Regards Harry (Part 2 of Moment of Impact Series)
by suitesamba

Summary

Harry Potter's sixth year at Hogwarts, following canon and original events, but with the mentor/father relationship established with Severus Snape in this story's prequel, Moment of Impact.

Notes

A/N: Welcome to Regards, Harry. This is a sequel to my recently completed story Moment of Impact. Note that the events of this story occur BETWEEN Chapters 43 & 44 of MOI and will all occur during Harry's sixth year at Hogwarts. All events roughly follow cannon except for the mentor/father-figure relationship between Harry and Severus that was established in MOI. While MOI was told in Harry's POV, the POV in this story switches between the Harry and Severus and is told with limited narrative and regular letters between the two. The background (given in MOI), is that Severus must publicly appear to treat Harry the same as ever, but they agree to communicate through letters written to each other on Harry's Defense Against the Dark Arts homework assignments. While this story can be read by itself, there are frequent references to events and situations that occurred in MOI, which took place in the summer between fifth and sixth years.
Harry Potter sat in a squashy chair in the Gryffindor common room with a pile of books in front of him on a low sofa table. He was three days in to the first term of his sixth year at Hogwarts and already the homework was piling up. They had been warned—each and every teacher had lectured their sixth year classes on the demands of their N.E.W.T-level classes. He'd already completed his Charms and Transfiguration homework and had nearly finished the eighteen inch Defense essay Snape had set for them on shield spells. He glanced over at Hermione, Ron and Neville. Hermione and Neville seemed hard at work on their own assignments and Ron…well, Ron seemed to be sleeping. Obviously Hermione hadn't noticed yet. Harry sighed and wrote two more lines to finish his essay then, looking over at Hermione one more time, licked the end of his quill and began writing at the bottom of his completed essay.

4 September, 1996

Wednesday

Dear Severus:

This is weird. Definitely weird.

News first, I guess. I'm meeting with Professor McGonagall next Thursday to begin Animagus studies. She's already informed me it will require MORE meditation. Well, I suppose you'd say that time spent meditating is time not spent wandering about the corridors under my invisibility cloak, yeah? Didn't I read something in your book about the Beatles and Trans-something meditation?

Did I mention it's really weird writing you a letter on my HOMEWORK?

Whose idea was it, anyway, to put Slytherins and Gryffindors together in class—ESPECIALLY in Defense? I think you're just asking for trouble when you make us duel each other. Is even Dumbledore—PROFESSOR Dumbledore, I mean—that naïve? To tell you the truth, pitting me against Malfoy doesn't exactly make me want to practice my defense skills. (I know you know what I mean.) And I know you have to treat me like dirt but did you have to get that dig in about my relatives? I really don't need anyone thinking that they gave up vacations in the Canary Islands in order to afford my Hogwarts tuition.

Our first Potions class yesterday was great! Hermione really got her nose out of joint when I used your directions to make the Draught of Living Death and mine turned out better than hers. I got a special prize from Slughorn—alright, alright—Professor Slughorn—for my work. I'm not sure that he should have given it to me so I think I'll not tell you what it was just yet.
I gave my friends their t-shirts after the sorting the other night. Ginny's looks really nice on her but Ron thinks I made a mistake and got her shirt three sizes too small. Ha! No mistake there. He liked his shirt, but kept calling it a sumbareen even though it was spelled right out for him on the shirt. Hermione's mouth would twitch up at the corner whenever he said it.

Did you have a headache today in class?

Hermione is looking at me funny. I don't think she's ever seen me write so much on an essay at one time without looking things up in a book or asking her how to spell something.

Can I count this section as an additional 6 inches toward my essay?

Regards,

Harry

Harry signed his name with a flourish of ink, making Hermione look up suspiciously.

"Do you want me to read that for you, Harry?" she asked.

"Yeah, thanks. That would be great. Just let me clean it up a bit," he said, smiling at her lopsidedly. He'd learned several years ago that that awkward smile worked like a charm on Hermione. He grabbed his wand from the table and tapped the parchment, softly incanting the spell Snape had taught him to hide the personal part of the homework assignment. They’d modified it to hide the writing completely. It didn't do anything to the ink blots and smears, however.

"Let me, Harry," sighed Hermione. He handed the parchment over to her and sank back into his chair. It was a lot more difficult getting used to the constant commotion at school and in the Gryffindor common room than it had been any other year he'd returned to Hogwarts. But then again, this was the first year he felt like he was leaving home to get here.

- Severus -

One day, Severus Snape was going to calculate how much he was paid per actual hour worked at Hogwarts. A full six hours spent in front of students, another two to or three marking most evenings, mealtime duties, Head of House duties, monitoring Quidditch games, meetings with parents, convincing teenage Death Eater wannabes not to do something incredibly stupid. ..

The sixth year essays were uniformly terrible. Even Granger's lacked originality. Malfoy's was a half-hearted attempt at best. Harry's was barely acceptable. Ah, yes. He'd almost forgotten. He smiled when he came to the end of Harry's essay and found another eight inches of blank parchment. He tapped it with his wand and settled back into his rolling desk chair. A smile flitted over his face as he read. The boy was all over the place, jumping from one topic to the next. He finished the letter and picked up his own quill to begin his reply.

/ 4 September, 1996 Wednesday
Dear Harry:

Professor Slughorn has already made it known—to everyone in the Faculty Lounge and any passing students in the corridors outside and possibly to our hotel concierge in Liverpool—that Harry Potter is the lucky owner of a full dose of Felix Felicis. I trust you understand the restrictions on this potion and will use it wisely. In general I find that we create our own luck in life but am still interested to hear of your escapades with the potion—once they occur.

Yes, the headmaster is that naïve.

It's Transcendental Meditation and do NOT go there again.

No, you cannot count the vertical space your missives occupy toward your essay content, nor the blank space between the end of your homework and the beginning of your letter. Nice try.

As for my behavior—and your own—in Defense classes, I shall endeavor in the future to avoid certain topics, as long as you can look properly affronted by what I do throw your way. May I, for example, deride your taste in the opposite sex? Ah. I thought not. However, I must appear to be seriously cruel in my attacks, and therefore must get personal and verbally attack what you value—and what you value most are friends and family and fairness. I doubt I would make your blood pressure rise much by making fun of your new school clothing or your habit of eating your dinner one food item at a time. Indeed, those revelations would only expose the fact that I pay attention to you outside of class.

Perhaps we could make this more of a game. You could make me work harder for your reaction. I'll give Gryffindor a point (later and, of course, privately) for each time I provoke you and you don't rise to the bait. No—a better option. For each time you manage to do no more than seethe quietly, I will share with you, in my next missive, one memory about your mother. A fair trade, don't you think?

Right now the clock on my mantel is pointing to "Hagrid's." While I know you are enchanted by those adorable balls of feathers (your words, I believe), soon-to-be-post-owls down there, it is starting to get dark and I know from long experience that N.E.W.T. level classes have exacting homework requirements. Do not forget about my clock, Harry. Perhaps knowing that it is here in my quarters might inspire you to spend more time in the library. However, I will allow that it is the first week of term and your load now is lighter than it soon will be. Recall, too, that the Headmaster has restricted students' activities after dark. The new rules are there for a reason—do heed them.

Please note that there is a shocking lack of red ink on this section of your assignment. Quite a stark contrast to the essay itself. I don't believe your handwriting ever recovered fully after your accident this summer. Do try to take more care with your penmanship. A finer point on your quill will be helpful. I will keep you after class one day this week to teach you a charm to manage that.

That being said, I am of course happy that you can write at all after that little visit you had to St. Mungo's this summer.

As for your reference to my headache—I always have one when I have Gryffindor and Slytherin together.

Regards,

Severus
Severus finished writing and waved his wand to cast the concealment charm. Could the connection Harry had with him alert him to something as minor as a headache? Or had his mood and manner given his condition away? Hell, he should just admit it. The boy probably didn't need an empathetic connection to him to tell when he wasn't feeling well. Harry watched him like a hawk and probably caught him pinching his nose once or twice or a dozen times. At least Harry's interest in him could be easily passed off as suspicion. For now, anyway. He would have to watch this.

Severus sighed and pulled the next pile of homework assignments over in front of him on the desk. First years'. Oh joy.

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-Harry-

He couldn't believe he was doing homework on a Saturday. But Snape had given them a weekend assignment and he was killing time before his meeting with Professor Dumbledore. He'd devoured Snape's letter when he'd finally gotten back to his dorm after classes on Thursday. He'd smiled when he came to the part about the clock—he hadn't forgotten it was there on Snape's mantel but he hadn't really been thinking about it either. And memories of his mum? He supposed Snape should just share them with him regardless, but he was willing to play the game to get to know her better.

He hadn't exactly finished his Defense essay, but he wanted to start on his letter. Boldly, he left the required twelve inches of parchment and moved his quill—nicely pointed now—down to the bottom of the page.

/ 7 September, 1996 Saturday

Dear Severus:

Gryffindor is too loud. And too dry. I talked to Professor McGonagall about a waterbed and she gave me her permission to transfigure it myself. Ha! I wrote down the incantation this summer and would like to give it a try. Is there anything special I should know before I do? I don't know...like maybe you have to be underwater when you cast it or be thinking watery thoughts or something. I do realize the point is to transfigure the stuffing to water, but it seems pretty complex. The water would leak right out the sides if I don't somehow make them waterproof. I hope figuring this out is worth it.

My meeting with Professor Dumbledore has been moved up—I'm meeting with him this evening. I bet you already knew that, though.

I think you owe me a story or two about my mum. I managed not to punch you outright when you lined us up tallest to shortest and acted like I was in the wrong class because I happened to be at the end of the line. I've got some stiff competition in that class as you KNOW in the height department. Ron, Dean, and Crabbengoyle are all even taller than you! (And no, that wasn't a mistake. You never see those two separately so I've decided they're really just one person.)

This is kind of embarrassing—but I really don't know who else to ask... I'm getting lots of...um... attention...from girls. Not just girls in Gryffindor or girls my own age, either. It's nuts. They won't leave me alone. I left some books in the common room a couple nights ago and they stuck LOVE notes in them. At first I thought it might be my new glasses or my new clothes, but that doesn't make...
sense. I'm still the same person underneath it all—are you?

When I was meditating last night (ha ha—you probably thought I was just skiving off and not bothering, didn't you?) I thought of something. You told me that water is your barrier material and that you used to use a moat as your Occlumency shield. What do you use now? And why did you change?

By the way, it's impossible to write a foot on mental preparation for wordless spells when there's nothing in our book about it and you haven't even mentioned it yet. Hermione is going crazy trying to find something in the library on it. She's across from me now practically twitching. Sometimes I worry she'll have a stroke or something with all the pressure she puts on herself. Can wizards have strokes?

Ron gave me a great idea about chess. You can draw a board on paper and play "by owl." He did it with his cousin Barney last summer. If you're game, we can have a go at it so I won't get rusty over the term. I play with Ron whenever we need a break from books, but I've never beat him either.

Malfoy is a prat. Thought you'd want a reminder in case you'd forgotten.

Regards,

Harry

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"I know you're up to something with your Defense homework," said Hermione. Startled, Harry almost dropped the scroll.

"What do you mean?" he asked with feigned innocence.

Hermione rolled her eyes and smiled.

"Never mind," she said. "I'll just go on thinking that you've turned over a new leaf and are just trying to get better marks."

"Yeah, that's it," he replied. "Good marks. N.E.W.T.s and all…"

She stared at him a moment over her book and shook her head, smiling as she returned to her work.

- Severus-

He'd always hated Mondays. The students were tired and grumpy and the faculty was even more tired and more grumpy. But reading Harry's letter—specifically, his "problem" with the opposite sex—cheered him up. If Harry knew he was the favorite subject of the female members of the Faculty….

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9 September, 1996

Monday

Dear Harry:
Ron Weasley is not taller than me. Crabbe and Goyle may be—if you measure around their waists and not top to bottom.

Now that I've gotten the important part of my letter out of the way….

For a person who supposedly meditates every evening, and who has mastered Occlumency, you certainly should have been able to come up with something better (or at least more creative) regarding mental preparation for wordless spells than (and I quote from your very mediocre essay) "The witch or wizard should think the words of the spell in their head mentally."

Albus told me your meeting on Saturday went well but did not offer any details. I expect you will fill me in? Do remember what I told you, Harry. If at any time these meetings become too much for you, you are to let me know. I suspect they will start out informative and relatively easy and gradually become more serious and stressful, as the subject matter dictates.

About the proposed transfiguration of your four-poster into a waterbed...the biggest danger, of course, is drowning. Your transfiguration must "hold" for if it does not, you may find yourself sleeping in the bed rather than on it. I'm not eager to see you sleeping with the fishes (Muggle movie reference…ask me later if you're interested) so why don't you Polyjuice into Goyle, sneak into the Slytherin dorms and try it on Malfoy's bed first?

You do know I was joking in that previous statement, do you not? Keep out of the Slytherin dorms and stay away from Polyjuice potion altogether. My advice is to try the transfiguration in the morning and if the bed is still a waterbed in the evening, do the incantation again and have a good night's sleep.

As for my Occlumency shield, I believe I'll let you discover that yourself when I teach you Legilimency over Christmas Break.

Ahh…down to chess and girls. I am game for the chess game you describe. You will be white. I await your first move.

I do hope you know that your little problem with the female population of Hogwarts has been noticed by most of the staff and is a rousing topic of discussion in the faculty lounge. You do realize, do you not, that MOST boys your age would not look on this as so much a problem as an opportunity? You are wondering, I imagine, what has happened to you to expose you to this kind of attention. New glasses? New clothing? Perhaps. But you have also filled out, so to speak. Your proportions have changed. You have grown taller. You are shaving…albeit not as often as Mr. Malfoy. Hmmm…I should have saved that one for Defense class. In short, Harry, you are becoming more a young man and less a boy. If you need further details of that transformation, you may ask Madam Pomfrey for a very informative little pamphlet she keeps on file.

Yes, wizards can have strokes. Fortunately, we have available greater means to prevent them and to help sufferers recover from them than Muggles do.

Finally, I applaud your control during our little line-up in class on Friday. To reward you, here is a small tidbit about your mother. She had an owl named Eleanor Rigby.

Regards,

Severus

He had half a notion to go up to the infirmary and get the entire set of pamphlets from Poppy—from
"So You've Noticed Hair in New Places” to "So You Find Yourself Getting Excited at Inappropriate Times”—and present them to Harry during Defense class. Well, it was good to reserve as a threat anyway. And if he DID do it, and Harry kept his cool, he'd have to reward him with two tidbits about Lily. He wondered if he'd ever run out of stories to tell about her.

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-Harry-

Harry sat down in the library. He'd told his friends he was going to study by himself for an hour or so. They had a Charms exam on Friday so it provided a convenient excuse. What he really wanted to do was to read Snape's letter on the homework assignment Snape had returned in class today. He'd rolled the scroll open briefly after class and all he'd seen was red ink. He knew Snape would be after him about the quality of his homework soon.

He hadn't been able to seethe quietly today in class when Malfoy had lobbed a jinx at his back after he'd tripped over his untied shoelace and bent down to tie it. Snape had seen the whole thing and instead of docking points from Malfoy, he'd awarded him ten points for the excellent rat's tail Harry had sprouted through his robes. Harry rubbed his backside where the tail had been (thankfully Hermione had been able to remove it in a trice—though Snape had made him keep it for the rest of the class period). Snape had to have known it would remind him of Wormtail. Nevertheless, he couldn't help a half-grin as he opened the scroll to read Snape's letter. By the time he finished it and picked up his quill to start his reply, he was smiling broadly.

11 September, 1996

Wednesday

Dear Severus:

We're going to spend Christmas together? Are we staying here or going somewhere else? Shell Cottage (hint, hint)? I wonder what the sea would be like in the middle of winter. I think we'd spend more time by the fire than on the sea porch, but that would be fine. I wouldn't even make you get a Christmas tree. Does it snow in Yorkshire? And are you really going to teach me Legilimency?

How many pots of red ink did you go through on my essay anyway? It looked like you gave one of the Weasleys a haircut and used my essay to catch all the loose hair. Fine—I'll try harder on these essays from now on. I suppose you were being generous with the Acceptable you gave me. Hermione only got an Exceeds Expectations so I figure the marks on this one were rather low. She's finished with her crying jag now and is fact checking all her errors against the textbook and eight other books she checked out of the library and made me and Ron carry back to the dorm.

And Ron IS taller than you. I watched closely today and he's got at least a centimeter on you and that's not counting the extra height your boots give you. Do you have a problem with your students being taller than you? I don't see why—Millicent Bulstrode has been taller than you since fifth year—and she has a fuller beard!

About my mum and her owl...really? Eleanor Rigby—that's the song about the lonely people—right? Is it one of Paul's songs? I remember the tour guide pointing out the headstone in the cemetery with that name. Still, it's a nice name for an owl, even if it once belonged to a sad old woman. Do you know what became of her?
Quidditch try-outs are Saturday. I'm hoping we get enough people to come out for the team. Not that you care or anything, being a bit partial to those Slytherin goons you put up on brooms. You'd probably support me picking the Creevey brothers for Gryffindor beaters. I don't think Dennis could even lift the bat. He'd probably wet his pants if Crabbe and Goyle came after him on their brooms.

Ron is making me crazy. He stares at Hermione all the time with his mouth open. It doesn't seem to matter whether she's doing homework, chewing on the end of her quill or scratching herself on the head. I wish they'd just figure it out and get together or something. After this summer…well, I caught them holding hands a couple times, but Ginny says Ron acted the right git in Boston and Hermione backed off. Apparently, he had quite an eye for the American girls and Hermione thought they didn't wear enough clothing over there. Ron says it was awfully hot and he can understand why they need to wear such tiny little shorts.

No, I don't need the pamphlet you mention in your letter, thank you very much. After that little stunt you pulled with Pomfrey this summer in the corridor with my "dirty" upper lip, I'm not sure I should trust either of you. I bet she was in Slytherin too.

I have to tell you (again)—this Potions Book is magnificent! I'm a sixth year now too (right….you know that already…) and I've just never thought about making up my own spells. Our summer Charms homework was the first time it occurred to me that it was possible. Remember—we had to come up with a variation on a spell we already knew but we didn't actually have to DO the spell… just write about what it would do and create an incantation. Guess that's why you're the teacher and I'm the student, right? How many new potions did you create? Do you get patents for them like you would in the Muggle world? Do you think you could make one that makes girls think I'm repulsive? Well—most girls anyway. It's really embarrassing to have third years pass you love notes.

Well, I've saved telling you about my lesson with Professor Dumbledore until the end. He had a memory from someone who used to be with the Ministry and we went into the Pensieve together. The memory was about Voldemort's mother and her family and where they grew up. It was pretty horrible but Dumbledore apparently is going to take this really slow. I think he's giving me a little bit to think about at a time. I already knew that Voldemort was a half-blood (like some other people we all know), but on Saturday I got to see who his parents were, where he came from. Makes him more human, and I don't like that. His mum's dad beat and verbally abused her. That's a little too close to home. I suppose that might have been the point, though. Dumbledore is like that.

I was going to say something about class today but seeing as I rather rose to your bait and have not earned another story about my Mum, I'll only repeat that Draco Malfoy is a prat—and that he's about as hairless as a first-year. I bet Malfoys don't grow facial hair—it's too Muggle.

Regards,

Harry

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creatively. If there were charms to remove facial hair, certainly there were jinxes to make it grow… perhaps in unwanted places? Grinning, he flipped to the end of the book and began to read.

Chapter 2

Sept. 13 – Sept. 18, 1996

Severus

Severus finished Harry's letter and leaned back in his chair. What was Dumbledore up to? Yes, he had known—from Dumbledore himself—that the boy's lessons would begin on Saturday. But the Headmaster had not filled him in afterward on the details, only telling him, when he'd asked, that the evening had been successful and that he had given Harry quite a lot to think about. He would have to monitor this more closely and see if Harry would offer more up after the next lesson.

He shook his head. Harry had given him a lot to answer, from creative potions and patents to Malfoys and their facial hair to the coming Quidditch try-outs. He chuckled, imagining Lucius Malfoy sporting a beard similar to the Headmaster's, or Draco with an evil goatee. Ahh…Draco. He sobered thinking of the true mess the boy was in and the vow he had taken with the boy's mother. Shaking his head, he decided to give his answer to Harry's letter more time this evening, so he set Harry's homework scroll aside and started in on the third year essays on Werewolves.

13 September, 1996

Friday

Dear Harry:

There was no mention of the waterbed in your last letter. Did you have a damp night?

In order to permanently put the height question to rest, I have consulted with my cohort in crime (Madam Pomfrey to you) and she has agreed to give all of the sixth years their yearly physicals early. A few extra tests are added for sixth year boys, including (cough cough) a check for hernias. Enjoy.

In answer to your questions about holiday plans—yes, barring unforeseen events that make it impossible, we will spend a week of the holidays at some as-yet undetermined remote location. The sea is an untame, wild place in the winter, yet magical still, but in a different way than in the summer. I think you would like it almost as well. I will warn you, though, that in the winter, the sea can evoke in one a profound loneliness.

A potion to make you less popular with the girls? I would not recommend the gender-changing potion. It has some side effects that are difficult for most males to tolerate—even for a short time. There are quite a few others that come to mind, though, including ones that produce spots, severe halitosis, extreme body odor, flatulence and warts. Each of these will keep the girls at bay, some more effectively than others. Do let me know which you prefer and I'll have Dobby bring you the required dosage.

I have, in my career, invented more than one potion and have made significant enhancements and changes to others. Wizards do have patents, of a sort, for potions and spells but the patent process is
managed through the Ministry of Magic. A special department in the Ministry—the Department of Magical Innovation—reviews all new spells and potions and grants titles to worthy creations. As Magic is shared by all, the creator does not own the potion or spell he or she creates but is officially credited with its development and does earn certain residuals. Since you did ask, I am credited with the creation of a variant of Veritaserum for children. The potion, unlike the variety used in adults, leaves no recollection of the questioning and is chiefly used in cases where abuse is suspected, or when the child has witnessed an atrocity and willingly or unwillingly suppresses the memory.

As you can tell, I can be quite long-winded when discussing potions.

I must say that your tail in class on Wednesday was magnificent. I do know that it must have made you think of Pettigrew which of course brings other unpleasant things to mind. As a small reparation, I will give you this for your future use: As a child, Draco Malfoy owned a pet bunny which was killed by his father's hunting dogs. He still gets quite weepy when he sees rabbits. His own rabbit was white with black ears and assorted black spots.

Sadly, I do not know what happened to your mother’s owl after her death. She received the owl as a gift from your father during our sixth year and I imagine she still had it when they married and when you were born. Eleanor Rigby was a Tawny Owl—quite large, even for a Tawny—and had more white than most owls of her breed. As for the Beatles song that gave the owl her name, it is quite a significant one for the group, and its authorship is contested. I'll let you read about it next time you visit. I've now rewarded you with another story about your mother without you earning it. I am indeed getting soft. This will not happen again.

Finally, I must comment—at the end of my letter—on that which you, too, left for the end of yours. I do not believe your meeting on Saturday with Professor Dumbledore will be the last one in which you will review memories in his Pensieve. Your job, Harry, as you travel these difficult waters with the Headmaster, is to go into these memories not as a student, following his lead, but as a colleague, working at his side. Be alert—do not focus all of your attention on the obvious action. Look to the sides, notice details, ask yourself why Dumbledore chose this particular memory. I am not advising you to try to beat the headmaster at his own game, Harry. I am asking you to learn to think like he does, to learn from him how to lead while you can for I cannot promise that you will not have him with you as long as you will need him.

By the time you read this, Quidditch try-outs will be over so I shall not wish you luck with the selection process. However, I do advise you to set a realistic practice schedule that recognizes that academics are the reason you are at Hogwarts. You will also already have had your first meeting with Professor McGonagall to begin Animagus studies. I suspect your return letter will be quite informative.

My clock has just moved from "In Trouble" to "Gryffindor Tower." I think I will change this clock and add hands that read "Breaking Curfew," "Snogging in the Astronomy Tower" and "In Detention" as "In Trouble" is far too broad for my comfort.

Regards,

Severus

Severus rolled up the completed scroll and placed it back with the other sixth year homework assignments. He glanced at the mantel clock again—thankfully, it still read "Gryffindor Tower." He’d stayed up late tonight to mark essays as he fully intended to be on the Quidditch Pitch tomorrow during the Gryffindor try-outs. He and Minerva would be sitting together through
Gryffindor try-outs in the morning and Slytherin in the afternoon.

He stood and stretched then went into his kitchen to find his hip flask. Minerva was bringing the hot coffee, he the brandy. He filled the flask and took it into the sitting room, placing it on his desk beside his wand. He glanced at the clock again—purely out of habit—as he retired for the evening.

-Harry-

Harry —showered, dressed and ready for classes — crept down to the common room a full hour before his usual time. It seemed like every teacher had piled on the homework yesterday, having held back somewhat the first two weeks of class. He'd managed to finish all of it, but hadn't had time—or opportunity—to write to Snape, even though they didn't have class until tomorrow. And he had lots to write about, like his first Animagus Studies session with McGonagall and the semi-disastrous Quidditch try-outs. He shuddered thinking about how chaotic it had been.

Now, however, in the early light of this autumn morning, it was more peaceful in the Common Room than it had been since the day the Hogwarts Express had brought his friends back to the castle. He sat on the sofa and propped his legs on the low table they used for homework, took out his quill and began.

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17 September, 1996

Tuesday

Dear Severus:

Good one yesterday—making fun of Ron playing Quidditch. Comparing him to a water buffalo on a broom was inspired. I wasted an entire hour of homework time last night trying to calm him down and talk him out of quitting the team (again). I believe you owe me for this one, since I totally kept my cool in class and even though I had my wand in my hand I didn't spell Umbridge's bow into your hair.

So how much of the Gryffindor try-outs did you see? I spotted you with Professor McGonagall toward the end. You two looked very chummy sitting there sharing coffee. Well, if you saw ANY of it you know what a fiasco it was. When I got there I bet there were fifty people waiting to try out, and we only have a hundred in all of Gryffindor! Some of the girls weren't even IN Gryffindor and most of them could barely stay on their brooms. Once I weeded out the ones that weren't in Gryffindor, couldn't ride brooms and didn't know what a Quaffle was from the mix, I still had trouble with some that thought they should have made it but didn't. All in all, it's a decent line-up but I'd give almost anything to have Fred and George back. And Oliver Wood. But don't tell Ron that. It was hard enough just getting Ron on the team. I don't want a repeat of last year with the lovely song your Slytherins made up. Did you help them with the lyrics?

I haven't exactly slept in the waterbed yet. My first attempt at transfiguring my four poster was… um…interesting. I think I must have gotten the Latin wrong, because I ended up with a wet bed instead of a waterbed. The guys really had a time with that one. Even Neville was laughing. Would you send me the correct incantation? Better yet, would you sneak up into Gryffindor Tower and do it for me?

I thought you were kidding about the sixth year physicals until Madam Pomfrey came into our Transfiguration class this morning and passed out our appointment times. Gee, thanks! Are you sure you two aren't related? It won't change anything, you know. Students getting physicals doesn't make
YOU taller! And I'll be watching you to see if your heels start growing on your boots.

I'll take a pass on the potions you suggested to keep the girls away. I'll just have to resort to being rude and breaking hearts. I mean, a few years ago I'd probably have taken the flatulence potion in a heartbeat. But not today. However, if you would have Dobby send up a dose or two, I'm sure I'll find a use for it. Hermione can be rather long-winded, if you know what I mean….

Thanks for telling me more about my mum's owl, even though I didn't earn it. I asked Hagrid about Tawny Owls and found that they're the most common ones in the UK, and the largest too. I love Hedwig, but sometimes it would be nice to have an owl that just blended in with all the others. Guess I wasn't thinking about that when Hagrid took me to get her. I fell in love with her on the spot—I'd never had a pet before and she was so beautiful. Well, back then I didn't realize that I would stand out already at Hogwarts and she'd make me stand out even more. Don't get me wrong—I'd never give her up or trade her in. Just thinking how things might have been different…

I never asked you this before. Hope I'm not being rude or nosey. What do you normally do over the holidays? Do you see your family? I suppose you don't have a wife and children—I don't think you'd have let Dumbledore saddle you with me for a month this summer if you did. Well, I'm sure I'm being impertinent (that's one of your words). I just don't want to cut into any other plans you might have for Christmas.

Do you think Malfoy would be sensitive to having bunny ears?

Oh—that bit about me being in trouble the other night…it was the girls again! I was trying to sneak out of the dorm under my invisibility cloak to get some peace and quiet. I ran right into Professor McGonagall when I got through the portrait hole anyway. I finally broke down and told her why I was trying to hide and she took a really long (and uncomfortable) look at me and said something like "you might try Severus' shampoo." What do you think she meant by that?

I think I know what you're getting at with your advice about my meetings with Dumbledore. I think you want me to learn and see what he wants me to learn and see but to look with my own eyes too. I mean, Dumbledore picked that memory for a reason—he wants me to understand what's motivating Voldemort. But what else is there? More important—what else is there that can help me defeat him? No word yet on a second meeting but I will keep you posted.

Well, you know I saved the best for last. That's my Animagus training. Most of what we did Thursday was theory. It was hard to get my head around some of it but she says we have lots of time and not to stress out over it. The last half hour was the best part. Professor McGonagall transfigured me into seven different animals—well, one at a time. I spent about two minutes in each form then she transfigured me back and I had to write down what I felt like in that form—she wanted me to put down specific emotions or adjectives. This time she picked a bird, a reptile, a feline, a canine, an insect, a forest creature and a rodent. I didn't have enough time to get to really try out my forms but just seeing out of the animals' eyes was awesome. Here are the seven adjectives I used—can you match them up? If you're making me play games, I figure I can make you play one too. Ready? Alert, vulnerable, powerful, afraid, alone, watchful and clever. I'll tell you what animals they were next time…can't give away all the good stuff just yet.

Classes are still going alright. The teachers are setting tons of work, but seeing as you're one of them, you already know that. You're not too original, you know. First an essay on shield spells, then one on nonverbal magic, and NOW one on nonverbal magic for shield spells? Is nonverbal magic really that important?

By the way, that potion you described made me think. Do the kids know they're getting the potion before they're given it? Is its use regulated? Can't you see it being used for some really dark
purposes? Sorry—like I said, it just got me thinking.

Regards,

Harry

Harry put his quill down and re-read the letter. He still had fifteen minutes before Hermione and Ron would be down. The common room did have activity in it now, with people coming down to meet their friends and get ready for breakfast. To kill time, Harry got out the Half-Blood Prince's Potions text book and began reading ahead. He sighed when he found another note stuck between the pages. It smelled flowery and the smell was stronger when he opened it.

"When I see you in the morning my head begins to sweat,

You're the chocolate on my biscuit, the soft hair on my pet.

I love you in the afternoon, I love you in the night,

If you were an apple, I'd take a great big bite.

"When I say your name out loud my mouth begins to drool,

Take me take me take me, you cannot be so cruel!

Your gorgeous face, your well-toned abs, your legs so long and lean

I lose myself in your eyes, so deep and bright and green…

Harry heard a suppressed snort and looked quickly behind him where Ron and Neville were reading over his shoulder. Great. Just great….

-Severus-

Severus was tired. It was not like the Dark Lord to summon him on a school night yet the summons had come nonetheless, while he was marking papers near curfew last night. He had flooed Minerva quickly to have her check on Harry and had been gone seconds later, hurrying down to the gates, thankful it was already dark. He hadn't returned until well after five a.m. He'd showered quickly, taken two Pepper-ups and had gone straight up to the Great Hall to be there when breakfast was first served.

Minerva had come in soon after he did, her face looking the tiniest bit relieved when she saw him in his usual place at the head table. She sat down beside him, taking Pamona's place.

"You look dreadful, Severus," she said, reaching for the plate of toast.

"How is Harry?" he asked, ignoring her statement.

She moved her head slightly to indicate the Great Hall. He looked up and saw Harry, alone, moving toward the Gryffindor table. He looked like he hadn't slept much, but at least wasn't obviously staring at the table where he sat. He did glance over more than once, however, and Severus couldn't tell if the boy looked more worried or relieved.

Now, after a day full of classes following a night without sleep, he was too tired to mark. Still, he dug out Harry's assignment and read his letter, noting the hastily scrawled "He'd better not hurt you.
He's beginning to really piss me off," at the end after he'd signed his name.

18 September, 1996

Wednesday

Dear Harry:

I am fine. While I appreciate your outrage on my behalf, building up anger over my plight in life and in this war will not yield the results you seek. He is what he is; nothing will change that. Sometimes —no, often—he uses us as an outlet for his frustration. I am not singled out any more than any other. I am accustomed to dealing with this situation. You must trust me in this.

I am thankful that you reached your occluded state more naturally than you have in the past. Minerva said you were able to follow a chess game between your friends, albeit silently, while occluded, and that they believed you to be suffering from a severe headache. This is indeed good news, Harry. This represents a step toward a more natural state that will allow you to continue to function while occluding. I do not wish to trouble you, but there will be more nights like last night as this year progresses.

You have now kept your head in two classes without being rewarded with a story about your mother. I agree, Mr. Weasley's Quidditch skills could give me fodder for the entire year. You came closer to losing your cool this morning when I read that lovely poem that was stuck in your book aloud to the entire class. Harry, with poetry like that coming at you, perhaps you SHOULD consider the halitosis jinx.

So…down to it, then. I have been thinking of this one for some time now, since we agreed to this little game. It is an old memory, but a fond one for reasons you will soon appreciate. During our first year at Hogwarts, Gryffindor and Slytherin were paired for Potions and Professor Slughorn set us the standard first year boil-cure potion. Your mother was paired with your godfather who, despite growing up in a magical family, had obviously never made a potion and probably should not have been allowed around fire or volatile ingredients. He sat there gaping at her and joking with his friends and let her do all of the work. The potion turned out perfectly but your mother, who certainly had a little bit of Slytherin in her, told Professor Slughorn that she wouldn't be happy unless they could test it to make sure it worked. Since no one had boils—at least, no one that admitted to it—she asked Slughorn to jinx Black so that he could earn the marks she had gotten for them. Black got boils, and the potion ultimately cured them. However, Slughorn first made Black drink the potion your father and Pettigrew had brewed together. That one made the boils disappear but left curious purple circles wherever they had been. After this first class, your very clever mother had an invitation to the Slug Club.

Now, the Gryffindor Quidditch try-outs. First, let me commend you for actually ending up with a team. I was fairly certain, early on, that the group of second-years experiencing their first broom-rides would plow into your good players, leaving you crippled and maimed. Thank you for one of the most entertaining Saturdays I have had in some time. While I could not let my evil public persona laugh outright, I was laughing inside. While you may be eager to have the Weasley twins back at Hogwarts, I myself am having quite a good year with only half as many detentions to monitor as in previous years when they were here. My first years are also not turning into canaries, though several have had severe nosebleeds at very opportune times.

You have surmised correctly that I do not have a spouse or progeny. Most Hogwarts professors have quite enough of the under-eighteen set at school and do not rush off to procreate and bring more
potential Hogwarts miscreants into the world. I inherited my small home in London from my parents upon their deaths and usually spend my holidays there. A holiday away from my London home occasionally would be most appreciated. It is not the most inviting or welcoming of places.

Now to the challenge you have set for me…note that I am also hazarding a guess on what specific animal Minerva chose for each category.

Alert Forest creature (stag)

Vulnerable Insect (bumblebee)

Powerful Canine (wolf)

Afraid Rodent (mouse)

Alone Feline (lion)

Watchful Bird (owl)

Clever Reptile (snake)

Do give me my score in your return letter. We'll see how well I know you…and Professor McGonagall. I noticed that she did not turn you into any aquatic creatures—I suppose her office was not the best place for an experiment of that sort. However, I will suggest she at least give you the opportunity to experience a few minutes of life as a goldfish in a bowl.

Is nonverbal magic that important? You have just earned yourself an additional six inch essay on why it is. I'd like it Monday, please.

The Veritaserum potion variant I described to you is closely regulated. You are correct; it could be used for dark or selfish purposes—as could many other potions developed for practical and altruistic purposes. Add six inches of moral discussion to the end of the previous essay on the pros and cons of continuing to develop such potions.

I shall speak to Minerva about her comment regarding my shampoo. I am not entirely sure that she meant her comment to be complimentary.

Still waiting for that chess game…

And always remember, Harry, you're the chocolate on my biscuit—

Regards,

Severus

/

Severus chuckled as he finished the letter. He was beginning to very much enjoy both reading and writing these missives. He looked at the stacks of homework on his desk and decided to leave it for early morning, after he had a good warm dinner inside him and at least eight hours of sleep. He glanced at the mantel clock—it was dinner time and Harry was, predictably, in the Great Hall.

Severus’ stomach rumbled as he stood up and made for the door.
Chapter 3

Sept. 19-27

-Harry-

Harry put down the homework scroll and stared at it for a long moment. He'd just read Snape's last letter—the one where Snape had managed to perfectly line up the adjectives with the animal categories, and in addition had guessed five of the specific animals correctly. He was so focused on that feat that he almost glazed over the "chocolate on my biscuit" comment near the end. He was never going to live that one down.

He thought back to what Snape had told him about his mother…and about Sirius. He could hardly imagine them as eleven year olds, twenty-five years ago or so. He could imagine Sirius not paying attention in class and joking around while his mum worked hard to make the potion perfect. But even easier to imagine, for some reason, was Severus watching the whole event play out, secretly pleased, certainly smug.

It had been a long week. He felt like he finally had eased into a routine, with the right mix of quiet time and time with friends. He sat in the common room now, in that quick and noisy hour between classes and dinner, watching Ginny and Dean sitting together—closely together—in a loveseat near the fire. He'd forgotten that they were officially dating with all that went on this summer, and had taken to watching them—surreptitiously—when they were together.

He'd drawn out a chessboard last night and had made his first move—on paper—after having Ron check to make sure he'd labeled it right. He tucked the paper under his parchment and began to write his letter.

/  

20 September, 1996

Friday

Dear Severus:

It's Friday, late afternoon, and classes are over for the day and for the week. I'm sitting in the Gryffindor Common Room waiting for Hermione and Ron so we can go down to dinner together. I'm early—Ron is who knows where but Hermione is still in Arithmancy. The common room is kind of quiet for a change. Our new first years are getting more comfortable with Hogwarts and are starting to make all sorts of noise and trouble. Fortunately, the first year girls at least are leaving me alone. Too much competition from the second and third years, I guess.

Speaking of that, I found another note in my text book this morning. The poem was worse than the first. Let's just say that it was about a specific part of my body and rhymed it to "A stick of gum," "A Scottish lass" and "A lithe King Tut." This time I was smart and burned it before you could pluck it out of my book.

I had another class with Professor McGonagall last night. It was pretty much the same as the first one—meditating and then transfiguration—but this time she did partial transfiguration only. So, for each category of animal she used last week, I got to experience having the arm of the target animal. That meant I could touch it with my other hand, feel the fur or the feathers or scales, see it with my human
eyes. Yes—I know snakes don't have arms but this time she used a turtle for the reptile. This was another fantastic exercise. Even the bee's "arm" was fascinating. It had three claws on the end and a special claw just to clean its antenna. I could extend and retract my claws as a panther, and feel the sinews and muscles in the owl's wing. But it was the rodent's hand that was most interesting and most like my own. That bothered me.

So, you get a 100% on the required part of your test. You lined the adjectives up with the animals exactly how I did. You got five of the seven animals right too. Obviously, the panther was one you got wrong. The other was the rodent. Yeah, I can see how you'd think she'd do a mouse, being that she's a cat Animagus and all. But she made me a squirrel! I never even thought of the squirrel being a rodent before. Next time she's just doing heads. I'm not sure that's a good idea. Will the heads be proportional to my body or will I have this giant stag head and a tiny little bumblebee head? Maybe you should talk with Professor McGonagall before she gets too carried away—I'm not sure that partial transformation is exactly healthy. I'll always remember Victor Krum as half shark/half human after the second task in the Triwizard Tournament. He never seemed quite right after that...

We've got our first real Quidditch practice tomorrow morning. I'm hoping we don't have an audience this time—we really need to get down to business and play some serious Quidditch for a change. Minerva (I can call her that outside of classes now since she's my guardian, nyah nyah nyah) bought me Quidditch shoes this summer. I thought they were kind of silly until I tried them out last week. They've got special grips on the top so you can practically lie down on the broom and wrap your feet around it for traction. Anyway, they're perfect but I still like my boots best. Did you mean for me to keep them? The ones I wore on our London holiday? I figure they're too small for you, but wondered if they were yours originally and you down-sized them for me.

I can't believe you gave me another essay! I already wrote the moral discussion part—that was actually fun. Now I'm working on why Nonverbal Magic is important. Let's see…it would allow me to give Draco Malfoy rabbit ears during class without him ever knowing who did it. I could give Dean bad breath while kissing Ginny without him having any idea what's going on. Excellent. I'm convinced. Do I still have to write the essay?

I'm sorry I asked about you having a wife and kids because your answer wasn't just about you but about Hogwarts faculty in general and I'm pretty sure you used the word "procreate." Now I've got a picture in my head of Trelawney procreating, or Professors Sprout and Filch. Not TOGETHER. I didn't mean that. Damn. Now I'm going to have to gouge my eyes out.

I've been thinking about the memory you described about my mum and Sirius. First, thanks for giving me one that had Sirius too, even though he was a prat in the memory and covered in boils and purple spots too. I somehow imagine my mum as being smart like Hermione but not so over the top and serious about it, if you know what I mean. I also imagine her being a lot like Ginny—pretty, and funny and brave. But of course she was my mum so I'm likely to think only good things about her—right? I like the potions class memory because it shows she could hold her own and didn't let people take advantage of her. I bet she was brilliant. I know this is stupid, but I'm sitting here feeling sorry for myself and thinking that life's really not fair. I bet you can second that one. My mother was this brilliant, beautiful witch. The only unkind thing I've ever heard about her came from my Aunt Petunia and I've heard HER say nasty things about the Queen Mum and Mother Theresa. Yet my only real memory of my mum is of Vold—sorry….Tom…killing her. Green light and screaming.

On to less depressing (slightly less depressing) things. About the other night when you had to leave the castle suddenly—what's the real danger of me NOT occluding? Well—other than the effects of the Cruciatius if it's one of those kinds of nights? Basically, I'm out of commission during those events. Yeah, last time I managed not to pass out completely, but I couldn't do much more than watch Ron and Seamus play chess, and that was in a vague sort of way, like I was only half there.
Anyway, I think by now it's obvious that Tom's not trying to possess me or send me false visions so what exactly are we protecting by me occluding whenever you have to "leave suddenly"?

I'm rolling up the post-owl chessboard inside my homework scroll. As you can see, I've made my first move and believe it to be a winner. I await your brilliant return.

Were you in the Slug Club too? If so, why didn't you WARN me about it?

Regards,

Harry

Harry re-read his letter and decided then and there to never again write on an empty stomach. Well, he supposed it would have to do, depressing and melancholy as it was. He thought about his mum and how he imagined her as half Hermione, half Ginny. Did that mean that Hermione—and sweet Merlin not Ginny!—were mother figures to him?

He glanced over at Ginny and Dean, still sitting together on the loveseat. They were holding hands and Dean was talking to her, rather earnestly it seemed. Harry waved his wand over the letter he had just written to hide the text and then packed it up to take up to his dorm before dinner.

He didn't look at Ginny and Dean again. Somehow, seeing them together like that gave him a stomachache and he didn't completely understand why.

-Severus-

Monday again. The weeks were really flying by. Severus had just eaten a hasty dinner in the Great Hall and was hurrying down to the Quidditch Pitch to observe the first Slytherin practice of the year. He made it his habit, as Head of House, to address the team at the onset of the season and was always present for the first practice. He typically sat in the stands and marked homework but he was there nonetheless.

Severus watched the practice for a time before beginning to mark. Draco, still Slytherin Seeker, actually appeared to have his mind on the game. He'd been…distracted…of late, but then, Severus could not fault him that. Yet others were beginning to notice and that could cause future problems. He had noticed Harry watching him, and that could not turn out well.

When the team began its routine drills, Severus pulled out Harry's homework scroll, which he had already separated from the rest. He cast the spell to reveal the letter and read it through to the end. He looked up again to watch the team. The reserves were practicing too and it looked like they were about to scrimmage. Severus unrolled the post-owl chess board and studied it a moment before dipping his quill in ink and making his own first move.

He didn't write his reply to Harry's letter until the next evening. He needed time to think before committing words to parchment.

/ 24 September, 1996 Tuesday
Dear Harry:

Well, you've managed to earn another story about your mother. I am actually inclined to give you only half a tale, since YOU managed to sheathe your anger but your cohort in crime (Mr. Weasley, lest that not be clear) took the bait. Yes, yes, I know keeping him quiet was not part of the bargain and frankly, I continue to be amazed at the loyalty your friend shows you. The fact that Mr. Weasley reacted as he did today tells me I am doing an adequate job of making my torment of you believable. Please assure him I meant you no lasting harm when I insinuated that you and Ms. Granger are more than friends.

I have indicated black's first move on the enclosed post-owl chess board. I expect good things from this game, Harry, as you will have ample time to consider my move and plan your own. Do try to not let this game interfere with your homework and sleep. I will also know if you consult Mr. Weasley. If he wants to challenge me to a game of chess, ask him to approach me after class some day. I hear Minerva has a special transfigured chess set with which he has played before.

Rest assured that Professor McGonagall is not trying to kill you by her rather unorthodox methods of Animagus studies. In cases of partial transfiguration, the transfigured body part usually stays in proportion to the body to which it is attached. I am sure you already noticed this when she transfigured your arm—or did you indeed have a little wispy bee arm the size of an eyelash sticking out of your shoulder? Be thankful your guardian is such a clever witch. I certainly would not want Sybil Trelawney pointing her wand at my head to transfigure it. Then again, I wouldn't want Sybil as my guardian either. (Please forgive the use of her given name. I simply cannot bring myself to pair "Professor" with "Trelawney," even to adhere to protocol.)

Let me now address your feelings about your mother. Those of us who grew up with mothers, even imperfect ones, often take for granted their very presence and find it difficult to imagine life—especially early life—without them. It distresses me greatly to know that your only memory of your mother—and I might say that it is more the echo of a cruel event imprinted on your mind than a true memory—is of the moments leading up to her death. It would have been better, I believe, to have been left with no memory of her at all. Harry, it is not fair that she died that way—that they died that way. And while your mood when you wrote the letter was justified and can be excused occasionally, do not give in to frequent bouts of self-pity. Instead, be grateful that they loved you enough to protect you to the end, that you have your mother's eyes to remind you daily of the part of her that lives inside you. Be grateful that you have your father's courage (if not his penchant for getting into trouble). Be thankful that they achieved, through their sacrifice, exactly what they hoped—to give you a chance at life. My offering to you now is this, something that I know will mean a lot to you considering its source: your mother loved your father with all her being. Harry, he was a good man who put his wife and child before everything else. He was a better man in the end because of her love. And you will be a better man as well for the same reason.

Please take note—I will not offer such lengthy sentimental treatises often.

As for the Slug Club, yes, I was a member. Horace "collected" me when I showed great prowess in Potions. I know that is hard to believe—surely you thought, as did many others, that he was interested in my family connections and wealth, or simply thought I would succeed thanks to my rakish good looks.

The miraculous Quidditch shoes you describe do NOT give you leave to try new stunts such as flying upside down or hanging from your broom by your shoelaces. As for the boots, they are of course yours to keep. Yes, they were mine, and yes, I resized them to fit you.

Finally, we are NOT going to discuss the need for you to occlude when I have to "leave the castle."
If you need convincing, consider all the fun you had at St. Mungo's this summer.

Regards,

Severus

Severus considered the hand-created parchment chessboard, checking his move again and wondering how long it would take Harry to see his strategy. No less than two more moves by black, he thought. He had yet to tell Harry that he was absolutely itching to play a game against the youngest Weasley boy. He had barely been able to beat Bill, and Bill had told him that Ron routinely beat him. A good game of chess and a glass of scotch were nearly heaven. Add a pipe and it was nirvana. He didn't indulge in the tobacco habit frequently; rarely enough that it could hardly be called a habit. It was a Muggle artifact, one of the few pleasant memories he retained of his father, who had sat in his corner chair with a pipe and the evening paper in rare peaceful and sober moments.

Smells, Severus knew, were among the most evocative of memories. The half dozen times a year he took up the pipe, he always smoked his father's brand of tobacco.

It was something his father had given him, but he'd be a fool to deny that there were others.

-Harry-

By the time he got back to Gryffindor Tower well after curfew following his Animagus studies with Professor McGonagall, Ron had given up and gone to bed and only Hermione and a few scattered students remained in the common room. Only Ron and Hermione knew what he was really doing on Thursday evenings. The rest of his friends, at least those who bothered to ask like Neville and Ginny, thought he was spending "mentoring" time with his new guardian. He sat down across from Hermione in their usual spot.

"What are you grinning about?" she asked, putting down her Transfiguration textbook. She grasped her hands together behind her head and stretched. Harry gawked. In that pose, he could see why Ron spent so much time with that trance-like stare on his face ogling her.

Hermione didn't seem to notice. "So, how was your lesson with Professor McGonagall?" she persisted. "You know you're going to have to start meeting with Ron and me to pass it all on, don't you?"

"I don't think Minerva knows you as well as she thinks she does," he said with another grin. "She figures you won't ask me to do that because it would be against the rules. She doesn't realize that your desire for knowledge trumps your reluctance to break rules."

Hermione grinned back at him and started packing up her books. She bent to give him a quick goodnight hug before heading off to her dorm. Harry settled back on the sofa and finally took out the scroll Snape had returned to him in class that afternoon. When he unrolled it, the post-owl chess board fell out first. He looked at it for a moment and decided he would consider it in the morning and make his move when he wasn't so tired. Instead, he settled in to read the letter, hardly noticing the "E" at the top of this essay.

27 September, 1996
Dear Severus:

You know, I've been wondering about your name. I think of it every time I write "Dear Severus." Are you named after anyone? What's your middle name? Are most wizarding children given family names? If so, I wonder where "Harry" came from. Ron's middle name is "Bilius" for some uncle or great-uncle. I think Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had so many boys that they ran out of non-embarrassing names.

Anyway...

About ribbing me about Hermione being my girlfriend and Ron's reaction to that. Do you think you could go back to slamming my rule-breaking conceited dad instead? Ron is a little sensitive about Hermione. Actually, he's a LOT sensitive about it. He won't make a move to ask her out but he's ridiculously jealous if she gets too close to anyone else. And now you've made it look like we're together TWICE! Today was kind of funny, actually, even though Ron almost punched me after class. I mean, saying that Hermione was botching her wordless stinging hex because she didn't want to ruin my flawless porcelain complexion and she knew I couldn't do a nonverbal shield spell to save my sorry…butt. Ron KNOWS I'm not interested in her that way, but for some reason he's not thinking with his head—he's (how does Madam Pomfrey put it?) letting his hormones think for him.

And speaking of Madam Pomfrey…I had my yearly physical yesterday. Thanks so much for getting her to move up the schedule on that. You DO know, don't you, that "protocol dictated" that she have another male in the room when she administered the exam? And WHO do you think is available during the day when the teachers are all in class? Filch! Ick! Thankfully he sat in a chair in the corner grousing and grumbling about having to be there and the only naked buttocks HE wanted to see were those getting beaten by a paddle back in the GOOD ol' days when Umbridge was here or back when Professor Dippet was Headmaster. Wasn't that like fifty years ago?

Anyway, you should be happy to know that I am officially 170 cm tall (St. Mungo's had me at 167.5). Soon I, too, like Ron, Dean and Crabbe and Goyle, will be taller than you. You'd better owl-order some lifts for those boots.

My class last night with Minerva was eye-opening. I am beginning to get some idea of what kind of animal I might be if I ever manage to transform. Some forms are more natural to me than others, and Minerva has some trouble with a couple of the partial transformations. Now, since we're having such fun playing games, see if you can guess the three categories that are giving her trouble. Two of them give her lots of trouble—my body just doesn't want to take on the shape and doesn't hold it as long. The third transfiguration takes hold right away but never in the exact way she intended. And that's all I'm giving away.

You were right—the animal heads were in proportion to my body. WAY cool seeing out of a bee's eyes, by the way.

We've had two Quidditch practices since I wrote last—Saturday and Wednesday. I'm not having any problems with my arm in case you're wondering. Well, I could blame my arm for how long it took me to catch the snitch in practice Wednesday, but to be honest, I'm just a little rusty after not playing much last year. Don't start doing a victory dance over there in Slytherin. Malfoy isn't exactly at the top of his game either. There's something going on with him—he's acting squirrely and I should know—I've BEEN a squirrel.

Oops, distracted again from Quidditch talk. Last Saturday, we had about twenty-five girls in the stands watching us practice. They more or less left us alone but Coote and Peakes couldn't help
showing off and trying to thread the needle through the goal hoops. Coote nearly decapitated himself and Peakes ran right into Ron and gave him a bloody nose. But the worst part came at the end when we were in the showers. They infiltrated! I didn't hear them until it was too late since I was actually IN the shower. And it's not like there are curtains in there to hide behind! All we could do was try to scare up more suds and hide behind each other. Fortunately, Ginny and Katie showed up and chased them off. Somehow, it didn't seem quite as bad that they saw us starkers as that mob. One thing did come out of it—they're singing "Weasley is our King" again but this time with new lyrics. You've probably already heard it this week. It goes something like:

"He has the cutest freckles
His bum it looks all speckled
That's why Gryffindor girls sing:

Weasley is our King."

I think Ron kind of likes the attention, even though his ears get all red every time someone mentions his freckled bum. I did catch Hermione looking at it though and I assured her that the song is right—his bum DOES have a lot of freckles. She hit me with her Arithmancy book when I said that—and that's the biggest book she owns and believe me, she owns some big books!

Saved this bit for last. Even though life IS unfair, I don't spend a lot of time feeling sorry for myself. Nothing is ever going to change the fact that I grew up in the Dursley's house thinking my parents were drunks that got themselves killed in a car crash. (I know that sounded like I'm feeling sorry for myself.) Just like nothing's going to change the fact that my parents gave their lives up to protect me and I need to honor their sacrifice with how I live my own life. Hey—don't make that face! I do have moments of great depth and enlightenment occasionally (and more so since I've been hanging out with you.)

If you and Ron ever do play chess, I want to be there to watch you. He's been wanting to start a Hogwarts chess club but needs a faculty sponsor…

Regards,

Harry

Harry quickly finished his letter. It was almost time to go down to breakfast—he could hear Ron's heavy footsteps on the staircase and a chorus of "He has the cutest freckles" started up around him. He threw his quill, ink and homework scroll into his backpack and stood up, grabbed Ron by the arm and pressed through the small hoard of girls, pulling him out the portrait hole behind him.

"Thanks, mate," said Ron. He looked quite disheveled as he looked down over his shoulder at his rear which had been pinched as he pushed through.

"No, thank you," said Harry. "At least they're leaving me alone for a while."

"Come on King Tut," said Ron with a laugh. "Let's get some breakfast."

Chapter 4
Sept. 28 – Oct. 9

-Severus-

Late Tuesday night. Tonight he'd spent more than two hours in the Slytherin common room as he did on the first of each month. He always started with an all-hands meeting, pointing out who had won (and lost) the house the most points, and gave the Quidditch team a pep talk. He then met individually which each form and ended with one-on-one meetings with specific students to discuss issues with academic performance or behavior. He was worried in particular because Draco's marks were dropping and along with his, Crabbe and Goyle's (and they didn't have a lot of space left to drop much further).

Back in his quarters, he re-read Harry's letter. His eyes kept returning to the line about Draco Malfoy. He had to keep Harry focused on his work, his friends and his task with the Headmaster and not on Malfoy. An almost unachievable task, more difficult in a way than his current role as Dumbledore's spy among the Death Eaters. If Harry didn't show signs soon of letting the matter go, he was going to have to risk a meeting with the boy.

Before he picked up his quill to write a return letter to Harry, he made tea. Strong tea.

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1 October, 1996

Tuesday

Dear Harry:

Since reading your letter last night, I have had the catchy tune and words "His bum it looks all speckled" running through my brain. I had finally convinced my brain to let the lyrics go after hearing it repeatedly while I witnessed the end of the Gryffindor Quidditch practice on Saturday. Thank you. And remember—paybacks are hell.

I caught the last fifteen minutes of your Saturday practice—the part just before Slytherin took the pitch. How you manage to stay on your broom or catch the snitch when you have your eyes glued on Ms. Weasley is a mystery to me. While I do admit that she is quite adept on the broom, I do not think it is her skills on the Quidditch pitch that are foremost in your thoughts. My advice to you here—and for the record, I am not the one to go to for advice on matters of the heart—is to decide what you want and then plan how to get it. If it turns out that you cannot have what you want, move on. Going on as you currently are will likely result in broken bones as well as broken hearts.

I did notice the guard you posted outside the showers. Merlin help us if Mr. Creevy manages to get in there with a camera.

On to your questions. My mother's family had a penchant for Latin names. Severus is not a family name—it was chosen because of my "severe" attitude as an infant. I suppose it could have been worse. They could have named me Cyrano (look it up) for my extraordinarily large nose. My middle name is my father's—Tobias. You are not to give that piece of information to anyone, even though it is an ordinary enough name and less distinctive, for sure, than "Severus." In answer to your other questions, it is quite common for Wizarding families to name their children after deceased family members, but it is also common to use thematic names or name denoting character (hence, my own). You will find this in old, pureblood families particularly. Think of your godfather and his family—
the Blacks were given to use stellar names. As for the origins of your own name, my suggestion is to consult a wizarding family genealogy book to trace the Potter bloodline and to ask Remus Lupin. He may know more about your father's family than I do. Since Harry is often a derivative of Henry, do not overlook that name in your research. I did not know of any Harrys or Henrys in your mother's family.

I do not know Argus Filch's age. I suggest you ask him at your next detention. While you are at it, and since you will already be marked for death, offer to put Mrs. Norris out of her misery.

As for Draco Malfoy, please do not concern yourself with him. I am well aware of his distraction and am monitoring him closely. Please, Harry, chase after Ms. Weasley, play Quidditch, learn to be an Animagus, go on adventures with the Headmaster, do your homework and be Slughorn's golden boy. You have quite enough to go about doing without obsessing on Draco. You must trust me on this.

Now, your challenge. I am going to guess that the two animal forms that do not hold long are the insect form and the rodent form. I am basing this guess on my knowledge of your character and your experience with other Animagi with these forms. They would not hold, would they, if cast on a strong-willed wizard who did not want to be that specific animal. While your penchant for sneaking around under that invisibility cloak would seem to point to an Animagus form that was small and stealthy, you also are known to charge in like a herd of rampaging rhinoceroses (the plural form is NOT rinoceri) when in foolish Gryffindor mode. For the animal that doesn't transform the way Minerva had intended, I will guess the forest creature. Minerva is undoubtedly thinking of your father in his Animagus form instead of the animal itself. Well, that guess is as good as any. I am curious to hear how right—or wrong—I am in your next letter.

I have made my second move on the enclosed parchment chess board. It is quite fulfilling to play a game that lasts more than thirty minutes, though I suppose to be fair we should be counting number of moves instead of elapsed time playing.

I cannot argue that you do not have moments of "great depth and enlightenment." Your statement in your previous letter, that you must honor your parents' sacrifice with how you live your life, is not the first time you have proven that. Since you have begun again to focus on the end of their lives, I will distract you with something about your mother when she was a girl. While she was a bright pupil was academically gifted, she had a playful side as well. She was incredibly talented with a Muggle toy called the Hula Hoop. If you are not familiar with this contraption, imagine a Quidditch goal, made of hollow plastic like a garden hose, with small balls inside that rattle as it spins. The hoop was not as large as a Quidditch goal of course. The objective was to use your abdominal muscles to twirl the hoop around your midsection, keeping it in motion and not allowing it to drop to the ground. When we were seven or eight, both Lily and Petunia received hula hoops at the beginning of the summer holiday. They would bring them to the park where we often played. Petunia was stiff and uncompromising even then, never really managing more than a five or six awkward rotations before the hoop would clatter to the pavement. Lily, however, could spin like an exotic dancer. As hula hoops were still quite the rage that summer, there were many at the park at any given time, and Lily learned to keep as many as a dozen going at once, from her neck down to her knees. I can still picture her spinning and laughing and I thought, at the time, that it must be magic. I have since realized that indeed it was—but not the kind of magic that was already in my life.

Regards,

Severus
Writing about Lily always made him melancholic. He rolled up the letter, placed it with the other sixth-year essays and took his tea tray to the kitchen. When he sat back down by the fire, his eyes drifted to the Beatles anthology on the coffee table. He picked it up and opened it up on his lap but his eyes were far away, at the playground near Spinner's End, watching the red-headed girl with the green and orange hula hoops spinning, spinning, spinning…

-Harry-

The common room was a disaster. It had been raining for several days and nearly everyone had cabin fever. It was too loud to study and almost too loud to talk. Harry, Ron and Hermione's spot near the fire had been taken over by a group of about fifteen girls who apparently were starting a new club organized by Lavender. The girls were giggling and Ginny, who had plopped down next to Harry, looked over at them, annoyed.

"They call it a Quidditch fan club!" she protested. "But they're not fans of me and Katie and Demelza." Ron and Harry's heads swiveled over to the girls. Two of them were holding up a poster-sized picture of Ron. Harry grinned, until Ginny elbowed him and he saw, to his complete dismay, a photo of himself blown up to life-sized proportions.

"I almost wish we still had that ban on clubs," said Harry. "This is getting out of control."

3 October, 1996

Thursday

Dear Severus:

Hope you can read this through the blotches. I'm trying to write this tonight from my bed. The third through fifth year girls took over the common room tonight with their Quidditch fan club. There's never been a Quidditch fan club before! They had all these photographs that you know who (no, not THAT You Know Who!) took of us yesterday at practice, so of course Ron and I bailed and came up here. Well—we came up here AFTER they enlarged a picture of Ron's face and connected the freckles across his face to spell "Sexy." I won't even TELL you what they did with my scar! Believe it or not, one of the sixth-year girls, Lavender Brown, seemed to be organizing them. Anyway, I finally managed the waterbed transformation tonight, but the bed feels more like a boat than a bed now—like I'm on a raft in the water instead of on a solid mattress made of water. I tried making it harder—Ron helped me with that spell. I should have asked Hermione because I ended up with an ice bed instead of a waterbed. Anyway, I managed to melt it again but I'm freezing (because now it's ICE water)...and I'm seasick.

Well, you were pretty close on your guesses about the Animagus forms. The transformations that don't stick well are the insect and the rodent. You were right on both of those. Minerva thinks she'll go ahead and eliminate those two starting next week. The one that often doesn't transform the way she intends is the bird, not the forest creature. The first time, when she went through all the animals really quickly, she tried for an Eagle Owl and got the Tawny. The next time, when she did just the wing, it turned white like Hedwig's. When she did the head only, she got an eagle instead of an Eagle Owl. I think she hasn't gotten close enough to the kind of bird I'd likely be. I told her she should go with something more ordinary, perhaps a robin or a starling, and not such a large and showy bird. She thinks she'll just eliminate the birds too. When I meditate, I always get the feeling that I'm not in a small body and I have never imagined feathers at all. Next week we are going out
with Hagrid in the Forbidden forest to do another experiment. I'm not sure what it is—she doesn't like to give me too much information in advance—just enough to keep me on my best behavior the next week. Did you know that she's threatened to cut off our lessons if I don't keep my grades up and my behavior to par? I'm expected to get all Es or above and have no more than two detentions this term. Two! I'll probably have two before half-term. Good thing she didn't threaten to take away Quidditch. I'm beginning to realize that she's so competitive about her house that I could probably get ten detentions and still play for Gryffindor.

I was really looking forward to looking up the Potters in a wizarding genealogy book. I asked Madam Pince and she said that these books are mainly owned by old wizarding families and Hogwarts doesn't have one. She suggested a family's personal library—which made me think of Sirius' library at Grimmauld Place. I hope the Potter line is in a book and you don't have to bring a giant wall-sized family tree tapestry back to Hogwarts for me. You DO get over there for Order meetings, don't you?

By the way, I don't really think it's a bright idea to name a person after how they act when they're an infant. What's the guarantee that you'll still act that way when you're an adult? What if you were all happy and giggly as a baby and your parents had named you Euphoria? (Yes, I looked it up.) And what if they HAD named you Cyrano and you had grown into that nose? If more families were like yours we'd probably have kids here named Noisome, Soporific and Flatulencia. (Yes, I looked those up too. Since I was in the library bothering Madam Pince, I borrowed a nifty little thesaurus. That's a book of synonyms, in case you didn't know.)

I think that if I ever have kids I'll name them after important people in my life, people that I loved or that loved me. Not that it's likely I'll ever have any, but if I do make it through all of this, I'd like a couple of messy-headed kids with green eyes and glasses that can take my place and annoy you here for years to come.

I don't stare at Ginny Weasley, by the way. I watch ALL of the team—it's my job as captain. But she is a great flyer, isn't she? See—even YOU noticed. You may have also noticed that she already has a boyfriend—she and Dean Thomas have been going out since the end of last year. So I'm not going to set myself up for a broken heart. Besides, she's really like a sister to me—all the Weasleys are like family. With all that red hair and freckles, it's hard to tell them apart.

I asked Hermione about hula hoops and she knew all about them. She managed to transform one of my belts into one and we all gave it a try. I never laughed so hard in my life as when Neville tried it! It would just go around about two times then clatter to the ground and he'd look all embarrassed and apologetic about it. The one time he got it going he gyrated so hard that his pants fell down. Ginny was the best at it, though. She can make it go up and down her stomach and hips and keep it going forever. Hermione called it "undulating" and Ron decided he didn't much like his sister "undulating." I guess it didn't help that she was wearing the t-shirt that I gave her from Liverpool. It was perfect for the job—not a lot of extra fabric getting all clumped up and in the way. When Ron tried it out (because we made him, of course), Colin showed up with the camera and got a couple shots of Ron looking seriously stupid before Ron realized it. Do you think it's possible that Colin's got a crush on Ron? I suggested it to Ron and only just avoided a black eye.

I just reread your letter to make sure I had responded to everything and hadn't let you get away with one of your snide little comments without a reaction. So…NEXT detention with Filch? Doesn't that imply I've already had one? I guess the physical with Madam Pomfrey could count. It was both painful and humiliating—like Defense class is getting. Listen, I have to get this off my chest. I had decided to let it go but it's eating me up and I can't. What the hell is Malfoy playing at in class? Hitting me with a "stray" Stupefy when I wasn't even dueling with him? My head still hurts where I hit it against the desk on the way down. I'd probably have a concussion if I hadn't fallen on top of
Seamus who was already on the floor after Hermione's jelly legs jinx got him. I get it that you have to blame me for getting in his line of fire but the fact is that I didn't! You know it too! I don't care about how you treated me—I just want to know why he's targeting me like that right out in the open. You tell me to stop worrying about him and to trust you but then something like this happens. If he's willing to attack me in front of an entire class and a Hogwarts Professor, don't you think I should be worried about walking through the corridors or being out on the grounds between classes or on the weekends?

Alright. I'm letting it go. Riiiiight.

My next chess move was rather obvious. I have a feeling this game won't last through October.

One more thing—I was walking down the corridor yesterday and heard the Beatles! Turns out the Muggle Studies Professor is doing a unit on Muggle Music. I saw her in the Great Hall last night and told her that you're a big fan and have some great memorabilia. Enjoy sharing!

Regards,

Harry

Harry waved his wand over the parchment, attempting to turn it blank nonverbally. Five tries and no luck. He finally muttered the spell out loud and sighed. Why were nonverbal spells so difficult for him? He picked up other things a lot more easily. The mattress underneath him rolled as he shifted his weight and he toppled back, hitting his already sore head on the headboard.

He closed his eyes and thought about his bed at Shell Cottage, about the sound of the ocean beating against the shore, about the smell of the salty air and cooking potatoes in the fire. He remembered his fear and hatred of Snape gradually turning into something else, something that involved trust and understanding.

Now, though they saw each other nearly every day and lived under the same roof, he missed the man. Harry Potter missed Severus Snape. Harry looked up at the canopy of his bed but miraculously, the sky was not falling.

________________________________________

-Severus-

Severus woke up Sunday morning with a headache. He made coffee instead of tea and decided to forgo breakfast in the Great Hall in favor of jam and toast in his quarters. He had tried again yesterday to talk with Draco, to gain his trust and confidence, but the boy was having none of it. What he could see, and Harry could not, was that Draco was just as much a product of events outside of his control as was Harry. Draco could no more easily choose to go against the wishes of his family—and of the Dark Lord—as Harry could elect to ignore the Prophecy. Still, Severus knew that the task ahead of Draco, heinous as it was, was nothing compared to the task looming for Harry. The two boys would likely never realize that they were both pawns on someone else's chessboard. A kinder hand was moving Harry's piece, but the goals were the same, and in any game of chess, the pawns were the first to be sacrificed.

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6 October, 1996
Dear Harry:

Your letter did, as usual, cause me to smile in places, frown in others and in one or two places, laugh out loud. First of all, the matter of your bed. It is simply a matter of finesse, so to speak. You do not have the experience in transfiguration to deal with all the nuances of this complex of a change. You must change the contents of the mattress to water without losing the structure of the mattress itself, but you must also make it waterproof so that the water does not leak out on the floor. I suggest that you work directly with Minerva. She IS the Transfiguration Professor, your Head of House AND your guardian. I do realize she challenged you on this, but perhaps it is better to admit defeat and learn something from her in the process.

I suppose that, after the events of Saturday, I will not be hearing too much about your Quidditch fan club. The entire school is talking about your practice on Saturday morning and even I cannot ignore it any longer. I do not know who taught those young girls the Denudo spell, but as it is banned at Hogwarts, the entire membership is being punished and the club officially disbanded. I congratulate you on a perfect shield spell, by the way. I am sure that the gathered girls did not expect you to throw up a shield so quickly when they hit your team with multiple "Undressing" spells and furthermore could not have anticipated that their spells would bounce off your shield and reflect back on themselves. Your beaters should be out of the hospital wing by tomorrow—I suppose they had never seen naked girls before and that was the cause of their unfortunate midair collision. As for Mr. Weasley, Poppy has managed to get his eyes back in his head.

I remain very interested in your studies with Minerva. You have actually given me cause on more than one occasion of late to wonder if it is too late to pursue the art myself. Frankly, I did not ever before feel a desire to be an Animagus. The thought of existing in animal form was a bit daunting to me; the thought of being stuck in animal form terrifying. What are your thoughts on this, Harry? Are we ever too old to learn something new? I am not sure that a trip to the Forbidden Forest with Hagrid is a good idea. I cannot think of a single occasion where you have ventured into that place that did not result in some major heart-stopping event. Wild creatures live there, Harry, and I swear I once saw a rogue Muggle automobile sneak by while I was collecting potions ingredients.

Fine. I will search the Black Library for a book on wizarding genealogy. If I find other books that I believe will interest you, should I bring them back as well? I am sure there are many on proper wizarding courtship etiquette as well as correct deportment for young witches and wizards. I am curious myself if "undulating" is allowed in wizarding society. I think not.

Speaking of undulating, I am quite impressed by your use of the thesaurus. However, if you ever call me Euphoria (or Noisome, of Flatulencia) you will quickly have more than two detentions and can kiss Animagus studies goodbye. At least Severus is an honest name, one that suits my personality quite well.

Hard to tell the Weasleys apart, is it? All of them with the same red hair and freckles? Harry, quit kidding yourself! As I said, I am NOT the one to come to over matters of the heart, but anyone can see you are pining after her and NOT after her brother (we will leave him to Mr. Creevey) so you must be able to tell who is who.

You did not say, by the way, if you yourself were adept at the hula hoop during your session with your friends. Perhaps you can show me over Christmas? If your guardian will agree to stop by, I will let you teach her as well. I am sure they make hula hoops in her tartan.

I regret that I am not able to leave you with another story about your mother, Harry. I was well within my right to criticize Mr. Longbottom as I did. You rising to his defense so vocally was not
called for, no matter how hurt his feelings were and how much it damaged his "spirit." Perhaps your energy would be of better use helping him learn these required spells and practice them outside of class. This, indeed, will allow you to take even more focus off Mr. Malfoy. I do hope you are fully recovered from your altercation with him last week.

Again, I must reiterate that you must trust me with him, Harry. If you only knew what it did to me to see that spell hit you and to hear your head crack against the desk. It is not easy for me at all to watch this play out as it must. All I can tell you is that the situation with Mr. Malfoy is complicated, as complicated as your own situation. I must watch him very closely. You know who his father is, Harry. You know with whom he associates. Do not think me—or the Headmaster—so naïve that we need to be told he is up to something. That being said, I have been remiss in allowing the situation with Mr. Malfoy to endanger you. You indeed have a point about your safety outside my classroom. I have spoken with the Headmaster and we have put a plan into action to further protect you. We refer to this as "Plan D" for "Dobby."

Professor Burbage approached me even before I read your letter, by the way. She asked me to be a guest speaker in her Muggle Studies class. Naturally, I had to decline. However, I did loan her my Beatle’s anthology book and told her that I had seen you and Weasley wearing Beatles t-shirts and perhaps she could ask you to come in to sing your favorite Beatles' songs to her class. I told her that you had a melodious voice and Mr. Weasley a rich baritone. I would be happy to grant you and Mr. Weasley a pass to miss Defense one day in order to help out in her class.

Touché.

Regards,

Severus

He finished the letter, signing his name with a flourish. Though it had ended on a light-hearted and teasing note, Severus worried that his assurances to Harry about Draco would not be enough. The boy, despite how far he had come this summer in learning to trust, despite his own influence and the presence of a new guardian, was far too accustomed to terrifying leaps of faith, to taking matters into his own too-young and inexperienced hands.

Severus knew it was time. Time to talk to Minerva.

-Harry-

He was cold, wet and tired. It had rained during the entire Quidditch practice. He was behind on his homework. His legs and back hurt from the spill he had taken from his broom. He wanted to sleep but he needed to write a quick letter to Snape. He still couldn’t believe that last night, during his weekly Animagus Studies lesson with Minerva, he had gotten to talk to Snape outside of class, away from the castle, just the two of them with Minerva. It was like a healing balm; no—more like a drug, a Snape fix. He knew now that he’d need more of these to get through the year, and the next sure one at Christmas holiday was still two and a half months away.

He was still suffused with the comforting feelings of relief and peace Snape's visit had given him when he went to bed a short half hour later.
Dear Severus:

I can't believe you were there with us last night! I was already a bit on edge in the forest with Minerva and then you about gave me a heart attack when you stepped out from behind those trees like Count Dracula. I really needed to see you, you know—acting like yourself and not like you do in Defense class. When Minerva told me Hagrid wasn't coming with us I was a little bit worried. I wasn't sure what kind of relationship she had with the centaurs and the spiders and the thestrals and such but I pretty much trusted her not to get us killed or maimed or anything, and figured her wand was as good of a weapon as Hagrid's crossbow. Still, having you there in that glade with us made all the difference. I felt safe with you there, too, at home even though I'd never been to that place before. I can't believe how easy it was to meditate, to slip into that altered state she talks about all the time, when we sat in that tight circle. I know we're miles from the sea but somehow it felt we were on our porch at Shell Cottage and the ocean was just a stone's throw away.

I couldn't believe how many different animals came out once she evoked the spell. The hares, the foxes, the deer, the wild boar, badgers, wild cats, squirrels, wolves, raccoons, skunks and all the birds! We learned in Primary that wolves are extinct in the UK—I suppose they didn't know about the population in the Forbidden Forest. For next week, I have to list each and every animal we saw and give two adjectives for each describing how that animal made me feel. I know I'll get tripped up on the squirrel as I'll only remember the moment it ran up your arm and sat on your shoulder, batting its eyes at me and sniffing your ear.

Last night, it was like a hole somewhere inside me started to fill up and close, like the holes we dug in the sand on the beach that would gradually fill in as the waves came in, smoothing over, leaving no sign there was ever a hole there to begin with.

Thanks again for coming last night. I know there's always the risk you'll be seen. Thanks for thinking I was worth it.

Regards,

Harry

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That night, Harry dreamed again. He was on the beach, digging holes. The gentle waves washed in, filling up each hole in turn.

He knew then, looking out to sea, that there would always be enough sand to fill up the holes, and always more holes to fill in.

But at least there was the sand, and the sea to stir it up.

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Chapter 5

________________________________________

Oct. 12 –Oct. 17
Severus Snape paced in Minerva McGonagall's office. Twenty minutes ago, he had finally left the hospital wing after containing the curse on Katie Bell as best he could. The girl was alive but unresponsive and Poppy was arranging for her transfer to St. Mungo's. He had sought out Minerva immediately upon leaving the hospital wing, and she had just filled him in on the part Harry had played in the event with the cursed necklace.

"He could have been killed! ANY of them could have touched that thing. As it is, I'm not sure that Miss Bell will recover fully, and she was wearing gloves when she touched it!"

"But they didn't, Severus. Calm down, please. As I understand it, Harry prevented Mr. Weasley from touching the necklace and only picked it up himself after wrapping it in his school scarf."

Snape brandished the scarf. The necklace it has contained was now encased in a locked box in the Headmaster's office. The Headmaster, of course, was off on one of his fact-finding "missions" and was not scheduled to return until tomorrow.

"This scarf? What if IT had had a hole? This cannot go on, Minerva. I have no control over Malfoy anymore. Someone is going to die, and it is unlikely to be his intended target."

"Malfoy was with me today, Severus, serving detention," said Minerva. Severus looked at her, surprised. "Now calm down. You are as bad as Harry. Would you like me to call the boy here so you can speak with him yourself?"

The pleading look he gave her held his answer. Minerva pushed a rather full glass of scotch across the table toward him and called Dobby while Severus dropped down into a sturdy armchair and reached for the glass with a shaky hand.

12 October, 1996
Saturday

Dear Harry:

This day has been a long one for me, and certainly for you. You may find it odd that I am writing this reply only hours after meeting with you in person in Minerva's office. After the events that transpired today, I am certainly on edge and even the physical evidence of you, hale and healthy, was not enough to put me at ease again. The curse on that necklace was not child's play but dark magic so deep that it would certainly have killed you had you picked it up with your bare hands. There is no sure way we can protect you—ANY of you—outside of Hogwarts. You must remain vigilant at every moment. Think of what Miss Bell's friend said—that she was not acting herself after she returned from the bathroom, that she was, as we now know, surely under the Imperius curse. Your vigilance must extend to the behavior of all those around you and you must alert me, Minerva or the Headmaster if anything—and I mean anything—seems out of place in any way.

I was in my quarters marking second year assignments today while you were making your way back from Hogsmeade. The clock, which now sits on my desk instead of my mantel, read "Traveling." When next I looked up, the hand had moved to "Mortal Peril." I had no sooner jumped to my feet when the hand moved back to "Traveling." I have already told you the rest—that I made it to the doors at the same time that Hagrid did and went with him and Miss Bell to the infirmary, that Hagrid told me you had been there when Katie was injured. I wonder if I should cover the clock with a cloth..."
to save myself the gut-wrenching fear I experienced today, or change the hands all the hands to read "being his usual self."

Enough of this drama. We are all in need of an end to it. On to your previous letter. You may recall you wrote it after our last in-person meeting earlier this week. I hope you have had your fill of me of late—you are not likely to experience this degree of physical proximity again until the term break. I do not know why you found it odd that the squirrel found me to be such a suitable seat, so to speak. I am, I suspect, quite calm when compared to your teenage twitchiness, and therefore a squirrel magnet, so to speak. I must admit that spending the evening as we did, without the baggage of my evil Professor persona or our usual classroom enmity, smoothed the ragged peaks in my psyche as well. It was as if I had the most unnatural of deposits on my skin—callouses of pettiness and anger, raised scars left from barbs and jabs. The night seemed to smooth these away, leaving me closer to the even keel on which we departed on September first. Sand is a curious substance. It is rough, gritty and abrasive, yet leaves a smooth, unblemished and level surface.

I confess, as I must if I am to maintain this relationship with you that we fell into this summer, that I worry about you now even more so than when you were injured and ill this summer. You are finding it more difficult to trust in adults and depend on them now that you are back in this environment. I see that in your continued pursuit of the matter of Draco Malfoy. I am not telling you that he is innocent or that he should not be watched. Indeed, it will behoove you to keep your distance from him whenever possible. I am, however, telling you to trust me and the Headmaster to appropriately deal with him. You must not distract yourself with his doings nor endanger yourself in any way by getting between him and his game, whatever that may be. Harry—let it be.

And speaking of games, I am returning the chessboard with this letter. You will find yourself in "check," Harry. This may be an appropriate time to call in Mr. Weasley. I will not fault you if you do.

As your behavior in class on Friday—when I praised the shield spell you used at Quidditch practice and suggested you used it deliberately to denude your female fan club—was enough in-line to earn you another fact about your mother. I should hold out for more information from you on your hula hoop skills and expect an answer to my question on that subject in your next letter. However, as I am playing nice, here it is. Your mother's favorite ice cream flavor was mint chip. She was rather allergic to strawberries, as well as to bee stings. Perhaps that is why you are not meant to be a bumblebee.

I have risked a glance at the clock. It is half past midnight now and it has you in Gryffindor Tower where, I might add, you belong. I hope sleep has found you, and restful dreams.

Regards,

Severus

Severus re-read his letter, finding it satisfactory if not a bit too revealing of his emotional state during the day. At this point, however, there was no real reason to hide it. After all, he'd shown his hand earlier today in Minerva's office. When Harry had knocked on the door only ten minutes after Minerva had sent Dobby off to find him—just long enough for Snape to get down a healthy portion of scotch—and Minerva had bade him enter, Severus had been on him in a trice, grabbing his shoulders and, because he was too insecure to hug him, shaking him until Minerva had to maneuver herself between them to make him stop. He'd dropped back into his chair, grabbing his head and muttering "Sorry" until Harry himself had knelt down next to his chair, apologizing to Severus and promising to be more careful. "It's all right," he said. "I'm fine. Really, Severus, I'm fine."
It was the first time he'd called him Severus in person.

-Harry-

Harry read the letter from Severus one more time. He would keep this one, as he kept them all, words hidden behind the secrecy spell, rolled up and stored in the corner of his school trunk. But he wanted to remember parts of this letter in particular, the part about the gut-wrenching fear, and about the sand, the substance that was an equalizer for the two, filling in Harry's emptiness, wearing down the calloused spots on Severus' soul.

He had a lot to write about this evening. He, Ron and Hermione were sitting in the library tonight, preparing for a Charms exam on Thursday. Katie Bell had been sent to St. Mungo's—Harry had tried to visit her on Sunday and Madam Pomfrey had told him then. He didn't like the look on her face when she told him. It didn't speak of hope and the promise that she'd be back in class—and back on her broom—by the end of the week. He was a bit behind in his studies already as he's spent the previous evening with Professor Dumbledore, exploring Dumbledore's own memory of the first time he'd met Tom Riddle as a little boy in the orphanage in London. Tonight he'd managed to complete his Defense and Transfiguration essays and had revised the reading assignments and his notes for the Charms exam. Across the table, Hermione was studying diligently, a half dozen or more reference books piled up around her, creating a low castle wall to shield her from his gaze. He glanced at Ron who was sitting next to him, across from Hermione. Ron was checking his chess move on the post-owl chessboard and shaking his head. He looked at Harry and rolled his eyes as he bent over the board to study it some more. Harry knew he was trying to figure out Snape's strategy and make some excuse for Harry's lack thereof. He'd be at it for a while.

15 October, 1996

Tuesday

Dear Severus:

I'll admit straight up that Ron is helping with my next chess move. He's been looking at the game for fifteen minutes now, shaking his head. If he could play Quidditch like he can play chess…no, forget I said that.

I found out they sent Katie to St. Mungo's. Do you know what is going on with her? Madam Pomfrey has me really worried—she didn't look very hopeful when I tried to visit Katie on Sunday. Listen, I'm really worried. It's not just about Quidditch, though she was our most experienced chaser. I'm guessing you know more than I do, as they'd have to have told the teachers when to expect her back in class.

I went down to Hagrid's after classes today to see the owlets. They're nearly grown now, and Hagrid is starting to feed them whole mice. It's rather disgusting, I suppose, but after more than five years of making potions from pickled newt spleens and parboiled rat tails, not much phases me anymore. And even though I'm not taking Care of Magical Creatures anymore, Hagrid set aside one of them for me to train! It's a male that I've been calling "McKenzie" after the priest in Eleanor Rigby, but Hagrid has shortened it to "Mac." Mac is more solitary than the other owls—hence the name and why I picked him out. There's just something about him. He seems older than the others, somehow.

I love mint chip ice cream. It's one of the first flavors I ever tried at Fortescue's in Diagon Alley. Was Fortescue's around when you and my mum were at Hogwarts? Or did you have it in the Muggle world? By the way, thanks for making all my classmates think I'm a pervert (they're calling me Pervy
Potter now) and that I deliberately made all those girls naked! How could I POSSIBLY have known what spell they’d lobbed at me? I was on a broom on the Quidditch pitch, not hunkering down behind them spying on them in the stands! I just saw them all pointing their wands our way and naturally threw up a shield spell. When I saw what the spells did when they bounced back on them I about fell off my broom. It was like a mass riot! They were in full panic mode, screeching and crouching down under the seats for cover. Hermione had to go over and start conjuring robes for them. Anyway, I think Ron was a bit miffed at Hermione for that piece of help. Ginny had to hit him on the back of the head to get him to look away. I, of course, was the perfect gentleman and kept my eyes averted. Well, I was forced to as my beaters knocked themselves out running into each other trying to get a closer look at our naked fan club. I am glad they were finally disbanded. I mean, if you're going to have a boy-ogling fan club, why not call it that instead of pretending they like Quidditch?

Last night I had another session with Professor Dumbledore. This time, he pulled out some of his own memories. Apparently, he was the one sent from Hogwarts to tell Tom Riddle that he was a wizard and was on the list to attend Hogwarts. This has to be a hundred years ago or so—there was a horse drawn carriage on the street in London, anyway. I've never really thought about how old Voldemort is…well, when he was born anyway. Not sure if you count someone's age by how old their current body is or from the year they were born forward. You know what I mean. Is he one and a half or eighty? Anyway, he's got to be about the same age as Hagrid, right? Since they were at Hogwarts together? It's just hard to imagine how old Hagrid is. I've never looked up the lifespan of half-giants. Wait—I'll just ask Hermione. She's sitting right here at the table. I'm sure she'll know and if not, we're in the library and she'll have an answer in five minutes! What else would you like to know while I have her on the hook? How much bigger (or smaller) their brains are than the average person?

I think the whole idea of the memory last night was to show me that Voldemort was already set on his path even before he came to Hogwarts. I don't feel sorry for him, really, even though he grew up in an orphanage and his mother was dead and his father abandoned them. He didn't have to be bitter and angry about it, did he? He didn't have to treat the other kids so poorly. He could have tried having friends—there were certainly enough other kids at that orphanage. No, what bothers me is that he was a wizard, and down on the list for Hogwarts, but no one bothered to check out how he was doing, or find a wizarding family to take him in. He just grew up in that orphanage until one day a stranger came by with the offer of a boarding school in Scotland, and a fantastic story that he could do magic. And he had to go back to that orphanage in the summer, too. It doesn't make any sense to me.

I remember what you told me this summer, the night before we went to St. Mungo's from the flat in London. You said "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." Look how strong it made Tom Riddle. That worries me. A lot.

Do you know how to make an antidote to a love potion?

Regards,

Harry

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Ron had pushed the chessboard parchment over to Harry right as he was rolling up the homework parchment on which he'd written the letter.

"Will that save me?" whispered Harry, looking at the move Ron had indicated on the board.
"Maybe," whispered Ron. "You started out pretty strong but missed his intent on the third round. This move gets you out of check and starts a more proper offensive."

Harry smiled at his best friend. "Thanks, Ron," he said. He had a feeling this would be Ron's chess game from here on, but figured he'd learn a lot about strategy from watching it play out. He tucked the chessboard parchment and the letter into his Charms text book and read it again as he pretended to study Charms. He wondered if Snape would notice he hadn't mentioned Malfoy at all. He'd made the conscious decision to drop the matter, at least in the letters. He wasn't making any promises yet, however, with real life. Instead, he'd take a piece of Snape's advice and remain vigilant. If anyone at Hogwarts bore watching, it was Draco Malfoy.

________________________________________

-Severus-

Albus has summoned him to his office on Wednesday afternoon after classes to tell him that he would be gone again on the weekend and would he and Minerva sit through all four Quidditch practices, just to keep an eye on things? Severus agreed, albeit grudgingly, but only on the condition that Minerva would also agree, and would bring Irish coffee this time.

Sixth year Defense class had been more stressful than usual that day. Harry had been late to class, and Severus had immediately docked ten points from Gryffindor. Harry didn't protest, sliding into his seat quietly. He looked like he hadn't slept well, and Severus suddenly remembered that he himself had been up half the night with a migraine. It had been painful, and annoying, but simply a part of life that he'd been putting up with for many years. He hadn't even considered how it would affect Harry now that they shared this connection.

He found Harry watching him intently during class. He could read the worry in his eyes and considered keeping the boy after class to assure him that he was fine; that he hadn't been called; that he was just plagued with occasional migraines and one had come on last night.

He thought better of it as class went on. He shouldn't slip at all, let down his carefully constructed façade even once. Fortunately, the entire class seemed to be performing abysmally and he had the opportunity to rant at them as a whole. "It's bad enough that I was up half the night with a migraine and you are not helping my mood with your third-year performance!"

Harry gazed at him intently for a moment and apparently accepted his statement. Severus tested him, flinging an insult his way about his inability to do a simple shaving charm. Who had taught him, Hagrid?

The comment won the approval of the Slytherins. Harry, however, remained silent and did not appear amused.

/ 17 October, 1996

Thursday

Dear Harry:

I should have told you some time ago about my migraines. They are, unfortunately, quite unpredictable. I am not as likely to have them in the summertime, for some reason, and last night's was the first I'd experienced in several months. The one last night was not terribly severe as migraines go. I have taken several doses of migraine headache potion to Madam Pomfrey for your
use. Please pick these up from her and avail yourself of them as needed if I have another similar attack.

That being said, it has been nearly a month since I have had "to leave the castle" as you say. I am hopeful that your Animagus transformation will have progressed enough by Christmas that you will be able to shield yourself behind your animal mind instead of relying on the deep Occlumency you depend on now when I have to leave again. Until that time, do what you must to avoid further damage to yourself when I must go.

I suppose I owe you something about your mother after belittling your shaving charm today in class. I taught your mother to play chess when we were ten years old, a year before coming to Hogwarts. It took her six years before she beat me. After she beat me, she never played against me again.

I think McKinzie is an appropriate name for a post owl. Be sure to introduce Hedwig to him early on before she gets wind of him and gets jealous. Familiars are not as unforgiving as you might imagine them to be.

Why don't you ask Hagrid what years he attended Hogwarts? You will also find yearbooks going back more than a hundred years in the library. Please do not make an effort to look for me in those books, though you may find me skulking about if you are looking for photos of your parents or godfather. I was not the most photogenic of children.

I think, Harry, that your outrage—no, perhaps outrage is too strong a word for the emotion you are feeling—on behalf of the boy left in the orphanage is, perhaps, outrage on your own behalf. You cannot help but see the parallels between your life and Tim Riddle's and if you are normal in any way, shape or form, those parallels will bother you. The Headmaster is striving to help you reach your own conclusions, of course, but to cut to the chase, he is showing you that two boys of similar backgrounds and life circumstances chose two very different paths. You know that you, too, were placed in an orphanage of sorts, in a place where you neither felt at home nor had parents to call your own. You were both neglected and isolated. The wizarding world ignored you both until you were of age to attend Hogwarts. At that time, you both did great things, but with different intent. Harry, consider the outcome, not the circumstances. You could have become bitter, disenchanted, vindictive. You did not. Whether that was the result of nature or nurture, blind luck or divine intervention, no one knows. I suspect the Headmaster will set a task for you and the successful completion of this difficult task will depend on your ability to understand Tom Riddle and to know his mind. Do not allow pity for the child to color the picture of your enemy. "Know thyself, know thy enemy. A thousand battles, a thousand victories."

Tell me Harry, how did Tom Riddle's experiences in the orphanage make him stronger? And how did yours at the Dursleys?

You asked about Miss Bell. The faculty has been told that she will recover, most likely fully, but that she may spend months in the hospital. The recovery will be slow as she regains the energy and magic depleted by the curse's attack.

Love potions? Please give me more to go on. Are you intending to make one or imbibe one?

Regards,

Severus

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Severus spread out the chessboard parchment on the table and studied the chessboard he had set up
on the table, making sure he had the pieces positioned correctly. The move Mr. Weasley had made was a strong one. He'd have to pay more attention to the game now—it wouldn't do to be bested by a sixteen year old Gryffindor.

Suddenly, Severus laughed out loud.

Bested by a sixteen year old Gryffindor.

He may as well throw in the towel right now. A sixteen year old Gryffindor has been besting him all summer and it was getting harder and harder to feel the least bit annoyed by it. He glanced at his clock. The hand was stuck between "Gryffindor Tower" and "Somewhere Safe." Curious.

Up in Gryffindor Tower, Harry was dreaming and in his dream, he was sitting on the beach at Shell Cottage, smoothing the damp sand with his hand.

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Chapter 6

________________________________________

October 20 - 27

-Harry-

Harry was not watching Ginny and Dean. He was not. Watching. Them. Kiss. Or snuggle together in the loveseat by the fire. He had written his letter to Snape earlier in the day and was wondering if he'd given away too much about the spell they'd discovered in the Half Blood Prince's potions text. Well, he'd just leave it. Snape was bound to find out soon and then he'd probably catch hell no matter what.

/ 20 October, 1996

Sunday

Dear Severus:

I suppose I'll start by telling you about the love potions. I'm not MAKING one and hopefully am not drinking one either. It started when Slughorn announced his Christmas party. Yeah, I know, almost two months in advance, but the man actually scheduled it around ME so that I couldn't make up an excuse not to go. We're allowed to bring a "guest" and since I haven't asked anyone yet, I'm apparently fair game. Hermione overheard some girls in the bathroom planning to slip me a love potion. So, I need to give all my mates the antidote so they can dose me with it if anything happens. I'm not exactly sure what WILL happen, but I figure if I'm all wonky over some girl I've never paid attention to before, they should give me the antidote just in case. Or hit me over the head with a cauldron. Both methods might be effective.

Thanks for telling me about Katie. I never would have thought it was so bad, that she'd be out for months. I'm one lucky idiot for not touching that necklace. And Ron too—talk about a brush with death. I suppose we all need to take a page from Moody's book—constant vigilance!
You did know I'd go straight to the library to find those yearbooks, didn't you? I haven't gone back far enough to find Hagrid and Riddle yet (and I've gone back thirty-five years already) but I did find one of you and my mum your first year. I can't believe how small you were! I think my mum was even bigger than you (though I think your hair was longer). How did she EVER get you to join the Gobstones Club? I'm sure you remember the picture—it's you and about six girls. You look properly sulky and keep slinking behind my mum like you're trying to hide from the camera. I'm not sure but it looks like you're wearing some kind of big medal around your neck on a red ribbon. Were you champions that year? Did you win the Gobstones Cup?

I'm still doing great in Potions with the help of the Half Blood Prince. I have a bit of confession to make about something that happened with that book, and I don't think you're going to like it much but I figured I'd better tell you before you find out yourself. Last week I was reading my potions book in bed. I particularly like to read the margins where you've made all sorts of notes and doodles. I had my wand in my hand and was waving it around a bit (just casually) and I happened to read something you wrote out loud...Levicorpus. Anyway, before I knew it Ron was hanging upside down in the air—like a giant was holding him up by his ankle. He'd been sucked right out of his bed. I don't know who was more surprised—me or him. But I knew the spell then—it was the one in your memory that I saw in the Pensieve last year. I know you told me not to use any of those spells and I really shouldn't have. The thing is, the other guys kind of picked it up and it's becoming quite the prank in Gryffindor now. The girls have all started to tie their robes down around their legs. I have this feeling someone will use it in front of you one of these days. Did you invent that spell? It really is brilliant—especially for a kid your age. I can see how it could be really useful to use on someone who was trying to run away or who needed to get blood flowing to their brain really quickly.

I worked with McKenzie yesterday after Quidditch practice. I'm just working on getting him to take treats and rewards without breaking my skin. I've had to go to Madam Pomfrey already to have her heal a pretty bad gash he gave me. So far he likes bacon the best, but he'll also take almost any food except for Hagrid's rock cakes. Hagrid usually sends me some of those for Christmas so this year I'll be sure to save some for you.

Quidditch practice was a bit of a downer without Katie. Ron was a mess and even Ginny had an off day. The beaters thought it had more to do with the lack of naked girls than with the lack of Katie, though. Since we were all so down, we snuck down to Hogsmeade and had a few pints at the Hog's Head. I met this really cool witch down there. She had a room above the bar and took Ron and I up to look at her Chocolate Frog card collection. Can you believe she had Morgana?

(Just checking to make sure you're still paying attention!)

Well, I did think about the questions you asked about my last meeting with Professor Dumbledore. How did what I went through at the Dursleys make me stronger? The obvious answer, of course, is that a kid gets pretty strong by cutting the grass, weeding the garden, and running away from Dudley and his friends. But I'm guessing you aren't talking about physical strength, are you? Well, I learned to take things less personally, to let things they said bounce off me. I developed really thick skin. I learned to make do with what I had and not to expect special treatment, or to expect anything, really. I learned to be inventive. When I finally had the opportunity to make friends, I appreciated them and didn't take them for granted. And because I never had a real family, I was able to build one of my own and didn't have to stick to the rule that families share a blood connection.

Kind of sappy, isn't it?

As for Riddle, I'm not sure what to say. I really don't like to think about it too much, and I know you are challenging me to do it anyway. It's just that it's so easy to see myself in him. I liked the quote you gave—Know thyself, know thy enemy. A thousand battles, a thousand victories. I'm really
hoping we can get by without a thousand battles, though.

Can I stop playing chess when I beat you too?

Well—since you've pretty much demanded an answer, I'll tell you about my experience with the hula hoop. I was way better than Ron! I kept the thing going for a couple minutes, actually. The problem is that when I did it I made practically everyone fall on the floor laughing so hard they were crying. It would probably be a good way to take out a room of Death Eaters—have Harry Potter hula hoop them to death. Hermione says I look like an Elvis impersonator (whatever that is…she told me to look it up) and Ron says I look like I have a severe itch "down there" and am trying to scratch it by moving everything around "down there" without using my hands. In any case, I had my go with it and everyone had their laugh and now I'm done.

By the way, Ron says your last chess move was "predictable." I hope "mine" is not.

Have you ever had a pet?

Regards,

Harry

Harry rolled the letter back up after concealing the text and picked up his wand. His Animagus Studies homework was to try to transfigure common objects into miniature animal models. He had to keep a log of each original object and what it had been when he transfigured it into an animal. He wasn't supposed to think of a specific animal when he did the transfiguration but to concentrate instead on the object he was holding, on its "essence." So far, he hadn't had what he considered to be too much success. The quill had become, predictably, a small bird. It wasn't any type of bird he could identify, however, looking somewhat more like a robin than a sparrow but not really like either. The Chocolate Frog card had become a frog. No surprise there. The little model frog was made of something green and squishy. His sock had turned into some sort of mammal—he was sure of it—it had fur after all. Sighing, he picked up the silver sickle he had placed on the table and tried again.

-Severus-

He was going to kill him. Take away the blasted book, burn it in his fireplace and THEN kill him. Except… except the boy had told him. Had trusted him enough to lay it on the line. Severus was comforted by that thought for mere moments before realizing that Harry had told him only because he knew Severus would find out anyway.

He racked his brain. What other spells were written in that book? It had been so long—more than twenty years—since he'd even opened it that he simply couldn't remember. Damn!

The boy was clever, that much was for certain. Offering those humorous bits about the hula hoop and the introspective piece about life with the Dursleys…almost obscuring the utter foolishness of uttering an unknown spell while waving one's wand about.

Sometimes…sometimes Harry acted like he was sixteen going on forty. And other times, like he was sixteen going on ten.

/
23 October, 1996

Wednesday

Dear Harry:

I trust you enjoyed your Animagus Studies class last night. I certainly enjoyed taking over the lesson plan for the evening, and whole-heartedly enjoyed the time I spent paging through my old Potions textbook erasing material deemed inappropriate for foolish Gryffindors. I suppose I should have had you do something more constructive than lines but Minerva's suggestion that you write out by hand the first chapter of "Magical Me" by Gilderoy Lockhart was as close to "cruel and unusual punishment" as I could get without facing an investigation by the Hogwarts Board of Governors.

