Ghost of a Memory

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Ghost of a Memory

by Phoenix Boy (jetsam)

Summary

After killing Voldemort, Harry leaves the wizarding world for a few years before joining the university under an assumed name. Safely graduated, he returns to teach at Hogwarts. He doesn't really want to be Harry Potter again, but keeping his identity secret is a lot harder when surrounded by so many familiar faces.

Notes

This story was written quite a while ago, just after OotP was published and, say, a bit before we knew anything about Blaise Zabini. Please excuse any errors caused by canon catching up to me and I hope you enjoy the story.
Chapter 1

James Evans was sitting opposite Albus Dumbledore in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He was a young man, only twenty-four, and a new graduate of Griffin University, Europe's wizarding university. His face showed nothing of his feelings while Albus read through the letter he had brought with him, but inwardly he was quaking. His mentor and primary teacher had been Aberforth Dumbledore, brother to the Headmaster, and he had no idea what had been written.

"You majored in Defense Against the Dark Arts?" Albus said at last.

"Yes sir."

"Yet you didn't choose to become an Auror. Why?"

"I didn't think I wanted to take orders from incompetents," James said, smiling sheepishly. "I don't really trust politicians." Albus smiled, his eyes twinkling merrily at the sally.

"I can tell my brother taught you, you have his strange sense of humour. Do you believe that you have the kind of experience necessary for this job?"

"I did a fair amount of coaching at Uni of the younger students and I've covered a number of classes in other schools. No one's complained yet."

"You know about the so-called curse on the position? I'm afraid it has defeated everyone for these many years."

"Of course, sir, it's common knowledge and Aberforth briefed me thoroughly. I'm happy to risk it; someone has to. From what I've heard, you haven't had any outstanding candidates anyway, bar a few notable exceptions, only inept idiots who let themselves be convinced of failure from the start."

"A most sensible view, would you like a sherbet lemon?"

"Um . . . what?"

"A Muggle sweet; I'm addicted, I'm afraid."

"No, thank you, then. It's a bit close to lunch for me."

"Of course, of course."

"So?"

"Ah yes, the job. I'm sorry, I must have been distracted, age is advancing on me, you know. Welcome to the staff; you're hired. Did Aberforth happen to confide in you what he wrote in his letter?"

"No sir."

"Mm, very well, how like him," Albus said with a smile. Indeed Aberforth Dumbledore was quite the character: an agent for the Order of the Phoenix and a dedicated academic, he also owned the Hog's Head in Hogsmeade, one of their major intelligence gathering locations. "You were in Merlin House, so he tells me, and an exceptional student at that."
"I did my best."

"Yes, well, Professor Snape has requested an assistant in his work as Head of Slytherin House, would you be agreeable to the post? With two of you sharing the work, it should not be too arduous."

"Certainly."

"He can brief you on your responsibilities himself later. You can take the suite next to his in the dungeons, one corridor along from the Slytherin common room, behind the portrait of Salazar Slytherin. That will mean you're on hand if you're needed, not that it's likely you will be. Slytherins tend to be very self-sufficient. Hufflepuffs, however . . . I can summon a house-elf to show you the way."

"That won't be necessary, thank you, sir," James said, then added quickly, "I was given a map."

"Fascinating, there are very few in existence. May I see?"

James reluctantly passed over a neatly folded piece of parchment, its true identity carefully concealed by a charm. It was a very handy charm that a friend from Uni had taught him that caused the Marauder's Map to highlight certain individuals. He was sure that the Marauders themselves would have used it to locate figures of authority; he believed he had come up with a more useful adaptation given his circumstances.

"Amazing, I've only ever seen one map remotely like it and that one was lost eight years ago when Harry Potter died. Tell me, why is Professor Snape highlighted?"

"Uh . . . He's a Slytherin teacher," James said quickly.

"Yes, but so am I."

"Really, sir? Everyone says you were in Gryffindor. I'm sorry, I'll correct it when I can," James said, knowing that, actually, the man had been in Ravenclaw in his long-distant schooldays. It was amazing the things he'd learned when he was still following Hermione around the library.

"Sometimes you'll find it's wisest not to contradict rumour if it is beneficial to yourself. Off you go now."

James walked out, closed the door and ducked into the nearest student's bathroom. He pulled out a small mirror from his pocket and Muggle make-up. Carefully, he examined his face: long, red-streaked raven hair, silver eyes and pale skin and, appearing as a shadow as he carefully rubbed his forehead, a lightning shaped scar, a mark borne only by a boy presumed dead for eight years. Harry James Potter deftly reapplied the concealing make-up with long practiced ease and continued on towards his new quarters, revelling in the homey feeling that came with returning to Hogwarts at last. Since the defeat of Voldemort eight years ago, he had been able to live without the associations of the name for the first time in his life and while he had had to sever himself from his former life, he had found that he was very content with his lot in life.

It was strange that simple Muggle make-up worked so well at hiding the scar. As he'd discovered, no magical potion, charm, spell, glamour or even self-transfiguration was able to eradicate even the smallest part of it. It was so simple that he was sure no one, not even Hermione Granger, would have thought of it. Indeed, only desperation had led him to attempt it.

Halfway to his quarters, as he turned the corner in to a dungeon corridor, he bumped into a black-robed man, Professor Snape: former bane of James' existence, spy, warrior and, according to the
map, the only other gay man at Hogwarts. Just his luck.

"Who are you?" he demanded sharply. He looked much healthier than James remembered. His hair was silky, neat and recently washed, his skin was clean and slightly tanned and his face no longer showed the strain of living a double existence, where a single error could cause countless deaths.

"James Evans," he replied smoothly. "I'm the new Defense Professor."

"Severus Snape, Potions. I suppose we can only hope you are somewhat better than the incompetents we usually get. Good morning."

James watched as he swept away, smiling slightly at the departing back. No, he hadn't changed one bit. He was the same as ever, reassuringly constant, a sarcastic bastard but one who had always done more than his share for the war effort and who Harry, in later years, had come to respect. He continued on to his rooms without a second glance.

Salazar Slytherin's portrait, a grand affair, eyed him suspiciously.

"I'm the new Defence Professor, James Evans," he said cheerfully, introducing himself.

"Very well. You will need to set a password."

Is 'Open' acceptable to you? James hissed fluently, in his best Parseltongue. Salazar arched an eyebrow in a way that tugged at James' memory, then nodded curtly. The portrait swung inwards and James set about creating his new home.

* * * * * * * * * * * *

A few days later, he was lounging in the staff room, empty for once, browsing idly through the latest copy of the Daily Prophet, when Professor Snape came bursting in, his black robes billowing out behind him as he spun to face James. James looked up, his face deliberately mild and curious.

"Professor Snape, can I help you?"

Snape, he thought enviously, seemed to have no problem with his surroundings, but then, he'd been living here for so much longer than James that it was understandable he no longer felt uncomfortable in staff areas.

"Evans," Snape said briskly, sneering slightly. "Would you mind explaining to me just how you came to the conclusion that I required an assistant? I might be a few years older than you, but I am by no means in my dotage."

"Actually, sir, I had no intention of applying for the post," James said, striving to keep his tone mild. "My main concern is that of my subject, Defense if you remember, and I only accepted the additional task at the request of the Headmaster. He seemed quite certain that you had requested assistance."

"I merely happened to mention, as I often have in previous years, that there were many calls on my time since my responsibilities include brewing the potions for the hospital wing," Snape said, affronted that his personal capabilities had been insulted. "Students, I have found, attract trouble. As he has never in the past seen fit to provide me with an assistant; I find it odd now that he should. However, since I now find myself saddled with you, I must endeavour to keep you amused. You play Quidditch, I assume?"

"Yes, sir, Seeker mostly, and I make a fair Beater."
"You may take over the running of the Slytherin Quidditch team, then. That will mean advising on team members and assisting with training, if requested. You can also take charge of the first-years. That will require dormitory checks to enforce lights out in the first few weeks and dealing with any bouts of . . . homesickness . . . that might ensue."

"Of course, I'd be happy to. How many students do we normally receive in a year?"

"The average is around five boys and five girls, though of course it varies depending on the aptitudes of the pupils. I am sure you will find that quite enough to manage alone, considering your inexperience. You will find that Slytherin house is the greatest house but also the most difficult. Slytherins tend to be the reclusive children, the abused children, the loners and the mistrustful ones in addition to the ambitious ones that you more commonly hear about. You will find that the Sorting endeavours to put children where they will receive the most appropriate care and at present they find that with me.

They require great understanding, and you should feel free to speak to me about them at any time. Contrary to popular belief, we do have a number of Muggle-born students within our ranks, yet they behave in a manner befitting a traditional pureblood and are accepted as such by those outside of the house. I have never understood why the other houses have no such system in place, something which causes their own muggleborns to stick out from the rest. The other houses commonly despise us through fear and ignorance; therefore, there must be complete trust within the house. Furthermore, all Slytherins are expected to live up to certain standards in manner, dress, academics and attitude; I will brief you more thoroughly on those later. You are also required to conform, and I must allow that your present attire is by no means acceptable."

"Yes, sir, of course; it's the holidays and I haven't any teaching robes yet, just my university ones. I've ordered some, but they haven't arrived."

"And stop calling me 'sir'. You are a Slytherin teacher; have some pride. You are not a student and are technically my equal, so you may address me by my given name."

"Perhaps I wouldn't act like a student if you didn't treat me like one," James snapped, more than a little irritated at this dressing down. "My name's James, you know. You're welcome to use it instead of speaking to me like a disobedient Gryffindor reporting for detention."

Snape looked at him penetratingly for a moment, then nodded curtly and spun around to leave, his robes swirling behind him and blowing over the pages of James' paper. As he left, he seemed to be muttering under his breath about an 'interfering old codger' and 'approaching his dotage'. Since James was fairly sure that he was not the man in question - if Snape thought James was elderly, what did that make him? - he assumed that Dumbledore had once more interfered with his staff's private lives.

As he left, Professor McGonagall came in. She seemed to have taken an instant shine to James as soon as she met him, and admitted to liking Snape, more than most, as well, claiming, much to everyone's disbelief, that he was actually quite sweet under the cold exterior.

"Was that Severus I just saw?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"What did he want? He normally avoids this place whenever possible."

"He stopped by to let me know that he doesn't need an assistant. I think I've managed to turn the blame away from me, though; he was muttering away about an 'interfering old codger' when he left."
"Poor Albus, he won't know what's hit him. It serves him right; he knows how tetchy Severus can be. I wouldn't take it to heart, James, he doesn't mean half the things he says; he's just a bit upset that Albus doesn't seem to trust him. So, what's he having you do?"

"Quidditch and first-years."

"Oh, a Quidditch player? I was keen in my youth, and I have to say that Gryffindor has rather a stranglehold on the Quidditch Cup at the moment; we've won it every year for the past ten. Severus is just a little put out with me about that. Hopefully, this year we'll be getting Simon Wood in our house, apparently he's very promising and a sweet little boy. He's Oliver Wood's nephew, the Puddlemere Keeper. Now, he was on my team, as well; one of the best I've ever seen. Let's see, that would have been him as Captain and Keeper, the Weasley twins as Beaters, Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson and Katie Bell as Chasers and young Harry Potter as Seeker, our very own child prodigy. I'm babbling. Why don't you tell me about your experience? What position did you play?"

"See if you can guess, you're obviously quite the expert."

"Hmm, Seeker if your build's anything to go by, possibly Chaser."

"Seeker it was, and I've played Beater competitively as well, unlikely though it seems. I was on the Merlin team at university, Beater for the first two years while Malfoy was there, then Seeker. He was two years ahead of me, so I was forced to give another position a go."

"Captain?"

"Well, yes, and Uni Quidditch rep."

"Very impressive; I'll have to warn my players to train extra hard this year. I hate to have to tell you, but you've got a lot of work to do with the Slytherin team at the moment; you might even have to start again from scratch. So many of your players finished school that you're rather at a disadvantage."

James smiled; he enjoyed Minerva's company. She, unlike Snape and a few of the other teachers, was quite willing to accept him despite his relative youth. Anyway, she had a tendency to have a loose tongue away from the students, and it was amusing and useful to see how much information he could glean from her.

* * * * * *

A few weeks later, James took his place somewhat apprehensively at the large table that had materialized overnight in the middle of the staff room for the start-of-term meeting. He smiled politely to Minerva and looked around. Everyone seemed to be there except Severus, but the Gryffindor Head of House had informed James of his odd habit of arriving precisely on time, never early, never late.

Albus stood at his place at the head of the table, smiling benevolently at them all, an expression that sent most of them into fits of apprehension. He only wore that particular expression when what he was about to propose was so outrageous he would have to ram it down their throats.

"Are we all here?" he asked, hoping against the odds that he'd be able to start early and return to refolding his sock collection.

"Severus," Minerva said; it needed no further explanation.

"Ah," Albus said, looking at his new Muggle watch as the Hogwarts bell began to chime the hour.
"He'll be here soon, then."

Precisely as the last chime sounded, the door opened. Severus strode in, not a hint of apology in his bearing, nodded curtly to them all and took his seat next to James.

"Let's begin, then," the Headmaster said. "Our new prefects were decided last term, of course - someone should provide James with a list - and they should have been notified by now . . ."

"We know that, Albus, it's all been sorted," Minerva said, sounding exasperated.

"Excellent. For those of you who haven't met him yet, our new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor is James Evans, a graduate of Griffin University, Merlin House. He'll also be attached to Slytherin house. Let's wish him better luck that previous holders of the position."

Albus beamed down the table at him. James flushed as everyone turned to look at him. Well, all except Professor Binns, who had a certain detachment from present events at the best of times, and Severus, who saw no need to examine a man he'd already met and found considerably lacking in many areas.

"So, our first event of the term will be the Harry Potter Day festival."

James blanched at that, though he hid it well. Harry Potter Day? Had he missed it while he was at University? How was he meant to cope with this? Didn't his friends have any sense?

"That is, naturally, October seventeenth, the day that Mr Potter destroyed Voldemort. We will be hosting the usual three days of festivities. The first day is dedicated to the dead, with a memorial service in the grounds followed by a banquet in the Great Hall. The second day will commemorate those who survived, and many of them will be speaking to us and giving short workshops in their fields for the students and any adults interested in attending. The last day is devoted to Harry Potter. I have persuaded some of his friends to speak of him. That afternoon, there will be the usual Quidditch match between present and past pupils of the school, and we will end with a banquet."

"Albus, you need to select another teacher to manage the past pupils' Quidditch team," Rolanda Hooch reminded him. "We agreed that I'd only do the present team."

"Hm. Minerva, would you like to take it on?"

"Thank you, Albus, but no. I fear my Quidditch days are long past," she said, excusing herself rapidly.

"Do any of the rest of you play?"

"Too small," Flitwick murmured.

"My Inner Eye has foreseen disaster should I take to the skies," Trelawney said in her usual misty, dreamy voice.

"Most undignified," Sinistra said, sniffing.

"Couldn't possibly, Albus, you know what I'm like on a broom," Sprout said, smiling at the memory."

"No," Severus said bluntly.

"Albus, James is an extremely proficient player," Minerva said innocently. He scowled at her,
looking, had he known it, remarkably like Severus.

"Marvellous. My dear boy, do you suppose you could take it on? It seems the rest of us have talents, well, that lie elsewhere. It's hardly an onerous task . . ."

James sighed.

"Okay."

"Thank you, thank you. We can talk about more detailed arrangements - rooms, Portkeys and the like - later. The next event will be Halloween, at which we will have our normal feast in the evening. After that, I fear there is nothing else until the start of next term, when we have the Hogmanay Ball at the beginning of January. To adapt for this, we are starting and finishing the winter break a week earlier this year."

"What horrors do you have for us this year?" Severus asked sourly.

"I thought perhaps a little costume ball, compulsory dressing up of course. The children love them and it encourages their imaginations. When I think of how young Mr Whitby came as Voldemort, it must have been five years ago now, and scared half the school into screaming. I haven't laughed so much in years . . . It will be compulsory for staff as well."

"What?" came from a number of people. Albus' face displayed what, on another man, might have been termed a smirk.

"There won't be compulsory attendance, of course," he reassured them. They relaxed. "Except for those people I have chosen as chaperones. I will be attending myself, naturally. Accompanying me will be James Evans, Augusta Vector, Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank and Severus Snape."

"Not a chance, Albus," Severus said firmly. "I will happily patrol the corridors but there is no way I am attending this . . . this spectacle of yours."

"I'm so sorry, Severus, but I'm afraid that's my final word; the arrangements have already been made. I'm most terribly sorry, I seem to have forgotten to mention the inter-house Quidditch tournament. The first match will be in November, Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw. January will see Hufflepuff vs Slytherin. Gryffindor vs Slytherin will be in March and Hufflepuff vs Ravenclaw will be in May. The usual rules apply to those. Rolanda is forbidden to give extra coaching to any team, but anyone else who chooses to may, if requested to do so by the team in question. Finally, if anyone happens to be interested in finding out the updated list of all banned items, they should ask Mr Filch. I believe, however, that the entire stock of Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes is forbidden to the students. Most inventive pranksters Hogwarts has seen since, the Marauders, you know, James. That's all for now; you may leave."

James stood with relief and hastily left, followed closely by Severus.

"I hope you know what you've let yourself in for," the other man warned him. "Organizing the past Quidditch team is one of the worst jobs. You have to select a team, contact them, arrange training sessions and coach them. Minerva volunteered one year, Merlin knows why, and gave up after the first session. She, I might remind you, remembers every one of the potential players personally. You will have to do some research. Good evening to you, Mr Evans. I will see you when the students arrive tomorrow, I imagine."

James groaned as he watched the other man sweep away. He was right, what had he let himself in for?
James watched as the doors to the Great Hall burst open and the students flooded in to begin their new year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. A young girl took his old seat at the end of the Gryffindor table, a sixth- or seventh-year by the looks of her. She appeared to be deep in conversation with two boys sitting across from her. James spared a thought for when he, Ron and Hermione would sit, talking like that, then dragged himself back to the present. Dwelling on the past would not help him, would not help these children he was meant to teach.

James himself received a number of curious glances, mostly from the younger students. For the older ones, well used to the 'curse' on the position, a new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher was no big deal - there had been one every year they could remember.

When everyone seemed to be seated, Dumbledore nodded to Minerva. She walked to the main door at the back of the Hall to bring in the new first-years, anxiously waiting to be Sorted. They came in, most staring around at the other students, the ceiling, the ghosts and the paintings on the walls. There seemed to be a lot more of them than he remembered and they all seemed very small, much smaller than he himself had been. James grinned; even the second-years were probably thinking that, those of them that were paying attention at any rate. He levelled a severe glare at a pair of Hufflepuffs who were giggling secretively at the far end of their table. They ignored him, probably never having seen him in the first place. He scowled, irritated. All Severus Snape seemed to have to do was look at the brats and they'd shut up. Then, Severus had a certain reputation that James was yet to gain.

Minerva brought out the stool and placed the Sorting Hat carefully on top. Then, everything prepared, Dumbledore rapped his glass with a spoon and the Hall fell silent at once. The Hat twitched and burst into song. James listened, fondly remembering the past songs he'd heard particularly the very first one when he had been standing there himself, terrified that he'd fail whatever test was about to be given to them. A few of the first-years visibly relaxed as they realised all they'd have to do was to try it on. No doubt, older siblings had told them stories about trolls and the like just as Fred and George had done to Ron.

Professor McGonagall now stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment that hung down in front of her.

"When I call your name, you will put on the Hat and sit on the stool to be Sorted into your houses," she said.

The Sorting began. James watched as, one by one, the children were Sorted into their houses, the tables applauding each time the Hat called out a house. There were a few surnames that he recognised, whether that was coincidence or not, he had no way of knowing. Still, there couldn't be that many Boneses, that many Spinnets.

"Wood, Simon," Minerva read out, nearing the very end of her list. James looked at the boy with interest, knowing that this boy was definitely Oliver Wood's nephew. He was tall and skinny, dark brown hair flopping into sparkling blue eyes. His grin - James thought, inwardly shuddering in apprehension - reminded him of Fred and George Weasley. It took a long time to Sort him and the boy was scowling slightly, as if arguing silently, for or against which house James was unable to tell. At last, it called out:

"SLYTHERIN!"
Minerva gasped loudly. Most of the other staff looked surprised, Dumbledore even raised an eyebrow slightly in question. Severus, however, looked unaccountably smug and raised his goblet slightly to the boy. Simon grinned, saluted him and went to join the other new Slytherins. He was not nearly as upset as James would have expected him to be, considering that Oliver had been a Gryffindor; he actually seemed delighted with the placing.

"Welcome!" Albus said, beaming at them. The first-years in particular were listening with rapt attention, hanging on his every word. "Welcome to another year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our excellent feast, I have just a few start-of-term notices to give to you. First-years should note that the Forest in the grounds, the Forbidden Forest, is completely off limits to all students, as the name suggests. A few of our older students would do well to remember that, as well."

Dumbledore's twinkling eyes flashed in the direction of the Gryffindor table, at whom James couldn't guess.

"I have also been asked by Mr Filch, the caretaker, to remind you that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors. He has also asked me to inform you that a list of all forbidden items can be found posted on the door of his office. I have it on reliable authority that all of the products sold by Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes are strictly forbidden and possession will be punished severely. As usual, Madam Hooch will be selecting our Quidditch team for The Harry Potter Festival during the next few weeks. I wish all the best of luck to any promising players from each of the four houses. Remember that we have a tradition of victory to uphold: we have never yet lost a match to the veteran team. House Quidditch will begin immediately after The Harry Potter Festival, and I look to our Quidditch Captains to arrange that. Finally, I would like you all to welcome Professor J Evans, who will be taking on the Defence Against the Dark Arts position, hopefully for many years to come. He has also taken up the post of Assistant Head of Slytherin, and his office will be located next door to Professor Snape's, should you need him at any time. And now, before we eat, let us sing the school song!" cried Dumbledore.

Harry made himself smile with false enthusiasm; it looked like most of the other teachers were doing the same.

Dumbledore gave his wand a little flick and a long golden ribbon flew out of it, which rose high above the tables and twisted itself, snake-like, into words.

"Everyone pick their favourite tune," said Dumbledore, "and off we go!"

"Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,
Teach us something please,
Whether we be old and bald,
Or young with scabby knees,
Our heads could do with filling
With some interesting stuff,
For now they're bare and full of air,
Dead flies and bits of fluff,
So teach us things worth knowing,
Bring back what we've forgot,
Just do your best, we'll do the rest,
And learn until our brains all rot."

The noise, as always, was awful. Of course, everyone finished the song at different times and James thanked the gods that no one had chosen a funeral march this time. When the last few stopped, everyone cheered. Dumbledore flicked his wand again and the feast appeared. Chatter broke out as the students turned to their food. James tucked in; he couldn't get enough of Hogwarts cooking after living off his own for a few years.

When James was finished eating, Severus told him to go down to the Slytherin common room and wait for the new first-years to arrive. They, of course, would be brought down by a prefect. Relieved at not having to ask where it actually was, thanks to his experience during second-year, James found his way down through the maze of the dungeons. As an experiment, since none of the students were around, he hissed experimentally in Parseltongue at the entrance,

**Open**

The section of wall swung open immediately. That was interesting to know. Was it just the dungeons that had a Parseltongue override to the password system, or was it the entire school . . .? If only he'd known that when he was a student.

The first-years arrived about ten minutes later; in fact, they were the very last of Slytherin house to arrive, not knowing any of the shortcuts. Traditional dictated that they'd have to discover those for themselves. The entire house was assembled in the common room when Severus came in and stood near the entrance.

"For those of you who are just joining us, welcome to Slytherin house; everyone else, welcome back. As Professor Dumbledore said at the feast, Professor Evans is joining us as Deputy Head of House and he will be working in particular with the Quidditch team and the first-years, although his door, as mine, is always open to you at any time. Many of you will have heard stories about our house: forget them immediately. If other houses wish to labour under misconceptions, it only makes things easier for us.

"This is the Slytherin common room; the dormitories are in the corridors leading off it. First-years share two or three to a room; the girls will find their chambers behind the portrait of Morgana, the boys behind the portrait of Agrippa. Seventh-years should remember that you now have the option of taking a private room, as do the prefects from fifth-year up. Prefects should wear their badges at all times. Although Professor Dumbledore said that house Quidditch would start after The Harry Potter Festival, I would like our team to be training within two weeks. Anyone who wishes to try for a vacant position should speak to Archie Alderton, this year's Quidditch Captain. Professor Evans has volunteered to give any advice necessary and coach the team, so long as it doesn't coincide with his coaching for The Harry Potter Festival veteran team."

"Sorry Professor Snape," a seventh-year boy said, raising his hand, "but could you book the pitch for us every evening between seven and nine? You know the Gryffindors always try to get it first."

"Easily, Archie. That's all I have to say to the older years; you can go. First-years remain behind."

The majority of the students filed slowly out through the various portrait holes in the walls. James
found this interesting. The Gryffindors had just been divided into two areas - boys and girls - with
rooms for each year within the section. That left ten first-years behind: six boys and four girls. They
moved awkwardly forward from their scattered positions around the room.

"Look at each other," Severus said. "This is your family for the next few years. You'll live together,
work together, and fight for each other if necessary. We're Slytherins; we have a bad reputation. You
can never count on the other houses to stand up for you, Gryffindor in particular. However, we are
the best house, the cleverest and the most powerful. Now, how many of you are from non-wizarding
families?"

Two boys and a girl raised their hands shyly.

"Contrary to popular belief, Slytherin has as many Muggle-born students as the other houses; we just
make sure you settle in well. Mr Wood, if you would help Mr Macdonald around; Mr Rosier, if
you'd guide Mr Richards, and Miss Higgs, could you look after Miss Wilkinson? For now, these are
your roommates. Should you wish to change in a month or so, come and see me. You will all be
taking a basic junior Potions course in the evenings until I'm sure that you have all mastered what
those of you from wizarding families should already have been taught. Now, it's late and you should
go to bed. The password for the first-years' portraits is 'Parseltongue,' the same as the password to the
common room. Good night."

After that, he waited, watching while they successfully opened the passageways to their rooms
before leading James back out again.

"Give them their privacy tonight, we won't start enforcing curfew for a while. So, what did you think
of them? First impressions?"

James was a bit surprised by the question.

"Uh, Simon Wood is going to be trouble, a prankster if ever I saw one. Rosier, sorry I can't
remember his first name, looked as though he still has some of those pureblood-Mudblood attitudes.
Is that why you told him to help Richards?"

"Exactly. Anything else you might have noticed?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Very well, much what I'd expect for a new teacher. Arabelle Higgs seemed to share Michael
Rosier's views, too, and Alistair Macdonald is a possible victim of homesickness. Muggle-born
children tend to have more of a problem with it because of the strangeness of the situation to them.
You'd better go and see him later on. That's why I put him with Simon. I didn't get on well with
Oliver Wood - he was a Gryffindor, after all - but he's a good man and I'm trusting that his nephew is
the same. He'll be perfectly placed to help Alistair through it all."

James nodded, still a bit shocked by the revelations about Slytherin house that he'd received that
evening. Did that mean that his old Slytherin year-mates hadn't actually hated Muggle-borns? That
some of them had even been 'Mudbloods' themselves? And he'd never known that you were meant
to know some very basic things before you went into the school's Potions lessons, though Hermione
certainly had. Suddenly, his entire view of Hogwarts had collapsed, and Severus hadn't even been
sarcastic this evening. It was really too much to take in at once.

An hour or so later, James went back into the Slytherin common room and down the first-year boys'
corridor. The first room belonged to Simon Wood and Alistair Macdonald; this was the one he'd
been told to check. He cautiously pushed open the door just enough to peer inside through the crack
without disturbing them. As Severus had predicted, Alistair was sitting up in bed, sniffing desperately in an attempt to keep himself from crying. He looked completely lost. Simon, James was pleased to see - although he'd expected no less from Oliver's nephew - was perched on the bed next to him, an arm around his shoulders, trying to calm him down.

James knew that it would be much better to let Alistair cry himself out and get it out of his system, so he pushed open the door a bit more and slipped in. Simon looked up, but James motioned him to stay quiet. The boy slipped off the bed and back into his own to let James take his place. James scooped Alistair up and cradled him in his arms like a much younger child. Alistair broke at that comfort and, clinging around his neck, burst into tears. James murmured meaninglessly into his hair until he'd finished and tried to sit up.

"Feeling better?" he asked quietly. Alistair nodded. "Just remember, we're always here if you need us. If you start feeling homesick again, you can always come down to my rooms and talk for a bit. It can be hard the first time you're away from home. For me, that was really when I was about sixteen. I cried myself to sleep every night for the first week, but don't tell anyone that. Do you think you can sleep now?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Goodnight, then. I'll see you tomorrow."

James smiled at them, tucked Alistair back up into bed, knowing full well how much he would hate being treated like a baby at this point, and left. He'd been telling the honest truth. After he'd killed Voldemort and left the wizarding world was the first time he'd left home, really, since he'd always considered Hogwarts his home, never the Dursleys'. But now, it was late, and if he wanted to get a decent amount of sleep, he'd have to go to bed himself.

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The next day, James woke up, his stomach churning and a cold sweat on his forehead. He'd taught before, but never as a full-time teacher, never to students younger than sixteen and never to classes of twenty or more. To put it plainly, he was terrified. He dressed, pulling a smart green robe over the black shirt and jeans that he normally wore. After all, there was no reason to antagonise Severus unnecessarily. He managed that by accident often enough!

