glad he hadn't after he heard the stories about the Malfoy-Potter drinking contest in the Hog's Head that afternoon. He could feel the grey hairs coming. Harry and Malfoy both served detention for it.

SIRIUS BLACK INNOCENT?

GODFATHER OF THE-BOY-WHO-LIVED FRAMED BY THE MAN HE WAS CONVICTED OF KILLING?

Severus had no formal proof, and therefore the article was printed as speculation, but he had told Skeeter of how he had seen Pettigrew several times at Voldemort's side and the pathetic man had admitted to being guilty of handing James and Lily to Voldemort and killing the muggles. Albus had approved that one reluctantly, as it could potentially hurt Pettigrew's position with Voldemort, but

had conceded for Harry's sake. The public condemnation of his godfather quite obviously still hurt the Gryffindor.

Another look at the Gryffindor table told Severus that Harry had found the article, or Granger had found it and pointed it out for him, and was struggling to hold back tears. He looked up at the staff table and mouthed, 'Thank You,' before getting up and leaving with his friends.

"Your reputation is ruined you know," Remus commented with a sly grin.

Severus raised an eyebrow, "And precisely what reputation is that?"

"That the dementors got you years ago and you're a soulless bastard who preys on small children, or at least your potions students, and Gryffindors in particular," Remus was grinning cheekily. "I've heard we have the most delicious souls."

For once Severus was not about to be outdone by the Marauder. He scowled and waited until Remus had a mouthful of coffee before putting on his wickedest smirk and saying very quietly, knowing the werewolf sense would hear, "I have only tasted one Gryffindor, though he was rather delicious."

The timing was perfect, and the mouthful of coffee sprayed across the table. Remus murmured a quick, "Sorry," to Pomona Sprout, who was sitting next to him and had gotten the side of the spray. He flicked his wand and cleaned up the spilled coffee before calmly pouring more and sipping it. "Developing a drinking problem Lupin?" Severus asked casually. "There are places that can help you."

Pomona laughed at that and Remus scowled into his coffee cup for a moment, but recovered quickly, "Why didn't Charlie come back with you?"

"Renee had already come here while we were in Romania," Severus reminded the werewolf, "and Charlie said he'd rather not risk my wrath combined with that of Granger if he distracted Harry from studying for his exams."

"That was noble of him," Remus laughed. "Are you sure he's a Gryffindor?"

"Not many Gryffindors would face both Severus and Miss Granger," Minerva commented from the other side of Severus. "We are brave, not suicidal."

Severus stood to head down to his classroom, where the third year Gryffindors and Slytherins, why Albus always scheduled them together Severus did not know, would be having their last lesson before exams.

"Checking your board to make sure it's correct before class Severus?" Remus got his last little dig in, to the stifled amusement of both Minerva and Pomona. News of Harry's prank had circulated the castle quickly, as all rumors did, and every staff member knew exactly who was responsible.

"No Remus," Severus glared. "My classroom has been protected against such attempts since before the Weasley twins set foot in the castle. The perpetrator was caught, admitted to having the password, and was not given the new one."

Severus was about ready to strangle Albus by the time he had finished classes with his third years. The headmaster had followed the lesson plans for forth year and above to the letter, but had given the younger years a bit of a holiday, and taught them frivolous potions, such as the Non-Cracking, Non-Peeling, Ever-Shiny Nail Polish in Whichever Color Your Wand Desires and Homemade Bubblegum in Twenty-Seven Almost Simple Steps.

His fifth year Gryffindors and Slytherins were the last class of the day, and he was already in a horrendous mood when one of Slytherins, the younger Crabbe boy, blurted out, "Is it true sir?" Severus shot him a scathing glare.

"Of course it's true you twit," Ginny Weasley replied, with a glare of her own. "The *Prophet* wouldn't even consider printing something like that about the Professor and Harry without Ministry approval and the Ministry adores Harry again. Use your brain for once in your life!"

Severus just raised his eyebrows at the girl, who blushed bright red and mumbled, "Sorry for speaking out of turn, sir."

"Yes Miss Weasley, perhaps five points from Gryffindor will dissuade you in the future?" he said with his usual hostility. It was the end of a very long day and he would be damned if he was going to be nice to his students. The Gryffindors had obviously hoped for some change in his attitude with that morning's newspaper article and the disappointment showed on every face except Weasley's. "That will also be ten points from Slytherin for doubting the veracity of my words. Should you need to define the word 'veracity' Mr. Crabbe, I am sure Miss Weasley can assist you after class, granted you don't mind being hexed."

The Slytherins were all dumbfounded and the Gryffindors snickered, until Severus shot a glare in their direction. His students sufficiently cowed, Severus got on with the lesson, hoping to beat at least one more bit of information into their already bursting brains before they took their Ministry standardized exams the following week.

It was actually a relief to have the sixth year N.E.W.T. class on Tuesday morning, the first time that Severus could ever admit to thinking such a thought. As he had begun doing, until the younger Crabbe preempted him the day before, Severus began his class with a little warning.

"As you all must know by now, if you haven't lived with your heads between your own legs for the duration of your career at this institution, the article in the *Prophet* regarding Mr. Potter and myself was indeed correct," he glared at the entire class, not catching one Gryffindor by surprise he noticed. Of course, these particular Gryffindors had longer than any other students to grow accustomed to his dual persona.

"Should you have questions regarding the article that do not invade my privacy this class is *not* the place to ask them. Now, shall we see if any of you managed to pay attention to the headmaster?"

His smile had several students scrambling for their notes, "No notes. Mr. Malfoy! In the preparation of the Draught of Desire, what is added after the crushed dragon eggshell?"

"Four fluid ounces of syrup of vanishing nightshade, sir," Malfoy answered confidently.

Severus nodded, "Five points to Slytherin."

Several of the students swallowed fearfully and Severus continued to call out questions, subtracting and adding points to all four houses at such a rapid pace anyone watching the counters would wonder precisely what was happening. The oral examination lasted for the first half of the class, followed by the brewing of a potion that would appear on their exam the following week.