You received your lecture last night so I will not waste more parchment space to expound further on how utterly foolish it was for you to use an unknown spell. Instead, I will move on now to address the other items in your letter, but you will know that what I'm really thinking of in the back of my mind is your foolishness! While you placed your experience with the hula hoop at the end of your missive, I will address it now. As I was not present for your debut with the toy, and would very much like to witness your prowess, you might look for a large ring-shaped object under the Christmas tree this year. The more rock cakes I get, the more hula hoops for you.

Ahh…what memories you evoked about my first official club membership at Hogwarts—the Gobstones Club. In fact, I joined this club a year before joining Future Potions Masters of Europe (FPME) and three years before being inducted into HSSS (Hogwarts' Sexy Snarky Slytherins). For your information, my mother was a Gobstones Grand Champion and taught me to play when I was a small lad. (Yes, I was a small lad once. I started out very small, in fact, and gradually grew to my present size.) It was I that convinced your mother to join the club with me and for your information, I was NOT the only boy in the club. Leslie Nolin, a prefect from Hufflepuff, was our team captain and Miles Pettibone, a third year Ravenclaw, was also on the team. Miles is now known as "Melinda" but that's neither here nor there.

I will be happy to give you the formula for a standard love potion antidote which you may make on your own time in the Potions lab under Professor Slughorn's supervision. The ingredients are all readily available and most are in your sixth-year potions kit. I can also provide you with a love potion so that you can test the effectiveness of the antidote. Do not, however, get funny ideas in your head about testing it out on Miss Weasley. She will not appreciate it and is unlikely to forgive you when the potion wears off.

I thought it was you I saw at the Hog's Head Saturday night. Did you not see me in a corner booth with Professor Trelawney? We were enjoying a cup of sherry together after a lovely tea at Madam Puddifoot's. So, your new friend has Morgana? Do you realize how rare that particular card is? I would really like to buy it for Sybil so please pass on the address of your friend.

(Just checking to make sure you are paying attention.)

On a more serious note, Harry, I do appreciate that you gave thought to the challenge I put before you—to look at your life at the Dursleys and suggest how that experience made you stronger. I hope you see now that your real strength comes from the integrity of your character and not from the trials you endured during those early years of your life. Your assessment of friends and family is not a bit sappy. You need never be alone. Whether you have a thousand battles, or one monumental one, your friends and your family (and I believe it is difficult to define where one starts and the other begins) will be there with you and for you if you allow them to be. The Headmaster is helping you with an understanding of your enemy. I will help you further your understanding of yourself. And less I get too sappy here, as you say, I hope you now understand that your impetuousness will continue to get
you in trouble and the first time I see Levicorpus performed at Hogwarts, I will punish you by revealing to the combined Gryffindor/Slytherin DADA class that your sixth-year physical revealed that you have a tattoo of a butterfly on your arse. No—make that two dozen butterflies, spelling out the phrase "Kiss my Arse."

Tell Mr. Weasley that my last move in our chess game was logical and calculated. His, however, was ridiculous.

A pet? Where did that come from? I had an owl when I came to Hogwarts. Her name was "Tempest." Since then, I have been adopted from time to time by a variety of stray cats. The most recent now lives mainly in Minerva's quarters—a cranky old calico called "Snarky" by your head of house. You may have seen her once or twice during your lessons with Minerva.

Have you found a new Chaser for the Gryffindor Quidditch team yet? I heard that Romilda Vane had been given the position but had not heard that from you and wondered why you are remaining silent on the issue. Is she your secret weapon?

Regards,

Severus

Satisfied, Severus signed his name and regarded the chess board. Weasley's move was far from ridiculous. It was both daring and unexpected. He studied the board he had set up to mimic the parchment game and moved a bishop, studied the result, then returned it to its starting point. He spent ten more minutes strategizing before finally committing his move.

His meeting with Harry the day before had been interesting. Harry had been instructed by Minerva to bring his homework to his study session, including his textbooks. She'd left the office to Severus, and it was Severus who was sitting behind her desk when Harry knocked. Harry had frozen just inside the door as Severus held out his hand and demanded the Potions textbook. The ensuing argument had been priceless as Severus let Harry go on in his mistaken belief that Severus was taking the book from him permanently.

"But I NEED it," he had exclaimed. "I have a reputation to maintain in Potions now!"

In the end, Harry had spent two hours hand-copying the ridiculous Lockhart prose and Severus had paged through the text, reliving memories both good and bad. When he came to a page with the words "Sectumsempra" and "For enemies," he nearly shuddered as he erased the spell from the pages of the book, relieved beyond measure that it was not this particular spell that Harry had chosen to mutter aloud while waving his wand about.

-Harry-

Harry was sitting in the common room with his leg propped up on the sofa, a pillow under his still-sore knee. Madam Pomfrey had let him leave the hospital wing several hours ago "against her better judgment" as apparently the Skele-Gro was still mending his kneecap. He'd had another Quidditch accident and had spent the night in the infirmary. He didn't remember much from the night, but what he did remember was enough. Apparently, Severus had been called by Voldemort while Harry was under the influence of a strong pain potion and they'd had to call in the Headmaster to deal with Harry's convulsions.
He'd been told that Severus was safely back in the castle, but he hadn't yet seen him.

The upside of the injury was that Ginny was sitting on the floor leaning against the sofa, reading her Transfiguration text and chatting with him. Dean and Ron were both in detention with Filch (for getting in a fist fight over Dean snogging Ginny behind the tapestry on the fifth floor) and Harry just couldn't muster up a bit of pity for his friends.

He regarded his Defense Homework and picked up his quill.

/  

27 October, 1996  

Sunday  

Dear Severus:

I'm saving what happened yesterday and last night for the end this time.

I think I'm in love with Ginny Weasley. No, I didn't just say that. Wait. I did. I really did. I haven't told anyone. Scratch that—I haven't told anyone but you. And now I'm trying to figure out WHY I just told you. You've already said (twice) that you are not the one to come to for matters of the heart or some such rot, but I can't tell Ron. He'd belt me in the mouth for even THINKING about Ginny in that way. Dean is already going out with her so I doubt he'd like to hear that I fancy his girlfriend. Seamus is Dean's best friend. I'm pretty sure that Neville likes Ginny too—he always stutters and stammers when he's around her. I'd tell Hermione but I REALLY don't want to hear her advice, which would probably have words like "feelings" and "honesty" and such in it.

So here I am telling my DADA Professor, the man I hated until a few months ago, that I can't stop thinking about Ginny. I was watching her eat the other day and I even love the way she holds her fork. We were all sitting around the common room the other night drinking butterbeer and she burped and I even thought that was cute. What is WRONG with me? In the meantime, Romilda Vane (who is NOT on the Quidditch Team and is NOT our secret weapon but who IS the one threatening to slip me a love potion) is fluttering her eyelashes at me and showing up in the common room in her little nightie and it does nothing for me at all. Well, it might if someone did Levicorpus on her while she was wearing it…

I'm such an idiot about this that I'm thinking of picking Dean Thomas to replace Katie on our Quidditch team. I think he's the right choice anyway, but what I keep thinking about is how it will make Ginny happy. I had this dream the other night—I don't think it's one of those significant dreams like I had at Shell Cottage but who knows?—where Ginny and I were in our own compartment on the Hogwarts Express and I was trying to count the freckles on her face and then they all rearranged themselves to spell out "I Love Harry" right across her cheeks and nose. I am pretty sure your tale about my tattoos spelling out "Kiss my Arse" inspired this odd dream.

By the way, if you EVER start spreading a rumor about me having tattoos on my bum, I'll drop my pants right in the middle of class and prove to everyone that you're making it up! Butterflies! Where do you come up with this rot? All my tattoos are dragon-related. Scales and talons on the derriere, in case you were wondering.

So that WAS you at the Hog's Head! We thought so but Hermione could not believe you would break a school rule and "associate" with another faculty member. Personally, I think ol' Sybil is worth breaking a few rules for, don't you? All those bangles and baubles and the smell of sherry to boot—she'll certainly never sneak up on you! If you don't smell her coming at least you'll hear her.
Do you know that she's been predicting my death for several years now? It started third year when she saw the Grim in my tea leaves. I think she's disappointed whenever I show up for a new year. Anyway, why don't you and Syb and me and my new friend (Candy) get together for a few drinks next weekend at the 'Head? Should I sneak out with my invisibility cloak or will you give me a pass?

I can't tell if you're feeding me a line about the Gobstones Club or if you really were the one to convince my mom to join. By the way, does HSSS still exist? If so, who are the current members? If it is a registered club at Hogwarts, the membership rosters are public record. Are you the faculty moderator?

Well, onto the important stuff. We finally had a decent Quidditch Practice yesterday. Everyone was pretty on their mark for a change, and I didn't spend all my time staring after Ginny. At the end of the practice, though, I got hit pretty hard with a bludger. I was pretty high up and had a hard time controlling my broom. Ginny and Ron helped me land but I couldn't walk. Turns out my kneecap was shattered and they had to hover me back inside and up to the hospital wing. I was still there a few hours later, knocked out by a really strong pain potion while the Skele-Gro worked, when you were called. I really don't remember having any pain, but Madam Pomfrey said I was practically convulsing on my hospital cot. She had to call the Headmaster, and he apparently sat with me for a long time. Ron says he was there for several hours while he and Hermione waited outside to see me. Madam Pomfrey thinks I'm alright, though. This morning, Minerva came in and told me you got back and were perfectly fine and resting up today in your quarters. I'm going to have to trust her until I see you for myself in class tomorrow.

What happened to Tempest?

I've seen Snarky, by the way. She kind of reminds me of you—aloof, picky, meticulous, sneaks around puking up hairballs. I can see you as a cat person.

We're having a Christmas tree at Shell Cottage?

Regards,

Harry

Harry rolled up his scroll and put it on his lap. He sat for a long while, regarding the back of Ginny's head, wanting to touch her soft hair, but not daring to even raise his hand.

Why had he told Severus about his fascination with Ginny? What had come over him?

A voice in his head said you trust him with it. And really, when it came right down to it, he didn't trust anyone else.

Chapter 7

October 29-November 5

-Severus-

Severus sat at his place at the faculty table, idly pushing his food around his plate while listening to
Minerva beside him talking about Harry's progress in Animagus Studies. He glanced over at the Gryffindor table as he listened and caught Harry's eye. He held his gaze for the briefest moment then turned back to his colleague. Harry had had an odd look—well, odd for Harry, anyway. Contemplative. As if he were trying to figure something out and didn't have quite enough cues yet.

Sunday night, when he had returned from the gathering with the Dark Lord, he had found a note on his mantel informing him that Harry was in the hospital wing recuperating from a shattered kneecap, the result of yet another Quidditch accident. As it was nearly midnight, he risked a visit, Flooing directly to Poppy's office so he wouldn't be seen by any wayward students in the corridors. It was there that he learned that Harry, though sedated and under the influence of Skele-Gro when he was called, had convulsed in his sleep and could not be awoken.

The Dark Lord had been particularly angry that Hogwarts had proven impenetrable and had reacted negatively to Severus' claims that he himself could not breach the new wards. All of the Death Eaters with children at Hogwarts had suffered that night, and each had been ordered to use their children as spies, to find a way to breach the security Albus Dumbledore had managed to achieve.

Severus had sat beside Harry's bed, watching the gentle rise and fall of his chest as he lay with one arm thrown over his forehead and the other splayed out on his stomach. Albus found him there some time later and Severus didn't bother pretending that he wasn't watching Harry sleep.

29 October, 1996

Tuesday

Dear Harry:

Minerva sought me out soon after my return from my "outing" on Saturday to let me know of your Quidditch accident and assured me that Madam Pomfrey had taken care of your knee promptly and efficiently. In a way, it was fortunate that my calling came at the time it did, with you safely in bed and under Madam Pomfrey's care. The Headmaster informed me that he spent time at your bedside. I told him that you were now old enough to go without bed rails, and were in little danger of falling out of bed. It was then that I learned that your healing sleep was anything but restful. I am sorry that you had to suffer at all, even in your sleep, and wonder what, if anything, you recall. Unfortunately, I was delayed in getting to my off-site appointment as the Headmaster had called me into a special meeting with the school governors and some Ministry officials to discuss the efficacy of the new wards. Needless to say, I could hardly run from the meeting or Disapparate on the spot and consequently was the last to arrive so the mark burned much longer than usual. I was saved from severe punishment only because the matter of Hogwarts' wards is much on the Dark Lord's mind of late.

You seemed to be walking with some difficulty coming into the Great Hall for dinner. It looked like Ms. Weasley was doing a fine job keeping her arm around your waist so you would not stumble and fall. I am sure it would have been a much more pleasurable experience for you had Mr. Thomas not been supporting you from the other side.

Speaking of Ms. Weasley, your last letter was indeed enlightening. Your description of your feelings regarding her may or may not indicate love. Many aspects sound remarkably like infatuation. The one person you do not consider (and in fact reject) telling is the one person you should consider—Ms. Weasley herself. Indeed, she may have similar feelings for you and find endearing the way you are always pushing your glasses up on your nose or half-scowling when you see one of the current members of HSSS walk by. End the misery, Harry, and find the time—and the opportunity—to have
a private meeting with the young lady. While I give this advice to you to help you move this potential relationship along, I must also, in good conscience, advise you that you are only sixteen and that sixteen is far too young to be in love.

In answer to your question, yes, HSSS still exists. I cannot divulge the names of the members, as it is a secret society and one not officially recognized by Hogwarts. However, I will reveal that HSSS members have a secret hand signal they make when passing another HSSS member (past or present) in the corridor. Look for it and I am sure you'll be able to identify the members.

You asked about Tempest—she was a barn owl and quite an extraordinary creature. She was given to me by my mother when I was eleven, just before I came to Hogwarts, and she stayed with me throughout my time at Hogwarts and through my years gaining my Potions Mastery. I brought her with me when I came to Hogwarts as a Professor. Sadly, she died a few years later. She was already a mature owl when my mother gave her to me, and she lived a long life. I have not had need of a personal owl since as I have an owlery full of them at my disposal. The name "Tempest" came from Shakespeare, of course, and was suggested by your mother. It occurs to me now that you may never have read Shakespeare—magical education in our country is sadly remiss in literary studies and you were only eleven when you came here, not old enough to have been introduced to the Bard in school. The play in question is "The Tempest" and it is one in which magic and spells appear. The complete works of William Shakespeare are found in the library here. Given your current situation with Ms. Weasley, please do not start with "Romeo and Juliet."

I simply cannot go on anymore with this silly farce about "Syb" and "Candy." It has been an enjoyable interchange but surely you understand that you have the upper hand here as I have "Syb" and you have "Candy." I will, however, gladly treat you to a round (or three) at the Hog's Head when you complete your Hogwarts education. I know the barman quite well there and while I cannot vouch for the cleanliness of the pint glasses, I tend not to worry too much about errant germs as the alcohol is of such a proof that lingering bacteria will not last long once the glass is filled. For the next two years, I prefer that you stick to butterbeers at The Three Broomsticks and an occasional shot of something stronger when you need bracing (administered by a responsible adult, of course). By the way, I am curious how you know about the Hog's Head to begin with—it certainly is not the kind of establishment that caters to the Hogwarts crowd. More importantly, how do you know about the upstairs rooms?

Since we are discussing, in essence, "Rites of Passage," please leave your first tattoo to me as well. If you are indeed desirous of having one—butterflies, dragons or ancient runes—when you finish your education at Hogwarts, I will accompany you to a reputable establishment of my choosing where you can make an appropriate, mature decision, look at a catalog of offerings and then leave without going under the needle, secure in your decision NOT to mar your body with an unnecessary brand.

Finally, I want to bring up something that concerns me, and in doing so, admit that the problem is in part of my doing. After two months of DADA classes, you are not progressing in nonverbal spells. Your aptitude in Defense is otherwise remarkable but your total inability to cast a spell nonverbally will not only bring your DADA marks down but will inhibit your progress in all of your classes. I have spoken with Minerva about this matter and she has suggested that from here forward, all spells learned or used in your Animagus Studies will be nonverbal. We are hoping that your desire to achieve the Animagus transformation will be sufficient motivation for you. In admitting my part in your lack of progress, I am not intentionally opening a door for you to place full blame on me. I admit only that the environment in which you must learn and demonstrate progress in Defense class is less than ideal and certainly does not motivate you to excel. If you truly wish to become an Auror, you will need this skill. Perhaps we can find time over the Yule holiday to practice together.

Don't milk the bad knee for too long with Ms. Weasley. She's quite a smart girl and you would not
want to fall lower in her estimation.

Regards,

Severus

For some reason, it had been a difficult letter to write. He had almost divulged that he had spent two hours at the boy's bedside, watching him sleep. Albus had sat with him for part of the time, watching silently with him, laying his unmarred left hand on Harry's head, then resting it on Severus' shoulder as he stood and left.

But in the end, he hadn't admitted it. Perhaps at a later time, in a weaker moment, he would.

Another letter from Harry with no mention of Draco Malfoy. Snape was smart enough to know that Malfoy was still heavy on the boy's mind but that he had learned that mention of him in his letters to Severus earned him a virtual slap on the wrist. So he'd simply stopped mentioning him. Severus would have to watch this closely.

He chuckled a moment thinking about the "secret sign" for the HSSS society. He would have to come up with some ridiculous signal and make sure Harry saw him using it.

-Harry-

It was Friday—the big night before the biggest game of the year.

Dean, Ginny and Demelza were all sitting together on a saggy couch, Ginny with her feet up in Dean's lap. They were talking through plays. Coote and Peakes had already gone to bed and Ron was pacing in front of the fire, talking to himself. Hermione stood up, pushed Ron into the chair she had vacated and force-fed him what appeared to be a calming potion. Harry then gave him the post-owl chess game and told him he'd darn well better come up with a brilliant move because if he lost this game to Snape, Harry would accidentally show moving photos of Ron doing the hula hoop to their Defense class.

Needless to say, Ron was now studying the game as if his life depended on it. Which, in a way, it did.

Better get at it…

I November, 1996

Friday

Dear Severus:

A lot has happened since I wrote the last letter. A lot of it is Quidditch-related, so you'll have to bear with me. I asked Dean to take Katie's place on our team. He accepted, of course, and is turning out to be a good choice, even though Seamus is now ticked off. Figures—I can't ever seem to make everyone happy at the same time. Ron is mad at Ginny too. We caught her snogging Dean and Ron gave her a piece of his mind. She wasn't having any of it, of course. As for me, I kept my mouth shut.
after she laid into Ron. As far as I can tell, Dean's not a great kisser so she's bound to get tired of him sooner or later. Besides, they can't be in love or anything. Sixteen is far too young to be in love! (And that's Dean—Ginny is only fifteen!)

Ron's a mess about Quidditch. Practice hasn't gone very well for him. He seemed to do better when we had the fan club making up songs about him and dancing around naked. He keeps trying to quit—he's lost all his confidence. I'm telling you this now since you won't read this until after our game tomorrow so you can't give your Slytherins a heads up that we have a weak link (though if they don't know by now they're thicker even than they seem). If he really screws up at the game, I am definitely sneaking out with him to the Hog's Head so you'd better let your friend the barman be the "responsible adult" and give us a couple of bracing shots of the good stuff.

As for how I know about the Hog's Head—well, from Hermione of course. Really. But I DIDN'T know about the upstairs rooms. I was just making that up. Which makes me ask—how do YOU know?

Your owl Tempest sounds a lot like Hedwig. I sure hope I have her as long as you had Tempest. She's the first pet I ever had, and the first real gift too (that I remember anyway). Hagrid got her for me for my eleventh birthday when he took me to Diagon Alley to get my supplies first year. Maybe I'll name my next pet after a Shakespeare play or a Beatles' song rather than from my History of Magic textbook. You know, Hedwig is the only interesting thing I ever got out of that book. It's about as dry as the bottom of Professor Trelawney's sherry glass.

Now…on to the tattoo issue. First of all, who's to say I don't already have a tattoo? Muggles get them all the time—the kind that just stay where they're put and don't change colors or move around your body. Professor Dumbledore once told me that he has a scar that looks like a map of the London Underground but a couple years ago I read in the Surrey Advertiser about a guy who had the map tattooed on his stomach upside down so he could consult it when he was on the tube without having to sit close to the map over the door.

Anyway, I never said I wanted a tattoo, did I? I mean, I've already got this ruddy scar, which is pretty much like having a big ugly lightning bolt tattooed on your forehead, isn't it? Of course, I COULD have the scar turned into something else—use the lightning bolt as part of the design, right? You know, it looks more like an "N" than anything else. N….N….N…. Further proof (as if you needed any more, really) that Voldemort went after the wrong baby and really meant to kill Neville!

Alright—I just have to ask. You taught me the shaving charm, you offered to take me to get a tattoo and you're going to take me to the Hog's Head to have a drink when I graduate. I think you're missing one big "Rite of Passage" event, aren't you?

By the way, did you think that telling me that my Mom suggested Tempest's name counts for a story about my Mom as a reward for me keeping my cool in class on Monday? Surely you remember Monday—when you somehow managed to insinuate that I have a bed wetting problem? How you managed to convince your rather dense Slytherins that you have the house elves reporting to you about my bed sheets is beyond me. Please pay up in your next letter with two stories. And if you can make Aunt Petunia look bad in one of them, all the better.

I haven't had a chance to check out a Shakespeare play from the library yet, but I did mention it to Hermione. She practically launched herself on me and hugged me to death! I sure wish Ginny liked Shakespeare like Hermione apparently does. Anyway, she's not sure if I should start with a comedy or a tragedy. She suggested a play named "Othello" first, but then muttered something about Ginny and Dean and changed her mind and told me to read "The Taming of the Shrew." I think I'll wait for her to bring me the book—she told me she's going to have Ron read it too and then we can have a
"book club" discussion. So thanks. Thanks a LOT. Did my mum make you read Shakespeare or did you do it on your own because you are cultured and intellectual?

By the way, I saw you make that sign at Draco when he walked by you while we were all outside in the corridor waiting to go into Defense class. Don't even try to make me believe that kissing your fingers then touching them to your forehead is a secret sign for your fictitious HSSS group. It rather looked like you were spitting gum into your hand then sticking it to your forehead. Besides, Draco Malfoy is not sexy. I mean, I don't THINK he's sexy. Not that I ever noticed. Or not. Maybe I should ask Ginny.

Well, Animagus Studies was sure a blast on Tuesday now that I have to do everything nonverbally. I understand your concern and I see how you think this will motivate me, but it was nothing but frustration. Even Minerva had a hard time with me. "Mr. Potter!" she kept saying. "This should not be that difficult! Think! Just think the spell with INTENT!" It reminded me of our Occlumency "lessons" last year. "Occlude your mind!" No one told me HOW to occlude and no one is telling me how to THINK a spell with INTENT.

Ron is trying to figure out the next chess move now. I had to give him something to do to distract him. He's so nervous about the game tomorrow that Hermione forced him to drink a calming draught. For Hermione, that's about the same as using illegal drugs. Anyway, he's muttering things like "Bloody brilliant!" and I don't know if he's talking about your move or our next move or about how Lavender Brown looks in those work-out clothes she and Parvati are wearing.

Do you think I talk about girls too much?

I went down to see Hagrid after dinner tonight. Hagrid had me bring Hedwig down to meet Mac and they seemed to get along just fine, though she nipped him a couple times when he got a bit affectionate with me. Mac's a serious owl and rather a loner, but I think he'll get along just fine with Hedwig. I think he just needs a friend to bring him out a bit.

I'll see you tomorrow at the big game. Hope you're bringing lots of hankies to hand out to your Slytherins afterward.

Regards,

Harry

/  

Harry had a plan and that plan was to train Mac and give him to Severus for Christmas. Hagrid had already told Harry he could find a home for the little guy, and heartily approved of the plan to give him to Snape. Mac was an ordinary looking owl that would blend in almost anywhere. He was quiet, taciturn, observant. He'd be perfect for Severus and even if Snape claimed he didn't need an owl, it didn't mean he didn't want one.

He rolled up the parchment and got ready for bed. Tomorrow's game against the Slytherins was a big one, and he needed plenty of sleep. He also needed an extraordinary amount of luck to pull Ron out of his slump and get him up on his broom, guarding the goals, looking and feeling every bit like the fantastic Quidditch player he was.

It would take a miracle. A miracle….

Fortunately, Harry had one in his pocket.
Monday's sixth year Defense Against the Dark Arts class with Gryffindor and Slytherin had gone as poorly as could be expected given that Slytherin had suffered a defeat at Gryffindor's hands on Saturday. But this time, he couldn't even count on house solidarity to give some expected structure to the class. His class seemed annoyed with Draco, who had not played in the game, for reasons not yet satisfactorily explained to Snape. On the Gryffindor side, it was obvious that Weasley and Granger were furious at each other, and Lavender Brown had abandoned her friend Parvati Patil and was practically sitting in Weasley's lap. Now there was a picture he didn't need to see or imagine ever again. Harry, for his part, was sitting with Granger instead of Weasley.

To shake things up a bit, Severus decided to teach a new offensive spell—a variant on the Confundus that had a short-term effect similar to Veritiserum. When used successfully, the caster could often get the attackee to truthfully answer several questions. The spell never lasted long. But it usually lasted long enough…

He started with Longbottom, calling him to the front while he explained the spell and its effect. With a quick flick of his wand he cast it, then quickly asked three questions, resulting in Longbottom revealing to all that he was wearing white y-fronts, that he had not, in fact, completed his homework and that he thought Ginny Weasley was the prettiest girl at Hogwarts. He then demonstrated the protective spell to counter the curse and called Harry to the front of class.

"Nonverbal only," he reminded the boy as he raised his wand to cast the Confundus variant.

Harry looked like he was about to be hit by a train.

5 November, 1996

Tuesday

Dear Harry:

First, let me congratulate you on your win on Saturday. I must say I was surprised at Weasley's performance. Are you sure he wasn't on mind-altering drugs? I am sure that Slytherin would have sailed to victory had we had our full team on hand but as it is, you appear to have won fair and square (or so Madam Hooch assures me). Well played, Harry. I have seen very few people in my life as comfortable on a broom as you appear to be.

Pray tell me how Ms. Granger learned of the Hog's Head. Have you actually been into this establishment? The reason I know that there are rooms upstairs is that the Hog's Head is an Inn as well as a pub. While the owner does not publicize the availability of rooms, not a few regulars have used them when they imbibed too much and were incapable of Apparating or Flooing home. And before you go down that path, young man, I am neither a regular nor an over-indulger. Perhaps you imagine your mean old Defense professor as a lush?

And since you have brought it up yourself, I suppose it IS time for the "missing" Rite of Passage or, as you have undoubtedly guessed, the SEX TALK. My Muggle father, not known for his tact or his compassion, accomplished this rite by tossing me a box of condoms when I was 14 and saying "There. That should last you for a good while." By that time, of course, I'd been living in a dorm full of boys for several years and knew three different protection and contraception spells, though I'd had no chance to actually use them.
Allowing for the fact that Slytherins are likely two years ahead of Gryffindors in matters of the libido, you probably know—or have heard—those spells already. If ever there was a time for nonverbal spells, it is on the occasions when a protection or contraception spell is needed.

At sixteen, the mechanics of the sex act are also likely known to you. You have also covered basic anatomy with Madam Pomfrey in your wizarding health classes. You know about puberty—having gone through it yourself.

So what would the SEX TALK delivered by Severus Snape to one Harry Potter include if not anatomy, mechanics and proper protection?

I think, Harry, that you need more than the SEX TALK. You need to talk about sex with an adult. And as Minerva is your guardian, you should start with her.

Now that I've put you off that idea…

You brought the book club misery upon yourself by telling Ms. Granger of your desire to be introduced to Shakespeare. However, I agree with all her suggestions, for what you should read and NOT read. Please let me know how your first book club discussion goes and allow me the privilege of suggesting your next selection.

I do not know what signal you imagined you saw between myself and another member of HSSS, but I can assure you that whatever you saw was not what you thought it was. Me kissing my fingers? Now why would I do that?

On to the story about your mother you feel you deserve. I think adding a bit about Petunia is as good as telling two stories about your mother, so one it will be. This particular story is one that I have never repeated, and I expect you to keep it in the strictest confidence as well.

Your mother was two years younger than your Aunt Petunia. After our fourth year at Hogwarts, when we were 15, your mother asked me to kiss Petunia. It seemed that Petunia, at 17, had yet to have her first kiss and was most anxious to get that experience out of the way, even if it was with me. I think your mother truly wanted this experience for Petunia, who was not as smart or as pretty or as kind as her younger sister. When she made the request, I looked at her in horror. She thought, of course, that I was horrified at the thought of kissing Petunia. I was, but I was equally unsure how to tell her that I myself had not had a first kiss yet so how was I to teach Petunia? Lily, being Lily, somehow sensed the truth. "Oh, Sev," she said, laughing and leaning in just then to kiss me lightly on the lips. "Just kiss her. Don't think so much about it." Petunia was cold and awkward but cussedly determined. She wanted to practice on me, and instructed me to open my mouth, use my tongue. She licked my teeth. I practically threw up in her mouth. Needless to say, our already shaky relationship did not get any better after that.

Tell Mr. Weasley that I am on to him and my counter move shows it.

Regards,

Severus

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Severus had taken it relatively easy on Harry with the Confundus truth spell. Three innocent questions, each one answered honestly. But each one answered in such a way that the rest of the class thought Harry had managed to throw the spell (wordlessly) and bend the truth in his answers.

Who was your first friend?
Hagrid.

Who is your favorite professor at Hogwarts?

You, sir.

What do you regret most in life?

That I didn't get to know you better sooner.

Harry had looked at him almost gratefully when it was over, before planting the dissatisfied scowl on his face. But for a moment, if only a moment, he'd been able to be honest about his relationship with Severus, just as Severus has intended.

Chapter 8

Nov. 7 – Nov. 13

-Harry-

Harry had managed to break free of both Ron and Hermione and was sequestered in an empty classroom practicing nonverbal spells. Defense class was tomorrow and he was determined to finally produce a nonverbal shield spell. He could produce a Lumos nonverbally now, and a Wingardium Leviosa. He'd managed an Accio in Charms yesterday too. But for some reason, the offensive and defensive spells didn't come to him as easily when he didn't actually speak the words of the spell.

Sighing, he sat down at one of the empty desks and pulled out his Defense homework. Best get started on it—two feet on the fundamental differences between reflecting shields and absorbing shields, when to use each and a critique of the Auror Corp's "Shields as Offensive Weapons" program.

He gave up after getting half-way through, measured to the bottom of his parchment, and began his letter to Severus.

/ 7 November, 1996
Thursday

Dear Severus:

You sure gave me a lot to think about! Of course, I will NEVER get the image of Aunt Petunia licking your teeth out of my mind—EVER! You have damaged me deeply and permanently and are going to have to get a second job to fund my psychiatric treatment. That might not even be enough to stop the night terrors. You also now have me thinking that my mum was cruel and heartless and you owe me! So, I'm going to start asking you questions about her in these letters and you have to promise me to answer them fully and truthfully. Here are my first two: What were my mum's parents like? What was she afraid of?

Thanks, too, for putting the idea in my mind of talking with Minerva about sex. What a great plan! I'll just knock on her office door and when she opens it I'll say something like "Hi, Minerva. I was wondering if it's unusual to dream about being in bed with several naked girls at the same time." I'm
pretty sure she'd invite me in, offer me tea then launch an in-depth discussion to help me analyze these dreams and understand the symbolism of multiple naked girls in my bed. Hopefully, there will be time to discuss female erogenous zones. And since she's so familiar with the castle, she can tell me some good "secret rendezvous" places that are less obvious than the astronomy tower. I know! I'll ask her where she used to go with her lovers when she was a student here! And yes, I will be telling her that you were the one that suggested that I go to my guardian to get answers to my questions about sex.

You probably have already noticed that Ron and Lavender Brown have a new "relationship." It mainly consists of snogging, and neither one seems to care where they do it—in the common room, out in the corridors, in empty classrooms, in the potions supply cupboard while Professor Slughorn isn't looking. Ron's lips are actually bruised from all the abuse they're getting. I've never ever actually seen them have a conversation—I suppose talking would keep them from snogging so it's considered wasted time. Hermione isn't happy and isn't speaking to him, putting me in the middle. Why can't they just figure out they like each other? This fight is all a big misunderstanding anyway—I DIDN'T put the Felix Felicis in Ron's pumpkin juice before the match but I made him think I did. It totally changed his attitude. Hermione thought I really put it in there and she was all bent out of shape because she thought we cheated. Then she and Ron got into it because Ron thought that Hermione didn't think he could play that well without "help." One thing led to another and suddenly Ron and Lavender were making out in front of everyone. So, I'm kind of walking on eggshells with those two again. One positive (if you can call it that) is that I'm getting a lot more homework done—that's what happens when you spend a lot of time with Hermione.

I suppose I'll tell you the truth about the Hog's Head. Hermione scouted out Hogsmeade at the beginning of Fifth Year looking for a place we could all meet that wouldn't have Hogwarts students or professors wandering in and seeing us. She found the Hog's Head and we had a meeting there to plan our Defense Association—the group we nick-named "Dumbledore's Army." I didn't go upstairs or anything—I'm pretty sure I'd think long and hard before taking a room there if the upstairs rooms are anywhere near as dirty as the downstairs. The barman didn't exactly encourage us to come back—gave us dusty bottles of warm butterbeer. Well—he didn't actually give them to us—he SOLD them to us, and at a pretty ridiculous price too.

You think you're pretty funny changing the HSSS signal, don't you? I saw you rub your chin then pull on your earlobe when Blaise Zabini walked by you when you were talking to Crabbengoyle in the corridor before class. I also noticed that Crabbengoyle didn't seem to have any idea what you were on about, so I take it they're not in the club? What, hands the size of mallets and brains the size of peas aren't considered sexy enough for you Slytherins? You know—I never asked if your club is co-ed. I'm going to have to start watching you around the girls too. If Millicent's beard gets any longer, I'm sure you'll be inducting her at your next meeting.

You'll be happy to know that I finally managed a nonverbal spell on Tuesday night in my Animagus study session. We've been doing something fun that doesn't require magic at all—verbal or not. We make lists of people we know and try to determine what animal suits them. It's not as easy as it might sound. I picked the cowardly lion from "The Wizard of Oz" for Neville. Minerva picked a black bear for Hagrid. Then I picked a blackbird for you. You know why, don't you? I'll admit it’s mostly the Beatles' song ("You were only waiting for this moment to arise"). But blackbirds—and I think of ravens for some reason—are smart, and crafty, and long-lived. I look at them as survivors, just like you. "Take these broken wings and learn to fly...." I heard on the news once in London about a raven that flew down to a picnic table where a family was eating and nicked their car keys and flew off with them to its nest. Come to think of it, that was probably you in your Animagus form having some fun, wasn't it? Maybe you don't need a second job after all—you can steal Galleons from wizards' nightstands where they empty their pockets and everyone will just think you're a simple bird attracted by shiny objects.
Anyway, while we were doing this exercise, the room was getting kind of dark and Minerva asked me to turn the lights up. I picked up my wand and she gave me this look—you know the one—that reminded me that I had to do it nonverbally. So I tried—I really did and for all my efforts I got the candles on her sideboard to light! I guess I'm not good enough yet for the oil lamps, but at least I didn't set the whole castle on fire like Hermione probably would have done since she'd have been so good at it. Minerva seemed pleased enough, at least. Now that I know I can do it, it's been easier. I managed a couple spells in Charms yesterday and tomorrow in Defense you won't even recognize me. If all goes as I suspect it will, I'll go in all ready to impress the socks off of you then you'll hurl some insult at me and then I'll nonverbally turn your eyebrows pink. Or maybe vanish them all together. Hmm...maybe I can learn to do the shaving charm nonverbally. If I used it on someone else, would it necessarily only remove the hair on their face?

Speaking of shaving charms, didn't William Shakespeare have a beard? And speaking of Shakespeare, I am now the proud owner of "The Riverside Shakespeare," a volume approximately the size of the Rosetta Stone. It was a gift from Hermione. She had her mum buy two of them and send them to her via owl. I'm sure the owl used to deliver these books has died, resigned or checked itself into St. Mungo's with a hernia. What's worse—Ron was supposed to go through this torture with me but now that he's with Lavender, Hermione's having nothing to do with him. I get the feeling a lot of people die in Shakespeare's plays—probably young, and tragically—because Hermione seems reluctant to read some of the plays I've suggested that sound more interesting than "The Taming of the Shrew" like "Hamlet" and "MacBeth." I think I'll do an essay for extra credit in Defense. "Voldemort as Tragic Hero: Victim or Villain?"

I have an idea the chess game won't last as long as I thought it would what with Ron in virtual perpetual lip lock with Lavender. I think he's not thinking with the "right" brain anymore...

And thanks for what you did in class the other day. Admitting those things about myself was brilliant. I just let the spell wash over me and the truth came out...yet everyone thought I had thrown off the spell. Your questions were brilliant—of course. I've come to expect brilliance from you.

Regards,

Harry

He'd reread the letter quickly and rolled it up just as the classroom door opened and Ron and Lavender spilled into the room, laughing. They hadn't seen him, and he was treated to a full minute of snogging and groping—Ron's hands were definitely not somewhere his mother would approve of—before they saw him and jumped quickly apart.

"Sorry, Harry," said Ron. He didn't sound too sorry, though. He sounded more breathless than anything.

"Get a room," muttered Harry as he made his way out of the room and into the corridor.

He wasn't jealous of Ron. If he wanted someone to snog, he'd just have to look sideways at Romilda Vane. Right?

-Severus-

Severus had managed to get away from the castle on Saturday evening for a quick visit to the Hog's
Head and a drink with the barkeep. Aberforth—for the proprietor of the establishment was indeed Albus Dumbledore's younger brother—pushed a pint glass across the bar at him. "Bitters tonight," he said. He never let Severus choose his own drink but then again, he never accepted payment from Severus either so he couldn't complain.

"Yeah, the Potter boy and his entourage did come in here last year. We almost never get Hogwarts students here—it put off my regulars a bit. Seemed like quite a bright boy—but I suppose he lives and breathes for Albus, eh?"

Snape downed the dregs of his bitters and shook his head. "No, you're wrong there," he said. "I'm happy to say that he's in Albus' camp instead of Voldemort's, but I'm making sure he knows everything he needs to—and that's a good deal more than Albus has told him."

"Well, keep him away from the Hog's Head, then," said Abeforth. "That should help keep him alive a bit longer."

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10 November, 1996

Sunday

Dear Harry:

I've just finished a meeting with Minerva. As your guardian, she of course receives your midterm grades and was concerned that your Defense marks were only Acceptable. She noted that in previous years you've consistently scored Outstandings in the subject. I reminded her that in previous years you did not have the excellent instruction you have this year, and were not challenged to the degree you are in my class. She gave me the look—you know the one—and made me promise to cut back the "psychological" abuse so you can "realize your potential." Actually, I had meant to talk with you about your grades, Harry. I do believe they'll begin to improve now that you are beginning to master nonverbal spells, but really, you're going to have to do better than an "Accio" when you are trying to block a jelly legs jinx. I'm not sure what you were TRYING to do—summon your opponent? Summon the spell itself? But when Miss Brown's book satchel flew across the room and hit you in the shoulder, making your subsequent stunning spell go astray and hit Mr. Weasley—well, all I can say is that the laughter was deserved. To your credit, you looked like you actually took it all in stride. Perhaps this is because you managed to knock out your best friend? Miss Granger did not look unduly worried, though Miss Brown's attempt at mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was totally wasted as Mr. Weasley was simply stunned, not dead. I hope you all appreciated the detention I assigned her with Hagrid. She seems just the type for a romp through the Forbidden Forest.

Truthfully, Harry, a bit more attention to your written Defense homework will go far to improving your grades. I know you enjoy our correspondence, but try to finish the homework first and reward yourself afterward with the letter. I can tell by the way you space your sentences that you often skip to the end of the assignment and write the letter before you write the assignment.

I was greatly intrigued by your exercise with Minerva that you described in your letter. I can, indeed, see Hagrid as a bear and yes, I am familiar with "The Wizard of Oz" and think the cowardly lion an apt fit for Mr. Longbottom. Let me assure you first of all that I am NOT an Animagus, never having studied the art. I do not frequent Muggle parks or wizard bedrooms to nick keys and coins or other shiny objects. However, I have been intrigued with crows and ravens for some time, perhaps, like you, due to the song you reference. Many attribute this song as Paul's reaction to the racial tension in the States in the 1960s. The song also speaks of death, and the afterlife. The raven also appears in a famous poem by Edgar Allen Poe, aptly named "The Raven." Since you seemingly enjoyed the
Muggle literature you read this summer, I am relatively secure in my belief that you'd do well to expand your mind further. But let's leave it at Shakespeare for the time being. And yes, you are correct. There are a great many tragic heroes in Shakespeare, and Shakespeare enjoys killing them off in a great variety of ways. As he wrote quite a few historical plays, he doesn't always get to choose the manner of death—it would certainly stand out if Julius Caesar died of appendicitis or hurled himself off of a balcony. I look forward to your self-assigned extra credit assignment. Perhaps that is just what is needed to bring up your grade to an Exceeds Expectations.

I took the liberty of copying the paragraph from your letter regarding that frank discussion you plan to have with your guardian so that she could do some advance preparation. I saw her in Madam Pomfrey's office earlier today going through a list of female erogenous zones and consulting a book on the interpretation of erotic dreams. The dreams you mention—the ones with multiple naked girls in your bed—they WERE erotic in nature, were they not? It is quite possible (though admittedly not very probable) that the girls in your dream were engaged in some totally non-erotic activity such as knitting, or studying or perhaps even meditating. However, since you are sixteen, I would imagine that even these activities could be considered erotic, being as the girls were unclothed.

On to your story about last week's Quidditch match and the Felix Felicis that you did not put into Mr. Weasley's drink. As I understand after piecing together your meandering thoughts, you pretended to dose Mr. Weasley with the potion, making him THINK he was under its influence when in fact, he was not. In short, he experienced the "placebo" effect. Yet Miss Granger believed that you indeed did give him the potion, and attributed his stellar performance to the drug. Mr. Weasley then took it that she questioned his Quidditch skills (small wonder). Ahhh…teen angst. Give them time, Harry. I am confident that Mr. Weasley will tire of a purely physical relationship by the spring and will look for something more. He may tire of it earlier when his head of house and Madam Pomfrey take him and his female friend aside to give them "the talk." As this is a boarding school, and we cannot expect the students' parents to step in, it is school policy for the Heads of House and Madam Pomfrey to take new "couples" aside to explain the ramifications of an unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and having an "ex" who lives in your house and who you cannot avoid. I have had the pleasure of having these conversations many times and Madam Pomfrey brings an interesting series of pamphlets (ahem) with full-color moving graphics. It is enough to turn one off of sex permanently.

I am NOT going to give you any more fodder regarding misdirected shaving charms. Try it on yourself first.

So at last we come to the questions about your mother. I suppose I will change the rules for you and allow two questions per letter. However, I will counter with two of my own. Agreed?

You ask about your grandparents. Your grandmother's name was Amelia and your grandfather's Charles. They owned and operated a local grocery. Both your mother and your aunt worked there throughout their teen years, your mother during the summers, of course. Mrs. Evans—of course, I called her that—was a spirited, lively woman who played the organ at their church and who had an exceedingly open mind. Petunia favors her in appearance more than her father. Mr. Evans was tall and bald but Lily's red hair came from him. He read constantly, enjoyed the classics, and taught me to play chess. Sadly, both were killed in an accident not long before your mother and father married. A drunk driver plowed into a crowd of people leaving church on a Sunday—a number of others were killed in that accident as well. By that time, your mother and I were no longer on good terms, but I attended the funeral services and know that she was devastated. Did your aunt not even speak of her parents to you? Were there no pictures of them in the house on Privet Drive? Your aunt adored her father, especially. I cannot fathom why she would erase them from her life.

Your mother's fears…an interesting question. I wonder why you thought of that one. Interestingly,
you have not even a vestige of either of the fears I am about to share with you. She did not like 
snakes, and she was terrified of heights. The Astronomy tower scared her, as did riding a broom.

Now, my questions:

Why have you stopped mentioning Draco Malfoy in your letters?

Why do you want to be an Auror?

Regards,

Severus

Severus placed his quill on the desk and rubbed his forehead. He'd had a long evening already,
having once more spent several hours in Albus' quarters, trying to contain the curse that was slowly 
working its way up the Headmaster's arm. Albus was stoic, as usual, putting up with Snape's 
ministrations in order to gain time—a few extra weeks, maybe a couple of months—time to work 
with Harry, to locate more Horcruxes. Snape was sure Albus hadn't revealed that particular bomb yet 
to Harry—Harry would never be able to keep that revelation to himself.

He was beginning to make plans for the Christmas holiday. He normally spent a week at Spinner's 
End over the holiday, but this year he planned to take Harry to Shell Cottage. Albus wanted him to 
spend time at the Burrow as well. He would have to contact Molly and Arthur and see what could be 
arranged.

He looked at the post owl chess game and shook his head. Girlfriend in lip lock or not, it was 
obvious that Mr. Weasley was thinking with the "right" brain. Snape had been contemplating his 
next move since he first read the letter on Friday evening. He finally decided and moved his white 
bishop.

He was looking forward to playing Mr. Weasley a real game of chess some day. Perhaps over the 
holidays it could be arranged.

-Harry-

He'd done it! He'd finally managed a nonverbal spell more complex than a summoning charm. It was 
made all the better by having done it in Defense Class, creating a reflecting shield that had bounced 
Zabini's stinging hex back at him and hitting him just below the belt. Harry did his best not to look 
smug and because he knew Snape as well as he did, he could, for a change, see through Snape's 
cruel retort and docking of points to the pride he felt at Harry's success.

He was sitting on his bed now, having just read the first scenes of "The Taming of the Shrew" and 
then skipping ahead in the compilation volume to read Hamlet's famous soliloquy and then the death 
scenes in "Romeo and Juliet" and "Julius Caesar." He resolved then and there never to admit this to 
Hermione. She HATED cheating.

13 November, 1996

Wednesday
Dear Severus:

What about class today! I will, for the rest of my life, savor the look on Zabini's face when his stinging hex bounced off my NONVERBAL shield and hit him in his bits. I'm still a bit smug about it, and am the hero of the sixth year Gryffindors—even the girls.

About my mum's parents—no, Aunt Petunia never talked about them. I remember when Dudley asked about them once—I think he thought they owed him some presents or something. She said "They're dead and never mention them again." If Dudley got that kind of response from her, I'd probably have been thrown in my cupboard for a week. So, needless to say, little Harry never asked. I learned that early.

What's weird is that I knew about that accident—it happened around 1979 or 1980, I think. There was a memorial plaque on the church wall where it happened and I used to read it when I walked by—it wasn't far from my primary school. All the times I saw that and wondered about those people—and I never knew my grandparents had died right there.

Point taken with my Defense homework. I finished it all tonight before I started this letter, and I think I did a decent job on it. I guess you're not going to be satisfied with my feeble excuse that practical magic is where my strength lies and I suck at theory? Didn't think so.

Thanks for opening the door with Minerva for me. I'm going to have to learn to stop joking around in these letters because you are much better at it than I am and I end up in an uncomfortable place where I am having to contemplate "female erogenous" zones and instructional pamphlets from Madam Pomfrey. I think I will remain single and celibate. But that was your intention all along, wasn't it? I do need a guest for Slughorn's Christmas party. I'm thinking of asking Tonks. What do you think? She's older and unlikely to kiss and tell.

By the way, Ron and Lavender had the "talk" yesterday that you told me about in your last letter. He still looks green in the face and he actually had a nightmare last night and woke up screaming something about "genital warts." I NEVER want to have that "talk" if it involves the words "genital" and "warts" in the same sentence.

I've started reading "The Taming of the Shrew" but you've got me interested in those tragic heroes, so I'm reading "Hamlet" too. Well, I'm reading bits of it. The good bits. Don't you think there should be "The Good Bits" versions of all great books?

Guess I should get around to answering those questions you asked.

Haven't I been mentioning Draco? I believe I referred to him directly in the letter where I described your HSSS "secret signal," didn't I? As for why I am not mentioning him as frequently—isn't it obvious? I am taking your advice and worrying about my own problems and not his. I am sure the adults are capable of keeping an eye on the sneaky git and will make sure that he doesn't carry out whatever evil plot he's working on. I can mention him a few times here now, if that will make up for lost time. Let's see, his Animagus would be a ferret. He probably has genital warts. His greatest fear—to wake up and find there were no mirrors in the castle.

Why do I want to be an Auror? That's easy—I can do what I'm best at and help keep our world safe.

Now it's time for my questions. And I'm changing the rules again. Ha! You'll see what I mean…

What are you afraid of? What were your parents like? I mean, I know that your mother taught you to play gobstones and your father tossed you a box of condoms…but I'd hate to form all my opinions from those two facts…
Regards,

Harry

Harry was tired. He'd given up trying to transfigure the dozen cat toy mice into real mice—nonverbally. Minerva had set this task for him for their next Animagus studies lesson and so far he'd managed nothing more than getting one to twitch its tail.

He closed his eyes and relaxed on his waterbed. It was much more comfortable since Hermione had helped him with a heating charm to regulate the temperature of his former "block of ice." He started to clear his mind, to meditate, but as he drifted toward sleep he could clearly see the image of the memorial plaque on the church near his school, could read the names of the victims, could clearly see the names Amelia Evans and Charles Evans. He wondered then what else was hidden from him, but right under his eyes all the time.

Chapter 9

Nov. 16 – Nov. 18

-Severus-

Severus had marked the sixth year homework but had not returned it in class on Friday. Of course, that meant no letter for Harry. Harry had barely managed to keep his cool when it became evident that the anticipated homework would not be forthcoming. Of course, this also meant that Snape didn't actually give out new homework—he didn't want Harry to vent in a second letter before he had a chance to answer the first.

Changing his lesson plans to accommodate this correspondence with Harry…what was the world coming to?

But he needed more time, time afforded by the coming weekend. If he truly wanted to answer Harry's question about his parents (and he wasn't sure he actually wanted to but somehow felt the effort would be good for Harry), he needed a day to sort out his thoughts.

He would do it Saturday, then head to the Hog's Head afterward for the drink—or two—he was sure to need after writing about his father.

16 November, 1996

Saturday

Dear Harry:

I realize you expected a return letter on Friday, but I needed a bit more time to compose my response to your last letter. Because of this, you and your class have a weekend with no Defense homework. I hope that is adequate recompense for my failure to complete a response to you before the weekend.
The questions you ask are fair, considering what I have asked you and plan to ask you in the future, but the answers are complicated and the reasons behind them more so. I could quite readily have taken the easy way out, telling you that as a child I was afraid of water, and telling you that my mother was a witch and my father an older Muggle who didn't quite know what to do with a magical wife and child.

But those are not the kind of answers that interest you, nor do they give you much insight into my past or my character.

Let's first dispense with the pleasantries, however. Your questions of me were but a small part of your last letter. I fully encourage you to invite Nymphadora to Professor Slughorn's Christmas party. That would certainly send a message to young Miss Weasley, wouldn't it? She's also likely to already know those important contraceptive spells. Furthermore, it would make my day—no, indeed, my year—to see both of you hauled off to have "the talk" with Minerva and Poppy.

As for reading only "the good bits" of a book, I encourage you to always read the complete book, in the order the author intended, from beginning to end, first. You can then go back and read "the good bits" over and over again. This reminds me of a certain book that made its way around the fifth year dormitories while I was in school here. It was a seedy novel featuring pirates and wenches and adventures of the carnal sort on the high seas. In any event, one had only to drop it on the floor and the book would open to a page which contained "the best bits." This, of course, was the result of the book being opened to that particular scene so often. But I digress…I am certainly not encouraging you to read this sort of fiction (I cannot in good conscience call it literature) but instead illustrating that reading only "the good bits" will leave you with only half the story (as the pirates involved of course all contracted all sorts of communicable diseases from these adventures, died and were buried at sea in later, mostly unread, pages)

About your grandparents and their death—I cannot fathom why Petunia never spoke of them or why you never knew how they died. I suppose, to be fair, that she lost a great deal in a short time, and perhaps putting it all out of mind was her way of dealing with grief. I do not condone that method but do recognize it for what it is. It seems to me that Petunia lives in the present, a not altogether bad thing. But ignoring the past does not make it any less important, or formative, and ignoring it completely means one fails to honor those that gave them life—no matter how the relationship turned out in the end.

Which brings me to my own past and to your second question. As you indeed already know, I am the product of a witch and a Muggle. My mother, Eileen Prince, was the only daughter of elderly parents, both magical. They were a modest family, and there were no mansions or estates or manors to leave to their daughter. After Hogwarts, my mother apprenticed at an apothecary in Diagon Alley. She met my father, a laborer, at a bookstore in London. He was twice her age. They married without her ever telling him she was a witch. She got a job at a Muggle pharmacy and I believe they were both happy for a number of years. She was eventually forced to tell him about her powers when she became pregnant with me. She was past thirty when I was born, some ten years into their marriage, and my father was in his fifties. She knew that I would likely be magical, and would most certainly have bouts of accidental magic, and felt it necessary to finally admit this truth to my father. I don't believe my father had ever contemplated having children. He did not know how to relate to a child, and most certainly not to a magical one. He began to drink, to frequent pubs after work, and by the time I was a teenager, to take his anger out on me physically with the belt. Fortunately, I was only home during the summers and during my earlier years was the victim only of harsh language and verbal abuse. I knew my father as one might know an older great-uncle. He took little interest in me and I in him. He died of a stroke when I was a sixth-year at Hogwarts. My mother kept the house at Spinner's End, the home I still own, after his death and became a recluse of sorts, filling it with even more books and living out her days surrounded by these "friends" as she called them. She loved me
—I am sure of that. She encouraged me as much as she was able, gave me my first pet, took me to King's Cross and picked me up each year, put up a Christmas tree during the holidays and did her best to keep me and my father from getting in each other's way. She taught me all about the wizarding world and would, on occasion, treat me to a day of immersion in the magical world in Diagon Alley. We used to while countless hours away in the summertime playing gobstones. She taught me at home—as wizarding families often do—and that was considered an oddity in my neighborhood. She died in 1989 after a short illness. Neither of my parents had siblings, nor did they have any other children other than me. She is buried beside my father in a Muggle cemetery at the Catholic church where we attended services with my grandmother when I was a child.

My father had a great affinity for Muggle literature, despite his lack of advanced education. He was certainly distant, and occasionally abusive, but when he was of the mood, and sober, he would walk into the sitting room and scan the shelves then with great purpose pull out a book and hand it to me, often without comment at all. I always read what he selected, for this indeed was his legacy to me. He handed me "Treasure Island" when I was ten and "The Hobbit" when I was eleven. He introduced me to science fiction at thirteen, and I spent that summer reading Arthur C. Clarke and Robert Heinlein. The next summer was spent reading the complete Sherlock Holmes and books on modern European and American history. He never discussed the books with me but always checked to be sure they were back in their rightful places before I left on September first for Hogwarts. I cannot explain his odd brand of parenting, and even the best book could not make up for him whipping me after a night out at the pub. While he didn't like much, and certainly not magic, I doubt that the beatings or the insults had anything to do with my being a wizard. I was a road bump in his life—unexpected, cropping up in his path at a time when he would have liked to sail into retirement, slowing him down, an inconvenience who carried his name and eventually inherited his library. This library actually outgrew our sitting room and to accommodate more books, my father built sliding shelves that could be moved away to reveal the staircase leading to our upstairs bedrooms. I've added to the library over the years, of course, as my mother did before her death, so that now it contains a great many wizarding books as well.

I never once had your mother over to our house, though my mother came with me to the park once to meet her. Even though she herself had married a Muggle and produced me, a half-blood, she carried the prejudices of her own pureblood childhood, and could not readily accept that her son had a Muggle-born witch for a best friend. I think she would have preferred seeing me vandalizing cars with the other neighborhood Muggle boys rather than fraternizing with a "mudblood."

And that, Harry, is enough, I think. I have told you now, in this letter, more about my past than I have told anyone save your own mother. While our pasts shape and define us, they do not limit us nor do they contain us. My father gave me my name, a few scars and a box of condoms, yet he opened up a world of possibilities for me with the library he bequeathed me. It is an enigma and I am still puzzling it out.

By the way, you are showing great progress with your nonverbal spells, though you may have just ended the great Zabini line with that unintended (I hope it was unintended anyway) bounced stinging hex. I suppose the Zabinis could invoke old magical law and demand your own firstborn as payment. But don't worry about that now—it's likely years away.

Ah—your second question. Simply put, I am afraid of failure. I'll leave it at that, since I elaborated at such length on your first question.

And now, two questions from me:

If you could not be an Auror, what would you do with your life? At this point in your life, what would you name your first child?
Severus

Severus would never admit it to anyone, but the delay in getting the letter written gave him an extra weekend to plan his next move in the chess match now openly between himself and Weasley. He spent half an hour studying the mock-up of the game on his own chessboard before committing his move to paper.

The wrenching feeling in his gut—the one he always got when thinking too much about his parents or his childhood—reminded him that he had promised himself a drink or two with Aberforth this weekend. He was in no mood to spend the rest of the evening alone. It had been months—certainly since before the weeks spent with Harry in August—since he'd had more than a social or casual drink. He toyed with the idea of asking Minerva to come along with him as he had the idea she'd be a very lively drunk. But in the end, he slipped out the front doors of the castle bundled up in his cloak, alone, as usual.

He was not alone when he returned four hours later, nor was the castle foyer deserted as it had been when he'd left. Aberforth was helping him walk, holding him around the shoulders as he lurched forward, belting out an old song his father had frequently sung:

"Beer, beer, glorious beer! Fill yourselves right up to here! Drink a good deal of it, make a good meal of it, stick to your old fashioned beer!"

"Albus." Aberforth greeted his brother calmly as the Headmaster appeared at the top of the stairs leading up to the castle entrance. "I found this in my pub. Could you take him off my hands?"

"Certainly," replied Dumbledore, letting Aberforth transfer Severus' weight to his own shoulder. "And thank-you for returning him. Fortunately, we had advance warning that he'd be in this state." Aberforth shrugged and turned back toward the gates as Minerva appeared and helped Albus half-drag a still singing Snape inside.

"Up with the sale of it, down with a pail of it, Glorious, glorious beer!"

Up in the infirmary, Harry belched and giggled.

-Harry-

He'd considered skiving off Potions in order to read Snape's letter but his conscience—a.k.a. Hermione—had kept him on the straight and narrow. Now, alone in an empty classroom after a hasty lunch, he unrolled it and started reading. It was apparent that Snape had written it in its entirety before Saturday evening and for some reason, had not added a note (or an apology) after his binge Saturday night.

Reading about Snape's parents was depressing. Harry was struck by the similarities in his early years and in Snape's...and in Tom Riddle's. It was more comforting than it should have been to add Snape to the "guys like me" list that to this point had held only Riddle's name.

/ 18 November, 1996
Monday

Dear Severus:

I always thought that the first time I got drunk, I'd be with my friends and that I'd actually DRINK something. I suppose that a night on the town, even one spent at the Hog's Head with the old barkeep and no "upstairs room" with "Candy" can be considered "passion." Remember we discussed this last summer? Pain and passion? Well, now we've proven that this connection I've developed to you sure goes beyond the pain part!

I'll get this part all out of the way first because I DO want to answer your questions and say something about your letter as well. I didn't realize that my questions would drive you to the pub—or rather that thinking about them and answering them would make you want to drown your sorrows. I know you've had a run-down from Minerva and from the Headmaster, but I doubt Ron told them the details of what I actually did up in Gryffindor Tower while you were enjoying your first half-dozen pints. Let's just say that I was inspired to lead all of Gryffindor House in a Beatles sing-along. I apparently got down on my knee in front of Ginny Weasley and sang the "I love you I love you I love you" piece from "Michelle" and then serenaded Mary Greystone (she's a second year so this is even more humiliating) with "Let it Be." Then Ron got me going on "Yellow Submarine" and that's apparently when I got too dizzy to stand up.

Oh, it gets better. You SO owe me!

Romilda Vane and Demelza sat down on either side of me on the loveseat—they really squished me in it—and I let them paint my fingernails! Bright red! They convinced me it was acceptable because red was a Gryffindor color. Of course, Colin was there with his camera. That's when Ginny (probably still reeling from my botched "Michelle") transfigured a belt into a hula hoop and had me give all the girls "lessons." The price for a lesson was a kiss. I'm brilliant—I came up with that one all on my own. So at least I can thank you for that part of the evening, Mr. "When I Drink my Inhibitions go out the Window" Snape.

Hermione came in while I was inside the hula hoop with Romilda. At least I am in the photo. I can't figure out how I thought that was the right way to teach hula hoop technique. Anyway, she was livid (or so Ron says) and asked what we'd been drinking. It took a while to convince her that I'd had nothing, and a bit longer for her to believe that no one had had anything. That's when she grabbed me by the arm and hauled me down to the infirmary. Of course, I was still inside the hula hoop with Romilda but she managed to escape before we made it through the portrait hole.

I don't remember much after that point. Madam Pomfrey had me drink some disgusting potion and seemed very confused when it didn't do anything. She put me in a very unstable bed that kept spinning around and Hermione stayed with me while she went to fetch the Headmaster. Hermione said he came in with Minerva and I told them both that I'd kissed nearly every girl in Gryffindor except Ginny and then I started crying and I hugged Minerva! Hermione thought I had been cursed, but Dumbledore sent her back to the dorm and told her I'd be fine by the morning.

And I was. Until you woke up with your hangover! I understand Minerva had to force-feed you the hangover potion. According to her, you have a "masochistic tendency to want to punish yourself for your transgressions" and had planned to suffer it out instead of going for the instant cure.

I am sure this is the talk of the castle. I have found photos of me with my lips locked with various girls—some as young as third years—posted in almost every boys' bathroom I have used. I've managed to explain it as an "Inebriation Curse." Professor Dumbledore gave me that idea. I'm supposed to be really mad and am looking for whoever cursed me.
So...since I've shared my drunken exploits with you, it's only fair that you do the same with me.

It's kind of hard to totally change the mood of this letter, but you might get another crazy idea NOT to assign us more work and another week will go by before I can write you again. Wow. You really answered my question...well, one of them anyway. I mean, you answered both of them but one in a lot more detail than I had imagined.

I always thought, growing up without parents, that even having bad parents would be better than what I did have. Now I'm not so sure. Maybe you'll feel like talking about this at Christmas with me. If it's too hard, we can both get drunk and you can do all the actual drinking.

I guess I could answer your questions now, since you did such a good job of answering mine and of taking me out drinking afterwards...

Alright then – first question... If I couldn't be an Auror, what would I do? I've considered professional Quidditch, but I couldn't do that forever. Eventually I'd get knocked in the head too many times and would have to retire. I guess I'd like to be a teacher, maybe take over your current job here at Hogwarts when you are all old and crotchety and start firing spells off in the wrong direction. I think I'm pretty good at teaching, and I have more patience than some. And if I couldn't be a teacher, I think I'd like to work with animals—maybe train post owls or breed hippogriffs.

Second question... You know, it's a bit unfair to ask me what I'd name my first child. I'm pretty sure I'd stick with James for a boy, and definitely Lily for a girl. Not sure about middle names—do those matter? If I had to do it TODAY I'd pick "Severus" for a middle name for the boy, and everyone would think I'd been hit with an Inebriation curse again.

And now, my questions:

Why are you afraid of failure? I mean, I understand people not wanting to fail, who would? But why do you fear it?

Do you want kids of your own?

I suppose I should stop now and go finish my homework. Then I need to search the castle again for more pictures of me kissing half of the girls in Gryffindor. I keep finding them in all the bathrooms—I'm pretty sure the Slytherins somehow got hold of them and are replicating them. Bad Slytherins!

Ron says your last move was predictable, by the way. He wants me to hold off on returning this letter until he comes up with the perfect next move, but if I hold off on the letter, I'll also hold off on the homework, and I'll probably get a detention.

Regards,

Harry

Harry had spent most of his free time the last two days in his dorm. The girls didn't bother him there and he was also less likely to find a picture of him hula-hooping with Romilda.

He hadn't had the opportunity to exchange any private words with Snape for quite some time, and definitely not since he'd awakened in the infirmary yesterday morning, with only vague memories of his exploits the night before.

Professor Dumbledore had called him to his office upon his release from the infirmary and had not
been able to keep the twinkle from his eye as he apologized to Harry for "not having thought" of that particular potential aspect of the Harry/Snape connection.

"Was he celebrating something last night?" asked Harry, not knowing the reason Snape had gotten drunk.

"I suppose, in a way, he was," answered the Headmaster, hoping fervently that Harry, also, would, at Severus' age, be able to celebrate the fact that he, too, had survived.

Chapter 10

November 20 – November 22

-Severus-

Thinking of his father, of his life growing up at Spinner's End, had left Severus with more than the need to drown his sorrows with Aberforth Dumbledore. It left him, in fact, with the odd desire to re-read "The Hobbit." It was, in essence, more of a children's book than the later works of Tolkein, but when Severus had read it all those years ago, his only experience with the magical world had come from his mother. He'd Flooed over to Spinner's End to pick up the book, an illustrated edition with quite surprisingly accurate representations of dragons.

Why was he already thinking of giving the book to Harry to read when he finished it himself?

However, giving Harry reading material others had written was not his first objective now. He had a letter to write, and he didn't quite know how to go about it. Should he apologize for doing something an adult had every right to do now and then? For not considering, in advance, that something that would cause both his physical and emotional state to swing so radically might indeed affect the boy as well? Who would have thought? From what Minerva and Albus had told him, Harry had not responded to the sobering potion—obviously, he wasn't really intoxicated but rather linked to Severus' own physical being somehow. And he had been fine in the morning until Severus himself had woken up and the hangover had hit him.

Well, he certainly wasn't going to swear off alcohol for life because of this. The boy would simply have to occlude next time, or he'd have to carefully time his nights out for when Harry was safely in bed.

Still, he could not help but chuckle at the boy's predicament. Kissing third years! And not getting to kiss the Weasley girl. When those two did manage to get together—and he was reasonably sure that they would before the year was out—it was bound to be explosive.

20 November, 1996

Wednesday

Dear Harry:

I've been thinking about this letter for the better part of two days yet I still do not quite know where to start. I certainly did not intend to take you with me, figuratively or not, while I went out for the
evening on Saturday. Though certainly well aware of the connection you have developed to me, I would never have suspected that the link would yield such interesting results. Were it not for the war, and were you not the Boy Who Lived, I would immediately launch a full research project, publish it and stake my claim to fame and fortune. However, we can hardly afford fame or further notoriety now.

I cannot promise to avoid alcohol for the rest of my life—or for however long this connection between us should last—but I will certainly limit my drinking to the hours when you are most likely to be asleep, and will make use of hangover remedies instead of suffering through the aftereffects of drinking as I am more often wont to do, as it serves as a reminder that actions have consequences. I believe, though there is no way of proving this, that the connection we share will endure as long as the Dark Lord endures. And if it does endure past his demise, then we shall have to make a practice of drinking together, and carefully occluding if the celebration is of a more "personal" nature.

Your exploits with the female Gryffindor population on Saturday have, indeed, reached my ears (and my eyes) from my Slytherins. I have at least a dozen photos of you which I removed from the Slytherin bathrooms. You may claim them from me at your discretion or give me instructions for their disposal. Most of these were in the girls' bathroom, stuck to the back of the stall doors, and showed you not in compromising positions with various Gryffindorettes but instead gyrating your hips inside that pink hula hoop. I very much hope you are not losing weight, Harry, for you were thin enough to begin with when I took over your care this summer. My concern arises from these photographs, in which the waistband of your jeans is clearly below your hips, inching lower as you gyrate. In fact, it is quite easy to see that your boxers are candy cane striped. My suggestion—next time you need a hula hoop, transfigure someone else's belt, not your own.

You did ask about my own activities Saturday night. Understand, please, that I am not obliged to share these with you. I owed my friend the barkeep at the Hog's Head a visit and, after answering your questions about my parents, I felt the need for distraction. I engaged in meaningful conversation about our new Minister of Magic with several patrons, played a game of chess with Mundungus Fletcher, which I readily won, and made an absolute fool of myself flirting with Mundungus’ sister, who is older than he is and half as attractive. Not much is clear after that point, except that I do remember singing Irish drinking songs, though I cannot at this time say for certain that I actually know any.

I did not recall seeing red polish on your fingernails in class so assume you took care of that problem on your own. I hope you did not try a standard banishing spell, as that may have banished your fingernails along with polish—a most painful experience.

As for your hula hoop lesson payments—consider it required practice for when you have a chance to kiss the girl you really want. She, if what you say is accurate, has had ample experience already. You are young, Harry. Boys your age should not worry about having kissed too many girls, even if some of them were only 13. Think about it from their perspective—all their lives they will be able to say that they received their first kiss from none other than Harry Potter. Let them have that, Harry. It is a selfless gift that does you no long-term harm. This, too, shall pass and soon there will be other exploits for the Gryffindors, and the rest of the houses, to share.

I am interested in your choice of possible careers, though I acknowledge that being an Auror is still your top choice. Playing professional Quidditch may indeed fill a few years, and if you have enough brain cells left following several seasons with the Cannons or the Tornados, you could indeed embark on a long career in education. I think you would be a good teacher, and likely, by that time, Hogwarts will have forgotten all about the night that Harry Potter did the hula hoop with his striped boxers exposed. A career working with or training animals is another valid choice, yet not one I anticipated. Still, it makes sense and is a viable option. You could always wrap two career choices
together—first an Auror and later on Defense Professor. Or Professor of Care of Magical Creatures and then an owl trainer. Don't limit yourself yet—you are far too young to box yourself in a single career path.

As for my second question to you, I see nothing at all wrong with honoring your parents with a namesake. I must admit that I would not mind so much seeing another Lily Potter (red-headed and green-eyed) in the halls of Hogwarts. If you have a James, though, make sure that he looks like his mother and not like you or that I have retired by the time he is ready for Hogwarts. However, I am not at all sure why you would even consider using Severus as a middle name. Surely you were jesting? What would your father think of a grandchild named "James Severus?" He would be spinning in his grave.

Now, the difficult part of this letter…your questions. Why am I afraid of failure? First, let me state that the fear involved is not akin to terror. It is a different kind of fear—a fear involving the psyche. Simply put, my life is my work. Or perhaps better said, my work is my life. What, indeed, is left for me if I fail at my tasks, self-appointed or assigned to me by others? I suppose that my fear originates from the consequences of failure. If I do not have my work, will I have to acknowledge the aspects of life I do not normally acknowledge?

I suppose you are as confused as I am. However, by now you should be able to guess the answer to your other question. No, I have never wanted to have children. My position in life—and you know what I refer to—would make that inadvisable at best. In addition, I am surrounded by the progeny of others nine months of every year. I fully support others having children—it's a form of job security. But children of my own? I will hope to leave the world a cure for lycanthropy instead of a passel of Snapelets.

And now, I believe, it is time for me to pose my questions of you. I do enjoy this quite as much as pulling up memories of your mother, though that pastime is pleasant as well. You do realize, don't you, that my questions of you will dig as deeply as yours do? So, that being said, where would you live this summer if you were allowed to choose and why? What is your greatest strength and your greatest weakness?

I trust your Animagus studies are still going well. Minerva has told me that she believes you will be ready for your first transformation sometime after Christmas. Your improvement in Defense, and in your other studies, is duly noted. If you continue to spend so much time holed up in your dorm hiding from the rest of the students your grades should show even greater improvement. Don't ask how I know—I just do.

Regards,

Severus

Severus rolled up Harry's homework assignment and placed it with the others on his desk. He was fairly satisfied with his response, but worried somewhat that he had given away a little too much. He hoped Harry would be distracted with all that was going on in his life and wouldn't delve too deeply into the matter.

He went into his small kitchen and made himself tea. He was stirring in the milk when a knock sounded on his door. He wasn't expecting anyone and was surprised to see Albus in the corridor when he opened the door. When they were both settled in front of the fire, each with a steaming mug of tea, Albus revealed the reason he had sought out Severus.
"Harry and Draco had a minor altercation this evening," he began, his eyes behind his distinctive glasses more serious than usual. "Draco said some disparaging things about his parentage and Harry lost control and punched him in the nose. Draco recovered in time to send a stunner Harry's way. Harry's in the infirmary—he unfortunately hit his head quite hard when he fell after the stunner hit him. Poppy is keeping him for the night."

Dumbledore regarded Severus carefully as his face betrayed his concern.

"I'll go see him this evening, after curfew. Is Poppy keeping him all night?"

"Actually, Severus, I had hoped you would deal first with Draco."

Severus stared at the Headmaster. Of course—he was Draco's head of house. How had he forgotten that in his concern over Harry? What was happening to him to shift his priorities and turn his orderly life upside down?

-Harry-

Madam Pomfrey had kept him in the hospital wing all day on Thursday for observation. He'd ended up with a pretty serious concussion when he'd fallen on a stone plinth holding a suit of armor after Malfoy had hit him with that stunner. At least Harry had gotten in a good punch and Malfoy had a bloody nose to show for it. Since he'd been in bed all day, he'd missed all of his classes. Hermione brought him his homework assignments and his returned homework as well—complete with the anticipated letter from Severus. He sure hoped it lived up to his expectations, but he had a feeling that Snape's escapades while drunk were likely much more tame than Harry's had been, and if they weren't, Snape wasn't likely to tell.

The previous night had been spent in fitful sleep as Madam Pomfrey had woken him up every two hours to check his pupils and ask him questions such as "Who am I?" and "Where are you?" The first time she woke him, he was surprised to see Severus sitting on the bed next to his.

"Minerva has assigned both you and Draco detention," Snape said, watching as Madam Pomfrey checked his pupil dilation and asked him when his birthday was. Harry jerked his head over toward Severus.

"Ow!" His head pounded mercilessly with the sudden movement.

"You'll be serving your detention with me," said Severus quietly. "Friday evening."

He'd stayed only long enough to have a quick word with Madam Pomfrey when she finished checking Harry. Still, Harry felt as if he'd been given a gift instead of a punishment.

Late in the evening, after Madam Pomfrey had finally released him and banned him from Quidditch for the weekend, only an hour before curfew, he found a quiet corner in the library and began his response to Severus' latest letter.

/ 

21 November, 1996

Thursday

Dear Severus:
Yes, I'm feeling much better, thanks for asking. I know, not fair. I know you wrote your letter before I got hurt and you did stop by and see me in the hospital wing last night (even if it was just to tell me that I have detention with you tomorrow night). But you have to believe me—Malfoy is an absolute prat! What he said about my mother…I can't even repeat it. Why is it always up to ME not to let him get under my skin? It doesn't help that he's an absolute prat who is UP TO SOMETHING NO GOOD!

So I have that out of my system. I think. Well, at least for a little while.

You know, you're full of contradictions and I don't think you really know yourself as well as you think you do. You talk as if your only accomplishments in life are "professional." I guess by that you mean the potions you've invented and improved, and your work here at Hogwarts—ALL of it, if you know what I mean.

When I think of my own life (now and in the future), obviously work is a big part of it. But I also think of having a family, and spending time with friends, of travelling to see the world and having hobbies outside of work like playing chess or raising owlets or perfecting the hula hoop. I think it's fair to say (and don't kill me for being honest) that you act like you've given up on those other things. Maybe it's just that you take yourself too seriously, or maybe you've been so burned in the past by your friends that you don't even consider how much they can add to your life.

Honestly, until this summer, I never once thought that there was more to you than an evil git who hated my father and was determined to make me suffer for being his son. But in the last four months (I can't believe it's been so long) I've learned that there's a lot more to you than potions. You're brave, and honorable and smart. You already know all those things, or I hope you do, but I don't think it hurts to hear someone else say it. I just don't think you've had the chance to get away from your "work" long enough to know what else is out there for you. When we're done with this—when the evil git is dead (the other one, not you)—I'll open up that Potter vault I keep hearing about and we can both take off and see what else is out there in the world. Personally, I'd like to go to Egypt or Greece, or maybe to Romania to see the dragons in their natural habitat. I hope you're not tired of insufferable brats by then, because you're going to have to put up with me for a long time. You may even change your mind about kids some day after you meet that gorgeous Egyptian archaeologist or Romanian dragon handler (for some reason, I keep picturing a female Charlie Weasley, and that's kind of disturbing).

It's kind of hard to think that far ahead, actually, but I figure if I have plans for when this is all over, I'll have hope, something to look forward to.

Which leads me to the answers to your questions. By the way, I'm not forgetting about the stories you promised about my mum.

First—where would I go this summer if I could live anywhere I wanted? You can eliminate the Dursleys right away. I'm not planning to go back there to live ever again, and maybe not even to visit. Blood relatives or not, they were pathetic guardians. I don't think I'd pick the Weasleys. I love the Burrow, and I love the Weasleys too, and if something every pans out with Ginny, it would be really convenient to live in the same house. But it would be hard to find privacy there, and time to do anything uninterrupted. I'd love to spend a few weeks there, but only if I have somewhere else to go back to. Grimmauld Place is out too—it reminds me too much of Sirius, and it's depressing. Really, what kind of family hangs elf heads on the wall? I can see why Sirius hated that place. I wouldn't mind staying here at Hogwarts, though it would be nice to have a change since I'm here all year. Yeah, I know, I'm putting off my answer—are you? I guess if I got to choose, I'd go back to Shell Cottage, and if Shell Cottage wasn't an option, someplace similar close to the sea. I'd like a hammock on a sun porch, a waterbed, a stretch of sand and some warm water. Is that too much to ask, do you
think?

On to my strengths and weaknesses. Or…my greatest strength and my greatest weakness. I suppose I should take more time to think about this before committing, but I kind of know this one already.

On the weakness side, it's my impulsiveness. "Rushing in where angels fear to tred" is what Hermione said once. I let emotion control me and my reactions. I know there's likely another explanation…we talked about that this summer…I rush in because I don't even think about asking adults for help or trusting or relying on them. So maybe the weakness isn't impulsiveness but my inability to trust adults. I've also got really bad hair (if you're looking for something more physical) and my eyesight is pathetic. Oh, and bad taste in girls I kiss.

When I was a fourth year in the Triwizard Tournament, "Professor Moody" gave me some advice for the first task. He said "play to your strengths." That's how I thought about summoning my broom and using it against the dragon. I guess it would be rather obvious to say that my flying ability is my greatest strength, but you're really wanting me to describe inner qualities, not really skills and abilities. Well, maybe it's my ability to survive. I'm not a quitter, and I have a real knack for living to see another day. I hope that gets me through fulfilling this prophecy and getting on with my life.

I'm in the library now and it's fifteen minutes 'til curfew, so I'd better finish this up and get back to my dorm. Ron's probably up there now with Lavender making all sorts of disgusting noises. I don't think they've gone much pass snogging—he seemed pretty dazed after that talk with Madam Pomfrey and Minerva. He kept muttering things in his sleep and once he screamed, sat up and said "Must keep my hands above her waist or they'll send an owl to my mum!" We were all particularly glad he shared that at 2 a.m. I hope they do send an owl to Mrs. Weasley. Can you imagine her howler in return? "Ronald Weasley! What's this about you petting Lavender Brown below the waist?" blasted out for the whole school to hear!

I'll be seeing you tomorrow in detention.

What's Draco's punishment?

Oh—almost forgot my questions.

Who were my mum's friends in school? Who were your best friends?

Regards,

Harry

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Harry turned his assignment, and his letter, in during Defense Class on Friday. Despite his best intentions, he and Draco got "into it" again in class, beginning when Draco sent a slicing charm at his backpack, causing all his books and supplies to fall all over the floor, including a dozen or more pictures on himself doing the hula hoop which Hermione had taken down from one of the girls' loos and given to him after lunch. He hadn't had time to incinerate them yet so had shoved them into his backpack.

Snape made it all worse by ordering them both back in their seats then picking up the spilled items and dumping them on Harry's desk, pausing to gather up the photos and flip through them slowly, commenting to the class as he did so.

"Striped RED underwear, Mr. Potter? Do you have a pair in Gryffindor gold to match or is this particular pair reversible—red on the outside and gold on the inside?
"Who are you kissing in this picture, Mr. Potter? She hardly looks old enough to own a wand."

Harry, livid, earned himself a double detention and was told to report to Snape's office at five p.m. instead of seven.

His day went downhill from that point. His nonverbal spell in Charms to change the color of his eyebrows resulted in him changing his eyes to a ghastly yellow color that took most of the day to wear off. He went to the owlery and got pecked by Hedwig for his lack of attention the last few weeks. Hagrid wasn't home when he went to visit after his last class but Fang drooled on him so much it looked like he'd wet his pants. Finally, his best quill broke when he tried to get a head start on his weekend homework. When he showed up at Snape's classroom door at fice p.m., he was ready to scream.

He would have liked to have cleaned cauldrons, but there was a shocking lack of them in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. He wouldn't have minded doing lines to get out some of his anger and frustration. Scrubbing the floor with a toothbrush would actually have been appealing. But what he came in the room, Snape, sitting behind his desk with a pile of essays in front of him, pointed Harry to one of the desks in the front row.

"Sit," he said, hardly looking up as he finished marking the scroll in front of him.

Harry slid into the desk, keeping his eyes on Snape as he dropped his repaired backpack on the floor.

Snape made a show of clearing his desk—pushing scrolls to one side and ink and quill to the other. He then put his elbows on the desk and rested his chin on his folded hands.

"You must not continue this antagonism with Draco Malfoy," he said. "It will not end well."

They spent the next hour with Harry prying for more information on what Draco was "up to" and Severus insisting that it was not Harry's problem and instructing Harry to let him handle it. When Harry would not let it drop, Severus opened his desk drawer and pulled out a thick book.

"For the remainder of this detention, you will be reading this book. It is the first volume of the complete works of Arthur Conan Doyle. You have heard of Sherlock Holmes?"

Harry looked at Snape with his mouth open.

"Well? Have you?"

"Yeah. I have. But that's it? My detention? To read?"

"Consider it advance training for your Auror career. If you are not in the mood to read something interesting, you may help me mark these second year essays."

Harry grinned as he opened the book. Snape surveyed him for a moment, then pointed his wand at the classroom door and locked it with a spell. He then stood and raised his wand again, pointing to the corner of his room where a dusty old bench was suddenly transfigured into a hammock, suspended from large hooks in the low ceiling.

"Don't fall asleep," he said. "We will have dinner at seven."

Harry's horrible day had suddenly taken a turn for the better. He sat carefully on the edge of the hammock, testing its weight, then settled on it properly, letting it rock him back and forth slowly as
he opened his book.

*A Scandal in Bohemia.* "To Sherlock Holmes she is always the woman…"

Snape didn't have to wake Harry up for dinner, but he did have to pry the book away.

Maybe Harry was right. Maybe he *could* leave a legacy that had nothing to do with potions or spells or Dark Lords. Harry may not be able to travel the world yet, but he could still visit it through the pages of the books his father gave him.

It did occur to Severus that it was quite a paternal act, but of late he was feeling oddly paternal toward one Harry James Potter.

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Chapter 11

________________________________________

**November 24 –December 1**

*Severus*

It was Sunday evening and Severus was finally making a dent in the stack of homework assignments on his desk. He'd unfortunately spent the entire afternoon in the Dark Lord's presence, planning the infiltration of Hogwarts. How many times before had they planned the same fruitless siege? Today, Lucius and Narcissa had suffered the brunt of the Dark Lord's frustration. As the parents of the boy who, according to the information he had gleaned today, would be opening up the castle for the attack, they were under constant scrutiny. At least Severus now knew what *else* Draco was trying to accomplish other than the demise of the Headmaster. Still, he had no idea what, specifically, he was planning and Draco had yet to open up to him—at all—about where he was going when he frequently disappeared.

His mark had begun to burn around ten o'clock that morning and he'd quickly sent his Patronus to Minerva before he hurried silently to the castle gates. He was in the Dark Lord's presence within ten minutes.

On his return at five in the afternoon, he'd gone straight to Albus' office to report.

He'd spared many thoughts for Harry, but had no opportunity to find out how the boy had fared in his absence. The Harry clock, sitting on his desk as he graded, assured him that Harry had spent the entire evening in Gryffindor tower.


/  

24 November, 1996  

*Sunday*  

*Dear Harry:*  

I've been back in the castle for several hours, safe and sound. It was not my day to suffer much, so I
hope your "parallel" experience left you pain-free and functional as well. I sent a quick "note" to Minerva when it became apparent I had to leave and trusted her to check on you, lest you were in the bathtub or flying on your broom when my call came.

It is my hope, indeed, that you will be able to spend the coming summer in a safe place, such as Shell Cottage. It is my hope as well that I will be able to spend time with you there, as I did this past summer. No matter what, rest assured you will not be returning to Surrey—recall that the Dursleys are no longer your legal guardians. Minerva's legal responsibility for you will extend until your next birthday, when you reach your majority. At that time, the Potter inheritance will be yours in full. I would expect there will be enough there for you to purchase your own seaside cottage, or flat in London, or castle in Scotland. Do remember to save enough for this jaunt you mention in your letter, the one you will take after HE is no more. If, at that time, you would still like my company, I will consider it. I have never been to Romania, and find that idea quite intriguing. Do you think the dragon handlers would mind if I picked some stray dragon scales off the ground, or perhaps some shell fragments from freshly-hatched eggs? Both are used in potions and are likely easier to procure than dragon tears or toenail shavings. Of course, you also mention Egypt. While our trip to the British Museum this summer may have given the impression that all the Egyptian mummies now reside in Great Britain, I remain convinced that some have yet to be discovered, sleeping peacefully still in their original sarcophagi, ready to yield a bit of their sacred dust for the betterment of mankind (and the eradication of toenail fungus). If, however, your whim takes you to the third destination you mention—Greece—I could be convinced to accompany you to see the natural sites, sample the food and the wine and contemplate the vagaries of the past among the Grecian ruins. As for the fairer sex, I am simply waiting to be pursued by the woman who finds me to be the man of her dreams. Strangely, there have been no takers as of yet.

While I do admit that my professional self-opinion far exceeds what I feel about myself from a personal perspective, I believe you are not well-versed enough in Slytherin tendencies to understand friendship from our perspective. Slytherins are ambitious. They have a strong desire to prove themselves. They do not commonly enter into friendships to establish support networks or friendly ears or drinking buddies. Slytherins devise friendships. They build partnerships—romantic and platonic—that can advance their agendas in the future. A Slytherin is more likely to choose a life partner for almost any other reason before romantic attraction, be it the uniting of powerful families, sympathetic bloodlines or old money. Slytherins create friendships for protection. They do not unburden themselves to their friends or lay bare their souls.

When you surmise that I, perhaps, was "burned" in the past by my friends, you assume that I had friends on whom I relied, or in whom I trusted. I assure you I did not. I had cohorts. I had dorm mates. I had mentors in the ways of the elitist wizarding world. I did not have friends in Slytherin. I had one true friend while I was at Hogwarts, at least for part of the time, and you know that was your mother. And Lily did not "burn" me. No, it was I that burned her.

Consider, too, that I was an odd product to land in Slytherin. My father—a Muggle. My mother—from an old family, but almost extinct and with no wealth to speak of. My parents did not marry in order to continue their bloodline. Yet I had an instinct to survive, and more importantly, to better my condition. Would it surprise you that most students coming into Hogwarts from neglectful, abusive or simply disinterested households are sorted into Slytherin?

I did not intend this letter to take this direction, but it is important that you think like a Slytherin when trying to analyze one. Enough said.

And enough said about my weaknesses as well. You state that your own greatest weakness is your impulsiveness. As I was, indeed, speaking of character weaknesses, I will ignore the quips about your hair and eyesight except to say that I have some special hair tonic you may borrow at any time
to tame your hair. I use it on mine daily and I am sure you cannot accuse my hair of being fly-away or uncontrollable.

Ah yes, your impulsiveness. Miss Granger did, indeed, describe it well with the line from a poem by the English poet Alexander Pope—"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." The "fools" in this oft-quoted line are those that don't think ahead and plan in advance. It is not the same thing as going with your gut feeling about something when there simply is not time to plan—such as when being pursued by a dragon and being presented with two closed doors. You have to choose or the dragon will devour you; the fool here is the one who waits outside the doors, unable to decide which one to try. My advice to you is this: when there is time, when deliberating a moment or two will not change the eventual outcome of the dire situation, always ask yourself if there is another option, another person who can help you resolve the problem. Perhaps that would not have kept you out of the Chamber of Secrets, for you did have an adult with you, or at least a sorry excuse for one. Indeed, with role models such as Lockhart, your lack of faith in adults is understandable.

As for your greatest strength, may I suggest a word to describe your ability to survive? Your refusal to give up? Try tenacity. A common definition would be "dogged" determination. You are certainly exhibiting this trait in spades of late with your fixation on the activities of Mr. Malfoy.

I would offer up another trait. The Headmaster may describe it as your capacity to love, the emotion that overpowers all the others. When you love someone, you love deeply and truly. But I see this strength of feeling also with what you do not love, what you despise, or what you do not understand fully. One might call it compassion, but I would remove the first syllable and simply call it passion. You love passionately. You hate passionately. Whether this is strength—or weakness—I cannot say. I would surmise that it depends on the circumstance.

As I just saw you in detention on Friday, and we had a chance to talk a bit at then, I will not fill this letter with idle pleasantries. Instead, I will attempt to answer your two questions. I have already answered one, of course.

Your mother was pleasant, intelligent and popular. She was liked by nearly everyone, not least the professors, and had more friends than I could enumerate here. However, she did not have a great many friends from whom she was inseparable.

While I count myself as her best friend, at least in the earlier years, there were three others who were quite close to her. The first was Alice Prewett, later Alice Longbottom, who is, of course, Neville Longbottom's mother. Alice was a year older than your mother and also in Gryffindor. She was an affable girl, smart like your mother, and like her son, her strength was in Herbology. Neville resembles her greatly. Beatrice Harper was your mother's best friend in Gryffindor. Beatrice was in your mother's year and thus they were roommates throughout their years at Hogwarts. She was from Ireland, and used to wear her hair in braids piled up on top of her head. We used to call her "Medusa" for those braids seemed to have a life of their own and would escape the knot and wiggle about like snakes. Beatrice was loud, brassy and Muggle-born, a perfect target for we Slytherins, but she held her own and was a good counterpart to your mother's usual calm. Finally, rounding out the group, was Mary Grace Owens, called "Mo" after her initials, a Ravenclaw. She had a Muggle father and went on to study at Oxford after leaving Hogwarts and disappeared into the Muggle world after your parents' deaths. During her years at Hogwarts, she was the uncontested chess champion. I played her once, at your mother's insistence, while in fourth year, and lost.

I trust you are enjoying the tome you started in my office on Friday. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is a most interesting read, and sometimes hard to put down. Given your affiliation with the Weasley family, you likely enjoyed "The Red-Headed League" which as I recall is the second story in the volume you are reading.
I cannot end without two more questions for you. Since I have given you some insight into the Slytherin psyche, what is your assessment of what friendship means to a Gryffindor? Following that, what qualities do you admire most in your friends?

Regards,

Severus

Severus shook out his right hand, which had begun to cramp from the grip he had kept on his quill. Harry was continuing to prove most surprising; in some ways he seemed infinitely more mature than any other sixteen-year-old but in others, infinitely younger. He had given the boy quite a bit of fodder to chew on and ample opportunity to throw many of his statements back in his face.

He glanced at the clock again; it still indicated that Harry was in Gryffindor Tower. As he should be.

He had a job to do, for both of his masters, and oddly it was the same task. He needed to know Draco’s progress; he needed to know what exactly the boy was up to. And he needed to find out before Harry got himself in more trouble. But Draco wasn't talking, and it was too late now to call him in for another session in which Severus attempted to gain his confidence and Draco remained resistant and aloof.

It was not too late, however, to visit the Headmaster and give him another treatment to stall the progression of the curse. Severus rubbed his tired eyes. Soon, all too soon he knew, Draco wouldn't have an opportunity to kill the Headmaster. The curse would eventually run its course. Hogwarts would be without a Headmaster and he, Severus, would have the most difficult of choices to make.

-Harry-

Harry had to admit that Severus had great taste in books. He'd been reading Sherlock Holmes on and off since Sunday and often had a hard time putting it down. He hadn't yet been able to figure out any of the stories, not before the mystery was revealed at the end, but he loved the titles and the characters and the scenes of a gritty London of yesteryear.

He wished he had a dad, even as lame of a dad as Snape had had, to give him books to read, books that would take him to times and places he'd never imagined. It crossed his mind then that in a way, he did. But he tucked that thought away. Better to hide it than acknowledge the feeling and risk losing something he really didn't have to begin with.

He decided then that he'd start now to catalog books to pass on down to his own children.

He found a spare piece of parchment and started his list. It only contained two books so far, To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee and The Complete Sherlock Holmes by Arthur Conan Doyle. But he left plenty of room for more titles, and carefully tucked the parchment into his History of Magic textbook. He hardly every opened that one and figured it would be safer there than anywhere else….well, unless he somehow got a copy of Hogwarts, a History.

28 November, 1996

Thursday
Dear Severus:

Since classes were cancelled yesterday (not that we aren't grateful for an occasional day off but how did Peeves manage to get hold of Trelawney's wand anyway?) I had some extra time to think about my letter back to you. I'm in the library now with Hermione while Ron and Lavender are out under the bleachers on the Quidditch Pitch getting up to who knows what. Actually, a whole bunch of them are out there. They're playing some sort of Muggle kissing game, and since I've already kissed most of the girls in Gryffindor, I figured I'd get some work done instead and give the other guys their chance. Hermione is finally over the shock of having an unexpected day off. The look on her face when Minerva came into the Common Room and told us we were all to stay put (all day if needed) while the Professors dealt with "a situation" was hysterical. Everyone thought Death Eaters had invaded, but Hermione pointed out that Minerva looked annoyed, not terrified. Since we didn't hear anything for a couple hours, I called Dobby and he told us what was going on. That was probably about ten o'clock in the morning, about the time Peeves used the Aguamenti spell to flood the Great Hall. Why couldn't you find the Bloody Baron to control him? Dobby gave us pretty regular reports. Everyone got a big kick out of the report just after lunch—that was when Professor Trelawney was trying to get her wand back and Peeves did a Levicorpus on her. I wonder if he learned that one from the Gryffindors? Who would have thought that she wore men's boxers under those skirts? You should have heard Dobby describe it! His eyes were as big as saucers and he said it almost reverently. "Oh, Harry Potter, sir. I should not be saying this but I is so admiring Professor Trelawney's undershorts. All silky they is, with one leg purple and one leg gold. And moon and star decorations in silver and red!"

Anyway, I wanted to thank you first for telling me about my mum's friends. I didn't know Neville's mom was her friend. You know, I know about Neville's parents. Last year, when we went to visit Ron's dad in St. Mungo's, I saw them. We ran into Lockhart and he was in the same ward they were. Neville never even told us—we just assumed his parents were dead since he lives with his grandmother and great-uncle. Whatever happened to Beatrice? You know, maybe I'm more like my Mom than you think…I only have a few close friends, too. Which takes me right to your question about my friends. I'll start with the qualities I admire most in them. Hands down, loyalty. Which is really kind of ironic, since Ron and I have been on the outs a couple times already, and Ron and Hermione aren't speaking to each other now. No matter, though, I know they'll be there for me whenever I need them, and I know I'll be there for them too. And you can't help but admire Hermione's knowledge, even when it gets annoying. She's a great witch and picks up almost every new spell so quickly. She's usually the first to succeed in the class, and that's why she can't stand Potions this year since I'm actually doing better than she is. Of course, she thinks I'm cheating. I don't know—maybe I am. But I'm learning a lot too, and I suppose that's what matters in the end. They have a lot of other good qualities too, but more than anything else, when they see me they don't just see the scar or the Boy Who Lived. They see Harry, just Harry. And you know, when it comes down to it, most people wouldn't want to get too close to me, given my history, but these guys don't care. They're some of the bravest people I know, and they actually value me as much as they value their own lives. I really don't even want to think about that anymore.

By the way, I don't think you ever really fill your letters with "idle pleasantries" but go on thinking that if you want!

Now let's talk about Slytherins.

There's something I should tell you. I had to talk the Sorting Hat out of putting me in Slytherin. It wanted to. It said something about my desire to prove myself, and then that I'd do well in Slytherin. But in the end it put me in Gryffindor. I bet if it had called out "Slytherin" you would have fainted on the spot, tipped right over onto the table and broken your nose on the gold plate or tipped backward and cracked your head on the floor. I can't even imagine how different my life would be. All I knew
about Slytherin was what Hagrid had told me—that most of the dark wizards came from Slytherin. Oh, and I'd met Malfoy while getting my robes in Diagon Alley. He was a real prat even back then, told me all about how wonderful Slytherin was. Anyway, it didn't happen and I ended up in Gryffindor where I can have friends instead of "cronies" and rush in where angels fear to tread with the rest of the lot.

What is friendship to a Gryffindor? We're supposed to be the brave ones, and I think Gryffindor friendship does have a lot to do with courage. We stand by each other no matter what's ahead, and we stand by our convictions too. Sometimes we're blindly brave or stupidly courageous, but we're very seldom alone. A Gryffindor always seems to have another Gryffindor or two around when things get tough. Gryffindors bring their natural camaraderie to the Quidditch Pitch. But Slytherins seem to create camaraderie because of the competition. You don't see Slytherins uniting together unless they're in competition against someone else.

I know I didn't do a great job of explaining that, but you see it all the time in the corridors. Gryffindors travel in packs. Slytherins are a lot more solitary.

Just one question back at you this time—what do you think is Dumbledore's greatest strength and his greatest weakness?

I guess Minerva told you about what happened when you had to leave suddenly on Sunday. Well, nothing, really. Which was good. I felt the call, like usual, and was able to Occlude without totally going comatose. I was in our common room watching Ron and Hermione try to avoid looking at each other when it started. It hardly lasted any time at all, and Minerva pulled me out of it after no more than twenty minutes or so. Doesn't matter though—I worried about you all day, especially when I didn't see you at dinner. But the Headmaster let me know you were alright—he has a signal, just a nod with a smile. It doesn't seem like very long since the last time. Is something going on I should know about?

I'm starting to rethink this trip with you. It's starting to sound kind of dangerous. Wouldn't getting newly-hatched dragon egg shells require getting reasonably close to dragon nesting sites? As I recall (think—Tri-Wizard Tournament, first task) female dragons are pretty protective of their eggs, which means they should be pretty damn protective of their babies. And opening up tombs to find fresh mummies? There's only so far this Gryffindor courage will take me! I think it's going to have to be Greece, then, unless you're up or Disney World.

It's almost December. Have you and Minerva had a chance to decide where I'm going and what I'm doing? Ron had invited me to come to the Burrow, and I wouldn't mind spending a few days there, but I'm really looking forward to going to Shell Cottage with you. I've been trying to remember all that we're going to do, well, what we've said in these letters. I think you promised to start teaching me Legilimency, and I'm going to teach you (and Minerva) how to do the hula hoop. That will be the absolute highlight of the holiday, and possibly the highlight of my life. Can you imagine the mileage I'd get out of a few strategic photos of you?

Well, Hermione is glaring at me. I think she realizes I'm not writing my Defense essay. Better get back to work so I have time to start working on my Christmas list. You know, I've never had one of those before. But this year, Minerva told me to give her a few ideas. I guess she plans on buying me something. Ron said to let it go—that's what guardians do, after all. Then he said to ask for chess lessons. Right! He spent lots of time over this latest move. He nearly wore a hole in the parchment with all the erasing until Hermione grabbed it from him (the most contact they've had in weeks!) and did an erasing charm and repaired the damage. Honestly, I think it annoys her that he's such a good chess player.
If you feel like giving me anything, I'd like a clock similar to the one you have. I think you know what I mean.

Regards,

Harry

Was it too forward to suggest a gift? Harry pushed aside that concern and left the last line in the letter. He'd gone as far as admit that he'd worried about Severus all day Sunday. Mentioning the gift wasn't really about getting or receiving a present; it was all about a certain kind of peace of mind, even with the distinct possibility that the clock hand would often point to some place that didn't exactly give him reason to be relieved. Harry could just imagine the hands on a Snape clock—"In the Dungeons," "Out Robbing Dragon Nests," "Terrorizing Students," "Monitoring Detention," "Getting Drunk at the Hog's Head," "Rubbing Elbows with Fellow Death Eaters" and "With My Master." Where would it point, then, when Severus was with Dumbledore?

-Severus-

The first day of December brought the first snowfall of the year. Severus was up at daybreak, walking softly with spelled feet atop the deep snow to the edge of the Forbidden Forest to skim off the top layer of snow beneath the pines and firs. He wasn't sure why he believed in the magical quality of winter's first snow, melted and used in potions requiring water. Still, there was a certain tradition to the collection process, and Severus always enjoyed the spell his mother had taught him that first Christmas he was home from Hogwarts that let him walk atop the snow without sinking into it.