When he arrived in the Great Hall and took his seat, Minerva looked at him sympathetically and piled his plate with food.

"Thanks, Minerva, but I'm not really that hungry," he tried to protest.

She wasn't having any of it. "Nonsense, you sound like a second-year before his first Quidditch match. You need your strength. Anyway, you'll be fine."

"If he's not fine, why would he be here, anyway?" Severus asked, sneering. "A teacher who's scared of his students is a worthless addition to the staff; he threatens the tranquillity of our own classes."

"Shut up, Severus, you can't tell me you didn't get first-time nerves, because I was the one who got you through them, just as I am doing for James now."

"I'm not nervous!" James contradicted.

"Then why are you acting like you have a problem eating?" she said patiently. "Go on, eat. Severus will leave you alone. Who do you have first?"

"Seventh-years, some of them at any rate. There's only about five of them in the class. I thought Defence Against the Dark Arts was more popular than that."

"It is; you'll find that your other seventh-year class is much larger. There was a timetable clash with Transfiguration and Potions. The class you have today takes Potions, but not Transfiguration; that's why it's such a small group. The seventh-years are a nice crowd this year. I hope you're intending to push them hard. Unfortunately, their last teacher was an incompetent of the worst kind, since he could scarcely cast the spells he was trying to teach them. Since you were recommended from the university, I doubt you'll be having that problem."

"You attended the university?" Filius Flitwick asked, sounding curious. "Which house were you in?"

"Merlin, that's why Professor Dumbledore decided I'd work out in Slytherin house."

"You know, James," Minerva said, "Albus would really prefer it if you called him by his given name, like the rest of us. He's just worried he'll make you uncomfortable."

"I'll . . . try."

"Good, now, Filius here was duelling champion at the university for - what was it Filius - two years? Have you thought who you're going to ask to assist you with your duelling club yet?"

"Profes- Albus agreed to do a demonstration duel with me in the first session. It ought to be
fascinating for the students. I've asked him to go full out and not hold back."

"Are you sure you can handle duelling him?" Filius asked, sounding interested. "He defeats me quickly every time I try."

"I think I ought to be able to manage fine. Excuse me, please, I'd like to go and set up for the lesson."

"Good luck, James."

James left, passing Albus Dumbledore in the doorway.

"Have I missed anything?" he asked as he took his seat. "James looked remarkably cheerful for a new teacher. I remember that the rest of you looked like you were about to throw up before your first lessons."

"James was merely informing us that he's not only more powerful than you, Albus, but that his technique at duelling is better than yours, also," Severus said smoothly.

"If he says so, I am certain that he's right. I already had my suspicions," Albus said. "My brother informs me that he's quite the prodigy in his field."

"He was saying that he was better than Filius!" Pomona Sprout said, sounding horrified.

"Sorry, old friend, but he is. He's... let me see ... not just the only first-year student at the university to win the duelling tournament, but the only one ever to win it four consecutive years, including against the post-graduate students."

"He won every year he was there?!"

"Yes."

"Standards must really have dropped since I attended, then," Severus said. "In my day, any first-year who got ideas above his station had them promptly suppressed by his elders."

"I don't believe James even intended on winning," Albus said. "My brother mentioned something about having to blackmail him in order to get him past the first round. As for standards, how good would you say Draco Malfoy is at duelling?"

"One of the best to have left Hogwarts in recent years," Minerva said promptly. "Mr Longbottom could beat him, but only just."

"Draco Malfoy, a third-year at the time and defending champion, was the one that James Evans beat in his first final, almost without any expert training. Since then, James has received three and a half intensive years of training from my brother, an acknowledged master. Now, unless you have any more accusations to make against our new teacher, I suggest you progress to your lessons. It wouldn't do for you to be late on the first day, now, would it?"

James, meanwhile, had cleared back the desks in his classroom with a flick of his wand and arranged the chairs he'd need in a circle. Then he waited, his nervousness returning, for his class to arrive. They came precisely on time, all five of them, and he ticked them off on the register. Two were Ravenclaws and there was one student from each of the other houses. Of course, it was a NEWT.
class. James almost kicked himself for forgetting that they were more mixed than the younger years.

"Take a seat and put everything away," he said, noticing that they were hesitating. "You won't need anything, even your wand, for this lesson. I am, as you know, Professor Evans. Since I've been unable to find a complete list of topics you've covered, could one of you provide me with your notes from last year?"

One of the Ravenclaw girls raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Fancourt?"

"Sir, I think we'd all agree that we'd rather learn the topics over again. I don't think I really understood them when Professor Keddle explained them to us."

"Okay, you'd like a quick review of the basic topics, then? Easily arranged. Professor Dumbledore informed me that you hadn't studied the Unforgivable Curses before, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent, that's what we'll be covering today. Since this is such a small class, treat this like an informal discussion; don't bother raising your hands. What do you know about the Unforgivables already?"

"You get sent to Azkaban if you use them," one student answered.

"There's three, I can't remember their names," another replied.

"Correct, can anyone name them?" asked James.

"Imperius, Cruciatius and Avada Kedavra or the Killing Curse," the Slytherin boy said promptly. James looked at him carefully, was he a bit too quick to name them? Then the boy continued. "You-Know-Who killed my parents with Avada Kedavra. I was hiding in the cupboard."

"Yes, he did favour it. He killed my family, too; he destroyed far too many families. Try to call him Voldemort, though, fear of the name increases fear of the thing itself, and he's long since dead. There is no way he'll be able to return again. Imperius is a charm that takes away your free will, Cruciatius stimulates the nerves and causes excruciating pain and Avada Kedavra kills you instantly, there is no defence. Let's start with the last, and supposedly most terrible, Avada Kedavra. Mr Ketteridge, would you say that it was wrong under any circumstances?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why? Is it any different from the twenty or so other death curses that aren't illegal?"

"You can't defend against it."

"So if you were fighting a band of Dark Wizards, alone, and you needed to kill them to survive, you'd rather have to use a curse that they could block?"

"Um…"

"Of course, the reverse applies too, but they don't generally care about the law and will cast it at you anyway. Let us think of another scenario, Miss Timms. You're on the battlefield and your best friend has been felled with a Gladius Hex, which hit them straight in the chest. There is no way he will be
able to flee with the enemy pressing forwards to where you are. There is a chance that you, yourself, will be able to escape. Should they capture your friend, they will certainly torture her further until she dies. What do you do?"

"I can't use a Portkey to get her out?"

"It's too dangerous to shake her up like that and the glow of the Portkey will attract the enemy to you. Besides, if you're planning on being an Auror, you should be aware by now that unauthorized Portkeys are illegal."

"I suppose I'd have to kill her."

"How?"

"The most painless Killing Curse?"

"Which is?"

The girl smiled slightly, understanding, and made a guess.

"Avada Kedavra."

"Exactly. Now we'll look at a completely different charm: Wingardium Leviosa."

"Please, sir, what does it have to do with the Unforgivables?"

"You'll see. Now, you're on a battlefield and the Ministry has somehow managed to prevent the enemy's wands from casting any Dark Magic or using any of the spells usually classed as offensive. One of them casts Wingardium Leviosa on you, levitates you to one hundred meters and drops you, injuring you by breaking your back, leaving you to die, and hitting another of your side when you land, disabling them, also. Is that wrong? Mr Barbary?"

"It does more damage to my side, doesn't it? It gets rid of two wizards instead of one. Then, it's slower, too. And I suppose it hurts more, as well."

"Exactly. In this situation, would you rather be hit by Avada Kedavra or Wingardium Leviosa?"

"Avada Kedavra," they said in unison, sounding a bit surprised that he'd managed to argue them into his point of view so quickly.

"Can you think of any other times when Avada Kedavra could be used in a beneficial way?"

* * * * * * * * * *

A week or so later, James was in the library looking over the performance records for various house Quidditch teams over the past few years. Being new to Hogwarts, he wasn't supposed to know anyone except by reputation.

"Do you have any ideas yet?" Minerva asked. He jumped, then recovered enough to reply. How he'd let her get that close to him without him noticing . . .

"Yes thanks, I reckon I know who I'll ask; I'm surprised no one's approached them before."
"Well, who are they?" she demanded. "It can't be worse than the team I chose. I selected one of the best teams that I remember, the team of '81. I'd forgotten that they'd all grown up at some point and most hadn't played Quidditch for years, some since their Hogwarts days."

James gave in. "I thought perhaps the Gryffindor team of 1992, with one addition: Oliver Wood as Keeper, Angelina Johnson, Alicia Spinnet and Katie Bell as Chasers, Fred and George Weasley as Beaters and the addition of Charlie Weasley as Seeker."

He was right, they were certainly the best recorded team in the past twenty or so years, and even with Charlie Weasley replacing him on the team, they shouldn't have changed that much. The Seeker was the position that was the most easily interchangeable, and Charlie Weasley was rumoured to have been offered a position on the National Squad.

"Now why didn't I think of that? It sounds like an excellent idea, but I'm afraid you'll have to find someone else instead of Alicia. It's Alicia Weasley now; she married Fred Weasley four years ago and she's pregnant at the moment. There's no chance she'll be able to play."

"Oh," James replied, a bit stumped by this revelation. He'd never thought of that as a potential problem. "Well, I can always ask Draco; he can play Chaser as well as he can Seeker."

"Draco Malfoy? On the Gryffindor Quidditch team that kept beating him when he was at school? You'll never convince him, or the rest of the team."

"I can try."

"I can convince Draco, I'm sure. Aberforth says he's been bombarded with about ten owls a week from him trying to discover where I am. I . . . uh . . . forgot to tell anyone else I'd got this job. Half of them probably think I'm in the Auror program. I'm hoping that the rest of the team won't mind too much; he's the best replacement I can think of, and he knows my style."

"If you're sure . . .?"

"I am."

"You know where to come if you need a hand. Have you thought when to schedule training? You'll have to clear it with Rolanda if you want to use the school pitch - she'll certainly have her team out every spare minute they have."

"I was thinking I could probably convince the university to allow me back to train. Professor Wainwright, the sports co-ordinator, always did like Draco and me. He'll probably decide it would be good for his students to watch such a first-rate team."

"What do you mean? I'm sure the university has teams that are as good: older players, for one thing. In '92 Oliver was the oldest, and he was only sixteen."

"Come on, Minerva, they've all grown up since they left school. Wood's a professional player; everyone thinks he'll be the next Scottish Keeper. I've been told that Weasley, Charlie that is, was offered the Seeker position on the England team but turned it down to go to Romania. Angelina Johnson is a Chaser for the Harpies. Katie Bell's an Auror, but could have gone into professional Quidditch if she'd chosen, and the same with Alicia Spinnet. As for the Weasley twins - they're legendary, even if it isn't for Quidditch."

"I suppose you have a point, James; they were quite remarkable in their day. Of course, if Potter were with them, they'd be unstoppable. I remember the first time the boy ever flew on a broom. It was his first flying lesson - he must have been eleven, I suppose, and in Gryffindor! Another child,
Mr Longbottom, broke his wrist and Rolanda was forced to leave them alone while she hurried him off to Poppy. That was the class with Draco Malfoy in it, as well. The two boys couldn't stand each other. Mr Malfoy was something of a spoilt brat at the time; he's improved considerably, since. As I remember it, Draco, who'd been flying for years, picked up Longbottom's Remembrall, intending to put it on the roof. Harry - always the hero - shot off after him, not a thought in his head that he didn't know how to fly. He was a natural! When Draco saw him coming, he threw the ball at the castle. Harry caught it, coming to a spectacular halt right outside the staff room window. Scared my wits right out of me. I swear he thought we were going to expel him when I marched him off to find Wood. Wood thought I was mad at first, giving him a first-year, with no clue what Quidditch even was, for his Seeker. By the end of their first training session, he was practically singing! They didn't lose a game when the full team was playing until the Dementors came to the school . . ."

James cleared his throat, interrupting her remarkably accurate rendering of the story. At least she wasn't repeating Madam Pomfrey's remark about him being 'delicate' yet. He never had lived it down.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, James. You must be wanting to take those letters off to the Owlery. Do you want a hand?"

"No thanks, I'll be fine. How many training sessions do you think we'll need?"

"A lot, trust me, a lot. It's a nightmare fitting together a team that hasn't played in years. You'll need every moment they've got."


A few weeks later, James had received affirmative replies from all of his prospective team members. He had also carefully refrained from telling Draco he was the only Slytherin on an otherwise Gryffindor team and telling the Gryffindors that they'd have to put up with Draco Malfoy. He'd contacted Professor Wainwright at the university and scheduled their first training session that very day at eleven o'clock. Now, dressed in his university Quidditch robes and with his new Firebolt XF in hand, he Flooed to the stadium. He was a bit early, but he'd always been taught that the coach should be the first to arrive and the last to leave. Besides, he didn't want Draco and the Weasley twins left alone together if he could help it.

Professor Wainwright met him at the Floo connection. A small, thin man of about sixty and given to gesturing with his hands when excited, he wasn't your normal image of a Quidditch coach. On this particular occasion, he was almost jumping with excitement at having his prodigy return to him and hosting such prestigious players in his own 'small' stadium.

"James, my boy, how are you doing?"

"Fine, thanks, Professor," James said, grinning.

Everyone humoured Professor Wainwright - it was safer to do that than anything else. "You, sir?"

"Oh good, good. Getting along well in your new job, I suppose?"

"It's a lot better than anything else would be. I think I'm doing all right. How's Davy shaping up? He's your Quidditch rep now, isn't he?"
"Not too bad, though not up to your standard, I'm afraid. He says he wants to go professional, just like you should have."

"Sorry. Uh, so is the stadium completely free at the moment, or are the house teams training?"

"Whatever you wish, James. I thought you might want to start with a practice game, so you could see where you are before starting, therefore Merlin are out there at the moment."

"Thank you, sir. I don't think I'll have any problems - except for Draco - but it should be very interesting. Is there somewhere I can leave my things while I wait?"

"Your normal changing room is free today. No one else seems willing to take it - they all still call it Evans' room and leave well clear."

James flushed. That wasn't exactly what he'd intended when he and his team had regularly used the room.

"Er, right. Could you tell my team to meet me on the pitch when they arrive, sir? I'll warm up while I'm waiting."

"Of course, off you go now. Show my youngsters how it should be done."

Ten minutes later, James was practising his Wronski Feints to the 'ooohs' and 'aaaahs' of the younger end of the Merlin team. The older ones, after training with him for up to three years, merely looked superior as they pointedly ignored him. It wasn't quite so amazing if you'd seen the player fall head first into the mud on numerous occasions while he was teaching himself the moves.

"Evans! Get down here!" someone shouted. James twisted mid-manoeuvre to look and saw the unmistakable figure of Draco Malfoy standing in the middle of the grass. He didn't look happy.

James swerved and came to a perfect halt just in front of the other man and slid off his broom. He was hit in the face by a fist at what felt like a hundred miles per hour.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"Not telling me where you were. You might have signed the letter you sent me!"

"I meant to," James said innocently, attempting to sound honestly confused. "I must have forgotten."

"So, where have you been?"

"Hogwarts."

"Hogwarts!? Why?"

"I'm the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"I should have guessed that," Draco said, his smile the closest to a grin James had ever seen him come. "Okay, James, I forgive you."

"That was quick," James said suspiciously. Draco had always been one to hold a grudge - this sudden forgiveness was completely out of character for him.

"Yeah, well, I wanted to tell you . . ." he began, flushing.

"What?"
"I'm a father!" he blurted out.

"I didn't even know you were married."

"Well if you'd bothered to keep in touch and reply to my letters, you might have. I married Blaise Zabini. She was in Agrippa house here, studying Egyptian burial charms. Remember her?"

"I think so; she plays Chaser, right?"

"Yes, she's brilliant, too."

"So, what about your baby: a boy or a girl?" James said, attempting to get the obviously smitten Draco off the subject of his wife.

"Oh, a boy of course. You never get Malfoy girls, it just doesn't happen. He's got blue eyes the colour of sapphires and lovely black hair . . ."

"Black hair?"

"Blaise has black hair."

"Right."

"We're calling him Harry, after Potter, you know. Everyone else seems too scared of the name being cursed to use it, so it will be original. As if Potter would do anything to harm a kid. His full name will be Henry Severus Malfoy and we want you and Severus to be godfathers."

"Me? Are you sure?"

"Would I have said so if I wasn't? You do know Severus, don't you?"

"Severus Snape, the Potions master? Yes, and he can't stand me."

"He's like that with most people; not with me, of course, but with almost everyone else. What do you think of him?"

"He's okay, I guess. If he'd stop insulting me, that is."

"He's insulting you? That's good, it means he likes you, or at least respects you."

"What does he do to people he doesn't like?"

"If they're enemies, he curses them pretty thoroughly. He taught me to duel, so he's excellent. Anyone else isn't worth the effort and he'll just ignore them. To be constantly insulted for a month . . . I'm impressed, Evans. He doesn't do that often, only McGonagall, Flitwick and Potter that I remember. Even he doesn't dare with Dumbledore."

"I'll take your word for it," James said, wondering if he'd ever understand the man.

He listened for a few more minutes while his normally reserved friend sang the praises of his wife and son. It was with some relief that he saw four more people appear on the grass. As they got nearer, he saw they were the three Weasley members of the team and Oliver Wood.

"Mr Wood?" he said, trying very hard to appear as though he was meeting them for the first time. "I'm James Evans, the Defence professor at Hogwarts."
"Pleased to meet you," Oliver said, sounding as though he meant it. "My nephew hasn't stopped talking about you in his letters. From what he says, it sounds as though you invented the wheel, or even the wand!"

"I'm a bit young for that. He's a pleasure to teach, very quick."

"That's good to hear. These are Fred, George and Charlie Weasley."

They nodded to him. Then one of the twins, Fred, James thought, noticed Draco standing behind James.

"What's he doing here?"

"He's the final member of the team. I needed another Chaser, and could get hold of him on short notice."

"Chaser? I though you wanted me to play Seeker!"

"No, you play much better as Chaser; you can deny it as much as you want. You made me play Beater; think on it as if I'm returning the favour. Besides, I'm sure Blaise could give you coaching between sessions."

"Fine," Draco agreed quickly. The Gryffindors' looks of polite indifference turned into a wary respect. They honestly had no idea why the 'Slytherin Prince', as he'd been nicknamed at Hogwarts, had backed down so quickly. It was unheard of!

"Thank you, Draco," James said sweetly. "Now, let's get down to business. According to the Hogwarts staff, the team of past pupils has a very bad track record. I'm intending to change that. If I have my way, you will not just beat them, you will wipe the floor with them. I've never lost a game while I captained or coached a team, and I don't intend to start now. We're just waiting for Miss Johnson and Miss Bell to arrive, then we will begin. If you have any warm-up exercises you use, I'd recommend doing them now; once we begin I expect you to be ready."

His new team glanced at each other, looking as though they might resent this swift transfer of power from Wood to him, but the captain nodded and they got to work. James had developed a certain presence over the past few years, and it wasn't letting them down. When the two ladies appeared, he gave them a few minutes to get ready, then took them straight into their short match with the present Merlin House team.

They won.

Easily.

By three hundred points to ten.

James grinned. This was going to be easy.

He showed his team the changing rooms, then gave them an hour to rest and eat lunch. The real training would start that afternoon.

* * * * * * *
Two days later, one Saturday, he was standing on a duelling platform in the middle of the Great Hall wondering how in Merlin's name Albus had managed to get him into this. A Duelling Club? After the complete failure of the last one? The man had finally lost it.

Despite his doubts, the floor around the stage was filling rapidly. Although young Professor Evans was a very popular teacher with all of the houses, not just Slytherin, no one wanted to miss the opportunity of seeing him thrashed by the Headmaster. Just like watching Professor Snape murder Lockhart, it was an opportunity that was too good to miss. Little did they know that James Evans had no intention of losing.

James also noticed that a number of the staff were lurking in the background, wanting to see if their colleague could actually live up to his boasts. He couldn't actually see Severus - the man was far too experienced a spy for that - but he was sure he was lurking in the shadows somewhere. James wondered, for a moment, whether Draco had told him who he was to share the honour of being young Harry's godfather with. He was sorry he'd missed it - it could have been very amusing watching Draco run for his life.

At last, the doors shut behind the last of the students and James called for silence. He got it immediately. Either he was better respected than he'd thought, or they were looking forward to the spectacle far too much to risk delaying it. He suspected the latter.

"As I'm sure you all know, this is a new Duelling Club for the school. It will be open to all years and all houses, though we might divide into groups if the turnout continues to be this high. Duelling is an ancient art filled with rituals that are invariably carried out in exhibition duels and almost nowhere else. In battle, the rules are completely discarded except in a few . . . strange cases. I will be teaching you both methods. It is certainly a skill that no wizard or witch should be without. Before we begin anything, the Headmaster has kindly agreed to duel against me in a match that should prove very interesting for all concerned. Both of us are experienced duellers, and because of this I will erect a barrier around the duelling platform to prevent any stray hexes hitting members of the audience. I have no idea what Professor Dumbledore has planned for me, but it is likely to be nasty. If you are ready, sir, shall we begin?"

Albus Dumbledore smiled slightly at him and climbed onto the platform about ten metres away. With an easy wave of his wand, a shimmering but perfectly transparent barrier formed around them and James' wand came forwards into a 'ready' position, prepared for any attack.

They bowed slightly, eyes never leaving their opponent. As he straightened, Albus sent off a hex at James, who somersaulted easily out of the way, sending back a Gladius Hex, mid tumble, in response. It deflected harmlessly off his opponent's shield.

After that, the hexes, curses and jinxes came thick and fast. Albus stood his ground. He was, after all, getting a bit elderly for the energetic tumbling that the younger man favoured. This worked, up to a point, but his shield was rapidly wearing down, although James doubted any of the students would be able to notice that.

Still focussed, he vaulted forwards, above the path of any oncoming hex, using a small amount of wandless magic to aid him in gaining height. As he landed, he channelled his power into a powerful, tightly wound, Stunning Spell. Albus knew he was finished even before it touched his shield; it was too fast to dodge. It hit him in the chest and he keeled over. The barrier around the platform came down and James revived the Headmaster easily.

The students looked stunned, disbelieving. The teachers weren't much better, but those he could see looked at the young duelling master with a grudging respect. In all of their lives, they had never seen anyone defeat Albus Dumbledore in a duel.
"Are you okay, Albus?" James asked, offering him a hand up.

"I'll be very stiff in the morning, but yes, my boy, I'm fine. My brother taught you well."

"I'm sure he'll be pleased to hear you say so. Thank you for your assistance."

"Always welcome. I hope it was challenging enough for you?"

"You, sir, could never be an easy target."

Albus laughed at that and went over to where a chair had been placed in the corner of the Hall where he could observe the rest of the session. James turned back to the students.

"As you see, duelling takes great skill and a great deal of practice and training. We'll start with the etiquette concerning the beginning of a formal duel, then you can start practising a few moves. Mr Barbary, perhaps you could come up here and assist me with a short demonstration. I'd look terribly stupid doing it alone."

The seventh year warily climbed up onto the stage and stood facing James, about five metres away.

"That's right. Take your wand out and hold it in front of you, ready to cast a spell. First, we bow to each other. Then we turn and walk ten paces away from each other. That's so that when we begin duelling, there's less risk of being hit with a short-range curse. Then we turn back and can begin whenever we choose. However, at the moment, I'm not ready for another duel, so Samuel will have to wait a while for his chance. The first duelling charm we'll try out is one of the most important, and I'm sure many of you will already know it. However, it's worth going over it again. The incantation is 'Expelliarmus'. Try it."

Obediently, the assembled students chorused it, though a number of the older ones appeared bored. James smiled - they would soon find things challenging enough - and turned back to Samuel Barbary.

"Now, Mr Barbary, I assume this is one you know."

"Yes, Professor."

"You can demonstrate, then. Put as much force behind it as you can; I won't resist."

The boy looked doubtful at that, but shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

A streak of red light shot out of his wand and knocked James' wand from his hand, throwing him backwards. He landed, rolled and came back to his feet, scooping up the wand from where it had landed.

"Excellent. Now, since we are such a large group and happen to have so many of the staff in attendance, I wonder if I might presume to request that they each take a group?"

He looked at the Headmaster, who nodded to him.

"Thank you. I'll stay in here with the first-years. Professor Flitwick, could you take the second-years? Professor McGonagall, I'd be grateful if you'd take the third-years. Professor Sprout, the fourth-years are yours. Professor Sinistra, if you would, the fifth-years will require some assistance. Professor Dumbledore has kindly agreed to take the sixth-years, and the seventh-years . . . um . . ."

"I would be willing to take them," came the calm, silky voice of Professor Snape, stepping out from
behind a crowd of second-years who scattered in all directions as he came forwards, smirking.

"Thank you. I'm sure they will benefit from your expertise." A number of the older students blanched. "Of course, once this Club is established, I'll take different groups at different times and it won't be necessary for me to impose again.

They relaxed again. James raised an eyebrow at Severus, whose smirk widened, if anything - he definitely hadn't lost his touch over the years - as he swept out of the Hall, his assigned students trailing in his wake.

* * * * * * * * * * * *

The next evening, James was sitting in the staff room, marking papers. He knew he shouldn't have left it to the last minute, really he did, it was just he'd had to write to Aberforth, and then he'd had a training session with the Quidditch team, then there'd been the Duelling Club . . . It wasn't his fault!

"James," Severus said from behind him, "I am glad to see that you sustained no . . . physical . . . injuries whilst attempting to pound some knowledge into the vacuum that passes as a brain for most of the first-years."

James sighed at the insinuation that he had sustained some mental injury, and turned to face him.

"Did you need something, Severus?"

"I was merely curious as to how you managed to convince Mr Malfoy that you were suitable material for his son's godfather when you are in fact two years younger than he."

"To start with, I'm not two years younger; I believe it's closer to two months. I was two years behind him at university because, after completing my magical education, I took Muggle courses for four years to gain qualifications that I could use should it be required. As for your question, I honestly had no idea I was even under consideration before he approached me. The only answer I can give is that I am his friend."

"An inadequate answer, as I should have expected. Why, out of all of his friends, should he have chosen you instead of a more suitable, properly Slytherin man."

"How Slytherin am I?" James asked wryly. "I'm Slytherin enough to be sorted into Merlin house; I'm Slytherin enough to have convinced you that I'm completely harmless, more of a Hufflepuff or Gryffindor than a Slytherin. If you had taken the time to discuss me with Draco, as I'm fairly sure you haven't, you'd know that I've outwitted him on more than one occasion. I'm Slytherin enough to have been assigned with the housemaster of Merlin as a mentor. What does it take to be a Slytherin in your opinion, then? A pure-blood family? Allegiance to Voldemort? Parseltongue? I'll take the opportunity to remind you that Mr Malfoy, a former student whom you obviously think so highly of, has none of these qualities other than his so called pure heritage."

"Even if I concede that point, not that I'm intending to, why you?"

"How many friends does Draco have?"

"A number."
"Of course he has a number, one's a number. How many?"

"In the region of twenty or so close friends."

"Twenty? How well do you know him yourself? I can tally those he counts as close friends on my fingers, almost on just one hand. He has many acquaintances - he's a Slytherin and an important man, after all - but he trusts very few. I would say you and me, obviously, Blaise and a boy from Draco's year at Merlin. Then I'd probably name Ronald and Hermione Weasley before running out of names. Before you accuse me of anything else, I suggest you talk to Draco and ask him about me. You're a Potions master, wouldn't it stand to reason that it's possible to transfer the idea of research to other areas?"

"Touché, Mr Evans. I would, however, advise that you didn't leave your marking until the last minute. It not only puts more pressure on you, but means that your grading is likely to be inconsistent and the essays less thoroughly read."

With that last jab, he left. James groaned and got back to work. Despite the source, it was good advice. Was Draco really right? Was this really how he treated people he liked? He was so confusing! He hoped his friend was right.

WHAT!

Had he just thought that he hoped Severus Snape liked him? Even just as friend, that was just plain weird. Then again, if the man didn't insist on those fifteenth-century robes and actually wore trousers for a change, leather ones preferably, he wouldn't look too bad.

Right, be honest, he'd look more than just okay.

He'd look damn good.

* * * * * * *
The next weekend, James decided that it would be appropriate for him to visit his new godson. He knew there would be documents to fill in, though none of the specifics, and besides, he wanted to meet this Potter look-alike.

That morning just before eleven, he changed from his usual school robes into an emerald-green silk dress shirt and smart black slacks. He topped this with an open black robe. Carefully, he stood in front of the mirror and reapplied the concealing make up on his scar. Turning slightly to check that it wouldn't show up with the light on it, James studied himself. He looked every inch a respectable young Slytherin gentleman, but there was still something missing. His hair, tied back in the fast and practical way that was about the only thing he could do with it, was fine for a teacher, but didn't have the same sense of elegance as the rest of his outfit. He freed it and brushed it out. Much better.

Moving quickly through to the open fireplace in his living room, he threw in a pinch of Floo powder.