The students left in a daze and Severus smirked. All was right in the world.

"Um..." Harry peaked back in the classroom, his face changing from a smile to suddenly confused.

"Call me whatever you like when there are no other students present Harry," Severus laughed behind his smirk.

"Okay Dad," Harry grinned. "Just wanted to say... good lesson."

Harry darted back out of the classroom, his leg must have finally been healing, and Severus raised his eyebrows at the retreating form. Potions class was something they rarely discussed, as it was a potentially explosive conversation subject. He was still staring at the door a few minutes later when Albus entered.

"Something on your mind Severus?" Albus asked with that damned twinkle in his eye.

Severus didn't bother to glare. It never worked on the man anyway and was therefore a waste of energy, "Harry just complimented my teaching."

"You are a good teacher Severus," Albus said calmly, "when you put aside prejudices and let yourself teach. Why do think I've kept you on my staff?"

"So I don't get myself killed?" Severus suggested bitterly.

"That has always been a consideration Severus," Albus allowed before walking towards the door. Didn't he have some purpose in coming all the way down to the dungeons? "I would not keep on a

teacher and Head of House solely to protect them. There are many places outside of Hogwarts where I can assure your safety, granted that you accept the protection."

"On that note Albus..." Severus smiled and outlined the plan he had formed, taking note of the twinkle, for once not objectionable, and the smile the headmaster gave him.

The Quidditch Cup was easily won by Gryffindor in their match against Ravenclaw. The final Slytherin game that Severus had missed had ended much as the Slytherin versus Gryffindor game the week before. The Slytherin chasers that year, two of them in their first year on the team, were just not up to par. Even though he wasn't the captain Draco Malfoy had been seen berating his team for their incompetence. Severus decided that the Malfoy boy would make a good captain the next year.

Exams were the easiest part of the year for the staff at Hogwarts. Though they had grading to look forward to, all they had to do was proctor five out the seven years of students. Severus always gave a combination written and practical exam to prepare his students for their O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams. Despite his absences and health problems, Harry was doing much better with his potions brewing. Once he had learned the very basics all the other lessons had started to make sense, but he would never be a Potions Master.

"Those people are insufferable!" Granger's voice carried across his quarters.

Harry ducked his head into Severus's office, where he was getting a head start by corrected the first year written exams. He could do those in his sleep if necessary and the work was monotonous, but it had to be done. He put a big red slash across the essay of a Hufflepuff who had confused several ingredients.

"Hey Dad," Harry smiled, "Can we study in here? The fifth year Gryffindors have Potions tomorrow and are panicking in the common room and some seventh year Ravenclaws are glaring harder than you at anyone who so much as turns a page too loud in the library," he rolled his eyes at his last statement.

"Just try not to make too much noise," Severus stressed. "I *am* working."

Harry stepped in and peeked over his shoulder, "First year exams?" There was a short laugh, "That's not work. You might as well be brewing potions for Poppy."

"Not work you say?" Severus smirked and handed a stack of parchment to Harry. "Let's see how you do, as you have potions tomorrow as well. Do not use permanent ink, as I will have to check your work, and you are not allowed to ask Granger for help."

Harry's jaw dropped so far Severus could swear he heard the sound it made when it hit the floor. He gave Harry a gentle push back into his, or he should really say 'their' he supposed, quarters, careful not to hit any spot he knew had a still healing injury. He closed the door that separated his office and quarters and leaned back in his chair, taking a sip of the coffee in front of him. Perhaps he would have time to work on some experimental potions that afternoon.

Harry had been frowning and chewing the end of his quill when Severus checked on the trio before dinner. Granger and Weasley were trying not to laugh while they did their own studying, often quietly quizzing each other. Harry had only a small pile in front of him by then, and a large stack with an abundance of red on the top exam.

Severus walked over and picked up the exam, scanning it quickly, "You're harsh Harry."

"Me?" Harry sounded offended, and possibly even a little hurt. "I'll have you know I wasn't half as hard on them as you were on me."

Severus closed his eyes and sat down, counting to ten before he opened them again. It was a technique he found worked well, "Do you still have your first year exam?"

Granger dug through one of the bags, hers Severus suspected, and pulled out a file folder. She opened it and handed over all the potions exams – the second year end-of-year exams cancelled and the exemption from his fourth year final exam due to the Triwizard Tournament – that Harry had

taken in his class along with his O.W.L. exam. Harry was just looking down at the parchment in front of him, visibly tense. Weasley was looking very uncomfortable but he moved towards Harry and put a hand on his back. Harry flinched, but recognized his friend and settled down.

"I will be back in a moment," Severus stood and went back towards his office. "Five points to Granger for superb organization."

It was painful looking over the exam papers. Harry's work had declined each year, but his O.W.L. exam was very well done, proving him capable. Severus massaged the bridge of his nose as he went over the grading. He had been unreasonably harsh, especially in Harry's third year where Severus had only barely passed him, knowing that Albus would have stepped in otherwise.

He remembered what Harry about said about his education before Hogwarts, that grades better than his cousin's only fueled his uncle's anger and so Harry had given up even trying. It looked like Severus had brought about the same behavior in his own class.

He threw a handful of Floo powder into his office fireplace, "Lupin!"

The werewolf poked his head into the fire, "Yes, Severus? I'm going over a few things with Minerva." "Could you both step through?" Severus figured he might as well admit to Minerva that she had been right all along while he was at it.

With his fellow professor seated across from him, Severus passed Harry's exam papers to them. As they looked over them Remus flinched several times, no doubt at the harsh comments Severus had written.

"If I had seen these three years ago..." Remus left the rest unsaid.

Severus grunted, his elbows resting on his desk with his head in his hands, "You would have been right."

Minerva raised a single eyebrow, "How did this come up?"