By the time he had gathered all he needed, the sun was high enough in the sky to draw out the students. They were bounding about, all ages and sizes and houses, though the Slytherins were fewest in number, having the good sense to stay inside away from foolish Gryffindors with snow balls. He watched from the edge of the forest as a very large and a much smaller figure worked in front of Hagrid's hut, building what looked to be a snow owl. He almost missed Hedwig as she landed on the small figure's shoulder, telling him definitively that this, indeed was Harry.

He allowed himself one small smile before beginning to walk back to the castle, where he knew he would find Filch having a fit with the tracked in water and mud.

/ 1 December, 1996

Sunday

Dear Harry:

December is not only close, it is here. By now you've surely seen the snow that fell overnight and are outside with the rest of the foolish students (you are right, Gryffindors do travel in packs) playing in the snow and getting frostbite. Madam Pomfrey will certainly have her hands full tonight...I hope Professor Slughorn is up to date on her stock of Pepperup Potion. If there is a shortage, please send Dobby here for a dose for yourself. We have but three weeks until the Christmas Holiday and it will not do to have you ill with pneumonia because of a basic potions shortage.
I appreciate your insight regarding Gryffindors and Slytherins. I agree with your spot-on assessment that Slytherin camaraderie is not innate and must be inspired by a common goal or rivalry. However, three Gryffindor fools rushing in is not necessarily better than a single Slytherin treading quite carefully.

I must comment on your performance in class on Friday. Your defensive skills, when properly applied, never cease to amaze me. The quick shield you created when Goyle blasted that hole in the wall saved several students from serious injury. Please realize that in circumstances such as that, it is not a requirement that you do the spell nonverbally. The strength of the barrier you erected nonverbally, by sheer instinct it seemed, rivaled that of what many adult wizards can create verbally. I do apologize for taking points from you for the scratch that Miss Patil sustained on her cheek from the debris that got through before your shield went up. I must also apologize for awarding points to Goyle for the strength of this blasting spell, ill-aimed as it was.

One small question, now that I am thinking of it. I never observed before that Weasley suffered overly much from spots. Yet today he seemed to have quite a number of them, and they seemed to spell out "Arse" across his face. Have he and Miss Granger been at it again?

You asked about your mother’s friend Beatrice. She moved to the States with her family soon after leaving Hogwarts. I would imagine she is alive and well with a family of her own.

I must devote significant space in this letter to the revelation you made in your last letter, indeed, one that I can hardly believe you have kept to yourself all of these years. Slytherin, Harry? I must admit that I wondered, albeit briefly, how you went to Gryffindor considering the atmosphere in which you were raised. It is also obvious to me that you still maintain a deep dislike and mistrust of the House of Slytherin. I cannot say I do not understand, for I do. I think you are correct in your guess about my reaction had the hat actually called out "Slytherin" when you placed it on your head. I fully expected "Gryffindor," of course. Both your parents came from that house and for all I knew, you had been raised with full knowledge of that and a glorification of your father's exploits. One thing I will say, Harry, is that had you gone to Slytherin, there would have been no going back to the Dursleys every summer, for I would have certainly recognized your situation there for what it was. Would that have made your life any better? Any easier? I doubt it. I think that in Slytherin, those things you see in yourself that are similar to Tom Riddle would have developed more fully, risen to the top, so to speak. The need to prove yourself, to better your past, may have been insuppressible. Harry, think. You have Draco Malfoy to thank, don’t you now? Meeting him when you did made you bargain with the Sorting Hat, and ultimately earned you your rightful place in Gryffindor.

No need to drop hints about Christmas presents. I have already decided on yours. I had to have them specially made, but I used Sybill's seamstress. That is all I am saying.

Yes, Minerva and I have already scheduled out the holiday plans. You will return to the Burrow with your friends and I will pick you up there on Christmas Day. We will spend the next week or so at Shell Cottage. Minerva will join us on Christmas Evening and Boxing Day. I trust this plan will satisfy all of your needs?

You are getting a bit sneaky with your questions, Harry. I did not agree to answer questions about the Headmaster, though I do see that you are looking for my own perceptions of him. I will answer, but expect you to answer the same questions—from your perspective—in your return letter.

Albus Dumbledore’s greatest strength is his capacity to love. His greatest weakness, to sacrifice what he loves for the Greater Good.

Reverse it now. Albus Dumbledore's greatest weakness is his capacity to love. His greatest strength is his ability to sacrifice what he loves for the Greater Good.
Which is it, Harry?

Regards,

Severus

It needed to be said. He convinced himself of it. Harry must know what he was up against.

Severus unrolled the chess parchment. His eyes widened. The boy was good—he had him in check and the loss of his white knight would hurt. He was going to have to find time to play this boy a real game on Christmas Day when he Flooed to the Burrow to pick up Harry.

Severus smiled wryly. Ron didn't know what was coming.

Chapter 12

December 3-December 10

-Harry-

Harry ran his hand down the back of Mac's head as he and Hagrid stood in front of the owlets' cages, regarding the almost-grown birds.

"I'll be sendin' 'em off to 'ave their trainin' finished," said Hagrid, watching as Mac flew to Harry's shoulder and began preening his hair.

"All except Mac, right Hagrid?" said Harry. He grimaced as Mac's beak dug a bit too sharply into his scalp.

"Aye, Mac's stayin'," answered Hagrid, smiling. "You're gonna 'ave to read up on owl trainin', Harry," he said, "if you want to make 'im useful to Sev'rus."

Mac was already bringing letters to Harry almost every day. He had a knack for finding him in the castle and Hagrid has recently started sending him off to deliver notes to Severus as well. All part of the training, they explained. Harry hoped Severus wasn't suspicious. Mac seemed to like Severus just fine, and Severus now kept owl treats in his pocket, which made Mac like him all the more. Over the holidays, Hagrid was going to give Mac his first long-distance assignment—a small Christmas package to deliver to Harry all the way at the Burrow in Ottery St. Catchpole.

"You sure he'll find me at the Burrow, Hagrid?" worried Harry as he placed Mac back in his cage and refilled his water bowl.

"It's what owls do, Harry," answered Hagrid, his black eyes shining as he ruffled the hair on his young friend's head. "He's old enough now to fly that far – he'll be fine."

Harry still planned to give Mac to Severus for Christmas. He wasn't sure how he was going to wrap an owl exactly, but was grateful there'd be one fewer present he'd have to buy. It wasn't the money—it was coming up with ideas. And he really liked the idea of Severus having an owl…and being able to contact him whenever he wanted. No excuses.
3 December, 1996

Tuesday

Dear Severus:

The Christmas plans sound great. Well, maybe not that gift you're planning for me, but then again, I shouldn't turn my nose up at new underwear, should I? I mean, a bloke can't have too many pairs of pants, can he? I can always turn around and give them to Dobby—sounds like the perfect kind of gift for him since he's a free elf and all. If I'm going to be at the Burrow for Christmas Eve, I'd best get presents for everyone, then. We get to go to Hogsmeade next weekend but I don't think I can find plugs and batteries there.

Nice to remind me I have Malfoy to thank for me ending up in Gryffindor and not Slytherin. Still, you have a point. The main reason I begged the hat not to put me in Slytherin was because I wanted to stay as far away as possible from the little prat. But I never asked for Gryffindor—I just told it anything but Slytherin. You know, I think I'll write Malfoy a thank-you note. Now if I could only figure out where he spends all his free time so I can deliver it… Any ideas?

Still, I wonder what it would have been like to have not gone back to the Dursleys every summer. Seems like there was one disaster or another every summer, from Dobby causing all that chaos after first year to Ron and the twins pulling the bars off the window with the flying car after second year to blowing up Aunt Marge the next summer. Then of course there were the Dementors and the accident. But if I HAD gone into Slytherin and someone (you, right?) would have figured out then how the Dursleys were treating me, where would I have gone? I mean, I probably wouldn't have been friends with Ron and I can't imagine spending summers at prat camp with Malfoy….

No shortage of Pepperup Potion, by the way. Filch stood at the door in the Entrance Hall as everyone tramped in after playing in the snow and sent us all right up to the hospital wing to get dosed by Madam Pomfrey. Apparently, Professor Slughorn had his seventh years make it in class this past week so there was plenty to go around. I had to wait for my dose while Madam Pomfrey cleaned the walls, though. Crabbe was just ahead of me and when she dosed him these huge plugs of earwax shot out of his ears with the steam and splattered all over the walls. It was at least twice as disgusting as you'd think it would be. Madam Pomfrey gave him a lecture about washing his ears and he was cringing. I thought he was afraid of her but turns out he wasn't used to hearing very well with all that wax and his ears were really sensitive to sound. In his defense, I have to say that Madam Pomfrey's voice can be really sharp when she gets going on one of her tirades.

I had a great time outside anyway. Hagrid and I made a snow owl instead of a snowman. It looked a lot like Hedwig, I thought. Hagrid had the most disgusting snot icicles hanging down the sides of his mustache into his beard. Well, not snot exactly, but whatever was dripping out of his nose. Can't believe Ron didn't make it outside—he had a detention with Minerva that morning. Apparently, he blamed Hermione for his outbreak of spots and swapped out her shampoo for some sort of prank hair removal tonic from the twins' joke shop. Thing is, Lavender borrowed her shampoo and ended up temporarily bald. So Ron took out after Hermione and very stupidly tried to hex her. She was the one that rearranged his spots to spell "arse" (a brilliant piece of spellwork, don't you think?) and his screaming fit in the corridor earned him the detention. I don't think Minerva likes to be woken up at midnight on a school night. For his detention, she made him spray all the boys' showers in Gryffindor with fungus remover and then check every toilet seat and tighten the bolts up if they were even a little bit loose. I think he's still washing his hands every few minutes.

By the way, thanks for apologizing for taking points when I did that shield spell last week in class. I
noticed that you didn't restore those points, though. You must have forgotten (again). I've noticed the same thing you have—that my defensive spells are a lot stronger than my offensive ones and come a lot more naturally to me. The thing is—I don't think I'm going to get rid of Voldemort by doing a Protego. So how do I learn to transfer some of that energy or finesse or whatever it is to my offensive spells? I'm not saying those are really shabby or anything, but they could be stronger. They NEED to be stronger for what I'm going to have to do.

I hate thinking of that. I hate that it's me. I hate that I can't even think about what I want to do later in life—be an Auror, play Quidditch, get married—without thinking that it has to be after I get rid of Voldemort. Then, inevitably, I think "I can be an Auror IF I survive" or "I can get married if I'm alive after it's all over." Damn depressing way to go about life, isn't it?

Why couldn't it have been Neville?

And I'm not going to answer that question about Dumbledore because you didn't really answer my question, did you?

Which one is your choice, Severus? I admit you pretty much nailed it, though I would have used different words to describe what's essentially the same thing.

I wonder if it's his greatest strength or his greatest weakness that he never really seems to think about himself? He doesn't have family, does he? So what does he have? Who does he have?

I'd better end this and get back to work. I have an exam tomorrow in Transfiguration and a new potion to prepare for. It's some sort of antifungal cream. Apparently, athlete's foot is running rampant in the school and Slughorn is having the sixth years brew the remedy. Pretty nice having your students do all your work, isn't it? Do you have any people you'd like to jinx? I'd be happy to step in and help you out. Ginny taught me the bat bogey hex. I think I'll use it on Hagrid next time we play in the snow.

Regards,

Harry

Harry studied the end of his quill critically. He used his knife to trim it then picked up his Transfiguration textbook.

"We really should practice on each other, Harry," said Hermione. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the fire, surrounded by books and parchment. "Half the points on the exam are practical, aren't they?"

Harry sighed. They were going to start on human transfiguration, and to help get themselves prepared, they had to transfigure a human-like feature onto an animal. Human hair on a kitten, for example. Hermione didn't even need any more practice, but Harry humored her. In class today, she'd given a coal black kitten a very Snape-like goatee. Harry's orange kitten, in the meantime, sported what looked like a very bad toupee.

While Hermione went off to look for Crookshanks (they hadn't been given practice kittens to take home so Crookshanks was very reluctantly filling in), Harry tossed Ron the chessboard that he had to include in his return letter.

Ron whistled. He began to study the board, scratching idly at his face. The "R" in "ARSE" now looked like a B as Ron had sprouted a few more spots, and the E was almost gone (hidden, Harry
thought, under some skin-colored makeup of Lavender's). Harry thought Ron rather liked having "ABS" written on his face as he seemed to be flexing his pecs and sucking in his abs a lot lately.

Crookshanks shot by Harry's feet, Hermione in hot pursuit. Harry opened his book and referred back to the chapter they had covered today. He very much wanted to give the cat Uncle Vernon's walrus-like mustache.

-Severus-

Severus finished re-reading Harry's letter and then read it again. It was Thursday evening and he'd just spent an hour with the Headmaster getting some answers. Bars on Harry's window? Blowing up Aunt Marge? What was the boy on about? And what was that about the house elf causing chaos on Privet Drive? Why was this the first time he was hearing these things?

Albus had been patient, and had gently reminded Severus that Harry's circumstances were different now. That when these incidents had occurred they had been dealt with by the proper authorities using the proper channels.

"But bars on the window, Albus? Minerva knows about this?"

Albus' look told Severus that she did not.

"If he'd been in Slytherin, he'd never have gone back there!" ranted Severus, knowing he was opening up the door to a path he really didn't want to pursue. "I most certainly would have recognized what was going on there."

"If he had been in Slytherin, he may have turned out like another certain orphan we know," commented Dumbledore dryly, stirring his tea and looking up sharply at his Defense Professor.

"Perhaps." Snape's retort was clipped. "Perhaps not. Not all Slytherins are evil. Not all seek immortality. Not all want revenge."

"No, they do not," answered Dumbledore. "But tell me, Severus. Where would he have gone those summers, then? Could you have mentored him then? Indeed, fathered him...?"

"I am not his father," cut in Snape.

Dumbledore continued stirring his tea a moment longer. His eyes, when he looked up at Snape at last, were keen.

"No, you are not," he said. His eyes bore into Severus, then softened. "But you'd like to be."

/ 

5 December, 1996

Tuesday

Dear Harry:

Plugs and batteries? What are you on about? I assume you mean the Muggle variety that power certain appliances. No, you certainly won't find these in Hogsmeade. It would be quite ridiculous to have a retail shop selling toasters and electric razors and CD players in a wizarding village, would it not? Perhaps you can give me a more clear picture of why these items are needed and I can help out
your quest. Of course, I am much more likely to think you insane. No—wait! I smell an Arthur
Weasley in this equation. Why don't you have Hermione write her parents and have them send the
plugs off of any broken appliances they have about the house?

Harry, please try not to worry about Mr. Malfoy's whereabouts. I am much more concerned about
your own well-being. I know your over-developed sense of justice will not let this rest, but you must
try. Both Professor Dumbledore and myself are monitoring the situation continuously. If you indeed
would like to write Mr. Malfoy a thank-you letter as you propose, deliver it to me and I will make
sure he receives it (probably heavily edited but receive it he will).

And thank you ever so much for the image of earwax plugs shooting out of Crabbe's ears and
splattering against the wall. I could likely have gone my entire life without having that image
implanted permanently in my brain and still remained reasonably content.

And thank you as well for the image of frozen nasal fluid icicles in Hagrid's beard and mustache.
Yes, I did see you with Hagrid playing in the snow. I had gone to the Forbidden Forest quite early in
search of some potions ingredients that are best collected with the first winter snowfall. While I am
not the Potions Professor here, I am still a Potions Master and like to keep stocked up. Your
experience with Hagrid—and his beard—might serve as further reasons not to grow a beard of your
own. They can be quite unsanitary and tend to collect pieces of scrambled eggs and bits of toast.
While you may argue that this could serve as an additional food source in case of famine, it would
prolong your life by a day at most.

It is not uncommon for the Potions Professor to help stock the infirmary with potions prepared by his
advanced students. And no, I do not have any jinxes I would like you to deliver, unless you want to
hex yourself in bed where you belong after curfew instead of wandering about the castle under that
infernal invisibility cloak spying on Mr. Malfoy.

Harry, you will always be better at defensive spells than offensive, because you at heart do not really
want to hurt your opponent. This is a strength, not a weakness. This is not to say that your offensive
spells are weak; they are perfectly adequate for a student of your age.

Now, on to the unjustness of the prophecy, to the unfairness of life and to your desire to have a
future that extends past a face-to-face meeting with the Dark Lord.

You have lived, now, with the knowledge of the prophecy, for only six months. Did you have these
thoughts seven months ago? When you knew that the Dark Lord had you in his sights, but did not
know anything of a prophecy that claimed you were fated to meet and that only one would survive
that meeting, were you able to think of having a family without thinking "if I survive?" Were you
able to contemplate a career? The same prophecy existed back then, as it exists now and as it has
existed since even before you were born. The only thing that has changed is that you now know of
its existence. No, let me rephrase that. Two things have changed—you know of its existence AND
you have the Headmaster's interpretation of this prophecy as well.

You have little experience with prophecies, Harry. How could you, being as new to the Magical
World as you are? Why they arise when they do is not understood, but serious prophecies such as
this (and by serious I mean "serious in nature," differentiating this prophecy from one about the size
of Hagrid's pumpkins, for example) tend to be made when they are needed and, when heard by the
right people, tend to be self-fulfilling.

Patience, please, while I attempt to explain.

Evil arises throughout the world from time to time, and is nearly always defeated. Evil leaders—
Muggle and Magical—are selfish by their very nature and crave power as an aphrodisiac, fueling
their souls with more and more and more. Many self-destruct, and those that do not are usually brought down by opposing forces around them…eventually.

Someone will defeat the Dark Lord because the world will not put up with him forever. Perhaps you are fated to be the one. Perhaps not. But a prophecy arising foretelling of the birth of one who will defeat him puts him on guard instantly, makes him wary, makes him watchful. It may eventually make him careless, make him take steps to protect himself that actually make him more vulnerable.

Who is to say that Neville is not the one, Harry?

You know, don't you?

You are. You are the one to say "It is me. It is not Neville Longbottom."

Prophecy or no, someone must step forward to end his reign. Remember, if you choose to do this (and by working with the Headmaster you have taken a step in this direction already), you will not be stepping forward alone.

Harry, it is not YOUR fight. It is OUR fight, and you are our general, but only if you choose to be.

That's the thing about prophecies, you see. A great number are made and recorded yet only a tiny fraction are fulfilled.

And this brings me back around to the Headmaster, and your question to me, and my answer (or lack of answer) to you.

I myself believe the following, assuming you must choose one of the choices I gave:

Albus Dumbledore's greatest weakness is his capacity to love. His greatest strength, to sacrifice what he loves for the Greater Good.

I know this belief is controversial, so hear me out before judging.

Albus Dumbledore's true greatness, his true power, comes from his selflessness. He is willing, and able, to work tirelessly and selflessly for the betterment of our world. While I admit that there is a subjective quality to the word "betterment" (who is to say what is better for the world, after all?) the Headmaster is keenly able to walk that fine line, to work both within the system and outside of it, to achieve his ends.

When he focuses on an individual instead of on a cause, his capacity to love said individual may deter him from the larger goal.

I do not advocate this life or this path for all, yet the Headmaster has CHOSEN it for himself.

You get to choose for yourself, Harry. His goals do not have to be your goals.

And in closing, let me say that the Headmaster loves me. And he loves you.

Does that put us both in the line of fire? Yes. Does it guarantee our untimely demise? No, it does not.

Regards,

Severus
Severus decided not to reread the letter. He would likely tear it into pieces and fling it into the fire if he did so. It was a study in contradictions, as confusing or more so than the real situation.

How could he love Albus like he did and allow himself to be moved all over the proverbial chessboard, a pawn in the Headmaster's plan?

How could he allow Harry to fall into the same game, working alongside Albus but not really getting to choose for himself?

Albus was honorable. But Harry…Harry was more honorable still. Less selfish even than Albus.

Severus resolved again, as he had so many times already, to give Harry everything he needed to make that choice. He would not let Albus keep the boy in the dark, or even in the semi-dark.

He put this on his mental list of "Christmas Holiday Topics" and rolled up the parchment.

________________________________________

-Harry-

Harry watched Ginny and Dean as they studied together, sitting quite platonically (he was pleased to see) at a study table and not in each other's laps on the squishy loveseat. They still spent quite a lot of time together, but was it Harry's imagination or were things cooling off a bit between them?

On the other side of the room, Ron and Lavender were studying as well—well Ron was studying and Lavender was playing spa. Ron looked pained as he tried to read his Defense textbook while Lavender sat on the floor in front of him, apparently giving him a pedicure and pulling out the hair on the top of his big toe with a tweezers as she babbled in baby talk about "Won Won's big hairy toesies."

Hermione, too, was with the one she loved. Why, thought Harry, was she reading *Hogwarts, a History* again?

He was bored. He was tired of school, of classes, of these silly letters, of not hearing from Dumbledore for another special "session," of not seeing Severus outside of class.

He was tired of Animagus studies and Minerva not letting him try a transformation yet even though he knew he was ready. How many times did he need to transform his feet into hooves until she just accepted he was going to be a stag and they got on with it? He wasn't trying to transform them into hooves—it's just what happened. Was it so horrible that he'd be the same animal as his father? Was it really that unusual? Just because it wasn't original didn't make it wrong, did it?

Why hadn't he told Severus any of this? And why did he care, anyway, what Severus thought about his Animagus form?

/ 10 December, 1996 Sunday

Dear Severus:

How about "Albus Dumbledore's greatest strength is his ability to love in spite of the need to sacrifice even what he loves for the greater good?"
If you know you are going to lose something, why let yourself love it? You'll just suffer more in the end.

The fact that the Headmaster allows himself to love shows that he values the emotion for what it is—the greatest human experience—no matter how it turns out in the end.

And no, Hermione didn't help me with this one.

I think his weakness has to do with control or trust. He doesn't ever give me all the information I need. Either he doesn't trust me to do the right thing with it, or his need for ultimate control won't allow it.

He's getting worse, isn't he? I can tell when I look at him in the Great Hall at mealtimes. I know he knows I'm looking at him, too. You never really told me how long he had...do you know? (Would you even tell me if you did?)

I'm going to try to let it all go for a few weeks and enjoy the coming holidays—yes, even the whole Malfoy thing. We went to Hogsmeade yesterday and I managed to shop all day until I got all the gifts I needed. Ginny helped me find something for Mrs. Weasley (nice robes...I felt kind of weird but Ginny swears she'll love them). I got Ginny some really pretty earrings. Do you think that's too much? Too forward? I mean, she won't even think the diamonds are real anyway, so it should be fine. Hermione helped pick them out and she looked at me really funny. I think she must suspect I like Ginny as more than a friend.

We saw Tonks when we were in Hogsmeade. She seemed to be hanging around nearly every corner we got to, and I finally figured out she was watching out for me. Some Auror I'll make, right? Anyway, I couldn't help but think of that nightie thingy that was in the flat in London, and then I pictured her wearing it (a much better image than Minerva in it if you must know) but somehow the picture morphed into Ginny. I think I'm obsessed. No, really.

Professor Slughorn's party is coming up and I still haven't asked anyone. Maybe I'll just skip it. Maybe I'll just ask Ron. Oh yeah, right. Then everyone will think that I'm dating him.

I did pretty well on my Transfiguration practical last week. We had to transfigure a kitten's hair into human hair—this is supposed to get us ready for our next section which is on human transfiguration—you know, changing the color of your own eyebrows or the shape of your nose. Minerva has already given us this giant lecture on how that sort of transfiguration is not intended for frivolous purposes and that serious consequences can occur if you try to enhance features that you feel are lacking. It took us a while but we finally figured out what she was talking about—giving ourselves larger "assets." The girls looked quite interested, Pansy in particular—she's flat as a Slytherin pancake. When we learned switching spells she tried to switch her assets for Millicent's. Anyway, not to worry, Minerva. A guy simply wouldn't do something like that, at least not until he had the spell absolutely mastered.

In the end, I got a black and grey striped tabby kitten and I gave it Minerva's bun. She looked rather disapproving (so did the kitten, in fact) but she gave me full marks. Ron did a decent job with his orange tabby. It ended up looking like his dads hair with receding hairline and everything. I won't say what Hermione did with her black kitten. I'm sure you've already heard through the Hogwarts gossip circuit.

I'm so ready for break! It's getting really boring around here. The fan club is still annoying but they pretty much leave me alone now after they all got kissed. Maybe I'm not such a good kisser. No one is using the Levicorpus spell anymore—not since you caught the first person doing it and assigned double detention with Filch—so we don't get to see anyone's underwear. Now they're all using this
cool spell Hermione found in your book—the Muffliato. Did you invent that one too? It's dead useful, so much that even Hermione will use it now. Ron and Lavender are old news, and the Hermione/Ron feud has even cooled a bit. I guess he's afraid she'll send more angry birds his way if he steps out of line, or rearrange his spots to spell "pervert" or something. No one's been hurt in a Quidditch or Potions accident, no one's been nearly killed by a cursed necklace and no one's figured out what Malfoy's up to. Oops. Sorry. Letting it go...

Regards,

Harry

Harry put away his things, stuffing them messily into his backpack, and trudged upstairs. He tossed the backpack on top of his trunk and sat on his bed, collapsing backwards and letting the waves rock him for a few moments. He felt better already just being on the waterbed. Lying back, he remembered the embrace of the water, the pull of the waves, the way the foam pushed up onto the sand, the little bubbles that surfaced from the shellfish beneath it. He tried to let go of the stress, the tension, the unanswered questions, even Draco Malfoy.

Filling his mind with nothing, letting himself float unhindered in a bubble of tranquility, he slipped into an occluded sleep and fully clothed, robes and all, slept until morning.

________________________________________
Chapter 13
________________________________________

December 12-19

-Severus-

It was snowing again. Snowing relentlessly, large slowflakes with high moisture, leaving a heavy, wet mess on the ground that reached mid-calf to most students. Severus' sixth years came into the Defense classroom right after Herbology and tracked muddy water all over the floor as they moved to their desks. Then they dripped all over the floor even more while they sat in those desks during class.

Severus made them stand up and taught them all three different drying charms—one standard, one with a cleaning charm worked in to banish the mud and a third that included a warming charm to heat up the frozen extremities.

And because he wasn't really a nice man, he let the Slytherins practice on the Gryffindors, and instructed them to use Aguamenti on them to make sure they were good and wet before they dried them off.

Harry looked mutinous. But then again, Nott had soaked his head pretty thoroughly. When Nott dried him off—successfully the first time—Severus noted that Harry's hair curled up in loose ringlets when it dried quickly. The Slytherins found this quite entertaining and started calling him Pretty Boy Gilderoy.

Harry was not amused.

/ 12 December, 1996
Tuesday

Dear Harry:

Your concern over the Headmaster is not unwarranted. You know what the eventual outcome of the curse he suffered will be. He grows weaker slowly but he does indeed weaken. I do not know how much time he has, Harry. That depends largely on him. He is exerting himself this year, attempting to do as much as he can while he has breath in his body to make it easier to destroy the Dark Lord. But he does not routinely share his activities or his discoveries, even with those he most trusts, as you have accurately pointed out. I do not think it is a matter of trust so much as an innate conceit or confidence in his own abilities.

I do think we could discuss the Headmaster and nothing else and still manage to produce long letters. However, I suggest that we accept him for what he is, learn from him what we can and love him—like a father, a grandfather, a mentor—while he is still with us. Most of all you must learn—as I have already—that when you are a pawn on an old man's chessboard, you must play a better game than the one pushing you about.

I have spent some time thinking about the statement you made about love as the greatest human experience. I find myself once more calling out my experience as a child, attending Catholic mass with my father's mother. There are many verses in the Bible that deal with love. I must admit that my adult self, cynical as I am, does not see these as my child self did. However, I clearly remember my grandmother saying to me as we left mass one Sunday, a mass where the famous verses from Corinthians were read: "When you hear those words, Severus, use your own name in place of the word 'love' and ask yourself if you are those things." And then she would say the words with me, words I remember to this day, for she would repeat them with me every time we were together.

'Severus is patient, Severus is kind. Severus does not envy, he does not boast, he is not proud. Severus does not dishonor others, he is not self-seeking, he is not easily angered, he keeps no record of wrongs. Severus does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. He always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.'

It seems ironic to repeat those words at this point in my life, for surely I have not lived up to them. Still, it is an appropriate illustration of the application of the emotion.

I feel as if I have just delivered a sermon. Well, I dress the part of a preacher; I may as well play the part as well.

I well remember human transfiguration and the lecture regarding the enhancement of certain features. I believe our practical exercise was similar, but we were given rats instead of kittens. I do believe Minerva has mellowed with age. And yes, tales of the long, greasy hair sported by Miss Granger's kitten have indeed reached my ears. I do wonder why it reminded all my Slytherins of their Head of House. It is almost as if they were hoping I would take umbrage (forgive me the use of that word) at the offense and dock points from Gryffindor. I am happy that I was not the only adult singled out and do indeed feel a bit sorry for the kittens. You have returned them to normal, have you not? If you have not, I would be interested in adopting the Minerva kit. It would irritate her to no end to know that her rather severe bun was residing in my quarters.

In answer to your question about the authorship of the extremely useful Muffliato spell, yes, it is mine and mine alone. For once, you stumbled upon and elected to use a rather benign spell, not one that will main, damage, destroy, rip, rend or mutilate. It is a shame that wizards cannot receive a residual each time a spell of their creation is used. Imagine the potential wealth of the witch who invented the breath freshening charm, or of the wizard who first uttered "lumos."

You bought Ginny Weasley diamonds? Obsessed is hardly the word, Harry. Perhaps you should
rethink this gift, save it for next year, or at least until you have had a date or two. By the way, every witch of a certain age knows the spell to detect a true gem from a false one. Perhaps you should purchase a book for her instead, or something of fine workmanship or value that is not, say, jewelry—especially diamonds. Quality Quidditch Supplies sells a very fine line of dragonhide gloves that are both supple and strong. Flourish and Botts carries extremely nice quills, some of them with gold embellishments. If none of those things appeal, why not surprise her with her own hula hoop? It's a toy, of course, and not considered too personal, yet you will get to enjoy it many times over if she takes up practicing it in the common room.

The weeks before holidays are slow for everyone but I do understand your boredom—call it ennui, if you are desirous of improving your vocabulary so I will stop mistaking you for a London street urchin. It grows from the frustration you are feeling—as if your hands are tied and you cannot do anything to alter the course of certain events. You may want to stop some, and make others occur more quickly, but all things will play one way or another despite your most fervent wishes. Remember that if you wish something to occur, there is likely someone else who wishes the opposite just as strongly. Your Animagus transformation, your work with the Headmaster, your relationship with Miss Weasley and whatever it is Draco is "up to"—all will play out in time. I encourage you to persist in your commitment to "letting things go." You may even go back to being the happy-go-lucky child you once were. Oh, excuse me. That must have been another Harry. You never did let things play out now, did you? Rushing in where angels fear to tread…

As for the appalling lack of disasters, I've been informed by several members of the faculty that the number of potions-related mishaps has dramatically decreased since Professor Slughorn took over my position. Easily explained—his regimen is less exacting than mine; he does not challenge the students as I did. I have also been told that the number of Defense-related injuries has increased threefold in the same time period. Again, easily explained. I am the first adequate Defense instructor this school has had in some time. The only injuries sustained last year under the Toad were paper cuts.

Ahh…forgive me. I did not mean to make light of the injuries you suffered during detention. I of course was referring to her actual lesson plans which consisted of reading, turning pages and extolling the virtues of Cornelius Fudge. I sometimes wonder about those two—I daresay that atrocious lime green bowler he favors is quite her style and would clash abysmally with that infantile bow in her over-teased hair.

You've only this week and next to finish out before the holidays—I trust you can manage to make it through without injuring yourself playing Quidditch (at least the snow will provide a cushion should you fall off your broom, especially if it continues falling at this rate) or getting punched in the nose (in a very Muggle way) by Mr. Thomas should he find you drooling over his girlfriend.

By the way, you did not include any questions for me in your letter, aside from the conversational ones about the Headmaster and such. Have you tired of your game? Have you found out everything you need to know? Or have you simply grown disinterested, succumbing to that internal ennui I've already described?

I've been saving up a tidbit and now seems to be the right time to deliver it to you. During the summer between our fourth and fifth year at Hogwarts, your mother dragged me to the theater to see a new film that had just been released. It was utterly ridiculous yet it remains one forever ingrained in my mind, as much for the lack of plot, the ridiculous premise and the use of the same castle in almost every scene (shot from different angles but the same castle nonetheless) as for the brilliance of the comedic actors. The name of the movie was "Monty Python and the Holy Grail." Your mother found it unbelievably funny. If you know the movie, you will understand more about your mother's sense of humor than anyone could ever describe to you. If you have never seen it, we shall see it
together in London this summer where it plays occasionally at a cinema I know.

Now my question for you—what do you think your Animagus form will be? You have been strangely silent on the matter as of late.

Regards,

Severus

Severus rolled up the parchment, melancholy stealing over him as he thought of that summer day in the theater, Lily laughing until she cried, how the two of them had seen the movie a half dozen more times that summer until they could repeat dialog together. Why, after all that had entered his mind in the years since, could he still remember it? Had the ability to be silly, to laugh ’til his sides ached, died along with Lily? What makes you think she's a witch?... Well, she turned me into a newt!... A newt?... Well... I got better.

He wasn't sure, really, if Harry would appreciate the humor as Lily had. Harry was far more serious than either of his parents, the burdens of life and prophecy heavy on him already. Yet, thought Severus as he rolled out the parchment chessboard, noted Ron's move (he'd stopped pretending Harry was paying any attention at all to the game anymore) and duplicated it on his tabletop set, who wouldn't appreciate the Black Knight, or the Castle Anthrax or indeed, the Holy Hand Grenade? Was there a metaphor in there somewhere for Hogwarts and the quest the Headmaster was setting for Harry?

-Harry-

He had been so angry, so disgruntled after class on Tuesday that for the first time he hadn't responded to Severus' letter. His homework was returned on Friday and Severus had scribbled a short note on the bottom, hidden by their concealment spell. "Forgive me. I should have known you were not in the mood."

Now it was Sunday, the weekend waning and all of his other homework finally completed. Nearly everyone was studying for end-of-term tests. Ron was distractedly rubbing Lavender's feet while he pretended to read the Potions textbook propped up on his knees. He was really staring at Hermione, rather openly, Harry thought. She was sitting at a table with Cormac McLaggen, apparently helping him with his Herbology. Interesting that she was helping a seventh year with material she apparently hadn't even learned yet herself, but this was Hermione after all. Cormac seemed to be paying a lot more attention to her cleavage than to the passage she was explaining. Harry mentally slapped himself for noticing her cleavage, or at least noticing that Cormac was noticing it. Was that the same? Of all the ways to make Ron jealous, Hermione had actually hit on the one that would drive him insane.

"Hey! That hurt!" Lavender pulled her foot out of Ron's lap, inadvertently (or so it seemed) dropping it on Ron's groin, which elicited the expected reaction. As Ron shrieked like a girl, Harry saw Hermione's barely concealed smile.

When the common room quieted down again, Harry opened his Defense homework and began his delayed response to Severus. 
17 December, 1996

Sunday

Dear Severus:

You're right—I wasn't in the mood. However, it wasn't right for me to take it out totally on you, even though it was your stupid idea to let YOUR Slytherins drench us with water. Personally, I'm not sure that what Nott shot me with WAS water. How would I know when he used a nonverbal spell? He could have done a "Dogpissamenti" or a "Sewerwateramenti." I wouldn't put it past him to know how to say "Dog Piss" in Latin. And I REALLY didn't need anyone to know about my little hair problem. It stayed like that most of the day and the stupid Gryffindor girls loved it. They kept running their fingers through it and telling me how soft it was. I actually sat on the couch in the common room that night and gave up. I let this first year girl—I think her name is Rosalie—stand up behind me and comb it for about 15 minutes. I hate to admit it but it actually felt good. I've had to think of other ways I can use my fame, popularity and stunning good looks to greater advantage. Perhaps I could get some of them to walk on my back? Or massage my feet? Or do my homework? Maybe they'd like to take over my chess moves since I'm starting to lose ground with you on our game.

I talked to Hermione about Ginny's present and she agreed it was too much. I'm keeping the earrings, though, to give to her when it IS appropriate. I actually appreciate your other suggestions. Minerva took me to Hogsmeade for a couple hours on Saturday and I got those gloves you suggested. Hermione also owled her parents and they are picking up a hula hoop. I figure that will give the entire Weasley family hours of entertainment, in case we run out of things to do while I'm there. I can just see Mr. Weasley trying to figure out how it works and what's inside it to give it that rattling noise. Of course, my ultimate goal will be to get Ron to do it. You know, I think we're old enough to have a drink or two with the adults to celebrate Yule. That might loosen him up a bit. I'm hoping we get to go to the twins' flat on Diagon Alley soon—they're quite the responsible adults now, aren't they?

I think I would have liked to have known your grandmother. What she said—what you said—makes so much sense. I have been trying to understand this "power" Professor Dumbledore thinks I have so much of. I've always thought of love as something elusive since it never seemed to pay a lot of attention to me, at least not until I came to Hogwarts anyway. Hermione has this book called "Bartlett's Quotations." When Ron and Lavender got together, she brought it with her once when we were studying together and was looking up quotes on love to prove to herself that she didn't love him, or even like him. I told her then that she didn't need that giant book—she just needed a Beatles anthology. I suggested "In My Life." I remember listening to it with you in Liverpool, in that quirky shop with the six thousand Beatles bumper stickers plastered all over the wall. "There are places I'll remember all my life, though some have changed…Some forever, not for better, some have gone and some remain…” I didn't say anything to you then about it, but you literally stopped when the song started and you got this look on your face, almost like you were in pain. It made me listen more carefully—I'd heard the song before, of course, but I guess I never really listened to what it was saying.

I know that's not really the gist of the song—it's really about the person that he loves more than everything else. Yet I can't help but thinking about how my life so far is really defined by places…Privet Drive, the cupboard under the stairs, Hogwarts, the Gryffindor common room, the Burrow, Shell Cottage. It's like I'm always looking for a home, for a place to hang up my heart, I guess. And really, the place that so far comes the closest is Shell Cottage. I love how I feel when I'm there, like it's just exactly the right size for the two of us.
If I told you I had already seen "Monty Python and the Holy Grail," would you still take me to see it with you this summer? I actually saw it the summer before last. Dudley and his friends had rented the video (do you know what video tapes are?) and I watched it while the Dursleys were at Aunt Marge's one Saturday. I wasn't so sure about the ending, but parts of it were brilliant. I was saying "Ni!" to myself silently whenever they told me to do anything the rest of the summer (Uncle Vernon: "Potter, get out there and scrub the hubcaps on my car with a toothbrush!" Me: "Ni!") and I swear after the Dementors attacked I would call out "Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!" and then say "I'm not quite dead yet." I admit—it was a great coping mechanism. I just can't believe my mum liked it, though. Don't you think it a bit…um….raw for her? You know, it's hard for me to think about her as having an off-color sense of humor. She was my mum, and I never even got to know her as my mum, much less as a friend. Do you know how lucky you were?

I imagine you do.

I don't really know what my Animagus form will be yet. Well, I think I do know but Minerva isn't so sure yet. Actually, I think I'm going to be a stag, like my dad. Minerva has me transform my legs or arms every time now, and they always turn into what seem to be deer hooves. She must think there's something wrong, though, because she doesn't let me try a full transformation. I hope you're not disappointed—I know I already remind you enough of my dad without having his Animagus form too, but honestly, I can't seem to do anything to change it. She has me think of feet and then I have deer feet. I don't THINK deer feet—that's just what I get when I think "Feet." I think I'm ready for the transformation. Sometimes it's hard to stop at just the feet, but she wants me to wait until after Christmas. Has she said anything to you about any of this? I really do think she's holding something back from me.

I don't know if I told you this yet—Ron's got this chessboard set up on a table down here and it has your chess game mocked up on it. He gets really upset if anyone gets too close to it, so when Cormac moved a piece yesterday he about went ballistic. He spent a good hour last night just staring at it. Don't you think this game has gone on long enough? Can't you just end it and put him out of his misery?

Sorry—had to go referee a fight and now I'm back. Ginny and Dean just got into this horrific row over you! It was really funny. Dean said something that wasn't exactly complementary about you (he was writing his Defense essay) and I don't know what inspired him to say what he said as it had nothing to do with Defense and everything to do with your supposed lack of personal hygiene and some specific ingredients in your homemade shampoo that—believe me!—should never be put on a person's head. Anyway, Ginny stuck up for you and said that she imagined that they didn't pay you enough here to be able to afford good shampoo and you probably just used whatever the elves gave you and besides you're a good teacher despite how unfair you are and biased toward the Slytherins. Hermione took Ginny's side (she even said that you not washing your hair more than once or twice a term was all a defense mechanism to keep people from getting too close to you) but then Cormac took Dean's side and said that your hair actually dripped on his textbook once when you were leaning over him in class. It ended up with Ginny stomping off to her room and Dean and Seamus sneaking out to the kitchen to nick food from the house elves.

Just a bit more than a week 'til we're back at Shell Cottage. Did you say we were going to have a Christmas tree? I bet Dobby would come and help us set it up…

Regards,

Harry
Well, he'd written all those things that were bound to get everyone else in trouble but he really didn't care. He was feeling a bit careless lately anyway, and with as boring as things had been, was perhaps unconsciously trying to liven things up. He could just imagine Snape leaning over Cormac in class this week and whispering in his ear something like "Careful, now, McLaggen, or I might drip hair grease all over you." McLaggen would think there was a Slytherin sympathizer in Gryffindor.

He packed up his things and trudged up the stairs to his dormitory, deciding to get to bed early for a change. He'd just changed into his pajamas and had slid beneath the covers when a soft knock sounded on the dormitory door.

"Come in," he called out, sitting up in bed and doing a quick nonverbal "Lumos" to light the wall lamp again.

Ginny opened the door and stepped inside, quickly looking at the other beds.

"Ginny, what's wrong?" he asked.

"Feel like talking for a bit?" she asked. She looked uncomfortable.

"Yeah, sure. Um, just let me get dressed again." He indicated his pajamas as he pulled his shirt and jeans on over them and then quickly put his shoes back on. "We can go up to the Head Boy's room." Each of the house dorms had single rooms for the Head Boy and the Head Girl, for years when the Head was from the house in question. As the Head Boy this year was from Ravenclaw, the Gryffindor Head Boy's room was empty. Together, they trudged up two more flights of stairs to get to the room at the top of the turret.

They sat on the bed next to each other as Ginny told him she was thinking of breaking up with Dean, and Harry tried to be sympathetic, he really really did, but his heart couldn't help singing just a little bit, lighting up with a glimmer of hope. He put an arm around Ginny and she leaned into him. He tried to convince himself he was feeling—and acting—brotherly. But he knew that Ron wouldn't find the smell of her hair quite as intriguing as he did.

He woke up some time later to find himself lying on top of the bed sideways, his legs on the floor still and his arm around a sleeping Ginny. It was decidedly uncomfortable and his feet were freezing. He closed his eyes again and pretended he'd never woken up.

Chapter 14

December 19-21

-Severus-

Severus sat on his sofa before the fire, Harry's homework assignment with its letter held loosely between his fingers. His eyes were far away and he didn't seem to notice when the parchment fell from his hands and floated slowly to the floor. Something was wrong inside him; something in his heart, or perhaps in his gut, was tighter than it should be. The skin on his face prickled; it felt too tight too.

He stood suddenly and walked over to his bookshelf, where a very old Victrola, hand-cranked, sat. He hadn't touched it in years. The albums were stored beside it, upright to avoid warping. He had every Beatles album, and they were stored by release order. 1965. Rubber Soul. He took the black
vinyl out of its sleeve, careful not to touch it with his fingertips, and placed it on the turntable. He'd
adjusted the device long ago to turn at the appropriate speed for "modern" albums. He dropped the
needle precisely on the beginning of the track and poured himself a shot of Firewhisky as the music
and lyrics, seemingly so simple, began to swell, bouncing off the stone walls and surrounding him in
melancholic loneliness.

Though Lily's image floated through the song as it always did, it was almost a background layer,
second to the other thing he wanted to hold on to, wanted to forget, could not forget, could not
ignore.

"...like it's exactly the right size for the two of us."

The two of us. Not Lily and Severus. Harry and Severus. Lily's son and Severus Snape. Her gift, her
legacy, her sacrifice, her progeny, her eyes.

Lily's eyes.

Harry's soul staring out of Lily's eyes.

19 December, 1996

Thursday

Dear Harry:

You will receive this letter tomorrow—Friday—the day of Professor Slughorn's Christmas party, and
on Saturday you will be off on the Hogwarts Express, headed back to spend the first part of your
Christmas holiday at the Burrow with the Weasleys. Because of this schedule, you may not have the
opportunity to write a response to it. I daresay you will not be continuing to write letters to me while
we spend time together at Shell Cottage. So, you may either wait until your return in January to
formulate a written reply or we can certainly discuss any comments or reactions you have while we
while away the time of day at our seaside retreat.

I think you made a wise choice in purchasing the gloves for Miss Weasley. They are of very fine
quality, are personal and beautiful while still being practical. Jewelry, especially of the diamond
variety, can wait. As for the other gift Miss Granger's parents are procuring, I myself am anticipating
seeing Mr. Weasley do the hula hoop in front of his entire family. In fact, I plan to challenge him to a
game of chess when I come to pick you up with the loser agreeing to entertain the assembled guests
by hula hooping to the tune of Celestina Warbeck singing "I saw Merlin Kissing Dumbledore" or
whatever her irreverent song of the year is.

I must admit to not having much experience with video tapes, though by the name I imagine them to
be recordings on magnetic tape that convey both pictures and sound. You said you watched the tape
and you obviously heard the dialog. In my opinion, Harry, one cannot see "Monty Python and the
Holy Grail" too many times, so yes, my offer to take you to the cinema still stands. There are other
Muggle movies I would enjoy seeing as well. Perhaps we can procure a player for these video tapes
and determine a way to use it in a cottage with no television and no electricity. Or we can simply go
up the road and break into the home of a Muggle who won't be back 'til the summertime. What to do,
what to do…

I will make it a point to lean over Mr. Thomas in class and soil his text book with my greasy hair.
What, exactly, did he claim to be in my shampoo? And what makes any of you believe I even use
There are many animals that have hoofs, not only the stag but a large variety of antelope. Be patient. Minerva is an experienced Animagus and will know when the time is right for you to attempt a complete transformation. She is not telling me anything she has not told you. Why would I be disappointed if your Animagus turned out to be a stag? You certainly have no control over the shape of your form; it is what it is. I shall certainly be glad when you can master the form and use it to help shield yourself from the Dark Lord.

Harry, while love may indeed be the greatest human experience, it is also the greatest human mystery. It affects different people in different ways. The Headmaster must believe that your capacity to love is larger than that of most people. I, however, propose that your capacity is not greater but is instead stronger—you have within you the capacity to love even though you were treated to a rather loveless childhood. You filled those very empty spaces in your heart not with rancor, or bitterness, or jealousy but unbelievably with love, with hope, with compassion.

You forgave your Godfather for his transgressions.

You do not hold the Headmaster responsible for leaving you with the Dursleys and condemning you to a childhood of neglect.

And you are able to overlook my treatment of you and, unbelievably, to consider me family.

For how else am I to interpret your words, that the cottage at the sea is just the right size for the two of us?

I do not deserve your respect or your forgiveness. But I accept them. I do not deserve to be a father, yet I am beginning to feel quite paternal when it comes to you. I have not made a real home for myself in all the years of my adulthood, but I am beginning to feel that home is not really a place to begin with but a feeling that surrounds one when with the people who make up one's family. I cannot deny these feelings or fully suppress them, no matter that they come at a time in my life when my primary objective is and must be my role in this revolting battle. I made a vow to the Headmaster many years ago that I must fulfill, and can only hope that I live to see a day when the battle is over and I am free. Until very recently, I would not have even dared to have that hope; I would not have had a reason to want to live on once I fulfill the task appointed to me.

The song you quote, "In My Life," is indeed one of the greatest songs of all time. It is simple and direct, the lyrics not complex, the meaning not hidden. Thank you for recalling it for me.

I will certainly see you at the much anticipated party given by our esteemed Potions Master. Who is your lucky date?

Regards,

Severus

He signed his name and re-read the letter. He knew it was sappy, emotional, overwrought. But he couldn't be bothered to care. The boy would be the end of him, the death of him. The vow…to protect the boy, to do it for Lily, to make up for his transgressions by putting Harry's life before his own.

Everything was so twisted and confused. It had been an odious chore to put up with the child in previous years, but this year it was an odious chore to treat him as he always had. He had always
seen James in the past. Now he saw Lily. How had the boy gone from spoiled to neglected? From arrogant to compassionate? From insolent to brave?

He poured himself another shot of Firewhisky, downed it, poured himself another, downed it. Poured himself a third. Downed that one too.

He sat on the couch and threw the shot glass in the fire.

Closed his eyes, light-headed. Opened them, remembering Harry. Groaned. Stumbled to his office in search of a Sober-up Potion.

Damn it damn it damn it. He couldn't even get drunk in peace.

-Harry-

Ginny hadn't broken up with Dean. One more chance, she'd said. Harry had somehow managed to dodge Romilda's love potion, ask Luna to the party and eavesdrop on Snape and Malfoy, all in one day. Severus was going to KILL him. He'd promised he would get through the end of term without obsessing on Malfoy, but the opportunity was right in his face and he couldn't—didn't—resist.

But all he'd learned was that Malfoy was up to something—something big and bad—and even Severus didn't know what it was.

Malfoy didn't trust Severus.

That worried Harry.

Was it just Malfoy or was it all the Death Eaters? Was it Voldemort too? Did they know he was a spy? Were they using him?

What could he do?

He felt helpless.

He had to find out what Malfoy was up to but he couldn't find out what Malfoy was up to. Even Severus couldn't figure it out.

He had to do something.

He packed.

He picked up the new owl cage he'd purchased for MacKenzie. He wrapped all of his gifts and packed them in his trunk. He met Ron and Hermione in the Entry Hall and they took the thestral-drawn carriages to Hogsmeade Station to board the Hogwarts Express.

They were only an hour into the trip when Severus was summoned.

Thirty minutes later, Severus was suffering the Cruciatus. Harry would not Occlude. He sent his Patronus back to Minerva. Minutes later, the Headmaster apparated directly into their compartment.

"He tried…Severus tried…to get Draco to tell him what he's up to…Being punished…"

The Headmaster's hands were on his shoulders, pressing him down onto the seat, his eyes locking with Harry's.

"Occlude, Harry," he urged with his voice and his eyes and his hands and his will. "Immerse
yourself, block the pain."

"He's hurting!" protested Harry.

"I know. It will end soon," answered Dumbledore. "Occlude…"

Harry closed his eyes and willed himself into his bubble, into his ocean, into his cocoon of silence and shadows.

21 December, 1996

Saturday

Dear Severus:

Dumbledore left me occluded until we reached King's Cross Station. When we got to the Burrow, Mrs. Weasley told me you were back at Hogwarts and were doing fine. I'm not sure what she means by fine. Fine as in you're not dead? Fine as in you'll recover? Or fine as in you walked back to the castle pain free and are having a glass of eggnog with Minerva?

I went up to Ron's room and took another nap. I woke up a few minutes ago. Everyone else is downstairs, probably having dinner. I can hear their voices floating up the stairs but I'm not in the mood to go down there yet.

Ginny came in to see how I was doing but I wasn't even in the mood to talk to her. I told her "fine." She probably wasn't sure what I meant by fine, but she smiled and went back downstairs. I think she understood.

Are you still coming Christmas Eve?

Regards,

Harry

Harry placed the very short letter on the nightstand next to his cot along with his glasses. He rolled over and buried his face in his pillow.

He didn't wake some hours later when soft voices approached in the corridor.

"He's sleeping in here, Severus. I put Ron in the twin's room to give him some privacy, so you can take Ron's bed."

"Thank-you, Arthur. I apologize for intruding this late but…"

"No need to apologize, Severus. Albus explained and we certainly understand. Wouldn't do to have him fretting about you until Christmas. Much better this way—put his mind at ease."

The bedroom door opened and the tip of Severus' wand lit up and hovered over Harry. His dark eyes glinted in its reflection.

Severus sat down stiffly on the edge of Harry's cot.
“What am I going to do with you?” he muttered, brushing sweaty hair off Harry's forehead.

Harry snuggled down into the covers as Severus found Ron's bed and climbed in, closing his eyes against the dizzying motion of the Chudley Cannons chasers on the poster above the bed. Even in the dark, he couldn't quite get all the orange out of his vision.

Chapter 15

-Harry and Severus-

Interlude

Christmas 1996

Shell Cottage

Harry loved Shell Cottage in the summertime. He loved the sun on his back, the feel of the cool water enveloping him when he floated in the ocean, the gentle sway of the hammock on the sun porch. He loved the wildflowers, gently tamed into uneven beds in the front garden, and the shells and driftwood that washed up on the narrow stretch of sand every morning. Harry loved the seagulls that dropped shellfish on the rocks and the dull-colored fish that darted in the shallow water near the shore.

In the summertime, Harry loved the gentle, warm breezes that warmed his bare back, spreading the sunshine over his skin like a blanket. He loved the feel of the sand between his toes, the evening beach fire warming his legs and the way the fire-roasted jacket potatoes almost but not quite burned the pads of his fingers.

And now, Harry loved Shell Cottage in the wintertime. The sun porch still caught the winter sun but was warmed by a clever charm Minerva cast on the baseboards that made them radiate heat, a heat he could practically see as it came up in waves to push the chilly air up into the rafters. The wind from the north shook the little house, and Harry loved the sound of the old wood creaking and the whistling from the clay roof tiles as the wind found grooves and flaws and forced its way through. The winter had made the shore forlorn and lonely, barren against a background of leafless trees and dusty brown grass.

The best part of Shell Cottage in the summer was the sun porch, with its windows on three sides, its comfortable lounge chairs and its creaky hammock. The best part of Shell Cottage in the winter was the cozy sitting room with its shelves of ancient books, its oil lamps with glass chimneys so old they waved with blown-in impurities, its oversized fireplace invitingly warm and its upholstered sofa and chairs now draped with crocheted afghans and warm fleece throws which Harry tucked around himself when he snuggled up with MacBeth. The Christmas tree in the corner reached to the low ceiling and was sparsely decorated with some baubles that Minerva had brought and old fashioned candles Harry had fastened one by one to the branches, using melted wax and a handy sticking charm. The best part of the tree was how it cast flickering shadows in the evening when the candles were lit, and Harry and Severus settled down to a game of chess, Harry nearly heady from the fresh scent of pine and the foreign but welcome feeling of home.

They'd arrived at Shell Cottage by Floo late on Christmas Eve after an afternoon spent at the Burrow and an early exchange of presents there. After the Minister of Magic himself had turned up at the
Burrow to see Harry two days before Christmas, and Harry had unabashedly and very determinedly professed his allegiance to Albus Dumbledore, they'd changed their plans and decided to leave the Burrow Christmas Eve instead of Christmas Day. Severus had returned to Hogwarts after the impromptu night spent sleeping on Ron's bed, returning on Christmas Eve with a bottle of Mead for Molly and Arthur and a board game for the rest of the family. Harry had taught them all to play Monopoly, Wizarding Britain Edition, and they'd gone at it with gusto. Fred and George argued vehemently over the pewter pieces used as markers, each of them claiming the Knight Bus, while Ginny grabbed the miniature cauldron and Ron the tiny broomstick. Bill, Fleur and Charlie had even consented to play, though Charlie spent a lot of time in Azkaban while Fleur took over an entire side of the board, as proprietress of all of Diagon Alley. Ginny claimed both Hogsmeade and King's Cross Station and Harry had the luck of the roll and put his roots down in Hogsmeade and bought both Hogwarts and Honeyduke's, though Fleur refused to sell him Zonko's.

After finishing the game, they ate a hearty dinner and Harry was feeling pleasantly full and sleepy when Severus challenged Ron to a game of chess.

Ron looked like he was going to throw up.

An hour later, as Ginny and Harry sat in front of the fire with Fred and George, they were still at it.

At 8:30, two hours into the game, Ron was sweating so hard he looked like he was going to pass out.

By 9:15, Harry was dozing on the couch, his head comfortably pillowed on Ginny's shoulder, when Ron walked into the room, a stunned look on his face, and whispered "I won."

At 9:30, Ginny handed her new hula hoop to Severus, who was glaring daggers at Harry as if he were somehow responsible for Severus being in this predicament.

At 9:35, they were all still watching Severus do the hula hoop. He hadn't let the ring drop even once and had managed to work the thing from low on his hips to high on his chest and back down again.

At 9:40 they declared Severus hula hoop king and Harry talked Ron into trying it next to "soften the blow of losing at chess" for Severus. It was one of the few times Harry had ever heard Severus laugh so openly. He didn't laugh loudly, or deeply, but Harry watched his face as Ron contorted his entire body around the hoop, gyrating his hips and thrusting out his pelvis. Crinkly laugh lines appeared around Severus' eyes first, then his mouth began to twitch and his shoulders to shake until he was wiping tears out of his eyes, declaring that it was worth losing at chess to see Ron do the hula hoop.

Harry hugged everyone goodbye in the Weasley sitting room, wishing all a Happy Christmas, and managed to hug Ginny an extra time before dropping the Floo powder in the fire, pulling in his elbows and reappearing in the snug parlor with the fresh pine tree. He'd added the candles before falling asleep on the sofa and slept soundly through the night tucked in tightly with a tartan fleece throw and a purple afghan. When he opened his eyes the next morning, the first thing he noticed was Severus, sleeping in the plush chair across from the couch, a cooling cup of tea on the table before him and one of the afghans draped loosely over his lap.

The sight transported him back four days, to the Burrow, when he woke up in Ron's bedroom the morning after returning from Hogwarts and sat on his cot for thirty minutes, a stupid smile on his face, watching Severus sleep on the bed across from him. He'd heard Snape's sibilant breathing when he woke up and had wondered where he was, and then, after he opened his eyes to find himself staring at the distinctive walls of Ron's upstairs room at the Burrow, had groggily turned over to see what was wrong with Ron. He'd groped for his glasses, double-checked what he thought he saw, then eased himself up to a sitting position on his cot….and waited.
Severus slept on his back, arm flung over his forehead and eyes, the crook of his arm and his elbow framing his nose. His good leather boots sat on the floor next to the bed, placed neatly side by side, and Ron's Chudley Cannon orange comforter covered him from feet to shoulders. Harry watched and waited. He knew the professor must be tired and in need of a good night's sleep, though he wondered what time he'd arrived, and whether Ron had already been in bed and had had to be ousted to give Severus a place to sleep. He had ample time to determine that Ron's bed, though adequate for Ron, was probably just as lumpy as Harry's fold-up cot and decidedly shorter than the grand four-posters at Hogwarts.

He wondered if Ron had drooled on the pillow sham. How could he not have? Was Snape's head resting on Ron's dried drool?

Harry's eyes drifted up to the Quidditch posters hung on the slanted dormer ceiling above the bed. For once, the Cannons weren't zipping in and out of the poster. In fact, the poster looked more like a Muggle sports poster than anything else and the beaters had all but disappeared from view.

He glanced at the door. Did all the Weasley's know that Snape was in here? Had Ron willingly given up his bed? Did they think Snape was here because he was worried about Harry….or because Harry was worried about him?

"Happy Christmas," said Harry a few minutes later after he had made fresh tea for both of them and brought the two mugs back into the living room. He caught sight of the Christmas tree as he sat down. Gift-wrapped presents were piled up underneath it.

Severus opened his eyes as the mantel clock struck eight.

Minerva arrived precisely at nine, bearing an armload of presents and a bag of Christmas crackers. Harry was sitting on the floor next to the tree, sorting out presents into piles and keeping an eye on the window next to the front door. Severus had pulled his armchair around to face the fireplace and the tree. He'd stoked the fire the old-fashioned way and seemed content to absorb its warmth and sip on his third cup of tea.

Minerva seemed delighted with a very old and dusty bottle of scotch that Severus handed her after tying a discarded ribbon around its neck. She perched the red tam from Harry on her head and laughed outright at the catnip mice he'd given her along with a selection of fine teas and quite excellent Scottish shortbread.

Severus, too, received a selection of teas Harry had asked Hermione's parents to buy—Muggle teas with ingredients that promoted relaxation, calmness, serenity and revival. Instead of shortbread, Harry had purchased the rather plain digestives he seemed to prefer. At ten o'clock, almost precisely on the dot, at least according to Harry and Hagrid's plan, MacKenize arrived with a letter tied to his leg, a letter addressed to Severus in Harry's handwriting, along with a small parcel from Hagrid—rock cakes, of course.

And thus Mackenzie became Severus' owl, and he stroked her thoughtfully as he watched Harry open his own presents. His new owl perched calmly on the edge of the sofa table, gratefully nibbling a lemon and rhubarb digestive, and Severus found himself a bit choked up that he had a familiar, and that he had Harry.

Harry in turn opened gifts from his friends at Hogwarts and then set in on the pile from Minerva and Severus. The highlight was a fur-lined cloak, sturdy and warm, yet finely made, a cloak with interior pockets for wands and potion vials and Galleons, sickles and knuts.

And of course there were books—a handy one on the psychology of Animagus transformation from
Minerva, his own copy of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, Wizarding Edition* (who knew that when Albus Dumbledore said to Harry "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities," that he didn't make that saying up on the spot but was first credited as saying it immediately after he defeated Grindelwald?), and a slightly brittle copy of *Tarzan of the Apes* by Edgar Rice Burroughs that entertained Harry into the wee hours of the morning when he really should have been sleeping. Minerva gifted him with Honeyduke’s chocolate and Severus with a black leather journal that very slightly resembled the diary he had destroyed during his second year in the Chamber of Secrets, but unlike that particular tome, this one had his initials inscribed on the spine and it didn't talk back at him when he wrote in it.

Dobby appeared at eleven bearing all the essentials for Christmas dinner, and Harry pulled the first cracker with him. Dobby held up a red and green baby’s bonnet which he put on immediately, flattening his large ears against his head, peering out with his large round eyes and managing to look like a lost puppy. With Dobby claiming the baby bonnet, Harry was left with a toy that looked quite a bit like a Muggle Slinky, but that didn't require stairs to be put in motion. Dobby squealed as the Slinky started moving across the level floor, end over end, then began to make its way up the stairs. Severus and Minerva pulled the next Christmas cracker. Severus gamely placed the black top hat on his head. It was a bit too large and slipped down to just over his eyebrows, making him look like a little boy playing at dress-up. Minerva came away with the toy—a set of gobstones which appeared to be made of polished beach pebbles. She immediately handed them over to Harry, who poured them out in his hand, remembering summer days digging for shellfish.

Minerva stayed for Christmas dinner, and Severus poured goblets of wine for all, including Harry, and they toasted each other over the goose and potatoes and stuffing and finished off with pie and ice cream. Harry fell asleep on the sofa afterwards, his stomach full, his mind peacefully blank. The house was shuddering in the wind and the flames in the oil lamps flickered as the wind pushed down the Floo.

Harry dreamed.

He was a small boy, and it was Christmas, and he was in the Dursley's living room, very early in the morning, before anyone was awake, not even Aunt Petunia. He was combing carefully through the gaily wrapped gifts, checking the nametags, looking for something, anything, for Harry. At the back, pushed up against the wall, he found his gift, triangular in shape, flat and narrow. He placed it on his lap and opened it, taking out the metal coat hanger and holding on to it as he watched the clock on the wall, watched the minute hand as it moved toward the twelve, holding it tightly as the hour changed and the hook grabbed him behind his navel and he disappeared in a swirl of colors and landed in a house, a house with stone walls and stone floors and a big fireplace and colorful afghans and warm fleece throws. He looked down at his feet, no longer cold and bare, covered now in sensible brown slippers with woolen linings. No one was in the small, warm room save a bespectacled cat sleeping on the end of the sofa. "Hullo cat" said Harry and the cat looked up at him, winked, then laid its head back down. A Christmas tree popped into the corner opposite the fireplace as Harry turned to take in the room, decorated with silver seashells and glittering pebbles, lit with mysterious lights that flickered like silver fish schooling together in the ocean shallows. Little Harry dropped the hanger and it clattered on the stone floor. The cat looked up, stared at the boy, then relaxed again on the sofa as the boy, transfixed by the glittering tree, approached it cautiously. Presents appeared as he approached, filling in all the gaps beneath the tree, wrapped in boxes of silver and gold and unwrapped with great red ribbons around a three-wheeler with a silver horn and a blue and green hula hoop and a gallon-sized cauldron with an iridescent glass stirring rod. He took a step closer and still no one appeared. Another step. A pair of warm leather boots. A cape lined with rabbit fur. An expandable book bag. A set of books. Children's Wizarding Heroes. A slinky that climbs up stairs. Gobstones made of ocean pebbles. A plate of cookies, still warm. A glass of milk, still cold. A tag on the cookie plate. "For Harry (eat me)." He picked up a cookie and bit into it,
filling his mouth and his nose with the rich smell of cinnamon and the warmth of the kitchen. Chew. Swallow. Another bite. Another. A swallow of milk. A small hand, reaching out toward the stirring rod in the cauldron, grasping it, moving it counter clockwise in wide circles, the potion inside beginning to thicken. Looking up toward the man with his back to him, then back at the potion, checking the color, checking the consistency, adding just a drop of freshly melted snow, stirring again, concentrating on the task. A hand on his, larger, broader, warmer. Helping him hold the stirring rod, moving his hand in slower circles, first clockwise, then counter clockwise, counting with him. "Finished" whispered little Harry, looking up at the man but seeing only the cobwebs clinging to the bottom side of the stairs going up to Dudley's bedroom, and Dudley's second bedroom, in the house on Privet Drive. Closing his eyes again. Big Harry dreaming about Little Harry dreaming about a home.

Minerva and Severus were talking quietly when he awoke, sitting on the upholstered side-by-side armchairs opposite the couch. The sun was beginning to set and the wind was still howling, the oil lamps still flickering. "...months," Severus was saying. "Won't make it through the summer." Minerva's voice, faint as he struggled to hear, "...he'll live as long as it takes...has a job to get done..." Harry shifted and struggled to sit, the furry-lined coat heavy around him. He didn't remember having it over him when he fell asleep. The dream niggled at his brain and he struggled to recall it as Minerva stood and bade him goodbye and Happy Christmas and Severus began setting the chessboard up on the low table between his chair and the sofa.

Christmas Day for Harry was for opening gifts and eating too much and napping and dreaming and losing at chess and feeling safe, safer than he'd felt since summer. Christmas Day for Severus was for coming to terms with being needed, by a familiar, by a child on the verge of manhood, by an old man who could not finish what had to be done without his help.

They played more chess on Boxing Day, and took a walk along the beach, bundled up in furry-lined cloaks. Harry sprawled on the sofa reading Tarzan of the Apes, enthralled at the tale, unbelievable as it was, but then again, wasn't his life unbelievable as well? Leftovers for supper, then two hours of Occlumency practice, learning to better split his concentration, split his attention, split his mind in two so one part could shield and the other function as if nothing at all were wrong.

The real work began the next morning, for Severus was determined that Harry would learn Legilimency. He also wanted to discuss Albus' plans for Harry, help Harry determine for himself, with all the facts he needed, the path he would take once he was really free to choose for himself. But as that topic did not lend itself well to casual introduction, he decided to begin with Legilimency. He didn't expect it would be easy for Harry as Legilimency, when used effectively, was a gentle, subtle attack, a sneaky and quiet intrusion aimed at stealing thoughts and secrets. Harry was a master of defense, which made him a natural with Occlumency once he learned to tamp down the emotions and lose himself in nothingness. Harry was not generally or outwardly aggressive—would he be able to steal into Severus mind, skim the surface, pry even deeper?

Yes, he would.

For Severus had forgotten one thing: Harry might not be overtly aggressive but Harry was sneaky, stealthy. He'd learned early in life to survive by slipping into the shadows, blending in with the woodwork, being invisible even before Dumbledore had given him that blasted invisibility cloak. Growing up in a family that never told him anything, all of his information was learned by stealth and observation.

Thus it took very little for Harry to grasp the essentials of Legilimency. Eyes. The windows of the soul. Lock eyes. Slip in behind the eyes, brush the surface of the mind, flitting over surface thoughts.
and feelings, pushing a little deeper, a little harder. Not the harsh attack, the mental rape, Severus had subjected him to last year but Legilimency as a sneak attack, the victim surrendering information without even realizing an attack was in process.

They went at it all day, stopping briefly for lunch, and Harry, by the end of the afternoon, had more adjectives to describe Severus' eyes than he'd had before, when he'd have said "black" and perhaps "intense." But after today he knew that they really weren't black but rather a deep, intense brown, the pupils looking larger than they were because the deep brown of his pupil blended with the black rim. Severus' eyes were dark, and intense, and clear and piercing. They were soft when memories of Lily were close to the surface and hard when those memories turned to James Potter and his friends. They could change from hateful to fearful to hurt to defiant. Harry's fledgling attempts at Legilimency revealed to Harry that beneath the even, polished surface, Severus was torn, that he didn't expect to survive his spying days, that he wasn't sure that Harry would make it through as well.

Severus didn't learn all about Harry's eyes that Christmas season. He'd been watching Harry and his eyes for six years, and he knew those eyes in another face as well. He didn't need Legilimency to know that Harry was afraid for Severus' life, that he was torn over Dumbledore, half mourning his coming end and half resentful that he was being used. But he used Legilimency to extract the half-remembered dream, and to realize that Harry, subconsciously, recreated his unhappy past with a Christmas cauldron and potion-making with a father he never had. He wasn't playing Quidditch with James Potter in his dreams.

On the sixth day they spent at Shell Cottage, after mock battles on the sand with wands and mock battles in the parlor with the chess board, Severus sat with Harry on the sun porch, heat radiating up from the baseboards and warming the air around them, and had the talk.

The talk about prophecies and reality. About free will and responsibility. About what the world needs...and what Harry needs. Don't go into this blindly, Harry, because a very old man that you love very much leads you down a twisted path with no finish line in sight. Don't rush in like a Gryffinder fool where Slytherin angels fear to tread. Think, Harry, think. What is the power he knows not? What does it mean to be Voldemort's equal? How can neither live while the other survives? What does it mean to be marked? What does it mean to be free? If you do choose to do this thing, don't go at it alone. Dumbledore always has a plan, always has an ulterior motive, will never tell you everything you need to know because you can tempt fate, dabble in the future, but in the end, everyone has a choice, right?

And he's dying, you know. The curse is spreading, up past his elbow, nearing his shoulder and from there such a short distance to his heart. But he has more to tell you, and even I don't know what it is that we're fighting yet. But he knows.

And Harry could give as good as he took. If I choose to leave, will you come with me? The look in Severus' eyes was his answer. No. His path is determined, he won't quit, won't flee, won't turn away. He'll be the spy and watch over Lily's boy and be Dumbledore's intermediary because he sinned, but is repentant; he erred because he is human but he will be forgiven, he will find peace. He made a promise to Dumbledore and he will see it through, 'til Dumbledore is dead and buried in a white marble tomb on the shores of the lake and his own body lies abandoned and forgotten at Voldemort's feet. Bury me on Dumbledore's left; you take the right, my boy, but wait a few years or a hundred to claim your place.

Would you give it up for me? We'll go to the States, to the Continent, to an island in the South Pacific. Change our names. Change our appearance. Dress like Muggles, like the Beatles. I'll be George and you can be John. No, I'll be John—wear the glasses—you be George. I'll just be one year short at Hogwarts but you can teach me what I don't have time to learn there. Who needs
N.E.W.T.s when you're living on the run, playing the guitar in the New York subway, catching Muggle coins and bills in a ragged top hat?

Harry knew that Severus was Dumbledore's man, through and through.

Severus knew that Harry was Dumbledore's man, through and through.

In the end, when Dumbledore was gone, they'd have each other. For a time, at least.

There'd be no New York subways, no islands in the South Pacific. Severus would remain a spy and Harry would remain the Chosen One. There was the prophecy, which they could defy. There was fate, which they could challenge. But in the end, there was Dumbledore, and Dumbledore needed them.

The New Year dawned clear and cold at Shell Cottage.

Harry and Severus packed up their things and prepared to Floo back to Hogwarts. Harry chased the Slinky down the stairs and gathered gobstones from beneath the sofa. Severus sent Mac ahead with a letter for Dumbledore. He was already becoming fond of the owl. That worried him.

"We'll come back this summer, Harry," said Severus, as Harry's eyes roved around the cottage as if committing its nooks and crannies to his memory.

Harry smiled. "Promise?"

Severus nodded, rashly promising something he could not hope to deliver.

Harry Flooed out first and Severus followed a few minutes later.

They wouldn't return together that summer, but they would eventually return. A taller Harry, hair longer, with broader shoulders, a stubbly beard, a few more scars. Not quite eighteen but a hundred years older. A thinner Severus, weaker, leaning on Harry, a few more scars, inside and out.

They'd walk on the beach, and sleep in the lounge chairs and sometimes, because he could and because he wanted to, Harry would slip into his Animagus form and run along the beach or nibble the grass where sand met turf, looking up with doe-like eyes at the windows on the porch and flicking his tail at the man standing there with one hand pressed against the glass and the other against his heart.
Chapter Summary

Sixth year - Just after Christmas to Easter break and a visit to the Chamber of Secrets with Severus and Albus.

Chapter 16

January 8 –9, 1997

-Harry-

Of all the times in the day, the best time for homework was the couple hours between the end of the last class of the day and dinner time. Hermione, of course, spent the whole time in the library. She was taking a gazillion classes and always had more homework than he or Ron did. A lot of clubs met at this time, and most teachers had their office hours, so the common room wasn't horribly crowded until right before dinner. Harry settled on his favorite sofa, a very soft and squashy scarlet monstrosity with a high carved back and low wide arms. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ron sneak up the stairs to their dorm room. A few minutes later, Lavender snuck up as well, and Harry wondered if Ron was trying to avoid her or if they were arriving at pre-arranged but separate time to their make-out point.

He spent an hour on his Defense Against the Dark Arts homework before beginning his first letter to Severus since the week before the holidays. It felt odd to write a letter to him now. After the past weeks and the comfortable closeness they'd returned to at Shell Cottage, the letter seemed disjointed and impersonal, one-sided and remote. Still, it was all he had now, unless he did something to earn another detention with Severus, or unless Minerva had Severus join in another Animagus lesson.

A movement across the room distracted him. Romilda Vane was giggling loudly, leaning up against Colin Creevey who was pressed against the wall near the fireplace, looking totally out of his element. Romilda was several inches taller than Colin but that didn't seem to deter her in the least. Harry wasn't quite sure that Colin liked girls—his attention to Harry in the past had seemed almost crush-like. Now, with the overly flirtatious Romilda after him, Colin looked helplessly over at Harry who grinned and shrugged, then gave Colin the thumbs up. To his credit, Colin did not faint when Romilda kissed him. Harry really wished he had a camera.

8 January, 1997

Wednesday

Dear Severus:
It seems like forever since we left Shell Cottage. My brain knows it was hardly a week ago, but it seems so far away in time and space right now. I can't believe so much has happened already. I had another session with Professor Dumbledore on Monday night and he gave me a job to do. I'll tell you all about it now since I guess we won't be able to spend any sort of time together anytime soon. I feel weird writing this on paper but there's really no other way. So….Dumbledore had a memory from Voldemort's uncle that was really disturbing (in more than one way) and pretty much indicated that Voldemort stole his uncle's wand, murdered his Muggle father and grandparents, and implanted a false memory so that his uncle thought he did the crime himself. He died in Azkaban. And Voldemort was only my age when he did this. Dumbledore had a second memory too—from Professor Slughorn—and in that one Tom Riddle asked him what he knew about something called a Horcrux. Slughorn didn't give Dumbledore the real memory, though. It was 'tampered with'—probably to make Slughorn look better since he likely regretted what he did or said back then. Anyway, Dumbledore has asked me to get the real memory out of Slughorn.

The thing is, I can't find anything anywhere to explain what a Horcrux is. Even Hermione doesn't know but she figures it has to be something very dark since it was that part of the memory, that is, how Slughorn answered Tom, that was tampered with. I didn't even ask Dumbledore. I guess I was too caught up in having to talk Slughorn into giving something to me he wouldn't even give to the Headmaster. Anyway, I hung back after Potions class yesterday to talk to Slughorn about that memory. Well, I really started off by asking him about Horcruxes, and from his reaction you'd think that he'd rather starve to death than talk about them (and that's saying something as from all appearances he's really quite fond of food). I tried again by saying I really just thought there might be more to that memory Dumbledore showed me and he practically screamed at me then ran out of the room. I've decided to let it rest for a bit before I ask again. I'm still not sure why Dumbledore thinks I can get this real memory when he couldn't. I know Slughorn likes me (well, he used to anyway) but if he's hiding something from the Headmaster, is he likely just to drop it into my lap?

So, if anyone knows, you must. Just what is a Horcrux? And what does it have to do with Voldemort?

Minerva put off our Animagus lesson until tomorrow since I had the appointment with the Headmaster on Monday night and she thought it 'prudent' that I get in some homework time. I think I'm really close to transforming. Now that Christmas is over maybe she'll let me have a real go at it.

I was really hoping that Hermione and Ron would forget their issues over Christmas break but they're still at it. I guess it didn't help much that Lavender launched herself at Ron from about twenty feet away while we were talking in the common room when they all got back here from break. The way she attacked him reminded me of Hagrid's dog Fang when we used to go down to visit Hagrid when we were kids. He'd jump on you with his paws on your shoulders and lick you with that big drooly tongue. And to tell you the truth, Ron looked about as excited about the whole thing as I did whenever Fang bowled me over. Maybe it has something to do with the Christmas present Lavender gave him. It was this awful necklace with letters hanging off it spelling "My Sweetheart." I haven't actually seem him wear it yet, and if I can I'm going to nick it so I have something to give you for your birthday.

When is your birthday, by the way?

It's kind of hard getting back into the swing of things after the holidays. Defense class, for example. I mean, what was the deal today with Malfoy and Crabbengoyle? First of all, it looked like Crabbengoyle were a good twenty five percent larger than they were when we left before Christmas. I'm pretty sure that Goyle's double chin has a double chin now and Crabbe's robes are ripping at the shoulder, like he's some sort of Incredible Hulk (sorry…Muggle superhero). Do you think they're really all human? As for Malfoy, it's almost like they sucked up him to expand themselves. He's
really off, Severus—I know you can tell. I know you saw how fast Hermione bested him when they were dueling today. And he acted like he didn't even care when he was wrapped up in ropes from that nonverbal Incarcerous she cast. Listen, I really don't want to talk about Malfoy (really) but I'm worried about you, about what happened when you were called right before Christmas. I know he's supposed to do something, and you don't know what it is but you need to know. Please be careful. I don't know what it would do to me if something happened to you because of him. I'd have to go after him—I couldn't stop myself.

I was thinking of that talk we had that last night at Shell Cottage. The one about the prophecy and about our choices. I knew as soon as I asked you if you would walk away from all of this that you never would. I knew that for some reason, some promise you made or some sin in your past, you'll stick it out 'til the bloody end. But you act like I have a choice in the matter and that's what I don't understand. You say that Dumbledore is only a man but you know he's really so much more. How could I possibly choose anything else than to go down this road that Dumbledore made and that you're obviously already on? I kind of hate getting older and wiser. It was a lot easier when I was younger and Dumbledore was my hero and you were the villain. It's a lot easier to love and hate when you don't know the people you're loving and hating. When you get to know someone, it makes everything so much more complicated.

Last night when I went to bed, I thought I could hear the sea outside my window. It was only the wind, but ever since visiting Shell Cottage in the wintertime, I hear the wind and think of the ocean. Isn't it odd how one thing links to something else in your brain? When you walked by me in class today I smelled the salt air, like I did this winter when you hung your robes on that chair by the fire to dry after we dueled on the beach.

I hope my homework assignment is acceptable. I never knew that "dark" objects were so hard to destroy. I know I got one of the materials right—I have personal experience with Basilisk venom. Have you ever been down to the Chamber of Secrets?

Hermione is waiting for me in the library so I'll end here. We're trying to find anything that tells us what a Horcrux is and fortunately she can talk almost any teacher into giving her a pass for the Restricted Section.

How is Mac? Have you used him at all? I think you probably should—he's likely to forget what he's learned since he's so young. You could send him with a message to me—I don't think anyone knows him yet so it's probably not too risky.

I think it's time to start back on our questions.

Everyone always says I look just like my dad. The only thing they ever say about my mum is that I have her eyes. Is that all? Is there anything else of her in me?

Regards,

Harry

Harry shook out his arm. It didn't seem to be up to the task of writing long letters after its two and a half week break since first term ended. He had forgotten to put down his quill and splattered ink all over the sofa, his homework assignment and Crookshanks, who had curled up between his thigh and the arm of the sofa. He did a quick Scourgify then packed up his bag, cramming books and parchment, ink and quill in haphazardly.
A group of third and fourth year girls was studying together at a table across the common room. Harry was surprised to see Neville sitting with them and realized he was helping them with Herbology. It occurred to him then that he could be helping his housemates out more with Defense, but his own pressing issues and his desire to get down to the library to hunt for references to Horcruxes pushed him out through the portrait hole without a backward glance.

Was it his imagination or did his scar twinge a bit every time he thought about Horcruxes?

-Severus-

"Albus! Are you insane, old man?" Severus waved Harry's homework assignment letter in the air as he charged into Dumbledore's office the next day.

"Not at all, at least not the last time I checked," answered the Headmaster calmly, pushing the bowl of lemon drops across the desk toward his Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. "Oh, and Happy Birthday, my boy."

Severus ignored the reference to the anniversary of his birth. He had just turned thirty-seven and it seemed to him a quite undignified age, not nice and round and divisible by a multitude of numbers like thirty-six, but instead divisible only by itself and one, a lonely number that was leaning much too close to that not-so-distant forty. He sat down heavily in one of the two chairs before Albus' desk and dropped the scroll onto the table.

"Horcruxes, Albus!" he hissed. "THIS is the Dark Lord's secret! And now Harry is trying to find out what one is...researching with Miss Granger. If anyone can find out, she can!" He looked up from his rant at his friend, his employer, and saw a pleased look on the old man's face. It made him furious.

"This is not a game, Albus! Do not give a boy...this boy...MY boy...such a powerful word and turn him out to see what he does with it. If we are dealing with a Horcrux, and you know it to be so, then sit him down and explain what it is. Do NOT send him off on fool's errands..."

"Severus! Severus!" Dumbledore finally stood to get Severus’ attention.

Severus stopped his ranting and stared at the man behind the desk.

"You have five minutes," he said. "Five minutes to convince me that you have not gone 'round the bend. Five minutes..."

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9 January, 1997

Thursday

Dear Harry:

It is always difficult to begin a new term after a holiday and I too miss the sound of the sea and the peace of our retreat at Shell Cottage. And while I may not agree with your rationalization of you not really having a choice in the direction of our life while the Dark Lord remains, I do appreciate the time you have spent thinking of our conversation before we returned to Hogwarts. The fact that I am on the road set for me by Professor Dumbledore need have no bearing on your own path and direction. As you have rightly determined, I am on this path because of commitments I have made and sins I have committed. You, on the other hand, are here because the occasion of your birth coincided with the prophecy of a mad woman. You committed no sin and made no vow. You need
not be the sacrificial lamb. If you insist on moving forward and playing out this role 'til the end, you will not go blindly. For that reason, I will give you a piece of information that the Headmaster is not quite ready for you to know, or would prefer that you learn on your own, with the help of your friend Miss Granger. The Headmaster has given you a taste of the word—the word Horcrux—and has of course expected that you will dive into your own investigation of the word.

However, he has made your search nearly impossible, at least at Hogwarts. He has removed every book with any mention of the word from the library. Yes, it is indeed possible that he has missed one or two, but the references will be buried and nearly impossible to find.

A Horcrux is created with the darkest of dark magic. It is the splintered portion of a soul, housed in an object, and created at the time a murder is committed. The wizard who creates a Horcrux willingly splits his soul and secretes the torn-off portion in an object. The Horcrux assures that a piece of the wizard's soul remains if he is killed, giving him another chance at life. I have long suspected that this was the secret to the Dark Lord's return, for his own soul, freed from his body when he gave you that scar, wandered the earth looking for its other half.

While a Horcrux exists, holding a fragment of the Dark Lord's soul, he cannot truly be destroyed.

Few witches or wizards will willingly speak of Horcruxes. Do not ask any of your professors, or speak to any more of your classmates about this less you be branded as Dark. I will seek more information for you—covertly—and deliver to you what I deem necessary. Now that the Dark Lord is reborn, he surely has had the opportunity to make another Horcrux.

I agree with the Headmaster, knowing what I know now, that it is imperative that you convince Professor Slughorn to give you that memory. I do not know how you will convince him, but you must. And once you retrieve it, and you view it with the Headmaster, come to me immediately. Use your invisibility cloak and come to my chambers however you must. I do not order you to break school rules lightly; you must see the importance of this for our quest.

Mac is doing well. Yes, I have sent him on several deliveries, mainly to deliver orders to my potions ingredients suppliers in Diagon Alley. He has developed a fondness for chocolate digestives and scrambled eggs. I may send him to you one day to see if he still remembers his original master. Perhaps he can deliver a Valentine from your secret admirer next month.

I could have lived my entire life without considering the sexual orientation of Mr. Creevey. Thank you so much for bringing that little scenario so brightly to life.

No, I have never been to the Chamber of Secrets. As I am made to believe, the entrance can only be opened by a Parselmouth, and we haven't had a lot of those running around in the last years. If you would like to take me on a tour, perhaps we can arrange that over the Easter Holiday. I must admit that a trip to the bowels of the castle is not on my "one hundred things to do before I die" list, yet I'm open to it. You do know this is likely to open up a floodgate of memories and emotions for you, do you not?

Your question…my answer. You rub your hands together and worry your bottom lip when you are nervous or impatient just the way she used to. Like her, you seem to have few but very loyal friends and display a fierce protectiveness to the values you hold dear. You drink your tea exactly like she did (one sugar, a touch of milk). You look much more like your mother than your father when you are asleep. Your features relax, the worry lines leave your face. You have your mother's eyes, as I have already said, but it's not just in their color, but in their shape, even when they are closed in sleep. While both of your parents were immensely brave, you are brave like she was. Brave in your convictions, brave in your values. When it comes to doing what is right, or what is easy, you choose exactly as she did.
And now my question:

If you had to spend a year on a deserted island, where there was no want of food or water, what five things would you bring with you, and why?

My birthday is January the 9th. As it has already passed (by the time you read this, in any event) you will have to save the lovely gift you mention for another year. And if that gift is no longer available (and I pray that it is not), I wouldn't mind my own *Imagine* t-shirt to keep at the cottage by the sea.

*Regards,*

*Severus*

/  

Thoughts of Horcruxes continued to plague him as he finished the letter, re-read it, placed it with the other assignments. He wondered about what Albus had been doing on his trips away from Hogwarts. He wondered about the curse that was consuming the old man's body. He thought of the broken ring that had contained that curse.

He began to see the pattern, and to realize what Albus was up to, and where he was going, and what he was doing with Harry. Preparing him. For the hunt. And he couldn't survive this game, win this game, kill the prey, unless he could get inside the Dark Lord's mind.

Horcruxes. Mutliple Horcruxes. What kind of madman would create more than one?

*What kind of madman would send a child off to hunt for them?*

Minerva's head in his fireplace pulled him from his ill-tempered musings.

"He's done it, Severus. Managed the transformation. You need to come up here at once!" Her Scottish brogue was more pronounced when she was excited. Her eyes shone and she looked both proud and profoundly affected.

Severus picked up the Floo powder and followed her through.

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**Chapter 17**

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A/N: Those of you who are reading this story after reading Moment of Impact may remember what Harry's Animagus form is. Those of you who did not read the original may be surprised (as will those of you who missed it, as it was in the final chapter of MOI and not discussed at great length). This chapter focuses largely on Harry's Animagus form, and what it means.

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**January 12-15, 1997**

-Harry-

Harry stared morosely out the library window, watching the snow fall in the evening twilight. Since his lesson with Minerva on Thursday he'd been out of sorts, and Snape's letter on Friday, obviously written before he'd joined them in Minerva's office after Harry had transformed, put him further
afield. He'd hidden himself in the library soon after lunch and had found an out-of-the-way alcove beyond the Restricted Section to peruse the books Hermione had found for him. Not books about Horcruxes—now that he knew what they were, he wanted to forget them, not learn more about them. No, these books were about Animagi, and about animals in general and what they symbolized.

No matter how right it had felt when he finally transformed, no matter the feeling of peace inside the alert watchfulness, he simply could not get his head around the fact that he had transformed not into a stag like his dad, but into a doe. A doe. The female counterpart of the stag. He had been so sure that he would be another Prongs, regal, majestic, with a set of proud antlers.

How could a deer—a doe!—be useful? He supposed it would be a handy Animagus form if he planned to spend a lot of time in the forest, but that wasn't likely to happen in his lifetime. He sure didn't have any plans to go camping or hiking in the woods.

Minerva had assured him that while not common, it certainly was not unheard of that a wizard or witch switch genders in the Animagus transformation. Merlin himself, she claimed, was reputed to have had half a dozen Animagus forms, one of which was a mare. Ha! As if being compared to Merlin made him feel normal. She also told him of a student she had taken on many years ago, a rather plain-looking and mousy young witch of extraordinary abilities who had transformed into a peacock. A peacock, she noted with definite emphasis on the "cock." Not a peahen.

Then there was Severus. Harry had already transformed back by the time Severus stepped out of the Floo, reluctantly retaking his human form after his first full look at himself with the barely faded spots of a fawn, the long ears and tail, the round, all-seeing eyes. He'd given it another go while Severus watched and through his gentle, watchful doe eyes, had seen Severus break down.

So he was channeling his mother. That's what Severus said. Her gentleness, her watchfulness. Her protection of her child.

But Harry didn't think so. He thought, perhaps, that he was channeling Severus. His love for something he could not have, that had been taken away before its time. The gentling of his troubled soul when the watchful spirit of Lily—his love, Harry's mother—breathed by.

12 January, 1997

Sunday

Dear Severus:

Happy belated birthday. Just so you know, it's perfectly fine to give someone a belated birthday present and since I don't have any Beatles t-shirts in my trunk (well, not any clean, unused ones anyway), I'll have to think of something else. Why don't we go out together to the Hog's Head some night and indulge a bit? I mean, I may as well go along since I'll probably get more or less drunk from our connection even if I don't go. I think I could use the calories—and it would sure get my mind off everything else that's going on.

You can probably imagine that I'm confused, trying to figure out what it means to have a doe as my Animagus form. I was sure I'd be a stag like my father. I admit I'm glad I'm not, but I'm not sure I'm comfortable being a female animal. No, that doesn't make sense. When I was the doe, my mind was so sharp and so undistracted. And my hearing! I had no idea there were so many sounds in a room, almost as if the castle itself was alive. And seeing out those eyes is like looking in all directions at once and seeing life as a panorama. It's hard for my brain to process it all. So yeah, I'm more than
comfortable when I'm in the form but I'm **not** comfortable thinking about it now.

And how is this particular form going to help me? I imagined curling up on a sofa and sleeping in front of a fire, not lying about in the forest and worrying about hunters. I know there's a reason for this but I need time to understand it. Hermione is trying to help—she gave me about a half dozen books to read. That's Hermione for you—when in doubt, throw a book at it. I didn't tell anyone else, not even Ron. Not yet anyway. Even I can see the advantage of being an unregistered Animagus and no one knowing what I am.

Thanks for answering my question, by the way. When I was little, I used to imagine my mum. I knew she was Aunt Petunia's sister and it was hard to imagine her looking like she really looks and not like some sort of grotesque caricature of my aunt. And that's stupid, because she was my mum and all, but all I ever knew about her is that she was a drunk like my dad, and they were killed in a car crash. But still, even then, I didn't really believe that. I thought of my mum as my Kindy teacher, Miss Marilyn and my dad (don't laugh) as our school janitor, Mr. Greene. Hey, I said not to laugh! He was a really nice guy and he had the best broom. He'd let a kid stand on each side of it and would just go on sweeping like he didn't even notice you were on it…well, unless you were Dudley, of course. At night, I'd close my eyes and think of this little pretend family—Miss Marilyn, Mr. Greene and me—living in a house that was more like Mrs. Figg's than the house on Privet Drive, and I'd always get to be the kid that got to ride around on the big broom and hit the erasers against the wall to get the chalk off of them.

Was my mum's Patronus a doe before she got together with my dad? I guess it's kind of a chicken and egg sort of question—did he become a stag because she was a doe? Did she have a doe Patronus to match his stag Animagus form? Or did they have nothing to do with each other at all—some kind of cosmic coincidence? And was your Patronus always a doe? I somehow think it wasn't.

Sitting here thinking about all of this now, I have this really odd feeling inside. I feel all closed in and confined in here. I want to be outside running, clearing my mind, not thinking of anything but the earth under my feet and the wind in my face. But I promised Minerva I wouldn't change without her there to pull me back if I get too wrapped up in my animal mind. She says that with the way I occlude, she's worried I'll hyper focus on my new form and forget that I'm human. If that happened, would I be excused from my homework assignments? Because this essay you set for us on dueling protocol is really really boring. Please! Differing angles of bows depending on the status of the person you're dueling? So if I'm dueling Hermione I just bob my head but if I'm dueling the Minister of Magic I more or less touch my forehead to the ground? And how do you determine status? Pure-bloodedness? Money? Position? Age? Brains? Oh…I guess I really should save all these thoughts for my essay and not waste them in this letter.

So, I could sit here and do my homework, or sit here and long to change into my Animagus form while at the same time freaking out because my Animagus form is a **girl**, or sit here and think about what you told me about Horcruxes. How could anyone ever do that? Just thinking about it makes me cringe. I think…I think that's why Voldemort's eyes are like that… They say the eyes are the windows to the soul, you know. So when the soul is damaged…or half-gone…what do the eyes show?

Damn…I just want him to be dead and gone. I want to get on with my life and feel like I have a life to go on with. But now I have to worry about some other piece of him hidden somewhere—could be anywhere—and you can be damn sure that if it's so important to him that he's not left it sitting out on the parlor table for me to find. "Oh here, Harry, take this pocket watch. I may ask for it back someday so keep it safe for me…"

Well, I'd better answer your question. I don't know where you come up with this kind of stuff, but it
did make me think (of things like—I'm a wizard! I could just Apparate right off that island!) So, five things to take with me to a deserted island… My wand, of course—it would get me out of a lot of scrapes, help me lift things and do simple healing charms. It can be my flashlight, my matches and my weapon and let me transfigure leaves into clean socks. My broom. I suppose I could use it to fly to the mainland and forget about the whole island problem! I would take my broom, though, no matter what. It would keep me from going mad, and I could use it to fly to the tops of the coconut trees to pick the fruit! Hedwig—to send letters to my friends. I'd hate to lose touch with them while I'm marooned. Hermione and Ron might make up and I'd never know about it, though I expect I'd feel the earth shake even out in the middle of the ocean. A self-inking quill and an endless supply of parchment would round it all out. Yeah, I know. I'm predictable and not really interesting, right?

Let me guess what you'd take.

A cauldron.

Your wand.

A change of underwear (I'm planning to use my wand and a Scourgify)

Something to read: Most Potente Potions? The Complete Sherlock Holmes? Some sleezy romance novel with a picture of Gilderoy Lockhart on the front with his robes torn off his shoulder? (I'm not suggesting you are attracted to Lockhart—those are the kind of pictures Aunt Petunia's books always had. Thinking back on it, I remember one novel in particular…are you sure you've never posed for the cover of a romance novel?)

A hula hoop

And here's a question for you. If you could choose your Animagus form, what form would you choose?

Regards,

Harry

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It was completely dark by the time he wandered back up to the Gryffindor common room. He'd managed to finish all of his homework in the library so he had time to relax before bedtime. Ron was sitting on the sofa by the fire, alone for a change. Hermione and Ginny were studying at a table, books strewn about. Neither Lavender nor Dean were anywhere in sight.

"Game of chess, Harry?" asked Ron as Harry approached and flopped down on a chair across from him.

"What does the loser have to do?" asked Harry.

Ron grinned, then glanced around the common room. He lowered his voice.

"Loser has to wear the necklace for a day."

"No way!" said Harry. "You know I never win. I'd rather hula hoop naked in front of the Quidditch fan club than wear that thing."

The grin on Ron's face broadened.
"Kidding, just kidding," said Harry quickly. Ginny and Hermione were both staring at him with interest. "How about loser asks Snape in class tomorrow if he's using a new shampoo?"

"You're suicidal," muttered Ginny, turning back to her homework.

Harry grinned. He rather hoped it would earn him a detention.

________________________________________

-Severus-

Harry had been sent back to his dorm, with instructions from Minerva to keep his success, and his form, very close to himself for the time being. Severus was of the opinion that there was a definite tactical advantage for Harry not to register his form yet, and while Minerva agreed on the tactical advantage, she had taken on a student in an official capacity and was having trouble with her conscience. Harry could tell Ron and Hermione, if he chose. Harry had left the room with an unexpected hug from Severus, obviously intensely happy yet incredibly confused.

As the door closed behind him, Minerva opened the cabinet behind her desk and extracted a bottle of scotch and two sparkling glasses. She poured both a little higher than normal for a social drink and handed one to Severus, keeping the second for herself as she sunk onto the couch and leaned back. Severus settled beside her.

"You knew?" he said, staring forward at the tapestry on the wall next to the door that painted a fantastical view of life under the Hogwarts lake (merpeople did not braid their hair nor did they chase their prey with axes that looked like those in depictions of cave people).

"I suspected," she said, after pausing to swallow a mouthful of the bracing drink. "I also suspected he might have a difficult time accepting it." She sighed. "I held him off as long as possible. He could have managed the transformation two months ago."

"Two months ago!" He shot her an astonished look.

She nodded. "I thought it would be best to get through Christmas first."

"That bit about Merlin, and your former student…" Severus let his voice trail off.

"Both true."

"Ahh. Good. Miss Granger will be checking, you know."

They both smiled. Severus let his shoulders ease back into the cushions of the sensible sofa.

"I did not expect this, anyway. To see him like that…"

"The Animagus form often reflects what is needed, Severus. At first, I suspected he would be a fawn in need of care. Perhaps he could have accepted that one more readily, when the gender would have been less obvious. The doe form recognizes him as an adult, but an adult tied to a family unit." She sighed, then caught Severus' eye, her voice serious. "This is difficult to describe, Severus. Let's just say that Harry is much more tied to you than you might realize. He may be my ward, but he does not regard me as his mother. You, on the other hand…"

"I am not his mother," he growled softly.

Minerva elbowed him in the ribs.
"Git," she said fondly.

15 January, 1997

Wednesday

Dear Harry:

New shampoo? Made with jasmine and clover? What has gotten into you, Harry? I thought the Slytherins were going to wet their pants! Could you have picked a day when I had actually washed my hair to comment on it? And why did you look disappointed when I took fifty points from Gryffindor? I am not sure what has prompted this suicidal behavior, but please return to your usual sulky yet quiet self in class of I will have to order you to the hospital wing for a checkup (or perhaps take you back to St. Mungo's—perhaps they restored too many nerves this summer. You have been quite nervy of late.) Surely there is enough to fill your head even during the winter doldrums without you having to resort to asking your professors personal questions.

Speaking of personal questions—you are correct. My Patronus was not always a doe. When I first cast it, during my sixth year (don't gloat, I know you managed it much earlier), it took the form of a greyhound. I thought it quite impressive at the time, and it was certainly the fastest one in our class.

As for the Hog's Head—if I did planning on contributing to the delinquency of a Hogwarts student, would I plan a trip to the closest town? I think not. Fortunately, am not planning on contributing to your delinquency nor am I planning any more drunken fetes until you are of age. In fact, we may wait until you are of legal drinking age in the States (twenty-one, I believe).

I was looking forward to your last letter as I knew you would have had time to reflect upon your Animagus form. You certainly reacted as I expected you would. Minerva is correct, Harry. Merlin is reputed to have had at least one female Animagus form. My advice to you is to try not to get caught up in the issue of gender. Having a female Animagus form does not say anything about your human self, mean that you are effeminate or imply anything about your sexuality. A doe, in most ways, is essentially the same as a stag. Yet she is always alert and watchful, slipping along at the edge of the shadows at times, nearly invisible. She is gentle, not aggressive by nature, though she will protect her young fiercely as will nearly every mammal mother. The doe is solidly linked with family as well. Consider it.

I cannot answer your question about whose form was first. We did not learn the Patronus charm at Hogwarts until we were in our sixth year, and by then your father apparently had already managed his transformation. Your mother and father began dating this year, so I suppose it is all connected.