"Albus Dumbledore's office!" he called, stepping in. He felt a tug, like he was being sucked down a huge vacuum cleaner, swirling through ancient passageways, then he was spat out unceremoniously, sprawled on the headmaster's carpet. He picked himself up, looking regretfully at his now-sooty clothes. Why did he persist in having such problems with something he'd seen six-year-olds manage impeccably? A quick 'Scourgify,' and he turned to Albus' desk. The old man was smiling at him, looking as though he was trying very hard to conceal his amusement.

"Why couldn't I have taken the stairs?" James muttered.

"James, my boy, what can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if I could use your Floo connection. Our fireplaces aren't on the Network, are they?"

"Not entirely, you can use them for conversations, but they have been blocked from allowing you to travel through them. Might I ask your destination?"

"I thought I'd visit my godson."

"Godson?"

"Harry Malfoy."

"Draco Malfoy's son? Who's the lucky mother?"

"Blaise, Zabini, I believe."

"Give them my congratulations, please. The Floo powder's on the mantelpiece." James dug around on the cluttered shelf until he found the pot.

"Malfoy Manor!" he called, and vanished.

He fell out into the entrance hall of the huge Malfoy home. After brushing himself down and straightening his hair again, he pulled the summoning bell for a house-elf. One appeared with a pop in front of him. James noted with approval that although it was wearing the customary pillowcase, it
looked new and freshly laundered. A far sight from Dobby's miserable rags.

"How may Hobby be helping you, sir?" the house-elf said, bowing deeply.

"Mr Evans to see the Malfoy family."

"One moment, sir, Hobby will just locate the master. Ah yes, if you would follow Hobby, sir, Mr Malfoy is in the family drawing room."

James followed on, attempting to present the image of a confident young pureblood. It would have been so much easier if he, like Draco and most other young boys, had been doing this since he could walk. His friend had once confessed to having had lessons in how to speak to different people, the five types of smiles (patronising, sucking up, genuine pleasure, the arrogant you-are-not-worth-my-notice sneer and the you-are-privileged-to-be-in-my-presence half smile) and many other things, all before he went to Hogwarts.

At last, they came to a small door. The house-elf pushed it open and stepped into a small, cosy room, much the same as a normal living room. Draco was sitting on the floor playing with a little baby while a lady, presumably Blaise Malfoy, was sitting, reading by the fire.

"Mr Evans to see you, master." Draco looked up.

"Thank you, Hobby, that will be all for now." Hobby bowed himself out. When he had gone, Draco scooped his son up into his arms and stood up, coming over to the door.

"James!" he said, smiling openly. "It's about time you came over."

"I sometimes think Severus is right," James replied wryly, "it does often seem like a lost cause attempting to teach anything to the little wretches. The Slytherins are the worst, definitely. But now, might I be introduced to your lovely wife?"

James smiled winningly at Blaise, who had put aside her book and come to stand beside her husband.

"Of course. Blaise, this is James Evans. James, Blaise Malfoy."

"A pleasure to meet you, James," Blaise said warmly. "I've always known of you, of course. I believe you were almost legendary at the University."

"I fear much is an exaggeration, though I do my best. I just regret that Draco never introduced you to me sooner."

"Stop flirting, James," Draco said irritably. "We both know you don't mean it."

"No harm in being polite, is there? Still, I would appreciate it if we could drop the formalities, Mrs Malfoy. I'm afraid that I wasn't brought up to them as you were."

"Certainly, but you must call me Blaise. This is little Harry, as I'm sure you've guessed."

"He looks a lot like you, but I think his bone structure is probably Draco's."

"Have you ever held a baby before?"

"No, actually."

She looked at him with the wary eye of a new mother who has seen a number of inexperienced
males handling her darling.

"I'd sit down, then, just until you get used to it."

James nervously took a seat on a sofa and Harry was deftly inserted into his arms. He looked down at the slightly pointed face, the silky black hair and the twinkling blue eyes. He really was very sweet. Although he'd never really had any contact with babies before, he thought that Harry was a beautiful child. As he held Harry up against his chest, the bright eyes fixed on his face and a little arm came up. Unmistakably, he brushed the scar on James' forehead, although James was sure it was properly concealed. Harry gurgled, then shut his eyes and fell asleep. Blaise smiled fondly at him, scooped him up and put him in a little cot over in the corner of the room.

"There are forms for me to fill in, aren't there?" James asked quietly.

"As a godfather? Yes, Draco has them. You basically agree to look after Harry's emotional, mental, physical and magical growth and well-being. We're obliged to consult with you before making any large decisions about his life, like which school he should go to."

"I think I could manage that. Is it a magical contract?"

"Yes, but completely confidential," Draco reassured him. Although he didn't know the reason, he knew that James was touchy about some things, especially when he needed to write down his full name. "As soon as you sign it, it vanishes to a special place in the Ministry Archives and it won't be taken out again unless it's needed."

"Fine. Where do I sign?"

Draco produced a roll of parchment and a quill from his desk and indicated the space at the bottom. He quickly stepped away. James signed his full name - Harry James Evans Potter - in the space. Then he used his wand to make a small cut on his wrist and allowed a drop of blood to fall onto the page just under his name. The parchment rolled itself up and vanished with a quiet pop.

Business dealt with, James spent the rest of the morning chatting with his friends about whatever came to mind. The upcoming Quidditch match was mentioned, memories of their days at University, news of other acquaintances and, of course, as much about Harry as possible. Neither of the doting parents was about to pass up the chance to talk about him to a willing audience.

Just before lunch, the house-elf came into the room again.

"Mr Snape has arrived, sir. Shall Hobby be showing him in?"

"Of course," Blaise replied. James tried very hard to shrink into the sofa, but Draco pulled him over to look through some Defence books.

Severus himself came through a minute later.

"Draco, Blaise, you're looking well. What are you doing here, Evans?"

"Visiting my friends and my godson."

"You agreed, then."

"Naturally. Who'd pass up the opportunity to be a godfather?"

"He won't remain this sweet for much longer."
"I know, but my godfather put up with me, I'm sure I can do the same with Harry."

"Only one?"

"That I know of. My parents died when I was young, so if I had another, I wasn't told of him. Of course, during the war there were many casualties."

"True. How is Henry, then?"

"Can't you call him Harry, Uncle Sev?" Draco asked. "Just because you couldn't stand Potter… Merlin, you never even knew him."

"Would you like me to call you Dray? No? I thought as much."

Draco rolled his eyes. This was obviously an old argument.

"Still, Harry's absolutely fine. He had a bad night on Tuesday, but Blaise thinks that was just a one-off."

"That's good, he obviously takes after his mother. We all knew you were a most antisocial baby. No wonder Narcissa had the house-elves take care of you much of the time. If she even tried to speak to someone else while you were in the room, you'd start screaming."

"I wasn't that bad!"

Severus didn't reply, just raised an eyebrow.

"Are you staying for lunch?" Blaise asked.

"I've got a conference with the Aurors' Potions master starting at two . . ."

"We're eating very soon. You'll have plenty of time to get to your meeting."

"Thank you for the invitation, then. I would be glad to stay."


* * * * * *

On October 15th, two days before the opening of the Harry Potter festivities, the professors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry met in the staff room for a last meeting about the upcoming event. Most of them looked bored. The formula for the three days was the same every year, only the speakers varying, and all of them, except for James, had run through it many times already.

"Although the holiday opens on the 17th," Albus began, "our first guests start arriving tomorrow. The majority will be housed in the South Tower; the house-elves have a complete list of the residents of each room. There are a few exceptions. My brother, who has decided to honour us with his presence this year since he no longer has a student, will be residing in the dungeons in the two-bedroom suite on the same corridor as Severus' and James' rooms. He will share it with the University media representative. I don't know if Claudius will accompany him this year, but I'm sure we can provide any facilities he requires."

James snickered slightly at the exasperated look on the headmaster's face as he continued.
"Of course, should anyone happen to find out my brother's secret, you will tell me, won't you? Since our guests start arriving tomorrow evening, beginning then, those of us who have them will have to wear graduation robes. James, you do have yours with you, don't you?"

"Yes, Albus."

"Good, good. Now, onto our seating arrangements."

"Severus is younger than I am," Professor Sinistra interrupted quickly.

"I am well aware of that. As usual, the youngest two professors will have to be seated with the students for the four days to make room for the Minister of Magic and our guest speakers at the head table and to help maintain a semblance of control in front of our esteemed visitors. This year, that will mean Severus, as usual, and James. Do either of you object?"

"Would it make any difference if we did?" Severus asked rhetorically. "No, I have no problem with that arrangement. I am sure the conversation offered will be fascinating."

"James?"

"Fine by me."

"Thank you. On the seventeenth, for Muggle parents and those who haven't had the opportunity to see Hogwarts before, the guided tours will operate from ten o'clock until lunchtime. The prefects are, as always, in charge of those. In the afternoon, the memorial service will begin at two o'clock on the Quidditch pitch, that being the only location large enough to seat our normal audience. That evening, the house-elves will prepare a banquet for us. Are there any questions about that?"

"Albus, how many times have we done this?" Minerva asked.

He shifted uncomfortably.

"On the second day, the workshops and speakers will be presenting throughout the day. Again, that requires very little organisation from us. On the third day, we have the speeches about Harry from some of his friends starting at ten o'clock. The afternoon contains the highlight of the three days: the Quidditch match. The balls will be released at three o'clock. Rolanda, how is your team getting on?"

The Quidditch coach smirked. "As well as they always do. We have some excellent players this year."

"James, still confident?"

"Of course. My team is unbeatable."

"Who is your team?" the opposing coach demanded.

"That's for me to know and you to find out five minutes before the game begins, less if I have my way."

"Children, please. Remember this is only a friendly match; we don't want any feuds starting, now, do we? Are there any other issues that need to be raised? No? Excellent, I believe we are finished here, then. Minerva, would you join me for tea in my office, I've got in a new supply of lemon sherbets?"
On the evening of the sixteenth, James dressed in his green velvet robes. Green for Merlin house, a white hood lining as a member of the Combative Department, gold trim for his qualifications as an honours graduate and master of his subject and the silver trim of a duelling champion. It certainly looked impressive. It was meant to.

When he went up for dinner that evening, it was still quite early. There was only a scattering of students at the four long house tables. James sat down by Archie Alderton and a group of other sixth- and seventh-years at the Slytherin table.

"Mind if I sit here?"

"Of course not, sir. We were just talking about the question you asked us to think about during duelling club."

"Which one?"

"What is the best opening method in a duel? What do you think, sir?"

"I'll hear your opinions first, if you don't mind. Bear in mind that there isn't necessarily a correct answer, a lot depends on the situation and your opponent."

"Well, I think that you should start with a fairly basic spell like the Disarming Charm. Everyone says that Professor Snape won a duel with it once, but then, he is very powerful. If you get opponents with it, you don't waste any unnecessary energy, but if you don't, they'll underestimate you."

"Only if you don't know them, of course."

"It would be far more sensible to start with a powerful strike, though," one of the others started enthusiastically. "You're likely to catch them before they're as ready as they would be later on in a duel, and the beginning's when you have the most energy behind it."

"And of course," Archie said scornfully, "by the time you're halfway through the duel, you'll be exhausted."

"Perhaps," James said, thinking about it. "It's certainly a good point, but for it to be effective, you'd have to be certain you would actually take them out on the first strike, wouldn't you? That technique's a bit better in a combat situation, though; it takes less time and energy if it works."

"What are you debating about?" Severus said from behind him. James looked around, startled, as the man, also wearing the green robes of a Merlin house graduate, stepped easily over the bench and sat down next to him.

"The best opening moves in a duel."

"Personally, I find the best method is to avoid being in a duelling situation in the first place; although, it certainly has its place. If there's an alternative, such as a group attack on a target or using explosive potions, it's best to take it."

"Yes, but what's your move if you are in a duel, sir?" someone asked.

"If I did have a standard opening move, which I don't, do you think I'd tell people about it? I doubt Professor Evans has told you his."
James laughed and continued to discuss the place and time for each technique.

"I find in a real combat situation, I like to obliterate my opponent as quickly as possible. Severus, do you have any burn potion on you?"

"Yes, why?"

James concentrated and brought up a laser-like beam of bright white light streaming out from a tiny point on his palm.

"What's that?" Archie asked, fascinated.

"Pure magic, magic so raw that it's near uncontrollable," James said quietly, and the ray vanished.

"Can I have the potion now, please?"

"For what?"

"I've got a blister!"

"You want me to give you burn potion for a blister?"

"A very nasty, very painful blister that won't go away unless I put some burn salve on it."

Severus rolled his eyes and handed James a small phial of potion.

"First few times I tried that, I hadn't got the hang of keeping it down to a small area and I burned half the skin off my body. It still hurts like anything to use it, but no Shield Charm works against it and it takes huge power to summon it in the first place. I never use this unless my life is threatened, it's too dangerous."

Just then, the main doors opened and an old man swept in. He was very tall, very old. His silvery-white beard and hair were long and his blue eyes twinkled behind half-moon glasses. He, too, wore a green robe, but his was plain green with no trim, no coloured lining. He was Aberforth Dumbledore, housemaster of Merlin and James' mentor. At first glance, he appeared to be without Claudius.

James was out of his seat like a shot and bounding towards him. Aberforth ruffled his hair affectionately, James scowling at him for doing this in front of his students. A quick handshake, and then Abe turned back towards the door.

"Claudius!" he shouted. "Hurry up! And don't you dare muck up any of Albus' floors! His house-elves have quite enough work to do without you adding to it."


A few moments later, a very grumpy, coal black, common goat marched sullenly into the Hall.

"Hullo, Claudius," James said, smiling. Aberforth's pet goat was notorious, not only for the 'inappropriate charms' cast on it, but also, within the university, for its terrible temper. It was rumoured to be worse than Voldemort on a bad day or, at least, it would be if it were human.

Claudius graced him with a contemplating look, seeming to lighten to a slightly paler shade of grey.

"James," Albus said as they neared the staff table, "would you show Aberforth down to his rooms? Uh, Abe, where do you want Claudius?"
"Could Rubeus possibly . . .?"

"Of course. I'll come by your rooms later, catch up. I'll even bring you some sherbet lemons."

"Uhm, thank you, Albus. Shall we go, Jamie-boy?"

James sighed, shook his head, and led the way out. Would the man ever remember that he was a fully trained, fully qualified adult, and a teacher too?

After they left the Hall, James led Aberforth down the now-familiar passages to the isolated corridor where his rooms were located. Claudius, meanwhile, was led off, as grumpily as usual, by Hagrid, who was thrilled to have a new . . . creature to look after. As soon as they were inside, Aberforth looked at James.

"So, how are you getting on?"

"Oh, fine."

"And . . .?"

"And what?" James asked innocently.

"How are you getting along with everyone?"

"Quite well. Minerva's been very helpful, especially in the first few weeks when I was still finding my feet."

"You know quite well that's not what I meant! What's your love life like?"

"Abe!" James exclaimed, completely embarrassed, though not at all surprised: it was the sort of question he had come to expect from either of the Dumbledore brothers. "I'm in a school, what do you expect?"

"Nonexistent, then? Such a shame. I'll have to talk to Albus, find someone you might get on with. I'm sure he'll know all of the eligible young men around, the nosy youngster."

"Thanks, Abe," James said, making an effort to be polite despite the obvious attempts to wind him up. "I'm fine. Really. And I don't have much time for a social life, anyway. It's a hard job, very challenging. I keep very long hours. And of course, I've got to look out for my Slytherins in the evening. Some of them get homesick, you know."

"Calm down, Jamie. I wouldn't do that really, you know that. At least, I wouldn't bother discussing it with Albus. He never did have any sense. You'd better go back up again now, hadn't you? You've still got to finish your dinner. Make sure you eat your beans. I remember the Hogwarts elves being very good at them."

James pulled a face, laughed and went back upstairs again. Just as he was passing through the small antechamber that the teachers usually used to get in and out of the Hall without passing through the main doors, he was stopped by Minerva and led off into a corner where Severus was waiting. She was tense, almost fidgeting, and Severus, though as silent as ever, stood with eyes sparkling with restrained excitement.

"What is it?"

"The goat," Minerva said urgently. "What did Professor Dumbledore do to it?"
"Abe, you mean? I'm not sure I can tell you, I mean, he didn't seem that keen on his brother knowing, now did he?"

"We aren't his brother," Severus pointed out smoothly. "And I give you my solemn word I will not speak a word of this conversation to Albus."

"Fine," James said, grinning. "It's not like it's anything important. All he did was charm Claudius so that he changes colour depending on his mood. Problem is, Claudius is so depressed, he's never anything but black, anyway."

"That's all?" Minerva asked incredulously.

"Yes. What did you think it was?" he asked impishly.

Severus quickly put a hand over her mouth. Minerva was blushing. Merlin, even Severus was slightly flushed.

"I think Minerva would prefer not to embarrass herself further," he said quickly.

James laughed.

"Don't worry, I know what you thought - it's what everyone does. It's the wording, isn't it? Inappropriate charms on a goat. Honestly, couldn't they come up with a more exact definition? Believe me, though, living with a goat isn't fun. It smells, even with cleaning charms, and Abe takes Claudius everywhere, literally. The idea is that if he ever does do something interesting, Abe's there to take notes. Guess who always had to muck Claude out, though?"

"A suitable task for an apprentice, one would have thought," Severus said.

"Quite, so it's unfortunate there wasn't one. I was a student, part of the university as opposed to being apprenticed to a single master."

"You know your rules," Minerva said, starting to recover her composure.

"One of my first tasks, a memory exercise, was to memorise the entire University rule book, including all the footnotes and definitions. Has anyone arrived while I was down there?"

"Not yet, though the Apparition wards have just signalled that the University media representative has arrived in Hogsmeade. Albus asked us to fetch you in case it was anyone you knew."

"I doubt it. Other than the Quidditch team, most of my friends were in my own year or a higher one. I found that the younger ones weren't quite as mature, probably because they can't remember the war much."

"It's certainly something no one will forget. We'd best go back in now. Did you finish your meal?"

"Just about. I doubt I'll have a chance to now, so I'll go to the kitchen later if I'm hungry."

* * * * * * * * *

James slept in the next morning, taking advantage of the lack of lessons. There was nothing he needed to be present at until the afternoon, so in the late morning, after a leisurely breakfast in the
kitchens, he went outside to think. His favourite place was a spot overlooking the lake, his back to an ancient tree growing next to it and hidden from general view by the reeds and willow trees that surrounded his small clearing. It was a sunny but chilly day, crisp air making it pleasant, although he noted that very few unaccompanied students were around.

After a while, he had drifted off into a kind of trance, mind lost in his imagination. He snapped awake as he heard rustling footsteps behind him.

"I'm sorry," the arrival said after a few seconds, sounding apologetic. "I didn't realise someone was here."

James turned to see a tall man, close on six foot six, looking at him curiously. His hair was neatly trimmed and orange, and he was wearing blue dress robes.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'm not doing anything important, Mr Weasley."

"How?"

"You look like your brothers," James explained, only Ron wouldn't have worked that one out. "I'm James Evans."

"Ron Weasley."

They shook hands.

"So, you teach here, then? I think Charlie mentioned you."

"Yes, Defence Against the Dark Arts. It's... different. Not what I expected at all, but then, nothing would be, really. I'm coaching the veteran Quidditch team this year."

"Now I remember."

"So, why are you out here?" James asked. He was curious and thought that Ron would probably tell him, even if he was a complete stranger, for a sympathetic ear.

"Hermione - my wife - gave me my instructions. It's my turn to do the speech this year about Harry."

"Harry Potter?"

"Yes. We were friends in school. We've organised it amongst us so that it's always one of his friends who speaks about him - who knows what a Ministry official would say? - and this year it's my turn. What's worse, no one's willing to help me write it."

"I didn't know him, of course," James said. "But what do you think he would have thought of all this, the holiday in honour of him, the speeches and everything?"

Ron thought for a moment.

"He'd have hated it, really. All the media around and the attention. He just wanted to be a normal kid at school. A three day festival, well, he'd probably have left the country!"

"There you go, you've got something to talk about."

"Huh?"
"People aren't interested in what he did, you can read that in any history book if you didn't already know. They want to know what he was like. If he didn't like the attention, tell us."

"Were you a Ravenclaw in school?"

"I didn't come to Hogwarts," James lied easily. "But I was in Merlin House at University, two years behind Draco."

"You know Malfoy, then?"

"How many Dracos do you know?"

Ron laughed. James grinned, yes, he was older, taller, more confident and much better looking, but he was still the same.

"You know, you reminded me of him for a minute, when I first came down. We used to come here a lot when we were in school."

"So I looked like Harry Potter?" James asked, amused.

"Well, it was just at first, from the back. You've got black hair, and you were sitting the same way. Now I see you properly, it's not such a strong resemblance. You look older, and your eyes are different."

"Everyone tells me I look like Salazar Slytherin," he said absently, knowing what the reaction would be.

"Nah, everyone knows Slytherin was a Dark Wizard. He looked more like You-Know-Who. Anyway, I remember Charlie and the twins saying you're coaching the veterans' Quidditch team. Do you play a lot?"

"Sure, Seeker mostly, or Beater. I'm not bad, really. You?"

"Keeper. It was the only position not taken when I played Quidditch with my family, and I guess I just got to like it."

"What do you think about the Chudley Cannons' chances this season?"

That afternoon, James took his seat in the teachers' area of the Quidditch stands. All around him were witches and wizards from all houses, all countries and all walks of life: some were schoolchildren; some were ancient old men, scarcely walking, but making this pilgrimage of sorts to honour their dead family and friends.

Severus looked irritated as he sat down.

"Damn travesty," he muttered.

"What?"

"Do you know how many people aren't on their list? Mostly the victims who came from the old, pureblood families normally classed as Dark. Narcissa Malfoy for one. And she was killed by her husband when she showed light tendencies."

"The joys of our Ministry," James said. "Shh now, I haven't seen this before."

Albus Dumbledore was standing in the centre of the Quidditch pitch, dressed in his best formal
robes, flanked by Arthur Weasley - the Minister for Magic - and Magnus Stebbins - an Unspeakable. Casting a quick Sonorus Charm, he looked around at the stands. He spoke for a while on the war and the efforts of people to end it, then was passed a large roll of parchment.

"Now I ask you for silence as I read the names of those who lost their lives during the first rising of Voldemort."

James closed his eyes, thinking about the memories each familiar name brought up. He was surprised to hear the names Harold and Margaret Potter and Simon and Rosemary Evans read out one after the other. They were probably his grandparents, together when they died. At last, Dumbledore neared the end of an impossibly long list. James was sober, he hadn't realised before quite the scale of the deaths.

"Fabian Prewett, Gideon Prewett, James Potter, Lily Potter," he finished, looking up at them once more. "And it was the sacrifice of Lily Potter, the mother of Harry Potter, which defeated Voldemort and allowed us thirteen years of relative peace. After that time, Voldemort rose again and his second rising began. His first casualty was Cedric Diggory, then came . . ."

James stopped listening. He knew of all of these deaths and relived many of them in his nightmares. He didn't need this reminder. Cedric, Sirius, Seamus - they all haunted his mind.

"Dean Thomas, Emmeline Vance, Alastor Moody and, finally, Harry Potter, the boy who killed Voldemort, destroyed him and died, we presume, from using up his life energy in the last blast of magic that saved us all. Now, let us have a minute's silence while we think of those we lost."

The huge crowd, wizard and Muggle parents alike, was quiet. Not a baby stirred. When the headmaster spoke again, he had their complete attention, not that he'd ever been lacking it.

"Before we end and go to prepare ourselves for the banquet to come, Arthur Weasley, a former Order of the Phoenix member and our current Minister for Magic, has asked to say something."

"Thank you, Albus," Mr Weasley said, his voice, though quieter, still carrying. "I fought through both wars and have never regretted it. Should I have been called on to do so, I would gladly have given my life. However, I was not. It does not do to dwell overmuch on those who have passed away, but we should always be aware of the sacrifice they made. They wanted us to have a peaceful life, free from fear, and that it what we must strive to do. In their memory, we must do our utmost to prevent the rising of a new Dark Lord, so that their deaths were not in vain. Thank you."

Thoughtfully, James went back down to his dungeon rooms to think, reading to try and escape from the gruesome memories the afternoon had recalled. Thinking back, he, like Severus, noted the large gaps in the list. He would have thought Albus would have done better, but maybe the list had been compiled by Fudge's Ministry. There was no way of knowing and, as he had once been told, it did no good to dwell on dreams.

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On the next day, James fully intended to do nothing until at least two o'clock. At that point, he might just find his way out of bed. If the school was particularly unlucky, he might even make it to a couple of the demonstrations taking place, but that was unlikely. This was a rare day off and he meant to make the most of it. Therefore, he was not impressed when someone knocked on his door at ten
o'clock in the morning.

Not caring what he looked like, he went over to answer it in the shorts he'd slept in, pausing only to apply a concealment charm to his scar. It wouldn't work for long, but it would last until he went back to bed. It was Severus.

"Evans," he said politely, appearing to be ignoring his colleague's state of undress.

"What in Merlin's name is it, Severus? I was sleeping."

"This late? I beg your pardon, then. I had assumed you were awake, as everyone else appears to be. Professor Dumbledore. . ."

"Which one?" James asked grumpily.

"Aberforth asked me to remind you that you're giving the duelling seminar in the Great Hall at eleven o'clock this morning."

James swore violently. The meddling, conniving… Severus raised his eyebrow but didn't appear to be shocked. James hadn't expected him to be.

"Had you forgotten about it, perhaps?"

"I never signed up for any damn lecture! I was intending to sleep all day. How do you sign up for one?"

"I believe you summon the house-elf in charge of the timetable and select a free slot."

"Excellent."

James snapped his fingers and a house-elf appeared, clutching a clipboard to his chest.

"How may I be helping you, Professors?" he asked, making a deep bow.

"Are there any times for lectures free this afternoon?"

"The lesser study hall is free at two thirty this afternoon, sir. Would sir like to sign up for this time?"

"Not for me; put down Aberforth Dumbledore."

"And a subject, sir?"

"Uses and care of Muggle animals, particularly the goat, and the meaning of inappropriate charms on an animal."

"Very well, sir, will that be all?"

"Yes, thank you."

The house-elf dissolved into the air, and James smirked.

"There. Severus, could you possibly 'remind' Abe of his own lecture, and tell him not to be so hypocritical as to remind me when he has forgotten his own."

"I suppose I could…"

"Would you, please?"
"Certainly. You had best prepare your lecture, unless you want to be embarrassed. You only have an hour remaining." With that last parting shot, he stepped out. It was only a fancy, really, but James could almost hear his old teacher's yells through the three-metre thick stone walls.

After hastily dressing, James went in search of Draco. He knew his friend was there; it was just a question of locating him. He caught up with the Malfoy couple chatting with Ron and Hermione Weasley in the Entrance Hall.

"Excuse me for interrupting," he said with a slight bow of apology. All the etiquette lessons he’d been given at University hadn't been a complete waste of time. "Draco, could I have a word?"

Moving a bit away, James explained his situation. Draco found it hilarious.

"You didn't think to block your name from being signed up? You? If I'd known that, you'd be doing far more than one measly session. You extracted a suitable revenge, of course?"

"Naturally."

"So, what can I do?"

"My subject is duelling. Unless you object, it would probably be easiest to just run through a training session with you."

"It's a good thing I like you, James. Fine, I'll do it. Eleven o'clock, you said? Then we still have forty minutes. Have you met the Weasleys?"

"I met Ronald this morning."

"I'll introduce you, then."

Oozing charm, Draco sauntered back into the little circle.

"Business sorted," he announced with a smile. "I'm assisting with a duelling lecture at eleven. This is James Evans, a friend of mine from University. He teaches Defence here, now. James, these are Ron and Hermione Weasley." Shaking hands with her, James looked at Hermione. She had grown up, too, was no longer the girl with frizzy hair and a permanently vexed expression. She had matured into a beautiful woman, her head level with her husband's chin, wearing quietly stylish clothes. She was giving him the same careful examination. James nervously ran his fingers through his hair, brushing it forwards in case his scar was showing. At that, her eyes narrowed slightly.

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr Evans. I've always wondered what it was like at the University. After all, some places are so selective with regards to all that rubbish about blood purity that I decided to apply for an apprenticeship at the Ministry, instead. Is this your first year of teaching, then? I feel sure I would have remembered had I seen you before."

"As I would certainly have remembered meeting such a radiant beauty as you. Yes, this is my first year," James said cautiously. He knew how intelligent Hermione was and how she noticed little things that most others missed. It would be unwise to underestimate her. He would have to be extremely careful. "I've just completed my university course, and when I heard the position here was open, it seemed to suit my needs."

"Did you have much experience before coming here, then?"

"I've coached a fair amount and taught small groups, but nothing on quite this scale. I've never had to do any written work, either. Its much harder work than I expected. I've heard of your reputation, of
course, so I don't imagine you would have any problem with the organisational side of things."

"James, stop flirting with Hermione; you wouldn't want to break her heart when she finds out you're not serious, would you? Hadn't we better go change?" Draco interrupted, glancing down at his own expensive, tailored robes.

At precisely eleven o'clock, James was standing on a platform that had been erected at one end of the Great Hall. Casting a Sonorus Charm on himself, he began to address his large audience. Practically the entire student population seemed to be present and a good number of adults, too. He wondered how many people besides Albus would attend Abe's lecture.