"The three of them," not needing to elaborate further, "are studying in my quarters, as they have both potions and transfigurations tomorrow and their common room is apparently not conducive to studying."

"Not conducive?" Minerva asked, as it was her House in question.

Severus smirked, "The Potions O.W.L. is tomorrow. Poppy will be dispensing several calming draughts before the night is over."

Minerva and Remus both chuckled at that and Severus continued his explanation, "When Harry asked if they could stay he commented on the first year exams I was grading. In response I gave them to him to grade."

Remus chuckled, but Minerva looked horrified, "Severus!"

"I don't plan on just letting whatever grades he gives stand Minerva," Severus rolled his eyes at his colleague. "I will check them over myself. I went in to see how they were faring about ten minutes ago and commented that Harry was being overly harsh in his grading."

"Severus, you didn't," Remus said with a groan. "After this?" he waved Harry's third year end of year exam in the air.

Severus glared, "We are all in agreement that my past treatment of Harry was inexcusable. I have been making an effort to repair whatever damage I have done." The glare disappeared, "Until today I thought I was making at least some progress."

"You have," Harry's voice made Severus start. He hadn't heard the door open. Harry was getting a little too good at stealth. "Ron and Hermione are heading down to dinner. I wanted to check in here first. Hi Remus, Minerva."

They both greeted Harry warmly and returned the exams to a stack on Severus's desk. Harry walked in and picked up the exam from his third year, looking in Severus's eyes and ignoring the other two professors, "I know this doesn't mean anything now, that it isn't you. It's just... it's like you've been two different people... but you're the same person... and it can just be confusing."

"I think this our cue to exit," Minerva stood. "Remus?" They both walked towards his office door.

"Have dinner here tonight. I am sure Albus will understand."

Harry sat down in the chair Minerva had been occupying once they were gone, "Dad?"

Severus looked up at him, "I'm sorry Harry."

"I know," Harry looked down at the exam again, and ripped it in half, then in half again.

Severus blinked in surprise. He charmed those papers so students couldn't destroy them, so they couldn't hide their grades from their parents.

Harry repeated the process with his other exams, then further ripped them all, ending with a pile of shredded parchment, "There." It was a declaration of satisfaction, as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders, and Severus felt the same. "I can always study off Hermione's exams. They're more detailed than my class notes."

Severus lifted his eyebrows and said provokingly, "Are you sure you want to admit that?"

"Her exams are more detailed than some textbooks!" Harry defended himself indignantly. "How could my notes possibly be better?"

Severus laughed, feeling a bit lighter himself. He removed the charm from the exams, though it hardly seemed necessary at that point, and incinerated the shreds, "Now, what would you like for dinner?"

Harry's eyes lit up, "Mm, how about steak and kidney pie, garlic spinach, mashed potatoes, and treacle tart with cinnamon ice cream for dessert."

Severus was surprised, normally under the assumption that most teenagers avoided a balanced meal wherever possible, "Sounds good to me." He summoned up a house elf and they went back into their quarters together.

Chapter Fifty-One

-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-oOo-

Harry had slept in his father's quarters that night, feeling that it might somehow make Snape feel better about the conversation they had the night before. Ron and Hermione had returned after dinner, and on had been more than willing to have a second, or most like third or fourth in Ron's case, helping of dessert while they finished studying. They were sent back to Gryffindor after curfew via Floo, as they had all lost track time while practicing their transfigurations.

The Potions exam went about as well as Harry expected. The practical portion was easier than any Harry had taken in his previous years, but he had also studied harder than ever before. He had some trouble with the practical, as he always did, but thought the lessons his father had given him on the basics had actually helped. There was always just some step that eluded him, or an ingredient that he prepared wrong. His result that time was slightly runnier than it was supposed to be and a few shades off the proper shade of orange.

"Hey," Hermione pushed her shoulder into Harry's during lunch. He was picking up spoonfuls of his broccoli cheese soup and letting them drip back into his bowl. "I'm sure you didn't do that bad." Harry smiled a bit, but he knew it didn't reach his eyes, "I was just hoping... I don't know... to make him proud, I guess."

Hermione gave him a one-armed hug and leaned in towards him, "Chin up Harry. I'm sure that he'll be proud just that you did your best. There is no rule that says that his being a Potions Master means you have to excel at potions. I should know. After all, I know *all* the rules."

Harry laughed and kissed her on the cheek, "Thanks 'Mione."

"Hey!" Ron exclaimed playfully from across the table. "Watch it Harry! You don't see me nosing in on..."

"Ron!" at least four voices interrupted together. He turned a succession of colors, red, pale white, and then sickly green.

Ginny was glaring at him, "I cannot believe what you almost said. I'm going to have nightmares for years because of you!"

"Really Ron," Harry shook his head and smirked, the opportunity just too tempting to pass up, "I didn't know you were into..."

Hermione clapped a hand over his mouth before he continued and Seamus, Dean, and Neville all started laughing, "Honestly Ron, Harry can give me a friendly kiss on the cheek, or hug me, and so can the rest of our friends. None of them would even considering doing more while I'm with you, and I wouldn't let anyone if they tried."

Sufficiently chastised Ron nodded, "Sorry Harry, sorry 'Mione."

"Well, if you're all through being sorry," Dean announced, "we have a transfiguration exam to take."

Ron groaned and started chanting his latest mantra as they left the great hall, "Just one more year, just one more year, just one more year."

"We have N.E.W.T.s next year and don't you think I'll let you forget it!" Hermione reminded her errant boyfriend.

"Aw, 'Mione!" Ron whined, "Can't you let me finish these exams first?" The familiar arguing from the two of them prompted laughter from their friends as they left the hall.

Explain the necessary steps in the animagus transformation. Discuss the progress you have made and make sure to be detailed.

Harry's jaw dropped and he looked up at McGonagall, who was smiling down at him as though she had just caught a canary in her animal form. He was tempted to repeat a few of the pranks he had heard that were played on her by the Marauders. It was one of only two questions on his exam.