Perhaps it is best that I be frank and tell you how I interpret your Animagus form. Minerva was very clear that the form can be affected by many factors. For some, the form reflects a salient characteristic. For others, the form is based on an emotional need, or a connection to a person or a thing. While I must admit that I, too, can see the attraction of spending hours asleep on a warm corner of a sofa, the life of a cat is not for all. You need time to explore your form, to run with other deer, to skirt the edge of the forest, to roll in the grass and stand watchful and silent behind the trees. I am glad you have a form that will make you feel at home outside, in the forest.

I will be honest with you, Harry. I believe the form in some way completes you, perhaps signifying something missing, or something you need. You have an obvious manifestation of your father in your appearance and in your Patronus. Perhaps this, in a way, is the manifestation of your mother's spirit in your life, a way for her to continue to offer a watchful eye on the son from whom she is...
Give it time, Harry. Each time you transform you will understand more.

Ahh—now to your question. I have always thought that my Animagus form would be some dark, shadowy creature, perhaps a bat to hang on my dungeon walls. But given a choice (and I know that I would not actually have a choice in the matter, but you did ask…) I would be a common bird, perhaps a starling or a sparrow, something that could get lost in a vast flock, but that would not be looked at twice when hanging about by itself. It would be an excellent form for a spy, don’t you think?

And yes, I admit my question about the island is a bit inane when it comes to wizards and witches who could, in most cases, readily remove themselves from said island by way of magical transportation of some sort (though I doubt that the Knight Bus would make a stop there). The question itself was meant to look at your priorities more than anything else. From your answers, it is obvious that you would want to assure that your ability to perform magic stayed with you, so your first choice was your most important tool, your wand. You chose your broom next, and your broom likely symbolizes escape and freedom, perhaps a type of unadulterated joy. An apt choice, and an appropriate one. Your next three choices—Hedwig, quill and parchment—reflect your desire to keep your friends near even while you are alone. I suppose I could point out that parchment is an unnecessary choice as you could readily transfigure a leaf into a sheet of parchment using your wand, but still, these three things would keep you connected.

Your choices for me are quite interesting as well. My wand, definitely. I suppose I would need a cauldron, or a vessel of some sort, as I am likely to find all sorts of interesting ingredients in this remote paradise. Of course, having a wand, I could transfigure something. I would probably give up the cauldron (and the change of underwear) for two more books, though I would probably push Lockhart aside (and out the window and perhaps into the compost heap) in favor of a lengthy work of fantasy or science fiction, something from one of the better Latin American writers (in translation of course) and the Oxford English Dictionary. The hula hoop can go as well—wand, remember? Of course, with no one here to watch me, I will become quite the expert. While I would be able to transfigure all the underwear I needed from leaves, old plastic bags that wash ashore and animal pelts, I doubt I’d even bother. Would you continue to wear robes and pants on a deserted island?

As that line of questioning was really quite entertaining, let’s have another go at it.

Same desert island. Which of these people would you pick to accompany you? Draco Malfoy, Sybil Trelawney or Gilderoy Lockhart? Choose well…and do not delay your return letter indefinitely as you contemplate your choice.

Harry, I am working on a way to take you out somewhere to experience your new form in its natural setting. Be content for the time being with your time with Minerva while I find a time and a place that is as safe as I can make it.

Regards,

Severus

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Severus replaced the lid on his ink and cleaned the tip of his quill. He blew on the parchment he had just finished distractedly then rolled it and scooted it over to the pile of sixth year homework. Albus, when informed of Harry’s transformation, had taken a long moment to react, obviously mulling over the turn of events in his head before a look of understanding settled on his countenance. He looked
long at Severus, searching his face, behind his eyes, behind his mask.

"This is not just about Lily," he said. "It is about you as well. You will not be able to truly help Harry with this until you accept that his form has as much to do with you as it does with his mother."

Severus had given Albus a very Snapish glare. "Ridiculous," he replied. "What is there of a gentle forest creature in me?"

Albus had met his gaze and they stared at each other for a very long moment.

"Take him to the forest, Severus. I think you will both find some answers there."

Chapter 18

January 16 – January 19

-Harry-

His last class of the day on Thursday, Herbology, had been canceled so Harry had made his way up to his dorm room to begin his homework and, more importantly, read Severus' letter. He opened his homework and grinned at the reluctant "E-" scrawled across the top. E minus! He imagined how much it pained Snape to give out good grades to Gryffindors, even to a Gryffindor named Harry Potter. He'd probably added the "minus" as an afterthought.

Harry ignored the actual assignment, not even bothering to read Snape's acerbic comments in the margins, and went straight for the letter at the end. He smiled more than once when reading Snape's ideas regarding his Animagus form, shaking his head at the obvious omission. Snape could suggest or insist that it was all about his mother, or something that was missing in his life (gee, could that be, say, his mother?) but Harry could not get past the obvious. His Animagus was a doe. Snape's Patronus was a doe.

Perhaps what was missing in his life wasn't just a mother.

16 January, 1997

Thursday

Dear Severus:

Lockhart, Malfoy or Trelawney? Are you kidding? All I can say is that I'm glad I have my wand on that island. Auuughhh! Just wait 'til you get to the end of this letter and get to my questions. Paybacks are hell, Severus.

Alright, let's get this out of the way. Malfoy. There, I said it. I figure that Lockhart and Trelawney wouldn't stay out of my way. They'd be all over togetherness time. Lockhart would have to have someone around to hear him talk and he'd keep forgetting who he is. He'd probably be helpless. I'd have to do all the hunting and cooking. I could probably convince him to swim for help, though…. Trelawney? I'd AK myself faster than you could say "Merlin's balls." Which leaves me with… Malfoy. It would keep me on my toes to constantly worry about what he's up to. Of course, if he's up
to something on that island, maybe he'll forget whatever he's up to here at Hogwarts.

So your first Patronus was a greyhound. I didn't know much about them before today, but since Hermione pulled all these books for me on animal symbolism, I looked it up. "Fidelity, majesty, courage and speed." It seems to be a perfect Patronus for you. When did your Patronus change to the doe?

I of course looked up mine too—kind of hard to pin down, since there are symbols for the doe, the stag and for deer in general. Heavenly longing, undisciplined vigor (you'd like that one—the undisciplined part anyway) and defeat of evil (hmmmm….). The druids thought that deer were capable of prophecy (maybe I could stay in my Animagus form on that island with Trelawney). I'm actually really looking forward to my next session with Minerva. She's kept me after class today to tell me to meet her an hour earlier for our next lesson—she's like to have me transform, keep my form for an entire hour, then transform back. I can't see why it would be so hard—but she said something about how the animal mind can fight for control and how sometimes it's hard to let go of the animal and return to human form. I can't imagine wanting to stay in deer form in her office, though. How fun will it be for a deer to poke around in a teacher's office for an hour?

Listen, I'm sorry for asking about your shampoo. If you must know (and I think you must given the circumstances), I lost a game of chess to Ron and along with it, a bet. I offered to hula hoop naked instead in front of the Quidditch fan club, but Ron picked an even more cruel punishment. Of course, the look on Malfoy's face when I asked you about your shampoo was worth the pain to Gryffindor House with all those points you took. If I didn't know him better, I'd have thought he was looking at me in awe. Didn't know it would take a blatant act of disrespect to bring out the Slytherin's secret admiration of the Gryffindors.

I'm kind of glad you won't be on that island with me, by the way, if you insist on bringing the dictionary with you. I can just imagine. "Hey, Severus, want to go for a swim?" I'd ask. And you'd look up at me, irritated, and say: "Not now, Harry, I'm almost to the Es. You aren't suffering from dysuria, are you? A difficult or painful discharge of urine?"

Ron and Hermione are still officially not talking, but they sometimes forget and one of them says something to the other, and the other answers, then they both realize they communicated civilly, then one of them gets all snotty and the other leaves the room. Ron's spending a lot of time hiding from Lavender. Dim as she can be, she's starting to get the idea and is beginning to stalk me if she can't find him. Speaking of stalking—Romilda has given up on Colin and slipped me another love note yesterday. From the gossip around here, Collin actually threw up on her when she cornered him for a snogging session. Take it easy on Collin in class if he's shaky the next few days—he's suffering from PTSD (that's Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in case you're not up on Muggle psychological disorders). I think they used to call it "shell shocked" after the Second World War (You know about that, don't you? I figure wizards suffered during the Blitz just like Muggles).

Did I tell you I signed up for Apparition lessons? I'm not as excited about it as everyone else seems to be. Maybe they don't know how Apparition feels—like you're being sucked through a straw and left in this vacuum-like limbo for so long you think you're going to suffocate. I can't imagine it's much different if you do it on your own or go side-along. But in my mind, it's a very convenient way to get from point A to point B. So, if I were on this island with Malfoy, could I Apparate off whenever I felt like it? How far can a wizard Apparate? Does it take longer to Apparate longer distances? Could you Apparate off an airplane to the ground? Could you Apparate while you're falling to save yourself from being smashed up on the rocks? If you know how to Apparate, could you Apparate in your Animagus form?

Just for the record, those don't count as my questions. Here's my question: Same island, no possibility
of getting off of it with magic, and you have to spend the foreseeable future there with one of the following three people, with one of the following three creatures roaming about the island. So, will it be Aunt Petunia, Professor Trelawney or Dolores Umbridge? As for the creature—pick from a dragon (a Hungarian Horntail), a basilisk (full-grown, not blind) and an Acromantula (size of a Muggle car).

I haven't asked Professor Slughorn again about that memory. I know Dumbledore is waiting for me to get it, but I can't figure out how to make Slughorn turn it over. He obviously doesn't want to even think about it, and now that I know what a Horcrux is, I can't say I blame him. Do you have any ideas for me to try? What are Slughorn's weak points? I figure I'm going to have to somehow guilt him into talking about it and giving it to me. Maybe you could make me a potion that would lower his inhibitions… Hey, if you have any of that, can I have a couple doses for Ginny?

I went down to visit Hagrid today after classes. The owlets are all gone now, and he asked about Mac. I told him you were bonding with him quite properly, and he was really pleased to hear that. He's got a new set of creatures for this term's studies. He wouldn't tell me what they're called, which took me right back to fourth year with the Blast-Ended Skrewts, but these look more like centipedes with fangs and wings, only they're about a foot long and lime green. Days like this make me happy I decided to drop Care of Magical Creatures.

I'm looking forward to what you mentioned in your letter—experiencing my Animagus form in "its natural setting." I hope you can arrange something soon. This snow is bound to melt one day (at least by April), but I wouldn't even mind going out while it's still on the ground. I'm going to try not to analyze why my Animagus form is what it is. I appreciate your interpretation, though. I figure it will all make sense in time.

And I think your Animagus choice is excellent. I can see it would be dead useful getting lost in a flock. You know, a starling is a blackbird too, and that's the animal I picked for you a couple of months ago when Minerva and I did that exercise I think I told you about—pairing up people we know with potential Animagus forms. Maybe I know you better than you think I do.

Regards,

Harry

Harry tucked his homework inside his Defense book and carefully wiped his quill on a cleaning rag, then capped the ink and returned it to his bag. A quick tempus told him that it was twenty minutes 'til dinnertime. None of the other sixth-years had come up to the dorm room to drop off their bags yet, so he wasn't surprised when he heard steps outside, though the rap on his door did startle him. "Come in," he called. It was Hermione's head, not Ron or Seamus or Neville's, which appeared in the open doorway.

"Coming to dinner?" she asked.

He got off the bed and stretched.

"Yeah. Just finishing my Defense homework." He nodded to the textbook on his bed and she smiled in understanding. "Did you need something or just wanting to walk down to dinner together?" he asked as he crouched down to tie his trainer.

"Well, yes, I did. Want something, that is," she said. She pushed the door closed softly behind her. "Ginny's holed up in the library, Harry. Luna's down with her now, but I thought you might want to
Harry stood up and made a show of dusting off his pants. He didn't want Hermione to see the silly grin plastered on his face. When he looked up at her, he had schooled his expression into one of friendly concern—or so he hoped. The smirk on her face let him know he hadn't been totally successful.

"They haven't broken up, Harry," she said, bursting his bubble a bit. "I know Dean doesn't want to, and she's confused. I just thought you could talk to her, cheer her up a bit."

"Oh. Sure," he said, smiling a slightly lopsided smile as he opened the door to go down to dinner. "Library, you said?"

"Dinner first, Harry," she said, grabbing his arm. She pretended not to notice the hopeful light in his eye as they made their way down to the Great Hall for dinner.

________________________________________

-Severus-

As predicted by Poppy Pomfrey, the wizard flu had hit Hogwarts. It was a particularly nasty strain this year, causing most patients to completely lose energy for several days as their bodies fought weakened immune systems and intense fatigue. Severus worked in his quarters, getting caught up on his grading before his turn to help out in the infirmary. Each of the teachers was taking a shift, and though most of the teachers carried immunities to the flu due to nearly yearly exposure to it, a few newer ones had taken ill as well.

Severus opened Harry's letter when he began working on the sixth year essays, reading it quickly then putting it aside as he formulated his own reply. He was beginning to visualize the same island whenever it came up in their letters. The island was somewhere in the Caribbean, had sandy white shores, palm trees, a clear, cool stream flowing from a single mountain, and, oddly, a Quidditch Pitch. When Severus looked at the island from his lofty spot in the sky above, he always noticed bare feet footprints criss-crossing the sand.

Dolores Umbridge was not on the island. Neither was Sybil Trelawney nor Draco Malfoy.

Severus shook his head, calling himself back to reality, to essays and homework. Island dreams were fine, and served as good object lessons for Harry, but served very little purpose otherwise. Severus wasn't really an island sort of man. He paused, thinking of the John Donne passage:

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the Sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee..."

19 January, 1997

Sunday

Dear Harry:

First, let me thank you for giving me such excellent choices for companionship on our deserted island. I did notice a certain absence of malevolent personalities, Death Eaters and the like, though
at least two of the choices you gave me would certainly make good evil minions. May I suggest that you allow me to choose all three deadly creatures and forgo the choice of a human companion?

And let's close the door immediately on the idea of a potion that would lower Professor Slughorn's inhibitions. In fact, we will close it on the idea of a potion to lower anyone's inhibitions. First of all, no reputable Potions Master would waste time on such a formula, as it has been invented already and is in wide distribution across the world—both Magical and Muggle. It's called "alcohol" and you have already had first-hand knowledge of its effects. I do not suggest, however, that you invite Professor Slughorn for a nightcap in your dorm room or for a social drink at the Three Broomsticks. You are going to have to think of something else.

And in that, I can help you.

You asked about Professor Slughorn's weak points. I needn't point out to you his fondness for certain sweets—surely you have noticed that already. His other prominent weakness is his fondness for collecting. While others might collect matchbook covers, rare coins or even dangerous pets, Horace Slughorn collects people. Celebrities. Former students who have gone on to fame or greatness, current students who, perhaps, have famous parents or who are known for extraordinary circumstances that have helped form their persona. Thus, his Slug Club—an attempt to ingratiate himself to potential future greats .

So what do you have to offer to Professor Slughorn in exchange for the memory? Hmmm. You might start with...yourself. He'd very much like to add you to his "collection," I know, as he has told me as much himself. I should add that he was extremely fond of your mother, a fondness that was more than superficial. He saw her great potential and was touched by her generous heart. I think, Harry, that you will find a way to reach Professor Slughorn and convince him to give you the memory that Professor Dumbledore desires. But you may have to "sell yourself," so to speak and lower yourself, at least temporarily, to win what you desire. I wish you luck. Knowing now what he did not back when Tom Riddle was a student, he will be reluctant to admit any complicity he had in Riddle becoming what he is today.

"Fidelity, majesty, courage and speed." I miss my greyhound friend sometimes, though I have become accustomed to and comfortable with its replacement. I did not know that the greyhound symbolized anything else but speed—thank you, Harry. You have now taught me something I did not know before. Still, I cannot in honesty ascribe all of these adjectives to myself, especially not "majesty." When did my Patronus change from a greyhound to a doe? I think I would like to leave that story for another day, Harry, perhaps during Easter break or over the summer.

You are full of questions today, Harry. I fear I will spend this entire letter answering them, but as there is not much new to write about, I will take the time.

Your questions on Apparition are good ones, and I will do my best to answer them accurately. When students are taught the theory of Apparition, they learn the 3 Ds: Destination, Determination, Deliberation. The wizard must be determined to reach his destination and do so with deliberation, but not haste. There are certainly limits to the distance one can Apparate, but these are not set, measured distances but more like zones of comfort. It is not uncommon to make several Apparition "hops" when traveling particularly long distances. Even Dumbledore would hardly attempt intercontinental Apparition.

Could you Apparate off the island to escape an eternity with Draco Malfoy? Even I would wholeheartedly recommend that. However, you must know your destination and keep it firmly in mind as you prepare to Apparate. Could you Apparate while falling from a cliff? While a certain stepping and turning motion is usually required, very adept witches and wizards can manage
Apparition with less of a controlled motion. However, only the most level-headed witch or wizard could keep the 3 Ds in mind while falling toward his or her death. In those circumstances, a well-timed cushioning charm or levitation charm would be more effective.

Does it take longer to Apparate longer distances? I think not, though I have not measured this nor have I ever actually considered it. Apparition is the act of disappearing and reappearing elsewhere. There is actually no "travel" involved. It is rather a force of will to dematerialize and rematerialize. I have Apparated countless times since receiving my license the year I turned 17 and each instance seems to me to be of the same length.

Yes, you could certainly Apparate off of an airplane. Or even off of the Space Shuttle. However, doing so would cause a great deal of chaos in the Muggle world and I do not recommend it.

I doubt that Apparition would be possible in your Animagus form. That, however, is a question, both practical and theoretical, for Minerva.

Thank you for the information on Mr. Creevey. He has been looking quite peaked lately, and on Friday he fainted dead away into his cauldron. He nearly over-dosed on shrinking solution, and I fear his nose will never be the correct size again.

I have made some progress on my plans to take you on an outing from the castle and have tentatively arranged for a visit to a property owned by the Headmaster next weekend. This outing is dependent on your ability to move back and forth between your human and Animagus form with ease and on how well you are able to stay in touch with your human mind while in animal form. Minerva will be the judge of your readiness. If all goes well with your lessons this week (Minerva has scheduled two, one on Tuesday and one on Thursday), we will leave Saturday morning and return at nightfall.

I have delayed answering your question as long as possible and shall try to make the best out of a potentially abysmal situation. For my human companion, I will choose your Aunt Petunia. For my magical creature, I choose the Acromantula. Remember, I have a wand; Petunia does not. I will simply wait for her to have an encounter with the spider, drop dead (whether from poison or fright is inconsequential) and then dispose of the spider (and of Petunia) with my wand.

Since you've introduced the Dursleys into our play, I'll follow up with this question:

If you could change any one thing about your life at the Dursleys, what would it be and why?

It is nearly dinnertime now and I have a pile of mediocre N.E.W.T. level essays to grade. I also have a meeting with the Headmaster to get through and am then going to the infirmary to help Madam Pomfrey with the influx of students sick with the wizard flu. Do try to stay healthy, Harry. Every bed is full in the infirmary already.

Regards,

Severus

Several hours later, Severus opened the door of the hospital wing and signaled to a very worn looking Poppy Pomfrey that he was ready for his shift. Most of the children in the hospital cots seemed to be asleep already, bundled up beneath layers of covers as the curative potions they'd been given worked to shorten the life of the very aggressive strain of flu virus from two weeks to only several days. He was still receiving a briefing from Poppy when the infirmary door opened and a
very pale Harry Potter stumbled in. He looked like he had no idea where his head was and couldn't be bothered to care much if someone did locate it.

"Mr. Potter," said Madam Pomfrey, hurrying over toward him. 'Is there a problem?"

Harry's tired eyes scanned the room, coming to rest of Severus. Severus, for his part, fixed him with a neutral gaze. No matter how much his insides choked up, no matter how much he wanted to hurry over to the boy, he resisted any outward show of emotion.

Harry smiled tiredly, understanding that his Snape was still behind that mask.

"Mr. Potter?" Snape, worried, could not resist taking a step forward.

"Not feeling well," answered Harry, his mouth and lips feeling clumsy and he brushed them with the back of his hand. "Throat...head..." He shrugged and sank down to sit on the floor, his back against the wall, before Poppy could reach him. A shudder shook his body and he wrapped his arms around his legs.

Poppy rested a cool hand on Harry's head as she passed her wand over him. "Definitely the flu." She scanned the room quickly, looking for an empty cot. "He's let it go rather long..."

Severus had given up the aloof act and was crouching down beside her, next to Harry.

"I told you not to get sick," he muttered, hardly realizing that those instructions were sitting in an undelivered letter in his quarters.

"Welcome to parenthood, Severus," said Poppy quietly as she stood, placing a hand on his shoulder and squeezing. "As I'm rather tied up here, and we're out of beds, why don't you take Mr. Potter through to my office." She lowered her voice further. "Use the Floo in there—I'll call in Pomona to help me here."

Severus helped Harry stand and half carried him through the door of Poppy's office, to the Floo behind that door, then through the Floo down to his own quarters. He didn't hesitate as he led Harry into his room and then tucked him into his own bed, following up with the needed potions and an extra blanket or two. Harry rolled himself into a ball and was soon asleep, looking small enough in the extra large bed to be a five-year-old child. Severus brushed sweaty hair back from Harry's eyes, then went to settle himself on the sofa. He obstinately ignored the headache that was forming behind his eyes and the ache in his shoulders. He was not getting sick. As he drifted off to sleep, he made a mental list of potions ingredients he'd bring to that island...just in case.

Chapter 19

January 24 – January 25

-Harry-

Harry gratefully accepted the cup of tea Minerva handed him. His hand shook slightly as he raised it to his lips. Minerva had just put him through a grueling sequence of transformations. He'd insisted he was up to it, though he'd just returned to classes yesterday. He'd been successful, maintaining his Animagus form for more than an hour and transforming back at her cue easily when sufficient time had passed. Walking around Minerva's office for an hour in his doe form left a lot to be desired. He
wanted to run and kick up his feet, roll in the grass, taste shoots of grass and acorns and not gaze out a window high in the castle wall, eying the Forbidden Forest and the surrounding grounds longingly.

"You did well, Harry. Well enough to have an outing with Severus this weekend." She smiled and scooted the plate of biscuits across the desk. "Have a biscuit or two. You've hardly eaten these past few days."

"Throat," he muttered, taking a ginger snap and dunking it in his tea to soften it a bit. "Hurt to swallow."

He smiled slightly, remembering all the things he'd been forced to swallow over the last few days—bitter-tasting potions, pudding, juices, ice cream—first by Severus and then, when Severus had become too ill to deny it any longer, by Poppy or Minerva on their regular check-up visits.

He remembered waking up that first time, late into the night on Sunday, or perhaps very early Monday morning, before the sun rose, and finding himself in a strange bed, in a strange room, and buried under a mound of heavy blankets. He turned over with difficulty to try to better see his surroundings, his face burrowing in the pillow as he did so. It was the smell of the bedclothes, and of the room, that put him at ease and told him he was home. The door to the bedroom was open and a faint, dancing light from the fireplace in the sitting room illuminated the walls of the short corridor.

Harry closed his eyes and listened. He always listened better with his eyes shut, even in the dark.

In Gryffindor Tower, he could hear the wind whistling outside the castle turret windows. But the dungeon walls in Snape's quarters were silent. In Gryffindor Tower, four other boys made so many noises at night that it all blended together and made it hard to tell who was talking in his sleep, who was snoring, who was thrashing around in the throes of a bad dream. In Snape's quarters, if he listened very intently, with his eyes squeezed shut, he could barely make out the sound of Severus' soft snores coming from the other room.

It occurred to him then that he was in Severus' bed and that Severus must be sleeping on the sofa. He'd only be in Severus' bed if Severus had put him there.

Severus had put him in his own bed, not on the sofa where a guest would sleep.

He turned that over in his mind a few times as he drifted back to sleep.

24 January, 1997

Friday

Dear Severus:

How are you feeling? You managed to act like your normal self in class today—disgusted with all of humanity, condescending and superior—even though I bet you're still sick and probably are already in bed (it's only nine p.m. in Gryffindor Tower and by my Gryffindor reckoning, the same down in the dungeons). Did Poppy bring you some of that special hot tea with lemon? I'm thinking that what makes it "special" is a strong calming drought. I felt half loopy for several days—why else would I have put on those ridiculous pyjamas Minerva brought down for me? I remember sitting down on the toilet seat Monday evening to get undressed to take a shower and pulling off that pyjama shirt and vaguely wondering why I was wearing blue fleece pajamas with cat paws printed all over them. It's a testament to how sick I was that I actually put them back on when I got out of the shower. Those and that pair of slippers she gave me. I know they were yours—plain, black, about three sizes too large
and smelling vaguely of formaldehyde.

Listen, I'm really sorry for ending up sick and for you having to keep me for three days. I didn't plan that when I showed up in the infirmary Sunday night. I just wanted something to clear up my congestion so I could get some sleep. Minerva told me last night that there were so many students sick that they had to eventually open up the visitors' quarters and put patients in there. Even though I know it had to be a bother for you to have me disrupting your schedule, I'm glad I got to stay in your quarters with you. I know we couldn't do much talking—which is a shame, since there's a lot I want to talk to you about—but we did get to share drugged tea, that huge box of facial tissues and Mrs. Willowbee's Eucalyptus Throat Soothers. And we got to listen to each other breathe. I know this sounds ridiculous, but sometimes just hearing the sounds someone makes while sleeping makes you feel less alone.

I had a good session with Minerva earlier tonight. I know you'll already know this by the time you read this letter, since she was going to go talk to you to tell you I was ready for the "little adventure" (her words, not mine) that you have planned for me this weekend. I was hoping we could do it tomorrow, but she's all for delaying until Sunday and me "taking it easy" tomorrow. She banned me from Quidditch practice this weekend. That would have hurt more if our practice session hadn't been cancelled since half our team is either sick or just getting well enough to go down to the Great Hall for meals again. Ron and Ginny aren't sick—they tell me the Weasleys are a "resilient lot"—something about having lots of immunities after being exposed to each other so much when growing up.

So, I've been ordered to stay in Gryffindor Tower tomorrow except at mealtimes, to wrap up in a blanket and sit on the sofa or one of the armchairs in the common room in front of the fire catching up on my missed work. Hermione gave me a book to read if I get bored. Ha ha. IF! She's given up on our Shakespeare book club, mainly because she's spending a lot of time in the library trying to keep up with her homework. Anyway, the book she gave me is The Return of Tarzan. She saw my copy of Tarzan of the Apes from Christmas and when I told her how much I liked it, she wrote to her parents and had the dig up this one from her dad's old books. Apparently, her dad owns the whole series. I didn't even know there was a whole series. The next books are The Beasts of Tarzan and The Son of Tarzan. Hey, nothing like giving away the plot, is there?

Minerva said you'd "contact me" to let me know what the plans are if we're able to go out on Sunday. Still waiting patiently. Well, not so patiently, but then again, you probably drank Poppy's tea and now you're in la-la land dreaming of taking points from foolish Gryffindors for disrupting class by breathing too loudly. My lesson with her tonight was a lot easier than I thought it would be. I stayed in my Animagus form for more than an hour and was able to change right back when she signaled. She had me do a quick series of changes at the beginning, and again at the end. I'm getting better at the transformation—it's really hard to go from a human standing on two legs to a deer trying to get its footing on smooth floors. My legs always seem to want to slide out from under me so I do better if I'm actually in motion—walking—when I start to transform.

Half-way through one of the transformations tonight I suddenly thought about my clothing and what happens to it when I transform and ended up as a deer wearing boxer shorts. Well, kind of wearing them, anyway. They ended up stuck around my neck and Minerva had to pull them off over my head. It's kind of embarrassing now, but you know what? As a deer, I didn't feel embarrassed at all.

I had to go back and read your last letter again. It seems like a long time since I read it the first time. I like your answer about the island—Aunt Petunia and the giant spider. You probably don't know this but Aunt Petunia is terrified of spiders. One dropped on her head once in the kitchen while the Dursleys were eating breakfast. Dudley saw it fall and screamed "Spider! Spider on Mum's head!" and tried to climb on his chair while pointing at it and hyperventilating. Aunt Petunia started hopping
around screaming and she actually hit herself in the head with a dinner plate trying to squash it. She used to wear her hair all poofed up—she went to the hair dresser's every Wednesday to have it washed and set. If you don't know what that means—they'd roll up her hair then poof it all up and set it in place with loads of hair spray. Anyway, she thought the spider had gotten inside her hair and was crawling around on her scalp. She kept running around the table pulling at her hair until Uncle Vernon grabbed her, dragged her into the kitchen and stuck her head under the kitchen faucet to try to drown the poor thing (I mean the spider, not Aunt Petunia. I guess I wouldn't have cared much if he'd drowned her…). So….good choice, all around.

Guess that's as good a lead-in as any to your question—what I'd change about my life at the Dursley's if I could change any one thing. You know that's a REALLY hard question—coming up with the ONE thing I'd change about my life there. I wouldn't want to be like them, to turn out like Dudley did. If they'd loved me (or even liked me) I think there would have been a good chance that I'd be as mean and as spoiled as Dudley. The worse part of my life when I was younger wasn't my clothes or the cupboard under the stairs or all the chores or getting treated like dog crap on the bottom of your shoe. The worst part was the loneliness. Dudley and I were in the same form at school and he made sure I didn't have friends. He was a bully and all the kids who might have been my friends were scared of him. You have to realize I was only ten when I finished my non-magical education. Ten is not an age when most kids stand up against tyrants. So I guess I'd change something about Dudley—maybe make him a couple years younger than me, or totally uninterested in me, or heck, since this is essentially a game, how about a one-armed mute with a limp?

You know…I changed my mind. I thought that would be the best thing to make my life at the Dursleys better. But there's actually something much better—and really much more realistic.

I wish I would have known about Magic. That wasn't a freak. That magic was REAL. That there was this REAL place in Scotland called Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and that my name, MY name, Harry Potter, was on the registry since I was born, and that I'd get to go there when I was eleven. If I would have had that—that one little thing—even if everything else was exactly the same all those years at the Dursleys…my life would have been so much better. I would have had a calendar on the wall in my cupboard and I'd have counted out the days until my eleventh birthday—even if there were more than a thousand of them—and I'd have been crossing them off, one by one, all those years.

I would have had hope.

And that makes me really angry. Why NOT? Why couldn't I have known? Not all the details…not a wand or an owl or even a visit to Diagon Alley but just a visit from Dumbledore, maybe in the middle of the night when everyone else was sleeping so he wouldn't be seen. Or while I was at Mrs. Figg's while the Dursleys were on holiday. Why couldn't it have been HIM to tell me what Hagrid had to? "Harry, you're a wizard." Four words. I can't even imagine how different my life would have been if I'd known that all my life.

But if there's nothing else I've learned these last few years, it's to look forward, not backward. The past is done and it is what it is. It's made me who I am, flaws and all. I've got to keep looking forward and try to have no regrets.

I'm sending this letter down to you with Mac since I expect to see you on Sunday and kind of hope you'll read it before then.

I'll change the tone of the questions. Here's a good one. If you could have one of the following jobs, which would you choose and why? Headmaster of Hogwarts, Minister of Magic, Professional Quidditch Player, bass player for a rock band, Auror, Healer or Motivational Speaker?
I'm really looking forward to our day out on Sunday. See you then?

Regards,

Harry

"What time is it?" Harry asked Hermione.

"Fifteen 'til ten," she answered, closing her Ancient Runes textbook and glancing over at the table in the corner where Ron and Lavender were studying. From the looks of it, they were actually studying. At least Ron was paying more attention to the essay spread out in front of him than he was to Lavender. Harry and Hermione could clearly see her running her foot up the side of his leg beneath the table. Ron pushed it away distractedly as he sighed, picked up his quill and began writing.

Harry rolled his head backward, forward and sideways, stretching his neck. His shoulders still ached considerably.

"Want to come to the owlery with me?" he asked as he stood up. "I need to get this letter sent off before curfew."

Hermione stood up and stretched. "Sure, I'll come along."

They walked slowly together, Harry still not back to snuff after his bout with the flu. He was panting a bit when they reached the owlery, and sat down on the ledge as Hermione called down Mac and attached the scroll to its leg. "It's for Professor Snape," she told Mac as Hedwig flew down to Harry and watched suspiciously as Mac flew off.

"Can't use you this time, girl," explained Harry as he scratched her head and offered her one of the owl treats he kept in his robe pockets. "You just stand out too much. If the Slytherins saw you flying down the dungeon corridors they'd be suspicious."

Hermione offered Harry a hand and pulled him to his feet. They stood for a minute looking out the high castle window into the dark winter sky. The moon was low on the horizon, but the dog star—Sirius—was bright enough to be seen despite the glow from the moon. Together, the two celestial bodies bathed the castle grounds in soft light. Harry gazed out toward the Forbidden Forest. Dark shapes silhouetted near the edge of the forest caught his eye and he leaned forward, watching in fascination as a group of deer foraged quietly. Their movements were slight, shadowy and their forms blended in nearly seamlessly with the shadows of the trees.

Alert and invisible. Watchful. Silent. A howl in the forest behind them and as one they were gone, slipping into the shadows. Harry turned toward Hermione to find her watching him. She smiled and grabbed his hand.

"Come on, let's get back," she said and the two slipped away as quietly as the deer, blending in with the shadows along the moonlit corridor as they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower.

-Severus-

Severus waited until morning to answer the boy's letter, putting Mac up in his cage after opening the door to his incessant pecking. The content of the letter was somewhat disturbing, particularly the
parts about the Dursleys. It did relieve him somewhat, at least, that Harry was finally beginning to show some anger at his treatment instead of only resigned acceptance of the ten years he had spent as the Dursley's house-elf.

He leaned back in his chair, his mind going back to the summer day so many years ago when he'd hidden on the edge of the wooded plot by the playground, watchful and silent, his eyes on the pretty girl on the swing as she pumped higher and higher then launched herself off and sailed through the air, unnaturally slowly, coming to rest lightly on the packed dirt, her green skirt settling below her skinned knees.

*She's a witch…she's a witch just like I'm a wizard,* Severus had thought, feeling a kinship with the girl and daring to approach her.

What a difference that had made to Lily…knowing what she was several years before her Hogwarts letter came.

What a difference it had made to him.

25 January, 1997

Saturday

Dear Harry:

In answer to your question, I am feeling much better. Fortunately, I was awake last night when Mac arrived and tapped frantically at my door. I admit I was a bit flummoxed to find my familiar outside my door, clutching a parchment scroll and imitating a bat, flapping his wings wildly.

I hope you went directly to bed after sending that late-night letter, Harry. I believe you stated that Minerva directed you to take it easy this weekend and I trust that now you are sitting on your very squishy sofa, knees drawn up to your chin, reading Tarzan or working on that Transfiguration essay Minerva set for you on Thursday (yes, we professors do talk…). You'd best be keeping warm. I could always send up one of these crocheted afghans I brought back from Shell Cottage. I'm particularly fond of the one in Minerva's tartan—I am sure it would be a "hit" in Gryffindor Tower.

Now that I've properly chastised you for being out and about at curfew last night, up in the cold owlery (what would Poppy say if she found out? She'd probably be up there right now with a double dose of Pepper-Up—enough to have steam coming out orifices other than your ears), I'll address the content of your letter.

Put your mind at ease, Harry. Providing you follow Minerva's directive today and spend the day resting, and are feeling well enough in the morning, we will indeed have our day out tomorrow. We will be Apparating to the location I mentioned earlier to give you the opportunity to experience your Animagus form in a more natural setting than Minerva's office. Please arrive at the Great Hall by eight a.m. for breakfast. Afterward, report to the hospital wing where Madam Pomfrey will assess your physical condition and release you for our outing. You will be met in Madam Pomfrey's office by a visitor who will bring you to the aforementioned location, where I will be waiting. Please dress appropriately for winter weather in Scotland—or Northern England—and be sure to complete all of your homework today as you will likely have only an hour or two do wrap it up when you return tomorrow. The blue cat paw pajamas, worn beneath your school robes, will keep you warm and toasty during your travels.
I must admit something to you—I did in fact know about your aunt's fear of arachnids. You do remember that I knew your mother when we were children, so of course I knew your aunt as well. Her fear of spiders was well-known among the neighborhood children and we often used it to our advantage. If she was monopolizing the playground swing, one had only to locate a small spider and toss it her way to send her flying home. If a boy wanted to get a glimpse of a girls' chest, he had only to drop a spider down Petunia's shirt and off it would come, ripped from her body with a piercing scream, followed by amazing gyrations as she attempted to shake the offending creature from her body.

Now that I have scarred you for life, I'll continue in a more serious vein.

I thought your answer to my question—both of your answers, actually—to be appropriate and well-thought out. I must agree with you and share your frustration—no, your anger—at crucial information being kept from you. However, you are right to look forward instead of backward. I will tell you that the Headmaster believed he was protecting you—keeping you totally separate from the magical world to keep you safe from those among us who would have harmed you (by excessive love or blatant hatred). What he failed to do was to protect you from those outside the magical world who would harm you, by neglect and rejection.

Had you only known what was waiting for you just beyond your reach.

Had I only known how Lily's child was being treated.

We will have ample time for discussion tomorrow, but I will answer your question nonetheless.

You gave me the choice of several stimulating and demanding careers. I noted that my actual careers (neither one of them) were in the list of choices. I am quite tempted to choose the exalted career of motivational speaker. You didn't include it for a lark, did you? Or because you thought I would be particularly ill-suited for such an occupation? I can well imagine myself standing before a crowd of potential Death Eaters, telling my sordid tale, and bringing the lot of them to tears before sending them all to the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix instead of to the Dark Lord's lair. But as there's really not much future in such a career, I shall choose another instead. While playing Quidditch professionally has its appeal—broken bones, a sore tailbone, skull fractures from errant bludgers—I fear I'm a bit too advanced in years to take it up. I'd much rather watch you play professionally, Harry, and help you spend all those Galleons our world bestows upon its star athletes. Now, while being a bass player for a rock band would be interesting and enjoyable, I suppose one would actually have to play the bass to excel in that career path. Auror? Not likely. Healer? Only for you. Minister of Magic? Please. Which leaves me with only one option—Headmaster of Hogwarts it is. I promise I will wait until you are gone from Hogwarts to take up the job, however. Perhaps I will be here as Headmaster when your children attend Hogwarts, all messy-haired and green-eyed and hiding under their dad's invisibility cloak to nick food from the kitchens after curfew. How I will enjoy catching them at it and calling in their father to Hogwarts to deal with the wretches!

I have a few arrangements to make for our day out tomorrow, Harry. I'll end it here with a question for you.

Back on the island—you now get to choose two people to bring with you. Who will it be?

Regards,

Severus
Severus blew on the letter to dry the ink then rolled it up and checked the clock on his desk. It was early still, and the hand on his Harry clock still pointed to Gryffindor Tower. He stooped to put on his boots then began the trek up to the owlery to find Hedwig.

He was almost back to his quarters when his Dark Mark began to burn. He uttered an unseemly expletive as he hurried his pace, entered his quarters and grabbed his robes and mask. He quickly sent his Patronus to Minerva and left the castle, headed for the gates and the edge of the Apparition zone.

He was back two hours later after a very brief—and very private—meeting with the Dark Lord. He hurried to the Headmaster's office, stumbling inside at Dumbledore's call and dropping into a chair in front of his mentor.

"He's chosen your replacement," he panted as Dumbledore calmly pushed a cup of hot tea across the desk to him. Severus picked up the tea, his hands shaking. "He's...he's chosen me."

He closed his eyes as he sipped the hot liquid, missing the flash of triumph in the old man's eyes.

Chapter 20

A/N: You'll notice some apparent gender/pronoun issues here, as Harry spends time in his female Animagus form. In general, the female pronouns are used when the doe's mind is in control and the male when Harry's mind is. I went back and forth on this for quite a while. Hope it works how I have it here.

January 26, 1997

Sunday

-Harry & Severus-

Harry had actually succeeded in completing all of his weekend assignments by Saturday night at bedtime. Of course, this accelerated homework schedule had pleased Hermione while annoying Ron, who typically did his homework with Harry and who was not overly interested in spending all day Saturday studying. The day had been unusually pleasant for a January day in Scotland and Ron had suggested a turn on the Quidditch Pitch. Harry had negotiated an hour on the pitch with Ron in return for a three hour study-session to complete both their Potions assignment (identifying a potion that each food item served at dinner on Friday night could be used in) and their Transfiguration essay. They had begun an intensive section on conjuring and Minerva had set them a theoretical essay on the subject which had tied Harry's brain up in knots. If the fundamental law of physics applied—and Minerva taught them that it did—and matter could neither be created nor destroyed—where DID conjured objects come from? If you conjured a camp chair so you could sit on the lake's edge and watch the sunset, did a camp chair disappear from a Muggle's garage? Or did "spare" molecules in the environment rearrange themselves and form a blue chair with a brand logo on it?

He decided against asking Minerva's or Poppy's permission to play Quidditch with Ron—instead, he dressed appropriately and had Hermione cast a warming charm on him, knowing that hers would likely last longer than his own. He actually felt invigorated when they came in and ate a hearty supper, followed by more study time in the common room. Ginny took the empty spot on the sofa beside him, toeing off her shoes and sitting cross-legged with her Herbology textbook open on her
"What unit are you on in Herbology?" asked Harry. He had been re-reading his Defense essay. He'd done the homework but this time hadn't answered Severus' letter. He figured he'd have more to say after his outing with Severus tomorrow.

"Venomous Tantacula," answered Ginny, shuddering slightly. "Well—the entire unit is on plants that can be used as weapons. Sprout seems to be fixated on that plant, though." Harry smiled. "I remember that unit." He looked around the common room. "Where's Dean?"

Ginny shrugged without looking up and continued reading her lesson.

Harry bit his bottom lip and stared at Ginny. "You two alright?" he asked, just managing to keep the kernel of hope he felt out of his voice.

Ginny continued to stare at her book. Harry tentatively reached out a hand and squeezed her foot. "Ginny?"

The gesture made her smile. She closed her book. "Yeah," she said. "Just had a fight is all…rather a loud one." She rolled her eyes. "If we're going to stay together, he's going to have to learn that I make my OWN decisions and can take care of myself."

Harry suppressed a groan. If Ginny and Dean did break up, and he did get a chance to date her, he'd likely have a problem with that "take care of myself" part as well.

He slept soundly that night, and even managed to pull Ron out of bed at seven thirty a.m. so they could breakfast promptly at eight. At eight thirty, while Ron struggled back up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower to fall back into bed for another few hours, Harry slipped into the infirmary to get the "green light" from Madam Pomfrey for his adventure today. She took his temperature, weighed him, looked in his ears, mouth and throat and scanned his lungs with her wand. Everything seemed to check out, but she still forced him to drink a Pepper-Up potion.

"Can I go now?" he asked, impatient as she made notes in his chart.

"He's waiting for you in my office," she said, nodding at the closed door at the back of the room.

Harry looked at the door curiously. Severus had said that someone would be here to bring him to the meeting place. He simply hadn't considered it would be anyone other than Minerva. Yet Poppy had said "He's waiting." He walked slowly to the door, turning to wave goodbye to Madam Pomfrey, then pushed it open.

Bill Weasley was sitting at Poppy's desk, both hands around a mug of hot coffee which rested on her blotter. "Bill!" exclaimed Harry, his face lighting up in a surprised smile. "I didn't expect to see you!"

"I'm doing a six-week stint in London for Gringott's," explained Bill. "Severus told me about your recent success at our last Order meeting and invited me to come along today. You ready?"

"Yeah," answered Harry. "More than ready. Where're we going, anyway? I mean, I know it's to one of Dumbledore's properties…"

"A little place in the West Country," responded Bill, taking a final drink of his coffee before he stood
up and moved over to the Floo. He reached into the jar of Floo powder and took a handful and motioned Harry over. He dropped a generous portion of the powder into Harry's hand.

"You go first—I'll follow right behind. Read this after you throw in the Floo powder." He passed Harry a scrap of paper and Harry glanced at it, recognizing the Headmaster's spiky handwriting. He looked at Bill sharply as he read the destination but Bill nodded at him and motioned to the fireplace so Harry threw in the Floo powder, stepped in the tall, cool green flames and said "Dumbledore's Cottage, Godric's Hollow." He disappeared from sight and Bill placed his coffee cup on the mantel and followed the boy into the flames.

Harry stumbled out of the fireplace in Dumbledore's cottage and was surprised when he was gripped by the arms and held upright.

"A wizard of your power should be able to remain upright in the Floo," said Severus drolly as he used his hand to brush soot and ash off of Harry's shoulders and hair.

Harry grinned as he looked around the cottage. "Dumbledore has a place in Godric's Hollow?"

"Just outside the village, actually," said Severus, letting go of Harry just as Bill stepped out of the Floo.

Harry had moved to a window in the front room and was looking out at a quiet cobblestone street. The house they were in seemed to be at the end of the quaint lane. The homes here, though modest in size, had large front gardens and were spaced so far apart that Harry could only get glimpses of three other houses from his vantage point.

"The village is up there," said Severus, standing behind Harry and pointing up the road. "You can put it into perspective by comparing it to Hogsmeade. This cottage is about as far from Godric's Hollow proper as the Shrieking Shack is from Hogsmeade."

Harry stepped away from the window and looked around the cottage. It had an air of disuse and the smell of dust. Old-fashioned photographs sat on top of the upright piano. Several seemed to have fallen over and were lying face-down in their frames. The windows had dusty lace curtains and black draping covered several large paintings on the wall.

Severus' eyes followed Harry's as they scanned the room. He exchanged a quick glance over Harry's head with Bill.

"We'll be out back, I take it?" asked Bill.

"This way," answered Severus, putting his hand on Harry's shoulder and guiding him through the kitchen and to a small room that served as a library. Harry looked at the floor to ceiling shelves—why did he always think of Hermione when he was in a library?—but Severus was leading him to a door at the back of the room that led to an enclosed sun porch.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. The porch looked out over extensive gardens. The gardens opened up to a grassy field edged with a thick wood. Unlike the northern Scottish environs of Hogwarts, it appeared warmer here. The grass didn't have even a trace of snow or frost though the trees were still largely bare. He leaned closer to the large windows to look at the garden paths. They seemed to be earthen paths covered with moss and mulch instead of paving stones.

His legs were itching to run.

He looked over at Severus, a question on his tongue.
"Base rules first," said Snape, moving to stand in front of the door as he correctly interpreted the unasked question. "You will stay within sight of the house at all times. If you do well with this we will go into the forest after lunch. You will follow any directions we give you, including directions to transform back into your human form."

Harry nodded, his eyes again scanning the gardens and lawn. Behind him, Bill laughed.

"This is torture for him, Severus. Look—he practically twitching."

"To date, he's only transformed in Minerva's office," commented Severus. "Think of the trouble he can get into out there!"

"Can I go then?" asked Harry, turning from the window to Severus. Severus raised an eyebrow. Harry turned to Bill.

"Don't look at me!" Bill said.

"But you're my guardian!" exclaimed Harry. "You can trump him if you want!"

"Oh, let's not go there…" said Bill, smirking.

"Come on then," said Severus, opening the door for Harry and following him out to the closest garden. Bill closed the door behind them and stood on the brick stairs as Harry left them behind and walked purposefully out of the well-planned garden plots onto an open area with aged and gnarled fruit trees. He glanced only once behind him, at Severus who stood with arms crossed on the walkway and at Bill who stood on the stair with his hand on the railing. Severus nodded.

A step forward and he had transformed, tripping over his gangly legs. He wasted no time getting his footing but leapt forward, loping a bit awkwardly toward the trees and slowing to scrape his back against the bark of the first one he reached.

"Wow," said Bill, sitting down on the top stair. "A red. Coloring is off for the season, though. Has he named himself yet?"

"It hasn't come up," said Severus, eyes still trained forward on the doe. It blended in with the morning shadows, with the leaf-bare branches of the trees and shrubs. Even the grass had a washed-out look in the winter. "However, I expect it will be resolved after today."

"He's awfully light on his feet for a newbie," said Bill as Harry the doe gave up scratching her back and ran forward toward the end of the orchard.

"Lightfoot," said Severus. "It has merit, for sure." The doe had now stepped closer to the garden wall where an oak tree branched over from the lawn and a blanket of rotting leaves covered the grass.

"Acorns," laughed Bill as the doe spread her front legs and nuzzled into the leaf mulch.

"I'll wait for lunch, thank you," said Severus with a grin as he took a few steps forward, striving to keep the doe well in his sight.

The doe raised her head, still chewing, and fixed her gaze on the men near the house. Severus locked eyes with her then strode purposefully toward the closed gate. He pushed it open and stood back.

Harry the doe swallowed the acorns and eyed the open gate before her and the expanse of grass and beckoning woods beyond. She watched Bill walk over beside Severus but for some reason held her ground. Bill and Severus exchanged a glance then walked through the gate, leaving it open behind
them.

She was out and past them before they knew it, bounding forward and across the winter grass. The muscles in her legs stretched and pulled but didn't tire. The earth, cool and soft, gave slightly beneath her hoofed feet as she ran. She was only vaguely aware of the moment when the gentle loping gave way to coordinated leaps, all four legs off the ground at once, coming down together, followed by the push of her hindquarters to make herself airborne again. The trees were tantalizingly close and the doe pushed toward them while Harry reluctantly reined in the instinctive desire to blend in with the shadows and changed direction, charging back up the gentle slope toward the south wall of the gardens.

As Harry sailed through the air and leapt again, his body airborne more than earthbound, his human mind told him You're flying…it's just like flying…

"He's flying," said Bill softly. "Trust Harry to fly without wings."

They watched together as doe Harry slowed at the garden wall, turned and trotted back out into the sun. She stopped and stood motionless a moment then turned her head slowly to stare back at the two men. After a moment, she flicked her tail and bent again to nibble beneath the turf, then raised her head and stared again at the distant trees.

"He's wanting to go there," said Bill. "How long do you plan to hold him off?"

"Until he is tired of running," said Severus. "Look."

Bill looked up just as the doe started walking forward again, the snack forgotten. She took only a few slow steps before leaping nearly straight up into the air then running again, moving toward the trees at the end of the lawn.

In his human form, Harry loved to run. He'd become quite good at it as a child, when speed and his own two feet were his only defenses against his bully of a cousin and Dudley's oafish friends. He still loved to run, though he didn't run for protection anymore, enjoying the burn and stretch of muscles as his feet flew over the grass, the rapid pumping of his heart, thrumming loudly to remind him of his effort as he reached his destination and slowed to a walk.

Running as a human required conscious thought, the decision to push himself to make it to his destination faster, to not be late to class, to make it back to Gryffindor Tower before curfew, to reach the Headmaster before something or someone hurt Victor Krum.

But running as a deer was as natural as walking, as instinctive as freezing. His human mind was beginning to have less influence the more he ran, though it must have been his human brain that soared along with his body when he leapt forward and sailed to the next landing, front legs hitting the ground a fraction of a moment before the back, then the back pushing back against the earth and launching him up and forward again.

Trees!

He skidded to a shaky halt just inside the forest, turned his head a fraction to see the two human shapes running down the gentle slope toward him.

"Harry!" He could see the darker-haired man trailing the redhead by a few yards, but it was he who had called out to him.

Without a second thought he transformed back to his human self and moved toward the men, out of the shadows.
"Sorry! I'm sorry!"

Bill reached him first and bent down, holding his own knees, laughing through his panting.

Severus had slowed to a jog from a flat out run as soon as he'd seen the mop of black hair. He walked the last few steps and joined Harry and Bill.

"You heard me call?" he asked, looking at Harry and taking in the flushed face and bright eyes.

"Yeah. I heard. I didn't realize I had gotten this far."

"Come back out for a while, then. Let's go have a drink inside and warm up before we have a go at the woods."

"Warm up? I'm burning up already!" protested Harry, but following Severus and Bill nonetheless.

Severus turned to face him, walking backward but keeping up the pace.

"Do you have a name?" he asked, seemingly from left field.

"You mean other than Harry?" quipped Harry.

"You know what I mean," answered Severus, turning around and continuing onward. Harry followed, thinking hard, but no name came to him.

If Harry thought that letting loose in the meadow and sailing over the treeless ground was exhilarating, the second half of his day—after a break and a quick lunch—spent grazing in the shadows of the trees, standing motionless behind conifers, oaks and beeches, drinking with splayed front legs from a cool stream, was restorative. Severus and Bill sat on a tarp draped over a thick bed of dry pine needles, warmed by warming charms and the bottom half of a bottle of fire whiskey they'd brought down with them from the cottage. Harry the doe didn't stray too far off, taking time to sniff and smell and taste and listen. She found a branch the perfect height from the ground to walk under to scratch her back and rubbed her flanks against the rough bark of the pine. She was disinterested in the conversation of Severus and Bill, even though she knew they were often speaking of her, analyzing her movements, discussing the logistical benefits of being able to transform into a deer and disappear into the woods. She ambled off to drink again from the stream, wading in it for a distance then standing still and alert before she lowered her head, tasting the new smell on the air. Lifting her head, she connected the new smell with the strangers across the creek—three roe deer, frozen in place, staring at the red, solitary stranger. One of them flicked an ear. In greeting? In warning? Harry's doe thought the latter.

The doe stared at them, fascinated. The smell of the other deer wafted across the water, as strong to her delicate senses as the odor in the Quidditch changing rooms after a long, tough game. These deer were different, yet the same, not like her yet more like her than anything she'd yet encountered in this form. As one, they turned and ran, tails upright, disappearing into the depths of the forest without a sound.

The doe watched them go, her eyes and ears alert, then turned from the stream and picked her way back toward the men on the tarp. She stood listening to them for several moments, cataloging their fire-whisky influenced conversation, then transformed back into Harry, walked out of the shadows and dropped down beside them. He held out his hand toward Bill, who had the nearly-empty bottle cradled in his lap.
"I could use a quick warm-up," he said.

Bill began to hand the bottle to Harry, stopped himself, and glanced over at Severus. Severus rolled his eyes.

"Go ahead. There's not enough left to do him any harm."

Harry grinned and took a swallow, feeling the effects of the liquid warming his extremities. He stared at his hands a moment, at the complexity of ten fingers and 54 bones. He moved his thumb to grip the bottle more tightly.

"What's so fascinating?" asked Severus.

"Opposable thumb," answered Harry. He looked at Severus and grinned broadly. "Maybe that's why animals don't develop drinking habits—no opposable thumbs. Can't pick up the bottles…"

Bill play-cuffed him on the side of the head.

"So, did you enjoy your time in the woods?" Bill checked his wristwatch and shivered. "You've been nosing about for three hours. It's a wonder we didn't completely finish that bottle."

"Yeah, I did. I saw some other deer. Just now, before I came back here."

Severus sat up. "You'll want to be careful with that, Harry, especially early on. There are different deer species in Britain…"

"I know. These were different. Roes, I think. They were across the creek—I saw them while I was drinking and wading."

Severus nodded and stood.

"I expect you'll eventually want to go find more reds. They may accept you over time."

"Will they know… I mean, will they know I'm different?" asked Harry. He didn't understand why he wanted them not to know.

Severus half-smiled. "I don't know. You looked and acted every bit a young deer to me today, but then again, I'm not a deer. Does it matter?"

Bill was looking at him curiously.

"Yeah, it does. But I don't know why. I just kind of want to be…." He shook his head. "I don't know…"

"Anonymous?" supplied Bill.

Harry looked down, trying to hide his smile.

"I heard you talking before," said Harry, still addressing his lap. "Right before I transformed back."

"Spying as a deer is still spying, Harry," commented Severus. Still, he looked intrigued. "You recall all that you heard?"

Harry looked up, a bit sadly. "Yeah, I do. I listened on purpose. I was trying to sneak up on you. My human mind seems to butt in every now and then."
"And spying in the corridor is a very Harry Potter sort of thing to do," offered Severus.

"Hey!" Harry reached out and pushed at Severus boot, then held out his hand to Severus. Severus took it and pulled Harry to his feet. Bill stood as well, then flicked his wand to banish the tarp once they had all stepped off of it.

"You were talking about the Headmaster," said Harry from behind the other two as they made their way out of the woods and onto the lawn, heading up to the cottage.

"We were, indeed," said Snape, not opening any doors.

"And this house," said Harry. "Something about a tragedy."

"That is the Headmaster's story to tell," said Severus, not unkindly. "He offered the house and grounds for our use today; he may not be averse to you asking him some questions about it."

Harry was silent for a few moments.

"He grew up here? In Godric's Hollow?"

"He spent part of his childhood here, yes," answered Severus.

"So did I," said Harry.

"Indeed, you did."

"Funny that he never mentioned that before," said Harry, jogging to keep up with the longer strides of Severus and Bill.

"Let's get in and get warm," said Severus. "We will discuss this more once we have made tea."

"Has a name come to you yet, Harry?" asked Bill. He walked backwards a few strides to converse with Harry.

Harry shook his head. "No idea. Is it supposed to take this long?"

They climbed the stairs to the cottage and settled in the living room while Severus conjured a neat tea tray with chocolate digestive biscuits.

"May I make a suggestion, Harry?" asked Severus, pushing a mug of tea toward him. "About your Animagus name?"

"Sure," answered Harry. He cupped his hands around the cup, absurdly grateful to have fingers instead of hooves, and let it warm them.

"In mythology, the messenger between gods and mortals is depicted with winged feet or sandals. He is Hermes in the Greek and Mercury in the Roman. Either name is fine, though both have other associations, including being protectors of thieves and guides to the underworld, that are less apropos."

"Winged feet," said Harry, considering the image. He smiled. "Yeah, that's what it feels like when I run. I like that."

"The name 'Lightfoot' came to me earlier while you played in the field." He caught Harry's eye. "It seems to suit not only your new form but your mood as well when you are in the form."
Harry considered, turning the word over on his tongue.

Bill spoke up then. "It's a good suggestion, Severus. I can see Lightfoot leaping over the grass and standing perfectly still listening to us in the wood."

"Gender neutral too," mused Harry. He tried the name out loud. "Lightfoot. I like it. It feels right too." He took a long drink of tea. "Lightfoot it is, then. Thanks, Severus."

Severus nodded, acknowledging Harry's gratitude. He felt absurdly proud for having come up with an appropriate name for Harry in his Animagus form. Naming was not something to be taken lightly, not in the wizarding world anyway. Names carried weight and meaning and sometimes, a burden. Names like "The Boy Who Lived," or "The Chosen One." He truly thought Harry could carry this name forward and not be tempted to shake it off and leave it on the roadside for someone else to find and carry.

"You were going to tell me about the Headmaster..." said Harry after a time.

"Harry," said Bill. "Don't assume that Albus has been keeping everything from you deliberately. The wizarding world of Britain is fairly small. There aren't that many villages where wizards and Muggles exist together in large numbers. This is one of them—quite a few wizarding families are from Godric's Hollow."

"Still, it's something we share," said Harry. "And he's never mentioned it. He goes out of his way to show ways that I'm similar to...to Voldemort but doesn't even mention that he and I come from the same village."

Severus had involuntarily winced at Harry's uttering of the Dark Lord's name but didn't chastise him for voicing it. He simply could not tell Harry what had happened here at this cottage so many years ago. He couldn't tell him that Dumbledore couldn't bear to mention the cottage by name, calling it "my property." "Take Harry to my property, Severus. He will be safe within the wards there, and there is room for him to run." He dare not lift the photographs that rested face down on the piano, or remove the drapes from the portraits on the wall.

Bill, in his rocking chair, looked thoughtful. Bill knew precisely what most Order members knew. That this was Dumbledore's childhood home. That Dumbledore did not speak of his childhood, but that Abeforth sometimes did. That something tragic had happened here. That the house was an Order Safehouse, but that the furnishings were to be left exactly as they were when it was in use.

Severus, however, knew a bit more.

"If the Headmaster strives to show you how you are similar to the Dark Lord, his intention is certainly to show you how different you are despite having similar backgrounds. Do not forget his message, Harry—that it is your choices that make you different. That being said, you should know that you are the first and only person outside of the Order that has been in this house in more than ninety years."

Harry's mouth dropped open. He looked around the house again.

"Harry, I do not approve of the Headmaster keeping important things from you, things about you or the prophecy that affect you directly. But in inviting you to come here today, he is showing you a great deal of trust—and love. He does not owe you an explanation for not telling you earlier that you and he share this thing. But do ask him, if you'd like—politely, of course."

Harry nodded, mollified.
"How 'bout you tell me about that trip to Liverpool, Harry?" said Bill. "Ron and Ginny came home over the holidays with some very interesting t-shirts."

Harry laughed and launched into the highlights of the trip while Severus sat back and sipped his tea, watching Harry relive a carefree weekend when he wasn't worrying about the Headmaster's secrets, or Severus being called, or his growing feelings for a certain Miss Weasley. Bill was a good age to mentor Harry, he thought, with siblings Harry's age and not too far out of Hogwarts to forget the fun and mischief of being a student at a boarding school. Yet he was an upstanding member of society too, with a secure job, a bright future, a beautiful, smart woman wanting to partner with him in life. He didn't answer to a madman. Wasn't beholden to the greatest wizard of his time, but worked for him freely and willingly. Bill wasn't just a good replacement for Severus should Severus lose his life during this cursed war, he was a good replacement for Severus in general.

Harry liked Bill, it was plain to see. Bill was decidedly cool. Bill was exciting. Bill was a Weasley. But when Harry looked over at Severus while telling Bill about Liverpool, he sought affirmation and confirmation in Severus' eyes. He drew Severus into him, checked to make sure he was present, listening, aware.

Harry liked Bill.

But Harry needed Severus.

Six months ago, he would have felt like a deer caught in the headlights at that realization, frozen in fear, terror-stricken. His instinct would have paralleled the deer's as well – flight as soon as he was able.

But today, when confronted by the reality that he was needed, he entertained the brief hope that he could survive what was ahead.

If he couldn't, if he didn't, there was always Bill.

Chapter 21

January 27 – January 30, 1997

-Harry-

Monday dragged on and on for Harry. He felt strangely confined today, both within his body and within the stone walls of the castle. He overslept, nearly missed breakfast and showed up at Herbology without his textbook. At lunch, he pushed his food around on his plate while Ron prattled on about Bill's girlfriend.

"You mean he didn't even mention her?" he asked, staring incredulously at Harry once again. Why, after Harry had spent an entire day with Bill and Severus outside of Hogwarts, learning to get his feet under himself so to speak in his Animagus form, did Ron only want to talk about Fleur Delacour?

"No, he didn't," replied Harry. "Should he have?" He poked at his chicken pie and idly stabbed at a potato.

"Should he have?" said Ron. "Should he have? If you were engaged to the most beautiful girl in the world, wouldn't you talk about her?"
"Oh, yeah. They're engaged. I forgot about that," said Harry, distractedly as Lavender glared at Ron from her spot two places down from him, next to Seamus. Personally, he thought Fleur was all right. She had a certain charm that had appealed to him when he was a fourth year, but lately he was more attracted to girls with, say, red hair and athletic builds. He unconsciously sought out Ginny at the table, and when he caught her eye, she rolled her eyes at him and mouthed "Phlegm." He bit back a smile.

The day stretched on. By ten o'clock, when he finally climbed in bed after finishing all his homework, meeting with the Quidditch team to schedule February practices after the long January off-time and replying to Severus' letter from the week before, he was finally beginning to feel at home in his own skin.

He pulled his curtains closed and had barely laid his head on his pillow when his head began to explode with pain. He sat up, choking back a cry, concentrating on the pain a moment. Certain that Severus was being called—again, so soon after the last one—he managed a moment of rational thought then kicked himself free of the covers and without another thought transformed into Lightfoot. The crushing pain, which had felt like a gale-force wind trapped within the confines of his skull, immediately ebbed and within moments became only a distracted memory. Lightfoot sighed, if indeed a deer could sigh, glanced out the window at the star-filled sky, staring at the shadows at the edge of the forest, then closed her eyes and slept.

27 January, 1997

Monday

Dear Severus:

If we have any more days out like our day yesterday, we're going to have to do them on Saturdays so I have a day to recover before classes. You should be thankful we didn't have Defense today—I was pants in Charms, was late to Transfiguration and forgot my Herbology book. I even almost missed breakfast. I just felt all wrong for most of the day—like I really wanted to be outside running again. You know, there's a certain attraction to being in animal form when you're a teenager and the other alternative is to go to class cooped up with a whole bunch of other teenagers, having to sit still and take notes and listen to a professor drone on. (You know I'm talking about Binns, right? You certainly don't drone on. I would never call what you do droning, now, would I?) Maybe that's why most wizards and witches don't learn Animagus transformation until they're out of school—probably had really high dropout rates, right? I mean, take someone like Crabbengoyle. Say, for instance, that they, by some ripple in the cosmic fabric, defy all expectations and manage the Animagus transformation. Once they change into their new form—something strong with a small brain and a big appetite like an ox or a dairy cow—and realize that in that form they don't have to read, use a quill, take a shower or say, wipe themselves—they'd never change back!

You know, I had a great day yesterday even though it left me so out of sorts today. Thanks for inviting Bill. It was great to see him again. I wouldn't have minded if you'd asked Minerva instead, or even the Headmaster, but since I don't get to see Bill during the school year I really appreciated the chance to spend time with both of you.

I never knew acorns could taste good, especially mushy half-rotten ones. Well, I wouldn't say good but they were incredibly satisfying. Don't get any ideas—like having the house-elves serve them to me on my dinner plate instead of my treacle tart or anything disturbing like that—but I'll take them when I'm Lightfoot any time.
Alright – getting back to your letter now. I'm sitting here trying to imagine you as Headmaster of Hogwarts. All that power at your fingertips…the ability to influence the main dish at every meal. The power to reinstitute corporal punishment as an alternative to detentions. The ability to use the school's funds to pay for new state-of-the-art brooms for the Slytherin Quidditch team. Of course, it would be your responsibility too to deal with Peeves and the Board of Governors and Muggle parents who wonder how their children are doing in maths and all of that. It wouldn't be ALL fun and games! I wonder what your welcome speech would be after the sorting? "Dear Students—welcome to another fun-filled year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This year, we have banned all products from WWW and Zonko's and have changed the school uniform to include spats and waistcoats for the boys and floor-length dresses and chastity belts for the girls. You'll notice as well that all prefects are from Slytherin House. At this time, I'd like to award the house cup to (dramatic pause)…..Slytherin House!"

Are you sure you don't want to be a healer? And do you really think I'd be a good one? (healer, that is) I'd have to be a specialist to make enough money so that you can enjoy the carefree lifestyle of a professional Quidditch Player, though.

Now—about any future children I might have. Don't assume they'll all be messy-haired and green-eyed (though I'd like to guarantee you at least ONE to assure you three generations of Potter torture). I think other hair colors—red, for example—come through pretty strongly in family lines. Yeah, I know my mum had red hair but I figure all the rest of her kids, if she'd had had time to have any more, would have been redheads.

That's weird, and really sad, thinking about the brothers and sisters I might have had, if Voldemort hadn't come around. I always think about what he took away from me, but this is the first time I've ever really thought about a big family—little brothers and sisters. I could have been like Bill is, an admired big brother to all the other Weasleys. Well, my luck I'd have gotten a whole brood of annoying little sisters I'd have had to protect and take care of, but it still would have been better than what I ended up with.

I know, I know. I'll stop feeling sorry for myself…water under the bridge, right? Keep my eyes—and my mind—looking forward.

I'm really beginning to worry about getting that memory from Professor Slughorn. I'm going to take your advice and get at him from another angle. I guess I'm really going to have to buy into that Slug Club crap, right? I'll give it another try soon. I have no idea when the Headmaster is going to call another one of our sessions, but it's been nearly a month since the last one already.

You asked me a question at the end of your letter. It's a good one…what two people would I take with me to a deserted island?

To give a really good answer, I'd need to know more. How long will we be on the island? How big is it (as in—could I get away from these companions now and then)? How warm is it (as in—will I need to cuddle up with another human at night to stay warm)?

But knowing only what I know about the island (practically nothing), I have to think along practical lines. Of course, there is an obvious choice between good company and good help or protection. Hagrid, for example, would be dead useful on an island but it would be almost impossible to hide from him and if he got all sad and melancholy we'd probably drown in his tears.

Hermione would be great—she's really clever and incredibly calm in a pinch. But I can't take both Ron and Hermione since they're not talking now (though maybe a romp on a deserted island would bring them back together) and Ron had a tendency to sleep half his life away so even though I'll miss them, I'm leaving the behind.
I've known all along who my choices are...just dragging out telling you.

You and Ginny.

That is, if you insist I take two. Can't I only just take Ginny? I'm sure that within a year or two we'd be able to produce that third person anyway.

You'd be the level-headed one, brave, wise, smart, great to talk to and could brew all sorts of useful potions (like a hangover potion from the coconut rum we'd make and of course a handy contraception potion). I don't think I have to tell you why I'd choose Ginny, but she's brave and smart too, practical, strong but soft in all the right places. Plus, I know you'd get along with her too, and if you close your eyes and squint she'd remind you of my mum.

If we're there long enough, and you run out of ingredients for that contraception potion I mentioned, I'd trust you to babysit little James Severus while we pop over to the other side of the island for some private time.

Well, I just reread your letter to make sure I remembered everything and now I have that picture of Aunt Petunia pulling off her shirt and honestly, I may have to gouge my eyes out. Thanks for that.

Guess it's time for my question then. Why did you choose Bill Weasley to be my second guardian?

I'm pretty sure you'll say "I told you so," but I'm exhausted. I think I overdid it yesterday after being sick all week.

See you in class tomorrow—looking forward to that surprise quiz you mentioned to me yesterday. I doubt the Gryffindors will be as surprised as the Slytherins, though.

 Regards,

Harry

"Harry! You overslept again! Harry!"

The curtains of his bed were pulled back and Harry groggily opened his eyes and looked at his best friend. He blinked.

"What the hell? Harry?"

Harry shook his head, realizing in his foggy brain that he'd spent the night curled up on top of his covers in his Animagus form. Dimly, he remembered the pain of Severus being summoned.

"Come on mate, change back! We're going to be late for Defense if you don't hurry!"

Harry concentrated and transformed back, rubbing his forehead though his scar no longer hurt. He looked out the window, seemingly surprised to see daylight, then moved his gaze back to Ron.

"Yeah. Thanks for waking me up. Do I have time to shower?"

"No—class is in fifteen minutes. Just get dressed and let's get going. I'll wait for you in the common room."

Harry was grabbing his robes, putting on his shoes and trying to pack his book bag all at the same time. He and Ron were out of the common room within ten minutes, approaching the Defense
classroom together just as class was set to start. Snape stood guarding the door. He stared at Harry but did not say a word as Harry and Ron slipped by him and found seats at the back of the room.

But when Snape walked past Harry toward the front of the room a moment later, Harry could not help but notice his limp.

-Severus-

Severus dropped Harry's homework assignment onto his desk. The parchment rolled back up, hiding the letter he had just read. Harry had obviously written the letter before Severus had been summoned Monday night, as there was no mention of the summons or the pain Harry had undoubtedly felt with it. Well, he'd have to address it in his reply. There was no way around it.

He thought back to Harry's Defense class on Tuesday. The boy's eyes had been glued to him throughout the entire session. He'd tried his best to hide the slight limp, but the extensive bruising on his hip had made walking difficult and painful. He'd spent most of the class period sitting behind his desk while the students practiced blocking the body bind spell. Harry had ended up in the infirmary after failing to block Longbottom's spell and falling backward and knocking heads with Weasley. Weasley yelled "OW!" but stayed on his feet, rubbing his head. Harry, on the other hand, tried to stand after Longbottom cancelled the spell but was obviously dizzy and glassy-eyed. Glassy-eyed or not, he managed to glare at Severus when he was sent to visit Madam Pomfrey, and the glare clearly delivered, perhaps with a small serving of Severus' Legilimency, the message "Shouldn't you be going too?"

Severus sat up straight in his desk chair, pressing the small of his back against the slats in the back of the chair and adjusting his hip against the small pillow he'd wedged between the side of the chair and his body. Two days later and he was left with only residual soreness. The bruise paste had cleaned up the rest of the mottled yellow and purple bruising. Harry might assume that he'd been the victim of a prolonged attack of Cruciates from the Dark Lord, but in fact his injuries had occurred after the meeting, when he'd literally gotten caught in the middle of a duel between sisters Bella and Narcissa. A blasting curse from Bella aimed at Narcissa had glanced his hip and tossed him against a wall.

No, his job was not getting any easier. Narcissa, always on edge because of Draco, had a twitchy wand hand and Bella did not like the Dark Lord's trust in Severus.

And how was he to respond to Harry's clever retort on his "chosen" position as Headmaster of Hogwarts? When Harry had posed his question in his previous letter—giving Severus a choice of potential "dream" careers—and Severus had chosen Headmaster of Hogwarts, he hadn't yet had his meeting with the Dark Lord where the bastard pronounced that he had hand-picked Severus himself to ascend to Dumbledore's position. Of course, the "appointment" presumed that the Dark Lord would take over the ministry and that Draco….Draco…would complete his appointed task.

Severus stood and glanced at the clock on his desk. As he watched it, it edged from "Gryffindor Tower" to "In Trouble."

Blast! What was that child up to now?

30 January, 1997

Thursday
Dear Harry:

It is Thursday night, around nine p.m., and you are up to something. I am warning you now that I will not take kindly to discovering that you were out prowling about the castle under your invisibility cloak, especially if you are up to anything other than nicking a late night snack from the kitchens. I shall be checking the detention roster in the morning and speaking with the other professors and Mr. Filch to see if any students were caught out of bounds last night. While I know it is impossible to expect a sixteen-year-old to obey every rule every time, I hope it was not your curiosity over a certain Slytherin's activities that caused my mantel clock to move to "In Trouble" just after I glanced at it to see that you were safely ensconced in Gryffindor Tower.

As for the timing of any future "outings" we may have, recall, please, that our original plans called for our adventure to occur on Saturday. I changed the plans and delayed until Sunday to give you an additional day to recover from your illness last week. With the extent of your activities in the field Sunday morning, I cannot help but wonder what you would have done as Lightfoot had you been in top form. Perhaps you would have leapt over the stream to join the Roan on the other side, disappearing into the forest to live out the remainder of your life as a deer. And while there is a certain attraction to never having to work again, study for an exam (or mark the infernal things) or face a dark lord, I fear you would miss your friends, especially a certain Miss Weasley.

So, you think that I, as headmaster of this venerable institution, would be satisfied with changing the discipline structure and dress code and elevating Slytherin House to its deserved position? While your ideas are indeed good ones that I shall definitely evaluate should the opportunity ever arise, I believe my first act as Headmaster would be to abolish the singing of that insipid school song. Is it too late to change my choice for my dream career? More and more I am thinking that the better choice would be a Motivational Speaker. I would, of course, speak on the value of total abstinence (life-long, of course) and would certainly secure engagements in schools throughout Europe—magical and Muggle alike. I am relatively certain that I will be quite successful and the already abysmally low marriage rate on the continent will plummet even further.

I would urge you, Harry, to step up your quest to secure that memory from Professor Slughorn. Perhaps the Headmaster has not scheduled another meeting with you because there isn't yet a reason to do so. Professor Slughorn will not be an easy nut to crack, especially given the subject matter which he decidedly would rather forget, but you may do well to stroke his ego a bit. Well, perhaps more than a bit. I don't think you can possibly inflate his head any more so lay it on.

Before I answer your question about the oldest Weasley, let me first take some time to discuss with you the youngest.

While I am indeed honored to be on your "short list" for companions on our hypothetic deserted island, it is obvious that I would be left floating on the life raft if the aforementioned Weasley was in the picture. I do not have many opportunities to see Miss Weasley together with her current boyfriend (Mr. Thomas, I believe?) as they are not in the same year and thus not in the same classes. That being said, last term I caught them out past curfew once or twice and found them in rather compromising positions before curfew as well. Indeed, they spent two rather interesting detentions with me in November "harvesting" the swim bladders from goldfish. It is now almost February, and they are either doing a phenomenal job of hiding from me, are extremely lucky, or simply are not engaging in the type of activity that would merit detentions. I do not want to give you false hope but felt that, given your obvious desire to get to know the young lady better, this bit of information might motivate you to verify it and to watch the young couple more closely lest another boy try to move in before you get up your nerve.

Now, before you run off to spy upon the snogging couples in the Astronomy Tower, let me address
your hormonal issue.

Bear with me, Harry. I do not necessarily take pleasure in asking teenage boys to reign in their primal urges, so to speak. But your rather frequent mention of procreation (resulting in the actual production of new little Potters) has made the alarm bells go off in my head. I recall that in previous letters I discussed the school's policy of taking "paired off" students to their Head of House and Madam Pomfrey for "the talk." "The talk" is meant to convince them not to procreate by enumerating the unpleasantries of parenthood. I shall simply take it as a given that when you mention populating an island with new Potters (James Severus? Why can it not be Severus James? Or better yet, Severus Ignatius or Severus Nobilis or some other appropriate name?), you are contemplating doing so at some date in the future, most likely in the next century. As long as I can go on blindly assuming that the next Potter to enter the world will not do so until you are shaving twice a day (out of necessity) instead of twice a week, I will allow our happy chatter in these regular missives to continue.

Mind you, however—don't count on me to be the workhorse on that island paradise while you and Miss Weasley go traipsing off to "pick coconuts." Contraceptive potions require a variety of ingredients and you will be responsible for searching for the appropriate shells, roots, leaves and animal scat. Yes, I said "scat." Look it up.

And now, I believe it is time for me to answer your question about Mr. Weasley. You asked why I chose him as your second guardian. I did so, even though the Headmaster had other ideas, because I was looking for the proper balance of adult influences in your life. Minerva serves as primary as she is your Head of House, is strict and will keep you on the straight and narrow as far as possible. She is honest and upright to the core. You will not be able to pull the wool over her eyes and she will make sure that you arrive at your seventeenth birthday well prepared to face your adulthood. Minerva is an excellent choice for guardian for all of these reasons, but she is not necessarily the best choice as a mentor for you. Arthur and Molly Weasley would be excellent choices as parents—they have done an admirable job raising their other children, but you, Harry, need more attention than they can realistically give you. Bill Weasley, however, has the qualities I recognize as critical in a mentor. He is young still, so you identify with him. He has a stable job, is a member of the Order, is quite gifted magically and, importantly, he is a member of a family to which you are close—a veritable “older brother” for you. In addition, he is not yet permanently attached to anyone else, and does not have his own children to take precedence over his care of you. He is not likely to have either while you are still sixteen.

Allow me to be blunt, Harry. Bill is a logical replacement for me, should a replacement ever be necessary. I do not claim to have all the qualities I described in him, at least not in the same measures, but should I become unavailable to you—temporarily or permanently—I want you to have someone to mentor you through whatever comes next.

As I know this will be a theme in your return letter to me, let me now address the events of Monday night. I was summoned rather late in the evening, and spent a relatively short time in the Dark Lord's presence. However, I ran into some trouble after the meeting, with some brawling stragglers, and was injured when attempting to intervene. I am recovered now and the injury itself was not serious, only painful. I do not know how you spent the time while I was gone, but trust you did so either in occlusion or as Lightfoot. I suspect you did not know of my injuries until you came to class, as you did not look overly worried when you and Mr. Weasley ran into class at the very last moment, and I applaud you for your ability to hide within yourself and not seek out the connection and open up any chance of the Dark Lord discovering this link.

My question to you now: If being a Gryffindor was not an option, which house do you believe you would have been sorted into, and why?
On that note, I will end this letter and go roam the corridors in search of offenders. If you are out there, Mr. Potter, you won't see me coming…

Regards,

Severus

He slipped out into the dungeon corridor a few moments later, clad, as always, in black from head to toe. Sometimes he wondered what he would have done with his hair had he been born a blonde…it certainly would have negated the whole effect. He took the great stairs up to the second floor and ducked his head inside the infirmary. Perhaps Harry's "In Trouble" indicated some physical malady. But no, about half the beds were still occupied with flu patients, but Harry was not among them. He passed the stone gargoyles guarding the Headmaster's office and thought in passing of a password appropriate to a Potions Master turned Defense Instructor turned Headmaster. The word "bezoar" came to mind, but he discarded it as too obvious and chastened himself for letting his mind go in that direction. He would not think about it again—he would not—until he was faced with having to go up those stairs to take over the office.

Up more stairs, behind tapestries—he knew the shortcuts too—skipping over the trick stair until he was in the Gryffindor corridor, but around the corner from the portrait hole entrance. He knew each of the recesses where the Gryffindor couples hid, just as he knew them in the corridors near each of the other houses. He leaned against a wall in the shadows and listened. Nothing was out of place. Not a noise to be heard, not an errant gasp or a sharp intake of breath. He waited only a moment more before going to Minerva’s office. She opened the door several moments after his soft knock.

Harry was sitting on her sofa, glaring at Dean Thomas, who sat opposite him on a wingback chair. Thomas has a fat lip and was holding an icepack on it. Harry had a gash in the bridge of his nose and had his glasses, broken at the nosepiece, clutched in his right hand.

"Professor Snape," greeted Minerva, carefully suppressing a smile. "Please allow me to finish with these two young men and I'll be right with you."

He backed out into the corridor without a word and leaned against the wall. The door opened a moment later and the two boys exited, Harry shooting a puzzled look at Severus as he passed. Severus watched the two disappear around the corner, then opened the office door and walked in.

"I've given them detention with you on Saturday, during their first post-holiday Quidditch practice. They are not happy."

Severus smiled. "No, they wouldn't be, would they? Miss Weasley's on the team, after all."

The two professors smiled at each other, and Severus dropped onto the couch and accepted the glass of scotch Minerva pressed into his hand.

Chapter 22

February 2 – February 8, 1997

-Harry-
After the longest weekend in the world, it was finally Sunday night. Harry had spent quite a bit of time that day finishing his homework, since Saturday had been filled with their first Apparition lesson followed by a seemingly endless detention with Snape. He’d served detention with Dean, of course, which meant that he’d had the "pleasure" of spending nearly three hours with "Snape" instead of "Severus," being subjected to the kind of Snape-like treatment he got in Defense class. He’d come terribly close to earning another detention by kicking the door frame in frustration just when Severus had opened it to admit them. The glare Severus had given him, after the verbal warning, had its own message in it. He had more of those glares as the weekend progressed, mainly from Ginny whenever they happened to be in the same room. Hermione had taken him aside to find out what exactly happened with Dean, and seemed almost amused after listening to his explanation. Girls!

Now he was stretched out on his bed. It was already nearly ten p.m., past curfew, and he was itching to get out of the confines of the castle. He tamped down the urge and picked up the letter Severus had handed him in class on Friday. He’d been angrier than he should have been at the time and had stuffed it in his bag with a glare and without reading it. He’d skimmed it quickly yesterday and now carefully unrolled it, said the spell to reveal Severus' words and leaned back to read it again.

He closed his eyes when he was finished. His wand hovered above him, lit with a Lumos and shedding soft reading light in the confines of his curtained four-poster. So much had happened since Severus had written that letter—the letter that contained all the cautionary advice about a certain "Miss Weasley," the words of encouragement regarding her relationship with "Mr. Thomas." Incredibly, unbelievably, Severus was trying to help him. Give him hope.

But the hopeless, nervous Bludger in his gut right now outweighed the fluttery Snitch of hope Severus' words gave him. He was going to have to talk to Ginny and apologize—for what, he didn't yet know.

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2 February, 1997

Sunday

Dear Severus:

She hates me. She really hates me. I swear girls are so complicated! Ever since Thursday night she's avoided me and when we do cross paths, she just glares at me and then looks away. She's been hanging out with Luna and this other Ravenclaw fifth year—Estelle something or other—and Luna keeps giving me this look ...like she's totally exasperated with my stupidity or something. But Ginny...she looks hurt! I don't understand girls, Severus. I didn't even do anything. Well, not to her anyway. I just tried to get Dean to shut up about her. He came into our dorm room mad about something and started kicking things around. One of my shoes was on the floor and he kicked it under his bed. I asked him to get it back out and he just kind of glared at me and flopped on his bed. Then I heard him muttering something about Ginny. Seamus called out from his bed something like "What's wrong, Dean? She still not putting out for you?" And Dean said (not his exact words, but damn close) "What do you think? She's becoming a damn prude!"

I don't know what happened to me. I should have been thrilled that she was pulling back from him—it confirmed what I'd been noticing myself, anyway. But instead I got up and got in his face and told him not to call Ginny names like that. And he said "What's it to you, Harry?" Then he got this look on his face and it was like the penny dropped. He figured it out—that I liked her. I didn't say anything else but he punched me right in the nose and knocked me back on the floor. I went for my wand but he was on me before I could get it out. We knocked each other around before Seamus and
Neville managed to pull us apart. He got in a parting shot and broke my glasses—and, it turns out, my nose too.

Unfortunately, Minerva was down in the common room talking with the fifth years—including Ginny—about their O.W.L.s. She showed up in our room within a minute and made us follow her to her office—right through the middle of the O.W.L. group. I saw Ginny pull Seamus aside to find out what happened. Then YOU show up when we're in her office! I'd like to think that was just coincidence but I suspect a certain tattle-tale clock.

Thanks, by the way, for the great detention Saturday. The rest of the team really laid into me—well, to both Dean and me, actually—for getting detention. It wasn't such a big deal that I wasn't there since I'm the Seeker and you can always practice without a Seeker. But not having Dean hurt. They pulled in Cormac to fly with them but that seemed to set Ron off even more. He didn't talk to me at all Saturday after practice. He acted like I missed practice on purpose—like me and Dean having detention with you was a PICNIC or something. I'm still half nauseous just THINKING about working with those dragon bogeys. Who even knew that dragons HAD bogeys? But at least now I know EVERYTHING there is to know about them, and how they're collected, and how they're used in potions ingredients, thanks to that two-foot essay you set us. It wasn't enough, was it, that I already knew how they feel when you have to pick them up with you bare hands and separate them into individual "portions" of EXACTLY ten cc and then try to force them into miniscule little potions vials? That was absolutely the grossest thing I've ever had to do—except possibly get my wand out of that troll's nose...

Right. Calming down. I'm calming down. I know you got a huge kick out of having me and Dean do that, and staying in the room the whole time marking essays and watching us glare at each other and gag. You probably gave a very detailed report to Minerva and the two of you got together Saturday night in your office and giggled like teenagers while you drank some "adult beverages" and planned your next attack.

Since I spent most of today doing homework, and groveling to the Quidditch team to get them to forgive me, and trying to write an apology note to Ginny (I just wished I knew what I was apologizing for), I guess the ONLY bright spot this whole weekend was the Apparition lesson on Saturday. Since you were there, I don't have to go into details about the Ministry instructor and the wooden hoops that strongly resemble another kind of recreational hoop. Really, though—who would want to keep going on with this when we might lose a leg? And what if no one's around to help sort it out when it happens? And why wasn't there blood spurting out? I'm thinking that brooms are a perfectly fine way to travel. Anyway, since I called the lesson a bright spot...I suppose I should be more upbeat about it. Well, honestly, it was hysterical to watch everyone (and yes, I know I should have been paying more attention to the instructor and really concentrating on the three Ds). No one had a CLUE what to do—not even Hermione—but Twytcross (that was his name, wasn't it) didn't seem the least bit concerned. It's like he expected us to fail and to splinch ourselves.

Well, I'm not going to bother much about responding to your talk about abstinence and the "youngest Weasley" and procreation and stuff. After Thursday night, the chances of me having any red-headed part-Weasley children (SOME day, Severus, SOME day...) seem to have plummeted. I don't understand! I was just trying to get Dean to stop talking about her like that!

I really shouldn't have written this letter when I was still so upset about the fight with Dean and how Ginny is dealing with it.

Sorry sorry sorry. I'm stopping here and going for a walk. Yes, I know it's past curfew. Turn your clock around to face the wall and pretend I'm in bed!
Hi Severus—I went up to the owlery. Not sure what your clock would have said as I wasn't "in trouble" but I wasn't "in Gryffindor Tower" either. No one saw me and it calmed me down so just give me this one, please? Mac and Hedwig were nestled up together back in a corner—not sure if they'd already gotten back from hunting or what. I'm beginning to think those two are up to something. Something that DOESN'T involve abstinence and contraception potions, if you know what I mean, and might result in little McHedwigs. Even though I helped Hagrid raise the owlets last fall, I don't really know anything about owls nesting. Who sits on the eggs? For how long? Will the owlets belong to the school or to the owners of the owls themselves? This has got to be the wrong time of the year for eggs, but spring will be here before you know it so I'm keeping my eyes on them.

Back to your letter. Bill is a great choice for a second guardian, but he's not a replacement for you. But at least now I know what was in your mind when you chose him. He's about as different from Minerva as you can get, so when you add Bill up with Minerva, you get about half a Severus. You're going to have to get me a couple of other guardians if you're really looking for a replacement for yourself, and you'd better be sure one of them likes the Beatles. I don't know how I could possible trust a mentor if their favorite Beatle wasn't John.

I tried again with Slughorn on Friday after class. I tried to suck up to him and asked him if he would tell me something about my mum. I think I should have asked him that first, before I asked him about the memory, because he said that my mum would never have asked a professor to talk about such an abhorrent (did I spell that right?) and despicable subject. He then claimed (liar) that he knew nothing about Horcruxes (so why did he spit the word out in a whisper, then?) and then said that he should have guessed what Dumbledore was after when he asked him to come back to Hogwarts. I'm really going to have to think of a different way to approach him. I don't want to mess up my chances of getting an O in Potions this year (yes, REALLY). I do have one more idea but if it doesn't work I'm going to just have to tell the Headmaster that I can't do it.

Are you sure you want me to answer your question?

The thing is, I already know the answer, because I had to argue with the Sorting Hat a bit when I was being sorted. I'm pretty sure I already told you this earlier.

The hat said I could be great...that I had a thirst to prove myself...and suggested that Slytherin house would "help me on the way to greatness." But I didn't care what house it put me in as long as it wasn't Slytherin. Like I told you, after meeting Malfoy in Diagon Alley and hearing about Slytherin from Hagrid (he said something like "better Hufflepuff than Slytherin"), all I knew for sure is that I didn't want to go to Slytherin.

Listen, I know I sound awful, considering you're head of Slytherin, and you were in Slytherin when you were a student here. I'm glad I ended up where I did but now that I know more about Slytherin, and more about you, I kind of see a little bit of what the hat saw. I wonder what else it saw inside me besides a "thirst to prove myself."

I'm almost too tired to get into what happened the other night that caused that limp you had on Friday. "Brawling stragglers?" I know there's a lot in there you're not telling me, so let me just remind you to be more careful, since we've already determined it will take at least four people to even BEGIN to "replace" you. And just to put your mind at ease, I transformed into Lightfoot as soon as I felt you get summoned, right there on my bed on top of the covers. And I was almost late to Defense because I spent the whole night sleeping in my Animagus form and Ron found me like that about fifteen minutes before class started. I didn't feel a thing while I was sleeping, though, so I doubt there's any way in the world Voldemort could have seen into my mind. If he did, he'd have just seen...
visions of running through fields, leaping over streams and eating acorns.

A question for you—

Where are my parents buried?

Regards,

Harry

Harry re-read his letter, not overly pleased with it. It was jumpier than usual, and he wondered if the question he’d included at the end was appropriate and fair. He was pretty sure his parents were buried together—and not on a mythical island—and that Severus wouldn't be visiting Lily's grave if he had to see James' too. He wondered if they were buried at Godric's Hollow somewhere, and if so, how close they had been to the cemetery last weekend when he’d gone to Dumbledore's place with Severus and Bill. Then he began to wonder about wizard funerals, and burials, and whether wizards were buried or cremated, and what they did at their funerals that was different than at Muggle funerals.

He'd actually been to a Muggle funeral, once. He didn't remember much about it—he’d only been four or five when Uncle Vernon and Aunt Marge's mother had died. She was incredibly old, or so he thought at the time, but really she probably wasn't much older than 65 or so. He sat in the back of the church with old Mrs. Figg while the preacher droned on about eternal salvation and the soul leaving the body.

He hadn't known much about souls back when he was five. He'd been more interested in the paper fan the man in black had given Mrs. Figg to cool herself in the church. Would he have been surprised, then, when he was barely tall enough to see over the pew in front of him, that a soul could be fragmented by an act of evil? That a soul could be sucked out of a person by a lifeless Dementor, leaving the Dementor just as lifeless and the person as good as dead?

Harry sighed and put away his homework and stuck his Defense essay and letter into the side pocket of his book bag. He cancelled the Lumos which had been lighting up the space inside his four-poster's curtains and listened. Ron's light snores from the bed closest to him and Neville's heavy but regular breathing from the bed across from his own somehow comforted him, despite his restlessness.

-Severus-

Severus collapsed on the sofa in front of his fireplace, his head thrown back on a seemingly boneless neck, resting nearly horizontally on the top of the sofa cushion. He stared at the ceiling of his sitting room, noting a larger-than-normal giant house spider waiting placidly in the corner. Not even remotely alarmed, but thinking immediately of an adolescent Petunia Evans running screaming (and topless) from the playground, he closed his eyes.

Another two hours spent with Albus, trying to coax the curse into submission, both of them fully cognizant that it was ultimately a futile effort, which would do nothing but buy them time. It was the most they could hope for and indeed, all that they really could expect given the nature of the curse. Afterward, Albus sat at his desk, occasionally flexing his blackened fingers and almost successfully masking the wince he could not hide, and brought up the subject of Harry.

"Has he told you about the task I have set for him?" asked Albus, temporarily pushing aside the pain
reduction potion Severus had placed before him.

Severus met his eye, considering. Honesty, then. "Yes, he has. He is becoming concerned he will not be successful."

Albus sighed. "It has been a month now. I know he has made some attempts, but had hoped…”

"Considering the subject matter," cut in Severus, "it is not surprising that Horace is not yet budging. Is it so important that Harry himself obtain this memory? Could you not coerce Horace in some way?"

Dumbledore did not consider before answering. "It is important, Severus. Harry must succeed, and we are losing time." He looked again at his hand, turning it over to examine the withered wrist.

Severus opened his eyes again. The spider had not moved from its guardian spot in the corner. All his marking was completed, yet he still owed Harry a letter, and an answer to his remarkably simple and direct question. No islands, no hypothetical situations, no "what ifs." Just a real-life question, a fact, a piece of concrete information requested by an orphaned child seeking closure. Why the hell hadn't someone thought to take him there in the six years he'd lived in the Wizarding world? Why the hell hadn't he?

5 February, 1997

Wednesday

Dear Harry:

Teenagers brawling over girls is nothing new at Hogwarts, Harry. Girls being hard to understand? Also not news. You're going to have to ride it out. My advice to you is to go to Miss Granger or Miss Lovegood for assistance before approaching Miss Weasley directly. They should be able to help you out—whether they will be inclined to do so I cannot say. As you have already determined, girls are a mystery. You certainly feel as if you are defending Miss Weasley's honor. But recall that Mr. Thomas said she was a "prude," implying that she was NOT (as Mr. Finnigan so crudely put it) "putting out." I imagine that this specific term did not upset you particularly (indeed, you should have been rejoicing inside) but that instead you resented your dorm mates talking about Miss Weasley in general. Since you will have to be in daily close proximity to Mr. Thomas for the next year and a half, I suggest that you have a discussion of sorts with him. Do not try to bend the truth and tell him that Ginny is like a sister to you and you were acting as a "brother" when you took issue with his language. A statement such as that may easily come back to bite you in the future and you would not want to be accused of "incestuous" behavior should your dreams eventually actually materialize.

As for the dragon bogeys…recall that a detention is a punishment. They are intended to be abhorrent enough to encourage detainees not to repeat the behavior that earned them the detention. I hope that you will always recall the feel of those dragon bogeys, their consistency, slickness and the difficulty of forcing them into small vials and having to scrape off the excess from the sides of the bottles—that you will remember all of this when you next consider throwing a punch at another wizard.

On to the more genial things in your letter. The owls. I must admit being intrigued at this possible turn of events. Hedwig and McKenzie? You know, of course, that Hagrid knows all there is to know about magical creatures of every sort, including owls, and he will be your best resource in this matter. I doubt that egg laying will occur before spring, as the owlets will do best when born when the weather is a bit warmer and it is easier for the parents to find rodents and such to bring back for the
babies. Alas, even though the owls themselves may be our familiars, I have a feeling that it will be the parents—our own Hedwig and McKenzie if you are correct in your guess about their intentions—that ultimately decide the fate of the young. If they nest in the owlery, we may have a chance at taming them. If they nest in the forest, the owlets will likely fly off and do what most owls do—sleep all day and hunt all night.

Yes, you would do well to concentrate on the 3 Ds of apparition, but I will say that the minor splinching of a single leg on Saturday was among the less dramatic of the occurrences during this event over the past years. Indeed, only two years ago, the Weasley twins managed to attempt apparition out of the Great Hall, resulting in becoming embedded in the exterior walls of the castle. I imagine they are still picking pebbles out of their derrieres.

I believe I could spend the rest of this letter, and the next, and some of the following, writing about your answer to my question. I do not know if it is common for the Sorting Hat to have "discussions" or "arguments" with the students it is about to sort. Indeed, I remember my own sorting clearly. Your mother, of course, had already been sorted into Gryffindor, breaking my young heart, for I already knew that I could not—and would not—be going to the lions. I picked up the ratty old thing, sat on the stool, placed it on my head and heard nothing but a brief chuckle before the hat sang out "Slytherin!" I remember looking over to the Slytherin table and hearing their cheers and clapping. For me. I forgot about Lily in that moment and found welcome amid the snakes.

I expect you had a similar experience on your own sorting night, when you took your place among the lions. I admit I watched the entire thing with trepidation, for the head of the house that received Harry Potter would indeed have his—or her—job cut out for them. It was generally assumed you would go to Gryffindor, as both your parents had been Gryffindors, but no one quite knew the kind of childhood you had had, and occasionally the hat surprises us. No one thought there was a chance in hell that you would become a Slytherin, but I think that both Professors Flitwick and Sprout were prepared to receive you. The hat did take its time deciding. At the staff table, we had the chance to exchange more than one look as you sat there, so much smaller than I had expected to see you, looking so much more like James Potter than I had hoped.

And you came within a hairsbreadth of being sorted into Slytherin.

I will state here that I am glad you became a Gryffindor, Harry, though had you gone to Slytherin perhaps we would have sorted out our "issues" much earlier.

I believe I should enlighten you, as I should have done months ago, on the better points of Slytherin House.

Slytherins, Harry, take care of their own. They do not rely on support from any other house or indeed ever expect it will come. While many come from wealthy homes, they do not typically come from happy homes or close families. Marriages, especially among the "purest" of the purebloods, are usually arranged while they are mere infants (and in some cases before they are born) and are business arrangements to unite empires and merge bloodlines. While not every Slytherin is from a wealthy, pureblood family, at least half of the incoming first years each year fit this mold, and the other half, ah, the other half... an occasional Muggleborn with a particularly difficult home life who has had to develop certain talents in order to survive, more than a few "seconds"—the illegitimate children of purebloods, "love children" as they are called in some societies, and always some half-bloods, like myself, embittered at being kept away from the magical world by a parent who hated magic. Children of many backgrounds, united by not just the thirst to prove themselves, but the necessity of doing so. My job as their head of house is not one envied by the other professors here.

You had the unfortunate luck (or perhaps fortunate?) that the first Slytherin you met was the icon of
all Slytherins, the heir to the Malfoy empire, a child born with the weight of ancestry, of fortune, pressed upon his insubstantial shoulders. Do not judge all Slytherins by Draco Malfoy.

While suicide is not common at all in the wizarding world, and less common even among the young, the vast majority of suicides in wizarding Britain are Slytherins. Chew on that one for a while.

Now I would like you to think about what the hat "said" to you, at least as you report it. "A thirst to prove yourself." "Slytherin could help you on your way to greatness." Before I answer your question, I'll set one for you. You've had five and a half years now to think about what those words might mean for you, in your life, Harry. Can you imagine Tom Riddle sitting on the same stool, with the same hat on his head and hearing those same words? Imagine what his reaction might have been.

My question. What did the hat see inside your head that day, Harry? What was that thirst to prove yourself?

Now, finally, let me address your question.

Your parents are buried in Godric's Hollow, in the cemetery beside the town's only church. I did not attend the funeral, but I visited the gravesite once during the year that followed their burial. It is an appropriate final resting place, peaceful and quiet, with climbing multiflora roses on trellises surrounding the churchyard. Lily and James are buried together, side by side, as they lived.

I will take you to see them, Harry, this summer, if you would like to go.

Regards,

Severus

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Lily died on October 31st, 1981, but it wasn't until June of 1982 that Severus visited the churchyard where she was buried and placed a wreath of calla lilies against her headstone. He'd known precisely where she was buried, as he'd been there for the funeral, but watching from outside the gates, hidden under a disillusionment spell, a voyeur, mourning in his own way from afar.

On that summer day in 1982, he'd traced the letters of her name with his finger, pretending it was the only name on the monument, the only life lost that day.