"Silence please! I was asked to give you a demonstration on duelling. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything I could think of besides what is already covered in duelling club. Therefore, I've decided to show you a standard training session. When I was on top form, I would train in this way at least five times a week, usually more. When training, it is, for obvious reasons, easier with a partner. While he was at University, Mr Malfoy was my training partner. A session consists of three main parts. This first is when any new spells are practised, but we won't be showing you that today. The second is a warm up and the third a training duel. Mr Alderton, do you have any idea of what exactly that is?"

"Is it just a duel when you aren't trying to defeat each other, more trying to learn?"

"A good thought, but not exactly. A training duel is one where each person's movements and spells have been planned out beforehand; in other words, you know exactly what your partner is going to do and how you have to block it. It's good practice when you're varying the strengths of spells and making your motions fluid. I believe the training session itself will be self-explanatory, so I won't be giving you a running commentary. I would just like to request that you remain quiet to allow us to concentrate."

The low murmur died away, and the two men took off their jackets. Standing now in shorts and t-shirts, they were ready to begin. They faced each other, and James raised his wand.

"Stupefy!" he said. Draco dropped like a stone. He woke him up, and the process was repeated the other way round. This continued for a while with other minor level hexes and charms.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" James said, carefully moderating the power of the spell. Draco rose slowly, touched one of the roof beams and dropped gently to the ground. He turned to James with a smirk.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

James rose up a bit; then Draco twirled his wand and he began to spin uncontrollably. After a minute, Draco let him down. James' face was a sickly green, as he sprinted for the door nearest a bathroom. A few minutes later, he was back, a determined set to his features. Draco lost the smirk. They stood twenty paces apart and bowed to each other. Despite the fact that he was limited in which spells he could use, James had realised that he was able to get his revenge by putting just a bit of extra power into each of them. Since Draco wasn't quite as powerful, he'd be working much harder than normal to shield himself from them. Flicking his wand idly as he sent each charm speeding along the platform, he watched with a certain satisfaction as Draco leapt about his end, frantically blocking all he could. The final spell of the sequence was a Disarming Charm. James channelled twice his usual amount of energy into it, and it hit Draco in the chest, his shield collapsing under the pressure. Just as younger duellers were apt to be knocked backwards by the force of a charm, Draco went flying about five metres backwards, landing heavily on his front.

During the loud applause from the audience, James went over and helped Draco up, returning his
wand to him. They shook hands and bowed to each other and the audience. Draco winced as he climbed off the platform.

"I suppose that was my fault for making you sick. Did you actually throw up this time?"

"Yes," James said grimly, "and I'd rather you didn't do that in front of my students. I'm meant to be infallible."

"You are, Jamie-boy; if you'd tried, you could probably have broken a simple charm like that, and if you were trying, it wouldn't even have hit."

"I suppose. A right pair we are, aren't we?"

"Maybe. We might as well change while they prepare the Hall for lunch."

After separating when they reached the Entrance Hall, James heard running footsteps behind him. He turned, dropping instantly into a duelling stance, wand at the ready. It was Hermione. The look on her face did not bode well.

"I think we need to talk, Mr Evans."

James winced. This did not look good.

"You could come to my quarters this evening at seven, I suppose. Any house-elf can direct you. I'd rather you didn't bring Ron, if that's okay. Tell him we're going through an Egyptian manuscript - he doesn't know Egyptian hieroglyphs, does he?"

"No. I'll see you later, then. You have a lot of explaining to do."

James sighed as he watched her go. There was no stopping her when she wanted to know something. Now he'd just have to survive the questioning, maybe by playing to her emotional side, making sure she knew he was okay, happy, back, pleased to see her…

That evening, just before seven, James knocked on Abe's door. It wasn't to ask for sanctuary, though the possibility had crossed his mind. No, he was going to discover for himself whether his mentor had known of his identity or not. Starkers or otherwise, he was an extremely intelligent man and had spent a lot of time alone with James. He answered the door almost immediately.

"Jamie, what can I do for you?"

"How much do you know about my life before I came to Uni?" James asked bluntly.

"Quite a lot," Abe said blandly. "It took me a while to figure it out, but your paperwork was somewhat incomplete and there were a few things that made me suspicious. You coming here now has just confirmed them."

"Well, Hermione Weasley figured it out, and I sort of wondered if, since you already seemed to know, you could perhaps come and, uh…"

"Protect you from her? Really, one would have thought a duelling champion would be capable of protecting himself. Of course I'll come; I want a full explanation. Now?"

"If possible, sir."

"Oh yes, fine, but I thought you were calling me Abe now, hm?"
James grinned self-consciously. When he was nervous, he always had had a tendency to drop back into the more formal forms of address. They met Hermione coming down the corridor, Dobby at her side. Stopping outside the portrait of Salazar Slytherin, he whispered his Parseltongue password and led them in. As soon as the portrait was firmly closed, Hermione turned to him.

"Right, Harry, I want answers. Start off with telling me who the man in the portrait was, and why you look like him."

"That's Salazar Slytherin; I'm surprised you didn't recognise him. I look like him because of the magic I've been using; it's changed my body slightly. Do you remember how I killed Voldemort?"

"How could I forget? It was like a blinding white light, and both of you vanished inside it."

"That's pure magic; I discovered it not long before the final battle. The book I found said only that it was extremely difficult to use safely, most users who attempted it died, and that it required an extremely powerful wizard to harness it. It didn't mention that it was the type of magic Salazar Slytherin was famous for. Anyway, when I released the energy, it completely destroyed Voldemort's body and soul. I was sick of my life and had already made plans to leave. I had money in a Muggle bank account, and I'd made a few contacts in the area around Southampton. I Apparated - they taught me over the summer, remember - despite my injuries, and ended up lying in the street. I was taken to hospital and spent two months there, recovering."

"What was wrong with you, exactly?"

"I was burnt all over. When I recovered, I left and set myself up. Since I'd lived with Muggles all my life, I already had most of the documents that I needed at the Dursleys', and it was easy enough to find them. I signed up then to do some studies at a college: Muggle subjects. It took me three years to get my A-levels - I took five subjects. After that, I gradually worked my way back into the wizarding world."

"How did you hide your scar?"

James grinned.

"Oh, that. Easy, really, simple Muggle concealer works perfectly well. What was even better was that no one would think of looking for it. So long as I didn't get wet, I was absolutely fine."

"Only you… Keep going."

"I visited the Leaky Cauldron and Diagon Alley, went to Hogsmeade, watched Quidditch matches and met various people. Once I thought I had enough contacts, I applied for the University."

"But if you didn't have any NEWTs?"

"It's not as uncommon as you might think, Mrs Weasley," Aberforth interrupted. "A number of children are home-schooled, as James claimed to be, and hadn't sat any exams. All applicants do an assessment, and then if the Sorting Cauldron accepts them, they enter the University. Needless to say, he passed easily."

"I was Sorted into Merlin House, and the Cauldron matched me with Abe. After that, I had four years studying. Then I came here."

"So who knows?"
"You, Abe, as far as I know, that's it."

Hermione looked at him for a moment, trying to match this tall, confident, silver-eyed young man with the scrawny boy she'd known. Something in his face must have convinced her, because she threw herself at him.

A few moments later, he asked, "So how did you figure me out?"

"I lived with you for five years, Harry," she said, brushing a loose strand of hair back off his face, "and I knew you better, perhaps, than anyone else. It was little things: the way you flattened your fringe over your scar when you were nervous, that you were gay, the way you moved, your power, the fact you were teaching Defence."

"I'm that obvious?"

"Not really; Ron didn't notice, after all, and I don't think any of the other professors have."

"And how about you, Abe?"

"Well Jamie-boy, your act wasn't quite so good when you first moved in with me. The concealer I found in the bathroom might have had something to do with it and how uncomfortable you were discussing the battle against Voldemort. I was never entirely sure, though, so I kept you away from events like this festival and trained you as well as I could."

"So, Harry… I can still call you Harry, can't I, or would you prefer James?" Hermione asked.

"I'd prefer James, if that's okay. I'm used to it now, and I'm not really Harry any more."

"Fine, but don't think you're running off again. You're coming to dinner soon, and you're going to write to me."

"Yes, 'Mione."

"Have you met Draco's son? He's named him after you."

"I'm little Harry's godfather, actually; one of them."

"You? Well, better you than Ron. Who's the other?"

"Severus."

"Snape? Hm, well, I guess he's not so bad once you get to know him. I'm never sure when he means something or not."

"Slytherin trait," James said, smirking.

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The next morning, James took his place in the teachers' box of the Quidditch stands for Ron Weasley's speech. He was surprised to see how many people were here. If there was a speech about him every year (Merlin forbid), then wouldn't they all have heard it already? Why would sixteen-year-olds, who had heard this every year in the Harry Potter Festival and again in History of Magic
Ron was looking smart and perfectly groomed for once, but he was looking rather uncomfortable with the setting. Maybe it was the fact that there was complete silence despite the two-thousand-odd people watching him. At last, he pointed his wand at himself and cast a Sonorus Charm. Then, looking nervously around, he began.

"Well, uh, good morning, everyone," he began, shuffling slightly in place.

"Calm down, Ron," Hermione muttered quietly. "You'll be fine."

"For those of you who don't know me, I'm Ron Weasley, and I was at school with Harry. Oh, and for anyone who has somehow missed the point of why they're here, I'm going to be talking about Harry Potter as I knew him. That's not the 'Boy Who Lived,' not the 'Heir of Slytherin,' the 'Triwizard Champion' or the 'Boy Who Killed Voldemort,' but Harry, Just Harry, as he said kept telling us. The thing is, you've all read the history books and newspapers, some of you saw him from a distance, but none of you really knew him properly; I don't even claim to have, myself.

"A couple of days ago, I went down to the lake to think about what I was going to tell you. I went to a place that Harry liked, I won't say exactly where, and I found James Evans there, the Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor here at Hogwarts. He didn't attend Hogwarts, and he's a bit younger than us, anyway, so he didn't know Harry at all. I introduced myself and told him what I was trying to do. He thought for a moment then asked me what Harry would have thought about all of this.

"That got me thinking. What would he have thought about it? I'm positive he'd have hated the fact that it's mostly being held on the Quidditch Pitch. I remember during the Triwizard Tournament, when they grew hedges on the Pitch for the third task, that he'd treated it like a sacrilege. He would have approved of the match this afternoon much more.

"To begin to explain what he would have thought, I have to begin with his life before Hogwarts. It's common knowledge that he lived with his Muggle relatives: his aunt, her husband and his cousin Dudley, who was the same age as him. I met them once, and I can honestly say that Dudley was a bully who looked like a young whale. Harry once told me he was wider than he was tall, and I'm not even going to contradict that. I've heard my teachers describe them as the 'worst kind of Muggles.' They hated magic, and Harry grew up not even knowing it was real. Every time he did accidental magic, and from his account, it was quite often, he was punished. He didn't have a bedroom, he slept in a cupboard under the stairs; he did most of the housework, and Dudley beat him up on a regular basis. That didn't come out too well, but essentially, they didn't like him; he hated them and Harry Potter didn't even know he was a wizard until he turned eleven. He was even told that his parents, Lily and James Potter, died in a car crash! A car crash!

"Around Harry's eleventh birthday, he received his Hogwarts letter, or rather, his uncle received his Hogwarts letter and burnt it. The next day, three letters arrived and his relatives started to panic. They boarded up the letter box - that's how Muggles get their mail delivered, someone puts it through a hole in their door - and the letters came down the chimney. At last, his aunt and uncle took him away to a tiny island in the middle of nowhere. This was the night between the 30th and 31st of July; Harry was about to turn eleven and he still didn't know what all the fuss was about. Just after midnight, Hagrid arrived and proceeded to present him with his Hogwarts Letter and explain to him the basics of the wizarding world. The next day, he took Harry to Diagon Alley, and Harry got his first taste of fame. He couldn't walk into a shop without people pointing at him, whispering and coming up to shake his hand. He was eleven-years-old, small for his age and with no prior
experience in the wizarding world. To put it plainly, he was uncomfortable and hated it.

"After giving him his ticket for the Hogwarts Express and buying him his first-ever birthday present, Hagrid put him on a train to his relatives' home. He was dropped outside King's Cross Station on the 1st September and left to find the train on his own. Now, any child who had grown up in the wizarding world would have known what to do, and any Muggle-born was always accompanied by a witch or wizard, but Harry was alone. They had assumed, or at least I think they had, that Petunia Dursley, who knew the way because she'd come with Lily, would be able to take him. This was when I first met him. We were heading toward the ticket barrier, me and my family. As you know, there's quite a lot of us. My mum was taking Percy, the twins, me and Ginny and we had school trolleys and an owl. I think Mum might have been talking about Muggles. Anyway, Harry came up to us - remember we didn't know who he was, then - and asked us how to get onto the platform. He seemed a bit embarrassed about it all.

"I shared a compartment with him on the way to Hogwarts and found out he was Harry Potter. He wasn't quite what I was expecting. I mean, I'd grown up on stories about how he'd saved the wizarding world, and I was only eleven-years-old. I expected him to be as tall as Fred and George, at least, and muscular, with really nice clothes and everything. I wasn't expecting him to talk to me at all. I certainly didn't expect him to defend me against Draco Malfoy, who, in those days, was an arrogant little snob, though I'll admit he grew out of it.

"Harry spent most of his time at school trying to do two things. The first was forget that he was anyone special and act like a normal kid. That might have been why he liked Quidditch so much - his father played it and Harry was good at it - he wasn't on the team because he was Harry Potter. The second was saving the school from any monsters, Death Eaters, etc. that came along. As a hero, he took his responsibilities very seriously."

James listened as Ron continued talking them through their years at Hogwarts. He was surprised that his friend had known quite so much about his home life and a little irritated that he was telling everyone. Still, since Ron thought he was dead, it didn't really matter. He was quite pleased about how the speech was going, actually; it wasn't making him out to be a superhero at all, just a normal teenager with a few extra responsibilities. Hermione seemed to be impressed, as well. James would have been very interested to hear what she would have had to say about him. She seemed to feel him watching her, since she turned and looked at him. He smiled slightly and she relaxed. Severus, on the other hand, was looking a bit surprised at some of the revelations Ron was giving him. Harry was not, and had never been, his father; he had never been spoilt, and he had never had a perfect home life. It was a lot to take in.

When Ron finished summing up his life story, his face became serious.

"Harry fought and gave his life to kill Voldemort, to help prevent the rise of Dark wizards. Many of the Death Eaters are in Azkaban or dead, but some, like Lucius Malfoy, are still alive and free, if in hiding. It is the nature of Dark wizards to attempt to take over the world. Think about it: Voldemort rose twice, before him Grindelwald, before him countless others. Yes, we won one fight in the battle, but we can't become too complacent and lose the next. Lucius Malfoy is a threat that Harry would want us to defeat. So to end this speech on a serious note, I'm going to quote one of my father's old friends who helped to train me and Harry: Alastor Moody. Mad-Eye told us 'constant vigilance.' We should remember that."

There was a long pause while people digested this unexpected warning. Then, slowly but surely, applause began and swelled until practically the entire audience was giving him a true standing ovation. Ron cast 'Quietus' on himself and bowed smartly to each of the four 'sides' of the Quidditch pitch. Then he marched off through the Gryffindor changing rooms.
People began to pick up their cloaks and move towards the staircases down to ground level.

"Please, congratulate your husband, Mrs Weasley," James said formally to Hermione, aware of the teachers around them. "It was an … enlightening . . . talk. The ending in particular was extremely relevant to the current situation. I was glad to be of help to him."

"I'll tell him you said so. But I thought I told you to call me Hermione?"

"Sorry, it didn't seem appropriate, given the situation," James said, glancing around. Her eyes flashed with understanding as she nodded.

"I'll see you for the Quidditch match this afternoon, then, unless you're eating in the Great Hall?"

"No, I'm eating with the players, as you no doubt already knew. Since no one knows their identities, I'm attempting to keep it that way. I wouldn't want to disrupt the staff betting pool."

"A staff betting pool? I'd never have guessed," she said, sounding horrified. Then she grinned. "So, what are the current odds?"

"Well, since Rolanda's team ha-"

"Rolanda?"

"Madam Hooch. Since they've won every year as long as anyone can remember, general opinion is that they'll win again."

"And your opinion?"

"I haven't actually seen her team play, she's been as careful about that as I have, but I would say that her unbroken record isn't likely to stay unbroken for long. However, this may be simple vanity on my part, so I wouldn't advise you to take me too seriously. All the players are ones I know and who know each other, so we stand a chance."

"Is it who I'm thinking?"

"Probably, with a few changes."

"Hm, do they let outsiders place bets?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. Severus?" he asked, catching the man's attention. "You run the betting pool with Minerva, don't you?"

"Yes," he admitted cautiously.

"Hermione was wondering if she could place a bet."

"Very well, current odds are 10 to 3 against the veteran team."

"Ten Galleons on the veterans - someone has to support James."

"Very well," Severus said, tucking the Galleons into a pocket of his robes and making a note on a piece of parchment."

"Out of interest, has anyone else bet on James' team?"

"Minerva and myself, and I believe a few of the others, have placed security bets of one Galleon
apiece."

"Interesting."

"If you have a minute, I could give you the full details."

"Thank you, sir. Well, I'll see you later, James," Hermione said, and vanished down the stairway with the Potions master.

At two thirty that afternoon, James had just finished going over the strategy with the team and was about to leave for the teachers' box from which he would watch the game. Before he left, he looked at his team, dressed in white and silver robes, and gave them the start-of-match speech that he remembered so well.

"Sorry to usurp this privilege, Oliver, but I've already been briefed," he said, and then cleared his throat. "Okay, men."

"And women," said Chaser Angelina Johnson irritably.

"And women," James agreed amiably, just as Wood always had. "This is it."

"The big one," said Fred Weasley, catching on quickly.

"The one we've all been waiting for," said George, grinning at his twin.

"We've got the best team that has sat in this changing room in a good century of Hogwarts players, and you're going to go out there and thrash those youngsters. A team I have coached has never yet lost a game, and you aren't going to break my perfect record. You're going to win; I know it. Right. It's time for me to go up. Good luck, all of you."

James shook hands with each of them and left, not noticing the smirks the team exchanged behind his back. He took his place, again he was between Hermione and Severus, and sat there, grinning openly. Rolanda Hooch was getting more and more disconcerted as time passed and kept glancing along at his smug expression. When Dumbledore at last took his place, Minerva nodded to the commentator, Lee Jordan, and he began. As the best commentator they'd ever had, despite his blatant favouritism, he had been invited back every year for this match. James walked over and slid a slip of paper in front of him, and Lee grinned at the team names he read.

"Welcome everyone to the long awaited Quidditch match of the Harry Potter Festival," Lee Jordan said, his voice, enhanced by a strong Sonorus Charm, booming out across the stadium. "As always, we have two teams. Our first team, playing in black, is the Hogwarts team, made up entirely of present pupils of the school and trained by Hogwarts' very own Flying Instructor, Madam Hooch! I give you Alderton, Smith, Bourke, Blotts, Bell, Thomas and Parkinson!"

The bleaches where the students were sitting erupted with cheers as the team zoomed onto the pitch. They were quite good, James admitted, and they had been training hard. Madam Hooch was now looking unbearably confident as she watched them zip around the stadium. Lee gave them a moment to absorb the applause before continuing. James felt that he was giving them their moment of glory before they were pounded into the turf, but then again, he wasn't anyone to talk.

"Our second team, playing in white, is the Veteran team, made up entirely of past pupils of any age, and trained by Hogwarts' very own Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor, James Evans! I give you some of the best players in living memory: Oliver Wood of Puddlemere United…"

"Damn!" Madam Hooch muttered. James smirked. "…Angelina Johnson of the Holyhead Harpies,
Draco Malfoy, Katie Bell…"

Madam Hooch groaned.

"…Fred and George Weasley of Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes and, playing as Seeker today, Charlie Weasley!"

Her head dropped into her hand. Resigned to her fate, she pulled out her purse and began to count out Galleons.

The cheers now were thunderous, students and adults cheering wildly as they saw some of the most famous young names in Quidditch before them.


The teams formed up in the standard positions, ready for the game to begin. Oliver Wood and Archie Alderton, the team captains, landed in front of the guest referee.

"Now, I want a nice clean game," he said sternly, "from all of you! Shake hands."

The two shook hands firmly, Archie Alderton looking awed at this contact with one of his all-time heroes, Gryffindor or not.

"Mount your brooms."

The captains remounted their brooms and flew into their positions. The referee kicked open the trunk containing the balls. The Bludgers immediately shot out upwards, followed by the Golden Snitch. The referee picked up the Quaffle and threw it straight upwards. The Chasers swooped in as the ball fell, and Angelina Johnson snatched it and shot off.

"And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson," Lee continued, "a former Gryffindor, for those who don't know - what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive too, as I've told her often enough."

"JORDAN!" McGonagall exclaimed. If Lee Jordan was going to act like a teenager, he would most certainly get treated like one!

James watched keenly as she sped down the pitch, the others following in a Hawkshead Attacking Formation. Using a perfect Sloth Grip roll to dodge the two incoming Bludgers, she dodged the Keeper and sent the Quaffle neatly through the right-hand hoop.

"A perfect goal by Johnson; ten points to the Veterans!" Punching the air triumphantly, they did a victory lap, swerving back to intercept the kids' attempt at goal.

Fred and George had latched onto a Bludger each and, using that peculiar synchronisation they had always been able to manage perfectly, had hit them simultaneously at the incoming Chaser in a classic Dopplebeater Defence. Roger Smith took a Bludger to the stomach and, while regaining control of his broom, dropped the Quaffle, quickly picked up by his teammate Sarah Bell.

Dodging the next Bludger attack, she bent low over her broom and sped up the pitch.

"I don't believe it," Lee said, sounding impressed. "Bell Junior is dodging veteran Chasers, including her aunt, Katie Bell, using the Wollongong Shimmy, an extremely complex Chaser move."
James, while impressed at this thirteen-year-old's abilities, was watching the Seekers far more closely. Charlie was circling high above the action, the opposing Seeker copying him. As he'd practised so often, Charlie jerked his broom round and dove down towards the grass beneath them. Scattering the Chasers below them, the two Seekers, for Jeffrey Parkinson had latched on and was very close, hurtled towards the ground. Twenty metres and closing, ten, five, but they kept going. At the last minute, Charlie jerked his broom up and Parkinson ploughed into the ground. Charlie hovered by him for a moment while mediwizards ran onto the field, then soared up again.

"A Wronski Feint by Charlie Weasley," Lee yelled amid the cheers and groans from the supporters. "Now we know why the England squad were so keen to recruit him. So the score stands at 130 to 40, the Veterans ahead. This game is closer than anyone expected. James Evans has stood up in the stands; he's calling for a 'time out'. The ref blows his whistle and Evans flies down to the pitch - he has a broom in the box, Madam Hooch's usual trick. She's following him. What does he want to tell his team, given that they're winning already?"

James scowled at Lee and turned to the team gathered around him.

"You're winning; good, let's keep it that way. Charlie, Parkinson is out of action; if he does choose to continue, he'll have problems taking the initiative; he'll follow you, so try another Feint. Chasers, they're going to be a challenge. Alderton and Bell are the strongest; Smith is definitely the weak link. His pass is weak. Alderton has a tendency to get distracted by the rest of the game; Charlie, you should try and keep his attention. Katie, do you have any advice on your niece?"

"Her passing can be a bit weak," she said hesitantly.

"Fine, work on it. Their Keeper is a little weak on the right hoop; exploit that if you can. Fred, George, try and keep control of the Bludgers. It doesn't matter so much if you don't hit a player every time, but don't give their Beaters a chance at touching one. Understand? That's it; go on and win."

He went back to his seat while his team returned to play. His attention refocused on the game as young Parkinson, a third-year boy, staggered off a stretcher at the side of the pitch and took off again, Madam Pomfrey looking insulted that he should even consider it. Charlie seemed to be smiling at the kid, congratulating him for his guts, if not his common sense. James had to admit that the boy had promise; he'd be one to look out for in the future. A few moments later, Draco started shouting, outraged.

"Foul! You were blagging, you little brat!" The referee obviously agreed, since he awarded a penalty. Draco took it and scored, following James' advice and aiming for the right-hand hoop.

Amidst the cheers that followed, he missed Charlie's eyes focusing on a point just beyond Parkinson's shoulder and pushing his broom to its limits as he zoomed after. Parkinson followed, a bit more cautiously than before. The stands fell silent as they watched the Seekers battle it out. Charlie drew ahead, dodged a Bludger, flew straight through the younger Chasers and, flying low above the pitch, stood up on his broom, arms outstretched. He lunged for the Snitch, overbalanced and tumbled to the ground. He appeared for a moment to be unconscious, but slowly, cautiously stood up, holding the fluttering Golden Snitch in his fist.

"Charlie Weasley catches the Snitch!" Lee yelled. "The Veterans win for the first time in six years! The final score is 350 to 90."

James joined in the cheering, beaming even more when the less fortunate members of staff began to realise their losses. He looked at Severus,

"Why did you bet on us?"
"Why? I cheated, of course," Severus said. "Once Draco told me who the team was, I knew the little dunderheads didn't stand a chance."

"Bloody Slytherins, I told them to keep quiet."

"Yes, but I'm family and don't count any more than Blaise does."

James' team flew a victory lap of the pitch as their opponents flew to the ground. After a moment, the winners followed, shaking hands with each of them and signing autographs when requested. Draco flew up to the teachers' box, dropping in next to Lee. He grinned mischievously at James and took the microphone. This looked planned; Lee hadn't looked surprised, at any rate, nor had McGonagall.

"Quiet please!" Draco roared. The stadium went silent. He continued at a slightly quieter volume, and Minerva cautiously removed her hands from her ears. "Thank you. Now, on behalf of the team, I would like to thank James Evans for coaching. As you already know, he attended Griffin University with me and was an expert dueller. He was also on the Merlin House Quidditch team, playing as Beater for two years, then as Seeker for a further two. The team have made a unanimous decision that you should have the opportunity to see his skills, even though he isn't a former student of Hogwarts. James, will you agree to a Seeker's match played now against Charlie Weasley?" He put his hand over the microphone and hissed, "You can't refuse; the bets have already been placed. No disagreement? Excellent. You go and change, while I give your spectators the stats on the players. I left your robes in our changing rooms.

"First up - and you've already seen him in action today - Charlie Weasley, a former Gryffindor student at Hogwarts and the second son of the Weasley family. He was on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, playing as Seeker for six years and, in his last two years, was the Quidditch Captain. His team won the Quidditch Cup twice. He is thirty-two years old, six foot three tall, unmarried and works as a dragon-keeper at the Sanctuary in Romania. There are rumours, sadly unconfirmed to this date, that he has been offered the position of Seeker on the National England squad a total of three times. He is flying today a Nimbus 3000, a top racing broom, newly out this year.

"Against him, we have James Evans, aged 24 and six-foot tall. I'm assuming you all know what he looks like. Joining the University aged twenty, he was immediately admitted onto the Merlin Quidditch team, captained by myself, in the position of Beater. Despite having no prior experience, he trained and was quickly the best Beater on any of the teams. After my departure at the end of his second year, he was unanimously elected Captain and returned to his preferred position of Seeker. Later, he was selected as the Quidditch rep of the University. His favourite move is the Wronski Feint; he is an acknowledged master at it and was the one who coached Charlie Weasley in it prior to this match. James has admitted that he has received offers to play as a Seeker on the England and Scotland first squads or as a Beater on England's first squad. As you can hear, he is much in demand. I am also told that, as a Slytherin House master, he will be assisting the Slytherin Quidditch team. Today, James is flying his preferred make of broom, the Firebolt, and the very latest model of its kind, the XF. Here he is now, dressed in green and black Merlin House Quidditch robes. Before the Snitch is released, he will do a couple of warm up laps."

James, inwardly delighted at the thrill of playing in front of an audience again, shot around the field. Draco continued with his speech.

"The Nimbus 3000 is the favourite broom for International Quidditch teams this year, its easy handling and sharp turning ability makes it ideal for the Seeker's position. However, it is known to have a poor acceleration speed given its other features. The Firebolt XF has the fastest acceleration of any broom ever made. Stripped down to the bare minimum of features, this is not the broom for an amateur; all the magic is focused on speed. With the excellent handling we are accustomed to from
the Firebolt Company, its only disadvantage in this match is a slightly slower top speed than the Nimbus. This will be, in the end, a match decided by the abilities of the Seekers."

James finished his warm-up and flew into the middle of the pitch, waving to the ref to indicate his readiness to begin. Holding the Snitch between first finger and thumb, the man stepped into the middle of the field and released it. Darting away, watched keenly by James and Charlie, it soon vanished from sight. When the two minutes of waiting time was over, the ref. blew his whistle and the game began.

Unlike a normal Quidditch match, there were no Bludgers, no other players, no points. The only way to win was to catch the Snitch. It was a contest of skill, keen sight, endurance and training, and it was also one that James enjoyed. He swooped around the field, watching for signs of his elusive target.

He saw a glint of gold just behind Charlie and pushed his broom forwards. Charlie hadn't noticed him, but the noise from the stands alerted him to James' movements. Glancing round, he caught sight of the Snitch and followed it into a steep dive. James, slightly higher, dropped into free-fall, something hardly anyone would dare.