He had just put his quill to paper when a loud roar made everyone in the room, except Harry himself, jump, several people cursing as their quills had been dragged across their parchment,

ruining the work they had already done. Harry knew that sound and jumped up from his seat to look out the window. He found that McGonagall had done the same.

"Is that...?" she asked quietly.

Harry nodded, and buried his head in his hands, "That's her."

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall stood straight and raised her voice, "you are excused to take care of this situation. I expect you back in my classroom immediately following dinner to complete your exam. Your practical portion can be completed with your class if you are ready in time."

Harry nodded again and raised his fake wand, *Accio Supernova II*. He opened the window and saw Hermione open the door while waiting for the broom. It smacked into his hand moments later and he flew out the window of the classroom, hearing Seamus behind him, "Now that's an exit."

His dragon mother was on the grounds of the school, roaring in confusion, searching for him. With all the people there it must have been too hard to single out his scent. When she saw him flying towards her she sniffed, and roared in welcome. He flew up to her head and huggers her snout, hearing almost purring like sounds in return.

"Hey there," he hissed in the flowing tones of parseltongue. "This is my school. I was just taking an exam. I told you I would be here."

She roared again and Harry let his empathy open wide. Gwendolyn had made it back to Romania safely he had read in a letter from Charlie, and he suspected that there had been some exchange that prompted this visit.

"I have to finish my exam, but I promise I'll come back out," somehow she managed to nuzzle him without knocking him off his broom. "The forest is a better place to wait for me. The other small wizards here will be afraid of you. I'll come to the edge of the forest after dinner."

Harry flew away when she spread her wings. She took off and went into the Forbidden Forest and Harry sighed. How the hell was he going to manage this if she kept chasing after him? He could just picture a dragon showing up at Privet Drive.

Harry landed and brushed off his robes, though dragons were surprisingly clean for large reptiles that only bathed when it rained. He watched the dragon land not too deep in the forest, and suspected she chose the clearing where Harry had lessons with his father and Remus. It was quite possible that just enough of his scent remained there for her to detect.

"You have a visitor Harry?" Harry turned around. How did the headmaster always... well, almost always... know what was going on in the school and grounds? Well, he did have ghosts, house elves, and portraits that most likely all reported to him.

Harry grinned a bit sheepishly, "Um, yeah. I'm not sure what to do."

"Perhaps they can help," Dumbledore pointed at four figures running towards them.

Renee, Deiter, Jeremy, and Charlie were panting as they skidded to halt by Harry and Dumbledore, "Is... Eliza... here?"

"Eliza?" Harry questioned with an arched eyebrow, his arms crossed over his chest.

Charlie looked startled for moment then grinned, "We named her after your mum."

At Harry's blank look Dumbledore bent down and whispered in his ear, "Lily's full name was Lily Elizabeth Evans before she married James."

"Yeah, she's here," Harry responded, refusing to react to hearing his mother's full name for the first time. "I sent her into the forest for awhile. I think she kinda freaked out that I was gone."

"Like son, like mother," Charlie teased. He gave Harry a quick hug, "She broke through the wards. We ran all the way from Hogsmeade."

"I, um, have to finish my transfiguration exam..." Harry wasn't really sure what he was supposed to do in that situation, but McGonagall did expect him for the practical portion of the exam.

"Not quite yet Harry," Dumbledore's voice was grave. "Should the children of any of the Death Eaters who took her be here she may recognize their scent. She knew who Severus was."

Harry paled. He had not thought of the possibility, "Well, if everyone feels like a trip into the forest...?"

"Lead the way Harry," Dumbledore gestured ahead.

Harry nodded and cast a very specific banishing spell that sent his broom back to his room. He headed towards the Forbidden Forest, now thankful that he had been in there so much recently. He turned to the dragon handlers, "Um, most of the inhabitants don't want us in here, so keep your senses open."

They all understood and seconds later Harry was much more aware of the other dragon handlers than he had been before. They all had some degree of empathy and so their emotions felt stronger, more real, than those of everyone else. He wondered what it would be like to live with them, to be that open to people, and the idea nearly panicked him before he got himself under control.

A hand on Harry's shoulder helped him calm, and he recognized the feel of Charlie, who leaned close and whispered in his ear, "Reign it in Harry. You'll get us all panicky if you don't stop projecting so strongly."

Harry just nodded and accepted the soothing comfort offered from not only Charlie but from Renee, Deiter, and Jeremy as well. Each of them had a different emotional feel, almost like a fingerprint that made their emotional patterns unique, and he knew he would be able to recognize them anywhere. He thought for a moment that the reason these people chose the profession they had was not necessarily for love of the animals they worked with, though none of them were lacking there, but because it was the only place to be surrounded by people that fully understood them. They came upon the clearing where Eliza was waiting without any excitement and, to Harry's confusion, Dumbledore just wandered off while Harry talked to the dragon. He held her snout and stroked her between the eyes while explaining his situation, that she couldn't follow him everywhere.

"Go with these wizards back to Romania," Harry asked of her in a soft hiss. "I promise I'll visit you."

He turned to the dragon handlers and spoke in English, "She'll go back with you."

They all nodded and Renee, Deiter, and Jeremy all gave Harry quick hugs. He found he didn't mind the contact from them, and the share of emotion increased with touch. Harry felt genuine friendship, admiration, acceptance, and concern from each of them. The three of them mounted their brooms and rose into the air as Charlie hugged Harry tightly.

"I'll see you later this summer," Charlie promised, the vibrations of his voice against Harry's neck sending shivers down his spine.

Harry nodded and told himself he would have that both necessary and dreaded talk with Charlie next time they were alone, "Thank you for coming for me, before."

"Anytime Potter," Charlie kissed him gently and sweetly and Harry felt at home, content, until he remembered they had an audience.

"Charlie!" Harry felt the heat rising to his cheeks.