*The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.*

He remembered that now, sitting on his comfortable sofa, watching the dying embers in the fire grate before him. A phrase from the Bible, appropriate in more than one way, for Lily had grown up in a church-going family and had been destroyed by the would-be destroyer of death.

As on the other occasions when melancholy threatened to weigh him down, pressing heavily on his shoulders until he sagged and wept, he poured himself a double shot of firewhisky. He downed it quickly then pulled on his robes and prepared to leave his quarters, giving a final glance at Harry's clock on his desk.

He was greatly surprised to see that it read "Somewhere Safe."

________________________________________

-Harry-
He'd read Severus' response and had immediately taken matters into his own hands. Deciding that Luna was the better option, he made his way, under his invisibility cloak, to the library. He really didn't know where the common room was, as he'd only ever seen the spiral staircase that the Ravenclaws climbed to reach it. It was eight p.m. on Friday so he simply went to the library, waited for a group of Ravenclaw third-years to leave and followed them all the way back and up the spiral staircase. He stayed a safe distance behind them and they were gone when he reached the top. He didn't even see a door off of the small room he had entered. Sighing, he considered, then pulled out his wand and cast his Patronus, sending it to Luna with a message. He was surprised to see the stag go down the staircase instead of through the walls and realized that Luna must be out too.

He went back down the staircase, pulled off his cloak and sat on the bottom stair, prepared to wait. He didn't expect to look up a few minutes later to find Ginny, not Luna, staring at him. He stood up quickly.

"I sent Luna to the library," said Ginny. "I'm guessing you wanted to talk about me."

Harry's cheeks reddened. Gryffindor bravery kicked in before he could slip on the invisibility cloak and run back to his bedroom.

"I'd rather talk to you," he said. "I was going to ask her how to manage that."

Ginny looked him over, then motioned for him to follow her.

"Come on," she said, turning to move back into the corridor. "I know somewhere safe we can go to talk."

/ 8 February, 1997 Saturday

Dear Severus:

I've set things right with Ginny. I mean, we're at least friends again. She's going to break up "officially" with Dean tomorrow, but she's rather warned me off, saying she's looking forward to getting through her O.W.L.s and having time to spend with her girlfriends once she's "free."

We talked for a long time, though, and she helped me with your question. I'd never told anyone else, ever, about what the hat said, not until I told you, anyway. But she seemed to understand and didn't call me a Slytherin scumbag or a traitor to Gryffindor or a Malfoy wannabe or anything like that.

The hat said, as near as I can remember, anyway, "There's talent and a thirst to prove yourself—that's interesting—so where should I put you?"

I knew almost nothing about myself back then, so I didn't understand, not really, what it meant to be The Boy Who Lived. All I had to go by up to that point was my life at the Dursleys, and all I wanted to prove was that I was worth something. I remember really really wanting to belong somewhere. Until I got sorted, no one had ever clapped for me like that, like they wanted me, like they were welcoming me. But still, that thirst to prove myself didn't mean I was going to change how I behaved —always thinking I needed to do things on my own, not thinking about asking for help or going to adults when things got hairy. No need to talk more about that—we talked plenty about that trust issue this summer, didn't we?

I wanted to tell you too that I never stopped to think about the job you have as Head of Slytherin.
Ginny's a really good listener, it turns out.

About going to see my mum and dad...yeah, I want you to take me. I think I'll be ready enough to go by this summer. No rush. They've been there all these years and I never went to see them. They know about my life, I guess, and they'll understand. They came to me in the graveyard, you know, after the third task in the Triwizard Tournament. I imagine Dumbledore's told you all about it, or someone else has...someone who was there, maybe.

I talked to Hagrid about the owls. He was more than interested. He told me a lot more than I think I need to know at this point, but he also said it would be unusual for Hedwig to accept McKenzie's "advances," since he's so young and inexperienced, but I have a feeling about it. It's a couple months off yet, according to Hagrid, but he gave me a book (yeah, Hagrid had a book!) and told me to watch for certain nesting behaviors.

I'm not sure what happened with you this morning, pretty early, because I don't remember much at all, just a pretty intense burst of pain in my scar about the time it was just beginning to get light out. I woke up again as Lightfoot, and I was totally under the covers. Ron woke me up for breakfast before the others saw me and I was able to change back but he practically had to cut the covers off me I was so tangled up in them. I think my hoof put a small hole in my mattress, because I ended up soaking wet which of course made the others think I'd wet myself. Can you believe 16 and 17-year old boys can giggle like girls when they think their dormmate wet the bed?

Maybe it was a fluke, or a dream, or maybe he wasn't calling you. That would mean that I was feeling him directly through my scar again, though, and I hope that's not happening. But if I am, I thought you should know. I was really worried when you weren't at Apparition lessons this morning, but was relieved to see you after Quidditch Practice.

Apparition this morning was great fun. Hermione had to go to the hospital wing because she started hyperventilating when she wasn't able to Apparate. I think she thought she was a failure and the thought was so foreign to her that she couldn't breathe. Lavender laughed at her and Ron gave Lavender the death glare. Then Crabbe Apparated right into Twyttcross' hoop—but only his head made it. His torso was left standing there and without its head it just fell forward right on top of Malfoy. All the girls were screaming while the teachers put him back together again and Malfoy got knocked out and I think...I think his BOOTS GOT SCUFFED! He's probably in therapy now learning to deal with it.

Minerva had a house meeting yesterday and told us we get three days off in late March at half-term. It's right at Easter time this year so almost everyone says they're going to go home. They're setting up special Floo connections again to get everyone out of here safely. Ron's invited me to the Burrow but I thought I'd find out first if you had any plans. Maybe I could hang around and help you or we could take a short trip to a dragon preserve to collect dragon snot.

Just realized that you're a head of house so of course you know about half-term break. Sorry.

Can't go without another question for you.

If you weren't a wizard, what would you be doing for a living?

Regards,

Harry

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On Sunday evening, Harry re-read the letter he had written the night before. He still had a vaguely warm and fuzzy feeling inside, slightly mudding his thought process and making studying difficult. It was two whole days since Ginny had taken him to an old and unused classroom that obviously had once been used for Divination, given the number of dusty crystal balls and padded poufs in the room. It was off the third floor corridor, close to where "Fluffy" the three-headed dog had been housed, and to get in you had to allow a very dispirited-looking seer on a faded tapestry to read your palm. Harry had been told that he would meet his true love "in the springtime of life" and that he would make a great fortune, but "not measured in gold." He looked at his own palm curiously as Ginny offered hers and the witch studied it closely, gazed curiously over at Harry, then told Ginny that she too, would meet her true love in the springtime of life and that she would be thrice blessed with life's true reward.

"Odd," said Ginny as they squeezed in through the small opening the witch allowed them, "last time I was here with Luna and Estelle she told me my hands would be calloused with my life's work. She never mentioned love of any kind."

He'd left all the details of his conversation with Ginny—and with the seer—out of his letter to Severus. As much as he enjoyed his correspondence with Severus, and as much as he enjoyed having an adult who truly cared about his welfare, he still needed his friends and some things, some things like how her hand—so calloused from playing Quidditch—fit so perfectly with his own, were best kept buttoned up inside his heart.

Chapter 23

February 12 – February 15, 1997

-Severus-

Wednesday already. A long weekend followed by a seemingly endless week. Severus had always hated February. It wore on and on and ended nearly as cold as it began.

After returning from his early morning Death Eater pep rally on Saturday, he'd tried to get a few hours sleep, but had been interrupted by an irate Constancia Crabbe who was quite interested in knowing how her son had managed to splinch his own head and live to tell about it. Severus wanted to tell her that the oxygen supply to his brain had been cut off so long ago that further damage could not possibly occur after such a minor incident as the one that occurred in Apparition class that morning. What he in fact did tell her was that her son was one of only a handful of sixth-years who had managed any semblance of Apparition, putting him at the head of the class (literally and figuratively) for the first time in his young life.

He had hoped for a cat nap after her visit, but Minerva had arrived to demand his presence on the Quidditch pitch where, for some complicated reason his exhausted brain could not comprehend, Gryffindor and Slytherin were about to practice together. Minerva assured him that the two teams would limit their activities to one end of the pitch each but he still smelled disaster. He'd gone out with her, nonetheless, spiking the thermos of coffee with his hip flask of Firewhisky as was their custom. It almost made practice tolerable. He tried to keep his eyes on the Slytherin team, but could not help but notice that the Gryffindors were playing as a well-oiled machine, with the exception of two of the chasers—Weasley and Thomas. Ahhh…the break-up. Thomas hurled a Quaffle at Miss Weasley with more force than was strictly needed to pass it to a fellow teammate—approximately eight times the force needed, in fact. She ducked just in time but the Quaffle landed in Severus’ lap,
spilling his hot whiskey-laced coffee on his thighs.

Thomas earned another detention. Harry looked pleased.

12 February, 1997

Wednesday

Dear Harry:

I have no plans for the Easter holiday. If you would like to stay at the castle, I am sure I can find plenty for you to do. A trip to a dragon preserve to de-bogify Hungarian Horntails is not outside the realm of possibility, though with only a long weekend at our disposal, we may want to stay in Britain. If you're keen on harvesting potions ingredients, we can attempt to coax the giant squid close to the shore and collect some of the protective slime from its skin. You will have to hold it down while I do the scraping so you'd best plan to wear your swim shorts. The lake water should be slightly above freezing by late March—perfect for an invigorating swim.

As for my whereabouts on Saturday when Mr. Crabbe decapitated himself in his first semi-successful Apparition, I was, in fact, away from the castle in the company of one of my demanding "employers." I do not believe you are feeling anything directly—it was, indeed, an abrupt and painful "message" that woke me just before dawn. I am heartened to hear that you are transforming so easily now, though I admit that assuming the form of a young deer while in a water bed can have some attendant difficulties. As for the reaction of your fellow Gryffindor sixth-years—I know a very handy charm that I will consider teaching you (but only if you solemnly vow never to reveal where you learned it). It is typically used by healers on unconscious patients instead of the more crude form of catheterization used by Muggles and had the effect of emptying the bladder—abruptly. If any Slytherins suddenly develop incontinence issues, I will know what is going on and will not hesitate to use the spell on you, in Defense class, while you are dueling Draco. Be forewarned.

I note that you believe Miss Weasley to be a good listener. Much has been said, and even more written, over the years about the art of listening. One of my favorite axioms is this: "Two ears, one mouth. Use them proportionally, please." An American writer wrote a poem you might like to memorize (calm down—it's only four lines):

The wise old owl lived in an oak;
The more he saw the less he spoke;
The less he spoke the more he heard:
Why can't we all be like that bird?

When you are listening to a friend in need, someone who has something to "get out into the open" as you apparently did with Miss Weasley the other night when your clock told me you were "somewhere safe," realize that listening is not just waiting for your own turn to speak. You will truly be a valued friend if you learn this earlier in life rather than later. I should not even attempt to give you "relationship" advice, especially since Miss Weasley has indicated a desire to stay out of relationships for a time, but I believe you will not go wrong by continuing to establish a true friendship with her, using your mouth half as much as you use your ears.

Still, I am happy that you were able to use Miss Weasley's listening skills to help work out the question I posed for you. I hope that you no longer feel you have to prove your worth and I most certainly hope you feel that you belong, not to the Wizarding world as some sort of "Chosen One" but to Hogwarts, and to Gryffindor, and most certainly to this small group of adult mentors and
caretakers which has grown around you these past months.

I do not quite know how to address your comment about what happened in the graveyard following the Triwizard Tournament. Yes, I am aware of what happened there. As you may recall, I was in the office with you when Crouch Jr. made his confession under Veritaserum. Albus sent me out after that to find Fudge while he took you to his office to hear your story. I am sure you recall my return—when Fudge was in the hospital wing, denying the return of the Dark Lord. He did not believe even when I showed him the evidence of my Dark Mark. You were still awake, I remember, after Fudge had left, when Albus sent me off again. You surely understand now my mission, for I was not present in the cemetery, having ignored the Dark Lord's summons when it came as I was otherwise engaged helping to oversee the Third Task. While the mark had been growing more clear all year, I still could not piece together what precisely had happened to make it blaze in pain at the same time that so much appeared to be happening within the maze. I only understood fully when I listened to Crouch's confession.

By the time I joined the other Death Eaters and the Dark Lord at the Riddle Mansion, the story of the joining of the wands was the only thing being discussed. So yes, hearing it from, as you say, "someone who was there" was indeed how I learned about the appearance of your parents. But I heard it again, a second time, when I returned to Hogwarts and reported to Albus.

I think now about how you must have felt then, Harry. You had just witnessed a host of atrocities, had been injured yourself and were functioning on instinct alone. To have your parents appear at that precise time…it must have given you the hope and courage to persevere, to keep trying even though you were certainly tired enough and hopeless enough to simply give up.

Perhaps you think that I have been avoiding your question. I certainly have not. While admittedly I never had to consider a career in the Muggle world, I did grow up in a home with a Muggle father in a Muggle neighborhood. I suppose you would expect me to propose a career as a chemist, which would seem to be similar to what I do as a Potions Master, or perhaps a professor at a university. But faced with a life without even a vestige of magic, I believe I would choose a career that would allow me to enjoy the ordinary magic of the world—perhaps in music or painting. It would have to be a solitary profession, of course, as I am not predisposed to a great deal of social discourse. I can, in some ways, envision myself doing the work of Michelangelo, or better yet, one of the many lesser artists that assisted him in his work in the Sistine Chapel. An anonymous artist, yet contributing to something enduring.

That being said, I do not think I have a special talent for art or sculpture, but we are playing a "what if" game, so I believe I should be able to choose something unlikely if I so desire.

I think it a fair question to ask you in return. When you were in Muggle primary, before you knew anything of the Wizarding World, what did you dream of being when you grew up?

Regards,

Severus

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Nothing when Dumbledore had cast the spell to open a direct path through the maze to the cup. Nothing and no one. Not Potter. Not Diggory.

"Point me Harry Potter." "Point me Cedric Diggory." Severus, Minerva, Pamona and Filius had fanned out in the maze to search for the champions. Ten minutes. Twenty. The searing pain, nearly forgotten, of the Dark Mark burning. He grasped his arm, hissing in pain, catching Dumbledore's eye. Dumbledore looked defeated yet irate.

The minutes, even now, seemed interminable. How had it felt for Harry, a fourteen-year old child, looking death in the face?

-Harry-

Harry hated February. Quidditch practices were icy and brutal in the Scottish winter. The castle was cold and damp all day, cold and damp all night. You'd think that magic could somehow shake the dampness out of a thousand year old castle, but no such luck. The house elves provided warmed flannel-wrapped bricks at night to put under the sheets at your feet. It was a bit old fashioned, but the charmed bricks stayed warm all night at least. Everyone used personal warming charms, which were satisfactory during the day, but faded at night along with consciousness. Classes, well into the second term, were progressively more difficult and professors progressively more demanding. Harry guessed that they were just as cold and damp as the students.

This February was no better than the five previous ones at Hogwarts. While Ron and Lavender were definitely no longer snogging against the walls, on the sofa and in the middle of the corridors, they did still grudgingly spend time together. Hermione and Ron spoke as infrequently as possible, though Harry could not and did not miss the looks they gave each other when the other wasn't looking. Ginny and Dean's break-up had gone as well as expected—not well at all—and Dean was still giving Harry death glares, though he'd let up a bit when it became obvious that Harry was no closer to having Ginny as a girlfriend than he was while she was seeing Dean.

And then there was Slughorn. Harry still hadn't gotten him to spill anything about the Horcrux. Dumbledore had passed him in the corridor yesterday and had given him an encouraging sort of nod. Harry had hardly been able to meet his eyes, looking away and to the floor, his cheeks, already red from the cold, turning even pinker in shame. He was fairly sure that the Headmaster's eyes had not twinkling.

Apparition lessons were still going strong. They'd had another lesson just this morning, though neither Harry, Ron nor Hermione had yet managed to make it out of their hoops. No one, in fact, had managed to do anything without splinching themselves, which made the remaining students a bit less eager to try too hard. If all you got for your efforts was ending up three feet from your original destination minus a useful body or two part like your leg or your ears, why expend too much effort?

Harry sighed and picked up his quill. He'd actually finished his Defense homework on Thursday night, but they hadn't had class yesterday, so he'd saved his letter for the weekend. The fifth and sixth years, or at least a good number of them, were having an impromptu study session in the common room. Ron had gone to their room, claiming to have a pounding headache, and Lavender had slid onto the couch next to Harry. She was sitting a little too close for comfort. He budged over a bit and she followed.

Sitting across from the couch on a squishy loveseat next to Neville, Ginny frowned.
15 February, 1997

Saturday

Dear Severus:

Thanks for the Easter break invite. It was an invitation, wasn't it? Because I've already told Ron I plan to stay here. If you really want to scrape slime off the giant squid, I think you should go ahead and do it now while the weather is still really cold. The squid doesn't swim very fast this time of year so your sixth year Slytherins can keep it pinned down during the next detention you assign them. Oh, I forgot…you don't ever assign Slytherins detention.

Hey, that charm sounds great! Easter break would be a great time to learn it. By then, Dean and Seamus won't even suspect me when they wet themselves. That really sounds like a handy charm—you know you professors could make tons of money selling those things to students. It would be a very handy—if not exceedingly embarrassing—way to skive off of class when there’s a test. "Oh, I'm sorry Professor McGonagall, but I seem to have wet myself. May I be excused?"

I like the poem. Easy to remember and also about one of my favorite animals. I get what you're trying to tell me, too. Take Hermione, for example. She's brilliant, and she can give really good advice, but she's always so ready to tell me what she thinks that I'm not sure how well she really listens to me. I'm not criticizing her—she's a better listener than Ron, anyway. It's just that I always have the feeling that whatever I'm saying makes her think of something else, and she's just politely waiting her turn to say it while I finish saying whatever it is I'm trying to get off my chest. Then there's Ron. He's just plain distracted half the time. We get along great, and he really cares about me—I know he does—but when it comes to listening he's pretty much pants at it.

That's why that talk I had with Ginny stuck out so much. We got to talking and I told her about the Sorting Hat, and then told her about the question you’d set for me in your letter. And instead of trying to interpret what the hat meant, or telling me what she thought it might mean, she asked me questions, and the answers to those questions brought me around to the answer I gave you in my letter. I hope I can return the favor someday when she needs me.

She doesn't seem to be needing me much now, though. Dean is still angry and sullen about the break-up, but he isn't openly harassing or blaming me at least. He leaves her pretty much alone, and doesn't dare talk bad about her around me, and she's trying to be friends with him. There isn't much love in the air around here anymore—which is pretty funny, since yesterday was Valentine's Day. I only got about fifty cards this year, almost all of them from girls in third year and below. Someone somehow got one of Fred and George's Valentine Day Surprise boxes and opened it in the common room. We had about a dozen little cupids shooting arrows all day. If one hit you, you got all goofy-eyed and started reciting poetry. It was horrendous. Neville was one of the first ones who got hit, right after lunch after those stupid girls opened the box. He stood up on a table and started reciting something by Ben Johnson (Well, that's what Hermione told me, anyway. He was a contemporary of Shakespeare. I'm really glad I have Hermione around.) It went "Drink to me only with thine eyes and I will pledge with mine.” There was a lot more but that's what we all remembered and everyone has been teasing him about it ever since.

And since you're going to hear it from someone, sometime, I'll go ahead and tell you that I made a fool of myself too. Probably worse than with the Hula Hoop, too. I had just gotten back to the common room after visiting Hedwig and MacKenize in the owlery after dinner and had totally forgotten about the stupid cupids. By the time I got there, one of the seventh years had figured out how to charm the arrows so they made the victim sing love ballads instead of recite poetry. Yes, really.
I got hit twice.

The first song that I belted out was "Killing Me Softly." I am going to just assume you know it. I did not—at least not before last night. If you do know it, you'll know it's sung by a woman, about a man, so it sounded like I had a male lover. Not that there's anything wrong with that, of course…it's just that I don't and the object of my affection was in the room at the time. Can you imagine how ridiculous I sounded? "Killing me softly with his song, killing me softly, with his song, telling my whole life with his words…"

Oh, don't worry, it gets better.

No sooner had I finished that one when I had this huge urge to drop to my knees in front of Ginny and sing "You Light up My Life." Who in the heck IS this Debby Boone person?

Needless to say, it was the hit of the evening, even though Dennis Creevey sang "Love Me Tender" to Steven Willis (he's in Dennis' year) and Romilda and Collin got hit ON PURPOSE and did this ridiculous song called "I Got You Babe."

Well, enough of that. I'm going to try to put it behind me and NEVER think of it again.

I'll answer your question first. When I was in primary the only thing I ever wanted to be was a policeman. I don't know if you knew that Aunt Petunia was in love with the royal family. She read all about them all the time, and watched every event on the telly. The streets were always swarming with police when the royals had something going on. I was fascinated by the bobbies with their chin straps and their uniforms and their sticks. I liked the ones on horseback the most. I think to me they represented protection, and good, and order. Looking back on it now, I can see that those were things that were lacking in my life.

I have a question for you. I know you might not want to answer it, or even be able to. It has to do with something Voldemort said in that cemetery after the Third Task. I was still tied up when he called the Death Eaters. They all began to Apparate in and took their places in a big circle. There seemed to be an order for it all, and he knew by the gaps in the circle who was missing.

Obviously, you were one of those gaps.

I'm trying to remember exactly what he said. I think I at least have the essence of it. He came to a big gap in the circle and said there were six missing there. He said three were dead in his service, one was too cowardly to return, one had left him forever and one was his most faithful servant and had already come back to him.

Are you one of those three? If so, which one?

I don't like to remember that night, or think too much about it even. None of it. Except what my dad said to me. He said "It will be all right…hold on."

It seems exactly the sort of thing a parent would say to you, doesn't it?

Too bad he had to be dead before he got to say it.

It kind of reminds me, just a bit, of when I was at St. Mungo's this summer, and how you stayed with me.

I'll try to end on a more upbeat note—did you get a valentine from Sybil?

Regards,
Harry finished the letter and carefully put it inside his Defense textbook. He had moved as far away from Lavender as possible, but she was still scrunched up next to him, drumming her long pink fingernails on her Potions textbook and chatting with Parvati who had sat down next to her on the end of the couch. Oddly, there was plenty of room between Lavender and Parvati. He glanced across at Ginny. She looked up at him and caught him looking at her. She grinned—no longer annoyed at Lavender after watching Harry’s futile attempts to squeeze himself into the arm of the couch over the last fifteen minutes.

Seamus had plopped down on the floor in front of Ginny. He took out his wand and did a quick Lumos, holding it above his head.

"This make you want to sing again, Harry?" he asked.

The room erupted with laughter as Harry turned pink.

"So many dreams, I've kept deep inside me," sung Seamus in an unnatural falsetto.

"Alone in the dark but now you've come along!" finished Dean.

"And YOU light up my life, YOU give me hope, to carry ON…" The whole room was singing now, and even Harry joined in. After Harry had serenaded Ginny last night, nearly all of Gryffindor House had stayed to learn the song lyrics from a helpful Hermione who, for some reason Harry could not comprehend, actually knew the song and all its inane lyrics.

"It can't be wrong…when it feels so right…

Cause you…you light up my life."

Harry stole a glance at Ginny. His stomach did a back flip when she winked at him.

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Chapter 24

________________________________________

A/N: In this chapter there is reference to a detention served by Harry and another student. In this detention, they have to "work" with Hagrid on a specific wild animal. A reader pointed out that the specific method they use doesn't actually..."work"...with the animal in question. However, the intent is to make everyone cringe a bit, so we'll just pretend that the animals in question, as they live in the Forbidden Forest, are slightly magical and that the "apparatus" used is magical as well...and that it would actually "work." Forge ahead! (And when you read this through, and realize what I'm talking about, I hope you are as amazed as I am that someone out there knew enough about this process and this animal to catch my error!)

February 18 – February 20, 1997

-Severus-

How do you answer a question like that? After all, he didn't really know the answer, though he could get there by process of elimination and some educated guesswork. Which missing Death Eater
Severus had first read Harry's letter Monday night. Defense class had been fairly uneventful that day. A week past the event and everyone was still talking about Crabbe's Apparition decapitation. Crabbe, who miraculously looked no worse for the wear, was enjoying his near celebrity status. Goyle, not used to his other half getting more attention than himself, was planning his own splinching and elicited groans from all the boys when he announced, in a stage whisper, that he hoped he could splinch his own "bits." "I'd like to see McGonagall and Sprout have to deal with that one!" Severus knew that neither Minerva nor Pamona would blink an eye at having to "deal" with such an event and it would be the talk of the faculty lounge for weeks to come. He almost wished Goyle would splinch himself like that. However, he'd never seen something like that happen. Boys were usually very keen on keeping their bits with them and in the determination phase might lose a limb, or even a nose, but never their bits.

He scanned the letter again, not able to suppress a grin at the description of the Valentine's Day cupids. Those songs! They were horrid even when they were new—some of them during his time at Hogwarts. But if the Gryffindors ever broke out in song during his class—or even in his presence—he'd have to come up with something non-academic to do with Harry during the Easter mid-term holiday. He couldn't leave the castle for too long—his summons had been far too frequent to risk leaving Harry in a hotel or on a London street. He sighed and turned to face the clock on his desk. He shook his head and sighed as he read Harry's status—"In Trouble." A glance at the regular clock above the mantle showed the time to be 10:10 p.m.—past curfew.

A knock on his door at precisely that moment made him jump. He opened it to see one of the Slytherin prefects.

"Malfoy's out past curfew again, Sir," said the boy.

"I'll deal with it. Thank you, Carson." Severus gave a backward, troubled glance at the clock as he closed the door behind him.

18 February, 1997

Tuesday

Dear Harry:

I am awake far later on a Tuesday night than I should be, as it is nearly midnight and my first class begins in a mere eight and a half hours. I had envisioned myself turning in rather early tonight, perhaps no later than ten thirty. However, at slightly after ten p.m., I was alerted by one of my prefects that one of my students was not in his dormitory. I was alerted at almost the same time—this time by a very informative clock I keep on my desk—that you, too, had returned to your common room, under cover of your invisibility cloak. Coincidence? I think not.

As I had to locate my own missing student, I alerted Minerva of the situation and we both set watch on the entrances to our respective houses. At eleven thirty, I apprehended my errant Slytherin. I received Minerva's Patronus at eleven thirty-five, alerting me that you, too, had returned to your common room, under cover of your invisibility cloak. Coincidence? I think not.

I will no longer beat around the bush about this, Harry. You are beginning to try my nerves. In one
breath you assure me that you are controlling this fixation you have regarding Mr. Malfoy. In the next I find you are out of bed, out of your common room and wandering about the castle after curfew.

While Minerva has assured me that she will deal with you appropriately, I have asked her to go one step further. You are dealing with an uncontrollable compulsion, or daresay I…an obsession. If you are found out after curfew again, or at any time if in any part of the castle in which you do not belong, you will lose your Quidditch privileges for the remainder of the year. Minerva has agreed to these terms as well, detrimental as they would be to her own house, and will likely impose them without telling you who suggested them. I want you to know, however, that I suggest them in an effort to force you to comply rather than to punish you for non-compliance. Be upset, throw things, call me an unfair git, but please, please keep your mind focused on matters that—well—matter. Your school work, your lessons with the Headmaster, your mission with Professor Slughorn, even your pursuit of young Miss Weasley. Trust me with Mr. Malfoy, Harry.

I will put this behind me now, and assume you have taken the matter to heart.

Speaking of hearts…

Yes, I did get a rather ostentatious valentine from Professor Trelawney. Apparently, her inner eye told her that we are destined to be together. Since I simply do not have the energy to continue to fight, I let her into my quarters and allowed her to serenade me with the most gyrating rendition of "All You Need is Love" that I have ever heard. After that, I was lost. How did Sybil know of my adoration of the Beatles? Indeed, it must be destiny, as she so claims. I have resigned myself to a life of marital bliss, Harry. I hope you don't mind that Professor Trelawney (soon to be Professor Trelawney-Snape) will be joining us on future excursions. Perhaps she will be useful in wrangling the giant squid over half-term break.

I suppose, since we are in the winter doldrums and there is only so much one can write about splinching vital body parts and the amorous attention—unwanted or not—of the opposite sex during Valentine’s season, that I should tackle the difficult question you posed. However, I do want to comment first that I find it intriguing that even as a small Muggle child, your desire to enforce law and order prevailed. I think there is much that could be said about this desire, and why it is so strong in your heart, but you are old enough to put those pieces together yourself now. If a career as an Auror is still what you want when this war is finished, Harry, and I am still on this earth and have my wits about me (which I decidedly will not if there is a Mrs. Trelawney-Snape in the picture), I will support your decision and help you make it through the academy. I am relatively certain you will need some assistance passing your Potions practicals (despite the glowing reports I daily hear from Horace of your brilliance in his classroom) so do consider my offer.

Now, to your question.

First, let me state that the Dark Lord keeps his friends close, and his enemies even closer. He knows each and each has a precise place in the circle, as you unfortunately witnessed two years ago. With this method, he can easily determine who is missing, who is late, who steps out of line during a meeting.

From your description of the three dead and the three missing all in one gap of the circle, I believe that indeed was my appointed spot. In fact, I stood with Karkaroff and Crouch, and beside us were three that were killed just after the Dark Lord disappeared. So, if the Dark Lord was going in order, after the three who are now dead stood Igor Karkaroff. I stood next to him, and beside me, Barty Crouch Jr

Which would make me the one who he believed had left him forever.
How wrong he was…yet how very right.

I suppose I should end with a question for you, as has become our tradition.

This one is hypothetical—like our island. I'm making late-night rounds and find you lurking outside the Slytherin common room, hiding under your invisibility cloak. I sense your presence and seize the cloak. You can try to convince me to drop my promised punishment…in exactly five words.

So Harry—what do you say to me?

Regards,

Severus

Severus smirked as he finished the letter, then rolled up the assignment on which it was written. He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was nearly twelve thirty now and he was more than ready to turn in for the night.

As he prepared for bed—brushing his teeth rather obsessively for three minutes while standing on one leg (he changed the leg each night—the exercise was excellent for improving one's balance and strengthening calf muscles)—he mused on the question he had set for Harry.

Explain yourself in five words.

Talk yourself out of punishment in five words.

If this assignment bore fruit (and he imagined it would—Harry was always up to a challenge, it seemed), he would give him a similar assignment in a future letter. Ernest Hemingway (he'd have to turn Harry on to him in a year or two), was once asked to write a story using only six words. He had written "For sale: baby shoes, never worn." He thought he'd ask Harry to write his own autobiography, or memoir, using only six words.

Of course, thinking along these lines caused Severus to think about his own six-word memoir.

"I chose poorly; life's a Riddle."

He scoffed, spit in the sink and rinsed, then looked up at his reflection. Would he be standing here in his dungeon rooms at Hogwarts, looking at his sallow face and tired eyes, if he hadn't chosen poorly? Would he, instead, see a bedroom reflected behind him, with a woman's robe hung on the bedpost, a crib beside the bed?

There was no choice, no life beyond his current role, for Severus Snape. He composed another memoir.

"Been redeeming myself for 15 years."

-Harry-

Harry sat on the hard wooden chair in front of his guardian's desk on Thursday evening. Minerva was sitting behind the desk looking at him patiently, waiting for an answer to the question she had posed. She took a drink of tea from the steaming cup before her, blowing to cool it. Harry shifted uncomfortably.
"Fine. I've learned my lesson," he huffed out at last. "But you don't understand…"

"Oh no, Mr. Potter. You are quite wrong about that. I do understand. I understand that you broke curfew intentionally and that you specifically ignored Severus' advice to leave the matter of Mr. Malfoy up to Mr. Malfoy's Head of House."

"But he isn't doing anything about it!" protested Harry. "Malfoy's up to something and…"

"Harry, you must let this go! You must trust Severus to handle this. I know it is difficult for you but he is the best one—no, the only one—that can handle this. You know the difficult line he must walk. He cannot have his attention split between his duty and protecting you from yourself. It is hard enough protecting you from others."

Harry had been about to protest again but he shut his mouth abruptly and sank back bonelessly onto his chair.

"I didn't think…"

Minerva smiled. "No, you didn't. However, being Gryffindor myself, I do understand. Now, tell me about your detention with Hagrid…"

Harry grimaced. The detention, served jointly with Malfoy, was one of the most disturbing experiences of his life.

"Never mind," said Minerva with a wave. "But Hagrid says that if you enjoyed your experience with the feral boars, you'll really love working with the thestrals next time."

20 February, 1997

Thursday

Dear Severus:

I don't know whose idea it was but if it was yours, you've made your point.

When Minerva gave me detention with Hagrid, I thought I had it made. I couldn't imagine how a detention with him would be bad, even with Malfoy right there with me. In fact, I was pretty sure that Malfoy would cry like a girl if he took us into the Forbidden Forest.

So when Hagrid met us in front of his hut and we set out for the forest, I had a Severus-worthy smirk on my face. Malfoy tried to look cool and uninterested, but I could tell he was nervous by the way his mouth kept twitching. Hagrid took us about a mile into the forest—at least that's what it felt like—and then we stopped inside a pretty big clearing that looked like it had been destroyed by looters. The plants were in shambles and the dirt was all dug up and rutted. I asked him what happened. I will NEVER forget his answer, not as long as I live.

"Feral boars," he said, "and we're going to castrate them."

So, on the very off chance that you don't already know this and aren't laughing your arse half off with Minerva in her office while you drink your oh-so-innocent "coffee," Hagrid decided to solve the problem of the feral hog population by castrating all the males! Not by capturing them and turning them into…say…BACON…but by capturing them, having Malfoy hold them down and having me wrap this REALLY TIGHT RUBBER BAND around their BITS! OR…when that got
boring, having ME hold them down while Malfoy did the dirty deed.

Hagrid had no problem luring the dirty buggers into the clearing. He had some sort of slop that he spread on the ground—it smelled like troll piss if you ask me—and they'd just appear out of nowhere. Of course, the boars were the mean-looking ones with the long tusks. As soon as one of them was slurping away at the slop, he had Malfoy tackle it from behind and wrestle it to its side while I had to grab its…its BALLS and force them through this tiny tight rubber band. When we let it go it squealed like it was dying as it ran back into the forest. I swear we could hear it yowling for five minutes. All I wanted to do that whole time was crouch down with my hands over my groin. I could FEEL its pain. You'd think that after that first one made all that noise no others would dare come close but Hagrid poured out some more slop and within five minutes another one was there.

I swear we castrated twenty hogs. I was so sore when we were done that I could hardly stand up. I almost even felt sorry for Malfoy. He looked worse than I felt, which means he looked practically dead. Hagrid sent both of us up to the infirmary when we were done. I had cuts on both arms and at least one puncture wound on my leg. Malfoy's face was all bruised up and his nose was broken. Madam Pomfrey looked at Hagrid like he was Atilla the Hun (umm…Muggle reference…) but he just smiled and said he had the "Heads o' Houses' blessin'."

When I was finally up in my bed last night I realized that Hagrid could have taken you with him, or Minerva, or any of the other professors and done the whole thing with magic.

But I had the last laugh—I just transformed into Lightfoot and the aches and pains faded away. I curled up and had a great night's sleep.

Did I learn a lesson? I think I did.

Alright. I've worked this all out of my system and can devote the rest of the letter to the serious parts of yours. Like the potential new Mrs. Trelawney-Snape. I'm not sure what I think about this union. She is a bit older than you, isn't she? Can she still produce little Snapelets? Since witches and wizards live longer than Muggles, I assume witches are fertile longer too, so I hope it's not out of the question. I think you need at least three children, but you'd better ask Sybs about it, since she has the inner eye and obviously already knows how many children are in your shared future. If you aren't eager to reproduce, Hagrid probably has some extra rubber bands…

Sigh. Hard to change the tone of this letter. But thanks for answering my question. I suppose that when you got to the meeting that night—way late, I know—you had to prove to Tom that your true loyalties were with him. I just hope that someday soon you don't have to pretend anymore. There are a lot of reasons for me to get rid of him, but none better than ending your spying days and giving you the freedom to get on with your life.

Guess all I've got left is your question—five words to convince you to drop your threatened punishment when you find me lurking outside the Slytherin Common room under my invisibility cloak (after curfew, I assume).

"Huh? I must be sleep-walking!"

So here's your question: Did you ever think about having children? Under what conditions might you consider having some in the future?

Regards,

Harry
Harry smiled smugly as he completed his letter, vanished the ink with the now very familiar spell and placed the parchment carefully in his book. He looked across the library table at Ron, who, instead of working on his Herbology assignment as they had planned, was gazing across the room with a lovelorn look in his eyes. Harry turned, knowing who he would find when he looked. As he expected, Hermione was sitting at a small table, a frown on her face as she read from a book that was approximately the size of a small Muggle automobile. She looked up to see him staring at her and gave a small wave, ignoring Ron altogether. Harry turned back to face Ron.

"You know, she likes you too," he whispered.

Ron frowned.

"I don't like her," he hissed.

"You do too like her," replied Harry, obviously too loudly, as Ron hissed at him.

"Quiet! She'll hear you!"

Harry shook his head slowly and dropped it into his hands. "You're impossible, Ron," he whispered. He looked up at his friend again and leaned forward. "Why don't you just apologize and get it over with? Tell her you're sorry for being such a prat and snogging Lavender like you were giving her a tonsillectomy with your tongue."

Ron glanced over at Hermione again, then back at Harry, but didn't say anything else. He dropped his eyes down to his book and pretended to read.

Harry sighed and opened his Defense book. He silently vowed that if Ron and Hermione had not made up by March 1st, he'd personally lock them up in a classroom, give them their wands and let them kill each other. It had to be better than this months-long stand-off.

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Chapter 25________________________________________

February 23 – March 2, 1997

Severus

Severus had collected his Sixth Year's homework assignments Friday at the end of class. Harry had hardly looked at Draco for the entire class period—a pleasant change from the usual death glares they leveled at each other. Severus had looked up as Draco approached his desk with his assignment in hand. Draco's face was set in a practiced blank expression. He nodded at his head of house as he placed the scroll on Severus' desk and strolled out of the classroom, ignoring the other Slytherins. Harry, however, held back until nearly everyone had left, making a show of cleaning up spilled ink on his desk and fiddling with his shoelaces. Finally, he approached the desk and handed over his scroll.

"Did you arrange that detention?" he asked, his voice deliberately low.

"Detention, Mr. Potter?" replied Severus, his eyes not leaving the open book on his desk. "Oh, you mean your little jaunt in the Forbidden Forest with Hagrid and Mr. Malfoy? The whole faculty room was in stitches over it. Hagrid said you and your partner did an excellent job—that you're both naturals at it." Severus looked at and met the boy's eyes. Harry looked incredibly tired—no, more
than tired. Worn was a better word. He chanced a smile, knowing that he was virtually hidden behind Harry who was standing between himself and the door.

"Not my idea, Mr. Potter," he said, looking Harry in the eyes. His lips twitched. "I wish I could claim it as my own, but I believe you have your own Head of House to thank….”

Harry's mouth dropped open.

"Minerva?" he hissed.

"She seldom uses her best detention ideas on members of her own house," Severus replied, feigning disinterest. "You must have really set her off with your behavior." He gave Harry a significant look, daring Harry to protest. Harry did not. "My poor snakes have long suffered from her cruel and unusual punishments, however. Several years ago, she claimed to have caught members of the Slytherin Quidditch team spying on the Ravenclaw girls through a convenient knothole in the shower room wall." Harry gulped but did not tell Severus that the twins had created that very hole. "She took the whole lot of them to St. Clementine's Magical Home for the Demented for an evening of assisting the residents at bath time. She said that if they were interested in seeing nudity, she'd give them nudity. Marcus Flint was never quite the same after that experience."

Harry swallowed hard and looked like he might sick all over his shoes.

"Homework, Potter?" asked Severus.

"Right. Here." Harry thrust the scroll at Severus and practically ran out the door.

23 February, 1997

Sunday

Dear Harry:

Thank you, but I am quite sure I will not be needing any rubber bands from Hagrid or anyone else. Rather, I am certain that my virility will enable me to father any number of children, should I so desire, being strong enough to overcome the advanced age of any potential partner. The question, then, is not whether "Sybs" is too old to give me children, but whether I am eager, or even desirous some day, of reproducing.

Ah, you are not accustomed to me addressing your questions at the beginning of my letter, are you? Well, today I will get right down to the root of the matter. I have never wanted children—for reasons numerous and varied, ranging from my own parental role models to my exposure to any number of dangerous ingredients in the past, present and future to my decidedly unpleasant disposition in general. However, lest my negativity put you off, I am not opposed to children in general, or to parenthood. Some people (say, for instance, the Weasleys) are meant to have children. Others (say, for example, Argus Filch) are not. There are others, like your friend Hagrid, that have all the love in the world needed to raise a child but none of the common sense. Still others, such as the Headmaster, would likely have been very fit, capable parents yet either chose not to reproduce or were incapable of doing so. It is a complicated situation made more difficult by the freedom most humans have in being able to reproduce without license, lessons or financial resources to raise a child.

However, were I desirous of passing on my genetics, I would not do so while the Dark Lord lives—while the world is subject to his whim in any way. It is not a world into which I would bring a child, should I have the desire and the opportunity, and my particular situation relative to the Dark Lord
makes the decision even easier.

That being said, I would not discourage others from procreating, and my reluctance should not influence any decision you might make on this subject—providing you are at least twenty-five years old, in a stable relationship and have steady and lucrative employment.

And while I do not argue that getting rid of "Tom" has with it many inherent benefits, the good it will do for the whole of the wizarding world—and a good part of the Muggle world—far surpasses in importance any benefit to me. I do thank you, Harry, for thinking of me, but retain your brains please and do not do anything foolish before you are prepared—fully prepared, with adult help. I will "get on with my life" regardless—though my life, as you are well aware, may "get on" in a different direction should the Dark Lord meet an untimely end. First of all, I would no longer have to plan grisly, retaliatory detentions for students who flagrantly break rules and go back on their promises.

Speaking of which…Minerva did fill me in on your detention with Hagrid and Mr. Malfoy. She assures me that you have learned your lesson and are prepared to toe the line. What that means, Harry, is that you will be in your dorm from curfew until breakfast and that you will apply yourself to your studies and restrict your extra-curricular activities to those sanctioned by the school—Quidditch, organized clubs, study in the library and of course post-Quidditch celebratory parties involving nothing stronger than butterbeer. Notice, please, that following Mr. Malfoy about under cover of invisibility cloak is not "sanctioned" by Hogwarts, and more importantly, not by your guardian or myself either.

As for your five-word answer, I must admit it to be inspired. However…I am relatively certain that in a catatonic state, you would not have the presence of mind to cover yourself with an invisibility cloak before leaving your room. Since you rose to my five-word challenge, let's get that mind of yours cranking again. Now, in five words, convince Professor Slughorn to share the memory the headmaster has asked you to retrieve.

My missive is not lengthy tonight, but I have a pile of essays from my N.E.W.T. class that I must get to, and an appointment with your head of house as well. Seems I have won a bet, and she owes me a game of chess.

Regards,

Severus

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Later that night, feeling a touch light-headed after heartily defeating Minerva at chess and drinking some very old scotch with his very old friend, Severus hung his robes over the high back of his dressing chair and sat on his bed to remove his boots. He stretched his feet, inspecting his threadbare socks and mentally adding shopping for replacements to his list for his next visit to Hogsmeade. He pulled off his socks, tossing them to the laundry hamper in the corner, and sat for a moment, lost in thought.

It was already getting late in February. There were only four months left of the school year. Four months for Draco to finish his task—or for Severus to do it for him.

Should he give Harry a better idea of Albus' limited time left on earth?

No. There was always the possibility, slight though it may be, that Albus would survive this mess.
But how could he? How could he survive the curse that threatened to end his life even before the end of term?

For a moment, only a moment, Severus allowed himself to think about the many scenarios he and Albus had covered in their regular meetings. All of them started out differently, but had the same outcome. Dumbledore dies by Draco’s hand, Severus’ hand or from the effects of the curse. The Ministry, already weakened, falls to Voldemort. Voldemort gains control of Hogwarts and puts Severus in the Headmaster position.

Albus was sure the Ministry would fall. Severus did not want to believe him, but he did.

With Voldemort in control of the Ministry and of Hogwarts, Harry would not be—could not be—at Hogwarts for his seventh year.

Where would he go? Who would watch over him?

That night marked the beginning of many nights of fitful slumber.

________________________________________

-Harry-

Harry had been lagging all day, plagued by a persistent headache and an uneasy stomach. The stomachache he could readily explain—he and Ron had visited the kitchen just before curfew and procured the remains of the treacle tart from dinner along with a liter of pumpkin juice. They’d gorged themselves just before bed—to Hermione’s disapproval and Ginny’s general disgust—so it was no wonder his stomach was protesting this morning. He picked at his food at lunch and was glad to see that Ron was looking a little green around the gills as well. He suffered through Charms, fortunately a theoretical lesson instead of practicals, and trudged into Defense class with Ron. Snape took his time with his introduction and explanations today—they were just beginning a unit on differing effects of the same spell used verbally and nonverbally—then told them to pair off to practice. Lavender managed to nab Ron so Harry and Hermione faced each other.

Harry had not uttered his first spell—he was doing the verbal blocking spell to Hermione’s nonverbal body-binding curse—when his head seemed to explode with pain. Reflexively, he grabbed at his scar as Hermione’s curse hit him full force. He fell to the ground, frozen, mouth open morbidly in a rictus of pain, hands plastered to his forehead.

Hermione, horrified, lifted her wand to cancel the spell but a hand grabbed her arm.

"No," Snape hissed. He cast his Patronus first, watched as the white mist split and cantered off in two different directions, then turned to Harry and did a hover charm instead. Hermione glanced around, but no one had noticed what was going on, not even Ron, who was reluctantly trying to revive an unconscious Lavender. Snape quickly maneuvered Harry out into the passageway.

"Take him to the infirmary before you cancel the spell," he instructed. "And urge him to occlude or, if there is a privacy screen, to transform. You are excused from the rest of class. Go! He may be frozen but he can still feel pain!"

Five minutes later, Harry had awoken screaming. Madam Pomfrey forced a pain relieving potion down his throat and stood by as Hermione coaxed her friend to calm down and occlude. She didn’t leave his side until the Headmaster came in an hour later.

/
26 February, 1997

Wednesday

Dear Severus:

What the hell is the rat bastard doing calling you in the middle of the day? Oh—like maybe you wouldn't be doing something else on a Wednesday afternoon when you're a Hogwarts professor? Ron told me that Dumbledore himself came to class and called you out in the corridor and then Dumbledore came back in without you. He just said he'd be finishing the class, picked up where you'd left off and had people keep working on the verbal/nonverbal spell pairs.

I did manage to occlude when Hermione cancelled the Petrificus spell. Madam Pomfrey force-fed me a pain potion and once that started to work I could concentrate enough to bring up my barrier. I didn't want to—I wanted to know what was going on. But sinking into my bubble felt too good. I started to feel like I was back at Shell Cottage, floating in the ocean current, bobbing in the waves. So different than Hogwarts in the middle of winter.

Dumbledore was there when I woke up. Well, he was the one to wake me up, I guess. I think I'd fallen asleep while I was occluded, after the pain went away at least. He told me right away that you were still gone but that he would let me know when you returned. He let me go back up here—to my dorm room—and Ron gave me my Defense assignment with your letter that Dumbledore returned at the end of class. We went down together to dinner—of course you weren't there. When we came back up, Ron made sure I was alright then left me to read your letter. I couldn't stand being alone up in the room, though, and came back down to the common room so I could be distracted by something other than thinking about where you are.

It's almost seven o'clock and no word yet from Dumbledore about you. I know it's only been a few hours, but that's a few hours too many for you to spend with Tom and company. I don't like it—especially since it was the middle of the day in the middle of the week. It can only mean he's happy, or mad, or planning something.

I'm not going to get anywhere worrying like this, so I may as well change the subject and try to lighten things up a bit. And the best way to do that is to go back to the subject of your cozy little relationship with Professor Trelawney.

Hermione and I spent some time in the yearbooks section of the library on Monday but couldn't find any trace of a Sybil Trelawney. Hermione (brave Gryffindor that she is) asked Madam Pince who told us that Professor Trelawney is a graduate of Beauxbatons. Ooh la la! A French girl, Severus! We did discover, through some clever grilling of Madam Prince by Hermione (turns out Madam Pince is a Beauxbatons graduate as well) that you are indeed interested in an older woman—older by nearly ten years, in fact—one that had a bit of difficulty in her studies and may not be "the sharpest tack on the board." I hope this doesn't surprise you. I bet you'd not like your kids (on the off-chance you decide to make a few of them) to have Crabbe and Goyles type intellects so you might want to choose brains over beauty next time.

Have you considered dating Minerva? I know she's quite a bit older than you are, but she's really clever and almost as no-nonsense as you are. She's really demanding and strict—I think you'd like that in a partner. And she's powerful too. She's really not that bad looking if looks are important to you (and they must be since you are so gaga over Sybs). I've seen her in her night robe several times with her hair down (now don't be jealous) and her hair is so long she could probably spread it out and run around the school naked and no one would know.

AAAAAUUUGHHHH! I did not just think that…say that…write that.
Since I'm trying to kill time and not do my "real" homework, I'll answer your question. You wanted me to convince Professor Slughorn to give me that memory—using only five words. (Where did you get this game anyway? Why not seven words? Or four?)

How about…?
"Cough it up, fat boy."

Hmmm. That one might not work.

"I won't hold you responsible."

I like that one—but it needs a set-up. Five words aren't enough.

"The memory for a shag."

(I kind of suspect Slughorn might be gay so that one would likely work, but neither Dumbledore nor the war effort nor even ending your days of working for Tom is worth that kind of sacrifice.)

"Do it for Lily, Professor."

I think I might be on to something with that one.

Ginny is staring at me. I'm sitting on the floor in front of the couch and she's sitting across from me. I think she's wondering why I keep chuckling. If she only knew what I was writing about.

I need to end this letter and at least make an attempt at my other homework. So here's your question—or assignment.

Describe me (that's Harry Potter) in five words.

Regards,

Harry

/

At nine forty-five, Professor McGonagall stepped into the common room through the portrait hole. The third-years playing with the Hula Hoop dropped the toy to the floor and the very noisy game of exploding Snap paused as students turned their attention to their head of house.

"Carry on," she said, maneuvering around a group of fifth-years who were spread out on the floor studying and making her way over to Harry and his friends in their customary spot near the fireplace. They were all staring at the professor as she approached, Harry unable—or not trying—to hide the apprehensive look on his face. He has been very antsy the last half hour, his body feeling achy and tired, his annoying headache threatening to erupt into a migraine.

"Mr. Potter, the Headmaster would like to speak with you in his office." She paused as Harry paled then stood, quickly shoving his text books and loose parchment and quill into his book bag. When he had left the room, slipping quietly out the portrait hole less than a minute later, the Professor addressed Hermione and Ron.

"He may be late," she said quietly. "Do not be concerned—he is not leaving the castle and he will be fine."

Hermione and Ron looked at each other, forgetting that they had been avoiding each other for
months, and nodded at their head of house. She nodded back to them and made her way back to the portrait hole, stopping to speak to several younger students as she passed.

Ginny Weasley watched her go and stared a long minute at the portrait hole door. Sighing, she looked down at her homework again and wondered how the word "Harry" had gotten doodled into the margin of her Defense essay.

________________________________________

-Severus-

It had been so close…so close. Poisoned mead, undoubtedly meant for Dumbledore, fallen into the hands of Horace, poured into cups offered to students. A birthday, a coming of age, nearly made tragic.

And Harry was the hero now, having saved his best friend's life with a bezoar. If he could remember only one thing Severus taught him in Potions, he had chosen wisely.

It needn't have happened at all. If Harry had come to him instead of to Horace, there would have been no poisoned mead. He, Severus, could have made the antidote to the love potion. But Harry had taken Weasley to Horace; Horace was their Potion's professor now. Harry would never have gone to Severus. He couldn't be seen going to Snape for help. And that, that decision, no, that necessity, had nearly cost Ron Weasley his life. And Severus could not forget that Harry, too, had a glass of poisoned mead in his own hand.

It was troubling enough that a Hogwarts student had given Harry love potion laced-chocolates. It was a miracle that Harry hadn't eaten them himself, though that would have prevented the terribly long day Severus had had yesterday, brewing the potions to totally purge the toxins from Weasley's system. He was a very sick young man, despite the fact that the bezoar had stopped the poison's progression and neutralized enough of it to stabilize him and keep him alive.

When he had Flooed into Poppy's office after hours Saturday night to deliver the first doses of the specific antidote, he'd found the office empty and had peeked out into the infirmary to find her speaking to the Headmaster. Sitting at Weasley's bedside, however, were Harry and Hermione. The fact that it was after curfew registered briefly with him but he set aside his concern given the unusual circumstances. Severus had had a brief meeting with Arthur and Molly Weasley before they left the school. Molly had thanked him profusely for preparing the antidote. His standard reply didn't work here—before this year, he would have said "It's my job as the school's Potion Master." But this year, Horace Slughorn was the Potion Master but it was Severus Snape that had more experience with specific poisons and Severus Snape that Albus Dumbledore had tasked with the Weasley case. So Severus had only been able to accept the Weasley's gratitude and assure them that Harry was doing well.

The Headmaster was his undoing. Albus looked up past Poppy and spotted Severus in the office doorway.

"It is ready, Severus?" he asked. Immediately, all eyes—all eyes belonging to conscious bodies, anyway—were on him. He took a small step into the room, staying close to the door.

"Yes, Headmaster," he replied, letting his gaze rest briefly on Harry before returning it back to Albus and Poppy. He held up a divided box with vials of measured doses. Poppy immediately moved forward.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger, back to your dorms now."
"What is it?" asked Harry, his eyes fixed on the box in Severus' hands.

"The antidote," said Poppy. She and Severus began speaking in hushed voices as he gave instructions for the administration of the potion.

"But I thought….I thought…the bezoar…" Harry looked from Ron to Severus to the Headmaster, confused.

"The bezoar neutralized enough of the poison Mr. Weasley ingested to save his life. It prevented it from spreading even further to his organs and stabilized his system. It did everything a general antidote can do. The antidote that Professor Snape has prepared is the specific antidote for the type of poison in the mead. It will purge the remaining poison from his system and stabilize him further."

Harry nodded and Hermione voiced her thanks. "Thank you, Professor. I imagine you've been brewing all day."

Severus didn't answer, acknowledging her words with the barest of nods.

"I imagine you'll want to get started on the next batch, then?" asked Poppy. When Severus again nodded, she cautioned. "Get some sleep first, Severus. These will hold us over for the night. I'd recommend you begin with the restorative for the digestive system first in the morning."

Severus stepped back into Poppy's office without a word, and Hermione pulled a reluctant Harry by the hand as they left the infirmary.

/ 2 March, 1997  

Sunday  

Dear Harry:

You have had an eventful week, as have I. When we last spoke privately, in the Headmaster's office on Wednesday evening, I am sure neither of us anticipated what was soon to come. Just as you needed to see me to assure yourself that I was alive and well, despite my having been summoned at an unusual time, I needed to see you to know that you were not harmed in any way by the events of Saturday. You skated on the edge at every turn, Harry. It could easily have been you that drank the poisoned mead, or worse yet, all three of you—leaving no one to provide aid or to even call for it. Your quick-thinking with the bezoar saved your friend's life and I commend you on your ability to think clearly and act appropriately in the middle of such chaos.

I want to assure you again, as I did with Professor Dumbledore on Wednesday, that I am unharmed after my day outside the castle. The Dark Lord is stepping up plans, plans that are likely to come to fruition as he is gaining ground at the Ministry and with certain other factions. It is imperative that Albus take full advantage of the time he has left to set his counter plan in motion and advance it as far as possible while he is here. I know of no other way to say this Harry, so I'll be blunt. I do not think the Headmaster will survive this summer. The curse is too aggressive and we have held it at bay too long. It is not fair that he ask you to be responsible for what he is preparing you to do, but even I see that he must pass off the task to someone. Remember Harry—always remember—you are not alone in this. You have friends, you have Minerva, and you have me. While I must exist in the background of your life, not openly handing you clues or helping you on the front lines of your battle, do not ever doubt my support or my loyalty.
I checked in on Mr. Weasley an hour ago, delivering the next batch of restoratives to Madam Pomfrey. I believe that at least one good thing—in your mind, anyway—has occurred because of this crisis. Miss Granger was sitting beside your friend, holding his hand while he slept. Perhaps at least one stressful element of your year will have eased now and the feud will have fizzled and been forgotten.

Just as you attempted to add levity to your letter near the end, so will I, for I must respond at least in part to your previous letter, with its suggestion that I begin to look at Professor McGonagall as a love interest.

Harry, you have discovered our little secret. Please keep it close as we are not yet ready to go public with it.

Now to address your five-word phrases to convince Professor Slughorn to share the memory. First of all, I will not comment on the sexual orientation of any Hogwarts professor but at least I am assured that yours does not lean toward relationships with persons many times your age or currently employed at Hogwarts. I will say, however, that your last suggestion—"Do it for Lily, Professor," holds merit. Think about that one, Harry. You are of course not restricted to five words when you speak with him next, but you must deliver enough in the first sentence or two to hold his mind open to the possibility. Perhaps it is not what you say that truly matters, but how you say it, and how you present yourself as the orphaned son of one of his favored students.

I will close with my five word description of you, as you requested.

"He is just a boy."

Do not be offended, Harry, but read instead the lyrics of a song from the musical "Les Miserables." Perhaps you have heard of the novel by the French author Victor Hugo on which the play is based? The play follows the struggles of several characters in the early years of the 19th century in Paris. The song is "Bring Him Home" and someday you and I will go see the play together and hear this song in context.

_God on high_
_Hear my prayer_
_In my need_
_You have always been there_
_He is young_
_He's afraid_
_Let him rest_
_Heaven blessed._
_Bring him home_
_Bring him home_
_Bring him home.
_He's like the son I might have known_
_If God had granted me a son._
_The summers die_
_One by one_
_How soon they fly_
_On and on_
_And I am old_
_And will be gone._
_Bring him peace_
_Bring him joy_
He is young
He is only a boy
You can take
You can give
Let him be
Let him live
If I die
Let me die
Let him live
Bring him home
Bring him home
Bring him home.

Warm Regards,

Severus

The melody filled his head as he finished his letter. He wondered if this was too much to leave at Harry's feet, but he thought it wasn't.

"He's like the son I might have known, if God had granted me a son."

Severus glanced at the clock on the table to assure himself that Harry was where he belonged. He wanted a drink; he desperately wanted a drink.

Instead of pouring himself a drink, though, he went over to the old Victrola, carefully removed an album from its cardboard cover and placed it on the turntable.

Alcohol was a drug, but so was music, and Severus got drunk that night to the sound of the Beatles.

________________________________________

Chapter 26

________________________________________

March 5 – March 9, 1997

-Harry-

Studying took on a whole new intensity when Ron wasn't involved. Stuck as he was in the hospital wing, still weak and half out-of-it, he could provide neither comic relief nor commiseration when they had to write an entire essay on the similarities between a turtle and a croquet ball for McGonagall's animal transfiguration lesson. Hermione was all business when it came to homework and looked disapproving instead of erupting in suppressed giggles when Harry suggested that a turtle could be used as a croquet ball, providing it was painted red with a white stripe.

Hermione did come in handy for some things, however. She had grown up in a Muggle household with Muggle parents and had a more than decent grasp on fine arts. Not that Harry hadn't grown up with Muggles; it was just that his Muggle family didn't know Victor Hugo from Winged Victory.

"Les Miserables?" she repeated, correcting Harry's horrid pronunciation, though he wasn't entirely sure that the word should really end with the "b." "I saw it in London with my parents just last
summer. Phenomenal production, really. Why do you ask?"

"Well…it's just that…well…” he paused, not knowing how to continue without giving something away he wasn't ready to reveal. He sighed. "Severus quoted a song from the play in his last letter," he said, his voice low.

Hermione put down her quill and blew on her Transfiguration essay to dry it before rolling it up and stowing it in her bag. She was biting her lower lip, as she always did when thinking very hard and not wanting to let on that she was several steps ahead of you already.

"I know the score rather well," she said at last, looking up at him. "I have the soundtrack at home on CD." Her eyes had a peculiar look to them, almost as if she was wanting to tear up but was suppressing the emotion. They were very soft and vulnerable that way, thought Harry, watching her bite her lip. "Which song, Harry?"

Harry looked away as he answered. "Bring Him Home." He looked up at her after he said it. Her eyes had softened even more and she gave him a small smile.

"It's one of my favorites," she said. She looked around the common room but almost everyone had gone to bed. It was nearly midnight, after all, and they, too, should really call it a night. "I'll sing it for you, if you'd like," she offered. "It won't be like hearing it in the theater, but you'll get the idea."

She smiled when he nodded, thought a moment, then began to sing quietly.

Harry stared at her, utterly transfixed, as she sang. Reading the words was moving enough. He'd read them and re-read them since receiving the letter yesterday at the end of Defense class, absorbing the words and their sentiment, but nothing was like hearing them in Hermione's clear voice; words and music together, each going beyond the expression of the other.

When she finished, they were quiet a moment. Harry, seated on the floor in front of the sofa as was his custom, rested his head back on the cushions and stared at the ceiling.

"He really loves you, Harry," commented Hermione softly, at last.

Harry closed his eyes.

"Yeah, I know."

/ 5 March, 1997  Wednesday

Dear Severus:

I went to bed late last night—Hermione and I stayed up studying trying to catch up after this weekend. That's why I didn't get a response written to your letter last night. I've been thinking about it, though, and I asked Hermione about that song. She knew it (of course)—she told me she'd gone in to London with her parents last summer to see the show. She told me (of course)—she told me she'd gone in to London with her parents last summer to see the show. She told me a bit about who sings it, and why, and I'm not sure what to think about that. I hope you know by now that I'm planning to survive this thing, but I'm not sure how good it will be to "come home" if you're not planning to be around. I have no choice to believe what you're telling me about the headmaster, no matter how much I wish it weren't true. He's gone so often at mealtime in the Great Hall, and he hasn't called me in for another session since just after term started. What are you doing for him? Is he in a lot of pain? And if he isn't
around next year…to run Hogwarts…will Minerva take over?

I can't even begin to imagine Hogwarts without him. I'm not sure I'd even want to be here with some Ministry-appointed idiot like Umbridge running this place next year. They'd likely run it into the ground, send all the Muggle-borns home and hire death eaters to teach.

This is really making me mad. Dumbledore has a plan for everything—I hope he's got this one figured out.

I just can't believe there's a chance he won't be around. It's a good thing you're here now to watch out for me and make sure I don't do anything stupid.

And I'm not offended by your five words. Well, not after I read the lyrics to the song, anyway. What you're really saying is that I'm young and have a lot of living to do still. Besides, "He is only a boy" is way better than something like "Stubborn git/Looks like James," "Gryffindor brat obsessed with Malfoy" or "Complete dunderhead, inept at Potions."

Ron is doing better—but I guess you know that. I went up to see him after breakfast this morning and he was awake and leaning up against a pile of about ten pillows. He had been eating some sort of disgusting gruel from a breakfast tray. He complained a lot about all the potions he has to take, and how awful they taste, and how they make him sleepy. And to prove it he went and fell asleep while we were talking. I wish I could sleep that easily. It's hard to get to sleep lately, especially without Ron snoring in the bed next to mine. You'd think the quiet would make it easier to sleep, not harder, but I lie there and think about how Ron almost died, and how no one is really talking about how that mead got poisoned in the first place. I remember Professor Slughorn saying he meant to give that bottle to Dumbledore for Christmas so maybe the poison was meant for him. Except Hermione pointed out that Slughorn wouldn't be likely to let go of such a good bottle of mead, would he? So it wouldn't likely ever get to Dumbledore, and any number of people could drink it once it did. As it was, we all three had it in our glasses.

I'm starting to realize that I'm like a cat with nine lives. The thing is, Severus, that I think I've used up most of them already.

Ron looks loads better than he did this weekend. Madam Pomfrey won’t tell me when he gets to leave the infirmary—I suppose it's possible she doesn't know yet. She just looked all serious and said "He's got a some healing to do still." When he fell asleep she tucked him in and took away his tray and about six of his pillows. She looked like she wanted to clear off his bedside table—I don't think she thought that all the gifts people sent him were appropriate for a hospital. Of course him mum and dad sent him flowers and Lavender brought him candy so it must have been Fred and George that sent the personal hip flask and of course the toilet seat. You know, you have to wonder where they get all the toilet seats they send us when we're in the infirmary. I've gotten three toilet seats from them over the years—I guess I should be wondering why I end up in the infirmary so often. The last one they sent was one of those cushiony kinds that was a really putrid shade of green. I gave it to Dobby and he about passed out from excitement. I'm not sure what he did with it but at least he isn't wearing it.

Everyone is after Ron's position on the Quidditch team. I finally went ahead and told Cormac he could keep on Saturday and he's driving me nuts with all his ideas and game plans. He follows me around with this animated chalk board drawing plays and bragging about his broomstick. Do you think you could manage to assign him a detention for Saturday afternoon? I'm beginning to think we'd do just as well without a keeper as with him. Quidditch was a lot more fun last year when I was banned from playing.

I've got a new game for you that Fred and George made up. It NEVER gets old. I'm going to name
three people. You have to kiss one (not just a peck—a regular snogging session at minimum), marry one (with full "benefits") and polyjuice into one and live their life for a day. Your choices are Professor Trelawney, Aunt Petunia and Rita Skeeter.

And just because that's so fun here is a second one with three more equally appealing choices. You have to spend a week in the same prison cell with one of them, be handcuffed to one for a week and teach the last one how to blend in in the Muggle world (and your life depends on your success). Your choices are Mad Eye Moody, Gilderoy Lockhart and Hagrid. (Oh, and you don't get to use magic on any of them.)

And while you're thinking about that, how about telling me why you became a teacher….using only five words.

I hope I haven't given you too much homework.

I went up to the owlery last night with Hermione—she borrowed Hedwig to send a letter to her parents. Hedwig and Mac were all cuddled up together making lovie dovie eyes at each other. Hermione thought it was sweet and romantic. I promised her an owlet of her own if these two get it together and have babies. I hope that's alright with you—I know you said they might nest in the forest and never bring their babies near us, but I have a feeling they'll stay nearby. Mac's very attentive but it's obvious that Hedwig is the one in charge. She'll have him regurgitating his food for the owlets while she eats her field mice and keeps them down. Anyway, I told Hermione she has to name her owlet after a Beatles Song and suggested Eleanor or Madonna. She looked at me like I was nuts—asked me if I didn't think a magical name was more appropriate. "What, like Dumbledore?" I asked. "Or maybe Hogwarts?"

I didn't deserve to be hit for that, did I?

I'd better get back to my homework. I'm getting behind in Transfiguration and Minerva will have my head on a platter if I don't get this essay done tonight.

Warmer regards,

Harry

Harry took off his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes. He stared into the fire for a long moment, remembering, as he often did when he looked at this particular fire for too long, how Sirius had come to him here back in fourth year, tried to give him advice about fighting the dragons in the first task. How Sirius had been worried about him and had made a point to come to him, by Floo call anyway, risking his own safety in the process. He remembered, too, that Ron hadn't been speaking to him at the time and had come down and nearly caught him at it.

Nearly a year now since Sirius had…gone. He thought of all that Sirius had been for him, in those too brief moments they had spent together. As close to a parent as anyone had been, closer even, up to that point in his life. All through fourth year, during the Triwizard Tournament, Sirius had come back to Hogsmeade, hidden in a cave, stolen newspapers, eaten rats. Risked discovery so he could watch over Harry. Fifth year they'd had those brief days at Grimmauld Place right before and after the trial, two weeks at Christmas. Harry remembered the Sirius of that time, stuck in Grimmauld Place. He thought he'd been happier in the cave eating rats.

He drew his knees up to his chin, hugged his legs even closer to himself and stared at the fire. After Sirius died, only six weeks had passed before the accident at Privet Drive and then Severus had
stepped sideways into his life and unbelievably had filled that hole; that hole created by his parents' death, left open and unhealed during his years at the Dursleys, half-way filled by Sirius, and by Molly Weasley, and now hardly noticeable at all.

What would Sirius think of his current arrangement?

He had a sudden stray thought and grinned.

Try this one, Severus…you have to be roommates with one, work partner of one and life partner of the other. And your choices are Sirius, Remus and James.

Severus would probably choose a life sentence in Azkaban.

________________________________________

-Severus-

He didn't have the stomach for this anymore.

He sat again in Minerva's office, in his customary spot in the middle of the loveseat, with his usual glass of scotch and the now all-too-common concerned look on his face.

"Severus, I assure you that Poppy said he'll be fine."

"But he hasn't regained consciousness yet…" Severus protested, checking the annoying cuckoo clock behind Minerva's desk. Two hours already?

"Nor will he until Poppy allows it," said Minerva. She moved a straight-backed chair in front of the loveseat and sat on it, knees almost touching Severus. "I know you are terribly concerned, Severus, but honestly, skull fractures are not all that uncommon among Quidditch players…"

"That's it! I am going to personally petition the Board of Governors for new Quidditch rules. Players should be wearing helmets! Preferably ones made from iron cauldrons. Did you hear what that sounded like, that Bludger hitting Harry on the side of the head?"

Minerva grimaced.

"I heard, Severus. I have already banned Mr. McLaggen from Quidditch for the rest of his Hogwarts career."

"Fortunately for him not a long one," muttered Severus. "I might just kill him myself."

Minerva sighed. "It was rather disturbing to witness his behavior on the pitch. He's not even a beater." She frowned. "Fortunately, since one of the Beaters was deprived of his bat, he had both hands free to catch Harry."

Severus tipped back his glass and downed the contents in a single go. He braced himself against the heat in his gut, then stood up. The cuckoo clock emerged for its half-hour chime. The bird left its wooden perch and fluttered around their heads. Severus brushed a tiny yellow feather off his black robes.

"Molting again?" he commented dryly as the bird regained its perch and disappeared into the clock.

Minerva reached up and plucked a small yellow tail feather from his hair. She examined it a moment then placed it on her desk where it joined several others of the same size and color.
"Can't have you walking around the castle with feathers in your hair, can we Severus?" she stated. "Sybil might think you're dressing up for her."

Severus glared at her but otherwise ignored her comment. "Well, if your idiot bird clock is correct, it's still hours before curfew. I'm going to Floo to Poppy's office and chance a peak in the infirmary." He was not going to waste an entire Saturday pacing in his quarters, worried about Harry.

Minerva put a hand on his arm as he turned to leave.

"Best be discreet, Severus," she warned. "Your reaction in the stands when Harry was hit was a bit…out of character."

"How so?" he retorted. "Did I not sit down and wait out the game while that idiot Hufflepuff Seeker took another hour to catch the snitch when there was absolutely no competition for it? Did I not cheer appropriately when Hufflepuff won the game—finally? Did I not scathingly comment on Miss Lovegood's relevant Quidditch commentary about the cloud that resembled my distinguished profile?"

Minerva squeezed his arm then released it.

"You did do all those things, Severus. Never mind. Go have a peek at Harry."

He handed her his empty glass, thanked her for the scotch and slipped quietly out of the room.

Minerva looked down at the empty glass then watched Severus walk silently away down the corridor. She closed her office door and shook her head, remembering the anguished cry of "Harry!" that had come out of Severus' mouth as the unconscious boy had slipped from his broom. Filius and Horace had looked at him oddly but in the ensuing commotion hadn't called him out on it. Minerva, however, still held the picture of Albus restraining Severus, his withered hand blending in with the black of Severus' robes.

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9 March, 1997

Sunday

Dear Harry:

It is a few minutes past midnight, just barely Sunday, and I write this from a comfortable chair not far from your bed here in the infirmary. At first, I found it a bit hard to concentrate what with Mr. Weasley's snoring echoing off the walls. I found that a nice Muffliato charm did wonders for my concentration, however, even more effective than a pillow over the head.

According to Poppy, you were unconscious all afternoon, waking up at sunset and causing a bit of a commotion in your desire to seek vengeance on your erstwhile teammate Mr. McLaggen. You will find some comfort in the knowledge that Minerva has banned Mr. McLaggen from Quidditch for the rest of his Hogwarts career, short though that be, for unsportsmanlike conduct. However, her punishment pales to the punishment that the Gryffindors doled out. While Gryffindors are not nearly the sore losers that my own snakes are (and I will deny saying that 'til the end of my days), they reacted rather poorly to one member of their Quidditch team nearly killing another. The ensuing slaughter by the Hufflepuffs may have further inspired their creative revenge. I do not know how the lions managed it, but just after dinner this evening (a meal from which Mr. McLaggen was conspicuously absent), the Slytherin Quidditch team—which had taken the pitch to practice—alerted me to the presence of a male, wearing nothing but a diaper, affixed to the Quidditch goal posts (with
nothing but tape) about twenty feet up from the ground. The tape they used was grey and very strong. Apparently, the Muggles use it for a variety of purposes and it has quite a popular culture following. According to an American Muggle-born girl from Hufflepuff (about half the school turned out to watch Professor Flitwick and myself remove McLaggen), the stuff is called "Duct" tape and the makers of the tape actually award a scholarship to an American student couple who design formalwear from the substance and wear it to their school's "prom." While McLaggen's "attackers" used the traditional grey variety, I am told it comes in a number of colors, including neon pink and lime green.

Miss Granger, who obviously has far too much time on her hands and researched uses of duct tape at the library over the summer, informed us that the tape can be used to repair the broken shells of tortoises, hold loose parts on automobiles and remove warts. If that is true, Mr. McLaggen should be completely wart free for a number of years.

Minerva said she would find the culprits and make sure they are punished. However, she must not be trying too hard as she was playing cribbage with the Headmaster when I left Albus' office a little while ago.

As for Mr. McLaggen, Poppy took pity on him and went to treat him in one of the guest rooms, as the Gryffindors would not allow him back in the tower, nor would they allow him in the infirmary near you. I have a feeling the young man will make himself as invisible as possible in the remaining months of his Hogwarts education. The Gryffindors have called for a public apology from the young man, to be made in the Great Hall during dinner. They would also like him to lick your shoes. I felt that was unsanitary so only approved the request providing he use an antiseptic mouthwash before licking anything of yours.

You are going to have quite a bit of bruising tomorrow so I have left Poppy some fresh bruise paste—her stores were rather low this far into the year anyway. I can't see much of your skin now as you are still bandaged up. It looks as if she was rather generous with the bandages, but there was quite a bit of blood I am told. You may be interested to know, too, that Miss Weasley came by this afternoon before you woke up and sat with you for some time. I do not know if she cried over your prone form and professed her undying love—Poppy only said that she sat with you for a while and argued a bit with her brother.

As you claimed in your recent letter that you already have enough toilet seats, I took the liberty of dealing with the one that arrived for you this evening. It wasn't obvious at first, as this one was covered by a lovely yellow floral arrangement and it sported a banner that read "Bon Voyage Carmen and Curly." It came addressed to you, however, from a Diagon Alley address, so I simply changed the banner to "Get Well Soon Little Brother" and placed it beside your friend's bed.

As you are still peacefully slumbering and I am not yet tired enough after today's excitement to return to my own bed, I will address your ridiculous questions. Really, Harry? Do these hypothetical yet impossible situations amuse you in some way? Do they not disturb you as deeply as they disturb me? I suppose you expect to be able to see within my psyche by analyzing my choices. Well, for what it's worth (even if it be a chuckle when you wake and read this), here goes.

To your first question: I will Polyjuice into your Aunt Petunia and live her life for a day. During that day, I will reveal to Vernon that I am having an affair with Dudley's gym teacher, entertain Dudley and his friends wearing only an apron and tell the neighbors that my nephew is a wizard.

As for the other choices—you do realize I am only continuing to humor you, don't you?—I will make Ms. Skeeter my bride and will engage in lip-lock with Professor Trelawney. Ms. Skeeter's life expectancy is far shorter than Professor Trelawney's as she is in the public eye and is bound to be
offed by an irate reader or squashed in her Animagus form. As for the benefits—what type of benefits do you mean, Harry? Please give me more details so I can better address the question.

On to question number two...equally difficult, I must say. I will spend a week in a cell with Hagrid. I will likely drown in his tears, but it is better than being handcuffed to him as I cannot imagine being dangled from his side for that time, my hand stretched over my head to reach his wrist, being licked by that drippy dog of his and sleeping next to him in a bed (where I will likely be smothered the first night). I suppose I will be handcuffed to Mad Eye, as I could never imagine him blending in with the Muggle world. I am not at all sure I will survive a week with Mad Eye, and I do not even want to imagine sleeping next to him or having him ask me to scratch his back. The last scenario is the easiest—Lockhart in his current state can readily pass for an insane Muggle. I'll just set him loose outside the Leaky Cauldron and that will be that.

Oh my—a third question, Harry? Five words to describe why I became a teacher. Harry, I have the five words. They were not difficult to put together. I simply am not...ready...yet...to reveal this to you, or to anyone. I promise you that someday, before too long, I will. I can tell you this now—I did not ever intend to become a teacher, until circumstances changed, and it was necessary.

Now a fun hypothetical question for you. Would you rather go through life with Mad Eye's appearance, Gilderoy Lockhart's brain or Mr. McLaggen's personality? Choose well, Harry.

You slumber on and I myself am growing tired. I'll end here, and save discussion of the Headmaster and the curse for another letter. You have other things to think about now, like getting better, and figuring out how to win the hand of young Miss Weasley.

Stay safe, Harry. I grow weary of the hospital wing.

Regards,

Severus

Severus blew on the parchment he’d been writing on to dry the ink, then muttered the concealment spell and rolled up the parchment. He placed it on the nightstand beside Harry's bed, tucked under his wand and glasses. Poppy had assured Severus that Harry would be in the infirmary most if not all of the next day.

As he walked down the corridors toward his dungeon quarters, Severus thought of Harry's question. Few people—no, only one person beside himself—knew the real answer to that question. He was a recently minted Potions Master when, at the age of twenty-one, he had fallen at the Headmaster's feet and vowed to do anything—anything—to protect Lily's son. And Albus had taken him up on it, had made him a spy, had kept him close, at Hogwarts, all of these years.

How similar his five words were to the five words Harry had suggested to convince Horace to give up the memory.

"Do it for Lily, Professor."

I did it for Lily.

Chapter 27
March 11 – March 19, 1997

-Harry-

For the fourth time, Harry had been called to a meeting with the Headmaster. For the first time, he’d been called on the carpet. Embarrassed by his failure, he ended up promising Professor Dumbledore that he’d try harder to get the memory from Professor Slughorn. He hurried down the corridor now, intent on getting back to his dorm before curfew as Dumbledore had instructed, but thinking, all the while thinking, of one of the last things the Headmaster had said.

"You see, we have never been able to keep a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher for longer than a year since I refused the post to Lord Voldemort."

He'd heard the position was cursed, of course. Everyone had. It was quite the joke among the students; Fred and George had started a little side business taking bets on what would happen so that the current teacher couldn't—or wouldn't—return. He hadn't been following the betting too closely this year but understood from Ron that the twins were giving fifteen to one odds that Snape would be sacked by Dumbledore, twenty to one that he would quit on his own and take back his Potions position and forty to one that he'd leave Hogwarts to get married. He knew that the better odds were for Snape dying in some gruesome fashion, or leaving Hogwarts to be Voldemort's right-hand man, but Ron tactfully didn't go there with him.

It had all been fun and games until now. Up until now, except when it came to this year and how he now felt about Snape, it was fine to joke about how the current DADA professor would meet his—or her—end. But now all bets were off.

Because now he knew that the so-called-curse had its start with Voldemort.

And that meant...or could mean...that Snape couldn't hold onto the job either.

With Dumbledore likely...gone...next year, what did that mean? Would Slughorn retire, allowing Snape to go back to teaching Potions?

He paused on the stairs as he climbed toward Gryffindor Tower, the stolen moment in Dumbledore's Pensieve his fourth year coming to mind...Karkarov's trial at the Ministry, Karkarov giving up Snape's name in his desperate attempt to buy his way out of Azkaban, Dumbledore's continued defense of the man.

Dumbledore had not acted frail or weak but Harry had seen it. Had seen how he kept his cursed hand nearly motionless on the desk. Had seen the worry in his eyes. Had heard the intensity of his admonishment, the pressing need for Harry to return with Slughorn's memory. His message, just barely under the surface of everything they'd seen and done tonight, was that time was short.

What would happen to Severus when Dumbledore was gone? Was Dumbledore the only thing standing between Severus Snape and Azkaban Prison?

No...he knew Minerva and Severus were friends, or friends of a sort anyway. He knew that Bill Weasley understood and liked Severus, and that the Weasleys approved of this relationship they had forged.

With Dumbledore gone, could Hogwarts still protect Severus?

With Dumbledore gone, could the Ministry protect Hogwarts?
Harry was glad Severus hadn't answered his questions about Dumbledore in this last letter—he had a lot more to ask now.

11 March, 1997

Tuesday

Dear Severus:

I've been out of the hospital wing since yesterday morning and I still haven't seen McLaggen. He's either under a disillusionment spell or Polyjuiced—though there's always the possibility he's disguised as a girl (I think he could pass for one of your Slytherin seventh years) or just hiding in the dungeons somewhere. From the way the other Gryffindors were acting tonight at dinner, I think they were expecting him to show up to lick my shoes. I made sure to go down to Hagrid's and muck around in the garden where Fang does his business before dinner to get ready for him. What a waste of good dog dirt.

Well—that's behind me now, anyway, right? Ron got out of the infirmary the same time I did so he'll be able to play in our last game. I've got more important things to worry about—like getting that memory from Professor Slughorn. I had another meeting with Professor Dumbledore last night. He really wants me to get that memory from Professor Slughorn. I could see it in his eyes, Severus—that time is running out. I've got to figure this out somehow, but I feel like I've tried everything I know how to try. Now that Hermione and Ron are friends again, I figure we might sit down together and work this one out. There's got to be a way. I feel like I've disappointed him, Severus. The way he looked at me—it made me feel like that dog dirt on my shoe. He really hasn't asked much of me, has he? And the one little thing he needs me to do I can't seem to get right.

The memories he shared with me last night were disturbing. I can see where he's going, now that I know a little bit about Horcruxes. He showed me Riddle just after he left Hogwarts—he took a job at Borgin and Burkes when everyone expected him to go on and do great things with his life. Somehow, he was fascinated with objects…especially objects associated with famous people. In the first memory, he visited an old woman who was a descendant of Helga Hufflepuff. She owned a gold cup that was once Hufflepuff's. A few days later she was killed and her house elf confessed to killing her. The cup was never found. I have a funny feeling that that cup is going to show up again—all of this is going somewhere and the Headmaster is trying really hard to get me to see something but he isn't telling me—yet—what it is he wants me to see. Why is it so important that I figure it out on my own? Can't he just tell me what the wants me to do? I mean, it's not like I don't have other stuff to worry about and figure out too…

And he is getting weaker, Severus. I can tell even though he sat behind his desk the whole time—well, the whole time we weren't in the Pensieve, anyway. He hardly moves his arm at all and he looks different—like he fills up less space than he used to. Maybe I'm just getting older, or maybe I'm having a growth spurt or something, but it's almost like he's shrinking. Or maybe it's just me seeing him with different eyes. If I didn't know what was going on with him, would I even have noticed these things?

I just never expected him to die, Severus. Not really. Not like this, anyway. In my experience, death doesn't come like this. It doesn't give you time to get your life in order or give last instructions or say goodbye to your loved ones. It sneaks up on you and pulls you through the veil while your back is turned.

I don't know which way I'd rather have it. I rather think I'd like to die like Sirius did, in battle and not
expecting it. Or like Cedric did, after winning a trophy, not even knowing he was "the spare."

What will happen when Dumbledore's gone? Who will take his place as Headmaster? I know I already sort of asked these questions in my last letter, but didn't want you to forget to answer them.

Will Hogwarts be safe without Dumbledore? Will you be safe?

What a depressing letter. Sorry I've let all this out, but it's been on my mind for a while and more so since my meeting last night with Dumbledore. I don't know—maybe getting knocked off your broom fifty feet in the air and fracturing your skull makes you think of your own death. Or nearly seeing your best friend die.

And for the record, you can't just let Lockhart loose in Muggle London and call it a day. You have to teach him how to blend in. You're going to have to show him how to use Muggle money and ride the Underground and use Muggle appliances like a toaster and an electric shaver. I'm sure he'll take right to it, Severus. Good choice.

Have fun sleeping with Mad Eye. Do you think he sleeps with his eye in? How about his leg? Does he leave it on his bedside table with his wand? Oh…sorry. I'm sure a guy like Mad Eye Moody sleeps with his wand on him at all times.

And while you're Polyjuiced into Aunt Petunia, could you give some handouts to homeless guys on the corner and tell Uncle Vernon you're pregnant?

Your question is a good one and not really all that easy to answer.

Would I rather go through life with Mad Eye's appearance, Gilderoy Lockhart's brain or Mr. McLaggen's personality?

Well, the obvious answer is "none of the above." I have a funny feeling you won't accept that one, and I also assume that I can't change McLaggen's personality if I should adopt it nor can I improve Lockhart's intellect. Now I'm trying to convince myself that appearances don't matter. Fine. I'll take Mad Eye's appearance but only if I can keep my own sharp wit, droll sense of humor, keen flying ability and dazzling charisma. How much of his leg is left? Could I even hold on to a broom with a wooden leg? Because if I can't fly, I'm tossing caution to the wind and going with McLaggen's personality. A guy's gotta live.

Except…do you think he can see through girls' clothes with that eye?

And as for my last question, I understand if you can't tell me. I'm really curious now, though, and hope that one day soon the time will be right. I have to figure out what I'm going to do with my life one of these days, after all.

I'll end with two questions for you.

If you never wanted to be a teacher, what did you want to be?

And how old were you when you first saw a thestral?

Regards,

Harry
In the middle of the night, after finishing his letter to Severus rather late then going off to bed even after Hermione, Harry woke from a restless, dream-filled sleep. He struggled out of his twisted blankets to sit up on the bed, leaning back against the headboard and drawing his knees up to his chest.

That was no sea-dream, he thought, sorting through the images skirting the surface of his consciousness. It wasn't a vision—no, it didn't feel at all like the dreams he had lived with last year, of mysterious corridors ending in doors he yearned to open. Like most dreams, it was a mishmash of actions and images with no logical sequence or sense of space and time. He remembered arguing with Hermione, a crying Hermione, telling her that he couldn't come back to Hogwarts for his last year, that he was moving to Liverpool to become a bus driver for the Magical Mystery Tour, but he'd have lots of time off and wouldn't it be nice to see the countryside, do a bit of camping, and maybe Uncle Vernon would let them use the car? But after that all he remembered was searching…fruitless searching…peering into dark and dusty windows on deserted streets, paging through books the size of encyclopedias, all three of them—Ron, Hermione, himself—on their hands and knees on the seashore searching through the sand for a lost galleon.

Sifting sand on the seashore, a needle in a haystack, a tiny minnow in an ocean of fish.

Left with the frustrating feeling of fruitlessness, of failure. The world is too big and the goal is too small.

That ridiculous Monty Python sketch about a game of hide and seek with the whole world as a playing field.

He was left with the feeling you get when you have something important to accomplish but can never quite cross it off your list.

He knew the dream was inspired by his meeting with the Headmaster, the pensieve memory of Riddle at Hepzibah Smith's home, and his fears and insecurities about a future without Dumbledore he'd expressed in the letter he'd written right before bed.

As he worked to clear his mind and enter his watery cocoon so he could sleep a few more hours, he resolved to get the memory from Slughorn and finally cross that task at least off the list.

-Severus-

Severus dropped Harry's homework assignment, his letter, back on his desk and shook his head.

Will Hogwarts be safe without Dumbledore? Will you be safe?

What Harry hadn't asked was "Will I be safe?"

Easter Break was only two weeks away, and Severus had agreed that they could spend the holiday together. He would talk to the boy then, begin laying out the framework of a plan to try to cover the spider web of possibilities.

How could he tell the child that in all likelihood, this would be his last year at Hogwarts? Severus wasn't a seer, but even Sybil Trelawney could accurately predict what was about to happen. Dumbledore would die; Voldemort would take over the Ministry; Muggleborns would be persecuted; Hogwarts would become a training ground for junior Death Eaters.

The ever-present knot in his gut twisted. Would it be enough? Would Harry be able to see through
the charade and understand, at the end, what he had done?

And why?

Dumbledore was meeting with him frequently now, passing along knowledge of the school, exacting promises from him that he didn't have a chance in hell of keeping. "If you do nothing else, Severus, keep the children safe."

And what of Harry?

"Harry will know what to do, Severus. You must let him do it; you must distract Voldemort's attention from Harry's quest." He'd caught Severus' hand then, across the desk, and pressed it urgently. "He will want to do this alone—he will want to spare his friends. If you can do anything, Severus, make sure he is not alone. His friends must be with him or he will lose all hope."

"Weasley will be the problem, not Granger," said Severus. "His loyalty to Harry has already waivered. He is more impressionable."

"Mr. Weasley will come through," said Dumbledore. "Trust in Harry, Severus. But put the idea in his mind—no, the conviction—that this quest is not his alone."

He smiled at Severus then, and began to hum a tune. It was a long-standing not-quite-joke between them, that Severus was Cevante's Quijote, on a quest to right the wrongs of the world and redeem his Dulcinea, his love of Lily.

"The dream seems even more impossible now," quipped Severus.

"Remember what you vowed, Severus," chastised the Headmaster. He continued to hum and Severus snorted.

"To be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause." He locked eyes with Albus then, and added. "My hell has changed of late."

Albus nodded. "And so, I suspect, has your heavenly cause."**

14 March, 1997

Friday

Dear Harry:

You are not alone in your fears and concerns, Harry. I will try to be as honest with you as possible, in the brief space afforded me by this parchment, but what I cannot write here we can talk about later, when we spend time together over mid-term break in a few weeks.

We cannot know precisely what is coming, but the fact is that Albus' time on earth is limited—as is the time of every mortal—but his more so as the curse progresses. He is old, Harry, and the great power he holds within has given him a strength these last years to defy the outward progression of this age. And with age comes wisdom, and acceptance, and he is facing his own mortality and planning as much as he is able for the safety of those he loves.

Sometimes, Harry, it is as difficult to accept that you are loved as to admit that you love. I am fortunate, indeed, to count myself among those that Albus loves, as are you, but we began our
association on rocky footing, one of us—that being Albus—having the "upper hand" in the relationship, as he saved me from Azkaban and exacted from me a long-term commitment.

Those were more than five words, of course, to dance around the answer to the question you asked in your previous letter. Up until that time, I had my mind set on being a Potions researcher, spending my days buried in a lab producing not boil cures and bruise salves for children but new varieties of Veritaserum and Polyjuice, a cure for lycanthropy, potions to slow the aging process or reverse deadly curses.

What I can tell you to ease some of your fears is that Albus has a plan. He always has a plan, Harry. He cannot assure our safety, and he cannot assure the safety of Hogwarts, but he has attempted to weave together the possibilities to create a working plan with his goal the elimination of the Dark Lord, a goal shared by all of us.

It will get much worse before it gets better, Harry. There will be darker days ahead, for the Dark Lord has already set much in motion that will be difficult if not impossible to stop. You cannot count on Albus being here for you, or even me, though it pains me to admit this to you. I am a servant to a volatile master.

You can count on your friends, though, and you must share your load with them. Put aside your desire to save them from pain and loss and accept that you are not truly whole without them nor they without you.

And know that as long as I am able, I will do all in my power to help you along the way. I ask only that you never doubt this, no matter what outward appearances may indicate.

This letter has a serious tone, as did yours, but you have asked serious questions and are deserving of answers.

I will be very clear on one point—I cannot guarantee that Hogwarts will be safe for you without Albus here. Therefore you must plan for that eventuality. Confide in your friends when the time is right, Harry. Wait as long as you can, until the term ends if you are able, but before then if you must.

In answer to your second question, I was eleven years old when I saw a thestral for the first time. The horseless carriages at Hogwarts when I arrived for my first term were not horseless to me. I knew what the beasts were from my childhood readings, but had never seen one in the flesh. I had a grandmother when I was very young, my mother's grandmother, actually, and she died when I was six years old. My mother and I were with her when she passed, and it was the most peaceful experience of death I have ever had, a very fitting way for a young person to see death for the first time. She died peacefully, after a long life, at home in her own bed. My mother reached down and closed her eyes and that was that. Her cheek was still warm when I kissed it.

A question for you, then, Harry. When did you first see the thestrals? I wonder if your first experience with death even registered as you were so young at the time.

By the way, your behavior in Defense Class this afternoon was less than stellar. I have appreciated the "sullen" acceptance you have adopted in my class. We can avoid direct confrontations that way, yet still give every appearance of despising each other in a "simmering beneath the surface" type of way. But confronting me directly as you did today should have earned you a detention on top of those house points. My suggestion that we not test the acne curse on your friend Mr. Weasley as the affliction would not be apparent with all those freckles was a simple statement of fact. It should not have inspired your rancor. Is something else going on that you want to speak about?

Yes, I imagine that magical eye of Mad Eye's can see through clothing. Not just girl's clothing,
though. Hagrid's too.

iRegards,

Severus

/  

It was Friday night, just after dinner, and Severus had already completed most of his difficult marking for the week. The first, second and third years had all had exams and he would ask two of his seventh year N.E.W.T.s students to mark them on Sunday during their work group.

He had a backlog of reading to do to stay current on Potions research and advancements, and Minerva had invited him up for cribbage and coffee. He decided to visit her first and then return, nicely sedated, to digest the dry material in Potions Weekly (three unread issues) and Potions Quarterly (thankfully, only one).

Minerva happened to be standing in the Entry Hall when he broke the surface from the dungeons. She had her cloak on.

"Oh, Severus. Good." She held up an oversized thermos and three plastic cups. "I was hoping you'd join me us the pitch for a little while. Gryffindor's about to start practicing and I want to make sure our keeper and our seeker don't overtax themselves."

"Us?" asked Severus, looking around the room and seeing no one else.

"Albus is already down there," she replied. Her eyes looked worried. "Said he was feeling a bit stir-crazy."

Severus fetched his cloak and joined his colleague for the walk through the brisk nearly dark evening. The pitch ahead of them was bright with spell light.

"They begged me for an extra practice session so I finally consented," she explained as they walked. "They felt they lost a lot of momentum with that last game."

Severus and Minerva joined Albus in the stands.

"That child was born to fly," said Albus by way of greeting as they settled down on either side of him. His eyes were on Harry, as they often were. Harry seemed not to have noticed his audience.

"That boy was born to do a great many things," answered Severus. "Would that all of them be as easy…and as pleasant."

Minerva passed each of them a steaming mug of her special coffee and they quietly toasted the Boy Who Lived.

________________________________________

**The Quest

From "Man of La Mancha"

To dream the impossible dream  
To fight the unbeatable foe  
To bear with unbearable sorrow  
To run where the brave dare not go
To right the unrightable wrong
To love pure and chaste from afar
To try when your arms are too weary
To reach the unreachable star

This is my quest
To follow that star
No matter how hopeless
No matter how far

To fight for the right
Without question or pause
To be willing to march into Hell
For a heavenly cause

And I know if I'll only be true
To this glorious quest
That my heart will lie peaceful and calm
When I'm laid to my rest

And the world will be better for this
That one man, scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage
To reach the unreachable star

Chapter 28

March 17 – March 26, 1997

Harry

St. Patrick's Day came on a Monday that year, and the house elves, ever eager to encourage celebration, dyed the milk, hotcakes and eggs all green at breakfast. Ron wasn't put off by it, slurping down his last bites of green hotcakes with a glass of green milk. Harry, however, had to close his eyes to drink the milk and refused outright to eat green eggs. The Gryffindors, as a rule, balked at wearing green and were thus subjected to more pinches than the others houses combined.

Harry had a free afternoon. The sixth years who were already seventeen were going into Hogsmeade for a special apparition lesson. Ron and Hermione were both in this group and Harry made them promise to tell him all about it when they returned. He waved goodbye to them from the castle doors and headed back into the castle.

Later, on the Astronomy Tower, he sat with his back to the outer wall and considered what to do. He had finally figured out where Draco Malfoy was going when he disappeared from the Marauder's Map. He'd tried to get into the Room of Requirement to catch him at his game but the room refused to open for him. He needed to figure out the right question to ask, the right requirement to hold in his mind.

And he needed to tell Severus—to warn him. But he had promised to let it go, to let Severus worry about Draco. And how could he tell him anything without revealing the secret of the Marauder's
Dear Severus:

Ron and Hermione are off in Hogsmeade at the special Apparition class. Ron was pretty excited about the lesson this morning. He says he's tired of Apparating—or trying to Apparate—into wooden hoops and wants to move more than three feet when he does it, like right into the middle of the Hog's Head, for example. He said that now that he's seventeen, he should be able to have something stronger than a butterbeer. I'm not so sure about his chances—he's already proven that he's prone to splinching. Last week he somehow managed to Apparate only his ears into the hoop. You should have heard the noise he made when he realized they were missing. I'm not sure I ever heard a noise like it before, but if I had to describe it I'd probably compare it to my Uncle Vernon when he was trying to pass that kidney stone (the only time in my life I sympathized with him—very reluctantly).

Did I ever tell you that Ron talks in his sleep? Well, he does, and last night he kept muttering "Destination, Determination, Deliberation." Well, moaning is probably more accurate than muttering but the end result was that he was making noise and thrashing about and I really wanted to shove one of those socks Dobby gave me for Christmas down his throat, but it reminded me too much of shoving that bezoar down there so I just put my pillow over my head and rolled over.

I saw you and Minerva and the Headmaster at our Quidditch practice last week. Seems like you had some more of that special coffee you and Minerva are always drinking, and this time you pulled the Headmaster into your ring as well. I'm not sure why all three of you would come out to watch the Gryffindors practice—probably to prevent me or Ron from doing something stupid. Well—it worked. Your presence prevented us from practicing our new play where the Chasers all hang from their brooms by one hand and kick the Quaffle to each other like a football, distracting the other team while I searched for the snitch (standing up on my broom and facing backwards). Yes, you being there saved my life! Or…maybe it was the fact that McLaggen is still in hiding and Dobby didn't curse a bludger and Crabbe/Goyle weren't disguised as Dementors and Quirrell wasn't trying to knock me off my broom…

Oh—and thanks for the bit about Mad Eye's magical eye being able to see through Hagrid's clothing. The next time I see Hagrid I'm sure I WON'T think about that. Nope. Not at all.

On to thestrals. The first time I saw one was at the beginning of last year—when I came back to Hogwarts. I didn't understand what I was seeing, and I wasn't a hell of a lot comforted by the fact that Luna could see them too. Then Hagrid covered them in Care of Magical Creatures and I found out why I could see them. I didn't really wonder at that time why I didn't see them before. I guess I was too young when my parents died for my mind to understand that I'd experienced death.

When we went to the Ministry at the end of last year, Ron, Hermione and Ginny couldn't even see the thestrals they were flying on. I couldn't believe they would do that for me—it must have been terrifying.

I hope they can't see thestrals for a long, long time. Death is much easier to deal with when it's invisible.

Your turn—what place (in the world) would you most like to visit? And do you know how to drive a
Harry put away the letter and his ink and quill, stood up and dusted off his robes then made his way back down the stairs of the owlery into the castle. He turned a corner quickly, wanting to hurry down to the main doors to wait for Hermione and Ron to come back, and ran headfirst into a group of Slytherin seventh-years. Gorilla-like Slytherin seventh-years. He couldn't say for sure that it was unintentional, though he couldn't say that it was intentional—but the elbow hit his nose so hard that he fell back against the wall. His hand, when he raised it to his face, came away covered with blood. The knee to his groin that followed was definitely not an accident. His wand was in his hand a moment later, but he never got to use it.

"Potter—off the floor! Ten points from Gryffindor for public disturbance!" The voice sounded exactly as it might have a year ago, before the summer at Shell Cottage. Harry groaned as he struggled to his feet. "What are you waiting for, get to the infirmary Potter," commanded Snape in that very-same cold voice. "Vaisey, Warrington, Hopper—enough of this dawdling about!"

Harry wiped his nose again with the back of his hand. He was in no mood to deal with a broken nose and the old Snape.

"Ten points, sir?" he managed to grind out. "Aren't you going to give points to Slytherin for a well-placed knee to the groin?"

Snape stared at him a moment, then the corner of his mouth lifted. "Ten points to Slytherin for ensuring that the Wizarding World has seen its last Potter," he said, his voice smooth. "Now go, Harry!"

Harry? Had Severus just called him Harry in front of his Slytherins?

No. As he limped away with a final glare at Severus, he realized that he'd heard that last command only in his head. As he turned the corner, he heard a "Scourgify" and the unmistakable sounds of Severus sighing.