The Snitch darted under the stands. There was a collective groan from the audience and some quick-minded person cast a charm onto the middle of the pitch to show what the players were doing. It was like James' match against Malfoy in second-year, the one when he'd broken his arm. But he wasn't twelve any more. Dodging the beams was child's play, though there wasn't as much space, and the pair of them followed easily, vying for position. The Snitch emerged, hovering just under a metre above the ground, under the teachers' box. Draco was craning over the edge.

"Here they come," he was saying. "Evans is slightly in the lead. It's going to be a difficult catch at that altitude…"

James shut out his friend's voice and focussed on positioning his broom as low over the grass as he could make it. Arm outstretched, he slowly pulled below Charlie, closing on the Snitch. Being lighter was certainly an advantage in these circumstances. He was hovering; was really less than a metre above the ground? He was almost there . . . just a little too high. . . He dropped under his broom in a kind of sloth-grip roll, one hand still outstretched. He reached down, caught hold of the Snitch and let go, skidding along the ground. His broom stopped, as soon as he fell off, and flew back to him.

They were cheering him now. Charlie dropped down and helped him to his feet. An arm around his shoulders, he helped him from the pitch.

That evening, Draco Malfoy was persuaded to join James and the rest of the Quidditch team for a rowdy celebration at the Gryffindor table during the feast. The students, though some were a bit disappointed to have lost, seemed equally enthusiastic. To James, it was almost like being a student again, although he knew that he wouldn't be invited to attend the inevitable party that the Gryffindors would be hosting in their common room. Up at the staff table, Madam Hooch was accepting defeat slightly less graciously. To put it plainly, she was sulking. Not only had her team, the one she'd been boasting about for weeks, lost by a huge margin, but she had also lost a large amount of money betting on them. In fact, the only ones looking pleased were Severus, who had apparently won in the region of fifty Galleons, and Minerva, who, despite having won a smaller amount, was revelling in the praise of some of her star students.

Actually, James was sure that the headmaster was cheating a little with this feast. Although the Great Hall seated the entire school at once, there certainly was not normally room for an extra two hundred or so visitors - that was simple mathematics! He'd probably used a similar set of charms to the ones Arthur Weasley had used on his car, ones to expand the space within without changing the outside dimensions. After all, it could have disastrous effects if the Great Hall suddenly grew - the
Transfiguration classrooms would be completely wiped out.

After another noisy rendition of the school song while they were all sitting back in their seats feeling stuffed to the brim, Aberforth signalled to James that it was time to leave. Excusing himself graciously - not that that was hard given the slightly drunken state of his teammates - James slipped out of the side door and down to Abe's quarters.

The older man arrived a moment later, giving the password and showing James in. Then he turned to look at his pupil.

"You know I'm going home this evening?"

"I thought you were at least staying until tomorrow," James protested. "You've got a room and everything, and it's not like they'll need you back at the University."

"Actually it's Claudius. He seems to be getting a bit homesick if you ask me, you know how close he is to me, and I'm afraid he's a bit lonely out there on his own at night. He might even be afraid of the dark! It might be detrimental to his health and I've grown rather attached to him over the years. I wouldn't want him to suffer any longer than he has to."

James sighed, knowing that the grouchy old goat would always come first.

"I understand, I guess, it's just . . . "

"You're stuck here and no one quite understands your situation?"

"Exactly. Its not that I don't enjoy teaching - I do, but it's hard not to tell them sometimes. I feel bad about not trusting them and. . . ."

"And?"

"And I wonder how much they're going to hate me when they do find out."

The older man paused for a moment, putting a comforting hand on James' shoulder. He seemed to be considering what it would be best to say.

"How many people would you say really cared about you when you were younger, not for the 'Boy Who Lived' but Harry?"

"Well, Ron and Hermione of course."

"And Hermione already knows and doesn't seem to hate you, quite the opposite in fact."

"Ron can be a bloody idiot when he gets irritated though."

"James . . . Harry, he's not sixteen any more. He's also married, and I suspect young Hermione keeps a fairly close eye on problems of that kind. Certainly he might be a bit angry to start off with, I think most people would be, but after a while he'll forgive you and you will continue with your lives again."
"And Draco?"

"He was an obnoxious little snot when he was a kid," Abe said, smiling slightly at the memory, "and those are his words, not mine. He grew up, James, and I know that he came to respect you as both Harry and James. He would never have named his son after you if he hadn't, despite whatever he says, and he certainly would never have named you godfather. Trust me on this one, Draco will accept you easily."

"Then there's Albus."

"Trust me, he won't give you problems," Aberforth said, completely the stern older brother. "Besides, even if he hasn't mentioned it, I find it hard to believe that he hasn't any idea of your past. If he's really in the dark, I will be terribly disappointed in him."

"And then there's the rest of the staff. Oh, not Trelawney, but most of the others. I feel bad about lying to them."

"Consider how Professor McGonagall treats her ex-pupils, even the ones who've lost their way slightly. She's not a young woman, James, and she knew you well. I'm sure that, as your Head of House, she was quite aware of your opinion of your life, and would understand your decision."

"But what about Severus?" James all but moaned, sitting down heavily on an armchair. "He bloody hated me when I was a kid!"

"Didn't you hate him back?"

"Well, yes, but he started it!"

"And you were both acting like five year olds, hopefully now the two of you have grown up enough to see past it. Look, think about it, why didn't he like you?"

"He hated my dad and godfather . . ."

"Albus said that grudge detached itself from you by the end of your second year."

"Okay, I was famous and he thought I liked it."

"And now he knows that you didn't."

"And he thought I was a trouble maker."

"You weren't?"

"Well, yes, but not in the way he meant. I never started the fights with Draco and it wasn't my fault Hermione got stuck with a mountain troll without any teachers nearby or that . . ."

"James, enough. I know for a fact that he received at least as many punishments as you did, though perhaps for different reasons. He was more involved with prank wars against the Gryffindors of the time."

"On yeah, and I was a Gryffindor."

"James, can you honestly say that you didn't look on Slytherins as the embodiment of evil when you were eleven. He was just defending his students, as he was perfectly right to do. Besides, from the rumours I've heard from the other members of staff, you've disabused him of that notion quite thoroughly. What was it you said, that if it took being a Parseltongue to be a Slytherin, he didn't
qualify either? Very clever, very Slytherin of you, my dear boy. That will have completely put him off the trail. I'd stop worrying about it, if I were you. There is very little about your younger self that he can justify hating you for, if he does, you can remind him of his less than exemplary record."

"But I . . . he . . ."

"Ah. I wondered why you singled him out. You do know that if you ever want to ask me for advice about your love life, you can come to me any time. I'm a very wise and accepting individual and since you can't go to your parents, I'd be happy to offer my services."

"You . . . " James spluttered.

"You know, dear child, it is far easier to understand you when you speak slowly and think before opening your mouth, hm? Now, what exactly is the problem?"

"You expect me to tell you?" James asked incredulously.

"Of course."

"Oh fine, I'm trusting you with my other secrets, I might as well with this one. I know he's gay, which is something, I guess, but I haven't ever seen him with another guy and I don't even know if I'm his type."

"Is that a problem?"

"Only in that I'll embarrass myself if it turns out I'm not."

"Ah, just a minor one then. So what you're actually hoping for is advice on how to ah get together with him?"

"I guess, yes."

"Start by continuing as you have been, make friends with him. There's no point in entering a relationship if you don't genuinely like your partner. Give him time to get used to that. Have you thought about your costume for the ball?"

"Ball?"

"The Hogmanay Ball that Albus is so keen on. I believe both you and Severus were among his choices for chaperones."

"Unfortunately."

"So, are you doing your usual?"

"Its not like I have any other costume, is it?"

"James, your costume is extremely flattering, it shows off your body excellently and it's very little effort for you. Now, I take it Severus is as enthusiastic about this as he usually is? Why don't you suggest that he use the Weasleys' latest range of sweets to change his appearance before he puts a costume on so that he can attend without having to live up to his reputation. I'm sure you could come up with a costume for him. Now, if you offered the use of one of your friends' names, say Bertram Highcastle, and went with him. After the illusions are taken down at the end of the evening, it will appear that you went with young Bertram and since everyone knows where the boy's inclinations run, he'd almost have to . . . ah . . . snog you, is it?"
"You really think that will work?"

"My dear boy, Severus has worked very hard to make himself feared, he needs to if he is to be effective in keeping order in a potions laboratory, it is, after all, very dangerous if mistakes are made. If you were living like that, wouldn't you appreciate some time to relax without that restraint?"

"I suppose so. Thanks."

"Feel better."

"Yes, actually," he said, surprised. "I'll say goodbye then. Give your students hell, and send Claudius my greetings."

"I will, Jamie-boy, now you go and get a good night's sleep, you're up late already and you have classes tomorrow."

James laughed, turning to smile at his mentor as he stepped back through the portrait hole back into the dungeon corridor. It was chillier outside of the suite and he shivered slightly. He hit something solid just as the portrait closed behind him. Not sure he wanted to find out what he'd walked into, James turned around slowly. He was facing a black-clad chest, a rather well defined one too. Agonisingly slowly, he raised his head to look Severus Snape in the eye. Cursing mentally, his brain reminded him of the fascinating discussion he'd just been having and he flushed scarlet.

"Well, James, had a bit too much to drink? I'll have a hangover potion for you in the morning."

"I'm not drunk," James protested. "I just wasn't looking where I was going."

"I had noticed that, somehow. Do you need assistance returning to your rooms?"

James' brain was mentally shouting yes.

"No thank you, Severus, I can manage perfectly well on my own. I will see you in the morning."

"Good night. That was . . . a most impressive piece of flying earlier by anyone's standards. Congratulations."

"I . . . uh . . . thank you. You've been most successful too, judging by the rumours."

"I did have some good fortune, Rolanda's luck had to run out some day. Besides, it's in my favour if you are so competent at Quidditch since you have already agreed to coach the house team. I would like to have the Quidditch Cup in my study again."

"A Slytherin through and through. Minerva tells me you're not bad yourself."

"She flatters me," Severus said, brushing off the compliment. "Drunk or not, I believe you should be in bed now. We do have classes in the morning, after all."
A few weeks later, having spent a few days completely unable to look Severus in the eye, James went up to breakfast in the Great Hall on time for a change, rather than oversleeping and getting a quick snack from the house elves.

"Morning James," Minerva said with a smile. Severus thankfully wasn't there, he was always the first to arrive and had usually finished eating and gone before anyone else had arrived. "I hear Quidditch try outs for Slytherin are this week, looking forward to it?"

"Naturally, I'm as mad on Quidditch as most of them are. I've seen some of them play, and even with a few novice players, they should be fun to train. How do you think the Gryffindor squad will do?"

"We're rather weak this year, I believe, after such a turnout last year. We have four vacancies to fill - two Beaters, a Keeper and a Chaser. We do have both Miss Bell and Mr Parkinson though."

"They're both very impressive. Third years, aren't they?"

"Yes and they were on the team last year. Of course, Sarah plays with her aunt over the summer and has done for years, and I believe Jeffrey's uncle used to play professionally as a Beater for the Arrows."

"You're likely to be our main rivals then?" James asked, knowing that historically this tended to be true.

"Given that Ravenclaw tend to be less interested in sport and more on their books and Hufflepuff tend to prefer tamer things like Gobstones, yes. It will certainly be an interesting season, I think."

James looked up at the sound of wing beats to see the owls swooping in through the opening in the roof. It was a sight that he'd never really got tired of during his years at Hogwarts, and one that he'd missed while in the Muggle world. All down the house tables, students reached up to catch packages and letters, some owls staying to share their master or mistress' breakfast before returning to the owlery. An elderly tawny owl dropped to perch on the back of Minerva's chair and she took a rolled up copy of the Daily Prophet from him. James amused himself while she skimmed it by feeding the owl small pieces of bacon: whether this was a school owl or not, it could be useful to have an owl liking you. It tended to make 'private' messages properly private.

Just after Albus arrived at the table, Minerva's expression turned serious as she found an article very near the front. When she'd finished that article, seeing that the Headmaster had his own copy that he was perusing gravely, she turned to James.

"Have you seen the paper?"

"No, why?"

"Death Eaters, or that's what I'd suspect. You'd better read it."

Glancing over at Albus again, James watched as he pulled out his wand and, pointing it in the direction of the main door, sent a small, silvery dart shoot out of it and head out of sight. It was a familiar sight, the Order's primary method of communication, and was undoubtedly going to fetch Severus or any other member currently in residence at the school.
DEATH EATER ATTACK?

Early yesterday evening, a group of hooded and masked figures attacked the homes and families of Godfrey Galton and Nicolas Burke. Both men, born into 'pureblood' families married halfblood or muggleborn women, and this is suspected to be what provoked these attacks. Mr Galton was killed by the Avada Kedavra curse while buying time for wife, Elissa to escape with their children Terrance (6) and Dixie (3). They are now in hiding at a Ministry safe house. The Burke family all perished, mother Jessie first being tortured under the Cruciatus Curse. Aurors arrived on the scene approximately thirty minutes later, alerted by Elissa Galton to the events of the evening. None of the murderers were apprehended. This attack raises serious questions relating to the number of Death Eaters who survived the trials of 1997. If the Death Eaters have indeed reformed, none of us will be safe from their terrorist acts. We of the Daily Prophet offer our condolences to the families of the victims and call on the Ministry to begin investigations at once.

Colin Creevey

"So it's started again," James said flatly.

"So it seems," she said grimly. "I suppose you were a little young to see any action in the last war, but knowing the elder Mr Malfoy, I can guarantee this one is going to be nasty. Do you have any family you might be at risk? Hogwarts professors are entitled to have a family at the school, though it's rare."

"My parents were killed by Voldemort when I was very small," James said cautiously. "My father I believe to have been a pureblood but my mother wasn't, so they were a target for sullying the blood or whatever rubbish they were spouting at the time. They were both only children, so no, I just have Abe and my friends."

"I'm sorry."

"Did any of the victims have family at the school?" James asked, determined to get her mind away from his family. Even by adapting the truth slightly - in the eyes of the wizarding world, Lily Evans had been an only child - he would rather stay off the topic, especially if dates or particular attacks came up.

"Thankfully no. The poor children were all below school age, maybe why they were chosen. Lucius is a sadistic man, he'd deliberately choose defenceless children."

"I had better go to my first lesson. The children will have heard about it, I suppose?"

"A few of them do get the paper, by the time first lesson comes round, it will be all over the school."

"I might see if I can do a lesson on Death Eaters then, prepare for any possibility. Do you think Albus would mind? I might cover some of the darker curses too, maybe the Unforgivables with the NEWT classes."

"I think Albus would think that an excellent idea. If they know why they're facing, they won't be so scared, hopefully. At least we know that Death Eaters are human, not acromantulas or some other beast."

James got up then, nodded to her and headed for the door. Even the students in the Hall were very
hushed now. He noticed that immediately after he left, Minerva and Poppy Pomfrey moved up on
either side of the Headmaster and began discussing it in hushed tones. Severus strode in a moment
later to join the group. After a few minutes conferring, they separated as quickly and quietly as they
had come together. James was sure however that the conversation would continue later in a more
secure location.

As it happened, his first lesson of the day was Gryffindor and Slytherin fourth years. This was a
slightly risky combination given the planned theme of the lesson, since the Gryffindors would
undoubtedly make the well-known statement that all Death Eaters were Slytherins, provoking a full
out war in the middle of his classroom. He would have to squash any signs of that very quickly.

There were relatively few of them in the class, only sixteen, the populations of both houses in that
year being quite small. This could, in James’ opinion, only be a good thing. When the whole class
had arrived, he began.

"Take a seat please," he said, when they hesitated, uncertain whether to sit down or gather around
the duelling space towards the back of the room. "Has anyone here not heard about the tragic events
that have recently taken place?"

A few hands went up - presumably those who had overslept and missed breakfast.

"Yesterday, the homes of two 'half blood' families were attacked. One family were all murdered
including three very young children, in the other, the father managed, at the cost of his own life, to
buy enough time for his wife and children to escape. It is suspected by the Aurors that this was the
work of Death Eaters. Regardless of anything the Headmaster chooses to do to remember these
people, before we begin this lesson, I would like to observe a Muggle tradition, I know that this is
unfamiliar to many of you. We will all observe a minutes' silence to remember them."

A few of the Muggleborns and half bloods looked almost as if they had been expecting something
like this and immediately went silent as he glanced at his watch and they began. Most had bent their
heads and some had their eyes shut. The purebloods, after a few glances around the room to check
they weren't going to do something foolish, followed suit. James himself thought back to his own
family, how, when they had been attacked, his father had attempted to buy time but had not been fast
enough to save his wife. When they sat up again, he felt that most of them looked more serious and,
his objective achieved, he continued with the class.

"Due to this event, I'm going to be telling every class a little about the Death Eaters and in your next
classes, we'll cover the main defensive charms and tactics you can use if you are ever attacked. If
you are at home and are attacked, over Christmas for instance, you will be able to use magic to
defend yourself, indeed you may have to. This is not something to be done lightly though, and I hope
none of you will ever need to.

"The Death Eaters were originally formed by Tom Riddle, most of you will know him as Lord
Voldemort and they were his servants. When he needed an ego boost, they told him how amazing he
was. He bound them to him using a mark, which I will show you later. This allowed him to draw
magical power from them and thus increased his own power levels.

"When they were first formed, they were called the Knights of Walpurgis, the name of a group led
by Salazar Slytherin that defended wizard from persecution by Muggles. They are mostly pureblood
wizards - that means that all of their family on both sides have been magical for generations. I believe
that the Malfoy family can trace their ancestry back to the French wizards that came with William of
Normandy in 1066. They believe that people who are like them are more powerful that those with
Muggle blood and that they should be treated as superiors. I do not believe this to be true. I am one
of the most powerful wizards of my age, and I am a halfblood and more powerful than Draco
Malfory, a pureblood. The only difference that I can see is that people from wizarding families will find it a little easier when they first start at Hogwarts because they will already know about wizarding culture.

"A Death Eater typically wears a long black, hooded robe and a white mask when they're on a raid. This is so they cannot be easily identified by the authorities, they may believe there is a ritual significance, but that is the main reason. Those who join voluntarily are often not particularly bright or slightly mad. Others join because their parents or friends make them. Some of you will remember that Professor Snape was a Death Eater because his father made him but he reported Death Eater actions to Professor Dumbledore and saved many lives in the process. Many Death Eaters were captured when Harry Potter defeated Voldemort just over eight years ago…"

That evening, after giving each of his sombre classes the same unplanned lesson, James sat in the staff room, composing some letters. He knew that the planned recipients would undoubtedly already know about the incident but he did want to hear their views on it and their recommendations for what he should do. The first was to Draco.

**Dear Draco,**

He wrote, then erased it with a wave of his wand. That sounded far too formal to suit his friend. He tried again. **Hi Draco!** No, given the contents of the letter, he was starting to think his original salutation was better. It didn't really matter that much anyway.

**Dear Draco,**

I assume that you have heard about the recent attacks either from the paper or from your contacts at the Ministry. If you do have any information that wouldn't have been in the paper, I would be very interested in hearing it. I am trying to start preparing the students for another period of civil war and it is proving difficult with the limited information I have.

I would also like to urge you to come and stay at Hogwarts for a bit with Blaise and Harry. Minerva reminded me today, told me rather since I had no idea, that a staff member is entitled to have their family with them, and who can I call family if not you and Abe? You know as well as I do that you are going to be an important target of theirs as soon as they gather the strength since you turned away from Voldemort's service. Even if you don't want to stay permanently, at least come for the weekend and talk about it with me and Severus. I would far rather you were here and irritated about it than back home and dead.

Much as I hate to bring up the subject, I hope that you have considered the possibility that it is your father who is behind these attacks. Given what I know of him and his position in the ranks of the Death Eaters, I would say that this is almost a given conclusion. He would be particularly interested in killing you since your betrayal was personal and while he would undoubtedly kill you and Blaise, he might take Harry and raise him dark, something I know you would hate to see happen. While the wards of Malfoy Manor might offer you protection against many others, your father is of the Malfoy bloodline and has free access to the grounds and mansion.

I know you hate not to stand up to danger in a distressingly Gryffindor way but for my sake and Harry's if not for your own, please come to Hogwarts for a bit.

**Your friend**

James

With that James put down his quill and took out the next piece of parchment on his desk. He wasn't
the only staff member involved in this sort of activity: James had no doubt that the next few days would see the more vulnerable family members of the Hogwarts staff arriving and taking up residence, either short or long term. Severus came in and walked over to him.

"Have you written to Draco?" he asked, no hint of sarcasm in his voice.

James nodded, passing him the letter. There was nothing particularly personal in it and if Severus would just add his own note to the bottom, they might manage to persuade Draco.

Severus was undoubtedly a fast reader and within a few minutes, had returned the parchment to the desk.

"That was more or less what I was intending to say to him."

"Feel free to add your own note. I know he respects your experience, it might make a difference to him."

The other man nodded, added two lines in his unmistakable scrawl. It was an unusually blunt instruction saying that Draco was going to come to Hogwarts even if Severus had to drag him back.

"Did you mean what you said about your family?" Severus asked, perhaps making sure that James hadn't been lying to get Draco to come and wanting to know whether there would be others coming to share the dungeon corridor. Aberforth Dumbledore could unquestionably take care of himself within the warren of Merlin House.

"Yes, my parents were killed in the last war and I'm an only child. Its . . . long enough in the past that I don't feel too bad talking about it, though I'd rather you didn't spread it around."

"I wouldn't anyway. Shall I take this up to the owlery? Knowing Draco, the sooner it's sent, the better."

James watched him go. Just as soon as he thought he had the man figured out, he came up with that. Whatever else he had suspected, he had not anticipated the open, honest ring to his voice that had been present. Was this how Severus treated Draco in private? They were very close, he could see that, despite the curt instruction he had sent. Only time could tell, really, and he still had one more letter to send.

Dear Abe,

I'm sure you know why I'm writing - please offer my condolences to anyone at the university who was connected to either family. Luckily, no one at Hogwarts was affected and for that we are all thankful, though it is unlikely to last. There always have been innocent victims in war, and the Christmas Holidays aren't far off. I've been trying to get the students prepared to defend themselves and their families should it be necessary. I hope that it never is.

I am a little worried that now that it is all starting again, I will be asked to join the Order of the Phoenix. I know that Fawkes probably recognises me and as a former member of the Order, I'm not sure what would happen at the induction ritual. Besides, while I'm perfectly happy to put my energies to defending the school, I have a feeling I might end up something of a figurehead again, not as the Boy Who Lived, but as the young Quidditch star giving up his career to assist in the fight. You can imagine the press articles. I really need your advice about this.

I am also aware that, if Albus decides he can trust me completely, I am likely to be named as the holder of the wards in the case of his death - I am the most powerful wizard on the staff and younger
than all the others as well. Who held them last time - Severus or Minerva? I would appreciate it if you would send me some information on what is entailed so that I can be prepared if it should be necessary.

I would also appreciate it if you could try to persuade Draco to come to Hogwarts. We all know that he is going to be a target and he won't be safe at his home because of his father. Severus and I have sent him a letter but its possible he would listen to you more. Should you ever have need of me, send word and I'll come.

Thank you,
James

* * * * * * * *

When no reply had come to him from either man two days later, James was getting just a little worried. Both were, unlike him, usually reliable correspondents and would return a letter to him within twenty-four hours. Draco in particular was relatively nearby and certainly had some of the best owls in Britain at his disposal. He was also foolish enough to refuse to leave his home even when danger threatened - 'an Englishman's home is his castle' could be taken too far, even if it was almost literal in this case. Since Lucius Malfoy, or whoever else the new Dark Lord could be, had now revealed himself, he would almost certainly go after the Malfoy family first. They could afford to waste no time.

Puzzled, he knocked on the wall by Severus' portrait. His guardian, Glover Hipworth, appeared to be at an important stage in a brewing process and looked almost as forbidding as Severus used to be, and of course it would have been terribly impolite to knock on the portrait itself. The only people who could get away with that were muggle-raised first years and even then, not for long.

A moment later, the portrait swung open, Hipworth not even seeming to notice.

"May I come in?" James asked, looking at his colleague and, he hoped, his friend. Severus was dressed casually in the privacy of his chambers, and had obviously not anticipated on being disturbed. Instead of his customary teaching robes, he was wearing a dark green shirt and smart black trousers under the open style robes that James thought must be the fashion for men of between about thirty and eighty. These were, obviously, black.

"Certainly, what are you here for?" he continued, leading James inside and gesturing towards an armchair while he went to fetch glasses. "Butterbeer alright with you, or would you prefer something stronger?"

"Butterbeer would be great thanks. It's just that its been about two days since I sent that letter off to Draco, more actually, since I sent it in the morning. I'm starting to get a bit worried that someone's intercepting the mail."

"Have you sent anything else?"

"A letter to Abe Dumbledore but he's at the University, so I won't worry about that for at least another day."

"Interesting. You are aware that Draco has . . . has an impulsive streak in him, he may just be staying because we told him he should not."
"I know that, the question is what do we do about it?"

Severus stopped and thought for a moment.

"They eat at seven, it's seven thirty now. If they only received the letter today, they might have been packing since this morning and augmenting all of the wards and defences already in place. I believe we should give them until eight to come. If they do not, one or both of us must go after them. They are in no immediate danger now, we have the time to give them."

"How do you know?"

Severus gestured towards a large clock standing in the corner. As was normal for a wizarding clock, it had hands such as 'safe', 'home', 'common room', 'upset', 'looking for trouble', 'in danger' and 'in mortal peril'.

"I use it to keep track of the worst trouble makers and some of the staff," he said. James was fairly sure that those of the staff he kept track of were the Order members, though he had stepped quite nicely around that issue. "It is always useful to know which students aren't in bed at night. I put Draco on when he was eleven."

"All Slytherins?"

"No, Potter was on there since the moment he entered the school - I believed that with his history it would be better to be safe than sorry. I certainly needed it to catch him as many times as I did. I believe that he has the record for the most points deducted for being caught out after curfew."

"He was a trouble maker then?"

"Once I thought so, yes. Now though, after I thought about it and received more information about his actual situation within the war, I'm not so sure that it was in a deliberate way. He was more a trouble magnet and he had some Gryffindor idea that the safety of the castle and everyone in it rested in his hands. Not that it didn't, of course, but it was a bit too much for a twelve year old to think that he could protect fifty-year-old veterans of two wars."

James fell silent, thinking for a minute. If that had been an honest answer, and it certainly made sense if it was, then maybe Abe had been right about the man's reaction when he found out. Severus certainly wasn't the intractable monster the students had once imagined him. If, as he suspected, it was Ron's somewhat indiscreet speech that had finalised this revelation, he would have to thank him once his identity was known.

He almost missed it when Severus continued.

"Of course, he tended to show all of Gryffindor's weaknesses and none of their strengths. He'd have made an admirable Hufflepuff but you could never imagine him being entirely happy with his studying, let alone appreciating being at Hogwarts. Besides, he never looked beneath outward appearances. Within twenty-four hours of his arrival, he was convinced that Slytherin were the embodiment of Voldemort's legions and hated the lot of us. He wouldn't have lasted a week in Slytherin."

"He does sound a bit like the stereotypical hero," James admitted. Put it that way, and even he had to agree. He had been quite an innocent aged eleven, though regrettably not in many ways. James decided he might as well fish for as much information as he could get to help his future campaign. "Draco seems to have liked him though."

"Has Draco told you about his first five years at Hogwarts? You couldn't walk into a class with them
without having to worry about whether their next fight would be in your classroom. Thankfully, Draco respected me too much to try anything too serious in front of me and I don't think Potter would have dared. They only started to make peace later; it must have been the beginning of their sixth year, the year Potter was killed. Draco was still a little naïve at that point."

There was a long pause. James glanced at his watch.

"That's eight o'clock."

"Indeed. I will open my Floo and see if the Headmaster can't open a direct link to the Malfoys' place." Severus moved over the fireplace and threw in a handful of Floo powder, kneeling down to put his head through the network to the Headmaster's office. James didn't know what would happen if Draco tried to come through then but he was sure it wouldn't be pleasant. After what seemed to be an agonisingly long time, he stood up and the fire continued to blaze green.

"There," Severus said. "That will set off an alert and give them a reminder if nothing else."

Five minutes passed.

The flames suddenly burst upwards and the silhouette of a figure appeared in the flames. She stepped gracefully out with the ease of one who has done it from an early age but her expression was agitated.

"Thank Merlin," Severus said with relief. "Please tell me Draco's following."

"He's not," Blaise said, anxiously trying to soothe the baby in her arms. "He's trying to pack up a few of the rarer dark objects so his father can't get hold of them."

"Damn!" James exclaimed. "I'll go after him Sev, if you get them settled."

Reluctantly, the other teacher nodded and gestured for Blaise to take a seat before preceding James back down the dungeon corridor to James' own quarters. Inside, he looked to him for instructions.

"My duelling robes are in the wardrobe," James said briefly. "Black with silver trim. Then I'll need the green trousers and T-shirt hanging next to them." When the Severus had gone, James went over to his desk and pulled out the lowest drawer, the one he'd hoped never to need.

He pulled off his robes and shirt, taking out a wand holster, which he strapped securely to his right arm. Next was a sheathed dagger that he fastened to his left arm. He selected a dirk, dipped it in a small vial of a clear poison and re-sheathed it, leaving it out on the desk while he went to find his boots.