Charlie just laughed and got on his broom, "Harry, they wouldn't be very good empaths if they couldn't figure out there is something between us without the visual. You'll get back to the castle okay?"

Harry nodded and waved as they all flew away, Eliza following. He didn't bother waiting for Dumbledore before heading back through the forest, as he still had exams to do. When he made it back the last person was just coming out of the transfiguration practical portion.

"Everything taken care of?" McGonagall asked him.

"For now anyway," Harry grinned cheekily. "I think I can spare five minutes or so before the next crisis pops up."

"In that case you have an exam to complete," McGonagall stepped back and motioned for Harry to enter the room. Harry thought he saw a small smile on the normally stern professor's face.

With exams finished, the Gryffindors lounged outside by the lake, enjoying the warm, sunny weather that was a rarity in Scotland. Any year before Harry would have been with just Ron and Hermione. Sitting against a beech tree, the same tree that he had seen the Marauders lounging under in Snape's pensieve, he looked at the group around him with a smile.

Dean, Seamus, and Ginny were playing Exploding Snap in the shade. Neville was lying on his back in the sun, for all appearances napping until he ran a hand through Luna's hair, her head pillowed on his stomach as she read the latest edition of *The Quibbler*. Every so often, a DA member would pass by and wave 'hello' or stop for a few words.

"What are you pondering?" Hermione asked, her shoulder bumping his as she leaned against the same tree, Ron's head emitting soft snores from her lap. He had one hand entwined with one of Hermione's and she was playing with his hair with her free hand.

Harry closed his eyes, "Us, all of us. I think Mum and Dad and Padfoot would be happy seeing me right now."

"I'm sure they are," Hermione rested her head on Harry's shoulder and he slipped an arm around her waist. It took him several moments to realize he didn't mind the close contact, not with Hermione anyway. He had his knees pulled up to his chest, and winced slightly when the healing skin on his leg was tugged at, the only remaining injury from the night he rescued his father. Hermione knew him well. She recognized the wince for what it was and didn't react beyond adjusting her head on his shoulder.

Harry closed his eyes and thought back to the night he went to Grimmauld Place. He hadn't known that Remus had been high-strung and irritable the entire time Harry was in Romania, as he couldn't visit to make sure for himself that Harry was safe. When he finally saw Harry he hugged him so tightly Harry had almost worried that his ribs would break. The werewolf had insisted on checking Harry's injuries and succeeded in thoroughly embarrassing him in front of several Order members. He had been able to provide information on the wound on Harry's leg. It would still be another week or so before it was fully healed and would be a permanent scar.

"Hey Malfoy," Harry heard.

Harry opened his eyes in surprise. That was *Neville* that had greeted the Slytherin so casually. He was intrigued and scanned Malfoy to find that he was just as shocked as Harry. Harry smirked lightly, almost smiling.

"Longbottom," Malfoy nodded and turned to each of them in turn. "Lovegood, Finnegan, Thomas, Weasleys, Granger, Potter."

They all gave some sort of greeting in return, except for the dozing Ron, surprisingly civil for Slytherin-Gryffindor interaction.

Luna smiled at the blond, "Have a seat."

Malfoy blinked, the only reaction that showed on his face, "Just passing through I'm afraid. I have things to do."

He began to walk away, and Harry realized he might not have another chance. He whispered to Hermione and stood up, "Wait up!"

Harry jogged to catch up with the Slytherin, trying to ignore his leg wound. Malfoy turned, "Something to say Potter?"

"Yeah," Harry responded and looked around. "You might want to hear this in private though." Malfoy lifted an eyebrow but nodded and they walked silently until they were out of earshot of the other students. Harry took a deep breath, "Your father is no longer imprisoned. He was at Voldemort's headquarters that night."

Malfoy froze, tense all over. Harry saw the muscles in his jaw twitch and knew it was taking everything the Slytherin had not to show what he was feeling, "Thank you Potter. I'll have to keep that in consideration." There was a long pause, "At least tell me you got a good hex in."

Harry smirked, "It was rather cathartic." He stopped, making Malfoy wait for the rest. They might not fight any longer, but it was still fun to get the other wound up. "He's still drinking all his meals through a straw if they haven't lifted the anti-healing curse yet. His jaw got well acquainted with my right fist."

"Cruel Potter," Malfoy said almost dreamily. "I like it."

"Just keep an eye out," Harry said with a touch of concern, resting a hand on Malfoy's shoulder. "If Voldemort hasn't punished him for what you did yet he will soon. He may come after you."

"Worried about me Potter?" Malfoy teased. "Careful, people might get the wrong idea and think we're actually friends."

"Merlin forbid," Harry snorted. "Don't get your knickers in a twist. I even worry about Fudge if you must know. That man is too stupid to avoid an attack. He'll probably be dead or permanently in Mungo's within a year."

Malfoy just shook his head, "And he'll take several Aurors him I'm sure. Thanks for the heads up Potter. I'll see you in September."

Malfoy headed down to the dungeons, and Harry went back outside to rejoin his friends. Ron had woken and they started a large game of Exploding Snap, using three decks to accommodate that many people playing.

"You know Harry," Neville had a bit of the old nervousness back in his voice.

Harry looked up at him, "Yeah Neville?"

"My mum is your godmother," Neville said quietly.

Everyone in the circle stopped talking and Harry looked at Neville in amazement, "She is?"

Neville nodded, "She was roommates with your mum in Gryffindor, and they stood for each other in their weddings. Your mum helped get my parents get together I think, or that's what Gran told me anyway."

Harry wondered why no one had ever told him before, but suspected it would have been a bit much. Guess what Harry, your godfather is in prison for betraying your parents and killing a bunch of people and your godmother is in the hospital and can't even remember her own name or speak.

"Thanks Nev," Harry smiled softly. "Do you think... maybe I could visit them with you next time?"

Neville blinked and Harry felt his surprise and gratitude, "I'll talk to Gran. We go every year on my birthday and Christmas."