-Severus-

He had supervised two detentions that evening—the first with three first-year Ravenclaws who had been caught cheating on a rather inconsequential quiz and the second with a sixth-year Hufflepuff and a seventh-year Gryffindor whom he had come upon during rounds the previous night in a rather compromising position. He had taken them to their respective heads of house in exactly the same state in which he'd found them. The Hufflepuff boy had his shirt unbuttoned and a rather large hickey on his collarbone. The girl, who should certainly have known better, was obviously missing a certain article of underclothing, as Severus had found it draped over a suit of armor, and her red and gold school tie was wrapped around the boy's neck. He could not help but chuckle at the memory of knocking on Minerva's door and handing her the undergarment along with the errant teenager.

When the students were finally gone—he had forced the older two to write detailed letters to their parents apologizing for their embarrassing behavior and had already dispatched said letters by owl, after his agonizingly slow and methodical review of them while the miscreants stood before his desk,
—he settled down at his desk with the rest of his marking. He looked sideways at Harry's clock and saw that the boy was safely in Gryffindor Tower. Strangely, the clock no longer comforted him as it once had. Was he doing homework? Giving Hula-Hoop lessons? Staring at the young Miss Weasley? Playing a game of chess with his best friend? Looking under his bed for a sock to stuff in his best friend's mouth?

Or was he focused, as Severus himself so often was, on what was to come? Closing his eyes against the dark thoughts, the unpleasant possibilities as he strove to imagine a world where the only thing on his to-do list was to kiss Ginny Weasley?

20 March 1997

Thursday

Dear Harry:

Just exactly what occurred in the corridors on Monday to leave you with a bloody nose and a wand in your hand? I detected no more malice than usual in my Slytherin seventh-years, and they were more prone to giggles than to jeers as they slunk away after I discovered you on your side gripping your groin. Please clarify as I am equipped to dole out "unjust" punishments as I see fit, and I can easily create a reason to take points or assign detentions with Filch. "Warrington—your eyebrows are asymmetrical. Five points and detention with Filch! Hopper—is that a red thread on your Slytherin tie? Detention with Hagrid in the Forbidden Forest tonight!"

I will put your mind to rest regarding your unexpected audience this past weekend at your night-time Quidditch practice. We were not there to assure that your self-destructive instinct did not kick into high gear, although if that was the unintended effect, I shall strive to attend more practices in the future. Your team will simply assume that I am a spy for the enemy, so to speak. Rather, the Headmaster was feeling a bit stir crazy and convinced Minerva to accompany him to the pitch to watch the action. Minerva brought me along as well, undoubtedly convinced that it would do my heart good to stop then start several times in the course of the hour we spent in the stands.

While Mr. Weasley may indeed be seventeen years old, and certainly capable of ordering a fire whiskey or mediocre scotch from the Hog's Head or elsewhere, age alone does not guarantee the maturity to appreciate strong liquor and handle its effects. Case in point—a certain set of sixth-year Slytherins, often referred by you as a single entity, celebrated their "coming of age" with a bottle of fire whisky a few months ago. They unwisely drank so much that they were totally incapacitated—so much so that their older housemates (you ran into a few of these the other day), taking absolutely no pity on them, stripped them naked and levitated them to the corridor outside of Minerva's quarters. She found them there at two in the morning, having been awakened by the sounds of retching. Minerva, holding me in such high regard, sent me her annoying Patronus to notify me that my charges were out past curfew, intoxicated, nearly naked, covered in their own vomit and wearing god brassieres with red tassels. She sounded a trifle vexed, or at least her three Patronuses did. Yes, three. She had to send them out in triplicate as I ignored the first two and only got out of bed after she threatened to transfigure my waistcoat into a similar gold brassiere while I was eating in the Great Hall the next morning.

I have given some thought to your question about the place in this world I would most like to visit. My answer is undoubtedly the Amazon Rainforest, for it boasts an abundance of flora and fauna that are not only rare and beautiful but that can be used in countless potions that promote healing and a better quality of life for those that suffer. There is old magic in that place, Harry, and I have long dreamed of visiting and exploring it. There are dolphins—pink dolphins—that swim in the rivers, cut
off by the rise of the Andes Mountains from the sea. There are flesh eating fish called piranhas and catfish that grow to enormous sizes and a deadly type of amphibian called the poison dart frog. There are hundreds of species of mammals, even more so of fish and birds, and nearly 30 million different types of insects—more types of ants in a single tree than are found in all of our own country. The Amazon Rainforest has more distinct flowers and trees than we can begin to imagine confined as we are to the islands of Great Britain.

You ask as well whether I know how to drive a car. Yes, I am able to drive a Muggle automobile, having learned from my father when I was a teenager home from Hogwarts for the summers. I can only guess that the two questions are somehow connected, though I do not think a car would be useful in getting from Scotland to Brazil, nor of great use in the Amazon Rainforest. There are no bridges over the Amazon River, you know, not because the river is too big but because there are no roads to connect with bridges. Do tell—why are you interested in my driving abilities?

I suppose that will stand for my question with this letter.

Regards,

Severus

His letter was short, but Harry's was as well. What was going through that boy's mind? Poppy had told him that Harry reported he'd simply turned the corner and walked right into the Slytherin boys the other night but that the seventh-years had taken advantage of him while he was down, kneeing him in the groin when he was trying to hold onto his gushing nose. It was not like Harry to be so distracted. He could not afford to be, Severus knew. There were many worse dangers out there for Harry Potter than three 18-year-old boys bent on causing him a bit of discomfort and embarrassment.

He'd barely thought the word…discomfort…when his Dark Mark erupted in pain. He cursed as he stood, fetched his robes from the hook in the closet, sent Patronuses to Minerva and Albus, and strode from his quarters as quickly as he could.

The Dark Lord was angry—he could already tell that much from the steadily intensifying burn in his left arm. He hurried out the castle doors and down toward the gates, noting that the moon was waxing toward full, that the lake was eerily visible under its soft light. He wished, briefly but fervently, that he could be anywhere else tonight, that he could be anyone else tonight. Tamping down that errant emotion and steeling himself for the inevitable, he slipped through the gate and Disapparated with a quiet crack.

-Harry-

When he pulled himself out of his occluded state, he was immediately aware that all was not right in the world. The pain of Severus' summoning that had sent him into his water cocoon had changed, but had not dissipated, moving instead into his extremities, making arms and legs ache and feel like heavy weights tying him to his bed. Worse though was the fear, the feeling that overcame him as he awoke, a weight heavier than the leaden feeling in his limbs.

"Mate? Harry?" Ron's voice pulled him out of the fear. He opened his eyes.

"'time is it?" he asked as he rolled onto his side with difficulty.

"Midnight. You were thrashing around. You alright now?"
Harry sat up, the oppressive weight of fear making his stomach clench. He shook his head.

"No." He slid his feet out of bed, reached for his robe and slid into it, kicking around on the floor for his slippers. Ron got down on his hands and knees and reached under the bed to grab one, handing it to Harry.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his voice low.

"Snape…" He fumbled for his glasses and stood up. "He's…afraid…"

"You wanna go down and check on him?" asked Ron.

Harry shook his head. "He's not here." He stood up, grabbed his pillow and moved toward the door. "Can't sleep…I'll go down to the common room."

Ron sighed and grabbed his own pillow. "I'll come with you," he said as he followed his friend out the door.

24 March, 1997

Monday

Dear Severus:

I need to see you in private. When I got to Defense on Friday and saw the Headmaster there in your place, my stomach sank into my shoes. At least he let me know you were alright, but told me you hadn't slept at all the night before and needed some time to yourself. He made it clear he didn't want me going down to check on you myself and told me you'd be back in class on Monday.

Having the Headmaster for Defense didn't do much to reassure me. We didn't even do any proper Defense practice—just read a chapter and wrote an in-class essay. Dumbledore sat behind your desk with his hands folded on the blotter the whole time. It was quiet and unsettling. Even Hermione looked a bit disturbed by how peaceful class was. At least he returned our homework that you marked and I got your letter.

The weekend wasn't a lot better. You must have had your meals sent to your quarters and frankly, I didn't have much of an appetite. I got my homework done by Saturday night and sat down with Hermione to try to figure out a way to get that damn memory from Slughorn. She thinks I need to reason with him—to present him a logical argument for sharing the memory. I'm pretty sure this isn't going to get me anywhere but agreed to try. She's even working up something on paper for me—kind of like an "If/then" chart so I have a "path" to follow for any potential argument or rejection he comes up with. I looked at the parchment after class today and had to laugh—it looks like a map of the London Underground. Hermione huffed at me—she does that when she really wants to say "You boys are IDIOTS."

I get the idea from your last letter that you want to see the Amazon Rainforest. I don't know much about it, but I've heard of anacondas, which you didn't mention. (When you're throwing out lethal species, why not offer at least one I can understand?) Put those together with piranhas, those poison dart frogs and millions of insects (probably flesh-eating ants or ear canal-burrowing termites) and it seems like the perfect place for a summer vacation. You did say you were going with Malfoy, right? Why don't you take Crabbe and Goyle along with you instead of pack mules?

Why did I ask about driving? Well, driving a car is dead useful. I've been thinking about things, like
what I'll be doing next year, or even this summer, and what will happen if I can't use magic to get around. I'm going to be seventeen this summer (in case you needed to be reminded) and I just thought that you could teach me to drive...if you knew how, that is. I know it's kind of stupid—it's not like you have a car or anything—but I thought that you could figure something out. You always do.

So when can I see you? Not in class, or in the Great Hall at meals, but see you to talk to you. I know you were afraid that night you were summoned, Severus. I could feel it and it was the fear more than the pain that kept me awake until past three in the morning. Ron stayed up with me and we tried to play chess but he trounced me even more thoroughly than usual. Maybe I could sneak down to your rooms under my invisibility cloak one night this week. I don't need to stay long—I just have some things I want to tell you that I shouldn't say in a letter.

I'll end with my question.

What made you so afraid?

Regards,

Harry

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He didn't think Severus would answer the question but he wanted to ask it anyway. The fear he'd felt—Severus' fear—gnawed at him. Severus, like it or not, had become his rock. What was going on now that made Severus' fear surface?

Was it possible that Harry had felt Severus' fear through their connection even if Severus had managed to suppress it when in the Dark Lord's presence?

He was frustrated beyond endurance. He wanted to see Severus for himself, alone. He wanted to *talk* to him, to sit in the same room and read a book or do his homework or practice Occlumency. He was tired of pretending that he hated Severus and more than tired of putting up with Severus' cutting remarks and Slytherin put-downs.

He put away the letter he had just written then reached, almost guiltily, for the Marauders' Map. Unfolding it, he immediately scanned it closely, looking for Draco Malfoy's dot. It was late and the tiny dots were concentrated in the four common rooms, so it took Harry several minutes to determine that Malfoy appeared to be in his room and probably asleep.

He was about to fold the map up when something caught his eye. A tiny "S Snape" was seemingly wavering back and forth near Dumbledore's office. No—it was moving up the spiral staircase…toward the office where Dumbledore waited. Harry squinted at the map, trying to see who else was in the office with the Headmaster. Weasley? W Weasley? Who was W Weasley?

Bill.

What was Bill doing in the Headmaster's office at ten o'clock on a Monday evening?

Harry continued to watch the map as Severus' dot joined Bill's and Dumbledore's, as Severus' paced back and forth and even around the other two. Finally, he could take it no longer. He grabbed his invisibility coat, stuffed it in his pocket and slipped out the portrait hole without a backward glance.
Harry wanted Severus to teach him how to drive. Drive a Muggle car nonetheless, because after all, he'd be seventeen this summer and legally qualified to secure his driver's license. It wasn't enough that he'd already taught the boy how to shave, and how to occlude his mind, and had held his hand and bathed his face when he'd been ill this past summer.

Severus remembered the first time he'd gotten behind the wheel of an automobile. His father had been almost intolerably patient, having apparently decided that he could impart this one thing to his wizard son that he could not learn from his mother. He'd taken him out on a Sunday afternoon to a mostly empty car park and it hadn't taken Severus long to master the controls and the clutch and after a few jerky starts, maneuver the vehicle in graceful, slow circles around the perimeter.

It was the best time he'd spent with his father in years, and the last good memory he had of him.

Well, if Harry wanted him to teach him to drive, he'd teach him to drive. Perhaps, with adequate lessons, he'd be less of a daredevil in an automobile than he was on a broom.

Now…to find a car…

/ 26 March, 1997

Wednesday

Dear Harry:

It cannot possibly have slipped your mind that Easter break begins this weekend and I have arranged for us to spend it together here at Hogwarts. I do not think it wise to attempt a private meeting before the weekend, however. By the time you receive this response from me, it will be Thursday already and the holiday begins the next evening. You may Floo to my quarters from Minerva's office any time after the students leave on Saturday morning. I will be waiting for you and am curious about what exactly it is you wish to discuss than cannot, or should not, be said in a letter.

And while we are together, I will answer the question you posed as best I can. Like you, I feel there are some topics best discussed in person. Things are progressing, Harry, coming to a head, so to speak. The Ministry is more far gone than I had thought and the friends we have there are dropping like flies. The Order is marshalling its forces but sometimes I think the effort is like stopping the rolling tide. We will have much to speak about next week, and plans to make for all eventualities.

Fear, Harry, is a powerful emotion. It can feed on your soul and remove the spine of the even the strongest and greatest men and women. Fear can be crippling; one person succumbing to their fears can destroy the efforts of many fighting against an evil. The poet Robert Louis Stevenson once said "Keep your fears to yourself but share your courage with others." Similarly, the American Martin Luther King Jr. said "We must build dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear." One person, Harry, by a show of courage, can become that dike to hold back the flood. We will talk about this next week; it grows more and more important.

I will decidedly not be sharing my Amazon getaway with any of my Slytherin students, though using some as pack mules is more and more appealing as the term progresses and their intellectual development does not. I could, of course, say the same for certain Gryffindors. I am now more interested, since you bring it up, of having a Parselmouth with me to communicate with the anacondas and other serpents of the jungle. As you seem to exhibit a fear (see previous paragraph) of
bugs, especially those ear canal-burrowing termites, be sure to bring sufficient insect repellant. I can whip some up for you if you'd like—how many liters do you believe you will need for a three-week stay?

I will do my best to arrange for driving lessons for you this summer, Harry. I do not drive frequently, but have been told that it's like riding a bicycle—you never forget once you learn. It is a useful skill, and I would decidedly prefer to work with you myself rather than handing you over to those miscreant Weasley twins who may set you up with a flying Ford Anglia instead of a safe War era Bentley. I trust that the color of the car (black) is unimportant to you?

I am behind on my marking so will end here—we will have ample time to catch up over the coming break.

Stay safe, Harry. No more lurking about in corridors under that infernal invisibility cloak.

Regards,

Severus

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Severus replaced the lid on his bottle of ink and rubbed the back of his hand. It was still cramping after his visit with the Dark Lord several days ago.

How odd he had found it that Harry had picked up on his fear that night. He assumed Harry had been roused from his occluded state by the fear rather than the group-directed Cruciatius; he was well-equipped to occlude against physical pain but if Severus had allowed his fear to surface…. He could not afford a slip as significant as that.

The Ministry was nothing more than an elaborate but poorly-constructed house of cards. And the Dark Lord, since his reawakening in the graveyard outside of his father's ancestral home, had been constructing a simple line of dominoes around and through it. Come the tipping point, they would fall, one against the next, until the house of cards toppled.

Severus knew what the tipping point would be, as did the Dark Lord.

As did Albus Dumbledore.

Could he live long enough to make sure that the domino in front of Hogwarts was strong enough to stand when the onslaught came?

________________________________________

Chapter 29

________________________________________

March 28-29

Friday-Saturday

-Harry & Severus-

"You sure you don't want to come to the Burrow, Harry?" Ron lobbed a dirty pair of socks toward his trunk from across the room while Harry relaxed on his bed, tossing a clean pair of mismatched
socks high in the air and catching it as it fell. Ron, along with most of the students in the castle, was leaving tomorrow morning on the Hogwarts Express for the Easter holiday and he'd put off packing until the last minute. Neville was lying on his bed reading, occasionally throwing back clothes when Ron overshot his trunk and they landed on Neville's bed, or on Neville himself. He been a very good sport about it, but didn't look half as amused as Harry and Ron had when a pair of Ron's orange Chudley Cannons boxers had landed on his head.

"Not this time," answered Harry. "Hagrid's going to teach me all about owlets over break—I'm pretty sure Hedwig is going to be nesting soon." The half-truth slipped out with little effort.


"Mum's got plans for me too," said Ron. "She's getting the house ready for Bill and Fleur's wedding this summer. Fred and George say she's already impossible and the wedding isn't for four more months. She's complaining to Dad that the house is off-kilter." He grinned. "When hasn't it listed? I mean, the whole thing is held together by a wish and a prayer—that's what Mum says, anyway."

"I love your house," said Harry wistfully.

"Well, she wants me to paint my room! She says that orange is 'distasteful'!"

"Do wizards actually paint walls?" asked Harry, looking over at Ron.

"Yeah, sometimes. You can change the color with a spell, of course, but you have to put on a new coat if it starts peeling off."

Seamus and Dean burst through the door at that moment, giggling like mad men, Dean obviously hiding something under his robes. He closed the door behind him then pulled out a dirty-looking bottle and held it up triumphantly.

"Old Ogden's!" he exclaimed. "We bought it off of a seventh-year Ravenclaw—that prefect with the braids."

"Hattie McDormand?" asked Neville. He closed his book, looking more interested.

"Yeah, that's her. She's cool. We figured what with the break and all, we could have a little fun before we leave."

Harry had been antsy all day, anticipating the break and finally getting to spend some time alone with Severus. He looked at the bottle in Dean's hand with interest.

"Are you sure it's safe? Why would Hattie want to sell it, anyway?" he asked.

"It's safe. I made her drink some first." He grinned. "She's dating Seamus' cousin. He's the one that talked her into giving it up for us. Well, nothing for it. Bottoms up!" He tipped the bottle into his mouth, took a long swig then sputtered and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Harry thought his eyes were watering, but Dean recovered quickly.

"Harry?" He held out the firewhiskey and Harry leaned over to take it from him. As his hand closed around the neck of the bottle, he remembered Severus' recent letter and his story about Crabnangyle's adventures with alcohol that landed them in front of Minerva's office – naked. But Dean looked at him encouragingly, and even the normally tentative Neville seemed intrigued. He took a small, experimental swallow. The taste was not unpleasant. It was stronger than butterbeer—
about a thousand times stronger, in fact—and burned going down, but warmed him pleasantly when it settled in his stomach. More confident this time, he took another swallow, pleased that he didn't choke or gag, and passed the bottle to Ron.

Ron, being fortunate enough to be the younger brother of Fred and George Weasley, had sampled purloined firewhiskey before. He sniffed the fumes escaping the bottle then sighed with over-exaggerated pleasure, took a long swallow then passed the bottle on to Neville.

"Bottoms up," quipped Neville, as he grinned and took a drink.

They managed to finish the bottle in forty minutes and before anyone could bemoan the loss of good liquor, Seamus produced another.

When Minerva broke up the party just before they had finished the second bottle, Ron was lying on the floor, drool snaking down his chin. He was staring at the ceiling in near panic, convinced that a particularly menacing looking shadow was a young Acromantula. Neville was in his bed, giggling and hiccupping and mumbling something that sounded like "yip yipping Yorkies." Seamus and Dean had pulled out a chess set and were playing a most unorthodox game that involved actually using your captured opponent's pieces on the board to strengthen your own side and Harry was lying face-up on his bed clutching the bed clothes to try to stop the spinning.

"This is precisely the type of trouble I hoped not to find," said their head of house, her hands on her hip and her brogue making her voice almost impossible to understand. "Ten points from each of you," she said, adding, beneath her breath, "and letters from me to your parents." She grabbed the bottle from where Dean had wedged it in the crook of Ron's arm and sniffed at it.

"Far too expensive to waste on your young palates," she sighed. She nudged Ron with her foot. "Get up, Weasley." Ron moaned and mumbled "Go 'way, Mum."

Dean, who seemed to have handled the alcohol better than the rest, looked from Minerva to Ron, horrified.

"Ron!" he hissed. "'ts not your mum! It's McGonagall!"

"Poffess'r M'Gongul," slurred Seamus. He followed the statement with a very undignified burp.

"You are all to report to the infirmary immediately for a sobering potion. You will stay there for the night so Madam Pomfrey can observe you. Take pajamas with you." She then turned to Harry.

"Can't go 'til the room stops," he said with a moan. "Dizzy…"

"Excellent. Because you are wanted in the Headmaster's office." She folded her arms in front of her sternly and glared at the other boys as they fumbled about in their drawers for pajamas. Dean was tearing through his drawer so feverishly that a pair of white y-fronts sailed across the room and landed at McGonagall's feet. She stared at them a long moment then looked up. "Go! And no detours along the way!" As they began to edge out of the room, she pulled out her wand and produced three cat patronuses which disappeared through the walls with her whispered message. Harry closed his eyes, apparently forgetting that he, too, was expected to leave the room.

"What has gotten into you, Harry?" mused Minerva. "Finally acting your age and not a minute older, eh?" Harry thought vaguely that her voice sounded warm and distant. He experimentally loosened his grip on the bedclothes. Good. The room was behaving itself—somewhat—and was no longer spinning or tilting at an unnatural angle.

"Never been drunk 'fore," he said helpfully. "Not really, anyway. Only when Sev'rus was…" He
was struggling to sit up but the water-filled mattress made it difficult in his current state and he fell backward again. He let out a very unmanly giggle.

"I have asked Severus to come here instead of meeting you in the Headmaster's office as he had planned," said Minerva as she extended her hand to Harry and helped him into a seated position again. "It is only fair that he deal with this in his way since he's to have you all week."

"We're goin' t' make *potions,*" said Harry, smiling broadly at his guardian, obviously too far gone to be concerned about Severus 'dealing with' him. 'An' practice d'fense spells. An' learn t' drive.' He paused, then added helpfully. "A car. A reg'lar Muggle car. Not one that flies. Maybe a fast one."

"And talk. Yeah, talk about why he's 'fraid," said Harry with not a small bit of conviction. He dropped his voice dramatically. "Sometimes...sometimes I think I'm 'fraid too..."

Minerva was inordinately glad that Harry was still in the "nothing is a secret" phase or inebriation and not yet in the "emotional outpouring and uncontrollable weeping" phase. She admittedly was rather glad that Severus would be around for part two. She conversed with Harry for another five minutes, learning that Draco Malfoy was up to something in the Room of Requirement and that Ginny Weasley had the softest hair and didn't she think her lips would be just as soft too?

"Sev'rus!" She had been standing in front of Harry, her back to the door, and hadn't seen, or heard, Severus' approach. She pivoted on her heel to find her colleague standing in the doorway staring at Harry and very obviously trying to suppress a smile beneath his stern countenance.

"He's all yours now, Severus," said Minerva. "Best get him sobered up before you teach him to drive a regular Muggle car—a *fast one.* I've already taken points and sent the others to Poppy for a sobering potion. She's going to keep them down there tonight."

"Who...?"

"All five of them," answered Minerva, shaking her head.

"Longbottom too?" Severus raised his eyebrows.

"Apparently."

"Who supplied the alcohol, Harry?" asked Severus, his voice sounding very soothing to Harry's confused brain. Harry brightened. He could answer that one.

"Seamus and Dean. They got it from that Rav'claw prefect 'Attie with the braids. She's dating Seamus' cousin and 'e talked her intoit." Severus and Minerva exchanged a look that Harry completely missed.

"I'm off to find Filius," said Minerva, shaking her head again. "Have a pleasant night, Severus. Oh—and a pleasant *morning* too." He heard her chuckling as she walked away.

Harry and Severus were left alone in the room. Harry was still sitting on the edge of the bed, a lopsided smile on his face. Severus still stood by the door, arms folded over his chest.
"Harry?"

Harry jerked his head up, lost his balance, and toppled backward on the bed. He lay there, prone, for a long moment, then giggled.

"You are pathetic," said Severus, too amused to be as annoyed as he should be. He walked over to give Harry a hand. "Come, we are going to my quarters." He righted Harry then took out his wand. "Accio Harry's pajamas." A pair of green pajama pants and a grimy grey t-shirt shot out from under the bed. He shook his head then grabbed Harry's arm as the boy started to stumble forward across the room.

"Where'd everyone go?" asked Harry suddenly, as if only just then realizing that his friends were gone.

"To sober up the easy way," muttered Severus as he led his charge from the room. "You, however, will not be so lucky…"

Severus hadn't been kidding. While Ron, Seamus, Dean and Neville slept in the infirmary, all traces of alcohol removed from their systems by the Sober-up potions Madam Pomfrey administered to them, Harry spent some quality time in the bathroom losing the firewhiskey, his dinner and what must have been his lunch too. When Ron and Neville, a bit queasy but generally chipper and ready to begin their vacations, joined Hermione and Ginny in a compartment on the Hogwarts Express, Harry sat sipping tea at the small table in Severus' quarters, trying desperately not to gag on the smell of the sausages and eggs on Severus' plate. When Ron and Neville munched on cauldron cakes and chocolate frogs from the lunch cart, Harry nibbled on a plain saltine and sipped at another glass of water—how many had Severus made him drink today, anyway? And while Ron's mother and Neville's grandmother stood on Platform 9 ¾ at King's Cross Station, each clutching a letter in Minerva McGonagall's spidery handwriting, Harry sat on the sofa, the fire in the hearth bright and the air toasty and warm, playing a quiet game of chess with Severus.

"More water, Harry," said Severus softly as he scooted a pawn forward.

Harry obediently picked up the glass and took another sip. He felt like he was going to float away but the headache had finally faded and he almost, almost, felt hungry again.

And late in the evening, when Ron sank onto his bed and regarded his plain white walls and held his grumbling stomach—how could she send a seventeen-year-old boy to bed without dinner?—Harry finished his bowl of soup and looked up as Severus placed the tea service on the table and removed the napkin covering a plate of warm ginger snaps.

"I'm sorry…about today," said Harry. "I was really looking forward to spending it with you."

Severus arranged two saucers on the table, poured tea into two cups, and placed the cups on the saucers. He slid one over toward Harry. "We did spend the day together, Harry."

"You know what I mean," said Harry with a sigh. "Really, I'm sorry I messed up. It was stupid to drink that much, especially when I'd never had any before."

"Yes, it was stupid to drink that much," agreed Severus. "But you're a sixteen-year-old boy. You're supposed to do stupid things. You make mistakes; you learn from them."

Harry reached for a ginger snap and regarded it before taking a small bite. "A whole Saturday wasted."
Severus snorted.

Harry furrowed his eyebrows, then suddenly grinned. "That's not what I meant. Not that kind of wasted."

"I disagree with you. It wasn't wasted at all. I think you learned quite a bit and I actually enjoyed the quiet—well, except for those two hours with all the retching. I had to put a silencing spell on the bathroom door so I could finish my marking." He raised one eyebrow then picked up his tea, holding the cup with both hands as he took a long draw from it.

"I did learn something, you know," said Harry. "Firewhiskey is evil."

"I would modify that to say 'Firewhiskey taken in excess is evil,'" suggested Severus. "No, I'm speaking of the other lesson, the one we discussed earlier."

"Oh. Actions have consequences," supplied Harry, frowning.

"And?" Severus looked at Harry over the top of his teacup. Harry was still a little pale, but more than anything he looked introspective.

"And…our choices define us," finished Harry, sighing and dipping his finger into his tea to test its temperature. Severus frowned and shook his head.

"Uncouth."

Harry shrugged. "I made a bad choice. I won't do it again."

"Yes you will," countered Severus. "But not for a while. And when you do, I hope it will again be with friends, in a controlled setting, and that it won't make you miss work or fail a test."

"It doesn't seem fair that Ron and the rest of them got Sober-up potions while I had to…"

"They also had letters sent to their parents. Letters that arrived while they were still on the train."

"No!" The corner of Harry's mouth twitched. He wanted to be horrified for them but couldn't help being amused. The thought of Mrs. Weasley pulling Ron by his ear across Platform 9 ¾ almost made his day.

"Yes."

They sat in comfortable silence for a few more minutes. Harry ate another ginger snap, dunking it in his re-warmed tea. At last he brushed crumbs off his hands and lap and stood.

"Do you mind if I go to bed? I'm really knackered for some reason. Seems odd—I didn't do anything all day."

"Fighting a hangover is hard work, Harry," said Severus and Harry knew he spoke from experience. "Go on, go to bed. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow."

"A big day? What are we doing? Are you going to teach me to drive?"

Severus smiled. "Yes, but not tomorrow. Tomorrow, the Headmaster has requested a favor of you and I thought I'd go along to keep an eye on things."

"Go along where?" Harry was eying Severus steadily. Severus seemed almost…excited. What was
going on?

"Albus wants to make sure that Hogwarts—the castle—has no vulnerabilities that he isn't aware of. Entrances or exits that are not protected, for example. To that end, he would like to check out the Chamber of Secrets, and needs you to open the portal."

Harry's mouth had dropped open.

"That's about the last thing I ever expected to come out of your mouth," he said, taking a deep breath and sitting back down on the sofa. "Well, maybe that or "One hundred points from Slytherin for cheating in Quidditch."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Are you amenable?"

"Amenable? You've got to be kidding. Of course I'm amenable!" He didn't add that having Severus and the Headmaster with him made all the difference.

"Good. Then get on to bed. We'll want to get an early start in the morning."

Harry stood again and headed to Severus' room where he'd be sleeping tonight. Severus insisted the couch was perfectly fine. He'd taken the couch last night too.

"Wear old clothes," he called back to Severus. "And sturdy boots…"

"Go to b…"

But Harry had poked his head out again.

"Have you had a tetanus shot lately?"

"Bed!"

Harry ducked into the bedroom, neatly avoiding the throw pillow Severus lobbed at him.

And Severus sat on the sofa for a long moment, staring at the clock on his desk. The hand pointed to "Somewhere Safe." It had rested there comfortably since Severus had brought Harry down to his quarters last night. He'd sat here earlier that night as well, marking N.E.W.T. Defense essays as he watched the hand move from "In Gryffindor Tower" to "In Trouble," shuddering and trembling as if not able to decide which one was more appropriate. He'd finally asked Minerva to check up on Harry.

He'd been immensely relieved to find out the boy had simply been drinking with his friends.

This marvelous clock needed an adjustment. As it was now, one hand could mean "getting drunk in the dorm room" or "lost in the Forbidden Forest."

Harry's childhood was ending. Soon, the clock would no longer point to "Great Hall," "At Hagrid's," "Class" or "In Gryffindor Tower." But Severus would leave them there, those useless designations, because a boy deserved a childhood, even if he had to close his eyes and pretend in order to give him one.

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Chapter 30

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They were standing in the bathroom—in that bathroom; the bathroom where Hermione had secretly brewed the Polyjuice Potion during their second year, the bathroom where, later that same year, they had discovered the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. The Headmaster was walking around the stand of sinks, seemingly fascinated by the architecture of this dreary little room with its faded tiles and cracked ceramic—or perhaps, thought Harry, simply interested in the interior of a girls' bathroom. Moaning Myrtle had already appeared and was observing the proceedings from on top of one of the stall walls—the stall where Hermione had locked herself when she turned into Millicent Bulstrode's cat—and was nattering on about how lonely she was and how Harry never came to visit her anymore and thank goodness that poor boy needed her. Severus, standing with his hands behind his back near the door, had raised an eyebrow at that statement and muttered "Anymore?" Harry wondered vaguely who the "poor boy" was who needed her, but followed his own self-imposed rule of never encouraging Moaning Myrtle in her moaning rants.

Nearly four years had passed since Harry had opened the passage but he was drawn immediately to the sink that hid the entrance. He stood before it, his eyes moving from the small serpent etched on the faucet to the mirror above it. His reflection stared back at him; his hair had grown since Molly Weasley had trimmed it up for him over the Christmas holiday. His eyes were as green as ever behind his glasses though he thought they looked tired, making him look older than he was. He saw the reflections of both Severus and the Headmaster behind him. Severus' face was carefully neutral; the Headmaster caught Harry's eyes in the mirror and gave him a small nod and a smile but Harry missed the sparkle in his blue eyes.

The gateway opened smoothly at his whispered Parseltongue "Open," spoken aloud in the serpent language without conscious thought. Severus had taken a step forward, wand in hand, even as Harry stepped back, away from the shifting of the sink before him. Harry could see that the Headmaster also wielded his wand, holding it deceptively casually in his uninjured hand. As the sink continued to shift and grate against the cracked marble floor tiles, Severus stepped forward again, placing his hand on Harry's upper arm and pulling him away from the gaping hole behind and beneath the sink. Harry stepped backward, not caring to struggle against Severus' protective hand, but Dumbledore moved forward, wand tip wordlessly lit with a beam similar to that given off by a powerful electric torch. Harry leaned forward to peer into the depths. The wandlight revealed a tunnel wide enough for even Dudley or Uncle Vernon to fit through, a tunnel of highly polished stone that dropped sharply at an angle reminiscent of a playground slide. Dumbledore moved his wand, changing the angle of the light, but the tunnel curved or dropped further and the light didn't reveal much more.

"How long is it, Harry?" asked Severus. He'd moved up to stand beside Harry. "Were you hurt at all going down?"

Harry took a step forward, crouching down to look into the tunnel. "It's long. Banged me up a bit but nothing serious." He stood up. "Of course I was a lot smaller then and I landed on Lockhart at the bottom."

Severus snorted. "Served the old fraud right. Too bad you didn't land on his…"

"We're two levels above the Great Hall," cut in Dumbledore. "It will be quite a drop…"

"I'll go first," said Severus. He paused, regarding his wand, then turned to Dumbledore. "We should try to reduce our speed…"
"Rubber," suggested Harry. At their puzzled looks, he explained. "On the playground, kids drag their trainers to slow themselves down on the slide. The rubber catches on the surface—it won't slip or slide. Maybe we can just transfigure the seat of our trousers into rubber…"

"While rubber pants would be…humorous," replied Severus, not able to resist a glance at Dumbledore, "we do have more sophisticated magical means at our disposal."

"I will bring up the rear and handle the spellwork," suggested Dumbledore.

Severus nodded and moved to the hole. "Give me a minute before you start, Harry," he said. He lowered himself, looked backward to Dumbledore who flicked his wand at him, then dropped into the hole and a moment later was gone.

"It gets messy a little further down," called Harry after him. He turned and grinned at the Headmaster, who was completing a complicated wand movement.

"I've added an impermeable spell to the modified impedimenta," he said. "Lamentably, Severus was already gone before I was able to cast it." His eyes twinkled at Harry, who smiled.

Harry took out his wand, performed a quick Lumos, and dropped down the pipe. He slid steadily forward, dragging his trainers even though the Headmaster's spell slowed him down significantly. It was not at all how he remembered the wild ride the first time. The pipe-like tunnel twisted and turned, the angle changing constantly and several times dropping straight down a meter or so before it leveled off a bit. He'd had Ron with him then, of course, and Lockhart, and he'd had no idea where they'd end up or what they'd find when they got there.

A muttered oath echoed back from somewhere ahead of him and he turned a corner and hit a stretch of sludge. He sped up as he passed through it, but the gunk didn't stick. He heard noise behind him, something that sounded a lot like "Wheeeee!" and knew that the Headmaster was on his way down. He wondered, with all the magic in his arsenal, why the Headmaster was reduced to sliding down what essentially amounted to a giant pipe to reach the Chamber of Secrets and could only deduce that to the Headmaster, it was fun.

The Chamber of Secrets. What the hell was he thinking coming back down here?

Too late, of course, for second thoughts.

He felt like he'd been dropping forever when he finally hit bottom. The chute had steepened as it came into a final long straight-away and Harry dragged his trainers even though his descent speed was still restricted by Dumbledore's spell. He jumped to his feet, his wand held high, as the tunnel ended in the first cavern. He spotted Severus over by the pile of debris that had fallen when Lockhart tried to Obliviate them, trapping Harry on the business side of the Chamber. Harry wiped dirty, sweaty hands on the seat of his jeans as he walked over toward Severus.

"Careful," said Severus, not turning to look at Harry. "This might be unstable—there appears to have been a cave-in."

"Spell backfired," explained Harry. The events of that day so long ago were so permanently instilled in his brain that he had forgotten that the others wouldn't know the details.

Severus shot Harry a curious look then continued poking around at the pile of rocks. "Go on..."

"Lockhart tried to Obliviate us when we got down here," he said. "He grabbed Ron's wand, the one that got broken when we crashed the flying car into the Whomping Willow….it backfired and the ceiling came crashing down." He paused, then added more quietly. "I got stuck on the other side of
Severus had been examining the small opening, large enough for a 12-year-old but certainly not large enough for a grown man. He poked at a rock with his wand and warned "Stay back, Harry."

"Hold on, Severus," said Dumbledore. He was standing at the base of the pipe, dusting off his seemingly impeccable robes with his good hand, his wand lightly held in the other. Apparently satisfied with the appearance of his robes, he transferred his wand to his other hand then swept it in an arc in front of him and the ceiling glowed with soft light. Harry hadn't spent much time looking at the tunnel ceiling four years ago. Now he could see that it was flat on top, curving gently as it reached the walls to give the passage a decided snake-like shape.

"Nox." Harry pocketed his own wand and Severus shook his head at him.

"Wand out, Harry," he said quietly, using his own to cast a spell to stabilize the loose rocks while he enlarged the hole.

"I'll crawl on through," offered Harry, peaking through the hole and noting that Dumbledore's lighting spell continued down the passage beyond the cave-in.

It immediately became apparent to him that he would not be going into any unknown territory first on this little adventure. Severus held him back until the hole was more like a small passageway, strengthened by more stabilization spells. Arguing with Severus got him nowhere. He didn't even bother to explain why Harry, who was the obvious choice as he was younger, smaller and faster, should not take the lead down the narrow, rocky passage and should instead be forced to take the "safe" middle position. Wrapping his head around the concept that he was being protected did not come naturally to Harry, nor did the understanding of why he was being protected…not because he was a valuable asset or pivotal lynchpin in a master plan, but rather because he was loved.

The passageway opened up, as Harry of course knew it would, into the Chamber itself. The Chamber didn't need Dumbledore's lighting spell. It was already lit magically, a portion of the ceiling seeming to admit the outside light, perhaps charmed to do so as was the ceiling in the Great Hall. Still, the light was dim and diffused and the Chamber as vast and eerie as it had been four years ago when Ginny had been lying up there on the flagstones, unmoving, and that…manifestation…of Tom Riddle had appeared.

The Headmaster had walked to a point away from the cave-like walls. He gazed quietly at the ceiling at first, then his eyes moved to the impressive stone columns supporting the roof and the carved stone monument that occupied the entire end of the room. There were representations of serpents everywhere and now that Harry's attention wasn't completely focused on saving Ginny, he noticed how prevalent the theme was in this, Salazar Slytherin's, room. His gaze moved from a stone python wrapped around a tall column to Severus, who had moved across the room and was approaching … something … something long, parallel to the far wall and difficult to make out in the faded light.

Dumbledore had seen it too. Both men were totally taken by whatever it was. He could tell by their stance, by their near motionless postures, by the quick glance they seemed to exchange.

He took one step closer and knew what it was. How could he not have known? Had he expected the carcass to be gone after four years? Reduced to dust and ashes? Scavenged by rats and insects here in the bowels of Hogwarts? He stepped forward again, then stopped, not daring yet to get too close. He had grown more than a head taller in the four years since he'd killed it, had gained two stone, yet the thing still seemed enormous to him, even though it was now only a shadow of what it once was.

How long was it? He hadn't thought about its length much back then, intent as he was on avoiding
its gaze and ultimately, piercing its brain. He remembered the attacking head with its blinded eyes and venomous fangs. He thought the monster's head was as large as his twelve-year-old body, but had he realized that the thing was at least ten meters long?

Now Severus was walking around the thing while Dumbledore stood at the front of it, where the skull rested sideways on the ground, attached to the spine but twisted as if the great beast had laid its head down on the floor in rest before it expired. Harry had moved close enough to see it more clearly now and from his new position saw that tattered skin still stretched over parts of the skeleton and that the floor was littered with scales, each one as large as his hand.

Severus completed a circuit, stopping near Dumbledore then reversing direction, walking around it now from the other side. Harry thought he might be counting his paces. Dumbledore accompanied him on the third circuit and Harry approached even closer then, taking the time to really look at the thing—ten meters long, nearly two meters tall, the skull larger than an adolescent boy. The bones were a deep yellow, nearing brown, the remaining skin nearly transparent, parchment-like. There was no flesh left, and curiously, no smell of rot or decay. The fangs, a great many of them, still fixed to the bony roof of the creature's mouth, held his attention and he glanced quickly down at his arm, healed of the hurt this summer at St. Mungo's, before moving his eyes back to the basilisk.

A step closer, close enough to touch now, and he reached out one hand, made himself touch the thing, run his hand down the darkened curved bone, nearly as tall as he was. He heard the crunch of a boot and saw Severus approaching him, his face gray.

"It's even bigger than I remem..." began Harry, but he was suddenly engulfed in Severus' arms, crushed close to him, face against the fabric of his linen shirt and robes, Severus' heart beating fast. He heard Severus talking, muttering. "You were only twelve...Albus, he was only a child... Look at this thing!" Harry stood stiffly in his arms, confused, but the nearness of Severus, his comforting smell, the desperation in his voice, all of these things made him begin to melt, made him begin to let go of the worry inside, the fear of the unknown, of what was out there, on the cusp of the horizon, coming at him, coming at them, of how he would handle it alone, how he would protect his friends, how he would survive it.

He desperately wanted to live.

Severus continued to hold him, shaking slightly, so that Harry thought he might be crying, might be releasing demons of his own, so Harry grabbed on more tightly, hands clenched in the loose over-robes Severus wore. He turned his head so that his nose was free to breathe.

And saw the Headmaster.

Dumbledore was looking at Severus, his face so undeniably sad, so full of pain and regret, that Harry knew, he absolutely knew, that Dumbledore did not expect it to turn out well.

Harry buried his face again in Severus' robes and cried.

Later, Severus had conjured three chairs, the kind you'd use around a campfire or on the sidelines of a football game, and they'd sat together, backs to the elaborate stonework at the front of the chamber, looking out over the long expanse of room. The Headmaster produced a full tea service and a curious little stone table to set it on, and the three men sipped tea from china cups and ate scones with jam and clotted cream, the small tea party incongruous in this vast chamber of stone and bones.

Harry had found the basilisk fang that he'd pulled out of his arm and used to destroy the diary, still
lying undisturbed on the flagstones, the end darkened with dried blood. The stones around it were darkened as well, black with the blood that had spilled from the diary. He'd stared at it for a moment, resisting the urge to pick it up and test its sharpness with his fingertip, then turned his back to join Severus and Dumbledore as they examined the perimeter of the room and looked for other ways in or out, conjuring candles to check for drafts and trying out any number of spells to reveal hidden doors and passages.

"There are those who believe that Salazar Slytherin kept a secret library in the castle," said Dumbledore softly. They'd taken to speaking in low voices as the echo the chamber produced was both eerie and sad. "They speak of tales of a hidden door in the Chamber of Secrets that leads to his private quarters and his personal library. It is rumored that he developed a written form of Parseltongue and that he kept his personal diaries in that language."

Harry laughed and found both Severus and Dumbledore looking at him oddly.

"What's funny?" asked Severus, privately thinking that not much could be more funny than having tea and scones on china while sitting in camp chairs in the Chamber of Secrets.

"You can't write Parseltongue," said Harry, shaking his head and still grinning.

"You can't?" asked the Headmaster. "Why not, Harry?" He glanced over at Severus. Severus had paused, his teacup midway to his mouth, and was looking curiously at Harry.

"You just can't. It's...ridiculous. The sounds aren't just letters strung together, you know. There's a certain feel to them—the emphasis you put on a certain syllable, or the way you draw out a sound."

"Couldn't you utilize punctuation, then?" asked Severus. He'd replaced his cup in its fine gold-rimmed saucer.

Harry shook his head. He couldn't explain how he knew, but he did.

"So, no library down here," said Severus. He looked around the chamber again. "I would say that this room by itself seems to be sufficient accomplishment for Slytherin." His eyes drifted over to the basilisk carcass. "Though it is decidedly more pleasant without its former...inhabitant."

"Tell me about it," said Harry, rolling his eyes. He couldn't stop the small shudder that went through his body.

"That thing could have eaten students whole, Albus," said Severus. He tried to keep his voice under control but it increased in pitch nonetheless. "It is a miracle—an absolute miracle—that all who were attacked recovered."

"How many of these places do you think there are at Hogwarts?" asked Harry suddenly, thinking of the Room of Requirement and the series of rooms that had guarded the Philosopher's Stone.

"Hogwarts has many secrets," answered Dumbledore cryptically. "She is more than a thousand years old now, and was built by the most powerful wizards and witches in history. It took nearly a thousand years for her to give up this secret, and that happened only because a great evil stirred in our world." He sighed. "I would rather she keep her secrets and keep evil at bay."

"The carvings in this room are exquisite," commented Severus after a moment of silence. "Every time I look, I discover something new. Look at the top of this column here, at the spiral of serpents, each consuming the tail of the next."

Harry followed the circle of light from the end of Severus' wand as Severus pointed with it to the
"What does that mean?" he asked, thinking of Slytherins instead of snakes.

"It could mean many things, of course," answered Severus, considering the nest of serpents under his care at the castle, and of his own days at Hogwarts in Slytherin House. "Unity, for one, but an enforced unity. It can also mean support, I suppose—look at the chain of serpents as a rope, perhaps. There is a certain synergy to the concept—that the whole is greater, or stronger, than the individuals of which it is comprised."

Harry nodded, swallowing a lump in his throat as he remembered Severus' admonishment that he would be stronger with his friends at his side.

"I think holding hands would be more useful than clinging to each other's tails." He imagined a row of circus elephants, each using its trunk to hold on to the tail in front of it. He wondered, briefly, if that forced stance was humiliating to an elephant and doubted that they traipsed around in the wild holding each others' tails.

"Alas," said the Headmaster, looking at his own withered hand, then over at Harry. "Snakes do not have hands."

Severus stood then and walked out toward the center of the room, taking his time to study the ceiling, the walls and the ornate carvings. His eyes focused on an area above the chairs where Dumbledore and Harry still sat.

"I think there is a hole up there," he said. "A rather large one. It is well hidden."

Harry looked up where Severus was now pointing. "Yeah, the basilisk came out of there," he said. "I'd forgotten about that. I wonder…"

Severus was already walking toward them. He was able to easily climb the pyramid-like footings to approach the aperture. He maneuvered himself until he could look into the space then finally turned.

"It is a tunnel that goes back a few meters then turns." He looked at Harry a long moment. "I am going to go through. Harry, climb up here. Do not enter unless I call you but I'd like you to be prepared."

Harry swallowed a last bite of scone then climbed up toward Severus. The Headmaster moved back into the Chamber so he could see them better. Harry thought he looked anxious.

Severus had already disappeared into the hole when Harry made it to the small platform he'd been standing on. Severus was hard to see as he moved forward, but Harry lit his wand again and trained it on his robes, which disappeared around the corner a moment later. Another moment and Severus' voice echoed out.

"The nest," he said. "It seems to have been built for this very purpose—definitely not a room used by a human. Harry, you can come back if you'd like."

Harry turned toward Dumbledore. "It's the basilisk's nest," he explained. "Severus wants me to come back."

Dumbledore nodded and Harry crawled into the tunnel. It was narrower than the one at the bottom of the slide; shorter, more close, walls polished over time by the scales of the beast as it slid along them. He turned the corner and had only two or three meters more to traverse before the tunnel ended in a room with a cool dirt floor and a low ceiling. The room was irregular in shape, like the interior of a carving.
cave, and was littered with bones. The walls were adorned with more carvings, mostly runes this
time. It was pleasantly cool and dry. Severus was walking the perimeter, casting against the walls,
examining the runes, but in the end he pocketed his wand and looked back at Harry.

"There is a second hole there"—he shone the light from his wand tip into another aperture on the
same wall as the one they'd used—"which is in keeping with a creature's nature not to find itself
trapped without egress."

"I'll crawl through," suggested Harry. He'd walked over to the second hole and peered into it. "We'll
need to make sure it doesn't exit somewhere else in the school…"

"The creature was moving about freely within the walls of the school in your second year, Harry,"
said Severus. "It obviously has multiple exits. It will be nearly impossible for us to determine if any
of them lead to the outside."

"What about the house elves?" asked Harry. "Could they explore these passages for the Headmaster?
Make sure they don't lead outside?"

Severus grimaced. "The house elves serve at the will of the Headmaster, but I wonder if any would
be brave enough to crawl into a basilisk's den." He glanced at the bone-covered floor but Harry did
not pick up on his insinuation.

"They wouldn't really have to crawl…" said Harry, using his hand to measure up to his waist.

Severus cuffed him lightly on the side of the head.

When Dumbledore had banished the tea service and Severus had vanished the chairs, they stood
together one last time looking at the Chamber.

"It really is a marvelous architectural accomplishment," said Dumbledore, looking at a point where a
fluted column met the ceiling and a dozen serpents, each clutching an apple in its mouth, were carved
in bas relief. "If we can assure that it is secured, students should be allowed to tour the Chamber." He
looked at Severus. "Put that on your list, Severus."

Harry glanced quickly at Dumbledore, then back at Severus, trying to grasp what had passed
between them with that simple directive and the pained look that crossed Severus' face.

"What about the entrance?" asked Harry. The two men looked at him.

"You need someone who speaks Parseltongue to open it," he explained.

"Perhaps next year, then," said Dumbledore cryptically. He began walking quickly toward the rear
of the chamber, to the passage from which they'd entered, leaving Harry looking after him and
Severus looking resolutely at his feet.

Just for a moment, before Severus schooled his expression and nodded to Harry to follow the
Headmaster, Harry thought he'd seen a look of forlorn hopelessness in Severus' eyes.

He was inordinately glad to leave that place.
Severus kept Harry very busy over the next few days. He seemed to have an agenda that he was determined to get through, and Harry, beginning to understand and to think like Severus, complied without question. They spent most of the early part of the week in the Potions laboratory, Snape drilling Harry on a few specific potions: Skele-gro, Pepper-up, a blood replenisher, an anti-toxin and contraceptive. Harry brewed each one several times and memorized the formulas, techniques, shelf-life and proper dosages. Severus spent a lot of time watching Harry, giving him advice on ingredient preparation and grilling him on substitutes. If powdered bicorn horn wasn't available for the Skele-gro potion, what could be used in its place? What were the three most common alternative protein sources in blood replenishing potions? How much cayenne pepper was used in Pepper-up if only the minced form was available?

Harry understood why they were making these particular potions, why he was committing them to memory (though he thought the contraceptive potion a waste of time at this point), but as he decanted the Pepper-up, he dared to ask a question.

"How about a fever reducing potion?" he asked, eyes still focused on the Pepper-Up.

"Muggle aspirin works very well, is cheap, takes up little room and has a long shelf life. If it's not available, collect willow bark, boil it and drink the liquid."

"Willow bark, right," said Harry, filing that instruction away. "Polyjuice?" he asked a few minutes later as he cleaned his cauldron.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Takes an entire month to brew," he said. "You may want to consider Muggle means to change your appearance if needed." He was staring at Harry's scar and Harry self-consciously shook his head so that his hair covered it again.

"You will want to invest in a Muggle first-aid kit," Severus suggested quietly a few minutes later as Harry re-stocked the left-over ingredients then washed his hands. "Make sure it contains burn cream, antiseptic cream, plasters and such."

Harry looked at him sideways a long moment, letting the warm water run over his clean hands, then
nodded once and turned off the faucet.

They had had a long talk, together, after returning from the Chamber of Secrets. Dumbledore had summoned Fawkes, and the Phoenix had flashed them back to the Headmaster's office, one at a time. It wasn't at all like Apparition but rather consisted of a brief sense of weightlessness and darkness, but the kind of darkness pierced by muted flashing colors, as when your eyes were squeezed tightly shut after glancing at the bright sun. It was, with the exception of magical brooms, Harry's favorite magical means of transportation to date. But despite the relative ease of their return trip from the Chamber, the Headmaster had seemed pale and drawn and Severus had tended to him while he sent Harry down to his quarters.

Severus had seemed worn himself by the time he settled at the small kitchen table with Harry. But he had braved a conversation nonetheless, and Harry, for his part, was grateful. Though the words did not come easily at first, they did come, and Harry thought about them as he lay in bed that night, trying to coax his tired body and overworked mind to let go of conscious thought and drift to sleep. Dumbledore's death would likely, in Severus' words, cause the dominoes to start falling in the Dark Lord's favor. Harry must not come back to a Hogwarts under a new regime—he would have to trust in his instincts, go into hiding, lie low.

"Harry, there will be a point when our paths must diverge," Severus had said, his expression serious and voice tight. "I may not be able to write to you, or communicate with you in any way. I need to be sure that you have the tools and skills you need to get by. You can fade into the Muggle world if it comes down to it. You should go to Gringott's this weekend and transfer enough money into a Muggle bank account to be able to go to university, or set yourself up in a flat…"

But Harry had shaken his head, even as Severus spoke.

"I'm not going to run away, Severus. Not like that." He was resolute in his determination and Severus looked at him a long moment, but in the end did not argue.

"You are a stubborn child," he said instead, with a serious smile. But he followed that conversation with two days of potion making and after that, he took Harry to the Forbidden Forest.

They spent all of Thursday in the forest. It was early in the year, of course, and winter was just releasing her grip on the woodland flora, but small branches and bushes were beginning to bud out. Severus handed Harry a leather-bound book, small enough to slip into his hip pocket, with a curious short, flat pencil in a groove on the inside cover. All morning, Severus took him from one plant to another. He sketched leaves, rubbed bark patterns and took notes on the medicinal uses of stems, leaves, roots and berries.

"Avoid all mushrooms," instructed Severus. "It takes a skilled eye to know the poisonous varieties from the safe ones."

"Would a bezoar work?" asked Harry, poking around in the loose dirt at the base of a large pine tree.

"Yes," said Severus. "But if you remember the incident with your friend last month, you know that the bezoar cannot heal the residual damage done by the toxin." He paused, looking up into the great pine above them. "And besides, bezoars do not grow on trees."

Harry wrote "get bezoars" at the bottom of a page in his notebook and underlined it twice. He then wrote "Sev. says they don't grow on trees" below it. Severus, looking over his shoulder, shook his head.

"Never call me Sev," he said, motioning for Harry to follow him to the next tree.
The afternoon was spent deep in the forest, well beyond the boundaries of Hogwarts, practicing Apparition. Precision Apparition. Since Harry was still spotty at even the hoop to hoop short-distance Apparition taught every Saturday in the Great Hall, the first hour was spent in simple techniques to refine the basics. The step-turn sequence turned out to be the critical piece, and if Harry paired his "deliberation" with the step-turn, he was successful at every attempt. Once he had successfully Apparated from one side of the clearing to another a dozen times without failure, Severus began a series of exercises with him to increase his accuracy, having him Apparate the same distance but to very precise locations marked by smaller and smaller circles drawn on the dirt with Severus' wand. Harry then had to Apparate from the middle of the clearing to small targets behind selected trees, taking care not to let Severus see him from his vantage spot beside Harry's original location in the clearing. Then they began a game of cat and mouse, with Snape Apparating and Harry finding him and Apparating beside him as quickly as possible.

Three hours in and Harry could hardly stand. He Apparated within a few meters of Severus and literally fell to his knees, weak and sick to his stomach. He remained on the ground, on his hands and knees, trying to catch his breath and was surprised when Severus dropped to the forest floor beside him and helped him sit up. He produced a stomach calming potion from his pocket, held it while Harry drank it then stood. He looked down at Harry a moment then smiled in challenge.

"Meet me at the gates of Hogwarts," he said and with barely a crack, he was gone.

Harry struggled to his feet.

"Bastard," he muttered, but he couldn't help but smile as he turned on the spot and disappeared from the forest.

________________________________________

-Severus-

Even though he firmly believed that the reward of a thing well done was to have done it, Severus could not help but offer Friday as a reward for Harry's attitude and accomplishments throughout the week. Harry had managed to Apparate from the middle of the Forbidden Forest to the gates of Hogwarts only a minute behind him. He'd landed on his feet and swayed, managing to look a bit smug even as he wobbled. Severus took three quick steps over to him and grabbed Harry by his upper arm to steady him.

"We're finished for the day," he said as Harry visibly sagged. "Let's get you back to the castle to rest—you've a big day ahead of you tomorrow."

"You're going to teach me to drive?" asked Harry hopefully.

"I'm going to teach you to drive," confirmed Severus. "Consider tomorrow your payback for everything I put you through today."

They were at the gates of Hogwarts again at nine o'clock the following morning. Severus was wearing Muggle clothing and was carrying a backpack. Harry's pocket held the wallet Severus had handed him before they left the castle—the wallet containing a very realistic looking driver's learning permit courtesy of Arthur Weasley's connections at the Ministry, a few photos (which had come with the wallet) and two ten pound notes.

"Take my arm," said Severus after checking—again—to make sure that his own wallet with its fabricated driver's license was in his trouser pocket. Harry grabbed on, his grip tight and body apprehensive, and a moment later they were standing on a gravel lane facing a familiar seaside
The smile on Harry's face was worth all the headaches Severus had gone through to make this day happen.

Between Severus and Harry and the cottage was parked a dark green MGB.

Harry let go of Severus' arm and stared at the car, then back at Severus.

"How did…? Whose…?" he sputtered, taking several steps forward toward the car.

"I have no idea," dead-panned Severus, walking briskly forward until he reached the car. He opened the passenger side door and started to get in. "Are you coming?" he called to Harry as he slid into the low seat. He watched through the windshield as Harry hurried toward him, stopping in front of the car then tentatively opening the driver's side door and getting in beside Severus.

"Whose car is it?" asked Harry, eying the dashboard then running his gaze across the top of the windshield, examining the latches that held the roof in place.

"It belongs to a friend of Bill Weasley," answered Severus. "The friend owed Bill a favor, and Bill was gracious enough to drive the car over here last night."

"I'll be sure to thank him," said Harry. His voice still held a note of awe. He reached in front of Severus to open the glove box, closed it again, then fiddled with one of the roof latches.

Severus sighed in resignation.

"You want the roof down, don't you?" he asked, reaching to loosen the latch on his side.

"Can we?" Harry replied, sounding as eager as a first-year about to board the Hogwarts Express. Together, they folded back the roof and secured it behind them. Harry then gripped the steering wheel and turned expectantly to look at Severus.

"You do realize that I'm going to be spoiled for life and a Ford Anglia is never going to do after this, don't you?" he asked.

"Next time I'll have Bill borrow your Uncle Vernon's car," answered Severus.

"Next time?" asked Harry, ignoring the reference to his uncle's car, the very one that had run over his legs the previous summer.

"Let's see if we survive today first, shall we?" answered Severus.

He had expected the day to be stressful, perhaps painfully so. He had expected shaky starts, grinding stops, too-fast turns and panic attacks.

He has expected an experience similar to his own first time in a car.

He had not expected driving to come as natural to Harry as riding a broom.

Of course, there had been some confusion over the pedals, and the usual jerks as the boy learned the feel of the clutch and adjusted to the slight sponginess of the brakes in this old but well-tended vehicle. In his seat beside Harry, legs stretched out in the surprisingly roomy area, he felt his own feet reacting to the movement of the car, pressing an imaginary brake, moving over to tap lightly on the accelerator.
He had chosen this area for a reason. Most of the cottages were seasonal on this long stretch of shoreline road, and few people were here in early April. Even those who might be planning to come for the Easter weekend hadn't yet arrived on this Good Friday morning. Plenty of smaller access roads led off the main highway, allowing Harry practice at turning, navigating, shifting and speed control.

Harry had started the car smoothly and had only killed the motor twice before he made it out of the far lawn beyond the fence where Bill had left the vehicle to the gravel road where they had appeared after Apparating from Hogwarts. Severus had directed him to the right, then down a kilometer-long straight-away, then onto another feeder road. He was as unfamiliar with the area as was Harry, but had a keen sense of direction and felt they had a reasonable chance of making it back to the cottage without getting too lost.

An hour into the lesson and Harry wasn't showing any signs of boredom. Severus put him through the paces—had him pull into driveways, reverse out, execute three point turns and stop and start again on an uphill grade. They adjusted the mirrors, learned the dashboard controls. Severus even had Harry pull off the road and tried to teach him how to change a tire. He couldn't quite get the jack together, but Harry laughed all the same and claimed to at least understand the principle of the thing.

Harry held the small, leather-wrapped steering wheel comfortably in his hands, knuckles not white like a typical learner. The car, Severus realized, by its design, its compactness, its magnificent handling, made Harry's job much easier and Severus was inordinately grateful that Bill's friend owned such a vehicle and that he, Severus, had thought to confer with Bill on the problem of teaching Harry to drive when he owned neither car nor driver's license.

Two hours out and Severus decided it was time to get the vehicle out onto the open road for a bit. He directed Harry off the arterials and onto the main highway, pointing out the speed limit signs. He thought most learners, even teenage boys, would tense up, drive too slowly, when faced with the open road and higher speeds.

Not Harry.

The boy whose first time on a broom won him a position on the Gryffindor Quidditch team took to the highway like a gull to the sea. Severus watched Harry as his body relaxed into the seat. The boy glanced over at him, a delighted smile on his face, as the car gained speed.

"How fast do you suppose this thing will go?" he asked, rather innocently.

Severus glanced at the odometer.

"I'd say about three times as fast as the legal speed limit on this road," he replied dryly. "Let's just stick to the posted limit, shall we?"

The car loved the highway. Severus' hair did not. Harry didn't seem to mind in the least what the wind did to his already messy hair, but Severus wasn't accustomed to having his hair fly out behind him, strands whipping in the air and lifting over his head. When Harry pulled off, at Severus' instructions, on a turn-out that overlooked the ocean below, he put the car in neutral, pulled on the emergency brake and turned to look at Severus.

And erupted in laughter. Laughter that was so welcome to Severus, for Harry had not been laughing much of late, that the corners of his own mouth twitched upward.

"Your hair..." said Harry, catching his breath. "It's...It's..." He shook his head then reached over to pull down the sun visor on Severus' side. Severus looked up into the small mirror. He looked like the
"I'm Hagrid!" laughed Harry, attempting to pat his hair down but soon giving up.

Severus opened his car door and got out, walked around the back of the car and came to stand next to Harry's door.

"Ready to let the old man take the wheel?" he asked.

Five minutes later, after only killing the motor three times, Severus—whose old adage of "It's like riding a bike" was proving true after a rather rocky start—had the car zipping down the highway while Harry sorted through a stack of Muggle CDs from Severus' backpack. He turned each over, reading song selections on the back, and finally held up "Rubber Soul." Severus glanced over, saw the cover art, and nodded.

"An appropriate choice, given the opening track," he said. Harry loaded the CD and "Baby you can drive my car" was soon lost in the wind behind them as both Harry and Severus, perhaps a bit self-consciously at first, belted out the lyrics, hardly even hearing their own voices above the rush of wind in their ears.

An hour and a half later, Severus had driven north until the last track of Rubber Soul was over and had pulled over to let Harry behind the wheel again. Harry pulled out onto the highway, the car jerking violently only once before gaining speed and heading back south again, and Severus picked through the CDs, looking for road music. He settled on one, turning it over in his hands, thinking back to his first introduction to this American artist, at term break during his seventh year at Hogwarts, after he'd had a parting of the ways with Lily, when he'd already started down his personal road to perdition. He'd heard a song on his father's radio one afternoon, a cold clear day when both his parents were working and he was sitting at the kitchen table, revising for his Potions N.E.W.T.

"Like a bat out of hell I'll be gone when the morning comes..."

He'd found the complete lyrics at a record store later that same day, written them out, memorized them.

Bought the LP, played it over and over in the hours he spent alone in the house during that dreary Christmas break.

At first, it was a song of escape for him, of breaking free from his Muggle prison. It didn't seem to matter that it was a song about death; there were many ways, after all, for a wizard to interpret—and avoid—the end of life.

But it became so much more to him later. Perhaps not then, when his life's path seemed to be set; leave Hogwarts, escape the Muggle hell hole that was Spinner's End, attain a Potion's Mastery, serve the Dark Lord. But later, as he realized his sins, mourned his first friend, his best friend, his lost love.

"Oh baby you're the only thing in this whole world that's pure and good and right."

He took the CD out of its case, looking over at Harry. The boy still had both hands on the wheel, his hair blowing back from his face, his eyes behind the round glasses fixed on the road before him. He looked more carefree, perhaps, than Severus had ever seen him when he wasn't on a broom. He wondered if he should introduce Harry to this particular song, to this set of songs, so perfect for the road, so full of angst and teenage love.
"Then like a sinner before the gates of heaven I'll come crawling on back to you."

He placed the CD in the stereo and turned the volume up. Harry's hand thumped on the steering wheel as the song played out. Severus didn't sing along, absorbing the lyrics instead, thinking of his past mistakes. Thinking of Lily.

When the song ended, nearly ten minutes later, Harry glanced over at Severus then adjusted the stereo controls and replayed the track.

And did it again ten minutes later.

The fourth time through, they were both singing the lyrics, and it was only then that Severus understood that the song meant something very different to Harry. He could tell by the lyrics that Harry latched onto.

"And I know that I'm damned if I never get out,
And maybe I'm damned if I do,
But with every other beat I've got left in my heart,
You know I'd rather be damned with you."

When Harry finally pulled up in front of Shell Cottage and cut the motor, they both got out, Severus rubbing the small of his back, and approached the cottage. Harry stepped inside, an expectant look on his face, and made his way immediately back through the kitchen to the wide porch facing the ocean. Severus smiled as he heard the hammock stretching against Harry's weight. By the time he'd used the loo and made his way out to the porch, Harry's eyes were closed. Severus walked over to the high porch window and stood there for a long while, watching the waves crash against the shore and the gulls swoop low over the water.

Behind him the hammock swayed gently, the porch rafters creaked softly and Harry dozed peacefully.

This, thought Severus, *this* is what it feels like to come home.

________________________________________

_Bat Out of Hell_ by Meatloaf (October 1977)

_The sirens are screaming and the fires are howling,_
way down in the valley tonight.
_There's a man in the shadows with a gun in his eye,_
_and a blade shining oh so bright._
_There's evil in the air and there's thunder in sky,_
_and a killer's on the bloodshot streets._
_Oh and down in the tunnel where the deadly are rising,_
_Oh I swear I saw a young boy down in the gutter,_
_He was starting to foam in the heat._

_Oh baby you're the only thing in this whole world,_
_that's pure and good and right._
_And wherever you are and wherever you go,_
_there's always gonna be some light._
_But I gotta get out,_
_I gotta break it out now,_
_Before the final crack of dawn._
So we gotta make the most of our one night together.
When it's over you know,
We'll both be so alone.

*Like a bat out of hell*
I'll be gone when the morning comes.
When the night is over
Like a bat out of hell
I'll be gone gone gone.
Like a bat out of hell
I'll be gone when the morning comes.
But when the day is done and the sun goes down,
and the moonlights shining through,
Then like a sinner before the gates of heaven,
I'll come crawling on back to you.

*I'm gonna hit the highway like a battering ram,*
on a silver black phantom bike.
When the metal is hot and the engine is hungry,
and we're all about to see the light.
Nothing ever grows in this rotting old hole.
Everything is stunted and lost.
And nothing really rocks
And nothing really rolls
And nothing's ever worth the cost.
And I know that I'm damned if I never get out,
And maybe I'm damned if I do,
But with every other beat I've got left in my heart,
You know I'd rather be damned with you.
If I gotta be damned you know I wanna be damned,
dancing through the night with you.
If I gotta be damned you know I wanna be damned.
Gotta be damned you know I wanna be damned.
If I gotta be damned you know I wanna be damned,
Dancing through the night
Dancing through the night
Dancing through the night with you.

*Oh baby you're the only thing in this whole world,*
that's pure and good and right.
And wherever you are and wherever you go,
there's always gonna be some light.
But I gotta get out,
I gotta break it out now,
Before the final crack of dawn.
So we gotta make the most of our one night together.
When it's over you know,
We'll both be so alone.

*Like a bat out of hell*
I'll be gone when the morning comes.
When the night is over
Like a bat out of hell
I'll be gone gone gone.
Like a bat out of hell
I'll be gone when the morning comes.
But when the day is done and the sun goes down,
and the moonlights shining through,
Then like a sinner before the gates of heaven,
I'll come crawling on back to you.

I can see myself tearing up the road,
Faster than any other boy has ever gone.
And my skin is raw but my soul is ripe.
No-one's gonna stop me now,
I gotta make my escape.
But I can't stop thinking of you,
and I never see the sudden curve until it's way too late.
I never see the sudden curve 'till it's way too late.

Then I'm dying at the bottom of a pit in the blazing sun.
Torn and twisted at the foot of a burning bike.
And I think somebody somewhere must be tolling a bell.
And the last thing I see is my heart,
Still beating,
Breaking out of my body,
And flying away,
Like a bat out of hell.
Then I'm dying at the bottom of a pit in the blazing sun.
Torn and twisted at the foot of a burning bike.
And I think somebody somewhere must be tolling a bell.
And the last thing I see is my heart.
Still beating, still beating,
Breaking out of my body and flying away,
Like a bat out of hell.
Like a bat out of hell.
Like a bat out of hell.
Oh like a bat out of hell!
Oh like a bat out of hell!
Like a bat out of hell!

Chapter 32

April 14 - April 18

-Harry-

After Potions class on Monday, Harry gave himself a deadline: one more week to get that memory from Slughorn. With Easter Break over, the next big milestone was end of term exams and Harry could practically feel time slipping away. He knew Dumbledore was counting on him, but even without that guilt looming over him, deep down inside he felt a growing sense of urgency. Two and a half months and the term would be over. Would Dumbledore even be here after that to assign him
Harry tossed and turned that night, turning over the Slughorn problem in his head. His dorm bed felt oddly small after spending a week in Severus' quarters and stretching out—every other night—on that marvelous king-sized four poster. His friends would never believe that Severus had such a decadent bed—a thick feather bolster, eight pillows, and his favorite thing of all—a large green quilt that was the perfect weight for the late spring nights. Harry had thought the quilt quite plain at first, despite its comfort, but when he really looked at it one morning when, still drowsy, he stayed in bed staring at the bedclothes before getting up, he found that the quilting stitches formed the shapes of a myriad of magical objects and creatures. It was a veritable hidden objects game, the solid color making it all the more challenging. Did all witches quilt with such magical talent? Hippogriffs, centaurs, wands, snitches, cauldrons, house elves, goblins, grindylows, merpeople, nifflers, dragons, broomsticks…even the Hogwarts Express made an appearance on the marvelous quilt.

On Saturday night, the last night Harry had spent with Severus before coming back up to Gryffindor Tower with his friends, Severus had appeared in the bedroom door to bid goodnight to Harry and had caught him examining the quilt, smoothing it with his hand.

"You have discovered the quilt, I see," he said, stepping into the room and walking over to stand beside the bed.

Harry traced a spot near the middle of the bed with his finger. "Your name," he said, looking up at Severus. "The 'S' is a snake."

"A gift from my grandmother," said Severus, settling on the edge of the bed and running his hand over the cover. "For my thirteenth birthday. She did a phenomenal job…considering that she was a Muggle and all she had to go on were my rambling verbal descriptions and pictures I drew for her."

Harry looked up at Severus in surprise. "So she knew you were a wizard?"

Severus sighed. "Regrettably, no. My father would not allow it."

Harry opened his mouth to say something, apparently thought better of it, then closed his mouth and ran his hand over the quilt again. "You must be a great artist," he said.

Severus shook his head, smiling fondly. "She had a great imagination." He traced the outline of a mortar and pestle then reached out and mussed Harry's hair.

"Get to sleep, Harry. I'm making blueberry pancakes in the morning. They'll go well with your Transfiguration homework."

"Yeah, I can transfigure the blueberries into chocolate chips," replied Harry. Severus smiled and left the room and Harry sighed and closed his eyes.

Just as he closed his eyes now, two nights later. On Saturday, he hadn't wanted to think about the end of break and homework and classes. Tonight he didn't want to think about that memory or Dumbledore's withered hand or why he might have to know how to make a blood replenishing potion and to Apparate silently and precisely.

He didn't fall asleep until well after midnight.

15 April, 1997
Tuesday

Dear Severus:

It's Tuesday evening already and I'm sitting up in the common room trying to talk myself into doing my Defense Homework and it's too warm up here and too loud and too crowded. Ron and Hermione had a stupid fight over their Apparition test next week. Everyone who's seventeen already is going to Hogsmeade on Monday to be tested. Hermione wanted to study for the test tonight and Ron reminded her that the test was a practical only and that you can't Apparate inside the grounds of Hogwarts. He probably shouldn't have said it in that sing-songy voice that sounded suspiciously like Hermione quoting from "Hogwarts, a History." So Hermione glared at him and said that they could study the theory behind Apparition and Ron about blew a gasket and said that his theory was that theory was crap. Then Hermione got all huffy and ran up to her room. She yelled something like "I hope you splinch yourself you know where!" as she was running up the stairs. Ron actually turned white when she said that and practically grabbed himself "you know where" and looked like he was going to be sick. If I had been worrying about that particular sort of splinching during our Apparition lessons last week I'd never have even tried it once!

I haven't told Ron and Hermione yet that I can Apparate. First of all, Hermione would probably want me to discuss the theory of Apparition with her and I haven't even started my Defense essay yet (note all the blank space above this letter—oh, right, I'd better fill that in before I actually GIVE it to you). Secondly, Ron would be jealous. Lastly, Hermione would worry that I was either cheating, over-exerting my magic or putting myself in unnecessary danger. Or all three.

I did have to tell Ron about learning to drive, though. He was practically drooling when I told him about the car. Jealous, definitely, not that he has reason to be seeing that his dad had a flying car and all and he flew it to Hogwarts when he was 12! (Totally his idea, of course. He had to drag me by the ear to get me to go along.) Apparently, he's a bit of a fan of Muggle cars and asked me about a hundred questions about the MG. I couldn't (or wouldn't) answer most of them. I mean, we didn't even look under the bonnet (for all I know there are squirrels in there making the thing go). And did I really want to tell him how fast that thing goes considering it was his evil Defense professor who floored it and not his best friend?

That day…that day was fantastic, Severus. Driving that car was almost as fun as flying. All that power and speed… I think a motorcycle would feel even more like flying, though. Another thing to put on my "do after the war if by some remote chance I manage to survive" list.

By the way, all my dorm mates got into a heck of a lot of trouble when they got back to King's Cross last weekend. Ron had to go to bed without dinner. I know that might not sound like a serious punishment, or one fit for a seventeen-year-old, but you have to understand that Ron is a bottomless pit and him going without dinner one night would be like you going without taking points for a week. I'm surprised he didn't go crazy and eat his Chudley Cannons hat. Seamus had to write a letter of apology to Minerva and another one to Professor Dumbledore asking them to forgive his "deplorable, childlike and heathen behavior not at all befitting an Irishman." Neville had it the worst, though. His gran cried—she actually cried—and told him that his parents would be so disappointed in him, if they had their right minds and all. I think he could have used a drink to get through her ranting and raving. Spending the day hung over in your quarters drinking gallons of water after spending a night puking my guts out seems like a picnic compared to that.

Ron's gone up to bed. He kept looking up the stairs to the girls' dorms with this scowl on his face. It was really funny to see him seem so angry at Hermione and so obviously wanting to have her with him. I told him to go on up and talk to her but he reminded me that guys can't get into the girls' dorms. (He tried that once and the stairs turned into a slide and sent him shooting back down into the
common room.) Do you think it's true that opposites attract? It seems like Ron and Hermione have almost nothing in common. She's brilliant and he...well, he tries really hard. She can be pushy and overbearing. He's easy-going and laid back (except when he's with her, of course). She puts books and studying first. He puts eating first. She read "Hogwarts, a History" (multiple times). He read "Flying with the Cannons" (multiple times). She wants to liberate the house elves. He wants to nick food from them.

Wait! Why am I worrying about them when I have Ginny Weasley right across from me, sitting cross-legged on the floor working at our study table? She's chewing on the end of her quill and has this little ink smudge on the side of her mouth. It's driving me crazy. I want to reach over and rub it off her skin with my thumb. Her hair is falling out of her braid and this long strand keeps falling over her eyes. I'm not getting anything done at all—she's way too distracting. Every time she looks up she catches me staring at her but she just smiles and keeps on working. Do you think she might know what she's doing to me? If I had her, if she liked me, maybe the rest wouldn't be so bad.

Severus, it's getting to be too much. You told me once to come to you if that happened. I have knots in my stomach all the time now. There's so much left to do before the end of term but I don't want that end to come. I can't stand thinking of what's happening to the headmaster, and what will happen when he's gone.

The facts are right there in front of me. He's weaker every time I see him. His hand is still withered. He's desperate for that memory from Slughorn. He's running out of time and that means he's running out of time to spend with me to teach me what I need to know to kill Voldemort. He's got to know that I'm not strong enough to do this without him. I'm not smart enough to figure it out. I'm not brave enough.

I can't begin to imagine not having the walls of Hogwarts around me. They're just cold stones but they're so warm and alive and won't I be dead without them?

I haven't touched my essay. I know it's going to be crap. But I'd better get at it or I won't get any sleep tonight and I don't dare turn in a letter without an essay to go along with it.

Would be a better night if I had my hammock and my porch and the ocean and the breeze and sea dreams instead of nightmares to make this all make sense.

Regards,

Harry

/ 

It was nearly midnight when he finally finished his homework. He'd tried to concentrate on it, only looking up occasionally at Ginny with her head bent over the table, writing out her essay in her neat and tidy handwriting. He was about two-thirds done with it when Ginny finally finished her own homework. She packed up her supplies quietly, wiping her quill carefully on an old rag and stacking up her books and notes.

"Nearly done, Harry?" she asked softly as she stood up and stretched, first her neck, then one by one her shoulders. He looked up at her, homework forgotten, watching her raptly until she said "Harry?"

"Oh, yeah," he muttered, looking down at his essay. He sighed then looked back up at her. "Nearly done."

"See you tomorrow then," she said, smiling at him as she walked around the table. She held her
books against her chest with one arm as she passed him and reached out and tousled his hair with the
other.

Gently. Not playfully.

For the barest of moments, he leaned into her touch.

-Severus-

Severus received Harry's letter on Wednesday. He didn't mark the sixth-year essays until Thursday,
as he found himself once again in the Dark Lord's presence on Wednesday evening. He fared better
than did Lucius and Narcissa, though he was under nearly as much scrutiny as they were over the
progress of Draco in his appointed task of murdering the headmaster.

The Dark Lord didn't know that if Draco didn't hurry, there would be no headmaster to kill.

The Ministry was beginning to crack. How long could it hold on? Months at best.

Harry was in the infirmary when he returned, force-fed Dreamless Sleep by Poppy, watched over by
Albus, pacing in the otherwise empty room. Severus had climbed the stairs to the second floor
wearily, hoping to slip into the infirmary unnoticed for a pain potion stronger than he had in his
quarters.

"He would not shield," said Albus wearily as Severus froze upon seeing him. Severus glanced at the
bed where Harry lay sleeping, the hard and weary lines of his face softening marginally as he saw
the boy.

"It was a difficult meeting," said Severus obliquely.

"He said you were being tortured." Albus took two steps toward his Defense professor. "Severus,
you look…"

Now, on Thursday evening, Harry's letter open on his desk before him, he thought back on that
conversation, on Dumbledore's dismay at his condition, on Harry's refusal to shield himself when
Severus was in such obvious pain. Harry's own pain was so evident in the letter, interspersed with
the joys of a teenager pining after a girl and dreaming of fast cars and motorcycles. Motorcycles! Did
the boy have a death wish….?

They were each facing grim reality, each of them more tense as the days passed by, each of them
realizing how much more they had to do, how much more they had to lose now than a year ago.

In class yesterday Harry had purposely antagonized him, complied with directions only sullenly,
protested the unfairness of points awarded to Zabini for a beautifully executed nonverbal shield spell.
He had wanted to be called out on his behavior, held after class, assigned a detention.

Severus had resisted, and his lack of reaction had hurt Harry more than a verbal lashing.

The boy had practically fled the classroom at the end of the period, Weasley hurrying to catch up.
Granger, however, gathered her books slowly and gave Severus a calculating look before leaving
after her friends.

Granger. The Muggleborn. She wouldn't be at Hogwarts next year either. He hoped against all hope
she'd be with Harry.
18 April, 1997

Friday

Dear Harry:

You've had a difficult week, I know, but more difficult times are ahead and I urge you to do everything in your power to get a grip on your emotions. You will need a level head in the coming days and weeks and months. Times are becoming desperate but they are not hopeless. Despairing now will guarantee failure.

I cannot get far into this letter without addressing what happened Wednesday evening. I found you in bed in the infirmary when I returned, watched over by the Headmaster, sleeping only because Madam Pomfrey forcefully administered Dreamless Sleep to you. Your refusal to occlude or to transform did not help me, Harry. There was nothing Albus could have done had the Dark Lord decided to inflict upon me even more damage. It pains him enough that I have to suffer; that you suffer along with me is nearly unbearable to him. He was pacing beside your bed waiting for me, knowing that things may not have gone well at my meeting. I would rather, Harry, that he not spend his last days worrying about me.

I do not say this to chastise you for your behavior. After the time we spent together last week, the bond we share was stronger and my pain affected you deeply. I understand this, Harry. I only ask that you consider my wish more seriously in the future; that you not burden the Headmaster with my pain but instead use your Animagus form or your occlusion skills to bear it out.

It is interesting that you speak of your friends and their abilities and personalities in your letter. You also say that you are not strong enough, or smart enough or brave enough to fulfill the quest the Headmaster is setting for you.

Perhaps you are not, Harry. Not alone anyway.

But with your friends beside you? Can they not give you the strength you need? Are not three heads better than one when it comes to intelligence? Do you not find courage to face the unknown when you walk between familiar pillars? Between friends hard-won and long-kept?

I was thinking this week of the weeks we spent together this past summer and of all the discoveries I made during that time about Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived. I remember in particular the time you spent in St. Mungo's, and how we discovered how strong your defensive magic is. You will certainly have noticed that this past week we did not practice the unforgivables or even the barely-forgivable dark curses and hexes that can maim but not destroy. You will survive by your wits, Harry, and prevail by your love. You will do this, I hope, accompanied by friends who have grown with you these past six years, who are indeed such a part of you by this time that to contemplate going at it alone should feel like the loss of a limb. If you would feel empty and alone without them, consider that they may feel the same without you.

It is difficult, indeed, for me to see past my blind prejudices and recall the child you were six years ago, five years ago, even four years ago. Besides your strong resemblance to your father, I remember only that I was determined to detest you and that you were usually flanked by Weasley and Granger. Even when loyalties waivered, they were always there for you at the end when you unerringly found trouble so big that your professors, the headmaster, the Minister of Magic, the Daily Prophet, half of Gryffindor House and the Queen of England were ultimately involved.
You have built family at Hogwarts, Harry. Those that you call family would not have it any other way. Keep them close.

With any luck, both Granger and Weasley will pass their Apparition tests. I am sure Granger will come out of it unscathed and is not likely to Apparate in front of a speeding car or into the shark pool at the National Aquarium. If all that happens to Weasley is that he loses his bits—temporarily, I am sure—he should count himself fortunate. The Ministry is sending officials for the apparition tests so I will not have to assist in the reconnecting of splinched parts (it's bad enough working with a detached leg or arm...) or the location of anyone who apparates off of a cliff or into the middle of a professional football match. I would certainly not want to obliviate a stadium full of lunatic football fans (unless they were Manchester fans. Decidedly.)

At the beginning of our summer together, back at Shell Cottage, we began your lessons with meditation. That practice (which I believe you have neglected these past months) will help with the stress you are feeling now. Ten minutes is sufficient at bedtime. More time in your Animagus form would also be of benefit. I will ask Minerva to speak with Hagrid—perhaps he can provide some supervision in the Hogwarts portions of the Forbidden Forest. You will not be able to focus your worry when you are your doe, and the knots of tension you feel now will unravel, at least for the time you are transformed. Perhaps you should consider sleeping in your Animagus form.

And for goodness sakes, Harry. Ask that girl out! How long will you continue to torture yourself? Wouldn't those knots in your stomach ease a bit more if you had this one worry out of your system?

I am anxious to hear of your success in the Slughorn quest. I know the Headmaster is counting on you. I do not think this particularly fair, but it is what it is.

And just to save us both from continued teenage angst, I will not be rewarding your behavior in Defense Class with punishments that allow us to spend more time together. If you need time with me, please find a way to ask me and I will do what I can. I trust you know the caution we must take. That being said, your behavior this week did nothing to create suspicion that we are anything but mortal enemies. Keep up the good work.

Motorcycles? We will have to find someone to teach us both, I'm afraid. I, too, will add it to my list even though I feel my hair has already suffered quite enough in the convertible.

Since we customarily end with questions—I wonder, Harry...has anyone told you about the trace?

Regards,

Severus

/H

"Hagrid, Severus? Are you sure?" Minerva sat behind her desk, a stack of homework assignments neatly arranged in front of her. Like her colleague, she often spent Friday evenings catching up on her work in order to have a "real" day off over the weekend. He glanced down at the essay she was marking—a shocking absence of red ink and some rather encouraging remarks written in the margins.

"Well I certainly cannot go traipsing off with the boy in the forest," he retorted.

"He needs release that much?" asked Minerva, looking more worried than she had when Severus made his initial request, perhaps just now realizing what it implied.

Severus pursed his lips and looked past her out the window behind her desk. Minerva's office had
the unique advantage of looking out at the turret that housed the Headmaster's quarters. He was not surprised to see Albus standing at the large picture window that watched over the grounds and the gates with their sculpted winged hogs. Albus stood very still and as Severus watched he lifted his blackened, withered hand and waved to a figure below as it approached the castle stairs. Severus glanced down and saw Hagrid walking rather quickly toward the doors, carrying his crossbow over his arm.

"Severus?" Minerva was standing beside him now, following his gaze from Hagrid's figure up to the Headmaster. As they watched, Albus grasped his blackened wrist with his good one, flexed the withered fingers slowly then moved the hand to rest against his abdomen.

"How long, Severus?" Minerva's voice was subdued.

"I can only guess," he answered, his gaze on the Headmaster. "Two months, perhaps three."

Minerva's sharp intake of breath gave away her surprise.

"That little? And Harry—Harry suspects?"

Severus shook his head. "Harry knows, Minerva."

She sighed, looking out past him at the shadow of the forest in the April twilight.

"I will take him to the forest myself, Severus."

He nodded his thanks and they stood together for long minutes, voyeurs both, watching the fading white king survey his domain.

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Chapter 33

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April 21 – April 24

-Harry-

I did it I did it I did it I did it!

The memory clasped tightly in his hand, Harry ran across the castle lawn toward the front doors, his feet sure on the uneven ground even in the dark, the Felix Felicis potion not yet quite out of his system.

He'd done it. He'd taken the potion and had made exactly the right decisions at exactly the right time. He'd comforted a grieving Hagrid over the death of Aragog the Acromantula, and he'd used every trick of the trade on Slughorn, pleading for him to help Lily's son, Lily's son who had Lily's eyes, the son Lily had died for, the son who needed that memory.

With the potion beginning to wear off, Harry felt slightly dirty, the realization that he'd stooped to such depths to get Slughorn's memory settling like a hard weight in the pit of his stomach. He purposefully pushed the feeling aside, hurrying inside, hurrying up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower and then, after hearing from Nearly Headless Nick that the headmaster was back in the castle, reversing direction and running back down the stairs, down the halls, skidding to a stop in front of the stone gargoyle, then up the spiral staircase, knocking on the door.
The headmaster's voice bade him enter and Harry pushed open the door.

Dumbledore's eyes looked tired and his face drawn as Harry held up the glass bottle containing the memory. Harry was breathing heavily after his run from Hagrid's hut to Gryffindor Tower and back down to the headmaster's office, but the feeling of elation at succeeding in the quest Dumbledore had set for him made him feel like he was looping the Quidditch pitch on his Firebolt or running like the wind through the Forbidden Forest in his Animagus form.

"Sir—I've got it."

The look on Dumbledore's face as comprehension hit him washed away the niggling feeling of dirtiness and every last trace of guilt Harry had felt over the past weeks.

22 April 1997

Tuesday

Dear Severus:

I knew getting Slughorn's memory was really important to Professor Dumbledore. I knew he was disappointed in me for not getting it sooner. And after last night, now I know why.

It was too late last night to write when I finally got back from Professor Dumbledore's office after we viewed the memory. I can't imagine you don't know by now—but yeah…I got Slughorn's memory. Finally! Months ago when I told you I won a dose of Felix Felicis in Potions class, you mentioned the restrictions on its use and a few other choice thoughts about people creating their own luck. But last night I took it and it helped me. It really did, Severus—every move I made came to me so naturally and before I knew it I was in Hagrid's hut and both Hagrid and Slughorn were drunk and Slughorn had the Acromantula venom from Aragog and he was so happy, and so drunk, that when I asked him for the memory and talked about my mum…well, he caved and gave it to me.

I know this makes almost no sense to you. I guess I'm hoping that by the time you read this you'll have heard about Hagrid's "pet" spider dying and the funeral we had for him last night and Slughorn being all over harvesting the venom for potions.

I went straight to Dumbledore with the memory after that, and the look on his face when I told him I had it turned life right-side-up again. It was like he became more alive and energetic—and suddenly everything became so urgent. I felt like I finally did something worthwhile. I knew it was important to him but now I know why. And it makes me sick inside, knowing what Voldemort did to make sure he couldn't really die, and knowing that it's going to be virtually impossible to undo him.

This still doesn't make much sense—does it? I'm not making much sense.

The memory was about Tom Riddle asking Slughorn about Horcruxes when he was still a student here at Hogwarts. He really had a way of getting the information he wanted out of Slughorn. Seriously manipulated him. I can't help but think that I did the same thing—using the Felix Felicis potion to get him to turn over that memory. Still…I think it was the right thing to do. One of those "ends justifying the means" things.

But Severus—that memory. Dumbledore thinks that Riddle made SIX horcruxes! Riddle asked Slughorn about splitting his soul more than once…and specifically talked about seven being the most magical number. I thought that meant he'd made seven of them, but Dumbledore explained that he'd have wanted to keep his soul in seven pieces and that there'd always be one piece left inside of him,
no matter how torn and corrupted it was. But even six, Severus! That's where Dumbledore's been disappearing to you know—looking for them, or trying to figure out where they are and WHAT they are.

The diary was one. It was Tom Riddle's diary that Ginny had in second year, that I had for a short time—the one that possessed her and helped her open the Chamber of Secrets. The ring was another—the one that cursed him and that's slowly killing him. But there are four more out there, somewhere. He thinks he knows what they might be, at least most of them. And we have to find them and destroy them or Voldemort can never die. The Headmaster showed me a memory a few months ago of Tom visiting an old lady and her showing him a locket that belonged to Slytherin and a cup that belonged to Helga Hufflepuff. She was so proud of those family heirlooms but you could see in his eyes how much he wanted them for himself. That locket and that cup were later stolen from the lady and she was found dead—it was probably Riddle and he probably made them into Horcruxes. But where did he hide them? As for the other two—Dumbledore suspects they might be something that belonged to Ravenclaw or Gryffindor. But what? He would have had to have had the objects with him when he killed in order to make a Horcrux. Dumbledore also said Voldemort's snake could be a Horcrux—it's always with him and it doesn't behave like a normal snake would behave. I'm hoping that's one—it's the only think I've got half a chance of ever finding.

The diary spurted blood when I destroyed it. It nearly killed Ginny before that…it was draining the life out of her. The ring's curse is killing Dumbledore. What will the other Horcruxes do, Severus? I know what the snake can do—but a locket? Will it wrap itself around my neck and try to strangle me?

You see what I see, don't you? That Dumbledore is never going to have enough time to find all of them and destroy them. That's why he's telling me. That's why it was so important that I get that memory from Slughorn. Because it's me, isn't it? I have to go find them when he's gone. I get it…HE can't know anyone is looking for them. HE can't realize that they're gone. That's why we don't have the whole Order mobilized looking for relics from the Founders and bringing them to Dumbledore to destroy. Why not let him destroy all of them? What does he have to lose anyway? He's already got one foot in the grave.

I'm sorry. That wasn't fair.

I hate this.

I told Ron and Hermione today. They both say they're coming with me. They both say they'll give up school next year. For Hermione to say that…to even think that, Severus… I'm not sure I deserve friends like that. You can't just miss a whole year of school and expect to get on with things in life, can you?

Who knows about the Horcruxes?

Dumbledore. How much can he do? How much longer does he have? He says he's getting close to discovering one more of the four and he'll take me with him when the time comes to find it.

You. You won't be off hunting Horcruxes, will you? "Sorry I'm late, my lord, I was looking for an important item that belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw on the off-chance that it might contain a fragment of your immortal soul."

Me, Ron and Hermione. So it's up to us? Wizards who aren't even fully trained? Who haven't sat for their N.E.W.T.s? Who don't even know what we're looking for….

It seems hopeless. But it can't be hopeless. Would Dumbledore really set me on a hopeless quest?
Would he ask me to do something even he couldn't do... if he had the time to do it?

To find and destroy four things—four things small enough to carry around with you—somewhere in the world. Buried in a hole in the ground? Locked up in a vault at Gringott’s? Built into a castle wall? Lost at the bottom of the ocean? Balanced on the top of the Eiffel Tower?

And when these things are gone, then I have to destroy Voldemort.

But not before.

How can I possibly see what I have to do? Where I have to go?

I can't do this, Severus. But I can't not do it either.

I'm going to bed. My head is pounding and I know I'm going to dream again about lockets and cups and diaries.

Regards,

Harry

/ 

He dropped his quill on the table and dropped his head into his hands. He'd managed to get through classes today but the enormity of the task ahead of him overpowered him, filling up every spare thought, stretching every spare brain cell. He couldn't wrap his mind around it. Four more of the evil things, somewhere out there.

But the world is so big and I am so small. The niggling thought rose inside him like bile. Impossible.

No. Not Impossible.

He'd saved the Philosopher's Stone, hadn't he? With Ron and Hermione by his side.

He'd saved Ginny from the Chamber of Secrets. Ron had been with him then, and they'd only found the entrance with Hermione's help.

They'd used the Time Turner and had gone back and saved Buckbeak. And Sirius.

He'd made it through the TriWizard tournament. Once Ron came around... he'd been there for him all the way. And Hermione had practiced the summoning spell with him until his wand arm was about to fall off and he'd been pummeled with every manner of object in the room sailing toward him.

They'd gone to the Ministry with him, no matter the result there. He swallowed a lump in his throat at the thought. Hermione had even lied to Umbridge.

Hermione was brilliant. Ron, too, when you came right down to it. And both were too brave for their own good. Gryffindors.

And there was Severus, too. He'd been warning Harry, warning him that they may not be able to communicate—frequently, or at all. The lump in his throat rose again along with the feeling of bile in his gut. No, they'd figure this out. They figured out this year, hadn't they? The letters on DADA assignments? They'd gotten to spend a week together at Christmas, another week at half-term break. He'd flown across the grounds of the cottage in Godric's Hollow in his Animagus form and along the seaside roads near Shell Cottage next to Severus in the MG.
Where would he be next Christmas? Where would any of them be? Try as he might, he just couldn't see that far.

-Severus-

"If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

"Six of them Albus? Six?" Severus was pacing, brandishing Harry's rolled up assignment and letter like a sword. Behind his desk, the headmaster watched him pace.

"Yes. Six. I believe that is the number Tom intended."

Severus stopped. Swiveled to face Albus. Brandished the parchment now like a pointer.

"Intended?" He caught and held Albus' eyes. The headmaster stood, wrenching his gaze away from Severus with difficulty.

"You needn't use Legilimency, Severus. Ask your question."

"I believe I already did," answered Severus weakly, sinking into a chair in front of the desk. The parchment roll was crumbled beneath his clenching white fingers. "And I believe I already have my answer."

"I can only guess," said Albus quietly, facing the window. "Conjecture—but based on my best analysis of the facts. The link that Harry has to Volde…"

"Don't say his name!" hissed Severus. His eyes were blazing as he too stood up and began pacing again. "Harry has a link to me as well. It does not mean that he is…that I am….." He trailed off. "No! There is no proof."

"No, there's not," replied Albus, moving around the desk. "But it will not help the situation to deny the possibility. If it is true, if Tom inadvertently made a seventh…one that even he does not know exists…if it is Harry…"

"Then we must find a way," said Severus decisively. "Stop this incessant searching and concentrate on Harry.

"I assure you, Severus," answered Albus, such a pained look on his face that Severus almost—almost—felt sorry for him. "I can hardly think of anything else these days."

24 April 1997

Thursday

Dear Harry:

Well done, Harry. Very well done!

Saving the Felix Felicis potion all these months for a purpose such as this was both selfless and fortuitous.

Before I go on to the more serious aspects of my response, let me state that Professor Slughorn's
motivations in collecting the Acromantula venom are decidedly not selfless. That venom will bring a king's ransom in the potion's market. However, if the availability of this source of Galleons enabled you at least in part to procure that memory, then so be it.

Now it is time to turn serious. Harry, slow down. Take a deep breath.

First, recall that the Headmaster is still with us. To be crass, he is not yet dead. While this does not change the eventual effect of the curse, suffice it to say that his will is extremely strong. Let him do his job, Harry. While I admit that finding four unknown artifacts scattered about England, Scotland or the world at large is a daunting task, the headmaster has devoted all of his time and energy to this apparent impossibility and will continue to do so while he has breath within him. There is little you can do at this point other than worry yourself sick. When the time comes that this becomes your task—if you choose to make it so—you need only pick up where he has left off. You will be able to see what to do at that time, Harry.

For you will be standing on the shoulders of giants.

By this I mean that your starting point in the quest will be further ahead, higher up, because of the work that has been done already by others.

Others such as Albus Dumbledore, a giant among men, a giant among wizards.

This man, Harry, has been the bane of my existence while managing to be both a mentor and a friend. He has a clarity of vision that is unsurpassed, and if he grapples with demons, it is in taking on the weight of the wizarding world at the expense of his own peace and happiness and safety.

No one wants to hunt horcruxes. No one wants to even contemplate their existence. Until recently, all I knew of them was gleaned from books I should never have been reading in the first place. If and when you decide to undertake what now seems to be an impossible task, you will not be alone. You must utilize your best resources, Harry, and you know what I am referring to.

Albus would not send you on a hopeless quest. Nor would he ask you to do something he could not do himself. If he asks you to do it, he believes that you can be successful where he was not.

Which does not mean that you should do it simply because he asks, or because he believes it is prophesized.

If you do it, do it because you believe in him, and in what he stands for. Do it if you believe in and stand for the same things. Do it if you think it is the right thing to do.

In the end, you can only answer to one man: yourself.

I do not willingly burden a sixteen-year-old with adult issues with which I still grapple. But from your letter it if abundantly clear that you seek direction and you lack confidence. The enormity of the task at hand overwhelms you.

Remember who you are. You are the boy who saved the Philosopher's Stone. The child you destroyed the diary in the Chamber of Secrets. Who rode a hippogriff, faced a troll, fought a dragon, killed a basilisk. You have learned Occlumency, Legilimency, Apparition and the Animagus transformation. You have survived a killing curse, a duel with the Dark Lord, a run-in with your Uncle Vernon's automobile, a year with Deloris Umbridge and a summer with me.

Doubt me if you must. Doubt the Headmaster.

But never doubt yourself.
Regards,

Severus

He had to give the boy hope.

He waited while the ink dried on his letter. It was late now, and he had finished his marking an hour ago. The letter had taken longer to begin, but very little time to finish. Words flowed when he felt passionate, and there were few things he felt more passionate about than Albus Dumbledore.

One of those things, unbelievably, was Harry Potter.

The words came to him again, words that had been weaving together in the back of his mind while he wrote his reply to Harry. Words from that song, the song he and Albus called "our song" in that tongue-in-cheek way.

"This is my quest, to follow that star, no matter how hopeless, no matter how far
To fight for the right without question or pause
To be willing to march into Hell for a heavenly cause."

He had signed up for this willingly. He had made his tragic mistakes. He had come to Albus seeking absolution. He had accepted the Hell doled out to him. His heavenly cause might differ from Albus', but it got them to the same place in the end.

How could he give the boy hope considering the Hell the child faced? The boy who had done nothing save having the audacity of being born on July 31st to parents who had thrice defied the Dark Lord?

He shook his head, recalling something he had read long ago and remembered from a Muggle novel by Oscar Wilde. The phrase had resonated with him then and came back to him now.

"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

What would be there for Harry in the end? What was there in the stars to give him hope for a better future? A woman to love? A family of his own?