James had always been taught that if you were to go into battle, you should make sure you had the best possible clothing and equipment, partly for intimidation purposes, partly so that it didn't let you down. All of his duelling clothes had been tailor made and this particular set had a number of defensive charms woven into the fabric. His knives had been made with his abilities and grip in mind and the wand holster was the perfect length for his admittedly short arms.

As soon as Severus returned carrying said clothes, James stripped down to his underwear. This was no time for modesty. As he pulled his boots on and did up each of the buckles, he slid his dirk down the side of his right calf. Then he turned to grab a hair tie. Pulling his hair severely back and spelling the tie into place, he turned to look at Severus.

"I'm ready," he said.
"Get Draco out if you can," Severus said, equally blunt. "If you can't, save yourself. You won't believe how difficult it is to get competent Defence teachers." He grasped Severus' hand in a firm grip then stepped into his own fire and left, senses alert for any possible danger.

After emerging from the Floo with his usual lack of grace, James paused for a moment, listening. It was all quiet, the house was mostly in darkness. There were no signs of a raging conflict and he doubted Death Eaters would have had the time to kill Draco between the time Blaise had left in his arrival. Draco was one tough bastard and he was on his home territory. There were undoubtedly a number of nasty surprises lurking for the unwanted visitor.

A house elf popped into the room. James spoke to it gently but urgently, without any of the usual pleasantries.

"I need to see Draco, will you take me to him directly?" It was a little known fact that a house elf could carry a human around in much the way that a wizard could Apparate. James knew for a fact that Albus used it at Hogwarts, though not many others did. For a house elf to confide this fact in a person was a sign of trust and liking. Certainly, no Death Eater like Lucius Malfoy would ever have discovered it.

A moment, then the little creature nodded and took James' hand. A crack and disorientating pull around his knees and he appeared in the room he had never been in before. It seemed to be in the dungeons - there were certainly no windows - and cases on the walls were full of dubious looking items. Draco was hurriedly packing these into boxes. If James made a sound, he would turn and hex him. Was it worth the risk, or should he use Draco's Order codename and claim he'd been given it by another member. He decided on the latter.

"Ferret boy?" he said quietly, trying very hard not to startle his friend.

Draco spun around, wand extended. Seeing who it was, he relaxed, pushing his wand back up his sleeve.

"James. What are you doing here?"

"Trying to make sure you don't get yourself killed."

"I can look after myself," Draco said, his voice icy.

"Against ten, fifteen Death Eaters in a dungeon room? I think not. Severus suggested that I knock you out and bring you back to Hogwarts but I'm willing to negotiate. We take ten minutes to pack up as much as we can and then we leave, no exceptions. This will be one of the first rooms Lucius comes to and it only has one exit. If we're caught here, we're as good as dead."

Draco paused, considering this.

"Fine," he agreed reluctantly. "Pack as much of this up and I'll make the changes to the wards that I need to. By the time I'm done, I don't want a living human to make it through."

"Won't that take longer?" Draco laughed grimly.

"We're a nasty lot, Malfoys. These wards are already in place, just disactivated at the moment. I will key both of us in and add Severus, Blaise and Harry later." James nodded curtly and began shrinking and packing as many cases as he could then shrinking them and putting them into deep pockets in his robe.

He stopped exactly ten minutes later and Draco came out of the trance he'd been in.
"Done? I've got everything packed and in my robes. We need to take the fastest way out," James said, knowing that that wouldn't be the Floo network. He knew, as did Draco, that the Floo network was unsafe at the best of times and would be the first place targeted. It could be disconnected, leaving you trapped in a small room or it could be diverted, sending you uncontrollably into enemy territory.

Draco started to jog up the stairs. Following, James found himself in the library. Following his friend's sure route, they navigated the maze of corridors and found themselves in the entrance hall. Draco pulled them into a small room off to the side and pressed their palms against a panel on the wall. It glowed slightly, then subsided.

"That's us keyed into the wards. I should have been safe already but you weren't. From here, we can Apparate to the Hogwarts Apparition point. Do you have the co-ordinates."

As soon as James nodded, Draco vanished with the tell tale crack. Hastily, James swiped downwards and followed.

They appeared in a small clearing on the edge of the Forbidden Forest and, wands in hands, began to sprint for the safety of the wards. They were taking this very seriously, knowing that Draco was in danger every moment he was outside of a public place or warded building. Perhaps their attitude would seem paranoid to the students, but both men had lived through the darkest dark lord in a millennium. They knew what the risks were.

Passing the flat stone that marked the boundary of Hogwarts School, both men touched their wands to the quartz on top. This would set off a signal in Dumbledore's office that both men were in the warded area and safe. This accomplished they relaxed noticeably.

They strode through the grounds to the castle, then down to the dungeon, James earning a number of strange looks as they did so. He looked very different from his usual self, downright dangerous in fact. When they reached Severus' chambers, the portrait swung open at their approach. While Blaise and Draco talked in the corner, Severus handed James a mug of Ogden's Best Firewhisky.

"You look like you need it," was all he said, with the experience of one who has seen it many times before. Their slightly emotional (for them) farewell was not mentioned, nor was the time James had abbreviated the other's name. They were both safe, and that was, for now, all that mattered.

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It was one o'clock the next morning when James was woken by a sharp peck on his finger. He rolled over, luckily the other way and fell out of bed. Abruptly, he opened his eyes and cast 'lumos'. He stopped, glaring at the offending owl that was just beginning to mutilate his bedclothes. There was no doubt who this owl had come from. Moving slowly towards the bird, James suddenly shot forwards and grabbed it. After letting out an indignant squawk and trying to peck him again, or at the very least scratch him with its talons, the owl retreated to the far corner of the room to sulk in peace.

"Don't worry Archimedes," James said with the forced tolerance that had come with long practice. "I'll find you something to eat after I've read the letter from Abe. You know, it's not generally polite to wake someone up at this time."

"Squawk!"
"And acting like a moody starling isn't going to help you any. I should pluck you and barbecue you like some common chicken."

A rustle of feathers and Archimedes was no longer there. James suspected he'd gone to ground under the bed.

Abe had named him after the highly intelligent owl in 'The Once and Future King', perhaps in the hope that his new pet would be able to talk. Alas - or rather luckily - this was not the case. James had commented on occasion - whenever Archimedes was being particularly irritating - that they looked the part of batty old wizard and irritable, moth eaten owl. Both had taken exception to the wording.

James unfolded the scroll Archimedes had brought and held it under his wand. This was the long-awaited epistle from Abe and it had better be good or James would be in serious trouble.

My dear boy,
That's a very impressive list of problems you have sent me; I will do my best to address them. First however, I will tell you that I passed on your best wishes to the families of the victims. There were three, two were cousins of the dead family, both in Agrippa and one a nephew of the father, he is in Merlin. All seem a little shaken but are recovering quite well and are throwing themselves into their study. I feel sure that if Albus is indeed intends to reform the Order as you suspect, all three would be candidates upon their graduations. They are all very capable and now are horribly aware of the stakes we are playing for.

About the Order, there is not much I can do to help. Yes, Albus is, especially with my recommendation, going to try to recruit you. There are two things you can do. The first is volunteer to take over at Hogwarts and free up several of the rest of the staff to go about Order business, you could claim that you are inexperienced and would feel better about taking such a position. The other, and I advise that you do this whether or not you use my previous thought, is that you have a talk with Fawkes. Claim you are fascinated by the defensive magic of phoenixes and ask if Albus will give you some time to study him, with Fawkes' permission, of course. Then you could attempt to explain the situation to him. There may be ways of faking the induction ritual that he could put in place should it become necessary. You can trust him with your secret, especially since he would find it very difficult to communicate it to anyone.

I have also written to Draco, though I hope it will not be necessary. Please write back to me to confirm if you do have him with you, and I can relax about his safety. Of all of my former students, you and he are two of those I am most concerned about. Keep him at Hogwarts for as long as you can, or at a safe house. Do not let him return home until this fight is finished.

Good luck, Jamie
Aberforth Dumbledore

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James was woken far too early the next morning when someone emptied a bucket of cold water on him.

"G'way Draco," he said, pulling his pillow over his head. "s too early to train."
"Unless you want me to start shoving ice cubes down your back, I'd at least open your eyes," Draco said, obviously hoping James chose to ignore this well-meant advice.

James groaned and pulled himself upright, scanning the room to check no one else was there.

"How'd you get in here?" he asked, his brain still not quite awake.

"The Floo, James, that's the one with the green flames that you threw up on, remember?"

"I know what the Floo is. I do ward my chambers though."

"I'm keyed into the Floo network - free access to everywhere. It's one of the perks of being in the Order of the Phoenix. And before you ask, since everyone knows I am, I don't need to be secretive about it. Are you going to get up now, or do we need to continue with giving you an incentive?"

"I'll move. What time is it anyway?"

"Oh, about seven o'clock. Albus wants a staff meeting before lessons this morning - probably between half seven and half eight."

"Why did I take this job?"

"Beats me. You could have been getting up at five to do Quidditch training but instead you choose the soft life. We were most disappointed."

"Push off Draco, I'll see you upstairs."

When he was quite sure that his friend had left his rooms, James rolled out of bed, untangled himself from his blankets and started looking around for decent robes to wear. He had been very glad to receive his letter but it would have been nice if he was able to make up for the sleeping time he'd lost. The whole idea of having staff meetings before dawn was horrific, something that had certainly not been in the job description. If Albus had only decided to hold it in the first period, not only could he have slept in and still attended the meeting but he would also have not had to taught his 5th year Gryffindor-Slytherin Defence class.

At last, dressed fairly respectably in forest green robes, he called a house elf. One of the multitudes appeared in his rooms - not one he knew by sight.

"I'd like a panini and a croissant as quickly as possible please."

"Is that all?" the house elf asked, sounding horrified. James winced inwardly.

"I just need breakfast, something I can carry with me and eat on my way to the staff meeting."

"Very well Professor, one moment."

A minute or so late, the elf was back holding a cleverly contrived bag that would provide a lining for the huge pockets of his robes. In it appeared to be at least three croissant, various pieces of fruit, a thermos flask - where the house elves had found one of those he had no idea - presumably of coffee and a cheese roll containing what appeared to be the goat's cheese that he liked.

"Thank you," he said, being careful not to go over the top and letting this sound like a dismissal as well -he knew all too well how touchy elves could be. The house elf seemed satisfied, bowed very deeply and vanished.

As he left his chambers, he met Severus in the corridor, looking a little haggard.
"Tomorrow," he muttered, "I am either putting up silencing charms or moving them into their own suite. I take back whatever I said about the boy being a nice baby."

"And how Draco manages to be so bouncy is beyond me," James said, remembering times from their university days when they'd gone to bed at around two and Draco had bounced back up again at six without a care in the world. "Have you eaten?"

"No time, I'll go to the kitchen after the meeting for some coffee."

James thought for a second: should he sacrifice his own precious stash of caffeine for this obviously needy friend or keep it to himself. It was an easy decision as conditioned Gryffindor responses came into play.

"Here," he said, handing over the thermos. "I got the house elves to get me breakfast. There's some fruit and croissant if you want it."

"Don't even think about a job change," Severus said, gulping down the steaming hot coffee without even appearing to burn himself. As they passed the Great Hall, he seemed to be almost back to his normal self. By the time they reached the staff room, his glare was back in place for the other members of staff and both of the Slytherin teachers were ready to start the day.

They were among the last to arrive, as usual, having had the furthest to come. In addition to the staff were a few other familiar faces from the Order. Draco and Blaise were there, obviously, as were Ron and Hermione and, surprisingly enough, Fred and George Weasley. When they had taken their seats, Albus stood up in his place at the head of the table.

"Thank you all for coming here at this early hour. As you know, the Death Eaters are rising again and we must consider the defences of the school and what measures must be taken. For this reason, I have invited Ron, Hermione, Fred and George here, since they probably know the school better than many of us teachers and have perhaps more experience with various traps.

"As always in this situation, our first consideration must be who it is that will be keyed into the wards, to hold them in the case of my demise. Minerva has taken that duty during Voldemort's two risings, but she has informed me that she no longer feels her power reserves are up to such a task. Most of us are quite advanced in age, the only ones I feel to be young enough to bear the wards in the event of my death are Severus, Irene and James. Irene, what would your feeling be?"

"Have you completely lost your mind, Albus?" Professor Sinistra asked. "My speciality is Astronomy, not Charms or something of that ilk and I'm not magically powerful either. Let one of the others do it."

"Very well. Severus, James, its up to you."

"My inclination would be towards James," Severus said smoothly. "I, like many members of the Order, am already seen as a target and, while I will do my best to survive, it is possible that I will be taken down early in the assault. He is also the most powerful of us here and perhaps the best trained for the accompanying title. It is 'Defender of Hogwarts', is it not?"

"Any objection James?"

"What exactly does this involve?" he asked, Abe not having remembered to send him any information.

"Minerva might be better to talk to but essentially we key you into Hogwarts' wards and identify you as my successor should I die. At that instant, instead of falling, the wards will immediately divulge
upon you and you will continue to hold them until a new Headmaster is chosen or until your retirement, depending who is appointed. Should nothing happen to me, it will affect you very little."

James considered it for a moment, the others in the room watching him in silence like a bug under a microscope. There was certainly no harm in it, if Headmasters had been holding this wards for centuries, and Minerva had been keyed to them herself and seemed to have had no ill effects. Although he knew that Albus, knowing that he was so powerful and trained by his brother, was not being entirely forthcoming, someone would have to do it anyway, and he was probably stronger than Severus in terms of sheer power . . .

"I'll do it," he said, and the room breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, dear boy," Albus said. "Now, on to the other defences. You say you know the locations of all entrances into Hogwarts itself."

The four Weasleys looked at each other and one of the twins - James thought it was Fred - spoke up.

"We know all of the ones that were there during our time at school. We never found the Marauders Map, so it's hard to know for sure, but we will have a good look for any new ones. When the wards are up, entrance above ground is only possible via the main school gates and by the Apparition point located just outside the grounds beyond the Quidditch pitch. It is also theoretically possible to cross the lake and enter that way but with the Giant Squid in the way, we decided that was impossible. Hermione had a few ideas for security."

At that point he stopped and Hermione took up the thread.

"Muggles have things called security cameras that act a bit like a portrait. You set up a screen in your office for instance, and the picture shows what is happening at a certain point. Ron and I think we could probably come up with some way of finding a magical alternative for each site. Fred and George are ready to start closing off the tunnels with one way portals. Some of the tunnels are already blocked by cave-ins and the like, but the others will be set up with as many Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes products as they can hide. We're also looking at a one way portal but that hasn't passed the experimental stage."

"So we can expect to be seeing you around the school during the next few weeks?"

"Well, Kingsley seconded me to the school anyway," Ron said with a grin, "and of course the twins will be along whenever they feel like it. We'll try not to be too disruptive to lessons."

"It would be appreciated. Mr Malfoy, will you be staying with us for a while?"

"It's not like we have a choice," Draco said, scowling slightly.

"We have a few options. You could either remain in Severus' quarters, take rooms of your own or move into a safe-house."

Draco and Blaise looked at each other for a moment. A silent decision was obviously made.

"A safe house might be best," he ventured.

"That's just what I thought. We have a few properties that could work, owned by the Order or by Order members. The ideal place would be this one, a Potter legacy. Unfortunately, Harry never found this place, I'm not sure he even knew it existed, and he didn't write a will. However, I feel certain that he would have been happy for you to use it."
Draco and Blaise scanned down a sheet of parchment.

"I never knew Potter owned a castle!" Draco exclaimed a moment later.

"Ah yes, as the sole descendent of Godric Gryffindor, through the Potter line, Harry would stand to have inherited this place on his seventeenth birthday. The Potter family had long since vacated it in favour of their holdings at Godric's Hollow, which were in a wizarding neighbourhood and with a more modern design. Technically, the heir of Slytherin would hold it jointly with him, since the Gryffindor and Slytherin family were allies, but we have been unable to determine the senior line, or even if there is a remaining branch of the family. I fear it must have fallen from the height of its power and heritage, perhaps the records were lost through Squib generations.

"The problem?" Severus said, telling something was amiss.

"Well, we haven't actually been able to locate the building, and unless we do, I'm afraid it is, for all purposes, useless to our cause."

"Ah, may I take that Draco?" James asked, wondering how he could phrase it. "I'm not sure of my lineage but I'm told I'm of Slytherin's line, so I might as well do some research into it. Perhaps if Mrs Weasley has time, she could assist me."

The other staff members looked at him with some surprise, especially Hermione. James could see the wheels turning in her head. He was undoubtedly Gryffindor's heir, Slytherin's heir in power and possibly senior heir also . . . No wonder he was powerful.

The meeting continued, all of the proposed safe houses being discarded for one reason or another: Lucius Malfoy might have known of those belonging to Severus, they'd used those ones before . . .

At the end of the meeting, Hermione came over.

"You'd like to meet up this weekend then?" she asked.

"You'll help me then?"

"I'm not sure I'd trust you alone in a library."

James laughed as they slipped back into the familiar banter of their schooldays.

"Do you think we should start in the Hogwarts library?"

Hermione pursed her lips and thought about it for a moment.

"We'll be tracing the ancestral home of the founders of Hogwarts. I'd have thought that most of the comprehensive texts about them would be here, so yes. Would about three o'clock on Saturday suit?"

"Fine by me."

"What do we know already? I could maybe do some preliminary research at the Ministry . . ."

"It's a castle that, before Hogwarts was founded, was occupied by the combined Gryffindor and Slytherin forces - they were allies - supposedly located in Scotland somewhere. When the Slytherin line declined into Squibs who left for Muggle settlements and the Gryffindor family had a smaller manor house built near the village of Godric's Hollow, the castle was abandoned. It is said that only someone who is a member of the family or keyed to the wards can enter or find it. That's about all, but it does sound ideal for Draco."
She grinned at him and pulled a Muggle-style notebook out of her robes, scribbling down notes already as she began to think about the best sources of information. Ron looked over to see where she was, then smiled indulgently as he caught sight of the expression on her face.

* * * * * * * * *

On Thursday evening that week, James pulled on his Quidditch robes, took his broom out of the cupboard and made his way to the Quidditch pitch, where he had agreed to help out with the Slytherin team's try-outs.

When he arrived, Archie Alderton, the Slytherin team captain, was already on the side of the pitch with the rest of the existing team. They had four players already but needed to fill vacancies for a Seeker, Chaser and Beater. All of the potential players were already in the air warming up, and the stands were beginning to fill with various supporters and friends, although it was clear that a few of the older Slytherins had taken it upon themselves to prevent entry from any of the other houses.

"Professor Evans!" Archie called. "We're just about to start."

James jogged over.

"What do you want me to do?"

"We've got huge numbers of candidates, so we're doing the positions one at a time. They can try out for more than one but we've advised against it. We're starting with the Chaser position but we were wondering if you could get the Seekers over to one side and check their brooms and stuff since we're doing them next. None of us know so much about Seeking, so that's where we're likely to need the most help."

"Certainly," James said. Unless they had other plans for him later, this wouldn't be too hard. "Sonorus! Could all Seekers not also trying for Chaser come over here please!"

About five people separated from the swarm of maybe twenty five and landed. There were four boys, one girl, and they had a good spread of ages. The youngest two boys had just started their second year while the oldest was one of James' star Defence Against the Dark Arts students. It was interesting that there were so many candidates - the position of Seeker was known to be the hardest and most dangerous and there weren't many with the guts for it.

"Do you know if anyone else is trying?" he asked. No one seemed to know of anyone, so he continued. "I'm just going to start by checking over your brooms. Of course, the make of your broom won't be a deciding factor, but if one of you was flying a Shooting Star and another a Firebolt XL, we'd have to take that into account.

Looking at them, James saw a nice mix of decent brooms: mostly Nimbus 2000s and 2001s but one obviously prized original Firebolt. One, belonging to a third year boy, was in quite bad condition, not because of its age, but because of bad maintenance. He had a reputation for carelessness and, while a cheerful enough kid, was notoriously lazy.

"Is this your own broom?" James asked sternly.

"Yes sir," the boy replied, obviously ignorant of what he'd done wrong.
"How long have you owned it?"

"My father bought it for me last May sir."

"And you've managed to let it get into this condition? I'm afraid that its doubtful you'll get onto the team this year, whatever your ability. The first rule of Quidditch is to take care of your equipment. See if someone can get you a broomstick servicing kit for Christmas and I'll show you the best ways of using it. There's a knack to it that can be tricky to pick up." Maybe the incentive of possibly getting onto the team would be enough to make him work at it - he was clearly proud of owning a broom.

"If anyone else wants advice, come and see me," he added, not wanting to be seen to be showing favouritism. "Now, put your brooms on the floor, take one step forwards from the front of the broom and call it to you."

A few of them looked at him, obviously puzzled, but they all followed instructions. James had found that almost anyone, with practice, could call a broom to their hand as they had in their very first flying lesson. More challenging was summoning it a short distance, since it testing the way they blended their magic with that of the broom's and was a good indication of how strong their control was. As they all managed this, he urged them further and further from the broom. At last, they reached a point where two of them - one of the second years and the fourth year girl - managed it and failed on the next step. James had to admit he was impressed. His own preliminary ground-based tests now completed, he allowed them to take a seat on the grass and watch the Chasers.

There were fifteen flyers up there, of very differing standards. Archie was going through what was clearly a pre-agreed routine, checking their broom handling, team work, strength and accuracy. He then had them shooting goals against the team Keeper while he and the other existing Chaser observed.

After about twenty minutes, he blew on a coach-style whistle and the Chaser candidates left, bar those also trying out as Beaters, who took seats in the stands until they were called. The new Chaser would be decided after this in a meeting where the skills and weaknesses of each was carefully discussed and their compatibility with the rest of the team discussed. If there was a particularly strong showing, one or two of the younger ones might be chosen as 'reserves', participating in training so that they could be prepared for when vacancies in the team came up and prevent such a large changeover the next year.

The Seekers were then called over, their names and years taken down and James was invited to run the tryout himself after they'd been taken through broom handling skills. He didn't release a snitch - that could have them all out there for hours trying to hunt it down - instead he started by throwing yellow painted golf balls for them to catch, watching how fast their reaction times were and how accurate their catching. Finally, he levitated one ball and allowed them to go against each other in a mock seekers' competition while he moved it randomly around the pitch.

That exercise left a clear leader - Davis, smaller of the two second years - and when the seekers were dismissed, James was decided that the boy would be the one he recommended to the team. While he was young (James forced himself to remember that he had been over a year younger when he was first admitted to the team), his grasp of the rules was good, his broom handling excellent and his reflexes good. His tactics could be better, but that came with practice that he would have time to acquire. He was also a good two years younger than any of the existing team members, spreading the team's age and decreasing the chance of having a mass departure. If the chosen players for the Chaser and Beater positions were as good, Slytherin would be in for a chance even against the admittedly strong Gryffindor players.
Early on Saturday afternoon, James sat in the staff room, working steadily through a pile of first year essays. They were really the worst of the lot - they'd got past the stage when everything, including the homework, was new and exciting, and their subject matter was boring enough that they weren't putting much time into it. It was standard practice at this time, so a number of the other teachers were also there, laughing over some of the funnier mistakes, chatting about various families or students. Professor Sprout and Madam Hooch were both in Hogsmeade with their families, a fact which they had carefully kept secret from their students.

Severus looked over at James from the desk next to him.

"Isn't Mrs Weasley arriving soon?"

James panicked for a moment before realising that this was referring to Hermione. It made her sound so old!

"Three o'clock," he replied. "Though I'm fairly sure she'll be early. She knows where to find me though, so I'm going to see how much more I can get done."

"First years?" Severus said knowingly.

"Unfortunately. Some of their answers - they seem to have no idea of geography, I don't even know if they've been taught it at all. This last one seems to think Nairobi is the capital of Finland. Why? Who knows. Tell me, to wizard born children normally get taught the basics?"

"I assume you had a mostly Muggle childhood?" Severus said, only a hint of a sneer in his voice.

"My mother was born into a Squib line and I was raised with my cousin. I went to a standard Muggle school until I was pulled out aged eleven for a proper education," James explained. It was perfect truth according to his research, yet didn't give away too much about his home life.

"Do you know anything much about our system then?"

"Not really."

"The subjects taught depend on their parents' wishes. Mostly, children are taught by their parents or by a tutor hired by their parents. There is the occasional small school around, where parents have pooled their resources but mostly it's just within a family. Some subjects are standard - they all have to read and write, for instance, and do some basic mathematics. Its also advised that they are taught the very basics of some of the magical subjects, Potions in particular and I believe also Herbology. My father was particularly keen on my beginning a magical education early, so I also did history of magic, potions and began to study the Dark Arts. Something like geography would be rare."

"That can't be that much work, how long do they spend on lessons?" James asked, surprised. He had thought that all of his friends would have had much the same lessons hours as him - eight thirty in the morning until three thirty in the evening. He'd stayed behind for every club there was to keep him out of the house - normally meaning he didn't get home until about five.

"Oh, mostly they work in the mornings from about eight to twelve then have the rest of the day to do what they please."
"Four hours?"

"Less really, considering they get breaks."

"No wonder they have problems doing their assignments."

"What did you think?"

"From the age of three I was at school in compulsory lessons from half eight to half three, with breaks of course, but still most of that was in lessons."

"I assure you that I followed a similar program. I would say that was the exception rather than the rule. Perhaps it is less surprising that after the initial culture shock Muggle-born students tend to do better, your friend being a prime example. That reminds me, reports will be compiled and sent home soon and we will be having meetings with the parents of the first year Muggle-born students over the next week. They are often a little uncomfortable with letting their children go off to a boarding school they have never heard of, to be taught by people who, to them, undoubtedly seem a little strange. We are to cover the three in Slytherin. I will see Mr and Richards and Mr and Mrs Wilksonson. However, Mrs Macdonald, when I last saw her, seemed to be very overprotective. I would appreciate it if you would accompany me for that interview, since you have a superior understanding of the Muggle system."

"Certainly. Do I need to do anything about the reports."

"If you had read the memo sent round, you would know. No you do not, since you have already submitted the grades for this term's work. I have written a general report on progress for each student in the house and that is all that is necessary."

"Okay then. I'd better go now."

"I would appreciate it if you would update me on your findings. Slytherin's own childhood home: it would certainly be a fascinating place to visit."

"Sure."

James piled his essays up and shoved them into a drawer. He was seriously considering issuing his students with Muggle-style exercise books next year. Parchment was all very well and looked very nice but handwriting seemed to suffer and it was so much harder to organise. During his own schooldays, he had found it challenging to manage not to lose all of his notes or get them muddled.

He wandered down to the library. As he'd suspected, Hermione rushed in a moment later, clipboard in hand. On it, she had a list of possible reading material.

"Afternoon James," she said. "I've already looked through some sources I found, and I've managed to compile a list of books we could start by looking at. Here, you try and find the ones on this sheet and I'll work down the other two."

James found himself presented with a very Muggle-looking sheet of A4 paper with about twenty titles written down in Hermione's tiny, neat handwriting. He moved off towards the shelves behind her.

Before long, they had a large pile of books in the table in front of them. Hermione looked at it critically, then around the library at the groups of students working there.

"We'll go back to your rooms to look through this. I'll just go and get them issued by Madam Pince. I
have a feeling she wouldn't let you take this many out on your own."

James watched helplessly as she thrust most of the books into his arms and marched up to the desk.

"Hermione dear, good to see you looking so well," Madam Pince said, thawing considerably from her usually cold self. "What brings you to Hogwarts?"

"I'm doing some research with Professor Evans. There are some books I need to take back to his quarters - a starting point really. There are a few more I'd like to come back for, and I'd love to get that copy of 'the Founding of Hogwarts' by Friedrich Fumage out for some light reading!"

Madam Pince chuckled indulgently at the young woman who, quite probably, had been her favourite student of the past few years. She was one of the few who loved books and reading and could be trusted to look after the books as they deserved to be looked after, unlike most of the young hooligans who used the library.

The now issued books were once again piled in James' arms and Hermione led the way back through the corridors down to the dungeons. Minerva McGonagall, walking up to the Headmaster's office for afternoon tea stopped short as she saw them pass. She knew, in hindsight, that she was just imagining things, but that picture had brought back so many dear memories. Young Miss Granger being trailed by either one or two boys, their arms piled high with books and a black head poking above one pile. What she would give for Hermione Granger and Harry Potter to have returned to Hogwarts together . . . . .

When they reached the dungeons, Hermione had James put the books down carefully on the floor and they sat down next to them.

"The first thing we need to do is sort them out into what they're about. I think we'll need three piles, no four. One each for the Gryffindor family and the Slytherin family - we'll have to include books on Godric and Salazar in those. One can be for any details on the founding of Hogwarts. The last can be for history textbooks about wizarding Britain during that time period. I think you'd better take the Slytherin pile to start with, since you said you'd already done some research into him and I'll start with the more general history textbooks."

James looked at the piles, the history pile considerably larger than any of the others, and hastily agreed.

An hour later, he summoned a house elf to fetch them some refreshments. Hermione agreed to this on the condition that they were kept over on his desk, away from the books.

By six o'clock, when they had to move and start getting ready for dinner, they had each got through their assigned piles. From the large piles, they had each found one or two books that might contain relevant references. James had enjoyed the afternoon surprisingly much, partly because Salazar Slytherin was such a fascination to him, partly because it gave him some time when he could be himself and talk about his past without having to lie and hide it all.