"End of July, right?" Harry questioned, realizing he only knew Hermione's and Ron's birthdays. He had to find out when his father's was... and Charlie's.

"July 30, the day before yours," Neville was again surprised. "How did you know?"

"Um...", Harry remembered that none of them knew what the prophecy said, but figured that much was known to the Death Eaters so it couldn't hurt. "That prophecy at the Ministry?" Everyone nodded, paying close attention, and Harry saw that Hermione, Ron, and Ginny were not at all surprised. He wondered how much they knew. "Voldemort already knew part of it. It was about him, and a baby born at the end of July to parents that had defied him three times. It was either you or me, but he essentially chose me."

Everyone except Harry and Luna was looking at Neville in blatant shock and disbelief. Luna kissed Neville, who was just gaping at Harry, softly on the cheek.

Neville shook his head out of the daze he was in, "Neville Longbottom, The-Boy-Who-Lived. Nah, doesn't really work, does it?"

Harry snorted, laughed, and soon they were all laughing hysterically, cards abandoned and explosions going unheeded.

"What about the rest of it?" Ginny asked with naked curiosity.

Harry shook his head, "Can't say, and trust me, you don't want to hear it."

Nearly all of them accepted that at face value, but Hermione and Ron gave Harry pained, knowing looks. They had been around him long enough to have a good idea of what he wasn't telling them. He mouthed 'later, I promise' and looked down. He had gotten a year of relative freedom from questioning and heavy training, and had a feeling that was all about to change. He had healed mentally as much as he was going to and had a destiny to face.

Chapter Fifty-Two

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The leaving feast was almost the same as all twenty-three other such feasts he had attended, with the exception of those when Severus was a student. At those feasts the Marauders had felt it their duty to play a prank of some sort on the entire school, students and teachers both. James had once told him how it started, that Black had feared going home their first year and so they had convinced the house-elves to put a cheering potion in all the drinks being served at the feast. Severus had never seen before James explained that there were occasionally altruistic intentions behind the pranks... only occasionally.

That night Severus could have used the yearly cheering prank from his student days. He was not looking forward to the following day, to leaving Harry in the hands of the Dursleys. There was a strong urge to make the Dursleys feel every bit of pain they had given his son, but he knew Harry would hate him if he carried out that dream.

"It's only six weeks," Remus said next to him.

Severus glared, "Excuse me?"

"You were grinding your teeth Severus," Remus smiled mischievously. "You were thinking about the Dursleys."

Severus grunted in response and drank from his goblet, almost feeling that prank at work. The hall was decorated in crimson and gold yet again. The less biased point subtraction on Severus's part, Weasley's points for the potion, and Harry's points for helping with the dragons and saving Severus had assured a Gryffindor victory. A glance at the Gryffindor table showed him Harry was fully enjoying the feast, a broad grin on his face.

"He doesn't seem to mind," Severus commented, a little mystified.

Remus's grin widened and took a long drink from his goblet, "That's because he's been cheered."

"You didn't," Severus would have gaped at the man had he not had such firm control over his expressions.

"Marauders are Marauders for life and beyond," Remus said a little wistfully, "Code 10 of the Marauder Code of Conduct. It's actually a magically binding contract, though we didn't realize it at the time when we all signed it. I only got a few Gryffindors tonight though. I *am* a professor after all." Severus looked at the man with a little amazement at the far-reaching potential of an accidental binding contract between four teenagers, "What does that mean for Pettigrew?"

"What?" Remus looked at Severus in confusion before his eyes widened in realization. "Bugger! He's beholden... that's why.."

"That's why what?" Severus demanded quietly.

Remus glared at his plate and Severus almost flinched away, "According to the Code, Harry is an Honorary Marauder and full Pack member, as are you by the way."

If Severus had been eating anything he would have choked. James was even getting him from the grave. He had never told Severus about *that*. Of course, Severus might have refused the bond out of principle if he knew it would have that consequence.

"That....," Severus took a deep breath. "Damn it James."

Remus laughed a little before continuing, "When we had Peter cornered in the Shack Harry stopped us from killing him. We let him decide... and it was because of the Code. He said James wouldn't want us to become murderers. Add Lily, she signed it eventually too, and that's three to two. Peter broke the Code, at least five of them. I hadn't actually thought about it at all until just recently."

Remus smiled at Severus as though he was privy to some tasty secret, "I had to add Code 35."

Severus had a flash of memory, something that had been happening occasionally when a phrase or sight provoked it, "That's what he was talking about." Remus just raised an eyebrow. "James would sometimes refer to Code 13 rather... suggestively."

Remus started coughing, and Sprout hit his back from the other side. Several students, Harry and his cohorts included, looked at the staff table in concern but Remus recovered and gave them all a weak smile. He shook his head and mumbled something Severus couldn't hear. Severus gave him a pointed look and Remus blushed lightly.

"Code 13: Gryffindors Rule, Slytherins Suck," the werewolf recited quickly under his breath.

"Ah," Severus nodded and smirked, always liking the discomfort he caused the Gryffindor in these conversations. "He rather liked that one."

Remus just continued eating, with his eyes far away in thought. Severus knew that look, and had a feeling it did not bode well for the rat animagus. Remus completely ignored Dumbledore's speech and left the hall in a hurry as soon as it was acceptable to, getting curious looks from several staff members and students alike.

None of their questions were answered that night, but Severus was not entirely surprised when Remus arrived at breakfast the next morning with his eyes slightly reddened from lack of sleep. The werewolf pulled Harry aside for a quiet word after the meal and the two of them disappeared in the direction of Remus's office. Severus's spy instincts were tingling, telling him to question Remus and find out exactly what was going on, but he restrained himself. He knew he would be told soon enough.

Harry's eyes had that same mischievous look in them when he came to Severus's quarters shortly before the train left, "Can I leave some things here?"

Severus nodded, "Of course. Anything in particular?"