Or perhaps a life where a lightning bolt emblazoned on your forehead was simply a scar, a relic of a long-ago accident, and nothing more?

Eyes on the prize, Harry, thought Severus, thinking about hope and feeling hopeless. Eyes on the prize…

________________________________________

Chapter 34

________________________________________

April 27 – April 30

-Harry-
The weekend had passed by more quickly and comfortably than Harry had feared it would. In Defense on Friday, Harry had behaved himself, anxious to hear back from Severus, hardly able to keep his hand from inching toward his pack where he'd stored the homework Severus had returned at the beginning of class. Severus had managed a perfectly menacing scowl when he slapped the scroll into Harry's hand and Harry had yanked his hand away, stuffing the homework into his bag without looking at it.

He read the letter on Friday in his free period after lunch. He didn't even notice the "E" scrawled on the top of the homework assignment.

He reread it before bed, after he, Ron, Hermione and Ginny came in from spending time outside. It was late April and warmer than usual for northern Scotland this time of the year, warm enough that the courtyard had been filled with students until nearly curfew. They'd sat together on one of the stone walls, legs over the side and facing the lake, Harry nestled comfortably between Ginny and Hermione, bouncing his heels against the stones below him. The sun set as they talked quietly, and the stars came out in the clear spring sky. Ursa Major was visible already—the Big Dipper. He'd had to learn the stars in Astronomy—Dubhe, Merak, Phecda, Megrez, Alioth, Mizar, Alcor, and Alkaid. Ron tried to name them first and said "Alkatraz" instead of "Alkaid" and Hermione cuffed him on the side of the head. They didn't talk about horcruxes—he'd asked Ron and Hermione to keep it to themselves and he didn't plan on telling Ginny—but they did talk about the summer and Bill's upcoming wedding and the awful dress robes Ginny had had to try on over half term break. Hermione had her nose in a Muggle book called "Off the Beaten Path—England, Scotland and Wales" and was marking pages with little squares of parchment. He leaned over to see the page she was reading.

"What's the Forest of Dean?" he'd asked.

On Saturday afternoon, after Quidditch practice and lunch, he read Severus' letter again.

"You must utilize your best resources, Harry."

"You seek direction and you lack confidence."

"Doubt me if you must. Doubt the headmaster. Never doubt yourself."

"In the end, you can only answer to one man: yourself."

He turned the phrases over in his head, testing each of them, learning their shapes, feeling their weight.

If he was really going to do this, he would need as much foolish Gryffindor bravery as he could muster, along with a side helping of luck.

He just hoped the Headmaster was able to find one of the horcruxes and take Harry along with him when he did. Maybe then he'd understand what he was up against. Maybe then he'd have both confidence and hope.

On Sunday, after a night of fitful slumber and disturbing dreams, Harry escaped outside to be by himself, kicking rocks in the path as he walked slowly down to the lake, his shoulders hunched against the afternoon wind. He sat beside the lake for a long time, legs drawn up to his chest as he often sat when lost in thought. He unrolled and rerolled a piece of parchment, then idly picked up a pebble and tossed it out into the water. Liking the feeling, he felt around for another rock, picked it up, examined it briefly, then flung it out side-armed and watched the splash as it hit the surface. Another brief search, another smallish rock, another splash. And so it continued. The searches grew
more frantic, the rocks larger, the splashes further out and closer together until it seemed almost as if
the heavens were shedding tears of stones while the boy on the shore resolutely did not cry.

27 April, 1997

Sunday

Dear Severus:

I've tried really hard to have a normal weekend. I got all of my homework done by Saturday (I admit
it—that's not exactly normal), spent time with my friends and had Quidditch practice on Saturday. I
managed not to break any bones or fall off my broom during practice, but Ron had a run-in with one
of the goal posts and was talking like a girl for a while. He was better by last evening, so he and I
went for a run on the grounds this morning after breakfast. It was kind of weird—more or less by
unspoken agreement we decided to try to get into shape and work up our endurance a bit more. We
probably shouldn't have gone out so soon after breakfast, though. Ron ended up with a cramp in his
calf before we even made it to the castle gates and writhed around on the ground trying to work it out
(kind of like he did when he hit that goal post). But after he worked it out he got back up and we ran
the carriage path next to the walls and it hurt but it was a good hurt.

Hermione asked for my journal—the one we worked on over half term break. She wants to
memorize all the ingredients for the potions and start stocking up. She's also started a list of useful
books to have around at all times. I have a feeling that "Hogwarts, a History" might show up on that
list. I actually read it last summer—finally since she's been on me about it for years—while I was still
at the Dursleys. I can't believe I avoided it for as long as I did. It was really interesting, except for all
the boring parts. She's been reading travel books lately. She had one on Great Britain yesterday and
one on Australia today. I'm wondering about that. I hope she doesn't think there's a horcrux in
Australia. How does a wizard get to a country that far away anyway? Can you apparate across the
ocean?

This afternoon I managed to get out of the castle by myself while Ron and Hermione were in the
library (probably checking out "Hogwarts, a History"—again). I sat by the lake for a long time, re-
reading your letter and thinking. I might have tossed a few rocks in the lake too. Like maybe a
hundred. Fine. I didn't just toss them in. I started with just tossing, but the more I thought about
things, the harder I threw. And the rocks got bigger too—from those little flat ones lying close to the
lakeshore that we all like to skip to the fist sized ones that you have to pry out of the ground. It felt
good doing that too—digging the rocks out of the ground with my fingers and rocking them back
and forth to loosen them. I was so angry, Severus, and I knew I shouldn't be, but it kept getting
worse and worse until I was hurling the rocks at imaginary horcruxes and at Death Eaters and at
Voldemort and at Dumbledore. Damn it! I could have hurled rocks at him, Severus, and hurt him and
it's so wrong! I wanted to destroy something. It would have felt better to pry the rocks out of a wall
one by one—with my hands, not my wand—and hurl them out in the water so that in the end there'd
have been a pile of rubble where the wall used to be but the rocks themselves would be scattered
around the bottom of the lake, still being rocks, but not serving a real purpose anymore. Not a part of
anything important. Rocks don't care how you use them, you know. A rock doesn't care if it's part of
a castle wall or the cornerstone of St. Mungo's Hospital or that center piece on an archway that keeps
the whole thing from falling down on our head. A rock would be perfectly content to sit in a fish
aquarium its whole life, or on the moon, or be ground down into little pieces and used to pave a
village road, or be carved into one of those giant heads out on that Pacific island somewhere.

Sometimes being a rock doesn't sound bad at all. All those rocks I threw in the lake today—they'll
eventually end up somewhere else, won't they? Maybe in a million years they'll be on top of a
mountain or on a cliff wall in a desert but in the meantime they'll just sit at the bottom of the lake and
cool off and collect some moss and algae and enjoy some new scenery and not worry about…things.

If I picked up a rock and carved my initials on it and then gave it to Hedwig and told her to fly off
with it and drop it into a lake in Scotland, finding that rock again would still probably be easier than
finding the horcruxes.

I felt better somehow, though, when I came back in. My arm hurt, and I pulled off part of a fingernail
prying out a really big rock there at the end, but it didn't feel like hippogriffs were wrestling in my
stomach anymore and most of all I wasn't angry. I think I worked it out with the rocks. I held that last
one for a long time before I came in—just looking at it, feeling its weight in my hand. And then I
dropped it on the ground. I guess I didn't need to throw any more rocks.

I ran into Hagrid on the way back up to the castle and we talked about the owls. He figures they'll be
nesting soon and told me to go up to the owlery and see if they're up to anything. That made me
think too. All that's going on now and owls keep on pairing up and making nests and laying eggs
like they don't have a care in the world and couldn't care less who controls the Ministry of Magic or
who's headmaster and I bet they'd be just as likely to puke up a dead mouse on Voldemort's head as
anyone else's.

Guess they really don't.

A rock, an owl or Harry Potter? I guess it's saying something that given those choices, I'd still rather
be me.

Regards,

Harry

Harry smiled as he finished the letter. He'd managed to work a lot out over the weekend, even
though working it out had mainly involved throwing rocks into the lake. He examined the nail of his
right index finger. He hadn't bothered to go to Madam Pomfrey to have her heal it when he came
back in the castle several hours ago. Instead, he'd wrapped a piece of an old sock around it and it had
eventually stopped bleeding. He'd then holed up in his dorm room to write his letter, unwrapping it
so that he could hold the quill properly.

Now the finger was throbbing painfully and he could see that there was still dirt under the broken
bits of the nail, which was torn vertically nearly from top to bottom. Damn. This was going to be
painful, even without the dressing down he was about to get from Poppy for waiting so long to see
her.

An idea came to him. Hermione! She seemed keen on practicing those potions and spells he'd
learned with Severus over Easter break. He looked down at his letter, said the spell to conceal the
contents, then rolled it up and tucked it away with his Defense textbook. Moments later, he was
running down the stairs looking for Hermione. He never once thought it was a bad idea.

-Severus-

On Sunday afternoon, Severus stood next to Albus in the Headmaster's quarters. Side by side they
looked through one of the majestic windows lining the curved walls of the circular room above the
office, watching as the distant figure of Harry Potter threw stones into the lake.

"He is angry," commented Albus, the words almost an apology.

"He is working it out," responded Severus quietly.

"Should you go to him?" asked Albus a moment later.

Silence for a long moment, then "Perhaps. But you know I cannot."

From this distance they could not see the way Harry's hands gripped the stones or the expression on his face nor could they hear the sound of the gulping breaths he took as he sought to hold back the tears.

"Why handle his anger with rocks thrown in the lake?" asked Albus.

"Better in the lake than at us," answered Severus.

"At me, you mean," corrected Dumbledore. He looked over at his friend briefly, significantly. Severus held his gaze then nodded, not denying.

"At you, then."

The men regarded each other another long moment then, on unspoken cue, turned away and looked out the window, foreheads nearly touching the panes, gripping the well-worn stones of the castle wall—Severus with his right hand, Albus with his undamaged left—as they leaned in to watch the storm play out from the Headmaster's impenetrable island in the sky.

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I have my books  
And my poetry to protect me;  
I am shielded in my armor,  
Hiding in my room, safe within my womb.  
I touch no one and no one touches me.  
   I am a rock,  
   I am an island.  

And a rock feels no pain;  
And an island never cries.  

/  

30 April, 1997  

Wednesday  

Dear Harry:  

I saw you and Mr. Weasley running again yesterday morning. While I am certainly in favor of physical activity to increase stamina and improve one's health, I hope you have seen—or are starting to see—the mental benefits to such a regime. Running is a solitary activity, even when done in the company of others; yes, even when your best friend runs beside you. It is your body moving, your heart pumping, your feet pounding the ground. The aches are your aches, the sweat your sweat, the determination to keep moving when your body is telling you enough already solely your own. You will, if you persevere, achieve a clarity of mind while running in your human form similar to the
freedom you feel when cantering as Lightfoot. When you have a problem to solve, or when emotions are rolling about with those hippogriffs in your gut, threatening to rise and choke you, take to the road and run.

I am happy you found a way this weekend to deal with the emotions brought on by the memory you obtained from Professor Slughorn. I understand, better than you can know, the need to unburden oneself by physical means. Throwing rocks into the water, imagining them as missiles directed at real or emotional targets, is, in my opinion, a healthy way to deal with anger.

Have you ever taken time to contemplate the power of rocks? What is Hogwarts Castle if not a pile of rocks well organized? A construction of the mightiest of witches and wizards, a monument to time and magic, a sanctuary, a home. But in the end, and in the beginning, it is granite and limestone and slate.

Rocks construct, but by the same token, rocks destroy. They are destructive as intentional weapons used in ancient wars, thrown from a catapult, bound to the shaft of an arrow or the head of a club. And they are destructive by force of nature alone—spewed from volcanoes, released down mountainsides in form of avalanches.

Earthquake, volcano and avalanche aside, nothing represents the power of stone more than a pebble in one's shoe. Consider that, Harry, and test it if you must.

On to another matter. Miss Granger's reading aside, do not begin to think that you must search the world over for these relics. The Dark Lord was not exactly a world traveler, Harry, though he could indeed have hidden items in the continent and was thought to have been in Albania before he returned to corporeal form. The Headmaster is, of course, concentrating on items and places of significance to the Dark Lord, and all kidding aside, I do not believe he had dealings down under. I do not expect you to have to leave Great Britain if you go with the Headmaster on a quest before the end of the year—and allow me to say that I am not altogether on board with such a venture, as much as I believe it necessary. Perhaps Miss Granger is simply interested in our old penal colony or plans to go on holiday with her family this summer.

In answer to your question regarding intercontinental travel for wizards, we can, of course, use Muggle methods of transportation, though Port-keys are the preferred magical means as the travel can be accommodated in a single trip. As the magic involved in Port-keys opens and then closes a portal in real world space, Port-keying across the room is hardly less time-consuming than Port-keying across the world. This magic, however, is both terribly complex and dangerous in the creation and as such international Port-keys are heavily controlled by relevant Ministry departments. While Apparition involves a similar portal-based magic, only the most Accomplished and brave witches and wizards will attempt international apparition. This, too, is heavily regulated due to the statutes of secrecy and the very real danger that you might Apparate into the middle of an ocean or into the lion pit at a Muggle zoo.

If, in the course of your life, you have need of visiting France, may I recommend the Eurotunnel?

And one more thing, young man. How is that finger of yours doing? I had a report from Minerva that you were pulled into the infirmary by your ear by one Miss Hermione Granger. Apparently, you attempted to coerce her into practicing her fledgling healing skills on you so as not to have to deal with the wrath of Madam Pomfrey. Don't try denying this, Harry. I have a report in front of me and on Sunday evening was Floo-called and asked to provide a keratin re-grower as Poppy had to remove a student's fingernail. Not knowing who the student in question was, I assumed it was a rash Gryffindor and suggested that she remove all of the nails before regrowing the one so that all ten would match and be of equal length.
Your Defense work lately has been quite well done and thought out, Harry. Perhaps you would be willing to duel with me in class next week?

Regards,

Severus

Severus completed his letter, wiped his quill, capped the ink and checked the clock. Six p.m. Another glance at another clock. Harry was in the Great Hall. Dinner time. Severus hurriedly washed his hands and made his way up the stairs, trailing a group of third-year Slytherins chattering about the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend and reminding him that he had reluctantly agreed to serve as one of the faculty chaperones on Saturday.

Dinner was the standard fare but he ate very little. He spent too much time watching Draco Malfoy to concentrate much on eating. Draco was unusually quiet at the table, toying with his food and hardly looking up as the Slytherins around him erupted in laughter when a whole bench full of Ravenclaw second-years toppled backwards when they all scrambled to avoid a spilled pitcher of pumpkin juice.

He studied Harry as well. Seated near the head table today with his friends around him, Harry seemed to have recovered somewhat from his weekend. His finger was still bandaged but he seemed to be having a pleasant conversation with Miss Weasley who was sitting directly across the table from him. His body language was so obvious that Severus wondered if there was a subtle bone in this boy's body. Not with a sixteen-year old's hormones, he decided. He smirked and turned back to his food, idly spearing a potato with his fork.

Next to him, Minerva gave a little "oh" of surprise as pudding popped onto the table in the form of thick slices of layer cake awash in buttercream icing. More "ohs" and even a few "ahs" sounded from the faculty around him; this offering was a truly adult treat, accustomed as they were to treacle tart and trifle. It was an unusual dessert, indeed, to be served at Hogwarts and this one, in particular, seemed to have been made with particular attention to detail. It was a delicacy Severus enjoyed enormously, though he was accustomed to having it only at weddings, and he tried to avoid those whenever possible. He'd found that he was occasionally invited to the nuptial celebrations of colleagues and former students, and that their goal seemed to focus more on getting him on the dance floor than to get on with getting married.

"New bakery elves in the kitchen, Albus?" The tone of Horace Slughorn's voice approached adulation as he forked into the cake.

Albus smiled and looked down appreciatively at his own serving. He stuck a finger in between two of the five layers and popped a healthy amount of buttercream icing into his mouth. "No indeed, Horace. I requested this recipe of them myself. I felt we needed a pick-me-up."

"The students too, Albus?" asked Severus as he looked up and noticed that slices of the cake had appeared on all four house tables.

"The students in particular," answered the Headmaster, nodding toward the end of the Gryffindor table.

Severus looked over at the Gryffindors. Everyone seemed to have gotten down to the business of eating the cake. The Weasley boy, sitting on Harry's left, was already covered in icing. There was a dollop on his nose and smudges on his cheeks and chin and a bit in his hair above his ear. Beside
him, Harry was doing a much better job of eating his cake rather than wearing it, though as Severus watched, he abandoned his fork, dipped the unbandaged index finger of his left hand into the thick icing on top and moved it toward his mouth.

A hand came out from across the table and caught his wrist.

Severus watched as Harry's arm froze in place and his eyes moved to look across the table at Ginny Weasley. He could only see the girl's back, but he could see Harry's face. Harry's eyes softened to match his smile and he let his hand be pulled over to the girl. His finger came back a moment later, clean. Score one for Ginny Weasley, thought Severus. Ron Weasley's mouth had dropped open into a wide O of shock, Dean Thomas' face looked murderous and Harry, Harry looked like he'd been carrying a stone around in his shoe for a year and had just taken it out. This, Severus decided, as he lifted his fork to his mouth, this was the picture of hope.

I am a Rock

By Paul Simon 1965

A winter's day
In a deep and dark December;
I am alone,
Gazing from my window to the streets below
On a freshly fallen silent shroud of snow.
I am a rock,
I am an island.

I've built walls,
A fortress deep and mighty,
That none may penetrate.
I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain.
It's laughter and it's loving I disdain.
I am a rock,
I am an island.

Don't talk of love,
But I've heard the words before;
It's sleeping in my memory.
I won't disturb the slumber of feelings that have died.
If I never loved I never would have cried.
I am a rock,
I am an island.

I have my books
And my poetry to protect me;
I am shielded in my armor,
Hiding in my room, safe within my womb.
I touch no one and no one touches me.
I am a rock,
I am an island.

And a rock feels no pain;
And an island never cries.
May 1 – May 7

"You're killing me, Harry!" panted Ron as they slowed to a walk. Both were bent slightly at the waist, hands on their hips, breathing hard.

Harry managed a grin. "Not me doing it," he said between breaths. "Thought you volunteered…"

Ron managed a snort. The two had come out for a pre-breakfast run, making it outside before the sun had crested the horizon. They'd run the carriage road again, down to the gates then around the Quidditch pitch several times. Now, as they walked back to the castle, Ron groaned.

"I'm not even hungry now. The thought of breakfast makes me sick."

Harry was several steps ahead of Ron. He stopped, turned around and stared at his friend. "You look like Ron Weasley," he said slowly.

"Git," muttered Ron, shaking his head and grinning weakly. His eyes narrowed and he appeared to be looking over Harry's shoulder. "What's he doing here?" he asked.

Harry turned around quickly. Albus Dumbledore himself was walking slowly down the path toward them. He was some distance away still, and didn't appear to be hurrying at all. Harry shrugged.

"Maybe he's going to Hogsmeade," said Ron. He grinned. "A bit early to have a drink at the Hog's Head…"

"He might just be visiting Hagrid," suggested Harry as they continued to walk up the path toward the castle. But he suspected that the headmaster was off on one of his trips, and now that he knew what those trips were about his stomach twitched uncomfortably.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley," said the headmaster in greeting as they approached him. "Out for a bit of exercise this morning?" He stopped walking as if inviting further conversation.

"Yeah," answered Ron, looking sideways at Harry. Harry seemed to be studying Dumbledore's robes and didn't volunteer anything so Ron continued awkwardly. "We've decided to get in better shape…" he trailed off, once again looking at Harry.

"Ahh," said Dumbledore. He nodded and spoke directly to Ron when he answered. "Well, I certainly agree that taking care of the body is as important as nurturing the mind." He indicated the castle behind him with a tilt of his head in its direction. "I sincerely hope that Hogwarts has done her duty these past six years, Mr. Weasley, and given you a more-than-adequate foundation?" He phrased the statement as a question. Harry's eyes moved from Ron to Dumbledore and back to Ron.

"And given you friends as well," added the Headmaster, smiling at Ron and nodding his head. Harry noticed that Ron's head began to nod along with Dumbledore's.

"Yes sir, friends too," Ron agreed. He looked over at Harry a moment and squared his shoulders, standing straighter. "I'd do anything for my friends, sir. Anything at all."

Dumbledore regarded Ron thoughtfully a long moment, then smiled enigmatically.

"And they anything for you," he added quietly, catching and holding each of their gazes for a moment. "Stick together, boys. Whether you're running toward something or away from it, stick together." He nodded amicably and continued down the path toward the gate, leaving Harry and Ron staring after him. Harry had not uttered a word during the entire conversation. When he disappeared down the hill, Ron looked at Harry.

"What does he mean?" he asked, his voice surprisingly even. "What was he trying to tell us?"

"I think he's saying that Hogwarts has already given us all she can, Ron," answered Harry, looking up at the castle looming before them. Ron considered this a long moment, understanding the seriousness of it, then lightened the mood with a Weasley grin.

"Nah, I'm feeling better now. I think she can give us one more breakfast at least. Race you to the Great Hall."

He turned and began to jog up the hill, Harry on his heels.

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1 May, 1997

Thursday

Dear Severus:

Ron and I ran again this morning. I didn't get your letter until after that, of course, after you tossed it on my desk, said "Acceptable" in that sarcastic tone you use with me when there are others around and then accused Hermione of doing my work for me. She was really upset, and I don't like my friends to be upset on my account. I think she was more angry that you would consider her work only "acceptable," than that you accused her of cheating. Anyway, I never really thought about running as a way to help out your mind as well as your body, but I can see your point. It seems like it's a great way to clear your mind, anyway, since there's no way you can be preoccupied with up-to-no-good Slytherins when your lungs are burning and your shins feel like they're about to splinter.

We ran into Professor Dumbledore when we were walking back up the hill after our run. At first I thought he was going down to see Hagrid but then it occurred to me that he's leaving the castle again. Now that I know what he's up to, it's worse than when I didn't. It put me on edge even more. He was standing on the path not too far away from the castle, waiting for us. It was kind of an odd meeting, and I know it bothered Ron a bit. He's different with Dumbledore than I am, maybe more respectful. I don't really mean that, because I'm not disrespectful or anything, but I guess I know the headmaster better than Ron does. I mean, I've spent more time with him and he's trusted more information to me (but not enough). So anyway, Dumbledore was just standing there on the side of the footpath, waiting for us. He greeted us both but Ron was the first one that answered him, so he ended up asking Ron some questions—like had Hogwarts given him a good foundation? And had it
given him friends? Then he told us to stick together no matter if we were running away from something or toward something.

And that's what I've been thinking about on and off all day. He was talking to Ron, Severus, but he was speaking to me. He might as well have said "Six years is all you get, Harry. You've made good friends here and they'll do anything for you. I'm going to ask you to do something nearly impossible, but you've got your friends to help you out."

But I wonder about that last part. He told us to stick together if we're running away from something or toward it. I know he means something by it, because it's Dumbledore, and that's how he is. I can think of lots of ways to interpret it, though.

This is giving me a headache again.

Oh yeah, I want to duel with you in class all right. Thanks for the warning, though. I'll go ahead and write my last will and testament now. I can see the headline of the Prophet after that. "Professor Kills Student in Classroom Duel; Slytherins Rejoice" or "The Boy Who Lived Dead at Sixteen; Snape Held Blameless."

Listen, it's not that I'm not honored. I know you must think I'm good enough to try, but it wouldn't do for you to be bested by me, would it? All those Slytherins reporting back to Mommy and Daddy that Professor Snape let Potter pulverize him or worse yet, didn't kill the annoying brat while he had the chance?

How about letting me duel Malfoy instead?

I've been thinking more about what you said about Port-keys and Apparition. What's the furthest you've ever Apparated? What do you think would be a safe distance for me? What's the limiting factor—is it the total distance or is it not having a good enough idea of where you're going and where—exactly—you'll end up? How can Port-keys be regulated by the Ministry if anyone can make one with a spell? Can they trace who makes them and where those people go?

And speaking of trace—you asked in a letter a little while ago if I'd ever heard of the trace. I hadn't, but Ron and practically everyone else in the dorm had. No, strike that. EVERYONE else in the dorm had. I'm not exactly sure how this happens all the time—everyone knows all this "common knowledge" stuff and they know I grew up with Muggles but no one bothers to explain it. Shouldn't there be some sort of orientation class when you get to Hogwarts? You know—it can have topics like "What happens when you come of age?" and "Magical Means of Transportation (or "What the hell was that purple bus?)" and "Do traditional wizards wear anything under their robes?"

So…the trace. It's a sort of a charm that lets the Ministry know if an under-aged wizard performs magic. Or if magic is performed around an under-aged wizard (Opinions in Gryffindor House differed on this.) And it breaks—or lifts—automatically when a witch or wizard turns seventeen.

So the question I have is—what am I going to do this summer until I'm seventeen?

Regards,

Harry

Severus couldn't be serious about dueling in class, could he?

Harry looked down at his hands. He'd been writing rather furiously—sometimes he sat and thought
about the letter he was writing quite a bit, and went at it slowly, but other times, like today, the
thoughts turned into words quickly and his hand sailed across the parchment. He wished it would do
that when it came to writing essays. In any case, his hands were pretty filthy. He did a quick
Scourgify to get rid of the worst of it and hoped that the rest would fade away when he washed his
hair in the morning and got his hands full of the sudsy shampoo.

He put his hand up to his hair and pushed the fringe out of his eyes again. He was going to have to
make a decision soon—either grow it out all the way so he could band it into a tail or get it cut again
so it stopped hanging down into his eyes. He was relatively sure that Mrs. Weasley would insist that
he cut it anyway before Bill's wedding this summer. It didn't really matter to him so he may as well
make her happy. Ginny cut Ron's hair during the school year—maybe she'd do his too.

"How about giving me a haircut, Ginny?" he said as he stacked up his books and stashed his
supplies in his bag. Ginny and Hermione were sitting across from him; Hermione still had books and
parchment spread out but Ginny had packed up her things.

The two girls looked at each other. Hermione giggled. Giggled. Hermione giggled. Harry was
instantly suspicious. Hermione Granger did not giggle.

"What? What's funny?" he asked.

"We've just been talking about your hair is all," answered Hermione. "About how shaggy it's getting.
We like it."

There would have been a time, Harry knew, when Ginny would have blushed at that comment, and
perhaps run upstairs to her dorm room, too embarrassed to continue talking. That Ginny had grown
up, though, and had already been through a couple of boyfriends.

"But I'll trim it, if you'd like," offered Ginny. "Just let me run up and get…"

"No, don't," said Harry. He combed a hand through his hair then shook his head. "I guess I like it
just fine how it is."

-Severus-

As a child, Severus had explained everything Lily Potter needed to know about the Wizarding
World. Lily had gone on to marry James Potter, a pureblood from an old family. They'd produced a
son. Who would ever have considered that that son would reach the age of sixteen and not know
what the trace was?

The boy had a point about an orientation class, though. It was a rarity to get a Muggle-born student
in Slytherin House, and when it did happen Severus made damn sure that the student was given a
crash course in Wizarding life. The problem with Harry, he thought, was that he was such an icon of
the magical world. It simply had not occurred to anyone that the boy was no better off than a Muggle
when it came to how the Wizarding World worked. For a moment, a very brief moment, Severus
considered a curriculum change to incorporate orientation into the Hogwarts start-of-year agenda.

Stupid, he thought. As if they'll be a need once Albus is gone…

4 May, 1997
Sunday

Dear Harry:

The Headmaster rarely says anything that doesn't carry with it deeper meaning. By now you are surely aware of that so your musings on the conversation you had with him earlier this week are certainly appropriate. He has much on his mind of late and worry for you and your future contributes to this rather heavy load. While I was not personally privy to this conversation and can only guess his meaning, I will say that it is not insignificant that he spoke to Mr. Weasley directly instead of to you.

To have a chance at interpreting his message, I suggest that you write down what you remember him saying, as you did in your letter to me. Next, for example, write down different things you might run toward and things you might run from. I, for example, might run from Professor Trelawney, a ravaging bear, a potion about to explode (a student's potion, of course—my own would never explode unless it was meant to). I might run toward a friend in danger or in need, or a lake were I on fire. Literally or figuratively. I do believe, knowing Albus as well as I do, that he meant his words in a figurative sense. Perhaps running toward something signifies a hunt or a quest; running away may signify avoiding danger. All this being said, the crux of his statement may instead lie in the word "together." Think about that if you can get your eyes and your mind off Miss Weasley for a few moments (yes, the same young lady who apparently has a sweet tooth, especially when it comes to buttercream frosting).

As much as I'd love to let you and Mr. Malfoy at each other for ten minutes to work off some of that aggression, dueling each other in my class is not an option. You will continue to exercise constraint around him, Harry and leave his extracurricular activities for me and his other professors to address. Perhaps I was a bit rash to suggest that we formally duel, for just the reasons you cite. However, I still believe that an appropriate match can be orchestrated. I will restrict myself to spells taught through the sixth year curriculum, and you, of course, will use nonverbal shields to defend. Not a true duel, of course, but an exercise in which you can demonstrate restraint and defense and leave the classroom gloating while I glower.

While I will answer your questions on Apparition and on magical transportation in general, I remain suspicious of your motivations in asking the questions. While you have demonstrated to me your understanding and grasp of the techniques behind Apparition, you do not yet have a license to Apparate nor an appreciation of your limitations. One does not move directly from short-distance precision Apparition to international travel.

I have, on more than one occasion, Apparated from London to France to procure certain ingredients that are more difficult to come by in the United Kingdom. From France I have traveled by that means to Belgium, and once into Russia. Recall that the further you travel, the less chance of successful "reattachment" should splinching occur. I once lost the nail from my big toe on an otherwise successful Apparition from London to Hogsmeade. I didn't go back for it—it was the one with the fungus and I hardly missed it.

Port-keys, like Apparition, can be traced because they essentially create "holes" in real space, as I have already explained. Physics is, of course, involved; not the physics that Muggles understand but the physics of magic. Few witches and wizards truly understand magical physics, or even attempt to study it, but Spellcrafters must at least grasp the concept, as well as Potions Masters. There is an entire Ministry department devoted to tracking and regulating magical transportation. You will fly under the radar if you Apparate instead of using Port-keys.

Your more difficult and relevant question is your last.

Considering the trace, what will you do this summer before you turn seventeen?
You will wait, Harry. You must wait.

Regards,

Severus

A knock sounded on his office door. He glanced at the clock. Already nine p.m. A quick glance at Harry’s clock assured him that the boy was where he should be. Severus opened his office door to greet Isabelle Stone, one of the fifth year Slytherin prefects.

"I'm very sorry to bother you, sir…” she began.

"I was about to make my rounds anyway," said Severus. "Is there a problem?"

"Only that Malfoy's been at it again," she said. "The first and second years are in a bit of a state. Several are asking to owl their parents. I thought that you…” Her voice dropped off and she looked at him hopefully.

"Is Draco still in the common room?" he asked as grabbed his wand off the desk.

"No. He stormed back out after he knocked over the kids' study table again," she answered. "Sir, what's going on with him? Is it trouble at home? No one from his year is talking…”

Severus closed the door to his office behind them.

"Yes. Something like that," he answered, heading down the corridor toward the common room. Something like the Dark Lord holding court in the formal dining hall.

"Aren't you going after Malfoy?" asked the girl, running to keep up with her head of house's brisk pace.

"I'll see to the younger ones first," he answered. And talk to Malfoy's friends he added mentally. This was not the first time Draco had let his frustration get out of hand. Refusing to confide in Severus, perhaps not even confiding in the beefy bodyguard accomplices he kept with him almost around the clock, he disappeared for hours at a time and returned frustrated or depressed. With the right combination of factors—noisy common room, high frustration, someone looking directly at him instead of keeping their gaze to the floor—Draco had, on several occasions since Christmas break, gone on a mini rampage. He upended tables, scattered parchment and books, herded younger students to their dorm rooms for the night as early as seven o'clock and, on one memorable occasion a month ago, cast a Silencio at the room in general so strong it had taken Severus himself several minutes to undo it.

He never did go find Draco that evening. After thirty minutes spent sitting on the floor helping his first and second years locate scattered pieces of homework assignments and repair them and another twenty grilling the sixth-year girls in his office, he called it a night. It was far too late in the game to worry about Draco Malfoy being out after curfew.

-Harry-

It wasn't fair! Harry pounded his pillow—his pillow in the hospital wing—and winced. He'd managed to break several bones in his hand when he'd punched Malfoy. The git. The insufferable
He deserved everything he'd gotten, his broken nose and fat lip and all. And who'd gotten punished? Malfoy? For trying to use the Cruciatuse on Harry? No. Because he hadn't finished the spell, had he? So there was no proof, was there? Why hadn't Severus believed him?

The evening had started out so well. He'd been on his way down to dinner and yes, he had checked the map to see where Malfoy was and had been surprised to actually find him in a bathroom…with Moaning Myrtle! Who could resist that one? But when Harry had shown up, Draco had been crying! Actually crying! And he'd been angry that Harry had seen him, and embarrassed, and had tried to curse him and it had gotten crazy in there. Neither one of them seemed to be able to hit the other and things were exploding and there was water everywhere and Moaning Myrtle was screaming…

But when Malfoy had started to incant the Cruciatuse, Harry didn't have anything, anything in his arsenal that bad, that powerful. He could have just tried to disarm him. In a way, that's what he had ended up doing. Running at him, surprising Dracso so much midcurse that he hadn't finished the spell. Raising his arm, punching him in the face. Wands forgotten, the two had rolled around on the floor pummeling each other, gasping with the pain and choking on the water which was shooting out of a blasted toilet, spilling everywhere.

Until Severus had appeared. Petrified them both. Left Harry lying in the water, face up by chance alone. Cancelled the curse on Dracso and stood him up. Gotten his side of the story while Harry lay there, cold, water in his ears, immobile.

Minerva had appeared before Severus was finished with Dracso. At Severus' nod, she cancelled the Petrifuscus on Harry, cold fury in her eyes. Practically yanked him to his feet. He grabbed a sink to steady himself.

"Owww!" He grabbed his wrist, tried to make a fist. Bit his lip. He couldn't move his fingers.

Minerva ignored his obvious pain and pulled him out into the corridor. In halting gasps, he told her what had happened. His side of the story. As he talked she reached into her pocket and handed him a handkerchief to help staunch the blood that had begun pouring from his nose when he stood up. His eye felt like crap. His glasses were gone and his right eye was starting to close up on him.

Minerva stared down at him, her face unreadable, as Severus led Dracso away to the infirmary. "You will stay here and wait for me," he said to Harry in a far-too-cold and quiet voice as they passed.

"Severus, he needs medical attention," said Minerva, her voice rather steely. "His hand appears to be broken…"

Severus' eyes quickly moved to Harry's hand but if he saw anything there he didn't like he didn't acknowledge it. "Then keep him here for ten minutes," said Severus. "Let me get Mr. Malfoy settled in one of the quarantine rooms first." He sneered, literally sneered, as they passed. Malfoy looked at the floor. Harry watched them until they disappeared around a corner. His hand was throbbing.

"He started it," he hissed. "I came in and found him crying. He said that he's going to kill him if he doesn't do it. He's up to something…"

"Enough," said Minerva. And she meant it. She looked at Harry and shook her head, the anger dissipating from her eyes. She shook her head. "Severus warned you about this, Harry. More than once. And you went looking for Mr. Malfoy, didn't you?"

Harry opened his mouth to deny it but closed his mouth almost as soon as he opened it. She was right. It didn't matter who had started it. He'd gone in there deliberately, knowing Malfoy was in there. A sick feeling washed over him. He'd screwed up badly this time and Severus…Severus didn't
look like he had a gram of patience left to deal with it.

"I cannot believe I am doing this, Harry. But you are grounded, literally. You are banned from Quidditch. And you will serve detention on Saturday as well...during the match. I will leave it to Severus to issue his own punishment as well and decide on that detention."

From the look on Harry's face, she may as well have said "We are sending you to Azkaban."

7 May, 1997

Wednesday

Dear Severus:

I know this letter won't really matter but for what it's worth, I'm sorry. Going in there looking for Malfoy was wrong. It was wrong because you told me to leave him be—to leave it be—and I didn't. He started the fight—I already told you that even though I don't think you believe me. And he was going to use an Unforgiveable on me—you might not believe that either. And that makes me so damn mad I can't even express it really. But I didn't have to go in there. If I had just gone on past that bathroom and into the Great Hall for dinner I'd be playing Quidditch on Saturday and I wouldn't have this broken hand and swollen face and detention with Filch and study sessions alone with Minerva. My Quidditch team wouldn't be looking at me like they are, like I did this all on purpose just to screw up our chances at winning the Cup.

I hate Malfoy. I can't deny that. But more than that I hate what I did because of how it made you look at me. I could see it in your eyes, Severus. You were furious with me. It wasn't all pretend. It wasn't only because you had to favor Malfoy because you're his head of house and all. You were worried about HIM. I could tell. I didn't see you in your eyes, Severus. I only saw Professor Snape.

I understand your punishment. Everyone else thinks it's cruel, even Minerva does. I can tell that Madam Pomfrey is terribly upset too. She's itching to use potions on me, and her wand. I don't know how she talked you into giving me that tiny dose of Skele-gro. But I get it. I got these injuries fighting like a Muggle and they're going to heal without magic too.

My eye is still pretty much closed shut and I'm writing with my left hand. It's taking me forever. Madam Pomfrey brought me a mirror this morning and I look like crap. She told me that I'll be in the hospital wing until at least Friday. She said my hand will take a couple weeks to heal with the quarter-dose of Skele-gro. And Minerva came in to tell me that you'd be coming in tonight after curfew to talk to me. I asked her if she'd take this letter to you and she said she would. She even smiled—almost. It was one of her serious smiles, the kind that says "You've really screwed up but I'm still rather fond of you."

I'm worried, though, that I won't get one of those smiles from you. I'll make it up to you, I promise, Severus. I don't know how but I will. Just give me another chance to show you that I can be the kind of person you want me to be.

Regards,

Harry

It would have to do. His hand was so cramped he couldn't write another word, and the words he had
managed with his left hand were oddly tilted and difficult to read, even though he'd tried to use a simple block script.

Harry rolled up the scroll one-handed and collapsed back onto the hospital cot. His hand throbbed painfully in its stiff wrapping which was more like a Muggle cast than a protective wrap, really. His nose and cheek were grotesquely swollen. He had scratch marks from Malfoy's fingernails all over his shoulders and neck. He felt about as good as he looked.

Those hippogriffs were fighting in his gut again. At this moment, on this day, he wasn't thinking about horcruxes and the hopeless quest before him. He wasn't concerned that Albus Dumbledore's life was coming to an end; he hadn't thought of the headmaster at all since he'd sat on this bed yesterday evening and listened to Severus dole out his punishment to a flabbergasted Madam Promfrey. He wasn't worried about the Quidditch game, or about how he'd let everyone in Gryffindor House down. No, today Harry Potter felt like a guilty son who'd disappointed his father and he had absolutely no idea what to do with that feeling.

Chapter 36

May 7

-Severus-

He should be angry still. He was angry still. The boy would not listen to him. As far as they'd come together these past months...as much as they had shared...as much as Severus had opened himself to the boys' needs...as much as the boy had let him in...Harry still did not trust him. Not completely, anyway. Severus could blame it on Harry. That was the easy way out, really. The boy was impetuous like his father. The boy did not think. The boy went looking for trouble. Or he could blame the generally rotten circumstances of their mutual purposes or godforsaken destinies.

Or, of course, he could blame himself.

For distancing himself from Harry this year, at least publicly. For not doing more to gain his trust. For not figuring out what Draco was up to himself. For not telling Harry what Draco was up against.

For not being there.

But this was madness! He could not...no, he would not, feel sorry for the boy. He had, ultimately, brought this on himself. He had gone in that bathroom for one reason only...because he knew Draco was in there, and he had to know what Draco was doing.

He had been waiting for Harry in the infirmary when Minerva brought him in. He'd gotten Draco settled in a private room, one of the small cubicles used when students had dragon pox or another highly communicable illness. He suspected that Harry was actually more severely injured than was Draco, but he wanted Draco fully healed and back in the Slytherin dorms as soon as possible. Poppy had him sorted out quickly enough, broken nose set and healed, assorted bruises and cuts treated. She didn't ask any questions. She'd glanced quickly at Severus when she came in. He stayed in the room the entire time, leaning against the wall next to the door, hands folded across his chest. When Poppy finished, Draco remained sitting on the edge of the bed, silent and still, looking at the floor. Poppy glanced over at Severus.
"He should stay here for an hour, Severus," she said quietly.

Severus nodded. "Thank-you. I will wait and escort Mr. Malfoy back to his room."

Poppy hesitated, looking from Draco back to Severus. "I assume I have another patient to see?"

Severus straightened. "Mr. Potter," he said brusquely, "will be along in a moment. He is being escorted by his Head of House. I will be out to meet them in a moment. Please do not begin to treat him until I am there."

Poppy stared at Severus a long moment then nodded. He closed the door behind her as she left.

"Now, Mr. Malfoy, let's discuss that Cruciatus curse you were about to cast…"

When Severus slipped into the hospital wing Wednesday night after curfew, Harry was the only patient in the ward. He was sitting up against the headboard of the narrow infirmary bed, knees drawn up against his chest in the position Severus had seen him assume so many times this past summer. He looked horrendous. His hand was bandaged and several of his fingers were splinted. He had a black eye, a swollen and split lip, a slightly misshapen and definitely discolored nose and deep scratches on his neck. He looked up as Severus walked quietly toward him, then looked quickly back down at his hands.

He had been crying.

"I didn't think you were coming," he said hoarsely as Severus reached the end of the bed and stood there. It took every bit of resolve in him to not go fetch Poppy and insist she heal the boy immediately.

Severus stared at Harry a very long moment. Harry was looking at his lap again and began to fiddle with the wrapping on his broken hand.

"Leave that be," said Severus, quietly.

Harry dropped his left hand onto the bed but kept his right one cradled against his chest.

Severus reached into his pocket and drew out the letter that Minerva had delivered to him several hours ago. He had read the letter, with its awkward block printing, several times. He had had to force himself to wait until curfew to come up here. He leaned forward and placed the folded square of parchment on the bed near Harry's feet.

"My answer," he said simply. "But we will talk first, before you read it."

Harry nodded, the smallest of acknowledgments. Severus pulled a chair around to the side of the bed and settled on it, resisting the urge to turn it around and straddle it. He didn't need to put anything else between himself and Harry.

"Are you in pain?" asked Severus as Harry continued to hold his right hand tightly against him. He felt vaguely ill for having left Harry like this. "Do you need a potion?"

Harry dropped his head back onto the pillow behind him. He stared a moment at the ceiling.

"No potions," he said. "Poppy brought me some tablets. They make me woozy." He indicated a small cup on the bedside table.
Severus eyes moved to the orange pills in the paper cup. They looked so...*inadequate*. He cleared his throat.

"Harry, we need to talk. Your letter...you have some mistaken...ideas...about my reaction...and this punishment..." The words were sticking in his throat.

Harry closed his eyes. He looked so tired. "So you weren't furious with me?" he asked.

When Severus didn't answer immediately, Harry opened his eyes and slowly looked over at Severus.

"No. I was," admitted Severus. He tried to hold Harry's gaze but Harry looked away again.

"Harry, look at me."

Harry didn't obey. He closed his eyes and shook his head fractionally. "Eyes hurt. Just talk."

Severus acquiesced. It was abundantly clear that Harry was in control here, though he didn't know it.

"I was furious. You...disobeyed. Blatantly. You put yourself in danger. I found you brawling, on a bathroom floor no less. You were *hurt*..."

"Then why did you go to him first?" Harry's voice was tight and raw.

Ahhh. This, *this* could not be helped. It was part of the game, part of the charade. For Severus, duplicity was second nature, part of his job description. For Harry, though, it was betrayal.

"You know why, Harry," he answered. It was an inadequate answer and he knew it.

Silence. A long, drawn-out silence. The clock on the wall ticked and tocked. Severus could almost hear the castle walls groan.

"It hurts."

Harry's voice was small. Severus knew that it must have taken everything in him to let out those two small words. Those words that didn't refer to the pain in his hand or his face or his eye.

"I know."

Another long, quiet moment. Broken, at the end, by a sudden, deep intake of breath, the prelude to a sob, but averted. For now.

"My intent in letting you heal without magic was not to remind you that you were fighting like a Muggle," Severus continued, forging ahead, "no matter what I told Poppy and Minerva. My *intent*," he continued, "was for you to be reminded of the consequences of your actions for longer than an evening. That by living with your injuries for a week or two, you might learn to think before you act and learn to avoid the circumstances that lead to...this."

Harry bit his bottom lip and winced. He turned his head away toward the wall.

"Harry, *look at me*."

Instead, Harry lifted his good hand and tried to cover his face.

Severus reached out instinctively and took hold of Harry's wrist. He pulled the boy's hand down and cupped Harry's chin gently with his other hand. He felt the raspy stubble of beard and was suddenly reminded of just how much Harry had grown in the months since he'd taught him the shaving charm.
When Harry was looking at him, finally, he asked:

"Who do you see, Harry?"

And as Harry stared at him, still resolutely not crying, Severus smiled. One of those "You've really screwed up but I'm still rather fond of you" smiles. One that Professor Snape could never have managed.

"Sev'rus," whispered Harry. The syllables were difficult against his swollen lip. A tear ran down his cheek.

Severus nodded, smiling tightly. He moved his hand to trace the bruising on the side of Harry's face, wiping away the tear as he did, then dropped his gaze to Harry's injured right hand, noticing the swelling at the fingertips. He sighed.

"Hard as it may be to believe, Harry, this is hurting me more than it's hurting you."

It should not have evoked the reaction it did. That simple phrase should not have made Harry break down into great sobs, gut-wrenching gasps that tore out Severus' heart, deconstructing it, reconstructing it, then shoving it back inside of him where it continued to beat but like a stranger, a foreign thing, trying to adjust to not being totally his any longer.

Harry had heard Aunt Petunia say that to Dudley on the rare occasions when he was punished, had heard Arthur Weasley say it to Ron. He'd heard it on television, at the movies. Parents said that, parents who loved their children, who were trying to teach them a lesson. Parents meting out tough love, but love nonetheless, love that was tinted with the color of forgiveness, love that had strength behind it, and valor within it. Love strong enough to bruise. Strong enough to heal.

Severus moved first. Slid from the chair onto the side of the bed, not understanding the trigger but letting instinct drive him. He put his arms around the boy, but only just ahead of Harry, who flung his own arms around Severus' neck and hugged him so tightly that he knew Harry's hand was screaming with pain and his cheek as well, pressed as it was against Severus' shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I won't do it again. I'll be the person you want me to be. I promise…" Harry said, after a long while, his body finally still after having the sort of cry that cleanses and exhausts, leaving the body lax and the soul frail and exposed.

"You already are the person I want you to be," whispered Severus. A few minutes later, he positioned the sleeping Harry's broken hand carefully on his chest and placed his letter beneath Harry's wand on the bedside table. Harry wouldn't see, until he woke in the morning, that the piece of parchment had a single word on the front of it.

"Son."

7 May, 1997

Wednesday

Dear Harry:

I honestly do not know where to start. By the time you read this letter, I will have visited you in the infirmary and we will have talked. About what, I do not know. I do not wish to rehash the events of yesterday evening. It is clear to me that Mr. Malfoy became provoked—whether by your presence or
by your actions is inconsequential—and attacked. It is also clear to be that he was prepared to use an
Unforgivable Curse inside Hogwarts…a curse that had it been used, would have been immediately
traced back to his wand, eliciting his expulsion from Hogwarts. Mr. Malfoy has you to thank, Harry,
as do others. The headmaster himself is most anxious to keep Mr. Malfoy here as what awaits him at
home is infinitely worse.

Close your mouth. Yes. Albus Dumbledore believes Mr. Malfoy is worth saving.

There are two sides to every story, Harry, as you already know. Perhaps I was wrong in not telling
you the other side of Mr. Malfoy's story. But it is not mine to tell, and the fact that I asked you to trust
me and to let the headmaster and myself and the other adults in this castle worry about him and what
he is doing should have been enough. So I am left to think—have I not earned your trust? And if I
have, why is it not enough?

I have given this problem quite a bit of thought since yesterday evening. I sat beside your bed while
you slept last night. Poppy was furious with me. She insisted someone be there to watch over you
while you slept, to make sure you were able to breathe through the swelling and to change the cold
packs. Minerva took a shift, as did the headmaster. I survived their cold silence, Harry, because I
knew that today and tomorrow and the next day and the next, your discomfort and your appearance
might make you pause, might make you think before acting.

My own father would have called it tough love. Oddly, I was always able to see the tough but never
the love.

I want it to be different with you, and that requires that it be different with me as well.

I will tell you this one thing. Mr. Malfoy has been on edge for some time. You are not the first this
week to have encountered him at the wrong moment. The others, though, were not looking for an
altercation. They were simply minding their own business, trying to complete homework
assignments or study for upcoming exams. I have had my hands full this week already, and this…
event…put me over the edge. You could not have known this, but it should not have mattered. You
should not avoid trouble so that someone else can have an easier time with their own life. You
should avoid trouble because it is the right thing to do and because you have faith and trust in those
who are guiding you.

It is difficult, indeed, to put a smile into words. A smile that says "You really screwed up but I'm
rather fond of you anyway." I think that, had you woken up last night while I was sitting beside you,
while I was enduring both your pain and Poppy's wrath, you would have seen in me the embodiment
of the words behind Minerva's smile.

Regards,

Severus

Severus was getting ready for his first class of the day when Harry woke up and read his letter. He
had a long day ahead of him with only a short break for lunch. His last class was followed by a
review session for his seventh-year NEWT-level students. Dinner immediately followed and after
that a protracted meeting with Albus and a very much needed drink with Minerva in her office.

It was well after curfew when he made it back to the infirmary.

Poppy met him at the door and spoke quietly to him.
"Severus, won't you reconsider? At least his hand? He is having difficulty eating, using the bathroom, dressing, doing his school work. I am sure he has learned his lesson already. There is no need…"

"Is he complaining? Has he asked for anything I asked you to withhold?"

Poppy looked puzzled a moment then sighed. "No, he isn't complaining. And he's not asked for anything at all—he won't even take the Muggle pain tablets. I finally ground them up and mixed them into his pumpkin juice. He was exhausted."

"Have his friends been in to see him?" Severus asked, noting the absence of flowers and cards and candy and such on the bedside table.

"The entire Quidditch team this evening," she said with a half smile. "They seem to have forgiven him. Miss Weasley sat on his bed talking with him for quite a while after the others left. Still, I believe he's a long way from forgiving himself." She looked over at Severus. "So, will you reconsider?"

"No," said Severus, his voice low, looking at Harry instead of at Poppy. "Not until or unless he asks. I believe he still needs the reminder…” His voice trailed off and he nodded to her absently and walked over to the bed where Harry lay sleeping, curled up on one side. He was still wearing his glasses and they were awkwardly askew on his still-swollen face. Severus reached out to remove them and saw the parchment clutched in Harry's left hand. He thought it was the letter he had left Harry the night before. It was the same size, folded in fourths like his had been. He carefully prised open Harry's fingers and removed the letter. His heart, so recently reformed, still so raw with unaccustomed need, clenched. Written on the front of the letter, in awkward block letters, looking very much like a small child had written it, was the word "Dad."

Chapter 37

May 8-11

-Harry-

By Thursday, he was feeling more his normal self but Madam Pomfrey kept him in the infirmary until Friday as promised. He was getting more adept with using his left hand primarily, able to feed himself and to do a rudimentary type of printing. He hadn't tried his wand yet, but felt that he'd have better control by Monday when he returned to classes. The Skele-Gro had nearly healed his fingers, seeming to work from the extremities inward, and Madam Pomfrey removed the finger splints and rebandaged his hand on Friday before she released him. The swelling in his face had gone down quite a bit too. On Friday morning, the mediwitch had draped a warm flannel on his face, keeping it there and rewarming it for an entire hour. It was soaked in some herbal concoction and felt wonderful, like one of those home spa treatments Aunt Petunia was so fond of—though Harry couldn't say that it helped her appearance or her mood. The swelling was greatly reduced now, though his bottom lip still felt big and the split on it hadn't fully healed. He was still generally sore but was anxious to get back to his own room. He might have detention tomorrow during the Quidditch match, but he intended to give his team a rousing pep talk anyway.

Ron came in after his last class of the day to help Harry back to the Gryffindor common room. He sat on Harry's bed and began shoving school books into his friend's bag, not taking particular care with
them. He was chatting as he worked, telling Harry about the duel Snape had had with Hermione in
class today.

"Wait a minute. Snape dueled Hermione?" asked Harry, incredulous. "Our Hermione?"

"Of course our Hermione. Do you know any others? She was allowed to use any spell we'd covered
in any of our Defense classes ever and all he could use were basic shields and the disarming spell.
He did eventually disarm her, but she got one stinging hex through his shields. It was brilliant! Got
him on the shin and he actually hopped around a bit!" He shoved one more book into the bag in his
lap. A folded parchment fell from the book onto the floor as he stuffed it in.

"Hey, give me that!" said Harry quickly, reaching down to pick up the parchment from the floor with
his left hand. Ron already had his hand on the letter when Harry grabbed it. He let it go, but not
before he saw what was written on the front. Son. In very distinctive handwriting. Handwriting he
recognized even though the ink was not red.

Harry's hand was shaking as he tucked the letter away in his pocket. He didn't give a single word of
explanation to Ron, and Ron didn't ask for any either. Harry was still nervous about the letter he'd
written to Severus, the one he'd thought he'd left between his books on the bedside table Thursday
evening. He couldn't find the letter this morning, but Madam Pomfrey had told him that Severus had
come by to see him the previous night and he assumed that Severus had the letter.

And that made him feel nervous inside, even though he'd meant all along to give the letter to
Severus. It seemed so natural at the time to write "Dad" on the outside of the folded parchment,
though he'd still called him "Severus" inside. But he'd stared at it for a long time after he wrote it,
second-guessing himself. Perhaps Severus' "son" had been a generic type of son, like when a kindly
old man at the market said "Son, can you help me with this bag?"

But there was nothing for it now. Severus had the letter. And Harry wouldn't get a response to it until
class on Monday. He thought the weekend would drag on forever. He didn't know he was about to
get a rather big distraction that would take his mind off of Monday altogether.

/ 8 May, 1997

Thursday

Dear Severus:

I never once thought past the fact that Malfoy is up to something he shouldn't be up to. I never once
thought about why he's doing whatever it is he's doing, except to assume that it's to somehow
advance Voldemort's plans. And no, I never thought that Dumbledore would think twice about him.
It's not that I thought Dumbledore wanted him dead, or didn't want him at Hogwarts. I just never put
Draco Malfoy and Albus Dumbledore in the same thought or the same sentence in my brain. I don't
think it's wrong or bad that I didn't spend a lot of time or energy thinking about these things.
Honestly, Severus, I don't know of many people my age who would have, especially any
Gryffindors, except maybe Hermione. But I know I can let it go now. No, I'd better be honest—I
know I can try to. I figure Draco Malfoy is even more screwed up than I am. Good luck with him.
No, I mean that—I hope you can help him somehow but I have to think that whatever he's up against
is bigger even than you or you'd have figured it out already. I hope he's not going to have to go hunt
horcruxes or the world is doomed.

The hard part now. Every morning when I wake up I reach over to the table next to my bed for my
glasses. This morning, I found your letter on the table too. It's hard to focus my eyes in the morning right when I wake up, even with my glasses. I held it for a long time looking at it, trying to make sense of what I thought I was seeing. I finally convinced myself that I wasn't hallucinating—that you'd really written that word on the front of your letter for me. I had just gotten up the nerve to open the letter and read it when Madam Pomfrey came over and made me get up to use the loo, then she came over and changed all my bandages and put on that salve from the tube. Then she brought breakfast over and got me all situated in bed so I could eat it—she even gave me a straw for my pumpkin juice. She finally left me alone and I ate my toast and bacon and a couple bites of whatever that was that tried to pass itself off as porridge and finally opened your letter.

I didn't know you—or anyone—stayed with me that first night. I've been thinking a lot about what you did, and what I did, and what you said in your letter about tough love, and about trust, and about Malfoy. Hermione and Ron had a huge row over your punishment in fact, right here in the infirmary at lunchtime. I swear it almost came to blows. Surprisingly, it was Ron who thought you should have healed me with magic and Hermione who said she understood why you didn't. But then, Ron's grown up all his life with magic and probably never went to bed in his life with a split lip or a splinted finger (and he's still a little upset about the Quidditch game Saturday—well, a LOT upset). Hermione, though—she grew up as a Muggle and what she told Ron was really interesting—she said "Time heals all wounds." Then she said that sometimes, because of magic, we don't give time enough time. How's that for confusing?

Anyway, I need to talk about what you wrote on my letter. I'm not great with talking about this kind of stuff. It leaves me with this feeling in my stomach. It's a good feeling, maybe whatever happiness feels like when it's just starting to grow, like a seed or a baby owl, or maybe it's something like safety. It feels warm and it makes me want to smile or cry or hug someone, I can't figure out which. Maybe all three. It's confusing and silly all at once. All my life I've been James and Lily's son. Everyone tells me how much I look like my father and that I have my mother's eyes and that James was brilliant at Quidditch and my mum brilliant at Charms and they died protecting me. And I've always felt proud that they were my parents, ever since I found out about Hogwarts and magic anyway and learned that they weren't drunks who were killed in a car accident. And I've never really admitted this before, ever, but I wish they would have done more, or chosen differently, so that I'd have gotten to know them as people and not as faces in photos and in that mirror or smoky shapes from the Priori Incantatem. And no matter the others I've had in my life until now, no one has really felt like a parent to me before. Certainly not the Dursleys. There have been times when Mrs. Weasley has come close, especially at the end of fourth year after the third task. With all that was going on up here in the hospital wing that night and with Dumbledore calling the Order together and Sirius and Bill getting involved, she had time to worry about me. She made me a priority despite all the other stuff going on.

And that's how I feel now. About you. I don't even want to think about all that's on your mind lately—the headmaster and that curse, taking care of Slytherin House, Draco Malfoy, your classes, Voldemort. Me. I know I should feel like I'm a burden to you. Just one more thing to worry about in a long list of stuff to worry about. But the thing is—I don't. You take time with me, like to write all those letters and the things you come up with to fill them up—the questions and the tidbits about my mum and the advice you give me. And the best part is that it's not just advice about how to go after Voldemort and do better in school and improve my magic. It's like you care about the parts of me that are more normal. That I have friends and sometimes have trouble sleeping and think about Ginny all the time and do stupid things like drinking too much firewhiskey. I think that's what a father would do. He'd want to make sure his son knew about girls and contraceptive spells (or maybe he'd tell his kid to keep his pants zipped up and his hands in his pockets) and that actions have consequences. He'd want to make sure he did well in school and tried his best but he'd realize that he has to have fun too, and that he'd make mistakes. He'd want him to learn from those mistakes too.
I can't think of anyone else ever in my life that's been what you've been for me since last summer. A friend but more than a friend. A teacher but more than a teacher. A mentor but more than a mentor. A big brother but more than big brother. A disciplinarian but more than that too, and more than a guardian and more than a protector. I didn't have a place to fit you anymore, Severus. It was like you were all those things but you weren't any one of them more than the others. All I had was one word.

So I hope you don't mind what my brain and my heart were telling me. I wrote it on the outside of this letter already, even before I finished it, and I know it looks like a little kid wrote it since my hand is still pretty stiff and sore, but it was me.

Regards just doesn't seem like it's enough anymore, does it? But it's part of the charm, I know, that hides the good parts of these letters. So I'll end…as I always do.

Regards,

Harry

Friday night came and went. He spent almost an hour talking to the Quidditch team, getting them psyched up for the coming game and telling Ginny that she was just as good of a seeker as he was and a better Quidditch player all around. Ron didn't look like he believed it, so he spent another hour with Ron and by the time he fell into bed, exhausted, he thought that maybe Ron really was beginning to believe that Gryffindor could win without Harry.

Saturday was the longest day in his life. Filch came up with the worst detention ever—he had to sort through and file a crate of old detention cards from the 1970s. He wasn't too surprised at how many times he found James and Sirius there, but the fact that he found a couple for his mother and for Severus surprised him. It was boring and tedious. He was in a cramped and closed storeroom all day. He could hear everyone tramping off to the game and what seemed like hours later, he heard them all tramping back in with a lot more noise. Filch didn't let him leave until almost four o'clock.

The passageways were empty when he got out and it wasn't time for dinner yet. He raced up the stairs. He had no idea if Gryffindor won. No one was in the corridors at all. He almost shouted the password to the Fat Lady and a minute later he was being yanked into the common room. Everyone was there shouting and screaming "We won!" It was standing room only and there was butterbeer and food from the kitchen and streamers and…Ginny. Ginny with the biggest grin on her face. Everything else in the room disappeared from his line of sight as he moved toward her. He threw his arms around her—or maybe she moved first—and his hand hurt where it was clenching her hip but it was a good hurt and his lip, his split bottom lip, he didn't care how much that hurt because kissing her was so good and so right and everything, everything suddenly made sense. He hugged her tightly for a long moment after the kiss ended. The entire house was cheering and cat calling and he was shaking with relief and with unbridled joy and he caught Ron's eye and got his very much needed nod of approval and Merlin he couldn't wait…couldn't wait to tell Severus.

-Severus-

Slytherin wasn't playing, but like most of the Hogwarts faculty, he proceeded to the pitch at the appointed time to watch the Ravenclaw-Gryffindor match. Harry would be in detention with Filch already. For some reason, he was glad he hadn't been the one to assign the detention to Harry, though his punishment would have effectively kept Harry out of the game anyway even if it hadn't kept him out of the stands as well.
The Gryffindor team had huddled together before Rolanda came on the field with the Quidditch case and before breaking up and mounting their brooms, had given up a united cry.

"For Harry!"

Why had that cry made his heart clench so?

The game quickly became a battle for the Snitch. The teams were fairly evenly matched otherwise, and the score toggled back and forth as one team then the other scored.

Minerva, sitting beside him with her hands clenched on her chair, looked miserable. He knew how much she enjoyed flaunting Gryffindor's possession of the Quidditch Cup.

Nearly two hours into the game, Ginny Weasley—who had been circling the field high above the crowd—went into a sudden steep dive. Midway down she leveled off then soared upward, golden snitch fluttering in her hand. While the stands erupted in cheers she circled the pitch once, then brazenly flew toward the faculty box and dropped the snitch in Minerva's hands.

"For Harry," she said with purpose. But while she gave the victory snitch to her head of house, she said the words to Severus.

11 May, 1997

Sunday

Dear Harry:

I not only have your letter in my mind and heart, but the Quidditch match on Saturday as well and the interesting information that has come my way since then from various and trusted sources. Of course, I have some visual evidence of my own, gleaned from careful observation of the Gryffindor table at the noon meal today.

I take it that you are feeling quite a bit better, physically and mentally.

Allow me to offer my heartfelt congratulations on finally landing the girl of your dreams. I had dinner in my quarters last night and spent time in my office marking afterward. I left the door ajar, and first overheard a group of my younger female students accusing you of incestuous behavior. "Oooh! She's practically his sister!" one said. I admit I didn't know at the time of whom they were speaking until one said "Maybe he was just congratulating her on catching the snitch." At that point, there could be no doubt.

Further stealthy observation eventually revealed the following—at least a portion of which is bound to be true. That you were found naked together in a broom closet by Filch (better Filch than Rita Skeeter), that you carried her up to your dorm room in perpetual liplock with her legs wrapped around your waist, that she is already wearing the Potter family bonding ring and (this rings the most true, frankly) that you are now sporting some additional bruises on your face, more accurately on the neck area.

I believe I know how you are feeling now—that you are on an island of peace in a tempest. And for that reason, Harry, I urge you to enjoy the companionship of this relationship, and the quiet times sitting together studying, and walks around the grounds as the days and evenings begin to warm. Treat each other with respect and care. I am not a romantic; I have been accused more than once of being a solitary man, and a bitter one. But I understand intimacy, and intimacy is far from a physical
thing. Physical closeness does not by default become intimacy. Sharing of self is intimate.

Which of course brings me to the part of my letter where I answer yours.

I am thirty-seven years old. I was born, as were your parents, in 1960. I had an upbringing not totally dissimilar to yours, though I at least knew I was a wizard, and had my mother's guidance in my youth. I had no positive male role models in my life until I came to Hogwarts, and by then it was too late to truly avoid my fate, a fate that I had unfortunately sealed for myself by my actions and decisions.

I would have argued that I am not father material, but I find myself now wrestling with the fears and lapping up the joys of fathers everywhere. I do not care, really, what name you put to it, or to me, but it is the knowledge that you would step in front of the killing curse for someone, that you ache with their ache and burn with their fevers and smile with their triumphs.

Your Gryffindor Quidditch team huddled before the game yesterday before Madam Hooch came onto the field with the game kit, and when they broke their huddle they shouted "For Harry!", dedicating the game to you. Minerva twitched beside me but I know my reaction was not so obvious, though it felt like a fist clenched around my heart. I was inexplicably happy that it was not my punishment that kept you from being at least in the stands, watching the game you could not play. And when Miss Weasley caught the snitch and ended the game, I felt like standing up and doing a victory dance. Of course, my sanity won out in the end and I refrained, but inside I was cheering and I had to hide the smile on my face with my hand, trying to look generally disapproving and disappointed with the outcome.

There is no one else in my life like you either, no parallel of equivalent I can draw from my years of existence. I do not know if I would have been a good father to a young Harry Potter; I rather doubt I would have had the patience then. I know only what I know—that your needs have supplanted my own. That I check your clock before I go to bed at night and look for your face at the Gryffindor table at breakfast each morning. It is not the same as having breakfast together and sharing toast and porridge or going together to a summertime Quidditch match. It is not a relationship blessed by blood or legal bond. What lies between us is of our own making and our own choosing but is no less valid than what links any parent and child.

I've never had a son and you've never had a father. But we are brave, you and I, and we are resourceful. And you can depend on me as long as I am on this earth, and beyond if I can manage it. Do not forget that, even if circumstances might lead you to believe otherwise.

Do not let your schoolwork suffer for this budding relationship with Miss Weasley. I will hold her accountable as well should your work begin to slide. I would very much dislike having to call her out in front of her fellow fifth-years and chastise her for keeping your brain too foggy to concentrate on your homework.

Finally, I ran into Hagrid this morning after breakfast. Have you spoken to him yet about your owl and her partner?

Regards,

Severus

At dinner Sunday night, Severus made his way to the staff table and took his customary seat beside Minerva.
"Still savoring the win?" he asked as he leaned over to grab a roll from the basket. "You look like the cat who swallowed the canary."

Minerva smiled. "It certainly eased my mind to know that I didn't singlehandedly seal Gryffindor's fate by grounding Harry," she said. "And I don't think he's complaining about the outcome either." She nodded toward the Gryffindor table.

Severus glanced over. Harry was seated toward the end of the table again, near the faculty. Ginny was sitting next to him. She was leaning in toward him, hovering over his plate. She was...she was...

"That little..." said Severus.

"Severus!" protested Minerva. "She's only trying to help. Look at him. He can hardly handle his own knife."

"But cutting up his roast? He's practically got her eating out of his hand!" he protested.

"Or the other way around," laughed Minerva.

"I swear, if she tries to feed him...uggghhh," Severus looked down at his plate while Minerva smothered her laugh behind a hand and several convenient coughs.

"It could be worse, you know," she said conversationally after Severus had refilled both her wine and his own.

"How is that?" he asked, watching Harry listen animatedly to his fellow Gryffindors as they undoubtedly stepped him through every highlight of yesterday's game—again.

"We could be having cake with buttercream icing for pudding."

Severus shook his head as Minerva speared a piece of roast with her fork and popped it into her mouth, savoring the roast as if it were a piece of the rich cake with the decadent icing.

"Obscene," he said. He looked at Harry again and found the boy staring up at him. Severus glanced over at Ginny and caught the blush on Harry's face.

He doesn't know that I know, thought Severus. He has no idea how the rumor mill circulates at this castle. Smiling innocently, he winked at Harry and went back to buttering his roll.

________________________________________

Chapter 38

________________________________________

May 13-May 15

-Harry-

Time, which had been creeping by at a flesh-eating slug's pace, suddenly seemed to pull the carpet out from beneath his feet, flying like Viktor Krum after the golden snitch. He'd gotten from Saturday afternoon to Tuesday without so much as blinking, and found himself sitting next to Ginny instead of across from her, doing homework in the Gryffindor common room. Perhaps "sitting next to" wasn't the most accurate manner of describing their positions. They were both on the sofa, Harry wedged
into the corner and Ginny relaxed under the crook of his arm, her legs stretched out beside his own. She was reading her Defense textbook while Harry revised Transfiguration with Hermione and Ron. Hermione was asking the review questions. She sat on one end of the loveseat opposite them, her feet tucked up under her, while Ron sat beside her trying to finish his Charms essay and only half-listening to the questions. He was making a mess with a poorly-trimmed quill. He had ink on his nose and a fingerprint-shaped smudge beside his mouth.

"I think you've got it, Harry," said Hermione, her voice sounding pleased and approving. She smiled at him and looked significantly at Ginny, who had not looked up, as if giving Ginny the credit for Harry's unusually accurate and succinct answers.

Harry used his still-bandaged right hand to gather up Ginny's loose hair then bent down to brush his lips over her neck. She turned her head and looked back at him, smiling as she reached up to pull off his glasses and kiss him.

"Get a room," groaned Ron. Then, as if suddenly remembering just whom he was talking to, looked up from his essay in horror at his friend's and his sister's smirking faces. "No, forget I said that."

Ginny placed Harry's glasses back on his face then stood up, closed her book, dropped it on the couch and held out her hand to Harry. Grinning, he allowed her to pull him to his feet.

"Looks like we're taking a walk," he said. "See you guys later."

"Another one?" Ron's eyebrows connected with his hairline. "You two had better be getting some exercise on these so-called-walks."

"Ronald!" hissed Hermione, pulling out one leg from beneath her and kicking him on the hip with her heel.

Harry grinned. "Oh, we're getting exercise all right…" He took Ginny's hand and they turned to leave.

"Vertical exercise!" called out Ron.

Hermione kicked him again.

/  

13 May, 1997

Tuesday

Dear Severus:

Potter family bonding rings? I don't know anything about those. I've never even thought about stuff that belonged to my mum and dad, but I suppose maybe it all went to Aunt Petunia and she "disposed" of it. If there were rings, I think I'd like to have them someday. Not yet. Don't get your knickers in a twist or anything—I'm not ready to settle down and won't be sharing rings with anyone for a long time. And no, I haven't been found naked in any closets either. I did run through the common room yesterday wearing nothing but a shower curtain because Seamus made off with my clothes and my towel while I was in the shower. At least I think it was him—no one would own up to it and I found my pants suspended from a light fixture in the common room. Those stupid shower curtains are sheer but fortunately this one had a bit of mildew on it and I wrapped it around me several times. It was still a little humiliating to dash through that crowded room, especially when you never know if Collin Creevey is lurking about with that damn camera. All I need is a picture of me
Severus, I can’t believe how good it feels to be with Ginny. I know you heard all about it from those loud-mouthed girls in Slytherin and I know you’ve seen us together around the castle but when it happened—when I came in the common room after that miserable detention with Filch—the room was crowded and everyone was celebrating the win but all I saw was Ginny standing there in the middle of the room. It was like a suddenly developed tunnel vision. Somehow she was in my arms and I was kissing her and I didn't care that my lip was messed up or that my hand hurt or anything. I could have held her and kissed her all night and not cared who was there, except maybe Filch. That would have creeped me out. We left and went out into the corridor and you wouldn’t believe all the places there are in this castle to kiss! All sorts of nooks to stand in and columns and tapestries to stand behind and empty classrooms and stairwells to duck into. We went up to the Astronomy Tower for a little while and then down to the owlery and Hedwig and Mac have a nest! I couldn't get close enough to see if they have eggs yet, or how many, but she hooted at me and didn't seem too upset to see me there.

I didn't let it bother me that Ginny was a more-experienced kisser than me. I mean, I knew more was involved than just moving your lips and I saw Ron and Lavender trying to remove each other’s tonsils with their tongues more times than was healthy for me, but I had no idea what you could actually DO with your tongue.

You know, I suddenly had this thought that kids don’t usually tell their dads this kind of stuff. I just tried to imagine Ron telling his dad about his experiences kissing Lavender and I almost started laughing. So does that say something about Ron and his Dad or about you and me? Anyway, I have to tell someone and Ron doesn't seem to want to hear anything that relates to me, his sister and any part of our anatomies, even the parts not normally covered with clothing.

Let me get this part out of the way now. YES we're respectful of each other and NO we're not having sex or doing anything stupid or dangerous. Except for kissing in front of Ron. He doesn't seem to like that much, to tell you the truth. He didn't seem to mind in the least being locked at the lips with Lavender in front of everyone for half the year, but let me give his sister a little peck on the neck…er…or the cheek…and he looks like he's severely constipated and Hermione has to hit him on the back to get him to start breathing again. Yesterday I reached out to grab Ginny's hand and she had turned and I ended up putting my hand on her…er…or the cheek…and Ron knocked it away so hard and so fast that I had to go back to Madam Pomfrey to make sure it wasn't broken again.

I don't think I've felt this happy for years. I know I haven't felt this normal. Is this how other kids feel? Like there's nothing to worry about except for school work and after class you just look forward to meeting up with your girlfriend and when you go to bed at night you're thinking of your girlfriend and not worried about your next meeting with the headmaster and you've absolutely never ever even heard of horcruxes?

I don't think you can possibly understand what it means to me to be able to put all this in a letter to you. I mean—I should be embarrassed, shouldn't I? Should I really have been looking forward to answering your letter all day? Maybe it’s like what you said—you've never had a son and I've never had a father before. We're not exactly sure how to go about this but it's kind of good not to have rules. We just play it by ear and do what feels right. And right now it feels right to tell you that at least for a little while I've got something on my mind that's pushing horcruxes and Voldemort and even Professor Dumbledore out of the way and squishing them back into the little broom cupboards in my brain.

I've found out something else since Saturday after the game when things finally fell into place with
Ginny. I found out that there's always more room in my heart. I'm not exactly sure how to describe it, but all through this past year, with all the things that have gone on, I kept feeling like my heart was filling up. So many times it felt so tight inside my chest. Looking back now at that feeling, I think it was really just having growing pains. Since I came to Hogwarts, it had room for all my new friends because it was close to empty before I got here. But it had to stretch even further to get used to the idea of having adults that cared about me. Love from adults is something different, something that I didn't trust at first. I know I sound really pitiful, Severus, but I'm trying to figure things out here. And I'm trying to tell you that it was you that made my heart stretch like that. You were there to hand me back all the love I would have rejected. You cut it up into pieces small enough for me to swallow. You packaged it up so that I didn't always know it was love and it lodged itself inside me and stuck there and grew.

It might be the calm before the storm. I'm sure it is, in fact. But if this is all I'm going to get, Severus, then I'm going to enjoy it while I can. Horcruxes can wait for a bit. It's already the middle of May. If I can just have some peace until this term is over, I promise I won't ask for any more.

Regards,

Harry

When he re-read the letter Wednesday morning after breakfast, before he walked down to the dungeons for Potions, he wished he had time to rewrite parts of it. He didn't think it was an adequate answer to Severus' letter, the letter with the strong and heartfelt words, that declared that they were no less father and son than those linked by blood or adoption. The letter that called them both brave. Harry wondered sometimes just how brave he was. Gryffindors were supposed to be brave, but he didn't know a single Gryffindor who came close to Severus Snape when it came to courage.

He was sitting on a window ledge on the first floor corridor waiting for Ron and Hermione to pass by so they could walk to Potions together. He'd already re-rolled his Defense homework with its letter to Severus and tucked it into his bag. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Draco Malfoy walking in the opposite direction of the Potions classroom. Malfoy disappeared behind a tapestry. Harry stared at the tapestry a long moment but when Hermione and Ron appeared, he stood up and followed them down the corridor.

-Severus-

Albus had asked him to come to his office and Severus suspected that the meeting was about Harry. The request had come at dinnertime on Thursday, after an unusually warm day tempted many of the students outside after classes ended. They'd filled the courtyard and beyond, many of them sitting on the rocky hill that led from the castle itself to the front gates.

Severus had come upon Albus on his way up to dinner. The Headmaster had been standing in the doorway looking out over the stairs and the courtyard. He appeared to be watching something—or someone—quite intently. As Severus approached him, the headmaster turned and gave him a small smile.

"I'd like to see you in my office after dinner, Severus," he'd said, giving him another smile in parting then turning and walking toward the Great Hall.

"Of course, Headmaster," replied Severus. He didn't follow Albus into dinner immediately. Instead,
he looked out onto the grounds, immediately spotting Harry sitting with his back to the castle, Ginny Weasley beside him. Harry had his arm around the girl and her head was resting on his shoulder.

He was prepared, then, for the meeting.

"I do not think it wise, Severus," began Albus as soon as Severus had seated himself in front of his desk. "It is a distraction at a time when we cannot afford a single distraction."

Severus stared at the headmaster a long moment, then let his gaze drift to the window over Albus' shoulder. It was dark now, and the moon was already bright.

"We cannot afford a distraction. I agree on that point." He looked back at Albus, choosing his words carefully. "But need we include Harry in that 'we'?"

"He will become too attached," stated Albus. He sighed, carding his good hand through his well-groomed beard. "Miss Weasley cannot accompany him on his task. He will be distracted; he will spend too much time accommodating her, protecting her."

Severus bristled, even though he understood Albus' point.

"Her parents will not allow it," he said at last. "They will insist that she return to Hogwarts."

"They would insist the same for their son Ronald as well," said Albus.

"He is of age," countered Severus. "She is not."

Albus shook his head. "Harry—and his friends—can have a certain singularity of mind." He stared down a moment at his blackened, withered, unmoving hand splayed out in front of him on his desk. "You must not allow it, Severus. It will be easiest, I think, to end the relationship now before it goes too far. Perhaps if you tell him their relationship is endangering Miss…"

"No." Severus stood up quickly. His chair toppled backwards but he ignored it as he placed his hands on the desk in front of him and leaned in. His voice dropped until he was whispering, but whispering in a voice that sounded more like a low, sibilant hiss. "He will have this, brief as it may be. You will not take this from him, nor will I. He has chosen this, he has orchestrated his own happiness for a change."

He straightened and turned away, walking quickly to the door. He stopped in the threshold, though, took a deep breath, and turned back to face Albus.

"I don't give a rat's ass about the greater good at this moment, Albus. We could all die tomorrow and at least Harry will have had this day."

He left the room, barely managing to close the door without slamming it.

/  
15 May, 1997  
Thursday  

Dear Harry:

Rest assured, please, that my knickers are not at all in a twist. I know you are behaving yourself with Miss Weasley and that you are not doing anything that would jeopardize your growing friendship with her. I know this because I am a professor at this school, and have been for quite some time. I
know each and every one of those hidden places you speak of. Pillars, tapestries, nooks, crannies, cupboards, towers, stairways—I do not believe there to be a single location where I have not found would-be lovers and dissuaded them from furthering their amorous activities. Many a cauldron is now clean thanks to my ability to ferret out couples who are thinking with other organs than their brains.

Mildew on the shower curtains? At Hogwarts? Surely you jest! The house elves, should they discover that the cleaning efforts in the Gryffindor boys’ bathrooms are below par, will likely jump off the Astronomy Tower like a bunch of lemmings, each one hurling after the next, falling to their deaths for having allowed mildew to grow in the castle. I do wonder, however, why you bother to have curtains at all if they are clear. Are curtains not erected generally for some semblance of privacy? And are not see-through curtains lacking in providing privacy? I do suspect that the upper-year Gryffindor girls might have sweet-talked the house elves into changing the curtains. The Slytherin bathrooms all have opaque curtains. Of course, they have solid gold fixtures, heated toilet seats and massaging shower heads as well.

Let us discuss, for a moment, the offhand remark I made regarding the Potter bonding rings.

As you likely already know, the Potter family is an old pure-blooded wizarding family. While the family had some wealth in its day, I do not think that there is a fortune out there waiting for your claim. There would be, however, various articles that had been passed down from generation to generation. Most wizarding families have bonding rings—you might refer to them as engagement or wedding rings. They always carry a family crest, and are often imbued with protective magic. I shall ask Minerva to make an enquiry on your behalf at Gringott’s. I cannot believe that Albus Dumbledore would have left something of this importance with Petunia Dursley.

Wizard families often pass along other items through the generations. Other pieces of jewelry are common such as lockets and brooches. And there are often such items as tapestries, magical books, clocks, genealogies and family portraits. It you recall the variety of items found at Grimmauld Place, you will have some idea of what an old wizarding family might value, minus the house elf heads, of course. I would also expect a shocking lack of dark magic and cursed items among a potential Potter trove and family portraits may well be less inclined to hurl out obscenities and insults. I remember well the house belonging to my mother’s parents. Though they were not wealthy by any means, they had a collection of family heirlooms, some valuable, others less valuable but equally treasured. When I was young, when we would still visit Grandmother and Grandfather Prince as my father had not yet imposed his tyrannical rule, I would frequently hide away in a small music room with portraits and tapestries on every wall. One pair of portraits always drew me, almost magnetically. They were grandparents of some degree, great or great great or even, perhaps, great great great. The portraits were hung quite low on the wall, beside the smallish upright piano I was given for practice while there, the grandmother on the left and the grandfather on the right. They would bicker at each other in a deep accent, nearly a brogue. Grandmother wanted me to play lively pieces while Grandfather preferred funereal dirges. That seemed appropriate, as Grandmother was dressed in finery to attend an opera or a party, while Grandfather was painted in old-fashioned, high-collared black robes (I know what you're thinking, Harry) and indeed looked like he had just returned from a funeral. Grandfather must have been fond of the drink, and had a fondness for the sea, for some days he would bid me to draw close and then he would settle back into his black leather chair with his pipe and his tankard of ale and entertain me for hours with tales of storms and shipwrecks.

I digress.

I expect you will continue to face challenges in dating the only sister of your best friend. The Weasleys worked long and hard to produce that single daughter. Personally, I myself would run screaming into the Forbidden Forest before taking on the daunting challenge of dating a women with
six older brothers. Brothers can be a bit protective of their little sisters, or so I am told, having never had a brother—or a sister—myself. If you think that the youngest Mr. Weasley is regarding you with a tad more suspicion, consider what you will face with William, or with the twins. My advice is to keep "Little Harry" under wraps and well disciplined. (Little Harry? You really give me too much fodder, you know. I do hope I don't misspell it in the future and use the homonym "Little Hairy" instead…)

I was heartened that you feel normal now, Harry. Perhaps, when all of this is over, you can take Miss Weasley to Shell Cottage for a visit and swim in the ocean and skip stones and dig for clams. Perhaps you can talk Bill into borrowing that car again, and teaching her to drive it. Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger might enjoy a visit as well, with a long game of chess for Mr. Weasley on the seaside porch while Miss Granger peruses the old books in the parlor. That is normal as well. Friends doing what friends do. Shell Cottage has been our haven and it still may be following all of this, but if I do not survive it, I want it to continue to be yours. It is a place of peace, a place to center yourself, to regroup and recover. I want this for you, Harry, even beyond Hogwarts. I do not want to appear maudlin nor depress you or take away any of the joy you are feeling now but should I not survive this war, take my ashes and scatter them in the ocean there. And if you do not have my ashes, sit on the shore and look out to sea and throw as many rocks as it takes and imagine. And when you are finished with that, and you have said your goodbyes for the time being, stand up and dust the sand off your pants and go on with your life.

But before you go on with your life any further here at Hogwarts, it has come to my attention that you have been 'dating' Miss Weasley for nearly a week and you have not presented yourself to your Head of House and to Madam Pomfrey for "the talk." Yes, Harry. You know what I'm referring to. It does not matter that you have already had to suffer through this presentation with me alone. You are a "couple" now, and are thus subject to a new set of rules. I spoke with Minerva about it tonight and she assured me that she would complete this task with you before the weekend. You may be assuaged by the fact that Miss Weasley has already had this talk, twice, in fact, so she will be able to fill you in in advance on some of the gruesome details, such as the very realistic plastic models that Madam Pomfrey uses in her instructional (and, may I say, very informative and acutely embarrassing) presentation.

Regards,

Severus

Severus had to attend several of these acutely entertaining sessions with young lovers and Poppy each year. They had ceased being embarrassing—for him anyway—quite some time ago. Now, he sat through them nonplussed as the couple wiggled, squirmed, turned alarming colors and sometimes looked downright nauseated. The plastic models were used for anatomical instruction and one of them had some highly predictable animated properties. Poppy did her best to vary the presentation, more for the amusement of the heads of house than for the benefit of the children themselves. She had taken, of late, to color-charming the models to represent the house colors of the young people in the budding relationship. Severus, unfortunately, suffered the most as no one wanted to see any of those parts in green.

It was very late Thursday evening, well after dinner. He had survived his short meeting with Albus, seething as he walked back to his quarters but understanding, loath as he was to admit it, Albus' position. That did not change his decision, however. Let the world take care of itself for a few months so that Harry could have these brief weeks of sunshine to hold onto when he was once again surrounded by shadows.
Severus entertained a growing feeling, deep inside, that Harry would somehow prevail in this. And while he did not believe that he himself would be spared, a nugget of hope, akin to that annoying pea buried under a dozen mattresses the fairy tale princess had been given to endure, had begun to grow inside him. It started as a pinprick but was alarmingly close to becoming a tendril. It was more wishful thinking than anything else, but on some days, in that two-hour stretch between end of classes and dinner, when he stood on one of the hidden castle parapets surveying the grounds, it seemed as if his world was suddenly bigger than Hogwarts and larger than Magical Britain and greater than the United Kingdom and wider than Europe. His focus would invariably begin to narrow then until he was obsessively watching the couple who liked to sit by the lake, sometimes skipping stones, sometimes sitting quietly reading, sometimes relaxing with a red head pillowed on a shoulder or a dark head pillowed on a lap.

Once the thought crossed his mind that from this distance he could be watching a different Potter, James Potter, with Lily, his Lily. Ginny Weasley did resemble Lily in a vague sort of way—same height and build and hair color. But that thought was gone as soon as he focused again on Harry. As strongly as Harry resembled James physically, he was every inch himself in how he carried himself. He moved with a confidence brushed with caution, a deliberateness that was neither cocky nor haughty. There was strength behind the movement. Harry Potter was growing into his own skin, not shedding the old like a basilisk but covering it with new growth. A new growth that hid his old scars, yet kept them just beneath the surface.

Chapter 39

A/N: Lighter content after a few pretty intense chapters. We're into the home stretch now. Remember that I'm following the calendar on the HP Lexicon, which puts the Astronomy Tower incident on May 28 and Dumbledore's funeral on May 31.

May 18 –21

-Harry-

It was nearly dark on Saturday when Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna finished their picnic dinner by the lake and returned to the castle. It had been the best time Harry had had at Hogwarts for months. He'd spent the entire day with his friends and hadn't once thought about horcruxes or homework.

He was surprised to find the Headmaster in the Entry Hall, and more surprised still when Dumbledore asked Harry to accompany him to his office.

Harry expected, for a moment, to leave the castle on a horcrux hunt. But it was obvious almost immediately that Dumbledore had something else on his mind.

"Have you been giving more thought to the horcruxes, Harry? What they are? Where they might be located?"

Harry, sitting in a low chair upholstered in green paisley right in front of the Headmaster's desk, nodded. "Yeah, I have. Well, before I got hurt, anyway. Hermione charted it all out and we tried to think of anything Riddle might have used and where each thing might be." He looked up from his
study of his hands at the Headmaster and frowned. "I don't have much to go on, do I?"

The Headmaster shook his head gravely. "No, I'm quite afraid you do not. But Harry, when you say 'we'—who specifically do you mean?" His right hand lay unmoving on his desk while he supported his chin in his left.

"Only Ron and Hermione," answered Harry, noting the Headmaster's frown and quickly adding "We're very careful when we talk, sir, to make sure no one else is around."

Dumbledore looked serious only for a moment more, then he smiled his kindly smile and nodded at Harry.

"And Miss Weasley—you have not told her? I see that the two of you are growing…close."

Harry shook his head. "No, I haven't told her anything yet. I've been…well…" he smiled shyly at the Headmaster. "I've been distracted, I guess."

Dumbledore gave Harry a small smile in return. "Understandable," he replied quietly, almost murmuring. "Harry, perhaps it is best that you leave things as they are—keep Miss Weasley in the dark. Horcruxes, and everything about locating and destroying them, are a serious business." He paused, peering intently at Harry until Harry gave a quick nod to indicate he understood. "You wouldn't want to endanger her at all, would you?"

Harry shook his head quickly. "No sir, of course I wouldn't."

The conversation continued in this vein and when Harry found himself on the moving spiral stairway a few minutes later, he had the definite feeling that Professor Dumbledore thought that his relationship with Ginny Weasley was rather…inconvenient.

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18 May, 1997

Sunday

Dear Severus:

You played the piano? Do you still play? Maybe it's time to start our questions back up again—seems like there's still quite a bit I don't know about you. Did you play football in the neighborhood? Did you play Quidditch at Hogwarts? What's your favorite fruit? Did you ever have chicken pox? What was your second favorite class at Hogwarts? (We all know what your favorite one was!) Which one did you like least? Are the uniforms still the same as when you went here? Did you have to wear these stupid ties? Did you have Hogsmeade weekends? Was Zonko's here when you were a kid? How about Honeydukes? What did you do in your free time? Did you have your own owl? When did you start making up your own spells? What made you want to do that, anyway? Is the Hogwarts food the same as when you were here? Was Filch still around?

When I was doing my detention last Saturday, Filch made me repair and refile this big bin of detention cards from the 1970s. I wasn't surprised to find quite a few with James and Sirius' names on them. They seemed to get written up for looking in the wrong direction. Oh—a lot of the offenses listed were legitimate. It's just that in the later years, it seems it didn't take too much at all to land them in detention. Sirius had one his sixth year that said "Took excessive amount of time to remove his homework from his satchel" and I found one of James' from his last year for "Went down stairway on right side instead of left." You weren't in charge of detentions back then, were you?
Well, now that I brought THAT up (putting you and detentions in the same sentence, anyway), I am going to have to admit that I found your name in that bin more than once. I assumed your detentions would all be centered around fighting with Gryffindors, turning them into hamsters, or making snarky comments in class under your breath. But no…it turns out Mr. Severus Snape had a real problem with curfew. Hmm. And with getting caught in places you apparently didn't belong. Do I see a bit of a double standard here with me?

I admit I'm kind of intrigued about some secret vault full of Potter family heirlooms. Not about the money, or what it might be worth. Seems that Sirius left me plenty already and I don't plan to hole myself up in Grimmauld Place smoking cigars (do wizards do that?) and counting my money. I'd like to do something worthwhile and fun and productive with my life (not necessarily in that order). I think I'd most like to have portraits, if they exist. I don't know anything at all about my family's history and having portraits to tell me about it would be better than reading it in some old dusty book. I saw all my ancestors once, you know, in the Mirror of Erised. Doesn't seem fair that there's no one left—not even some distant cousin or half-brother of a step-uncle or something. I guess I'm going to have to work pretty hard to repopulate the family. I'll probably want to have at least five or six kids so we can get this show on the road and regain all of our wizarding glory.

It's Sunday evening now and I've had the best weekend I can remember in a long time. I'm not counting Christmas or Easter break with you, of course (what could possibly top getting drunk with your friends, sobering up the old-fashioned Muggle way and then taking a trip to the Chamber of Secrets?) On Saturday, we got a pick-up game of Quidditch going. Yes, my hand is still bandaged, but I took it easy and flew left-handed. Besides, I couldn't be any worse than Hermione and Neville. That was the best part of the whole day. We actually got them to play with us. Neither one is a natural on a broom, which makes Neville laugh but makes Hermione downright mad. She's the kind of person that does absolutely everything well, from school work to knitting to handwriting to magic to first aid to dancing. So the fact that she's not the best on a broom, which she of course equates somehow with magic, really puts her off. I think she might be afraid of heights, and possibly of excessive speeds, either of which would seem to be a deal breaker if you're wanting to play pick-up Quidditch. Ginny took her under her wing, though, and gave her her own broom to ride and took one of the school brooms for herself. Ginny can make a push-broom perform for her, she's just that good. That's one of the advantages of growing up with all those big brothers—she's a whiz on a broom.

I helped Neville out. He's really not that bad—not afraid, anyway. Just a bit clumsy. But we didn't play too hard and bent all sorts of rules and at Hermione's insistence didn't even use the bludgers. She had an absolute fit when Ron started to get one out. Said that I was in bad enough shape already without getting hit on the head with a ball made of solid iron. But then she muttered that maybe it would hit Ron and rearrange his brains a bit and knock some common sense into him. He muttered back that it didn't seem to do a bit of good for the twins. He's got that right. With their shared brains and creativity, the Wizarding World had better watch out. You never know what they'll be up to together in a few years but I'm really glad I helped get them started.

Well, we managed to finish the Quidditch game with no really serious injuries and then Ron and I managed to talk the kitchen elves into packing us a picnic dinner. I asked Minerva if we could eat down by the lake and she let us, providing we got in by dark and with all the typical conditions like no swimming at this time of year and don't leave any trash out there and don't throw chicken bones in the lake because they might get picked up by the giant squid and splinter and get lodged in its intestines and cause a perforated bowel. (I admit I made that one up. That's what Aunt Marge always told Dudders when he wanted to feed her stupid dog chicken bones—though it's not like there was much left to them once he finished sucking out all the marrow. I tried to drop as many as I could. I hated that dog. Anyway, I'm not sure that squid have intestines and bowels, and doubt that something we'd ever learn at Hogwarts in any case.) We ran into Luna and invited her to come along.
with us and it was just the six of us, the same six that got into all that trouble last year.

That seems so long ago now. It's been nearly a year since Sirius fell and somehow I've gotten through it. Honestly, those first few weeks back at the Dursleys, before the accident and getting sent back to Hogwarts and then to Shell Cottage with you, I didn't think anything could ever hurt as much. I felt guilty then, like I somehow caused his death, but sometimes I feel just as guilty now. Guilty because I don't think about him so much anymore. Guilty because that gaping hole in my life in just...gone. It's so stupid to think that losing Sirius could cause a gaping hole...because really, I didn't know him all that well. But I guess it didn't matter because I knew he was there for me—only a letter away.

I'm getting sappy again, aren't I? I'm blaming Ginny for it, you know. My sappiness barrier has come down because somehow, when you get a girlfriend, the brain chemicals get all mixed together and when you used to roll your eyes and look sideways at your male friends when a girl got all weepy, now you put your arm around her and hug her and tell her it will be fine and you MEAN it and you WANT her to feel better and all. It happened to Ron when he was dating Lavender—I saw it more than once—and it happened with Dean and Ginny and now it's happening to me. I'm pretty sure the culprit is found in girls' saliva and is transmitted through kissing. Looks like I'm just going to have to live with it if the alternative is not kissing.

Well, there was one more thing I wanted to tell you. When we got in from our picnic by the lake last night, we ran into the headmaster. He was in the Entry Hall standing with his hands clasped behind his back looking up at the house points hourglasses. As we walked past him, he greeted each of us but then told me he needed to see me up in his office. For a minute, the bottom of my stomach just dropped. I thought it was time to go after one of the horcruxes. I think he could tell I was nervous, because he smiled and shook his head a little bit. Hermione, Ron and Ginny wanted to hang around and wait but he sent them back up to the common room and told them I'd be along shortly. Anyway, when we got up there he wanted to talk about my friends. He asked who I'd told about the horcruxes. He was obviously glad that I hadn't told Ginny and he more or less (more more than less) told me not to tell her—that enough people know already and that knowing about them could put her in danger—even make her a "target." Then it got even weirder—he asked what Mr. and Mrs. Weasley thought about us dating. To tell you the truth, Severus, I haven't thought about that one bit and I don't even know if Ginny has owled them about it. It's only been a week! And I'm her third boyfriend—it's not as if they're not used to the idea already. He sent me off a few minutes later and told me to give "priority" to thinking about the horcruxes—what they are and where they might be found.

You know, I'm not stupid, Severus. I can tell he thinks I shouldn't be starting a relationship with Ginny right now. I wanted to tell him to go have a swim with the giant squid—I really did—but I behaved myself and just answered his questions and pretended to be dense and clueless. I know I'm being selfish and I know he doesn't have a lot of time left but I might not get another chance with Ginny. Hell, I might not get another chance with anyone.

Oh yeah—there was one more thing. Minerva showed up outside my Potions class at the end of the day Friday and she had Ginny with her. She hauled us both up to the infirmary and sat us down in Madam Pomfrey's office for "the talk." Ginny had trouble keeping a straight face—she's already been through this a couple times as you know but it was all new to me. Could it possibly have been any more embarrassing? Those stupid house-color models? John Thomas and Regina? Would you want to see them in red and gold? PLEASE! I swear Minerva was covering her face with her hand to hide her smile, not to be polite while she coughed. If the intent was to make a boyfriend and girlfriend afraid of their own genitalia, I think they succeeded.

I've rambled on long enough, Severus. I'm looking forward to reading the answers to all those
A schedule change to accommodate a special Transfiguration project for the sixth-years resulted in no Defense class on Monday but a double on Tuesday. The previous week, Snape had dueled Theodore Nott on Wednesday and Daphne Greengrass on Friday. The Gryffindors were thus understandably nervous on Tuesday when, with twenty minutes left in the double period, Professor Snape closed his textbook and looked out at the class, scanning their faces for a likely victim. His eyes settled on Harry.

"Potter," he snarled. Harry didn't think his voice held all the venom it usually did, but he doubted anyone else would notice. At least Severus had managed to spit when he said his name.

"Sir?" answered Harry. He tried to convey confidence he did not feel in his response.

Snape fixed him with a level stare and a disdainful sneer. "Stand up. Do you intend to duel me sitting there?"

Harry stood and walked quickly to the spot where the students who had dueled the professor previously had stood. He stood there, wand in hand, feeling very exposed. Severus moved to his designated position and nodded to Harry.

"Same rules as the previous contests. Begin."

Fortunately, dueling was instinctive to Harry. He stuck to the spells he could predictably do nonverbally—Petrificus Totalus, Tarantallegra, Rictusempra—throwing in a "Stupefy" and an "Obscuro" from time to time, but those he still did verbally. So far, Hermione had been the only student who'd managed to actually hit Snape with anything. While Harry danced around, avoiding the disarming spells that were growing progressively closer together, Snape hardly moved. Miniscule wand motions seemed to be enough for him to cast strong shields that repelled Harry's every effort.

Finally, frustrated, Harry aimed his wand very precisely at his professor and called out "Cutis Sedis."

Snape's mouth dropped open in surprise as a very well-done shaving charm zipped by his cheek, erasing his late-afternoon stubble and leaving him absolutely speechless.

No one moved. No one said a word. Snape raised his hand to his cheek and rubbed it with his fingertips.

"Forfeit," he finally said. "That spell was not in your Defense Curriculum. Class dismissed."

Harry watched him stride briskly to the door to his office behind his desk. He opened the door, stepped inside and closed it immediately behind him. Harry stared at the door a long moment before returning to his desk to pack up his books. Inside the office, Severus Snape cast a quick Silencio, sat down behind his desk and laughed harder than he had in quite a long, long, long time.

-Severus-
"He hit me with a shaving charm from across the room," Severus said as he and Minerva sat together on the loveseat in her office, drinking red wine and eating a plate of cheese and crackers the house elves had prepared. "Didn't even nick me."

"His precision spellwork is improving dramatically," said Minerva. "Though his Transfiguration practicals are a bit lacking…he was unable to turn his armadillo into an ashtray today."

"Turning an armadillo into an ashtray is hardly practical, Minerva," said Severus. "Hardly anyone smokes these days and armadillos are a bit hard to catch even if you do need someplace to tap out your cigarette."

Minerva rolled her eyes, not deigning to respond.

"Albus grows weaker by the day," said Severus after a long quiet moment in which they both sipped their wine and nibbled their cheese.

"I know," she answered. "I can see it in his eyes."

"He has asked me to do something I am loath to do," said Severus a few moments later. "He does not want the Malfoy boy to succeed…"

"In killing him? I should say not," said Minerva idly. She tensed and turned her head toward him. "No. Severus, you cannot…"

Severus drained his wine and stood up. "If not me, then who?" Would you like to volunteer?"

Minerva bristled. "No one need do it. The curse will take care of it for him. It may be crass to say so, but it is the case. No one can live forever."

"Unfortunately, the curse is not working as quickly as Draco Malfoy," answered Severus.

"Then stop Malfoy," said Minerva. "We can expel him—send him back to his parents…there is ample cause."