Before they called it a day, they carried all the books they no longer needed back to the library and checked them back in, restoring them carefully to the shelves from whence they came.

"Are you staying for supper here?" James asked her.

"No, we eat at the Burrow on Saturdays - I'll Apparate home and Floo with Ron."

"Have a good evening."
"You know, you'd probably be welcome to come some evening," Hermione said, remembering how much he had enjoyed his rare time at the Burrow.

"Its okay," he said. "Just remember to tell me all about it. I've sort of got my own family now, what with Draco and Abe. They seemed determined to adopt me."

"Good for them. Well, shall we continue same time next week?"

"I'd appreciate that, if you have the time."

Hermione grinned at him and started back down the main path to the apparition point. James watched her go. In some ways he envied her, but really he knew that he would never have completely fit into the family life of the Weasleys - he was too Slytherin by far and as much as he loved them, they had never really understood him.

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The following evening, Draco dragged James down to his quarters for a drink. Blaise had taken Harry up to the staff room, where both mother and child would be fussed over by every female member of staff plus Albus, who never had been able to resist a baby

James poured them each a mug of butterbeer and they sat down in front of the fireplace.

"So how's the love life getting on?" Draco asked a moment later.

"Is everyone obsessed with my life?!" James spluttered, choking on his butterbeer while Draco smirked. His timing had been perfect. "That's just what Abe asked me last month."

"We just want you to be happy," Draco said, smiling angelically. "And Professor Dumbledore requested that I ensure that you never lack for good advice. I'm also meant to owl him anything of interest. Now spill!"

"Draco, I am in a school. Perhaps you'd noticed that there aren't that many adult guys in a school, even fewer who are gay."

"And since your not going out at weekends and the evenings to look for company, it stands to reason that there's already someone you like. Since I know it's not me, it must be Sev. Does he know?"

"I never said I liked Severus!" James protested helplessly. Bloody Draco - he'd always been far too perceptive.

"But you do, don't you?"

"Well . . ."

"As I thought. Have you told him yet?"

"No," James said, then swore violently as he realised he'd just confirmed his friend's suspicions.

"So how serious is it then?"

"I don't know!"
"Think it through. Do you want a one-off, short term or long term?"

"Definitely more than a one off, unless something drastic happens. I . . . guess I like him a lot."

"Enough for a long term relationship?"

"I think so."

"Good, because Sev isn't likely to settle for less. I take it you're moving slowly so as not to surprise him too much. Are you planning on staying at Hogwarts for a while then?"

" Probably, I don't think there's anywhere else I'm dying to go. I don't want to work as an Auror or as a professional Quidditch player and definitely not at the Ministry. Curse-breaking might by interesting but I think this job suits me as well as anything. I have some plans that I'd like to see through but I don't think its going to be happening any time soon."

"You always were a sucker for kids. Don't tell him I said this, but Severus is, even more so than you. So long as he doesn't have to teach them, he's brilliant with them - spoilt me rotten when I was younger, still does actually. There was this one time, I must have been about six, when he was visiting. Lucius must have been at the Ministry and mother was out shopping with friends. We were meant to be doing some potions but as soon as they left, he got out his broomstick and took me for a ride. I absolutely loved it. Then the house elf that was my nanny snitched on us to my mother and I was grounded and I think he was told off."

"Your mother told him off?" James asked incredulously.

"That's what I remember. Of course, he was only about our age then and no one seems to worry about telling us off."

"Too true," James agreed. Teacher or no, he was still the baby of the staffroom.

"Of course, its not like we've ever done anything to deserve this sort of attention . . . " Draco continued.

"Its all Bertie's fault," James whined. "I didn't do anything." They both burst out laughing. Yup, there was absolutely no reason the pair of them had managed to obtain a reputation for being the worst trouble makers in Merlin house - it was Bertram Highcastle who had done everything they'd been blamed for.

"How is Bertram anyway?" James asked. "I assume you've heard from him more recently than I have."

"If you'd actually reply to letters you might get more mail. He's much the same as ever. At the moment he's in London, I think. His hair was almost an ultraviolet colour last time I saw him and his latest boyfriend was some German fellow. Of course, knowing him, all of this is completely out of date."

"Any sign of a job?"

"You think anyone would employ him? No, and it's not like he needs one given that his family owns the patent for the Skele grow potion. At least he hasn't decided to go into politics - the worst thing is I think he'd be extremely popular."

"Please Minister Highcastle, I want there to be a ministry run night-club to raise our public image," James simpered in a decent impression of Umbridge, then he laughed. "The worst thing is that he'd
probably agree to that."

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Severus looked helplessly at James, who stepped smoothly in.

"In most ways, yes. Hogwarts is a relatively small school, so all students live in the castle itself. There are four houses altogether, each with approximately seventy students. Each house has its own dormitories and common room. In Slytherin house, the first years share two to a room. Alistair's roommate is a boy called Simon Wood. We have a house points system, it helps to reward good behaviour and discourage rule breaking. The differences are that we have never had a fagging system and there is no bullying, for various reasons." Severus decided that was probably enough detail and continued.

"For the first month or so, we decide on who they share a room with. This is mostly so those who are new to the wizarding world have someone to help them settle in. Simon's father is from a long line of wizards, his mother was born to a normal or Muggle family. They are getting on very well and Alistair is having no problems adapting. He seems particularly fond of exploding snap and some of the other children's games that he's been introduced to."

"He has mentioned Simon a few times. Is he from a nice family?"

"I should say so, although they tend to be in Gryffindor house so I do not know them as well as some others. Mr Wood works at the Ministry and Mrs Wood teaches pre-Hogwarts age children at home. His uncle plays professional Quidditch and is a very good man."

"Do you think we could meet up with them? If the boys are becoming friends, I think I would like to."

"I can easily supply you with their address and telephone number," James said. He knew that they were connected to the Muggle telephone network but he wasn't sure Severus did.

"Thank you. So tell me, has he been all right being away from home. He's never been away from me before and I have worried that he'd be terribly upset about it all."

"Alistair was a little homesick for the first few nights, which is a perfectly normal reaction for an eleven year old away from home for the first time and he was by no means the only one. He got over it very quickly and now seems perfectly happy. He's adapted admirably to his life at the school and we've brought you his report in person so we can help you to understand it."

He took small booklet out of the pocket of his robes and put it on the table. It was a fancy affair compared to those James had seen his cousin bring home from Smeltings. He of course had never been aware Hogwarts even compiled reports, his aunt and uncle not being inclined to discuss it with him. The front sheet held the school coat of arms. Severus opened it to the first page.

"This is a summary of his grades in each subject, each teacher has written a more detailed report later on. If James could go over this with you, I will arrange for some refreshments to be brought through."

James moved round the table so he was next to Mrs Macdonald. As soon as Severus had left, she looked at him suspiciously.

"You look very young for a teacher."

"I'm twenty four, Mrs Macdonald. I assure you that I am well-qualified for my subject."

"What do you teach?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts. It is an interesting subject, in first year we look at various animals"
and creatures and start the basics of duelling."

"Isn't that a little dangerous?"

"Duelling? Not really. I believe fencing is taught quite often at schools, think of it as much along the same lines. There's a lot of formality involved but its very enjoyable and excellent exercise."

"What qualifications do you have?"

"I finished my schooling in wizardry early at the age of sixteen and went back to the normal world to take A-levels in Maths, History, IT, German and Latin. Then I was invited to attend a wizarding university. I took a four year course there, graduating with an honours degree, just as almost all of the other members of staff have. Do you wish to look at the report now, it will be quite different from ones Alistair will have received at his junior school since we have a different grading system."

"Very well."

"Do you understand what each subject involves?"

"Not exactly."

"I've explained Defence already, I teach Alistair that and he's a very able pupil. I've graded him O, that's an Outstanding and the equivalent of an A grade - the top mark. Potions is taught by Professor Snape and that's similar to chemistry. The students learn to make a huge variety of potions, including ones for healing. It's a very highly praised ability. Professor Snape gives children from non-wizarding families tutoring at the beginning of term to make sure they are not at a disadvantage to the other students. He's given Alistair an EE, Exceeds Expectations. That's the next grade down from an O and a very respectable mark, especially since he's known for being a harsh grader."

"And the next subject, Transfiguration?"

"Turning one thing into something else. They start out small, matches into needles and the like but the Masters in Transfiguration, like Professor McGonagall can even change themselves at will into animals. She's given him an O, most impressive. It's one of the hardest branches of magic. Charms is next on the list. That's perhaps one of the most useful subjects, since students are taught a huge variety of charms, many of which can be used around the household. There are charms for lifting things up, for tidying, packing, cleaning and so on. He's received an EE in charms, again, very good. Herbology is a bit like a cross between biology and gardening - you learn to look after magical plants and about their various properties and uses. They are quite difficult to raise and it's quite a challenging subject. He's received an A for this, an Acceptable grade. That's a pass, showing he's solid in the subject and doing fine, but has no particular gift for it."

Severus came back into the room, a tray of tea and cakes floating behind him.

"Finished?" he asked.

"Almost," James replied, as he hastily continued through the rest of the subjects. Mrs Macdonald seemed very concerned that her son was performing to the best of his ability, even if it made her come over as a little pushy. James could just about understand her concern over his youth - he did probably appear more like a teenage rebel than a teacher to her Muggle eyes, with his long hair. She seemed much friendlier towards Severus, who was older, had a huge amount of presence and a natural air of authority.

Towards the end of the afternoon - they had already been speaking for two hours, putting to rest as many of her concerns as they could - James asked,
"Have you been receiving letters all right?"

"By owl you mean? Now that really was strange. I'm a little afraid of the birds myself, but Alli seems very fond of his. I bought him one when he got his school supplies and I have to say it's very efficient. I'm not sure I'm feeding it right though."

"He'll certainly be fed at Hogwarts in the owlery. Otherwise there are mice and owl treats you could buy. Shall I go and pick some up for you before you leave?" James asked.

Severus nodded and James pulled on his cloak and left, leaving Severus to deal with everything. He was promising to make sure Alistair was wearing thermal underwear ("it can get so cold up north") and wearing his scarf (a lovely shade of red that no Slytherin would consider putting on, let alone wear in public).

By the time he returned, they seemed to have finished and were just getting ready to leave. He handed her a neatly wrapped parcel.

"I've put some statis charms on to keep them fresh for as long as you want to keep them."

"Thank you so much, young man."

He nodded politely to her and watched as Severus led her out.

He returned a few moments later.

"Parents," he muttered irritably. The poor man had been forced to be nice all afternoon.

"I never knew mine," James said lightly. "So I wouldn't know. My aunt and uncle couldn't have cared less."

"My mother died young; my father was . . . unpleasant to say the least. Still, there are times I think I am better off without."

"What, you mean you don't want to wear a Gryffindor scarf?"

"The poor child."
The next Saturday, the door of the staff room burst open. The teachers looked up, a few going automatically to their wands. Hermione Weasley burst in, eyes shining, a sheet of paper clutched in her hand.

"You're early, Hermione," James said, smiling indulgently at her enthusiasm. He'd missed seeing his friends over the past few years. "It's only two o'clock. What's up?"

"I think I've found it!"

"Let's see."

She came round to stand next to him, putting her slip of paper down on the desk.

"It's from Arsenius Jigger's 'Gryffindor and Slytherin: Friend or Foe' - Percy had a copy so I borrowed it."

"With or without asking?" James said, highly amused

"Um... Anyway, listen.

The combined Slytherin and Gryffindor force built for itself a great fortress, which could hold and support all of the clan's allies, dependants and warriors in time of crisis. This location of fortress was protected by a Fidelius charm tied to the bloodline itself - only a member of the Gryffindor or Slytherin bloodline could take a stranger through the wards. The only ones exempt from this were those born within the castle itself and while they could pass through alone, they could not bring others within the wards. The geographical location has been much discussed, although they have not been able to be tested. In many documents of the time, Salazar Slytherin has been poetically described as coming from the Fens - modern day Norfolk. The Gryffindor family 'from wild moor' would have originated in Yorkshire. Together the two families controlled the majority of this part of Britain, their main rivals in power being the Delaney-Podmore family of Cornwall, the last remaining member of which is the ghost now leading the Headless Hunt, Sir Patrick Delaney Podmore. The fortress, as one of the defences against the forces of this family, would have been located between the two territories, therefore, taking into account other political alliances, in Cambridgeshire.

"This is it James! We've found it."

"Er Hermione, that's only a general area."

"No, it goes on to give a few more details, such as its height over surrounding land, it being on a river and its proximity to the coast and I think I've managed to pinpoint an exact site. Its marked as being a quarry on Muggle maps, so I imagine the Muggle-repelling charms are still in effect, and it would only take seconds to Apparate there."

"Do you have a map with you?"

Hermione gave him a scathing look and took a new Ordnance Survey map out of her bag. She unfolded it over his desk. As she did so, Severus and Draco came to look over their shoulders. Putting a hand-drawn map of the UK on top of it, she sketched on the various alliances' territories and her theory for the location of the fortress, showing them where it corresponded on the map.
The men exchanged glances.

"It sounds like it should work," Draco said doubtfully. "But it can't be that easy, can it?"

"Easy!?! Do you know how long it took me to find that one reference? Do you know how rare that book is, how long he had to research to find that much information?"

James and Severus backed carefully away. They summoned a house elf and requested enough food to last them overnight if necessary. If the castle really was there, they doubted any of them would want to leave without exploring it thoroughly. James wasn't surprised that it seemed the two Slytherins intended to accompany them, he was excited himself. He was even less surprised that they had joined the expedition without asking and, to be honest, he didn't care.

By the time Hermione had finished with Draco, he was a nervous wreck and the others had almost finished their preparations.

"Uh Hermione," James said carefully. "We're just going to go and change into clothes that would be more suited for this, okay? We'll meet you at the Apparition point in fifteen minutes."

She smiled at him, at once all excitement again.

"You've got food. Great, get Draco sorted too, and I'll see you there."

James bounded out of the room and equipped himself in battle robes, just as he had for the trip to Malfoy Manor. Even if the fortress could only be found by one of the bloodline, who was to say the last occupants hadn't left some nasty traps or that there wasn't anyone already living there?

At the Apparition point, he met up with the others, all similarly attired, and they took down the Apparition co-ordinates of the small village near the quarry. It would have been risky to attempt apparition straight to the site in case of any wards that had been erected.

They arrived with a pop in a quiet lane and followed the road - little more than a mud track really - down to the danger signs marked 'QUARRY'. Taking a deep breath, James stepped forwards and immediately met with a slightly resistance, as if he was trying to walk through water. He stepped back, puzzled.

"Well, there's definitely something there but I don't know how to get through the wards."

"Sometimes wards are blood-linked," Severus said reasonably. "When a child of the family is born, they are taken to the boundary and a few drops of blood are let fall to the ground to seal them to the wards. That might work."

James made a mental inventory and came up with a blank.

"Does anyone have a dagger that isn't poisoned?" he asked sheepishly. Severus shook his head - as James had expected, he probably had a nasty variety of potions on his. Draco drew one from his belt and handed it over.

Taking a deep breath, James forced his way back into the ward. He made a shallow cut on his arm and squeezed it enough for some blood to fall. Suddenly, he was encased in a silver glow and a small snake encircled his cut wrist. It curled itself tightly around his arm, then vanished with the glow. He looked down at his arm, seeing only unbroken skin. The resistance had vanished. James looked towards his friends.

"I'm in," he said. "Now does anyone know how I bring you in?"
"Sometimes physical contact . . ." Draco suggested tentatively.

"Worth a try."

James put a hand on Draco's shoulder and tried to walk him through. After a moment, Draco stepped back.

"It's like walking into a brick wall," he said in disgust. "I think you'd better go on James; we'll see you back at Hogwarts. When you've worked out what to do, we can have a fieldtrip."

James watched until they disapparated together, all of them looking a little put out at being excluded. He turned back again and looked around.

He was at the beginning of a series of fields, obviously well tended and producing many different crops, many of which were unfamiliar to him. Others contained archaic looking animals that must have been ancestors of modern sheep and cows. There, in the distance, was the castle itself.

It was an impressive affair, situated on the top of a hill and surrounded by a steep ditch. It was stone and, unlike at Hogwarts, it was quite obviously built for war, with only slits for windows. It certainly got the point across. A mud track led the way up to the castle, imprinted with small boots and horseshoes.

Following it through the fields, James crossed the narrow wooden drawbridge and came to the huge oak doors of the castle. They were shut. He stopped and thought about it; this was a moment when having someone like Severus along would have been extremely useful. Since inspiration failed him, James pushed the door in the hope that it was simply unlocked.

It swung open. The doors must have been perfectly balanced on their hinges since the door - standing at least five metres high and ten centimetres thick- was light and moved at the slightest nudge.

James drew his wand and stepped in. The door swung shut behind him and he jumped. It was shadowy inside, the only light coming from a high slitted opening up in the wall above him.

"Lumos!" he murmured, holding his wand up and looking around.

He was standing in a huge hall, maybe four or more times the size of the Great hall of Hogwarts and twice as high. Long wooden tables ran the length of the hall, benches running along side them. At the far end of the hall was a table perpendicular to the other and on a small dais, sort of like the teachers' table at Hogwarts. The floor was covered in a layer of some sort of plant, reeds probably, that rustled as he stepped on them and smelt . . . strange, unfamiliar. On the walls hung great shields and banners of coats of arms long since forgotten and the swords and axes belonging to the great warriors of ancient times. Small archways along the walls led off, presumably towards other parts of the fortress.

James found it particularly strange, since there were a few obvious design similarities with Hogwarts, yet it was so different, even more so in that this was a silent place, a memorial to times quite unknown to his generation. It was so well preserved, looked so lived in, that he expected to walk into a knight any minute.

He chose an archway at random and walked into a small, dark passageway that twisted and turned as if he was in a labyrinth. At last, he came to some uneven stairs and climbed up them. When he reached the top, he was standing in front of a small, wooden door. Examining it more closely, James noted the Slytherin snake carved into the centre of it.
He pushed the door open and walked into a bedroom. It was quite large but still simple - a bed in the centre of the room, a single shelf of books, a chest in the corner and a rail in an alcove (for clothes?). The walls were covered in tapestries for the most part and the floor held animal pelts that would have cushioned the room against the cold of the stone floor.

On one wall however, were two portraits. The first appeared to be a normal painting, a Muggle one, not moving at all. There were two boys in it, one of about nine years of age riding on the shoulders of a brawny young man. They were dressed in shirts and brown trousers but both wore a dagger in a sheath on their belt next to a wand holster and the older one had a ruby-hilted sword at his side that looked well-used and that he looked accustomed to wearing. Those had been troubled times indeed. A carved message at the bottom of the frame read 'Godric and Salazar'. It was certainly a fascinating piece - James had never realised how much younger Salazar must have been. Since the records stated that Godric had been twenty-nine when Hogwarts was founded, Salazar must have been a very young man, sixteen maybe.

There was a sudden 'POP'.

James jumped about a foot into the air, spinning around into a crouch to notice a house elf standing beside him. They stared at each other for a moment, then the house elf bowed deeply.

"Bienvenu Maitre," it said, its voice slightly gravely. James was no expert, but he thought the elf must be ancient, judging by the wrinkles around the eyes.

"Hello?" he tried, remembering with some panic that from 1066 for a few centuries, the nobility of England had spoken French. It was possible that it could present just a few problems. "Do you speak English?"

The house elf looked at him blankly.

"Vous ne parlez pas Francais?" James shook his head, guessing what it meant. He wasn't even sure if this was an archaic form of French. If so, the standard translation charm wouldn't work.

The elf narrowed its eyes and looked at him thoughtfully for a moment.

"Hwaet!" it instructed. James watched closely. It pointed at the wand and slowly articulated some words that were like no French James had ever heard. Might it be a spell? Worth a try. He gestured for the elf to repeat them again and copied them himself.

A shower of green sparks shot from his wand into the elf's body.

"You understand now master? The spell worked?"

"Perfectly, thank you."

"Welcome to Castle Firebreath. I assume you are the new master descended from the children of the last masters to reside in this place."

"Uh yes, I suppose so. My father was James Potter, I'm told he was descended from Godric Gryffindor. My mother was Lily Evans and I think that she was descended from Slytherin, but it's a Squib line, so hard to trace accurately."

"I am Wat, the chief house elf of the estate and I have to say that you do look remarkably like my last young master, Septimus of the Slytherin line."

"James Evans."
"That is not your true name."

"You can tell?"

"I am blood bound to your family, young master, I can always tell when you are lying."

"I wasn't lying!" James protested, feeling awfully like he had being pulled up by Professor McGonagall during his time at Hogwarts. "My true name is Harry James Evans Potter, satisfied?"

"Quite, Master Harry."

"I would really rather you called me James."

"Master James, then. Will you be staying here?"

"Not immediately. I'm teaching at Hogwarts at the moment, you know where that is?"

"I'm seven hundred and twenty three years old this Midwinter, not senile!"

"Yes, well one of my friends is in a lot of danger at the moment and someone found a description of this place, so I thought I'd look for it."

"A noble quest for a young man such as yourself. He is not related to Podmore, I hope."

"I don't think so, I think his family was French originally."

"Acceptable. You will be staying tonight, though. There is much you must see to if you are to take control," Wat said. It was not a question. James had the feeling that he was only the last one in a long line of young wizards and house elves this being had seen come and go: he quite obviously didn't stand a chance.

"Okay then," he agreed hastily. One night wouldn't do his job any harm. "Is there a bathroom."

"Bathroom?"

'Oh no, James thought, please let them at least have a decent bathroom.

"A place to uh relieve yourself . . . . " he said, gesturing towards that area of his body.

"There's the trench outside, or a jacks off the Great Hall," Wat said, sounding puzzled. That was obviously an answer in the negative. There was obviously quite a lot to do before Draco would agree to stay here. James loved him dearly, in a fraternal sort of way, but it was obvious why people tended to think he was gay. It had been an ongoing joke how long he spent on his toilette.

He thought for a moment about the austerity of the little of the fortress he had seen so far. The rushes and animal furs on the floors, the lack of toilets - this had been a fortress, not a manor house like the Malfoys owned. There was going to be a hell of a lot he needed to do.

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The next morning, after some lengthy negotiations with Wat about the improvements he was determined to make, James Apparated back to Hogwarts. To his surprise, Severus and Draco were
sitting at the Apparition point waiting for him.

"James!" Draco exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "What was it like!"

"Morning Severus. I didn't actually see all of it Draco, so I can't give you a full description. It is a little primitive though."

"It makes sense," Severus said, standing up and starting to walk back to the school.

"What does?" Draco asked.

"It hasn't been lived in for half a millennia, they didn't have lots of the amenities we have today."

"What sort of things?"

"Well, I'd imagine that they wouldn't have running water, so no bathrooms or toilets. I don't think magical portraits were often made until a while after Salazar Slytherin's death, so there would have been far fewer of those than there were at Hogwarts."

"It did surprise me a bit," James admitted. "There's a house elf there that's running things who I talked to, once we got the language thing settled out. He seemed perfectly happy telling me what to do, so I just agreed with him for the most part. I'm going to have a few things done to make it more habitable. I think I'd be constantly Apparating back here for a shower if I tried to move in now!"

"It's a plausible safe-house for the Malfoys then?"

"I'd say so, certainly Wat the house elf didn't have any objections. He didn't seem to mind who you were so long as you were relatively well born and not related to the Podmore family. You aren't, are you?"

"Of course not!" Draco retorted, sounding offended at the thought. "They were supposedly so inbred that they saw bunny rabbits instead of soldiers when they were last attacked. Besides, do I look like that idiot from the Headless Hunt? There is no resemblance whatsoever!"

"Take it easy on the poor little orphan boy," James said, amused at this rise.

"Hardly poor," Severus murmured; James glared at him.

"Why don't you go and tell Blaise?" he suggested. Draco nodded and stalked off.

The two teachers walked in silence for a bit, then Severus asked.

"Was it really interesting?" James nodded.

"I found a portrait there of Gryffindor and Slytherin. Did you know that Godric was so much older - he looked about ten or fifteen years older at the least. There's not that much personal stuff there at all though - anything like books was removed when the family moved out and it was a primarily a fortress anyway, very plain furnishings and the like. I thought I'd see if I could borrow Dobby from Dumbledore for a bit and see if he can modernise the place. As soon as I've got it presentable, I'll invite a few people who might be interested."

"Won't that be a security risk?"

"Shouldn't think so - only someone with the bloodline can get through the wards and since Draco couldn't, Lucius Malfoy won't be able to either. It's even stronger than a Fidelius charm, since killing the Secret Keeper can break that. Even if I'm killed, the wards should hold."
"Clever."

"Isn't it. Have you thought about what you're doing over the holiday?"

"Same as usual, I expect," Severus replied. "I'll stay at school, do some research perhaps. A crowd of . . . old pupils and friends generally meet up for Christmas day and then of course Albus has that Ball of his."

"I'd almost forgotten about it," James lied.

"Hogsmeade weekend next week, last opportunity to buy a costume. I assure you that there is no chance Minerva will be allowed to forget. She, of course, managed to get out of chaperoning and I really don't want to know how."

There was a long pause.

"Eww, I really didn't need that mental image!" James said, pulling a face. Severus checked the vicinity for students, then the corners of his mouth turned up slightly, his black eyes twinkling with mischief.

"You didn't know? I thought everyone did by now. There was a betting pool on until he kissed her on the lips after Harry Potter defeated Voldemort. We decided that was good enough evidence. I don't know why they maintain the fiction of having separate quarters either. . . ."

"Can we just drop the subject," James interrupted, blocking his ears. "He's old enough to be my grandfather's grandfather."

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The next morning, James was enjoying a well-deserved rest. Not that he was going to lie in or anything, he had classes to teach, after all. Still, he was intending to get a full night's sleep. That's when he was not impressed when he was roughly shaken awake.

He opened his eyes blearily and scowled at the offending person. It was Severus.

"Read this," he instructed calmly, as if rousing young men from their beds was a common occupation for him. He then watched as James sat up and skimmed through the article pointed out to him.

**THE NEXT DARK LORD?**

A highly placed source within the Ministry of Magic itself has today informed us that an intelligence report has confirmed the identity of the wizard behind the recent attacks as being Lucius Malfoy, a former politician and aristocrat who is a convicted Death Eater from Lord Voldemort's regime. Lucius Malfoy is a widower (wife Narcissa Black was executed eight years ago) and has one son, Draco Malfoy. The younger Mr Malfoy, reputed to be an Order of the Phoenix member and a close friend of heroes such as Ron and Hermione Weasley, was unable for comment this morning.

Lucius Malfoy is known to have taken part in the attacks on the Ministry during Voldemort's rising and paid hefty bribes to former Minister, Cornelius Fudge (convicted as a traitor to the Ministry, 1998). It is unknown how much of his money remains in his possession. Auror Commander
Kingsley Shacklebolt had only this to say to our readers:
"Lucius Malfoy is a very dangerous man who will stoop to anything to achieve his ends. It is the opinion of many that his time in Azkaban rendered him more than a little insane. Our only advice is to take care and avoid going into disreputable areas such as Knockturn Alley alone or at night. The Ministry of Magic is doing its utmost best to ensure that he is apprehended with all possible speed. Any sightings should be reported immediately."

At that, James stopped and looked up.

"It's certain?"

"The intelligence report was compiled by an Order member; we're sure it's him."

"Draco?"

"He's not taking it well. I think he knew it was coming but it's a shock seeing it in print so soon."

"I'll come through, just let me get dressed. Could you see if Albus would excuse me from teaching today? If that's what it takes, I'll stay on the Quidditch pitch all day to keep him occupied."

"Certainly. I'm sure he could cover them himself should it come to that. I'll join you out there when I'm not teaching."

James pulled on a heavy winter cloak and stuck the warmest pair of gloves he owned into his pockets. He was going to help his friend the best he could, but he'd do them no favours if he got ill doing it.

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Surprisingly enough, the revelation of the Dark Lord's identity didn't seem to have sparked off a run of attacks, a relief that the staff of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry were extremely grateful for. Most of them had taught during wartime before and knew that suddenly academics stopped mattering, with survival becoming more important. Also, even the school was unlikely to remain untouched for long. The children should be safe for the moment but their parents and friends were still out there in the world, Muggle parents completely unprotected, and sooner or later someone would be killed.

The next Monday morning, James went, rather nervously, up to the Headmaster's office at the very centre of the school. There the wards would be tuned to his magical signature and the school would be fully defended once more. The ritual would have taken place early, in fact, the paperwork had already been done, but certain preparations had had to be made. James had fasted for the past twenty-four hours and had eaten only bread and water for two days before that. Certainly, arrangements had also been made within the office, changing it back into the ritual room it had once been. Now he was dressed in a plain white robe and they were ready to begin.

He opened the door and went in. The room was bare of furniture and there were four concentric circles drawn on the floor - one ring of dragon's blood, one of wolfsbane one of breadcrumbs and one of salt. The heads of houses were standing, evenly spaced, around the outside circle and Albus was inside.

"Ah, James. Step through here, would you?"
With the precise moves of a well-taught acolyte, James drew his wand and used it to sketch a slit down the edge of the circle. He then stepped through and brought his wand up again to close it off. Since everyone else was already in position, he assumed they had already raised a protective barrier to contain the excess magical energy until it could be dealt with. Albus watched approvingly, his brother's students had always been this accurate in their movements. It was presumably a Slytherin thing, since none of his had ever quite managed the same precision.