"Well, I don't think I'll need robes at the Dursleys," Harry snorted and rolled his eyes. "I also don't want to bring my photo album, or my Firebolt, and there are a lot of books I don't need." There was a long pause. "It's nice to have somewhere to keep my things."

Severus thought about that for a moment as Harry began removing several items from his trunk. It looked like everything Harry owned was in there and Harry had been carrying his whole life with him for years, without any sense of permanence. It was yet another in the long list of reasons that Severus felt like hexing the Dursleys to China and back.

"Bring a few robes," Severus suggested, not letting Harry in on his internal dialogue. "You'll most likely go to Diagon Alley without stopping back here."

Harry's eyes lit up, "I get to go myself?"

"I told you I would take you to Gringotts," Severus reminded him.

Harry just grinned, "I'd forgotten, what with meetings with murderous dark lords and all." Severus snorted. It seemed like the cheering potion was still in effect. Harry separated out a few sets of robes, and Severus noted that all Harry had were school robes and one set of formal robes that dated back to his fourth year. They would need to stop by his seamstress. "I'll see you soon?"

"The Dursleys will learn to dislike my presence," Severus said with a bit of pleasure but with more distaste.

"Learn?" Harry said sarcastically. "Just give them the first year Gryffindor treatment, or even mention that you're a wizard, and they'll be shaking in their boots."

Severus put a hand on Harry's shoulder and looked down at him, "Go catch your train. I will see you soon."

Harry left with a bright smile and a spring in his step that had to be partially potion induced, but Severus knew there was a little more to it than that. Harry was finally healing, and though he had a long way to go yet Severus knew that he had played a large part in that process.

A knock on his door in the staff quarters corridor brought Severus out of his contemplations. He went to open the door and allow Albus to enter, the usual twinkle in his eyes shining brightly.

Severus sighed, wondering what the latest manipulation of his life that was about to occur was.

"You are planning to see the Dursleys this evening?" Albus questioned with a smile. Severus scowled and nodded. How was it that Albus always knew what Severus would do before he even did it? "Good. I have already informed them they need not retrieve Harry from the train station. When you have delivered Harry please come directly to London Severus. A meeting has been scheduled at the last moment."

"I take it this has something to do with the werewolf?" Severus sneered, grasping at keeping his normal self about him.

Albus merely chuckled, "You will see tonight Severus."

Severus could only grumble to himself as the headmaster left the room, sucking on his blasted lemon drops. It took a moment for Severus to realize he had not been offered one of the candies, and he wondered just what that could mean. Severus spent the morning in preparing his curriculum for the first and second year students for the coming fall, in hope that his summer would prove to be very busy and not allow as much time for this work as usual.

Lunch in the great hall the day the students left was always a celebration on the part of the staff. As was the normal for the past fifteen years at least, the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor was not present at the relaxed lunch. Severus heard speculation as to where Lupin had run off to, as he was the first Defense professor that would be back for a second straight year in over a decade, but did not join in himself. He did have a vague suspicion as to the werewolf's whereabouts.

"Severus," Albus spoke just as the Potions Master was about to leave the hall. "Please inform Molly and Arthur of the meeting when you see them this afternoon."

Severus just nodded and continued on his way. He updated his lessons for his third years and fourth years and noticed it was time to leave. Once Severus reached the edge of the Hogwarts wards he apparated to King's Cross Station, just in time to see the scarlet engine approaching on its track.

"Severus!" the voice of Molly Weasley carried and a number of parents turned to look at him in surprise, not hiding their open curiosity. He certainly understood what Harry hated about his fame. The redheaded woman made her way through the throng of parents to him and greeted him with a quick hug, causing further shock and whispering, "I didn't expect to see you here!"

"I do have some things to discuss with Lily's relatives," Severus said in a low voice. He did not want his conversation overheard and spread throughout the gathering, "You can expect a large amount of guests for dinner tonight Molly."

The woman blinked but regained her composure quickly, "Hm, I'll have to change the menu then. I can always send Dobby out."

Severus nodded and saw the students begin to pour off the train. The house elf that had been guarding the Death Eater prisoners was now splitting his time between Hogwarts and Grimmauld Place, having sworn on Harry's name that he wouldn't betray any secrets of the Order or its members. For that elf it was a stronger bond than that of master and servant.

"Dad?" Harry's voice speaking the word so naturally made Severus smile, a sight which no doubt was like a lightning bolt to the brains of his many students and former students that were around him at the time. "What are you doing here?"

The smile gradually faded to a smirk, "Do you think I would actually wait to speak with the muggles?"

Harry matched his smirk, "Of course not." Harry turned away to say his goodbyes and Severus noticed the rather large number of students, from all Houses, that passed by and had to say a word or two to The-Boy-Who-Lived. When Harry was done the platform was significantly less crowded, "How are we going then?"

"As you are not licensed to apparate yet I thought it best that I bring you along with me," Severus said, a little sternly. Harry Potter was still Harry Potter, and it wouldn't surprise Severus one bit if

illegal apparition was added onto the list of rules broken. They still weren't sure exactly how he got to the Dark Lord's caves.

Harry just nodded and rubbed his hands on his jeans. It was then that Severus noticed that Harry was wearing perhaps the absolute worst clothing he had. He raised an eyebrow.

"The Dursleys don't need to know I have money," Harry explained with a twinge of nervousness in his voice. "I'll let them assume I got some secondhand clothes that fit. Tandem apparation then? At least it's better than a Portkey."

"I am sure you are the only wizard alive to think so," Severus muttered with a shake of his head. He reduced Harry's trunk to the size of a Galleon and put it in his pocket before pulling Harry towards him. Harry stood with his back to his father and Severus held his shoulders firmly, "Relax." Severus waited for the muscles he was holding to loosen just enough before directing their apparition to arrive in Harry's bedroom at Privet Drive with a loud 'crack'. A muffled scream from downstairs signaled that their arrival had been noticed. Severus enlarged Harry's trunk and straightened the room with a flick of his wand.