Severus shook his head. "Albus refuses. He claims it is tantamount to murder. Draco will be killed if he does not succeed."

"Heads you win, tails I lose," said Minerva sadly.

"A catch-22," agreed Severus.

"What do we do, then?" Minerva filled both wine glasses and pressed Severus' back into his hand.

"We wait," said Severus. "We wait."

21 May, 1997

Wednesday

Dear Harry:

I have not asked you lately what you plan to do with your life once your life is entirely your own to enjoy. You have spoken in the past of becoming an Auror. After your performance in class on Tuesday, I stand ready to encourage you at nearly any career you desire where precise control of
spells is required. That shaving charm…not only did it surprise the hell out of me (your intention, I assume), but it was executed in such a way that not only was my cheek perfectly shaved but my nose remained blissfully intact. You might have elicited more cheers from your classmates had you taken off a bit of my nose, actually, though I gather they were shocked into silence. A curious spell to use in a duel, but one so innovative and original that I had to bite my tongue to prevent myself from awarding Gryffindor House ten points.

Now I will attempt to answer some of your questions.

Yes, I play the piano, though not frequently, and not as well as you might think after so many years of lessons. When I am feeling particularly stressed, I will make my way to the headmaster's quarters where a particularly fine and well-tuned upright waits for me. Albus uses it to hold a particularly ornate candelabra, photographs of his family and a very fine cut glass bowl full of those cursed lemon drops. It is only opened and played when I demand a session with it.

I did not play football in my neighborhood growing up. I was far younger than the majority of the children and the neighborhood itself was certainly lacking in open or common areas. The older boys played on the streets, kicking their balls to each other and frequently breaking shrubs and incurring the wrath of Mrs. Goodfellow across the street. I was not much inclined to team sports, being a rather solitary child, but I did like to watch the boys when they played on the street, if only to watch little Mrs. Goodfellow waddle outside in her pink house dress and dig the offending ball out of her hydrangeas, giving us all a very good view of her garters as she bent over nearly double to find the football. I don't know what she did with those footballs; she always took them inside with her. I imagine when she died her family found a whole room full of them.

I was not among the fortunate few to have played Quidditch on my house team here at Hogwarts. I do enjoy the game, however, and went to all the matches while I was a student. My favorite fruit? These questions seem to be rather random, Harry, but I'll answer them even though you may fall over dead from boredom by the end of the letter. My favorite fruit is the peach. And no, this is not an invitation for you to present me with peach-scented shampoo or body-wash for Christmas. I like to eat peaches, not wear them on my person, and am particularly fond of them in pies.

You do realize, do you not, that wizarding children generally do not get chicken pox? Even half-bloods and Muggle-borns are usually immune. So like you (I am sure), I never had chicken pox. I did have a pretty nasty case of dragon pox, however, while I was in my third year here at Hogwarts. And why do you presume that my favorite class was Potions? Perhaps it was actually Defense Against the Dark Arts? Or Arithmancy? But you didn't ask for my favorite, did you? You asked for my second favorite, which was, hands down, Astronomy. My love of Astronomy, unfortunately, lasted only until Professor Underhill turned up pregnant during my fifth year. I was so disillusioned that this veritable goddess of a woman had reproduced with old Professor Halibut, the Charms professor that preceded Flitwick, that I nearly insisted on seeing proof that they were married (they were) and that Halibut was one hundred percent human (debated still to this day). My least favorite class was always Defense Against the Dark Arts—most likely for the same reason it has been one of your least favored. The professors were mediocre at best, atrocious at worst, and to be frank, defending myself against the Dark Arts was really not a priority for me at the time.

Ties are not stupid. They may be ugly or uncomfortable, true enough, but not stupid. The uniforms have remained largely the same, except that we did not wear Muggle trousers under our robes. I trust you already know that (having explored a certain Pensieve that was left unguarded in my office last year). Yes, Harry, it is wizarding custom to go au natural beneath the robes, though students at school, prey to pranks from all sides, do wear underclothing. Only in the last ten years or so has it become acceptable and common place to wear a skirt or trousers with the robe over the top. I imagine you are lamenting the freedom that those of my generation enjoyed at Hogwarts.
Of course we had Hogsmeade weekends. What would the professors do with us all year if we had to bounce around inside the castle and weren't able to raid Honeydukes or Zonko's on the weekends? Both shops were there when I was at Hogwarts, along with a pastry shop which has since closed. I was always fond of red licorice and Honeydukes still sells a very tasty variety in "whip" format as well as cherry licorice "fish" and a box of Bertie Botts Licorice Flavored Beans.

Next letter please limit yourself to three questions. This is getting ridiculous.

Your next question pertained to my free time. In my free time, Harry, I studied. I went to a very special room with lots of books called "the library." Sometimes I went to Professor Slughorn's classroom to practice potions. By the time I was a fifth-year, he had given me a corner of the lab for myself and I began my own modifications to the potions we studied then. I also began making up my own spells during fifth year. I was fascinated by spell crafting and convinced there must be a new twist on almost every known spell. I was determined to create them to please the older Slytherins, to get the attention I so craved. And that is an object lesson on how to royally screw up your life.

I did not have my own owl. I used our family's owl—well, my mother's owl—for necessary correspondence. The owl's name was Winston, named, as you might guess, for the Prime Minister and statesman during the Second World War. The owl was named so solely for the similarity in appearance. It, however, did not smoke cigars (although it was an ill-tempered thing...I would not have been too surprised to find it hanging about the billiard hall, drinking and smoking).

Ahh! Down to only two questions.

Is the Hogwarts food the same as when you were here? Yes, it is. House elves live a very long time and have very long memories and are very set in their ways. The appearance of the cake with the buttercream icing the other day was so unusual that Horace Slughorn asked the Headmaster if we had new house elves working in the kitchen.

Filch has always been around. Mrs. Norris, however, replaced a scrawny, old, skeletal feline Filch called "Mr. Fish & Chips." Don't ask.

I feel a celebration is in order for having gotten through all of those questions.

I noted, Harry, in your letter that you referred to your father as "James." Let's set this one to right immediately. James Potter was and is your father. It is he that helped create you, who rejoiced when you were born, who named you, who loved you and who died protecting you. He gave you more than that messy mop of hair and your myopia. He deserves a title, Harry. It will not and does not offend me in the least that you refer to him as "father" or "dad." I am indeed fortunate to be able to carry on in his footsteps with you and would not be able to do so but for his sacrifice. Perhaps you could refer to him as "my first dad" if you feel you need more clarification.

And what is this about getting the Weasley twins started? Are you sure you want to reveal something like that to a teacher at Hogwarts who is forever confiscating candies and sweets that make the user vomit, turn colors, sprout feathers, develop a serious nosebleed, faint, grow curly horns like a mountain sheep or become so flatulent that one or more of the previous outcomes occur (fainting, vomiting, turning green) in those forced to remain in the room?

While this letter has been, in general, frivolous and light, except for one or two items, I do want to address one more serious matter. You are correct, I believe, in your assessment of the Headmaster's intentions in speaking with you on Sunday night about your relationship with Miss Weasley. He does have much on his mind of late, but his problems are not all your problems. He was once a boy of sixteen, just like you are, and while he may have dealt with issues most sixteen-year-olds did not face, he also took time, I am sure, for love, and fun, and picnics by the lake. I think sometimes he has
forgotten that. His time may be growing short, Harry, and he is old, and wise, but he is not too old to remember what it was like to be sixteen.

In parting, may I say that the "talk" given by Madam Pomfrey and Minerva did not always involve the props that are currently used. When I was in school, the fourth-year boys were all marched into the infirmary one day for a similar talk. We were taught "appropriate physical contact" and it was modeled by two professors, the only two married ones on staff—Professors Vesta Armistice taught Muggle Studies and Professor Hector Armistice taught Arithmancy. They were ancient to us then—probably in their 70s—and to be forced to watch them model "appropriate" hugging, hand-holding and kissing was akin to being forced to watch vultures peck apart road kill, though not nearly as appetizing.

Regards,

Severus

That same evening, after finishing the light-hearted letter, Severus was interrupted by an unexpected summons from the Dark Lord that took him to a very small and "intimate" gathering where the fall of the Ministry was orchestrated, concurrent with the fall of Hogwarts and her long-time headmaster. Severus got his first inkling of what Draco was really up to—opening up Hogwarts somehow to an invasion by Death Eaters. It took every drop of ice cold blood in his body to make it through the rest of the meeting, to participate in planning a pure-blood school where all legitimate magical children would come together to be taught and to understand their inherent superiority. It would be a new Hogwarts led by a new headmaster. Severus was sick to the point of nausea when he returned to his quarters that night.

The headmaster was waiting for him there.

"Albus?" Snape dropped his mask on a chair and faced his superior. "What is it?"

Albus simply nodded over to the thick wool rug near the hearth. Severus’ eyes followed. Harry lay sleeping there, curled up tightly in his Animagus form.

"What happened tonight, Severus?" asked Albus. "Neither Poppy nor Minerva could calm him or convince him to Occlude. He was distressed to the point of near panic. Poppy gave him a mild sedative and Minerva was finally able to coax him into transforming, but not until we brought him here. He did say that you were not in pain, but he remained resolutely silent and stubborn about anything else."

Severus had dropped to his knees on the rug. He reached out and ran a hand down Harry's back. The tightly furled animal did not stir. Severus sat back on his heels and regarded the animal a moment longer then stood and faced Albus.

"Tonight we planned Hogwarts under the new order," he stated, the bile rising in his throat again at the thought of what Hogwarts would become under his leadership. "If Harry was privy to any of it..." He gazed at the sleeping deer as he spoke. "Until now, he has accepted that he would not be coming back here for his seventh year. That alone was hard enough to swallow. But now he will have glimpsed what Hogwarts will be like for those who do come back."

"Like Ginny Weasley," stated Albus.

"Like Ginny Weasley," agreed Severus. "Among others."
He sank onto the couch and stared at the fire. Neither man spoke again for a very long time.

Chapter 40

A/N: To the reviewers who asked about my use of the word "legitimate" in reference to the students at Hogwarts in the coming year. I am referring to their magical inheritance, not whether they were born of two wedded parents. In short, Voldemort will require proven blood purity for incoming students.

Chapter 40

May 22 – 27

-Harry-

He woke in the early morning hours and transformed back into Harry without conscious thought. He was cold, even on the thick wool hearth rug, so he crawled up on the end of the sofa and fell asleep almost immediately, huddled up in the corner with his shoes still on. He slept there until six o'clock, when Severus shook his shoulder lightly. Harry opened his eyes and stared at him for a long moment, blinking as he tried to clear his mind and remember why he was in the same room as Severus.

"You're back," said Harry at last, rubbing his eyes and moving to sit upright.

"We need to talk—before you return to your common room." Severus sat down on the opposite end of the sofa. He was already fully dressed and his hair was still damp from the shower.

Harry rubbed his eyes yet again. Where to start?

"You're…you're going to be headmaster," he said at last, his voice not much more than a hoarse whisper.

Severus' voice was just as quiet when he answered. "If he has his way, yes."

"Oh, he'll have his way," said Harry. He dropped his head against the back of the sofa. "I should be relieved, shouldn't I? That you'll be in control here? That you'll be safe…"

"Relieved?" questioned Severus. He laughed, the sound harsh and abrupt. "What else did you hear, Harry? Before you transformed?"

Harry rubbed his head. Sighed. "I didn't want to listen, Severus. Not really," he said, still talking in a voice not much above a whisper, as if the subject material was easier to approach this way. "But you were hurting so badly…Dumbledore kept asking if you were in pain and I told him you weren't— because it wasn't physical pain, was it?" He looked up at Severus then, his eyes tired, his expression raw and open.

Severus shook his head. "No. Though sometimes I think I'd prefer physical pain to mental anguish."

"Because of what he's planning…what you have to execute."
Severus looked over at Harry sharply. "What exactly did you hear, Harry?" he asked again.

"The school. Purebloods only. Ethnic cleansing. He sounds like some sort of Hitler all over again."

"It is speculative, Harry," answered Severus. "His plans depend on the Ministry falling…"

"Yeah, I heard some of that too," said Harry with a guttural laugh. "I don't have any doubt he can make that happen."

Severus was quiet for a long moment. Harry's voice finally broke the silence.

"Promise me something. Promise me you'll make sure Ginny is safe. And Neville and Luna too. Promise me you'll watch out for them."

"Harry…"

"Promise me." Harry turned his head toward Severus. He was focused, intent, utterly and completely serious.

"I will do what I can," answered Severus at last. "But I cannot guarantee…"

"Promise me!" Harry's voice held a desperate sort of threat. "Or I'll take them all with me. I swear I will."

Severus dropped his own head into his hands. "I promise," he said at length. "I will watch out for your friends. But Harry, I cannot promise that nothing will happen. I do not have the ultimate power…"

"Then get them out of here," said Harry softly. "Send them away. Find a way to get them home with their families if things get too bad."

The two were quiet for several more minutes as Harry tried to wake up into this new reality and Severus into his.

Finally, Severus stood. "Do you require an unbreakable vow?" asked Severus. "If so, we must have a third person to bind it. It will have to be one of your friends—Mr. Weasley or Miss Granger. Or the Headmaster himself. No one else may know."

He looked down at Harry and until Harry looked up and caught his gaze. They stared at each other.

"No," answered Harry, his eyes still locked with Severus'. "You promised, man to man. That's enough." He stood up and held out his hand to Severus. Severus looked at the proffered hand and took it, knowing as he did so that the simple handshake bound him more than an unbreakable vow ever would.

24 May, 1997

Saturday

Dear Severus:

I slept like a log Thursday night, and Friday night too. By all rights I should be tossing and turning every night, thinking about next year and how it will be for you especially. I never thought about it much before—about who would run Hogwarts once Dumbledore couldn't anymore. The thing is that I put you in a really dangerous place, don't I? Voldemort putting you in that position—well, it means
he trusts you and he truly believes you're completely loyal to him. You're that good, aren't you? And now I'll be running all over the country and maybe the world trying to undo him, and you'll want to help me and know what I'm up to but Severus, you can't. I get that. To keep this place safe and to do it in such a way that he thinks you're working for him no matter what you have to have 100% of your mind on what's going on here. Hell, 100% won't even be enough, will it? I have a feeling that I'm going to have to radically alter what I think of as "safe" when it comes to Hogwarts.

I know this is all a plan in his head but it's more than a plan—it's evil at work, putting all the chess pieces in position to his advantage, ignoring all the rules about how you can move pieces around the board. He's pushing pawns ahead three spaces at a time then moving them sideways and is really careful to keep the king surrounded by strongmen, rooks that can just barrel forward and bishops that can strike out on the diagonal.

Listen, I know my analogies aren't great, but I know you're in more danger than I can possibly understand. I don't know how I'm going to manage this hunt without your help but I'm going to. I have to. If you can keep my friends here as safe as possible then that's enough. I can do my part and lie low so you don't worry about me. If I can figure out a way to let you know how I'm doing from time to time, I will, but you're just going to have to believe in me, alright? Believe that wherever I am things are fine, and don't believe everything you hear from others, especially the Prophet.

And I want to apologize to you about Wednesday night. I knew when you got summoned. I felt it right away, but it wasn't blazing pain like usual. I went down to Minerva's office to tell her and by the time I got there the pain was almost gone but I went in anyway. She wanted me to occlude but I argued with her that it was probably a false alarm since I couldn't feel anything anymore. She ended up calling Dumbledore and he confirmed you were gone. By the time he got down to her office I was starting to feel you again. Not pain, though. Like I told you already it was mental—it was more like anguish. Like I felt when Sirius fell through the veil—when I wanted to run after him. I'm not sure how I heard what I did—the parts about how Hogwarts is only going to be for "legitimate" magical children with two magical parents. I'm thinking of all the people I know who think they're coming back to Hogwarts next year…who may not be after all.

But you know what? This makes it all more personal for me and gives me even more reason to find and destroy the pieces of the soulless bastard and then come after whatever is left inside his current incarnation.

It's just so hard to think about all this on days like today, when the sun is shining outside and Ginny is sitting on the floor in front of me doing her homework and she's bending over writing an essay and her hair is loose and falling to one side of her neck. Her neck is so perfect. She's got freckles there—well, she's got freckles everywhere, I guess. I mean, everywhere I've seen. Not that I've seen everywhere… You know what I mean!

I can't make time speed up or slow down and I can't do a damn thing to find any horcruxes before school is over so I'm going to try to enjoy a few more weeks and pretend everything is normal. I'm not going to forget about what's coming, but I'm just going to force myself to wait for it and try my best to make the most of every minute I have left here, and every moment with Ginny, and every word in every one of these letters, and especially in your letters back to me.

And I really loved your last letter. It was great hearing more about you in your words, except for that last part about those two married professors and having to watch them kiss each other. Modeling appropriate behavior was bad enough—can you imagine if they had to model inappropriate behavior? So, the mediwitch says "And now the professors are going to show you some examples of unacceptable physical contact." Then the old guy puts his hands up the back of the old girl's robes and unhooks her bra or something. Or they start making out on the sofa and she slips her leg… Well,
anyway, I'm sure glad you didn't have to suffer through THAT.

By the way, I didn't know that wizards don't get the chicken pox. That makes a lot of sense now. When I was about seven, Dudley got the chicken pox. He had a rotten case of them—I swear every inch of his skin had them, even on his scalp and inside his ears and everywhere. He was miserable. Aunt Petunia did everything she could to infect me—she wanted to "get it all over with" at once instead of having to put up with me when Dudley was all better. I had to use the same washcloth he'd used, drink from the same cup, help put the lotion on him. But I never got them. Aunt Petunia was so angry with me. They all called me a freak of nature after that.

They'd probably think I was even more freakish if they thought I was one of those wizards who goes "au natural" beneath his robes. Really? The more I thought about this one, the more I wanted to go puke up my lunch. So, guys like Wilkie Twycross might be lolling about with no pants on? Or Dedalus Diggle? Or Professor Flitwick? And women too? No. Don't answer that. I don't want to even think about Minerva and that scenario. No! I just did. I am going to have to have Hermione Obliviate me immediately.

As for "Mr. Fish and Chips"…really, Severus? You expect me to believe that Filch had a cat named "Mr. Fish and Chips?" Next you'll be telling me that "Mr. Fish and Chips" had a brother named "Mr. Spotted Dick" and a sister named "Mrs. Toad in the Hole?" if there was a cat before Mrs. Norris, it was surely Mr. Norris. Of course, Mrs. Norris ratted him out when he was snoozing on a window ledge behind a suit of armor after curfew and he rotted away in a dungeon in detention.

I'm going to go ahead and tell you about Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, but I'd prefer that you keep this to yourself to protect the shadow investor involved. After I won the Triwizard Tournament, I gave the winnings to Fred and George to use to start their joke shop. I didn't want the money at all but Fudge made me take it. I really thought it should be used to make people laugh again. And they have made me laugh with it, really. I guess I didn't laugh too much when they pranked me with the crack-riding Quidditch-themed y-fronts (I can't believe I ever accepted those from Fred and George but I really liked the bat and bludger design) but the voice-changing bubblegum was wicked. It made me sound like Minerva as long as I kept it in my mouth and chewed it. I sat out in the corridor under my invisibility cloak while Ron and Neville and Seamus hid in a stairwell. When other students approached I'd yell out something like "And that'll be 10 points from Slytherin, Mr. Goyle, for excessive flatulence in Transfiguration today" or "5 points from Hufflepuff, Mr. McMillan, for failing to wipe yourself thoroughly after using the facilities after lunch." The best part was when we got Hermione. She and Ginny were walking back to the dorm together and I said "Miss Granger, please see me in my office after dinner. I'm afraid you answered the bonus question incorrectly on your exam today and only received a 100%.

Fred and George really are brilliant, Severus. I think they could really make a mark in the world once they get all this joking out of their systems.

And thanks for what you said about my dad. You're right. It doesn't make him any less my father because I have you in my life now. I really think he'd want me to have someone like you since he can't be here himself. I think he might petrify you first and then use incarcerous and ask you a lot of questions like "What's Harry's favorite food?" and "Who's his favorite Quidditch team?" and "What was his favorite plushie when he was a baby?" Then he might ask some hypothetical stuff, just to be sure that I came first in your life. Like "If you were dumped in the lake at Hogwarts and you could only save Harry or a vial of phoenix tears, which you would save?" and "If you had raised Harry, would you have dressed up as Father Christmas and entertained a room full of 6-year-olds if the hired Father Christmas hadn't shown up?"

You said I could have three more questions. Because I enjoyed your last answers so much, here are
some more. What was it like the first time you taught a Potions class at Hogwarts when you came back here to teach? What's the most memorable gift you have ever received? And was Madam Hooch born a woman? (that one was from Ron—honestly!)

Regards,

Harry

/W/

"Want to take a walk outside, Ginny?" asked Harry after he rolled up his letter. He'd read it over twice, hoping he had managed to turn his thoughts, and therefore Severus', toward more pleasant, ordinary, casual things. Throwing that question in there about Madam Hooch (which Ron had posed in fourth year, though not recently) was brilliant, he thought. Just the right touch to make Severus roll his eyes and go into lecture mode. He really couldn't wait to hear it.

"Sure, Harry. Want to go see Hagrid?" Ginny stood up and stretched, stacked up her books but left them on the study table. Ron lunged for the half-finished candy bar she'd left as well—it was a Muggle variety, a Cadbury Crunchie. Fred and George had shipped them an assortment and Ron, of course, had finished his off expeditiously.

"Leave it, Ron," threatened Ginny, turning from sweet and cuddly girlfriend to terror-producing little sister in the blink of an eye.

"But your girlish figure!" protested Ron, quickly moving into dangerous territory. "You're going to get fat just like Aunt Muriel…"

Ginny's wand was out in the blink of an eye, leaving Ron with lips so fat that the lower one draped down over his chin and the upper one swelled up and hit his nose, leaving him unable to use his nostrils for breathing.

His protests were totally unintelligible. He sounded like a person trying to talk underwater. Harry thought he could distinguish the words "Mum" and "kill you" but he couldn't be sure. To make matters worse, the jinx must have affected Ron's salivary glands because rivulets of drool were dripping out of his mouth onto the table and alas, splashing on the Crunchie bar.

"Guess you can have that now if you want it," said Ginny with a sweet smile as she took Harry's hand.

"Here, Ron." Harry reached into his pocket and tossed another Crunchie bar at him. "Try one without the drool."

Ron caught the chocolate bar.

"Angh-koo," he said.

Harry grinned and followed Ginny out the portrait hole.

-Severus-

Severus was sitting on a blanket on the seashore, wearing his swimming shorts and a Beatle's t-shirt depicting the fab four crossing Abbey Road. The t-shirt was damp and snug. Severus' hair was damp too, the ends of it wetting the collar of his shirt. He had a parchment, a quill and a bottle of ink and
was trying to answer a series of questions as accurately as possible.

1. *Harry's Birthday*

He carefully wrote out "July 31, 1980."

2. *Eye Color*

Easy. "Green."

3. *Favorite Dessert*

Ahhh. They'd covered that one this summer, and how could Severus not know with as many times as he'd seen the boy devour treacle tart in the Great Hall?

4. *Name of closest living relative*

Severus scowled as he printed "Petunia Poor Excuse for a Human Being Dursley" and added, in parentheses, "Horse-faced bitch."

5. *Best Friend*

"Ron Weasley," wrote Severus. He added an "s" to "Friend" and then wrote in "Hermione Granger."

6. *Name of Pet or Familiar*

"Hedwig, a Snowy White Owl," he wrote, "and three eggs." He'd checked with Hagrid on Sunday and Hagrid had confirmed that Hedwig and MacKenize had indeed produced a clutch.

7. *Parents' Names*

"Lily Evans Potter and James Potter, deceased," he wrote carefully, adding "Severus Snape, living for the time being" on a second line.

8. *Best School Subject*

Another easy one. "Harry is gifted in Defense Against the Dark Arts, could produce a corporeal Patronus at the age of 13, has shown proficiency at wandless magic and faced the Dark Lord in one form or another five times and lived."

9. *Favorite Quidditch Team*

Hmmm. A stumper. Harry had, to his knowledge, never seen one of Britain's teams play. He'd better go with the obvious. "Chudley Cannons," he wrote.

10. *If you died tomorrow, what would Harry say when he delivered your eulogy?*

"I need help with a question," said Severus, getting the attention of the proctor.

"Which one?" James Potter walked across the sand toward Severus. "What number are you on?"

"Number 10," said Severus, frowning.

"Number 10 already?" asked James. He scanned the parchment Severus was holding out and whistled. "Not bad, not bad at all."
"Well, what about Number 10, then? It seems rather subjective."

"It is subjective," said James with a curious smile. "But of course, it's the most important question on the test."

"What would he say about you?" asked Severus.

"He was only fifteen months old when I died," said James, smiling fondly. "I suppose he would have said that I made him laugh with his rabbit plushie and that I sang him lullabies and rocked him to sleep and pushed him on the baby swing at the park. That I made him feel safe, and warm, and loved."

He walked away from Severus then, back toward the ocean where the gulls were calling and the surf pounding. Severus stared down at the parchment. What would Harry say in a eulogy for Severus Snape?

That he made him feel safe? And warm? And loved?

He startled awake, the dream fading with consciousness, but he lay in bed for a long while after he woke, perfectly still, recalling the dream in reverse, fixing the details in his brain.

27 May, 1997

Tuesday

Dear Harry:

As I am a brilliant Potions Master, wizard and human being, I believe I have the capacity to devote 100% of my attention to the school, an additional 150% to you and the remaining 50% to other matters such as personal hygiene, recreational reading, the goings on of the British Royal Family and the growing House Elf Liberation Movement. We will not speak of this anymore. You must trust me to take care of myself and my concerns, and you must accept any help I can give you, expected or unexpected. The Dark Lord does indeed play an unconventional and brutal game of chess, but do not forget that brilliant strategy and dumb luck can overcome brute force.

And thank-you, again, for such visual images of the old Professors Armistice. I imagine that had he unhooked her bra we would have heard the flop of those great and monstrous breasts hitting the floor.

And now that I have left you with that image…

I refuse to discuss who goes starkers beneath their robes and who does not, though I might be able to introduce you to old-style wizarding underclothing. I am sure that Albus has a pair of traditional pants somewhere. They are knee-length, and lace up the sides and are often festooned with bows. They feature a drop-seat held up with laces as well. I am quite sure we could get Mr. Filch to agree to model them for you some day. This might require a goodly amount of liquor, but would be well worth the effort and expense. He might even then reveal the names of all his cats that have gone before the current Mrs. Norris. I have an idea, actually, that they have all been Mrs. Norris as creativity is not the man's strong suit.

As for your detestable Aunt Petunia and the chicken pox—I am going to make it my life's goal now to find a way to infect her with chicken pox again, as a Muggle can only get the disease one time. Once I perfect the serum, I will force-feed it to her and then leave her immobilized in a house with
only her son Dudley to care for her. I trust that is adequate revenge for her cruelty? It would actually be more satisfying to me to turn her directly into a chicken and compel her to cross a road whenever anyone tells a "Why did the chicken cross the road?" joke. And if a car, perhaps a sporty little green MG, should happen to hit her as she crossed and turn her into Chicken Kiev, all the better.

I will agree with you, albeit reluctantly, that the Weasley twins have brilliant minds. But I will now forget that you were the one that enabled them in their current business, making you in part responsible for every sweet-induced nosebleed, vomiting session and flatulence attack at Hogwarts this last year. You, in turn, will forget that I allowed that ridiculous shaving charm to penetrate my shields in our classroom duel last week.

And at last I come to your new questions. While I do not know your favorite Quidditch team (could it be the Chudley Cannons?) or the plushie you had as a child (a rabbit?), I can guess that your favorite food is either toast (as you inhale it at breakfast nearly every day) or Treacle Tart. Hypothetically, I would grab you and summon the Phoenix Tears. I am a wizard, after all, and can use magic. However, I would make a deplorable Father Christmas. I am too young, too thin, too dark and too surly. I would have scared you and your friends to death as the affable Father Christmas, promising each child to bring a mountain of green vegetables and some educational reading materials. It would have been better, instead, for me to have arranged to have Albus play the part. He has the requisite personality and beard and I could easily have fluffed him up a bit with some strategic pillows or well placed blubber charm.

Now on to the serious questions.

I was nearly frightened to death the first time I taught—or at least I was in the hour or so before I walked into that classroom. I had fourth-years first, a Slytherin/Gryffindor group, but when I glided into the room and the students immediately quieted I realized I had achieved nirvana. I launched, nearly ad lib, into my speech on stoppering death and the rest is history. I found that I enjoyed teaching students who wanted to learn and who were interested in the subject. I did not enjoy scraping burned potions and body parts off the ceiling or the walls. Nor did I enjoy informing parents that their students were missing body parts or, in some cases, were missing altogether.

My most memorable gift was a watch I received from my mother on my seventeenth birthday. It was a family heirloom, passed down from my Prince grandfather, and I treasured it then and still treasure it now. It is not the kind of watch that tells one where his family members are or if they are in good health. No, this watch tells the time. A simple piece with a specific purpose. I very much love that my watch does not try to be something it is not.

Finally, Madam Hooch. While I would like to remind you that this is an intensely private matter between Madam Hooch and her healers, I will also state that "Ron" is not the first Hogwarts student to have posed this question. I can only say that Madam Hooch has been a "Madam" as long as I’ve been acquainted with her. I have never seen her shave her face, stand up to urinate or smoke a cigar. Hmm. Let me take that back. I have never seen her shave her face or stand up to urinate. I stand corrected.

And now I have a question for you, Harry. If I were to be hit by the Knight Bus tomorrow and you were to deliver my eulogy, what would you say about me?

Regards,

Severus

/
Severus completed his letter and sighed. He felt a bit guilty for asking that question of Harry but since the dream he very much had it on his mind. He imagined, for a moment, an overcast day and a small group of people dressed in dark and somber clothing gathered on the shore of the lake at Hogwarts. Albus was there, and Minerva, and Harry and some of his friends and all of the Weasleys. Filius would be there as well, and Horace, and Poppy, of course, and Pomona and Hagrid. Rosmerta might come up too, and Aberforth. There would be a coffin and a great slab of marble to rest over it, dark gray or black, and a white podium with flowers. Perhaps lilies, or white roses and carnations.

Albus would speak a few words, and Minerva would wipe her eyes with her handkerchief in tartan, and Harry would sit very still and listen, wedged between Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley. And then he would come up to the podium. And say "He did all he could, but in the end it wasn't enough."

No.

There would be no gathering by the lake, no flowers, no white podium, no words from Albus.

It was ridiculous to imagine a funeral for a life destined to be snuffed out in an instant, for a body that would lie forgotten where it fell.

It was enough, he knew, to know he would be missed.

To know he was loved in life, and mourned in death. No matter that there be a dozen mourners in the end, or only one.

________________________________________

Chapter 41

________________________________________

May 29 –June 1

-Harry-

How do you write a eulogy for someone who's alive? Harry had asked Hermione about them, and she'd told him what the Greek root was and how they're supposed to be "good words" that show everyone at the funeral what kind of person the deceased was. She said they should be honest and heartfelt and portray the person in a good light, never a negative one, and if the person speaking believed the words he or she was speaking and was moved by them, everyone else would be as well.

Harry didn't really care if everyone else was moved by his words. But he understood something. He understood that this was his chance to tell Severus all of the things he'd regret not telling him if he were hit by the Knight Bus tomorrow. It was his chance, before the year ended, before they were separated by distance and circumstance, to thank him. To let him know in written words what the year had meant to him.

It didn't make it easier, of course. He thought about it for an entire day and did a sloppy job on his Herbology essay. He finally holed himself up in the library and just wrote it as he felt it. The parchment was a mess when he finished, and he looked rather like Ron did after chewing on his quill for an hour, but he thought he'd gotten his point across.

He wondered why Severus had given him this task. He hoped Severus didn't know something that he, Harry, didn't.
29 May, 1997

Thursday

Dear Severus:

First of all, I don't have a lot of experience with funerals and eulogies. Not that I can remember, anyway. I suppose I wasn't at my parents' funeral, was I? I was too busy screaming in terror when I woke up and saw Dudley coming at me. But I understand what a eulogy is. I've seen them on TV shows, anyway, though I'm not exactly sure TV eulogies are what you hear at normal funerals (not that your funeral would be anything approaching normal...) At first I couldn't believe you were asking me to do this—to imagine that you're dead and I'm having to plan your funeral. (Didn't I write something recently about trying to enjoy the next couple weeks?) But I thought about it last night after I went to bed and I decided it was a good question at the right time. It makes me appreciate even more what I've gained this past year, and what I stand to lose if we don't succeed.

So...here goes. I wrote this out already on another piece of parchment. That one has all the mark-outs and ink blotches and smears. This one should be better. I mean every single word, Severus. I don't want you to do this same exercise for me, though. It would make you too sad. And just so you know, I'm not planning to die, and you'd better not be either.

Eulogy

Severus Snape

1960 – 1997

Other people might get up here and tell you what a great Potions Master Severus was, and what a phenomenal spy, and how brilliant he was at creating new spells and how great he was at Defense. They can tell you about his sharp wit, and his dry humor, and his bitter sarcasm, and how he liked his tea with a dollop of honey and a splash of milk. They might have been his colleagues, or his students, or his friends. But no one here—no one else in the whole world in fact—can stand up here and tell you why he was such a great dad.

I really shouldn't be able to do that either. After all, my first dad died when I was only one. I made it all the way to 16 before I figured out what I had been missing. Well, my brain knew, but my heart didn't. Severus was so good at it, such a natural when it really came down to it, that I absolutely know that I'll be a better dad myself because of him.

I had James Potter at the beginning of my childhood and Severus Snape at the end of it. I inherited some things from James—my hair, my bad eyesight and my knack for getting into trouble. It was his sacrifice, along with my mum's, that made sure I'd live long enough to get to Hogwarts, and I know I can never appreciate that sacrifice and love my birth parents enough for it. But Severus dropped into my life and taught me things I didn't even know I needed to know. Not school things, and not things that were shoved into my brain through a lecture or from a book. I'm going to share with you now some of what I learned from Severus so you can see what kind of father he was. Because if I can make you understand what kind of father he was, you'll understand what kind of man he was too.

Severus didn't get to the age of 36 and decide to go out looking for a kid to mentor, especially a kid like me that was trouble with a capital T. He had plenty on his plate already, believe me. He took me on because the headmaster asked him to teach me Occlumency so I could shield my mind from Voldemort. I was having a rough sort of summer and I thought it was going to get a hell of a lot
rougher once I found out I'd be spending a month with Severus. I imagine that Severus was equally enthused about it. But that summer stretched out into a whole school year, a year where we made each other family and filled in the missing pieces in each other's lives.

Here's some of what I learned from Severus.

You can make a salve to help fade scars away, but some of them have to heal from the inside, and some never heal at all.

Sober-up potions are for wimps; real men ride it out and learn from their mistakes.

Clocks do a hell of a lot more than tell time.

Real men aren't afraid to sing to their sons, as long as it's the Beatles they're singing. And as long as it's not one of Ringo's songs.

Driving a car is like riding a bicycle. You never forget how to do it, and the real joy is in going fast and having the wind in your hair.

Just because you're old, and snarky, and sometimes ill-tempered doesn't mean you can't beat Ron at the Hula Hoop.

Gryffindor fools rush in where Slytherin angels fear to tread.

Being a grown-up is hard work. It's fine to be a kid and to trust the right adult to make the right decisions.

Swimming in the ocean under the stars reminds you of how insignificant you are in the grand scheme of things, and how small your troubles really are.

A shaving charm is a handy thing—it can be used in the bathroom and in a duel.

Actions have consequences.

You don't need magic to heal. Potions heal, but so do hugs.

And he brought my mum back to life for me, well, in a way. He shared his memories of her and I got to see her for the first time in my life through the eyes of someone who loved her. He was her friend, since they were little kids even, and he told me all about her. I got to know my mum finally because of Severus, even though she's been gone for 15 years.

But more than anything else, Severus made me feel like something I'd never felt before in my entire life—a normal kid. Just a kid who makes mistakes, who has fun, who thinks about girls, who skips rocks and plays Monopoly and drives a car and thinks about what he'll do when he's grown up. He set boundaries for me, and held me to them. He gave me choices. He saw right through the scar and he learned to see past the hair and the glasses and even my eyes.

His own eyes weren't really black—they were very dark brown. They were the most intense living things I've ever seen. The skin around them would crinkle when he smiled, which wasn't often, but was all the more special when it happened. I even heard him laugh once. He had the longest fingers. He played the piano. He managed to push me to improve, to grow outside of my comfort zone while at the same time protecting me from myself, from my own insecurities and trust issues and my desire to solve all the world's problems without acknowledging my own.

Amid all the problems he dealt with, and all the responsibilities, and all the demands, I came first. I
know I did. And I know that when he died, if he had even a moment to think about it, he'd have only been sorry to go because of me and how much I need him and how empty my life is going to be now that he's gone.

This last year, my year with Severus, was the best year of my life.

I love you Dad. I'll always love you.

(That last sentence wasn't part of the eulogy.)

And Severus, please…stay away from the Knight Bus. Writing this was hard enough when you're alive.

I guess I should leave you with a question. What's a wizarding funeral like?

Regards,

Harry

Harry was restless all evening. Ginny was studying for her O.W.L.s with the other fifth year girls and Hermione and Ron, now accustomed to Harry spending most of his free time with Ginny, were nowhere to be found. Probably off in the library again. But Harry had spent two hours there earlier writing the eulogy and needed something more active to do. He was itching to run, not one of his morning runs with Ron outside the castle. He wanted to have four feet on the ground, to run fast and uninhibited. But it was dark now, and Minerva would never permit it, nor would Severus, or the headmaster. He considered transforming and running down one of the empty corridors, but he wanted earth under his feet, not stones. Besides, no one was supposed to know he was an Animagus, and he didn't think anyone would fall for the story of a deer wandering into the castle.

Were there earth floors anywhere inside the castle?

Ten minutes later, he was outside the Room of Requirement, pacing back and forth. I need a place to run in my Animagus form. I need a place to run in my Animagus form. I need a place.." A door materialized in front of him. This door looked more like a garden gate and was thick with knobby vines. He reached out and pushed it open. He stepped into a forest clearing. A twig snapped beneath his feet. Narrow paths led off into the trees. The only sound was the whisper of leaves. The ground was a soothing mixture of earth and leaves and moss and pebbles. He dropped his backpack, transformed without thought, kicked and took off at top speed down a path.

But Lightfoot was not alone.

She heard the hooves behind her, saw the motion of an ethereal form before her. She kept running, though, pursuing and pursued, and at length entered another clearing and cantered around its edges, slowing to watch the others, the ghostly stag and the two sparkling does.

Lightfoot changed course and walked cautiously to the middle of the clearing.

The stag lifted its great antlered head and reared up on its hind legs. The two bright does skittered backward a moment, then rallied and circled Lightfoot, beckoning her to follow them. The does were the same but different. Both ghost-like, made of glimmering light, but one more joyful, the other more tentative, hiding in shadows. Lightfoot flew off behind them, the stag at their heels, until the path widened and they ran on side by side, four abreast, a race to an unknown destination, but the joy was in the running, not the winning, and in the company, in the almost-touch of fur on fur, in
feeling all alone in a hopeless quest but in *not* feeling alone in a forest of fears.

Harry thought that was important. He wouldn't understand why for nearly a year.

________________________________________

-Severus-

He had asked him, had he not? He'd asked him for a eulogy, or for some words appropriate for a eulogy. He should not have been as surprised as he was that Harry had *listened* and had delivered what he'd requested.

All because of that damn dream! What was wrong with him? He had nothing to prove, certainly nothing to prove to James Potter of all people. He didn't have to pass a test to prove that he was fit to father Harry. There was no reason in the world to feel inadequate about it. It wasn't as if he were stealing the job from someone else. Not from James who had lost his life fifteen years ago. Not from Sirius who had followed in James' footsteps much more recently. Not from Vernon Dursley who deserved to be wherever James and Sirius were (Severus was sure that if he were there, the Marauders would have a field day with him) and not even with Albus Dumbledore himself who had never quite gotten past Harry's scar, not where it really mattered, anyway.

Still, the dream James haunted him. Haunted him because he *hadn't* haunted him. He'd whistled at his answers, acknowledging that he'd done well. Casually told him what Harry might have said about him in a eulogy. Hadn't disparaged him in the least. Had appeared on his beach, walked in his sand, and hadn't said a damn thing about his Beatle's shirt.

Had it really been a dream?

He picked up Harry's letter again and read, for the fourth time, the words Harry had committed to parchment for him, about him.

*This last year, my year with Severus, was the best year of my life.*

That from the boy who this year learned about horcruxes, and that Albus Dumbledore was dying, and that he couldn't come back to Hogwarts—his home—for his last year, and that his friends' lives were in danger too.

*We made each other family.*

He'd almost forgotten what that felt like.

*I'll be a better dad myself because of him.*

He traced his fingertip along the sentence, ignoring the desire to deny the sentiment. After everything, *everything*, the boy still had hope.

/ 

I June, 1997

Sunday

*Dear Harry:*

I handed you a formidable task and am humbled by your response. I will not dwell on it. You honor me by calling me father; you lighten my heart by giving evidence that you understand the role and
responsibilities of parents and adults.

You have grown up this last year and I have a startling regret that I have somehow missed your childhood. I sincerely hope that I can begin to make it up by being a grandfather to those children you keep threatening to produce. I think I would like that very much. You would have been a good father, Harry, even had I remained Professor Snape to you. You have in your heart most of what is needed—an abundance of love. You will develop the needed patience over time.

I have listened to a fair number of eulogies in my time, but never before one that mentioned Hula Hoops. Please—if I should die—bring one to my funeral and have Ron Weasley Hula Hoop on my grave. Nothing would bring a bigger smile to my face in the afterlife than seeing him gyrate thusly in front of a solemn gathering of mourners, except possibly having Albus lift his robes and shoot the moon at the Dark Lord.

While you asked me not to return the favor, be it favor or not, and write a eulogy for you, I feel that reciprocation is not only due but required. I will not pose my response in the form of a eulogy. I see now that these are the things that should be said—that need to be said—while we are still together, and both still living.

When I recall my life before this year, I remember a driven man but not a happy one. I was successful at some things, and I was trusted. I believed, I truly believed, that it was enough.

But you have turned that life on its ear, challenged my very idea of self, rearranged all my priorities and taken up residence in my life and in my heart. All this to the extent that I do not remember how I filled all those school year evenings before I had letters to write to you.

I know I love you as a father would love a son. I feel protective of you, and proud of your accomplishments, and frustrated when you do not listen to me, and happy when you find fulfillment. While I have always deplored those parents who live vicariously through their children, I understand now the temptation of doing so. Indeed, when I sat through a recent Quidditch game, I was on the edge of my seat from start to finish, knowing you were inside in detention, but knowing as well that the game was somehow, some way, all about you.

You have given me more than I have given you. You have learned to trust me; you are one of a very few who do. You honor me with these heartfelt letters that so often expose your heart and soul to the danger of an acerbic reply. That you trust me not to hurt you is compelling. That you worry for my safety more so. That you call this last year, this particularly hard and unforgiving year, the best one of your life makes me mourn for you those other years that should have been so much more.

We are an unconventional pair, Harry Potter, but we are family and as family, we are in this together, to whatever end, to whatever outcome.

You asked about wizarding funerals. They are similar in many ways to Muggle services as there is a casket, and a body, and a eulogy. However, the body is conveyed to the casket and the casket to the vault or the ground by means of magic. The magic can be showy—fire if sometimes used—or ominous—the casket sometimes appears to sink into the ground. A wizard is typically buried with his wand, though sometimes wands are passed down to a child or other family member. Defiling the grave of a wizard is akin to murder; it simply is not done. Singing is not as common at a wizarding funeral as it is in the Muggle world, though. Monuments tend to be larger, more ostentatious, and epitaphs are frequently used on headstones. Wizards are rarely cremated, though there is no law or stigma against doing so.

It was fortunate that my father died before my mother, as he would never have permitted her a wizarding funeral. He is buried in a churchyard in Manchester. My mother, however, was afforded a
wizarding funeral with all the ceremonies and is buried in the Prince family cemetery in Wales. I did not ever regret separating them in death. They were ill-matched in life and are at least in death at peace.

Unbelievably, I have gotten through an entire letter without mention of the humiliating "talk" and the accompanying props. Until now. I apologize, Harry. It is just too easy to set you up with this subject.

Finally, I thoroughly enjoyed the classroom duel on Friday. Was it not brilliant of me to duel Crabbe, Goyle and Longbottom all at the same time? I was not surprised that Longbottom was the last man standing, though it was ridiculously easy, once he was on his own, to disarm him. I did not mean to disarm him so literally, however, and hope that Poppy has him righted by now.

Your hair is getting shaggy. You need a haircut.

Regards,

Severus

He was warm, relaxed and had finished all of his marking. It was inevitable that Dumbledore would request his presence and put an end to his comfortable evening.

"I believe I have found it, Severus—one of the remaining horcruxes." The headmaster paced between the two windows in his office, holding his right arm against his chest. He stopped and looked at Severus, sighing. "I have a few more details to work out, but I know now where it is. I will be ready to take Harry to retrieve it in a week or perhaps two."

Severus gripped his fingers tightly behind his back.

"Am I to assume it is in some dangerous location, perhaps locked in a vault at the bottom of the Arctic Ocean and guarded by venomous jellyfish?"

Dumbledore gave a half-smile, wistful. "Not quite that inaccessible, Severus," he answered. "But we are talking about Tom Riddle. He will not have made this easy."

Severus nodded fractionally. "And you are still resolute to go alone? Without me?"

Dumbledore turned and walked to the window, looking out across the moonlit grounds.

"We have discussed this, Severus. We cannot risk exposing you…"

"But we can risk exposing Harry?"

The headmaster turned around, but remained silhouetted in the window. "He must understand. He will not comprehend the enormity of this process unless he sees it firsthand."

Severus refrained from speaking. They had been over this already and the outcome was always the same.

"There is something else, Severus," said Albus after a moment. "Something you approached me about last summer, that bears mentioning again."

"You have an answer then?" asked Severus, understanding immediately. His voice was rough with suppressed emotion.
"Perhaps."

"What, then? I pray your suspicions were wrong…"

"My suspicions were not wrong, Severus. And how do you know of my suspicions, anyway? We left it last summer that the link between Voldemort and Harry…"

"You think the boy is a horcrux," spat out Severus. He threw his hands over his face and collapsed into a chair. "You believe he is carrying a piece of the Dark Lord's soul inside."

The Headmaster sat down facing Severus. He looked every one of his substantial number of years.

"Yes. That is what I now believe," he answered. He was very quiet and very serious. "And apparently you, Severus, have come to the same conclusion."

"And have you determined how to destroy the thing without killing Harry?" Severus spoke into his hands, not looking up. He startled when an old but still strong hand grasped one of his wrists and pulled his arm away from his face.

"Look at me, Severus. Please. I know how important this is to you."

Severus lifted his chin and stared at Albus. He searched his face and found no answers.

"Must he die, then?" His voice caught and he thought of Harry licking buttercream icing off of Ginny Weasley's finger, and Lightfoot running through the woods in Godric's Hollow, and Harry swinging slowly as he slept on the hammock on the porch of Shell Cottage and Harry in the infirmary, *I'll be the person you want me to be…*

"No. Not exactly. He must die, so the horcrux will die, but he cannot die, not if I am right about this one thing…"

And in that moment, father resembled son, grasping at hope, keeping darkness at bay.

________________________________________

Chapter 42

________________________________________

June 4 – June 8

-Harry-

He was at the old stove in the kitchen of #12 Grimmauld Place, coaxing a battered copper tea kettle to boil. He arranged chocolate and cinnamon biscuits on a plate while he waited then filled up the milk pitcher. Finally, the tea was steeping and he turned back toward the table and carried the tea service carefully to where Sirius sat waiting, casually tilting his chair back, balancing it on two legs.

"Just like old times, Harry," said Sirius.

Harry considered this as he prepared Sirius' tea. He didn't remember sharing tea alone with Sirius. He handed Sirius a cup, balanced on a matching saucer. Sirius took it and frowned.

"You know I don't like milk in my tea, Harry," he said.

"I'm sorry," said Harry. He looked at the milky tea and shrugged. "That's how Severus drinks his."
"Severus?" Sirius looked at Harry suspiciously. "You're calling Snivellus 'Severus' now?"

"Or Dad," added Harry.

"Dad?" Sirius was agitated. "He's not your dad. You already have a dad, Harry."

"And I have a mum too but she'd not sending me care packages now, is she?" retorted Harry, bristling.

Sirius stared at Harry a long moment.

"No, I suppose she's not, Harry," he said softly. He stirred his milky tea idly. "But Severus, Harry? Severus Snape?"

"Yeah—Severus," said Harry, the ghost of a smile lighting his face as he reached for a chocolate biscuit. He dunked it in his tea and took a bite, swallowed then looked back up at Sirius. "He's good for me, Sirius. He keeps me grounded. He looks out for me."

Sirius scowled. "Can't the headmaster do that, Harry?"

Harry considered that for a moment. "No, he can't."

"Of course he can. He's Albus Dumbledore. Listen, Harry, go talk with him, as soon as you wake up. Tell him…"

"No," repeated Harry. His voice was low but very firm. "He doesn't put me first, Sirius." Sirius straightened up in his chair and stared at his godson. Harry continued. "He'd like to, but he doesn't. He can't. But Severus does, even with everything else he has to do. He balances it, Sirius. He manages to take care of me while spying for Dumbledore and pretending to serve Voldemort."

Sirius picked up his teacup and took a long drink. The cup, with its old-fashioned pink roses and delicate handle shaped like a branch, looked out of place in his weathered fingers with his Azkaban prison number magically tattooed on them.

"He's dangerous, Harry. He's tricked you somehow. You mark my words—you'll be sorry you ever trusted Severus Snape."

Harry dunked his biscuit again and smiled over at Sirius. "No I won't," he answered. "We might have fallen into this relationship by accident, but I'm keeping it on purpose."

Sirius frowned, puzzling over the words. Finally, in the best show of acceptance he could muster, he rested his elbows on the table and put his head in his hands, his body language showing resignation. "If I had lived, it could have been me. I could have been your Dad, Harry."

"I know." Harry reached over and grasped his godfather's forearm. "But that's not how things worked out, is it?" Sirius looked up and the two stared at each other, Sirius searching behind Harry's eyes for…something.

"Be happy for me, Sirius," said Harry. "I deserve this."

"No one deserves Severus Sn…"

"Sirius—" Harry's voice had a warning edge. Sirius threw up his hands, surrendering.

"All right, all right. As long as you're happy," he said grudgingly.
"I am." He decided a change of subject was in order. "I'm dating Ginny Weasley now."

Sirius' pained expression turned into a wide grin. "You are, are you? Brave lad—dating a girl with six older brothers."

Harry grinned, remembering Severus' very similar words. "So how do you take your tea?"

"Two sugars, no milk," said Sirius. He looked intently at Harry a long moment. "And I expect you to remember that next time."

"Next time," agreed Harry.

Harry opened his eyes, the dream still fresh, more like a memory than a dream. He turned over to his side and folded his pillow, turning the cool side to his cheek and closing his eyes, imagining Sirius' face again, his voice, his tattooed fingers. Two sugars, no milk. Next time…

4 June, 1997

Wednesday

Dear Severus:

Hedwig has three eggs. She was suspicious of me, but Hagrid came up with me and she let him have another look—he said there were just three the last time she'd let him near. They should start to hatch this week—that's what Hagrid told me, anyway. I'm not sure McKenzie knows what he signed up for when he decided to court the old girl. Hagrid said it's lots of work, especially for the male. The eggs don't hatch all at the same time. Hagrid explained it all to me—it's something about spreading out the food demand. McKenzie will have to bring back all the food until the babies can swallow it whole. Until then, Hedwig will cut it up and give them pieces they can manage. She's using one of the nesting holes in the owlery, and she's not the only owl nesting. I asked why I never saw baby owls up there all the times I've visited over the years. Hedwig reminded me that birds don't leave the next until they're fully grown—the size of their parents. Their markings may be different but they're not noticeable by their size anyway.

I asked him if he'd try to train them. I'd like for Ginny to have her own owl, and Hermione too. He told me he'd give it a shot, but that owlets raised to maturity by their parents generally are free to just be regular owls. I kind of like that, actually. But then he said that being as both Hedwig and McKenzie are familiars, it might be just as natural for them to hang about wizards. Like everything else in life, I guess we'll have to wait and see.

For some reason, Monday was a really light day for everyone. Hardly any of the professors assigned significant homework. Well, Seamus got a big game of Truth or Dare going and I got talked into playing. I know you know all about the game already, seeing as it was you that assigned most of the detentions, but you did notice that I wasn't one of the ones that got into trouble, didn't you? I just told everyone when we started that Minerva threatened to ground me from Quidditch all of next year if I got into any more trouble and it would be up to her to decide what "trouble" meant. Since everyone knew she took me out of that last game, they figured she was serious. So, every time it was my turn if I chose Dare, they'd give me something to do in the common room. I'm not saying the dares were easy or that they weren't embarrassing, but at least I didn't have to go tell Filch I'm in love with Mrs. Norris and ask if I could take her to my dorm room for the night or slip a love letter under Professor Flitwick's office door or ask Madam Pomfrey to teach me the contraception spell because my girlfriend and I were going to "do it" tonight. No, I had to drink two liters of water and then do fifty
jumping jacks. That was pretty ridiculous but Seamus and Ron especially got a kick out of it. They couldn't get enough of hearing that sloshing sound from my gut. Next time round I had to close my eyes and let them pick a girl to kiss me then try to figure out who it was. Ginny rolled her eyes but let them go on. Thing was, I knew right away it wasn't a girl that was kissing me. I swear I always knew that Colin Creevey had a crush on me! Ron almost wet his pants over that one. So did Ginny. Evil Weasleys. The last one was really the worse, though. I had to let Lavender make up my face like a girl. She squealed—she absolutely SQUEALED when they thought up that one. She ran up to her room and came down with this huge tackle box. I thought we were going fishing for a minute but she opened it and all the girls gave this big "Oooooohhhhh" noise—even Hermione couldn't help herself.

And yes, Severus, I know you've already seen the results. Damn Colin and his camera! Personally, I think that I looked pretty sexy with those sultry bedroom eyes and pouty lips. I even let Ginny and Hermione "do" my hair. That was painful. It involved this potion that smelled like peaches (you probably make it and sell it owl-order, don't you?) and a lot of spray from this old-fashioned atomizer. I shouldn't have pushed Colin off so hard and kneed him in the groin when he tried to slip me the tongue (did I really just tell you that?). He might not have posted that picture of me in the faculty lounge if I'd have just kissed him back.

Well, anyway, it ended up a pretty enjoyable evening. No one got much done, but I figure we need nights like that sometimes. Hermione and Ron got dared to kiss each other but they both turned red and blurted out "Truth" then. Of course, Ron got asked if he liked Hermione and he gave this really ambiguous answer about how she was smart and pretty but that he was only just recovering from his last relationship and he'd rather stay unattached for the time being. Hermione just sat there mouthing "pretty?" silently. I think she would have snogged him right there except that he still had these giant rabbit teeth. It was stupid of him to accept a dare where Ginny got to hex him with whatever she wanted.

I did want to talk about your last letter to me. I really appreciate all the nice things you said. Really. I reread that one so many times. I don't really agree that I've given you more than you've given me, but how about we just "agree to disagree" on that one and get on with it?

And I like my hair! No haircut needed! Especially now that I know what I can do with it with potion and spray…

I am going to order a special black Hula Hoop for funereal purposes. It will become a new wizarding tradition. Within a few years you'll be able to hire professional Hula-Hoopers for funeral gigs, just like you can hire bagpipers now.

Neville's arm is much better. He wasn't quite disarmed you know—just had a very severely dislocated shoulder.

It was kind of sad reading about your mum and dad. But I'm also glad you took care of your mum, in the end, and that she's at peace now.

What was it like growing up with Muggles but knowing you were a wizard?

Wizarding funerals probably aren't a lot different than Muggle ones—well, except for the magic. Reading your description of them made me think of one of your recent letters when you told me to scatter your ashes in the ocean. I think I'd like that too, Severus—no, not scattering your ashes but having you scatter mine. The ocean would be fine, but it would be just as good if you take a long ride in a fast convertible and just let them fly out behind you. Keep a handful, if you remember, and throw them off the Astronomy Tower too. I think I'd like to scatter in the wind over Hogwarts, too, because this has been the best home I've ever had.
On Thursday morning, Harry and Ron went out for their usual run and by seven a.m., when they were headed back to the castle to shower and eat breakfast, walking side by side back toward the gates and the road that led up to the castle doors, they saw a man slip through the gates and start up the road.

Harry squinted to see the man better.

"Hey, that's Remus," said Ron softly.

"You're right," said Harry, taking in the man's appearance from behind. "Remus!"

The man stopped and turned, standing still as Harry and Ron broke into a jog and ran up to join him. He smiled as they approached, looking as worn and wrung out as ever but somehow happy.

"Ron, Harry," he greeted, letting his eyes study his two former students. They settled on Harry and Harry felt conspicuously under a microscope for a moment. Remus' eyes lit up and his mouth curved into a genuine smile. "You boys are looking all grown up. Harry, you've really changed this year."

"He's grown about three inches," said Ron with a laugh. "Must be all the running."

Remus nodded. "Glad to see you getting some exercise. It's a fine morning." He gazed at the sky a moment and Harry followed his eyes, noting the pale waxing moon still low on the horizon.

"Yeah, we've been running for a couple weeks now," answered Harry. He and Ron moved into step beside Remus as they continued to walk toward the castle. "What have you been up to? We haven't seen you all year."

"Order business," answered Remus. "Keeps me busy." He paused, adding "I'm here to see Dumbledore, actually, give him a report." Ron and Harry exchanged a quick look but neither asked Remus to elaborate. They walked in companionable silence until Remus spoke again, his voice intentionally quiet.

"How are things with Professor Snape, Harry? After this summer?"

"I'm going to run on ahead, Harry," said Ron suddenly. "Get my shower in. It was great seeing you again, Remus." He ran off ahead and Harry was unaccountably grateful for his friend's gesture.

"Good," answered Harry. "Still good. We get along now. We're close, even. Outside of school, I mean."

Remus smiled his tired smile. "I've heard," he answered. "I'm happy you've found each other. You both need taking care of…"

"Who's taking care of you, Remus?" asked Harry suddenly, surprising himself with the boldness of the question.

Remus smiled enigmatically. "Oh, there's someone who'd like to," he said. "I'm just not sure if I'm the right one for her…"

Harry laughed and shook his head. "Stop second guessing yourself, Remus," he said with all of the
wisdom and maturity of his nearly seventeen years. "Tell your brain to shut up and listen to your heart."

"You have grown up, Harry," said Remus.

"I'm going with Ginny Weasley now," said Harry.

"Ginny Weasley, eh?" Remus raised his eyebrows. "A girl with six older brothers? I've always known you were brave, Harry, but this…." He trailed off and shook his head.

"Yeah, I keep hearing that," said Harry, looking sideways at Remus and thinking that with the number of times he'd heard that lately, he really ought to be getting worried.

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-Severus-

Severus had been on his best behavior all year—staying away from excessive alcohol knowing that Harry felt the intoxication just the same as he did. But a man has to live, especially a man of thirty-seven, a man with the weight on his shoulders that he was currently carrying, that indeed, he had carried for some time now. He planned his escapade carefully, arranging to meet Aberforth at midnight, when the tavern was getting ready to close. Harry would be asleep by then and Severus would take a sober-up potion as soon as he returned to his quarters.

Ahhh…but for the best-laid plans of mice and men.

He did meet Aberforth, and a handful of the regular patrons who, already two sheets to the wind, were overjoyed to help a newcomer rid himself of his annoying sobriety. At three a.m., he found Aberforth escorting him to the gates of Hogwarts but not all the way to the castle doors as he'd had to all those months ago.

Severus trudged drunkenly up the road and into the castle, managing to do so quietly enough. He staggered down the stairs toward his quarters, getting the password to his chambers out without slurring too badly. Once inside, he sat on the sofa and removed his shoes and thought about the sober-up potion sitting out on his bedside table and his vow to take it as soon as he returned. He felt good. He didn't want to be sober right this moment. He'd sit here for a while and enjoy the feeling, the way his thoughts seemed to be untethered, the glorious weight of his arms, the clumsiness of his usually dexterous fingers. The heaviness of his eyes…the weight of the lids…

Banging on his door woke him on Sunday morning. He grabbed his head and moaned.

"Severus! Open this door at once!" He recognized Minerva's dulcet tones, but could hardly understand the words. Her accent made her speech nearly indiscernible when she was upset.

He staggered to the door and flung it open.

"Madam Pomfrey does not keep hangover cure potions in stock in the infirmary," she stated loudly as she pushed past him and headed to the bathroom. He heard her rummaging inside his medicine cabinet and opening the cabinet doors below the vanity. She returned a minute later with several vials, all marked "H.O.P." in his fine script.

"I am taking all of them," she bristled. "Mr. Potter may need more than one." She looked at him disapprovingly, eyes narrowed, then sighed. "Severus, I do not doubt that you needed last night, and I realize you are new at parenting, but you must think of the potential consequences of your actions." She straightened her shoulders. "I suggest that if you feel the need for a cure for your own hangover,
you brew one yourself. Good day."

With a nod, she was gone, slamming the door behind her. Severus grabbed his head, leaned back against the door and slid slowly to the floor.

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8 June, 1997

Sunday

Dear Harry:

I will start with my apology. What I did was irresponsible, considering that I knew of the potential effects to you should you wake and find me in an inebriated or hung over state. While my intentions were good—I had a sober-up potion waiting for me on my bedside table and had every intention of taking it as soon as I returned to my quarters—I did not carry them out. And because I did not carry them out, I was awakened at 8:30 a.m. by a screaming banshee who demanded entrance to my quarters, cleaned out my entire stock of hangover potions, essentially accused of being an inattentive parent then slammed the door in my face as she left to tend to you. Had I not been reduced to a quivering mass of pounding head, I might have taken offense, or at least chased her down and retrieved one of the potions she pilfered.

I am indeed sorry you woke up ill, and had to endure even five minutes of a hangover that you did not deserve. Minerva returned to my quarters at nine o'clock to pull me off the floor, put me into bed and assure me that my hangover cure had returned you to your normal bubbly self. I reminded her, even as I shielded my eyes from the over-bright lamp she lit in my quarters, that you are not typically bubbly and suggested she might have given you an overdose of the potion. She ignored my comment and took her leave, but in doing so admitted an owl through my front door that flew back to me and dropped a howler onto my bed. The howler was from Poppy, who wanted me to known just exactly what she thought of me having an evening out without taking the precaution of setting out a sober-up potion before I left. If only she knew that I did indeed set it out but selfishly elected to enjoy the lingering feeling of an alcohol high before I killed it with another type of brew.

I enjoyed your most recent letter, Harry. I did want to have a serious talk with you about that photograph that made its way into the teacher's lounge, but am relieved to hear that it was the product of a game of Truth or Dare and not a suppressed desire or hidden tendency. Not that I would mind if you took such care with your hair all the time. Since I am, indeed, the secret proprietor of "Olsen's Owl-Order Extra-Ordinary Hair Care Potions and Unusual Unguents," I would be happy to produce a special variety for your personal consumption that smells of, say, broomstick wax, rather than peaches. I will do so at no cost to you as restitution for Sunday morning's unplanned visit to the infirmary.

As for the game of Truth or Dare in general, I have been dealing with the results of this boarding school bane for more years than I have fingers to count. Monday night's episode, which resulted in no fewer than five detentions, was one of my favorites to date. I was very pleased to find Mr. Cormac McLaggen outside the castle, after curfew no less, but was a bit astounded to find him painting on the outside of the castle walls a nonsensical phrase in Latin. Romans go home? Did you not think there would not be at least one Monte Python fan among the faculty in the castle to appreciate this stunt?

One dare that went unpunished was pure genius. The boy's restroom in the potions corridor is indeed used by Slytherins more than the other houses, and they of course, having few Muggles among their numbers, never suspected the clear plastic wrap that was affixed over the toilet bowls. One in
particular (I shall not reveal the name) believed that his own urine was attacking him when he started to relieve himself. Another got quite a nasty little surprise when he...hmmm...took a seat.

Changing the subject...Hagrid had already informed me that Hedwig had a clutch of three eggs. I was wondering when you'd get around to seeing what she and McKenzie were up to. I am quite sure that despite the effort involved, McKenzie is up to the task before him and will be a devoted and attentive father to little John, Paul and George (pity there weren't four eggs, but do we really need another Ringo in the world?). John will be the one with spectacles, of course, and Paul the sappy one. George shall be the other. If there are females among the brood, they shall have to learn to live with the names, though we could attempt to feminize them. I would reserve John for a male and have a Pauline and a Georgette.

I am quite glad that I shall never have to scatter your ashes, Harry, as the task of doing so from a speeding convertible seems a bit messy. If you were to die before me (which is not an option—do not even consider it for a moment), I would be willing to stand atop the Astronomy Tower and let them rain down over Hogwarts. It would be a fitting tribute to the school and her grounds, to return to her what she helped create.

We dance around this issue frequently Harry. Discussing final farewells is a way that humankind grapples with its own mortality. Joking about it is one way we learn to deal with it. All joking aside, there is always the possibility that one or both of us may not survive this war. I hope we both live to see the other side of it, a brighter future, lives of our own not orchestrated by good and evil. But even if we live to a ripe old age, and you produce enough Potters to populate Hogsmeade, someday you will be faced with what to do with my earthly remains. Remember my wishes then. For I have, just this past week, completed the necessary paperwork to name you my heir. I wish there were more to leave to you, more Galleons in Gringotts, but alas, I have been a school professor for most of my adult life and the Board of Governors is of the belief that the "benefits package" is so great that the salaries need not be kept "to scale." (I do not believe they have ever had to deal with the aftereffects of a raucous night of Truth or Dare.) An heir is not the same as a beneficiary. As an heir, you have the right and the responsibility to make decisions should I not be capable of making them myself. We will discuss this at another time, but soon.

Finally, your question. It is a difficult one, as my life was not a happy one in general, for my parents grew apart as I grew older. My father suffered a severe illness, meningitis, and lost his job during it. When he recovered, he was never able to hold down a job long-term again. He did not understand why my mother's magic could not solve all of our family's problems. He began to drink and the alcohol took over his life. My mother used magic for ordinary household activities, and at times to entertain me, but she took care to avoid using it for frivolous reasons. It could not heal my Muggle father; it could not provide him a well-paying job. It could not create money from sheets of parchment, at least not legally, and wizards who attempted to do so in the Muggle world were subject to long stays in Azkaban. I came to regard Magic as a wonderful thing, for it eased the way for us when my father was not about, but I regarded it as something very separate from the Muggle world and working class neighborhood in which we lived. I shall tell you, sometime, stories about my mother, just as I have told you stories about your own.

And that is that for today. I still owe an apology to your head of house and will take myself humbly up to her office now.

Regards,

Severus
At sunset that evening, Severus stood on the Astronomy Tower, looking over the grounds of Hogwarts. It had been a beautiful day, enjoyable especially after he brewed the hangover relief potion and dosed himself heavily. The wind picked up, blowing his hair forward, and he imagined having handfuls of ashes to let loose in that wind, imagined the trajectory of those ashes, lighter pieces catching the wind currents and being carried over the lake, the Quidditch Pitch, the Forbidden Forest, Hogsmeade.

"Severus. What are you doing up here on this fine evening?" Albus' voice startled him from his thoughts. He turned his head to greet the Headmaster.

"Enjoying the view," he answered and left it at that.

Albus walked up beside him and rested his aged hands on the waist-high stone rail. He'd stopped wearing that glove some time ago. His two hands looked like they belonged to two different people, one black, one white, and Severus thought about those colors and how they were so often equated with darkness and light, evil and good.

"The grounds are beautiful this time of year," said Albus. "Everything is green and alive." His gaze went to his withered hand, and Severus' along with it. Severus deliberately looked away, lifting his gaze out over the forest.

"When he dies, Harry would like his ashes scattered from atop this tower," said Severus. He didn't understand why he felt compelled to share that thought.

Albus smiled a tired smile. "Does he, now? I think I would find that end fitting as well, raining down over Hogwarts from this place where lovers come to hide and grown men come to enjoy a late spring sunset."

Severus nodded. "If those are your wishes, Albus."

"They are, though I suspect someone will erect a white marble tomb instead." He sighed. "More's the pity."

"I should be getting back in," said Severus after a moment. "I owe Minerva a visit still." He turned to leave, but Albus caught his arm with his good hand.

"It shall be this week, Severus," he said. "I have learned all I can about the place. I am nearly ready to go and to take Harry with me."

Severus froze, unaccountable fear clutching at his heart for a moment. He willed it to beat again as he swallowed.

"You will forewarn me?" he asked, more of a demand than a question.

"I will," answered Albus. He nodded then let go of Severus' arm and turned once again to survey his kingdom.

"I would still like to go." Severus' voice carried over to Albus from where he stood, one hand on the doorway that led back inside.

"I know," acknowledged Albus. He then turned Severus' fears upside down. "But I'll be fine, Severus. I'll have Harry with me."

They stared at each other a long moment. Finally Severus nodded curtly and disappeared inside while Albus turned back to the railing, gripping it so tightly with his right hand that his already pale
Chapter 43

June 10 – June 11

-Harry-

Tuesday morning saw Harry and Ron once again out before breakfast. This time they ran the path along the side of the lake, the one that meandered above the banks of the loch, furthest from the castle. They ran until they reached the footbridge over the first stream that fed the lake then slowed to a walk and crossed it. They stood together on the low bridge, looking back at the castle.

"What's that?" asked Harry, pointing to a dark shape in the sky that was coming their way, though high overhead, nearly as high as the castle itself.

"Bird," answered Ron, squinting. "Looks like an owl…wait…it's Malfoy's eagle owl."

They gazed at the bird as it soared above them and turned to watch it as it winged away out of sight.

"Awful late to be out hunting," commented Ron carefully.

Harry scoffed. "It's not hunting, Ron. You know that."

"Awful early then to be delivering a letter."

Harry stared back at the castle, his gaze fixed on the owlery. He saw no movement there and figured Malfoy was already gone. But what had brought him to the owlery at 6:30 in the morning? What had been so important that it had to be sent off even before breakfast?

"Are there other eagle owls here?" asked Ron as he broke into a jog and caught up with Harry, who had set off on his own.

"Never seen one," said Harry, panting as he unconsciously picked up speed.

"Neither have I," said Ron, letting Harry run ahead and easing into pace behind him. He had a feeling Harry wasn't going to let this one go.

10 June, 1997

Tuesday

Dear Severus:

I understand why you needed to have an evening out, and don't hold it against you that you didn't take the sober-up potion in time to prevent a hangover. This year has been very stressful, and if you're used to drinking every once in a while, I sure haven't made that a possibility for you this year, have I? Not with this bond thing anyway. Ron was able to get me down to the infirmary before I puked my guts out—he thought I had the flu but I suspected what it really was. There's no mistaking that feeling once you've felt it once, you know.
Since you're a potions genius—why don't you invent alcohol that doesn't give you a hangover? Put all that knowledge and experience to good use and help out a good percentage of the wizarding world. If you want to really make some money and retire at the age of forty to a life of leisure, sell the formula to the Muggle world.

Still, I think Madam Pomfrey sending you a howler is hilarious! Too bad she didn't have it delivered to you while you were in the Great Hall eating dinner, or up in the Defense room teaching class. I suppose hearing her voice screeched out at you while you were hung over was punishment enough, though. Minerva sure was mad at you. She kept muttering things under her breath like "Severus Snape, you'd better be glad I'm a respectable witch or I'd have your balls on a platter." Something like that. I definitely do recall the "respectable witch" part anyway.

I'm not sure about the owl names. The little ones might feel incomplete without Ringo. What would they be, the Wee Three instead of the Fab Four? And giving the girls girlified boy names might make them confused and lead to all sorts of gender identity issues. Why not go with names from famous trios instead? How about Bacon, Lettuce and Tomato? Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria? Hook, Line and Sinker? Ready, Willing and Able? Stop, Look and Listen? (I'm on a roll now, Severus!) Hop, Skip and Jump?

I've got it.

Earth, Wind and Fire.

Those just seem right, somehow.

(But I'd be willing to consider Sex, Drugs and Rock & Roll.)

I don't even know what to say about being made your heir, Severus. I want to say 'You didn't have to do that' but I know you already know that. You didn't have to do it but you wanted to do it anyway. I'm not sure what all responsibilities I have now besides making sure I scatter your ashes over Madam Pomfrey while she's sleeping to get her back for that howler. And you may not have a lot of gold in your Gringott's vault but gold doesn't mean anything to me. My parents left me gold, and Sirius did too, but where are they now? I'd rather have you than all that gold any day, so don't worry about that at all. If it bothers you, I'll go have a talk with that Board of Governors after we kill Voldemort and throw my weight around a bit and negotiate a raise for you, with lots of back pay too. If they hesitate, we'll bring them all out to Hogwarts and get a good game of Truth or Dare going. I'm guessing that they were all students here once—maybe it will remind them of their own exploits.

"Hey, Ebenezer, remember when we broke into Professor Primenproper's quarters and transfigured all her white cotton bloomers into see-through red lace?"

I'd really like to hear about your mum sometime. It sounds like you have good memories of her, and maybe even good memories of your whole family before your dad got sick. It doesn't seem fair, does it, that some people have magic and others don't? And that people with magic live longer and can defy the normal laws of physics when they travel and conjure things 'out of thin air'? When I take time to think about it—to really think about it—I can see why my Aunt Petunia turned on my mum. It is something to be jealous about. And it really doesn't seem fair that one person has it and another doesn't. I mean think about it! A wizard can just drink a potion and grow more bones! Or get sobered up! A Muggle would have to drink a pot of coffee or get slapped in the face or stick his head in a bucket of ice water or something. And even after all of that, he'd still probably be pretty drunk. And grow bones? Are you kidding? It takes six weeks or more for a Muggle's broken bone to heal. If someone somehow lost a bone, the whole arm would have to come off.

This is making my head hurt. I shouldn't try to wrap it around all the unfairness in life. I guess it's no
different than some people being born into families with loads of money, or some kid being born into royalty and growing up to be the King of England just because he was born to the right parents and happened to be born a couple years before his little brother. What makes that firstborn son a better King anyway?

Still, I can't imagine life without magic, not now that I'm part of it. But even though I can't imagine it, sometimes I can't help wanting it—wanting a life where I walk to school every day and do my homework with a ballpoint pen on regular paper or use a computer and drink orange juice at breakfast and get my post in the mailbox. I think about that because it would be an anonymous life where I would decide what I wanted to do with my life and head off to Uni to do whatever that was. It would be a life where horcrux wasn't a real word and Voldemort was just some crazy guy in a horror movie and invisible horses didn't fly and portraits didn't move. It might be a boring life, but it would be a safe life.

Ginny is waiting for me downstairs. We're going to go up to the owlery to see if the eggs have hatched yet. Hagrid says we'll know because most likely, McKenzie will be off hunting. I'll let you know if they're here.

Regards,

Harry

/}

There must have been one baby at least, because McKenzie flew in with a dead mouse almost as soon as Harry and Ginny made it to the owlery. He delivered it to Hedwig and was off almost at once. Harry peered at Hedwig, watching as she tore the little creature up into manageable bits but she kept a cautious eye on him and he and Ginny never got a good look at the baby.

He delivered his letter to Severus the next morning during Defense Class and had a rather unremarkable day. He watched Malfoy in every class that they shared. Since seeing the owl take off with a letter so early the day before, Harry had had his mind on Malfoy, and though he didn't dare say anything to Severus in his letter or do anything at all to approach him or even try to find him, he kept him in his mind, knowing the days of the school year were ebbing and he'd have to execute his plan—whatever it was—soon. Perhaps the owl meant he'd already started it in motion. Perhaps.

It was just after dinner when the message was delivered to him—to get to the headmaster's office as soon as possible. Exchanging a meaningful look with Ron and Hermione, he left at once.

It was as if everything happened at the same time. Before he left the castle with Dumbledore just after sunset, he'd given the half-dose of Felix Felicis to his friends, convinced now that Malfoy had accomplished whatever he had set out to accomplish and that whatever he had planned might go down that very night. His run-in with Professor Trelawney had shown him that—and a few other things. He quietly lodged the other piece of information far back in his brain, the thing so casually mentioned by Trelawney—that it had been Severus Snape, his Severus, his father, his dad that had been caught listening outside the door when Trelawney met with Dumbledore all those years ago and made the prophecy that had changed his life.

The prophecy that Voldemort only knew about because someone, someone had relayed it to him. Not the entire prophecy, true, but enough to give Voldemort something to go on, a target, a victim.

He stomped it down. His brain knew it didn't matter and was trying desperately to convince his heart. *He never lied to me. He never pretended to be perfect. He never hid his past as a Death Eater. He admitted to making terrible mistakes.*
He never meant for my mum to die.

He didn't know it was me.

He pushed the thoughts away again, seeking strength from inside, from that place where hope resided, and lifted his head as he and Dumbledore came out of Apparition. He smelled the salt air and felt the ocean breeze and heard the pound of the surf and thought, for just a moment, that he was home.

Later, when he stood in Hogsmeade with the Headmaster, after somehow, some way, Apparating them both back here from that place, that cave, that hell hole, he thought that nothing, nothing, could possibly be any worse than what he had just experienced. He was so glad to be back, to be surrounded by the comfortable familiarity that was Hogsmeade, no matter that the headmaster was still weak, still leaning heavily on him, sinking to the ground, in fact, unable to walk any longer. Asking for Severus. Severus...I need Severus... Even that need, that name, was familiar and drew out that dampened hope from deep inside Harry.

Until suddenly his head exploded in pain. Severus.

Until Madam Rosmerta appeared. Until she pointed to the sky above the castle. Until she showed them the Dark Mark hovering there.

-Severus-

Severus hated June. The students spent most of the month thinking about end of term and summer break and very little of it thinking of final exams and homework and appropriate classroom behavior. The homework they did manage to turn in was often sloppy and hastily done, finished in a rush between pick-up Quidditch games and lakeside stone-skipping parties. He never did understand why classes didn't end on the first instead of the thirtieth—he'd gladly give up the two half-term breaks for a longer summer.

Severus hated this June in particular. Albus was dying; there was no sense denying it or trying to frame it any other way. The curse was progressing and would soon consume him.

Draco Malfoy was aiming for something bigger than just Albus' death. Severus didn't know yet what that was, but he suspected that Draco was setting something up, something big, something devastating. The boy was desperate. He would stop at nothing.

The weather would not cooperate by turning cold or dreary or rainy or even windy. The skies were a blue that rivaled the color of the deep Scottish loch, dotted with whispy white clouds that hung high overhead. It encouraged the children's spring fever.

Even Harry had fallen to the weather's spell, barely paying attention in class this morning as he gazed out the sole window in the classroom until Severus called on him to duel Granger. Ahhh. That had taken the glassy look out of the boy's eyes. He would want to win that duel but would not want to hurt his friend. It made for a fine ten minutes of entertainment for the entire class until Harry finally disarmed Hermione at the same time she dealt him a successful _petrificus totalis_. He hit his head on a desk on the way to the floor and she tripped over a book bag as she ran to help him. He sent them both to the infirmary to have Poppy patch them up.

Now he himself, weak old fool that he was, had come outside to one of Hogwarts' many private
turret walkways and had settled on the stone floor against an inner wall with Harry's letter in hand. He had watched Albus disappear hours ago, knowing that Harry was beside him, covered by his invisibility cloak. The sun was totally gone, the sky lit by a waxing moon, low on the horizon, not quite full yet. He had spelled fairy lights to hover above him as he sat, and he pulled his robe more tightly around him as he began his letter to Harry, his eyes moving frequently to the castle gates and the road beyond them.

11 June, 1997

Wednesday

Dear Harry:

You are gone now, with Albus, and I find myself at odds with myself, out of sorts, unable to let the day end in its normal way. I watched you go—no, I watched him go, for you were unseen beside him, no matter I knew you were there. It has been too long already; you should be back by now, asleep in your dorm. It is a school night—you will need to be up early again tomorrow to start a new day.

I do not like not knowing where you are or what you are doing or what is happening now. Right now. Where was this horcrux hidden? Albus told me only that it was in a cave, on the coast. How was it protected? What did you do to destroy it if indeed you did? How is Albus holding up to the stress of the search? He has been so weak of late, so close to the end. It will not be long now, Harry. You must be prepared.

I am certainly looking forward to the end of the war and my new higher-paying job with better benefits. I shall let you 'throw your weight around' all you want if it means I will work less and earn more. I have many avenues left to pursue in life and would welcome some time away from Hogwarts when this is all over, perhaps a summer, perhaps a term, perhaps two.

I understand your desire to escape the fame and notoriety that has followed you all these years, but you need not escape into Muggle life to find peace. It will come in time, Harry, and you must demand a normal life, and expect to receive it. Magic is not something you can live without. Many wizards have tried, and most find that magic is so engrained in their soul and their spirit that the absence of magic is like the absence of love, or a winter that moves right into summer without the rebirth of spring.

I want this for you, Harry, my son

A noise, a shout and a dazzling green light made him drop both quill and parchment. He jumped to his feet, wand already in hand. His head broke through the fairy lights and they scattered and fell. He stood, transfixed and horrified, one agonizingly slow moment as he watched the Dark Mark take shape, expand and rise. Rise from the Astronomy Tower above and beyond him, rise over Hogwarts Castle, hover, twinkling perversely, above his home. His home...

The Dark Mark on his arm erupted with sudden, intense pain. He kicked his ink bottle as he ran, stepped on the quill, ignored the letter that lay there, words not obscured though forever unread.

I want this for you, Harry, my son...
He summoned Madam Rosmerta's brooms. Moments later they were on them, Harry still obscured by his invisibility cloak, soaring directly toward Hogwarts Castle and the horrid mark hovering above her. He didn't know how Dumbledore could even stay on the broom, weak and unbalanced as he was, but he headed toward the Astronomy Tower with a singular purpose and Harry followed, his gut twisting. His friends. Severus. What had happened at the castle? What had Malfoy done?

The tower was deserted when they landed. Dumbledore clutched at his heart, called for Severus, ordered Harry to fetch him but before he could open the door—for finding Severus was precisely what he wanted as well—to get Severus, to find his father—someone was hurtling up the stairs and he stepped away and was suddenly frozen, immobilized by a spell from the headmaster, forced to remain frozen like a statue as Malfoy appeared and disarmed the headmaster, as Malfoy's whole sordid confession was made, drawn out word by word by phrase by phrase by the Headmaster, for only Harry to hear. The wandless headmaster who leaned against the railing of the tower and spoke calmly to the traitor, drawing him out, drawing it out, until so much time had gone by and Malfoy hadn't killed him and Harry could do nothing but look and listen, frozen, incapacitated, alone, terrified.

Crashing footsteps, company on the tower, Death Eaters, arguing, fighting below, screams, no one acting, no one touching Dumbledore, all of them waiting, telling Draco to do it, urging him, taunting him.

Until Severus was there and Dumbledore was pleading and Harry heard the message behind his pleas, Severus…please…, couldn't everyone hear it? It is time, Severus. End it now. Save the boy's life. End it now, Severus. I am dying… Do as you promised… Dumbledore's eyes shifted to Harry for the barest of moments, the briefest of seconds, looking through him to the night sky beyond. But it was not Harry he wanted to save. Harry knew that now. And he knew what was about to happen. And he hated Draco Malfoy, with a hate hot and black and molten, and he hated Dumbledore, and he hated Severus, but still he hated Malfoy more, for making Dumbledore think he was worth saving and making Severus do what he was about to…

"Avada Kedavra!"

No longer frozen but still frozen, Harry watched as the headmaster fell backward over the battlements, watched as Severus took a moment to search the tower with his eyes, a barely perceptible movement, focusing on the two brooms on the floor before grabbing Draco and running.

The next minutes were a veritable cyclone. Harry wielding his wand, jumping over bodies, petrifying Death Eaters, finding his friends, leaving them behind, running, tripping, always too slow, never fast enough until he was out on the lawn and Severus was in his sights.

"Don't leave!" he shouted, panting, gaining on Severus. Severus turned his head and in the light of the three-quarters moon Harry saw death in his eyes. Severus paused to shoot an impediment curse at him but Harry dodged it, jumping to the side.

Draco had made the gates now, with a handful of Death Eaters, but Severus was facing Harry and Harry was raising his wand, almost in slow motion, a Stupefy on his lips when Severus turned the tables on him, uttering an Expelliaramus, using his own best spell—so simple and unexpected—on him. He tripped as he lunged for his wand, landing on his face, wandless, soulless, hopeless, pounding his fists on the ground in frustration as Severus slipped through the gate, turned on the spot, and was gone.
By the time Severus ran through the maze-like corridors of the upper levels of the castle, the invasion was nearly complete. Death Eaters engaged in battle with students, with teachers. They were gleeful to see him, proud, cocky even. Greyback was here. Shit. Where was Draco? He could not be too late! Up the stairs—how had the Order gotten here?—around the spirals and onto the tower and…

Two brooms. Dumbledore, fallen, his wand on the floor out of his reach. Draco facing him, the others taunting him to finish the job.

Harry. Where was Harry? His eyes, when they finally rested on Albus fully, betrayed his fear. Albus stared him down, flicked his gaze so briefly toward the side, then pleaded with him.

"Severus…please…" It is time, Severus. End it now. Save the boy's life. End it now, Severus. I am dying… Do as you promised…

He lifted his wand, face passive, bile rising in his throat at the act he was about to commit, an act for which there would never be redemption, not in Harry's eyes, or the eyes of the law, and not in his own eyes, especially not in his own eyes. Harry was here. Harry could be watching. Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the man in white, the greatest wizard that ever lived, defeater of Grindelwald, Order of Merlin First Class, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot…

Albus looked at Severus again, pleading. The moon caught his damp blue eyes and they appeared to twinkle.

"Avada Kedavra!"

He dropped his eyes as Albus died. He hardly saw him fall. He tried to catch movement that showed that Harry was there, anywhere, saw only a flicker as he grabbed for Draco and ran.

He knew Harry was after him before he reached the second floor.

Idiot child! There were Death Eaters everywhere, ordered to leave him alone, to save the Boy Who Lived for the Dark Lord himself, but you couldn't trust a Death Eater, couldn't trust their bloodlust and insatiable thirst for power.

He made it to the lawn, panting, Draco sprinting ahead as they raced down the hill toward the great gates.

Harry was gaining on him. All that running with Ron had paid off.

"Don't leave!" Harry's voice was desperate, his pace not faltering. There was no longer any calm, no longer any peace. His voice ached of abandonment and fear. He called out "Don't leave" but Severus heard the unvoiced, unspoken "…me!" It was the plaintive cry of an orphaned child.

He futilely tried an Impedimenta. Harry dodged it. As he turned and disarmed his only son, leaving him lying on the ground pounding his fists as he slipped out the gates and Disapparated, he never felt less like a father, or more like one.

The fact that he was able to move surprised him. The fact that the crowd around the headmaster's body parted for him did not. He walked toward Dumbledore's body and knelt beside it, reached out

-Severus-

-Harry-
to straighten his crooked half-moon spectacles, covering closed eyes that he thought must be sparkling somewhere, but not here. Not in this place of bitterness and bile. He smoothed the headmaster's hair back from his crinkled brow, wiped away a trickle of blood from his mouth. He stared at the face, the face that was once upon a time the most beloved face in the world to him, and wept.

Wept for the injustice of it, and the selflessness, and the incomprehensible acts of bravery that had been committed this night, and the losses they all had suffered.

But most of all he wept for his childhood, though he did not understand those tears, for when he struggled to his feet and turned around and the crowd parted to let him through, Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, left as a man.

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Chapter 44

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June 12-June 14

-Harry-

12 June, 1997

Thursday

Dear Severus:

I found a place to be by myself. The castle is in chaos. Classes are canceled; they're sending us all home on Saturday after the headmaster's funeral. Bill was mauled by Greyback—his face is a mess but he'll recover. His family—and Fleur—are rallying around him. I couldn't stand seeing him like that but he called me in this morning and made everyone leave so he could talk to me in private. He told me that I was his responsibility now, at least until my birthday, and that he's taking me away with him as soon as the funeral is over. I was never so grateful for anything in my entire life…except for you.

Everyone is tiptoeing around me except for Ginny. Minerva pulled me into her office to ask me how Albus died. Not that I needed to—they interrogated some of the captured Death Eaters with Veritaserum. It's just that she needed to know. She needed to know that he didn't suffer but she already knew more than I did before last night. She knew why you did it, Severus. She sat me in a chair right in front of her and gave me tea with a splash of firewhiskey and pulled her own chair so close to me that our knees were nearly touching. And she said that I was never ever to doubt you, Severus. She said you are brave, and honorable and that delivering that curse to the headmaster and leaving me behind were the hardest things you ever had to do in your life and that that's saying something, because you've had to do some really hard things. I can tell she's afraid, Severus. She tries not to show it but she's lost some of her heart. She reached out and took my chin and pulled it up so I would look her in the eyes. Then she asked me the hardest thing ever.

She told me that people were going to call you Dumbledore's murderer, a Death Eater, Voldemort's most loyal supporter, even people in the Order, people I trust and love. She told me to let them. That it was important for your safety that everyone think you're a traitor and a double agent and completely loyal to the Dark Lord.
"If you love Severus, Harry, if you truly love him, you must trust him with this."

I stared at her a long time before I nodded my head. I wanted to see it in her eyes, too, that she loved you and believed in you. At first I saw only sadness and defeat. I had to look a long time to see the spark but it was there. I think Minerva thinks she's lost a good friend, Severus. I hope that if your paths cross again this next year—if all that you think is going to happen really does happen—that you figure out how to remind her that you're one of the good guys.

I acted like a child, Severus, when I ran after you. I had some wild thing inside me and it wanted out. I didn't feel like Harry Potter at all. I ignored nearly everything that was going on around me and slid on blood on the floor and jumped over people that were petrified. I have no idea what I planned on doing if I caught up with you, though in the end I had a stupefy on my lips when you disarmed me. I didn't think, Severus. I put you in danger and all I could think was that you were leaving me and that I had to stop you.

Do you even know what happened? When we got back to the tower from Hogsmeade, Dumbledore sent me off to find you. He wanted you…only you. But I couldn't even get out the door before Malfoy barged in. Dumbledore petrified me…under my invisibility cloak. I was there for the whole thing—Draco's confession about what he was doing this past semester and how he was responsible for the cursed necklace and the poisoned wine and the Dark Mark and the Death Eaters in the castle… And I was there when he couldn't kill the headmaster—or wouldn't—even when the other Death Eaters taunted him. And I was there when you came. And I heard what Dumbledore was really saying, Severus, what he was asking you with his eyes and his mind and I understood. I hated Draco and I hated Dumbledore and I even hated you then.

I'm tired of watching people die.

When you got away, I pulled myself out of the dirt and went back to him. He was on the ground and I touched him and cleaned his face and straightened his glasses. I took the locket, too—the horcrux we found. But it wasn't even a horcrux after all. Bloody waste of time and energy and life. We didn't have to be gone at all that night, did we? To get a locket from a booby-trapped island with Inferi grabbing at my ankles and force the headmaster to drink that potion when someone had already gotten there before we did and took the real horcrux and left a fake in its place. Someone who put a note inside it for the Dark Lord and signed it R.A.B.

There are still four of them out there to find and destroy.

I need you Severus. How can I do this without you?

Regards,

Harry

13 June, 1997

Friday

Dear Severus:

The funeral is tomorrow. Everything is somber and black here, except for the weather which remains brilliant and clear, and most of the students are milling around outside, sitting and talking quietly. No one's making much noise or playing Quidditch. They're setting up for the funeral down by the lake, close to where I like to skip my rocks, not far from the trail that Ron and I used to run.
Ron and Hermione understand, and Ginny does too, though she doesn't know everything they do. They're letting me have my space. Minerva invited me for tea today and I went even though I didn't want to. I think she needs me now, because you're gone, and Albus is gone, and I'm to be gone soon too. But after we had tea and some biscuits, she took me outside and we walked together to the Forbidden Forest, just like that, in front of anyone who happened to be outside. She walked with her hands clasped behind her back, right beside me, and nodded to anyone who greeted her, like it wasn't unusual at all for Minerva McGonagall to escort Harry Potter into the Forbidden Forest. She took me only a little ways in and then held out her hand for my wand. She told me then to transform into Lightfoot and to run it off.

I smiled for the first time since you left me.

I didn't wait for a second invitation. I transformed and was off, but I wasn't alone. Her Patronus ran with me, keeping me company, I think, making sure I ran true and straight. It never felt better to run in my entire life. It never felt better to leave my human mind behind me and to get away from Hogwarts. I never thought I could possibly want to run in that direction—away from here—but today I did.

Because you're out there somewhere.

I wish it were your Patronus running ahead of me so I'd have something to follow other than my instinct and some goal other than to run until I'm too weak and tired to go any farther.

I don't know how far I ran, or how long, but I knew when I was finished. I ran until I couldn't run another step, and then I ran some more.

I'm in my bed now, and lights are out. Ginny is sleeping next to me. No one seems to care at all where anyone sleeps. Propriety goes right out the window when hearts are crushed. Hermione is lying curled up on the end of Ron's bed, reading. He's sleeping but she's watching me over the top of her book. I know she's worried about me, but for a change she's letting it be.

We talked today—me and Hermione and Ron—while Ginny was sitting with Bill in the infirmary. We're going to go our separate ways and lie low until my birthday. Once I'm seventeen and don't have the trace anymore, we're going to set off. Ron's not planning on telling his mum and dad just yet and Hermione will spend July figuring out how to protect her family and keep them safe if she becomes, as I suspect she will, as much of a target as I am.

I don't know what's going to happen between now and then any more than I know what's going to happen once we start our quest. I just know that it's time to move on. There's nothing here for me anymore. I've given what I could and taken what was on offer.

I'm going to break it off with Ginny tomorrow. I think she'll understand. But for tonight, just this one time, I'm going to hold her close and wrap my arms around her and fall asleep with my nose buried in her hair and worry about tomorrow... tomorrow.

Love,

Harry

/ 14 June, 1997

Saturday
Dear Severus:

It's over. The headmaster is mourned, eulogized and buried. The Hogwarts Express is gone, with Ron and Ginny and Hermione and everyone else. The mourners have left, including the Minister of Magic. Bill is up in the infirmary getting his orders from Madam Pomfrey. She took me aside this afternoon and went over everything with me, too, since I'll be staying with him. His face is such a mess but she says it will get better, though he'll always have scars. I could tell him about scars, if he wanted to know… We're leaving in an hour or so. He wouldn't tell me where we're going but I think I know. When we get there, I'm going to lie on my hammock and close my eyes and not open them for days.

So now I've been to a wizarding funeral. The merpeople came to the surface of the lake, and the centaurs from the forest, and all sorts of other people. It was a blur, really, and I didn't even hear the eulogy, not really. But if I had had to give it, Severus, I'd have made sure everyone heard what I had to say. That Albus Dumbledore was a great man, and a selfless one. He may not have cared about me more than he did the greater good, but in the end, in the end he cared about saving one kid's soul. He thought it was worth saving. That kid wasn't me. It wasn't the Chosen One. That kid was Draco Malfoy. As much as I hate the prat, I think I understand what Dumbledore was doing. I'm sure Dumbledore made mistakes—everyone does—but he tried to make the world a better place. And if he needs my help in the end to do it then I'm with him.

Like I told Scrimgeour today, I'm Dumbledore's man, through and through.

I went up to the owlery one last time to see Hedwig and McKenzie and the babies. She let me get a bit closer this time. They're the most adorable little things. (I sound like a girl, don't I?) I've named the oldest one Dumbles. Well, Ginny came up with the name and it kind of resonated with me. I think it's going to be a snowy like Hedwig—it's not speckled like the other two, anyway. I wish you could see it, Severus.

I already miss you. I wonder where you are, and who you're with, and what you're doing. I wonder if you're thinking about me or just busy trying to play the role you got stuck with. That's not really fair, is it? I think that you chose that role, didn't you? Not that you had a lot of choices, but you could have walked away.

But you didn't.

Because you were Dumbledore's man too, weren't you?

What does that make us together? A pair of fools? I hope not. I can't go ahead on this quest with the idea that it will be hopeless. I have to think we'll prevail and find these damn things and destroy them. Because there's no one standing in between me and Voldemort anymore. I realized that during the funeral. First it was my mum and dad. Then he took Cedric instead of me. Then Sirius fell, and finally Dumbledore.

Now it's me and him.

And you're not really standing between us, Severus, are you? Because a few nights ago you had to choose. And you left me here on this side of the gates while you went back to his side. I can say it—write it—now without choking or crying or crumbling up the paper or punching the wall. I only feel like I'm alone and abandoned. I'm not really.

You might be standing next to him these days, and babysitting Malfoy, and climbing on an ever higher Death Easter pedestal because of what you did on that tower, but there's a piece of you lodged in my heart, a piece of you that Voldemort will never be able to understand, so he won't even notice
it's gone. I think I stole that piece from you while you weren't paying attention, when you were lying in the sand on the beach or sitting at your desk by the fire grading papers over Easter Break or lying in Ron's bed with that damn Chudley Cannons comforter pulled up to your chin. It doesn't mean that you're not whole anymore, because you've got a piece of me inside you too, and it's the exact same size as the piece you're missing that I took away. I dropped it into your hands one night while you were sleeping. I knew you'd keep it safe for me.

The sun is starting to go down and I'm supposed to meet Bill outside in a few minutes.

I just wanted you to know that I understand what you did and why you did it and even why you couldn't tell me. Because you didn't know, did you? If you'd have to do it in the end. You were hoping you wouldn't have to—that he'd just slip away in his sleep one night. But he wasn't ready—he had something to do, still. He had to point me in the right direction so I could finish the job.

And now I've got a job to do, and so do you.

Stay safe, Dad.

I love you.

Harry

He called an ordinary barn owl down from the rafters and tied the letter to its leg. He carried it to the window.

"Take this to Severus Snape," he said.

He tossed the owl into the air and it took off in a rush of wings. He watched it soar over the grounds, gaining altitude, disappearing over the Forbidden Forest just as the two previous owls had. Neither had returned with an answer.

He was sitting on the top step of the stairs in front of the great entrance doors ten minutes later when Bill came out. He was gazing out over the lake, at the white tomb beside it.

"Looks like the deer are keeping guard," he said quietly as Bill dropped carefully down beside him.

A dozen deer, does and fawns, grazed quietly in the grass where the white chairs had stood that morning. They both watched them for several minutes. Harry felt more at peace in this moment then he had in a month, more so than when he had woken up that morning with Ginny in his arms. Finally, Bill stood.

"Let's get going then, Harry." He held his hand out and Harry took it, letting Bill pull him to his feet. He turned to look once more at the tomb beside the lake.

"I…" His voice faltered.

A doe, ethereal, seemingly formed of woven rays of moonlight, moved among the deer near the tomb. It seemed to be grazing with the others, if such a creature of light and shadow could graze, but it lifted its head and stood, alert and watchful, regarding the white marble that was nearly as resplendent as the doe herself, turning then to fix her gaze on the castle. She disappeared a moment later, folding in on herself and dissipating like smoke on the water.

"Came to say goodbye, I suppose," said Bill hoarsely. "The only way he could."
Harry didn't argue with Bill, but he knew the truth. At that moment, he felt so old, so wise, and so very, very sad. Old enough to have played gobstones with Albus Dumbledore in his youth. Wise enough to understand the message of the whispering wind. Sad enough to christen the marble slab below with loss-laden tears.

The doe had not come to say goodbye to Albus. It had come for him, to bid him farewell.

Harry smiled through his tears and left Hogwarts behind him, disappearing into the twilight shadows with Bill by his side.

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**Old and Wise**

*The Alan Parsons Project*

As far as my eyes can see  
There are shadows approaching me  
And to those I left behind  
I wanted you to know  
You've always shared my deepest thoughts  
You follow where I go

And oh when I'm old and wise  
Bitter words mean little to me  
Autumn winds will blow right through me  
And some day in the mist of time  
When they asked me if I knew you  
I'd smile and say you were a friend of mine  
And the sadness would be lifted from my eyes  
Oh when I'm old and wise

As far as my eyes can see  
There are shadows surrounding me  
And to those I leave behind  
I want you all to know  
You've always shared my darkest hours  
I'll miss you when I go

And oh, when I'm old and wise  
Heavy words that tossed and blew me  
Like Autumn winds will blow right through me  
And someday in the mist of time  
When they ask you if you knew me  
Remember that you were a friend of mine  
As the final curtain falls before my eyes  
Oh when I'm old and wise

As far as my eyes can see…

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