With a sneer he transfigured the bed into something much more comfortable and conjured up self-cleaning sheets and several warm blankets, along with a few fluffy pillows. He cast a litany of spells, all designed to change the room into something that wouldn't remind Harry of his childhood or the previous summer and when he was done it was unrecognizable. Done, he noticed Harry was smiling at him, but the smile was not in the eyes.

"Thanks," Harry said softly, looking around the room. Severus cursed under his breath. He knew it was a mistake to send Harry back here.

"Are you sure you want to stay here?" Severus asked. "The Dursleys do not deserve your protection and I am not convinced you need the protection of this house."

Harry just nodded, "I'll be fine. It just... there are so many memories."

Severus stepped forward and pulled Harry into a hug. His son shook slightly against him, but there were no tears. When the shaking subsiding Severus pulled back and ruffled the messy black hair, the silky strands exactly like he remembered.

"Shall we give them a scare?" Severus suggested with an evil smile and gleam in his eye. Harry matched his expression and nodded.

It still infuriated Severus that Harry had grown up with these miserable excuses for humanity. It would have been bad enough if Harry was a normal child... but an Empath being raised in such a hostile, cold environment was despicable. It was no wonder Harry's talent had not been identified until he was sixteen.

With only negative emotions directed at him for years he must have shut himself off to prevent severe clinical depression. He would have made an attempt on his own life much earlier if he hadn't blocked his senses. It was probably only the close contact with Charlie that opened that talent up. An Empath that couldn't recognize love when he felt it...

When Severus arrived at Grimmauld Place he was questioned extensively on the behavior of the Dursleys and Harry's wellbeing. All the time he couldn't wipe the satisfied smirk off his face. It took over thirty minutes to placate Molly Weasley, and Severus found himself appreciating the level of concern she had for his son. If something ever happened to him the Weasleys would take care of Harry.

"Molly," Severus looked at her seriously. "I need to designate guardians for Harry should anything happen to me. I am sure he would agree with me that you and Arthur are the best possible candidates."

The woman burst into tears and hugged Severus so tightly he thought his ribs would break. Remus came into the kitchen then and caught sight of Severus's bewildered expression. Severus blinked and got his impassive mask back in place before prying himself out of Molly Weasley's grasp.

Appendix

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The Official Marauders Code of Conduct

Revised Edition

Code 1: Marauders stick together.

Code 2: There are four Marauders. The number of Marauders shall be four, and four shall be the number of Marauders.

Code 3: I solemnly swear I am up to no good.

Code 4: Marauders may hex each other, but only with just provocation, ruled on by the innocent, granted that any actually exist, bystander Marauders.

Code 5: Should any Marauder break a Marauder's Code, said Marauder's punishment shall be determined by all other Marauders. The guilty Marauder will feel compelled to right their wrongs.

Code 6: There is *no* Code Six.

Code 7: No Marauder may share any Marauder secrets with non-Marauders.

Code 8: The Pack comes first.

Code 9: Should any Marauder actually have children someday, Merlin forbid, said children shall be automatically deemed Honorary Marauders.

Code 10: Marauders are Marauders for life and beyond.

Code 11: No Marauder shall join You-Know-Who for any reason whatsoever.

Code 12: No prank is too big, no prank is small, no prank is unworthy of a Marauder granted that the prank does not cause permanent harm.

Code 13: Gryffindors Rule. Slytherins Suck.

Code 14: Marauders shall not rat each other out to professors, prefects, Head Boy, Head Girl, Slytherins, or prank victims.

Code 15: When a Marauder is having trouble every other Marauder is duty bound to help said Marauder.

Code 16: Remus Jacques Lupin, AKA Moony, is the alpha wolf and brain.

Code 17: James Aaron Potter, AKA Prongs, is the front man.

Code 18: Sirius Constantine Black, AKA Padfoot, is the crazy one.

Code 19: Peter Charles Pettigrew, AKA Wormtail, is the sneaky one.

Code 20: There are no secrets between Marauders.

Code 21: Credit for a prank may only be claimed in the name of the Marauders.

Code 22: Marauders are purveyors in the aid of magical mischief.

Code 23: All blackmail material is common property of all Marauders.

Code 24: The night of the full moon is the time for fun and games.

Code 25: All Slytherins are fair game.

Code 26: Revenge is sweet.

Code 27: The Marauders Map is not to be revealed to any non-Marauders.

Code 28: James's invisibility cloak shall not be exposed to non-Marauders, with the exception of other Potters and anyone James deems worthy, as it is his cloak.

Code 29: Davey Gudgeon, AKA Cyclops, may be considered a Junior Marauder and participate in pranks, but shall not be privy to all Marauder secrets.

Code 30: Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs shall be the official names of the Marauders.

Code 31: Honorary Marauders may be appointed by unanimous consent of all Marauders or are automatically inducted upon completing a bonding ritual with a Marauder.

Code 32: Lily Evans is an Honorary Marauder and may be included in all Marauder secrets.

Code 33: Pranks shall not be played on Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

Code 34: Harold James Potter, Honorary Marauder according to Code 9, was born July 31, 1980 at 9:42 am at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, weighing 6 pounds and 5 ounces, to Lily Elizabeth Evans Potter and James Aaron Potter after 15 hours of labor and 20 hexes before we took away Lily's wand. Harry shall be raised as befitting a Marauder, entitled to all the privileges and heritage thereof, and though Padfoot is his Godfather of record every Marauder is responsible for his happiness and wellbeing. Welcome into the Pack, our first pup.

Code 35: Merlin help us, Severus Snape is okay after all and qualifies as an Honorary Marauder and member of the Pack.

James Aaron Potter/Remus Jacques Lupin

Sirius Constantine Black/Peter Charles Pettigrew

Lily Elizabeth Evans Potter

David Francis Gudgeon

Harold James Potter

Severus Octavian Snape