Following the standard ritual procedure of warding, James knelt down, putting his wand in the exact centre of the circle next to a silver dagger that already lay there. All magical lighting in the room was removed and they were ready to begin.

"On behalf of the house of Gryffindor, I call upon the element of Fire to ward this circle and defend Hogwarts against the enemies that would destroy us," Minerva began, adopting a stance with legs well spaced to ground herself when the power began to flow.

"On behalf of the house of Hufflepuff, I call upon the element of Earth to ward this circle and to heal and nurture those who take refuge within the walls and wards of Hogwarts," Sprout continued from her place anti-clockwise from her colleague.

"On behalf of the house of Ravenclaw, I call upon the element of Water to ward this circle and to help us to find the meanings of the signs that we see."

"On behalf of the house of Slytherin," Severus continued, his eyes blazing, unfamiliar in his white robe. "I call upon the element of Wind to ward this circle and to guide those who need the protection of Hogwarts to us, be they beast, elf, Muggle or wizard."

With the final incantation, there was a blaze of colour as the circle of protection flared into life. There was no way to reopen the circle until the ritual was complete and nothing, not air, not sound, not magic, could now enter or leave it. Albus picked up the dagger and traced the runes engraved on it. The two men actively involved in the ceremony were completely cut off from the others standing just outside.

"I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster and Defender of Hogwarts, Bearer of the Wards, call upon the elements to witness to our deeds this dawn and infuse this dagger with your power. Do you, the Defence Master of Hogwarts, accept as your duty the Defence of Hogwarts Castle and Grounds and all other duties related therein and swear upon your magic to take them up immediately upon my death." James took a deep breath acknowledging and accepting the consequences as he began to give the response.

"I, Harry James Evans Potter, being sound in mind, body and magic, do swear upon the magic that is born from my soul to take up the duties of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore upon his death and hold them until another should come to take my place. Furthermore, I do swear to sacrifice my life for the safety of the castle and the well-being of all those within it should it become necessary for me to do so. I call the elements to bear witness to this oath and accept my life-blood as a symbol of the truth in my heart."

He took the dagger from Dumbledore and slit his arms vertically along the veins, hissing with pain as a red line appeared on each arm. If the oath was not accepted, he would bleed to death, essentially having committed suicide. If it was, the magic would close his wounds after taking the blood it required. He watched with a certain morbid fascination as the red blood spurted from his arms. Then there was a tinge and the deep cuts closed as if they had never been, leaving only the blood red on white stains of his robe. James let out the breath he had been holding and looked up to meet Albus Dumbledore's eyes.
"So mote it be," the older man murmured and the circle vanished.

The heads of houses sagged with relief and Albus helped James to his feet. Quite obviously acting on experience, the four of them staggered off.

"They'll be going to get an energy replenisher from Poppy," Albus explained. "You are going to sit down, take a dose of this one I fetched from her earlier and give me a full explanation."

James drank down the luminous green potion without complaint and closed his eyes with relief as he felt a tingle as his energy returned.

"What do you want to know?" he asked innocently.

"I am particularly curious as to how I have had Harry Potter under the same roof for months and not noticed when I could have sworn I would recognise your magic anywhere. Who else knows and were you ever planning on telling me?"

James sighed and decided there was no way to get out of it, certainly he wouldn't be able to pull off a strong enough Obliviate charm.

"After I turned sixteen, I began to think very seriously about what I would do when I defeated Voldemort. I had been studying like mad that summer already and was already about halfway through the sixth year syllabus. I remembered what had happened when they thought I was the heir of Slytherin when I was twelve, or in my fourth year when they all thought I was mad and decided that I'd given enough of my life. I wanted a chance to be myself, not to have to put masks up constantly and have no privacy."

"It would have been near impossible to keep you completely isolated from the press," Albus conceded, smiling slightly. James relaxed, his mentor obviously understood his reasoning.

"I sent off a few letters to Hermione and Remus, asking about it but not explaining exactly what I wanted to do. I transferred some money from my Gringotts vault to a Muggle account and had my papers given to the bank, my passport included, so that I could get at them without having to go to my relatives.

"In my research, I came across a mention of a type of power that was pure magic, that only Slytherin had ever been able to use with any degree of success before."

"And you can use it because you're his heir?"

"Sort of, there's a prophecy somewhere that I found about Slytherin's heir in blood and heir in power. I took those to be Riddle and myself but I didn't discover that I was also of his bloodline until Uni."

"My brother?"

"Yes. Well, I never learned to control the power properly, but it worked well enough to completely destroy Voldemort. I Apparated away and ended up in a Muggle street unconscious, delirious and with burns covering every inch of my body. Someone 'phoned an ambulance and I was taken to hospital. It took me two months to heal sufficiently to be able to leave and by then I was different; the magic had changed me. The colour of my hair is natural, as is the colour of my eyes. The only concealment I use right now is on my scar. I was also quite a bit taller and very pleased about it. I set myself up in another city, I won't say where, and enrolled in a 6th form college to get some Muggle qualifications. When I was twenty, I received an invitation to the university. I was surprised to say the least, I was already older than most who go to university and I wasn't aware that a magical one even existed."
"Surely you must have heard about it?"

"Not that I remembered. I was never that concerned with what people did after they left Hogwarts. I was assigned to Abe at Uni and took a Dark Arts course. One of the things I researched was my ancestry because someone told me that it's very rare for there to be a Muggleborn without wizarding blood somewhere in her family. In my mother's case, she was the first witch in a long line of female squibs descended from Salazar Slytherin's grandson."

"And she was in Gryffindor?"

"She was unaware of her heritage, and didn't expect to be in Slytherin because of not being 'pureblood'. Anyway, after my course finished, I decided I'd rather be here than anywhere else."

"Do you still have the scar?"

"Oh, yes. I use Muggle concealer so it doesn't show. Nothing magical works."

"And who else knows."

"That I know, your brother and Hermione. That's all. I wasn't planning on telling anyone but Abe guessed while I was at university and Hermione spent five minutes with me at the bloody festival and worked it out."

"Ah yes, the Harry Potter Festival. That must have been . . . interesting."

"Didn't any of you think to point out that I wouldn't have wanted it?"

"Ron, Hermione, Draco, Severus, myself. Everyone else seemed to think that it was their right to have a proper celebration."

"Severus?"

"It surprised me a little too. Perhaps he knows you better than you thought."

"I doubt it. You should have seen his face during Ron's talk. He looked as though all of his illusions had been shattered. I imagine he had a very clear idea about what my life was like and Ron was brutally honest and wrecked it all." Suddenly James got a little uncomfortable with the track of conversation. "I'd better go now - I've got a second year Slytherin-Gryffindor class."

"Certainly, my dear boy. But, you know Harry, you've turned out better than I could ever have hoped for. Should I ever die, I'm glad Hogwarts will be in your hands."

James fled at that. He wasn't that great, he just happened to have been born with a little more sheer power than most other people had. It didn't mean he was special: he couldn't brew even third year potions with any degree of accuracy and he had no knowledge whatsoever about Arithmancy or Ancient Runes.

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After lunch, Severus caught James leaving the Great Hall.

"Are you recovered yet?" he asked. "I have a few energy potions in stock should you need them."
"I'm fine thanks, Albus gave me an energy potion this morning. I don't feel any different from normal."

"Aren't you lucky then," Severus said, frowning slightly. "Every other person in this castle has been deliriously cheerful all morning. It's sickening really."

"You think the castle is affecting people?"

"I wouldn't put it past it. There can't be any other explanation for a fifth year Slytherin-Gryffindor class with no incidents whatsoever. Would you care to stop by my quarters for a drink?"

James agreed and followed him through, accepting a glass as he took a seat on a sofa.

"Draco agreed to take my second year potions class," Severus explained, "so I have a free afternoon. At least he's earning his keep for once - I swear that brat of his hasn't slept through the night once."

"Speaking of Harry, where is he?"

"Upstairs in the staff room, being doted on by Albus and every female member of staff who doesn't have a class to teach."

"I worry about him sometimes," James muttered. "At least it's the holiday soon."

"And Albus' ball."

"Urrgh, I was trying to forget about that."

"Have you found a costume yet?"

"Easy, same as I always wore at Uni."

"What is it then?"

"Salazar Slytherin."

"Appropriate."

"Isn't it. Normally I drag someone in to be Wulfric Ravenclaw and once I managed to get Draco as Godric Gryffindor. It only happened once though and I doubt he'll do it at Hogwarts - it would wreck his reputation. How about you?"

"I could always go as a Muggle."

James quickly revised his plans. The question was whether Severus owned a pair of leather trousers. Those would be better even than medieval tights, since they wouldn't be covered by a cloak.

"What would you wear?"

"Dress trousers and shirt would be the most logical."

Not leather then. Damn.

"You'd be welcome to come as Ravenclaw," he suggested. "I have a costume somewhere and it wouldn't take much to adjust the size. Merlin, if you really wanted to go anonymously, you could use that Weasley range of appearance changing sweets before you put the illusion on. That way it will look like you aren't in attendance and you can do what you want."
Severus paused, thinking this over.

"It is an . . . interesting idea. I will have to consider it. Which unfortunate did you plan on having me
go as?"

"I doubt Bertie would mind."

"Bertie?"

"Bertram Highcastle."

"Ravenclaw, the year below Draco, has a reputation for being a bit wild?"

"That's him alright," James confirmed, somewhat impressed by this show of memory. Memorable
character or not, Bertie had been in Ravenclaw, and he wouldn't have expected the Slytherin head of
house to know him well. "We were friends at Uni and he's gone to things like this with me before. If
someone asked him, chances are he wouldn't remember whether he was there or not, he goes to so
many parties. That is, if you think you can act like him well enough to fool some of his teachers . . ."

"Of course I can, its not like he's exactly a complex character. Act like an idiot and you have him to
the core."

"It's entirely your decision then. The offer stands."

"Thank you," Severus said. "I might just take you up on it."

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James was halfway through a lesson with a fourth year class when someone knocked on the door.

"Come in!" he called. Unlike the doors to the common rooms and bedrooms, this was a normal
wooden door, so didn't have the advantage of having someone to guard it. The door was pushed
open and a third year girl stepped in, a scrap of parchment in her hand.

"Note for you from Professor Snape, sir," she explained, handing it to him. "There shouldn't be a
reply."

"You can go then," James said, unfolding the note.

_Come up to the Headmaster's office at once. Our luck was too good to last. SS_

Someone had lost a relative then, probably someone in Slytherin house. James wasn't sure whether
he'd prefer it to be an older or younger student - a younger one would probably have more emotional
problems, whereas an older one would be more likely to do something stupid looking for revenge.
There wasn't an easy answer. The note had told him approximately what had happened without
spelling it out for the whole school to know had the girl read it.

"Continue reading through chapter five and summarise it. Put the summaries on my desk by the end
of the lesson. Mr Philips, Miss Summers you will report any problems to me."

As he spoke this, the instructions appeared on the board behind him. He locked any dangerous items
and the door to his office and left, breaking into a run as he left the classroom.
When he reached the office, he found Severus waiting there.

"James, I was worried you wouldn't get here."

"Who is it?"

"Mr and Mrs Macdonald."

"Alistair's parents?"

"Yes. At the moment, he's in Albus' private sitting room with him, being dosed with tea laced with calming potion. In a minute, I will go in and we will tell him. I would like you to call an assembly of Slytherin house as soon as class is dismissed in ten minutes. Tell them the bare bones of the situation - yes it was Death Eaters - and then we had better start thinking about who could take him in. The poor boy doesn't have any other close relatives."

James nodded and turned to head down to the Slytherin common room. He paused at the door.

"Good luck with him, I have a feeling he won't take it well."

As the bell rang to dismiss classes for the day, James pressed the button located within the fireplace of the common room and spoke his message.

"All Slytherins to report to the common room immediately. All Slytherins to report to the common room immediately, no exceptions." Over the next ten minutes, the students of Slytherin House poured into their common room from all over the castle, taking seats on the chairs, floor and benches.

"Professor, Alistair went to the Headmaster's office," Simon Wood said, looking lonely without his friend.

"I know. Go and take a seat. Is everyone else here now?"

There was a murmur of agreement.

"I had hoped never to have to do this but there is no easy way to say this. I am forced to tell you that a student's family was attacked and killed this morning by Death Eaters. Alistair Macdonald is a first year, for those of you who do not know him, and at present is with Professor Snape and the Headmaster. He has no siblings and no close relatives, so I would ask you not to ask him questions and to watch out for him over the next few days. Arrangements for him are being made as we speak. Anyone with questions or concerns should come to speak to Professor Snape or myself over the next few days. That is all. Thank you."

Simon came over to him as soon as James dismissed the gathering, followed closely by a seventh year prefect, Archie Alderton.

"Are Alistair's parents really dead?" Simon asked, with all the bluntness of his Gryffindor relatives.

"Yes, Simon, they are."

"I was just thinking, he'll have to stay at school for Christmas, won't he?"

"Probably, yes, but we do our best to make sure that everyone who stays still has a good time."

"Would he be allowed to come to my place for the holiday, at least for Christmas Day?"

"That would depend on whether your parents agree and what Professor Snape says, but I should
think no one would mind."

"We're not actually at home this Christmas, we're going to Oliver's boyfriend's family."

"The Weasleys?"

"Yes, he's going out with Charlie Weasley."

"Shall I speak to Professor Snape for you and see what he thinks. I wouldn't mention it to Alistair yet, we wouldn't want to disappoint him."

"Okay Professor."

Simon moved out of Archie's way and went to join some of his other friends. The seventh year was looking very serious. He obviously understood the implications far better than Simon.

"This is a bad time for it to happen, just before Christmas. Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Do you know how many people are staying over Christmas?"

"There aren't usually any, anyone who can't go home gets invited to a friend's house. There might be a couple this year whose parents want them safe but I can't see there being many."

"I'll have to make sure Professor Snape agrees to let Alistair leave for the holiday. He'll need to be around his friends, this year in particular."

"I was talking to a couple of others and we were thinking that maybe some of us could team up to buy him a few presents, since he won't be getting any from his family this year. It's not much but it might make him feel a bit better."

"As you say, it's not much, but if he has to watch other people opening piles of presents from their families it might make all the difference. Thank you."

"I know no one pays any attention to the start of term speech about us being a family, but it is true at times like this. Do you want me to organise it?"

"If you have the time. Be careful with the younger years, it's probably better if he doesn't hear about it."

Archie nodded and moved away, a few other seventh years drifting over to join him. They soon had a small huddle in one of the corners; one of them had produced a piece of parchment that they were scribbling names on. James smiled slightly and headed back upstairs.

When he arrived, he found Alistair curled up in Severus' arms, quite obviously asleep. His eyes were red with crying and he was clutching his teacher's robes like a lifeline. As James watched, Severus carefully pried his fingers open and put the boy down on the sofa. Albus noticed him standing in the doorway.

"Come in James," he said. Severus turned to see him.

"How is he?" James asked softly.

"Upset, shocked, a little angry - more or less how we expected him to be. We gave himself a chance to cry and then gave him a sleeping draught," Severus said, equally quietly so as not to disturb the boy. "How did your talk with the others go."
"I told them, they seemed to accept it. Archie had an idea that they could organise some presents for him between them and volunteered to organise it."

"I've always admired how Slytherins stand up for their own," Albus said wistfully. "I could only wish that the other orphans at Hogwarts were looked after quite as well, though I do my best. Of course, hopefully by next year he'll be settled with another family and this won't be an issue."

"Simon Wood seemed keen on having Alistair spend Christmas with him. It's certainly an idea, especially since his family's going to the Weasleys. They should be able to provide the support he needs and he'll feel welcome there."

"I'll have a talk with Molly," Albus agreed. "She has a way of adopting orphans. If they get on well, it might work as a more permanent arrangement too. I know she's felt a bit lost without teenagers in the house."

"One of my Slytherins with the Weasley family?" Severus asked, sounding a little incredulous. "They're as Gryffindor as anyone. Would they even agree to take in a Slytherin?"

"They're less prejudiced than you think Severus and a number of them have . . . Slytherin tendencies, I suppose - the twins and Ginny in particular. I'll send an owl to Molly this afternoon. I just hope we don't have anyone else lost before Christmas, or a great many children will be miserable this holiday. Having Alistair with the Weasleys could work very well, especially given that usually they come to Hogwarts. It might work better if we went to them this year though . . . James, would you come through to my study for a minute?"

James followed him out, then watched with surprise as Albus shut the door and erected a number of silencing charms.

"I take it you don't want Severus knowing who you are?" Albus said by way of explanation. "I wanted to ask whether you would rejoin the Order. I won't ask much of you beyond the defence of Hogwarts - its traditional that you should stay safely behind the wards - but I would like you to have access to certain channels that you wouldn't otherwise."

"I don't know . . . I've nothing against it in principal but how do we work the ritual. Fawkes knows that I'm already a member but everyone else will expect to see the full ceremony and that includes an oath that would require my full name."

"I will have a word with him. I'm sure we'll be able to work something out. I'm sure we can work out a limited effect silencing charm for your name. I will think about it."

"I'll do it then." Albus seemed to sigh with relief.

"I know you don't like people telling you but I think you will turn out to be as important in this war as the last."

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"STOP!!!!" James yelled as his first year Slytherin and Gryffindor class attempted to stampede to the classroom door. He had a feeling that he would come to hate the last days of term. "Return to your seats immediately!"
Muttering about the unfairness, the twenty odd children returned to their seats, among them a silent Alistair, Simon glued constantly to his side.

"As you know, this is your last lesson. However, just because I have finished the topic doesn't mean we are done," James said sternly, thinking very carefully about his phrasing so as to cause as little an emotional impact as possible on Alistair. "This is your last lesson of the day. When I do let you out, those of you who are leaving will go to your dormitories and pack whatever you think you will need over the holiday. Everything else can, of course, stay at school. At nine o'clock tomorrow morning, I want you all to meet me in the Entrance Hall with your things and I will take you to the train from there. I believe that is all. Mr Macdonald, could you stay behind for a moment?"

The class poured out and the two first years came up to the desk. James waved his wand at the door and it shut behind the last girl. He knew that pretty much everyone already knew about Alistair's parents but if anything happened, it might be better to talk in private.

"Are you ready to go, Alistair?" he asked kindly. The boy nodded mutely.

"Now, I've spoken to some people and Ron and Hermione Weasley are going to come to the station to pick you up. I know Simon's your friend but we thought you might prefer having someone especially for you. I'll travel down with you on the train and if you need anything during the holiday, I want you to owl me. I'll be coming for Christmas day anyway."

"Thank you, Professor," Alistair said, almost whispering.

"Its fine. Why don't you go and start packing now?"

At that, the two boys left. James watched them go. He, Albus and Severus had spent a long while discussing and making arrangements for Alistair that would make him feel wanted. One of those things had been getting Hermione and Ron to come and pick him up, partly because they were going to the Weasleys anyway. They had also agreed to act as 'godparents' of sort to him over the holiday and it would help to make sure he didn't feel left out when Simon was met by his family. It also helped that both of them had experience dealing with bereaved and orphaned children - James himself had been very touchy at times. Partly in the hope that Alistair would find a permanent home with the Weasleys, the Christmas gathering of Order members would this year occur at Grimmauld Place rather than Hogwarts.

As the youngest and probably the most approachable member of staff, James had volunteered to keep an eye on Alistair as much as he could. It was hardly an onerous duty but it could make a big difference just having someone available.

He sighed - bloody Death Eaters. Still, there was nothing more he could do for the present. James began to shut up the classroom for the holidays, locking the cupboards of equipment and putting any delicate instruments away out of the light. At last, he gave a final look around, decided he was done and left, locking the door behind him. It wasn't that he didn't trust his students but with a small number left behind over the holidays who might potentially get bored and start pranking, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Archie stepped out of the entrance as he passed the Slytherin common room.

"Professor," he said, sounding pleased to see him. "Could I have a word?"

"Certainly," James said. They went into his office and the portrait swung firmly shut behind them. "I take it this is about your scheme?"
"Yes sir. We think we've got everything sorted but we weren't sure how we could get the presents to him. Is there any way you could arrange it?"

"Easily. I'm going down to London with him anyway, so if you bring them along to my office I'll pack them and pass them on."

Archie appeared greatly relieved.

"Thanks. We'll drop them by throughout the evening, okay?"

"That sounds fine. It goes without saying to make sure he doesn't see anything suspicious, I suppose?"

"We are Slytherins, sir." He shared a smirk with James. Slytherins were always proud of their house, even more so than Gryffindors.

"Fifty points to Slytherin for being so supportive of your house mates."

The prefect grinned at him. It had been clear to James from the beginning that the kid hadn't had an ulterior motive but it was nice to get a reward and he knew a lot of work had gone into arranging this.

The next morning, James shrunk all of the presents he'd been brought and put them into a bag with his overnight clothes. He'd been told what each was. All of the contributions were joint and often sweets or chocolate but a few had been more imaginative and teamed up towards books and prank sets. Archie's own group had pooled their money to buy a tiny flying broomstick with a figure on it that, though they didn't say anything, had obviously been added later and looked remarkably like he did. He was a little surprised that they'd noticed how much Alistair was enjoying his flying lessons. Then again, this was Archie he was talking about. He had probably noticed any potential players and was grooming Alistair up to later take a place on the team. There were times when he was remarkably like Oliver Wood in his student days.

After a large breakfast in the Hall, he moved just outside to the Entrance Hall to wait for the Gryffindor and Slytherin first years he had been assigned to take down to the station. The older students would take themselves but it was assumed to be safer if first years were accompanied the first time they went by the carriages.

He was waiting for eighteen children. They came over gradually, in twos and threes, dressed warmly in winter robes with a heavy black cloak over all of it. Most of them were also sporting house scarves and heavy boots. A few of them had been quite surprised to discover the heavy snow they got in this part of Scotland.

At last, they had all assembled and he led them outside, trunks making thin tracks on the snow covered drive as they went out to the carriages. Other older students were already climbing in and setting off, their chatter travelling easily in the still air. James got into a carriage with Alistair, Simon and another Slytherin boy and sat quietly while they engaged in a conversation complaining about how much holiday homework they had received. Suddenly, Simon pulled up short, as if realising for the first time who they were sharing a carriage with.

"Uh Professor . . . we . . ."

James let him flounder for a moment before letting him out of his misery.

"It isn't term time at the moment, Mr Wood, and so long as you have no complaints about your Defence assignment, I can't see any reason for me to mention anything I should happen to hear to
another member of staff."

They seemed surprised at this and, after a few wary glances at him, they resumed their conversation, although the topic changed rather quickly to the innocuous one of Quidditch. Simon, it seemed, was a dedicated fan of Puddlemere United - hardly surprising given that his uncle played for them - and he was trying to convince Michael Rosier that they were the only plausible candidates for the Cup this year. James sighed inwardly, reminded of the fierce debates he'd witnessed between Ron and Seamus on this very topic. It wasn't that he hadn't followed professional Quidditch, more that he'd always preferred playing it and in any case, he'd supported the Cannons so Ron had no reason to attempt to argue him over.

Getting onto the train, James followed the same principal and sat himself firmly in a compartment with the two boys. If they chose not to include him in conversation, he saw no reason to interfere, but he felt better being able to supervise them. It would certainly give him a chance to catch up on his marking. He remembered the way Remus Lupin had been with them at the beginning of his third year. To this day, he wasn't sure how 'asleep' the man had been - sleeping for six hours was certainly impressive in the middle of the day, full moon or not. He had certainly moved fast enough when the Dementors appeared . . .

It was a long journey from Hogsmeade to King's Cross, in the region of eight or nine hours and neither Simon nor Alistair seemed to find it easy to fill up the empty hours with conversation. James got the impression that, supportive as Simon was, he didn't truly understand what it was like to lose someone and Alistair was reluctant to confide in him. At around twelve, after numerous rounds of Exploding Snap, they took out the sandwiches they had been provided with. All students could, of course, buy things off the trolley but given that some couldn't afford it, Hogwarts provided. Given the standard of food the house elves made, the packed lunches were probably as nice or nicer than anything bought anyway.

There was an awkward silence when the food had vanished.

"What shall we do now?" Alistair asked with the restlessness of most eleven year olds stuck in a confined space for a long period of time. Simon appeared to consider this seriously.

"We've played snap."

"Right."

"And talked about Quidditch."

"Uh huh."

"Um, we don't have anything else with us much, do we?"

"Not any games, anyway."

"There's always our holiday assignments, I suppose. I mean, its not like we have anything better to do and we won't want to do them over the holiday."

That settled it and despite their earlier complaints, both boys pulled out textbooks and parchment. James glanced over. He was seriously considering introducing Muggle-style exercise books to his classes. It wasn't that he didn't like parchment, it was in fact very . . . ornate and historic but it would be much easier for him and the students if all of their work for the subject was in one book.

"Simon," Alistair asked after about an hour.
"Yup?"

"What do you know about Devil's Snare?"

"You mean it's not in the text book?" Simon asked, sounding horrified. He obviously used Ron's method of doing homework - finding the relevant passage and all but copying out the necessary details.

"I don't think so, or at least, I can't find it."

"Let me have a look," he said, obviously not quite willing to believe that they would be set something not in the book. A moment later he put the book down. "You know, you're right. It's not in here. What in Merlin's name do we do now?"

There was a long pause.

Both boys had a chocolate frog to stimulate their brain processes.

No answer was forthcoming.

Half an hour passed.

"You know Alistair," Simon said eventually. "Do you think that Professor Evans would know?"

"Do you think we should ask him?" Alistair asked, sounding shy suddenly.

"Might as well try," Simon said with a shrug. "Professor Evans? Would you mind if we asked you about something on our Herbology assignment?"

James smiled at them, putting his pen down. He'd been listening to them for a while, wondering how long it would take them to realise that he had no doubt taken first year Herbology himself.

"I'll do my best."

"We're asked to describe what would happen if we fell onto a Devil's Snare and how we could get away from it."

Shaking his head slightly, James realised that this must have been added to the first year syllabus after his brush with it.

"Devil's Snare, I can certainly help you with that one. What exact details do you need to know?" James asked, knowing that it was best for them to think as much through themselves as possible.

"Size?" Alistair suggested.

"Well, with the proper care, it can grow very large, big enough to hold onto three humans at once without them touching."

The boys scribbled this down.

"And what does it look like sir?" Simon asked.

"Tendrils, sort of like the plant equivalent of the giant squid."

"Got it. Um... is it... does it eat people then?"
"It is carnivorous, yes. It will, as far as I remember, eat anything up to about a human in size."

"So it sort of grabs you and then suffocates you, or something?" Alistair asked, shivering.

"Exactly."

"So, what do you do if you fall into one?"

"Well, if it's a small one, you can just pull yourself free. A larger one, well, it likes the dark and the damp."

"So you could make a fire?"

"A magical one. Does that help?"

"Yes sir, thanks. I think we can bulk that out enough to make up the inches."

It was early evening when the train pulled into King's Cross, already dark and cold and in typically British style, it was raining. James looked up and scowled for a moment.

"Here we are then. We'll be taking a portkey to where you'll be staying, so you can stay in your robes.

"What's a portkey?" Alistair asked, shivering slightly in the cold air.

"It essentially teleports you from one place to another," James explained, using Muggle terms as much as possible. "It takes a bit of influence to get hold of one but its very convenient if you do. Pass out your trunks to me." With their help, he manhandled the awkward trunks out of the narrow doors to the platform, where they could be wheeled easily around. Once out, he checked they hadn't left anything behind and hustled them over to the sheltered area. Alistair by this time was starting to look jittery.

Simon spotted his uncle and Charlie waiting together and rushed over, leaving Alistair with James. It wasn't that he meant to be mean, he'd just forgotten about his friend temporarily in the excitement of seeing his family for the first time in months.

James put a hand on Alistair's shoulder and squeezed.

"Let's go and find the Weasleys then, shall we?" he said. Alistair gave a shaky smile and James guided him over. Just Ron and Hermione were there, it having been decided that three Weasleys making the trip was quite enough to overwhelm the poor kid.

"Alistair, these are Ron and Hermione Weasley."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr Weasley, Mrs Weasley," Alistair said shyly, holding out his hand.

"None of that," Ron said, shaking the hand heartily. "Its Ron and Hermione to you, kid. You'll have major problems if you use surnames the whole time."

"Uh, why?"

"Ron's the sixth of seven children," James explained, giving Hermione a brief hug and shaking Ron's hand. "Six are boys and I think all but Charlie are married. They're all coming for Christmas. We'd better get you inside, I think, before you catch cold."

"Merlin yes," Hermione said, sounding horrified that they'd stayed out so long. "Here's the portkey,
just touch it and make sure you're holding onto your things and I'll activate it."

The familiar tug and James opened his eyes to see the familiar, gloomy hall of Grimmauld Place. It had obviously been done up and the horrific portrait of Mrs Black removed but it was still dark in the hallway.

"Leave your trunk here," Hermione said, bustling them through into the living room, where a fire was burning in the huge fireplace and a number of Weasleys were gathered. "The house elf will take it upstairs for you."

James raised an eyebrow at that and she pulled a face at him when she was sure no one was looking. He let the warm, noisy atmosphere that he had always associated with the Weasleys envelope him like a warm blanket as Ron guided Alistair into the middle of the room.

"Oi!" he yelled. "You lot!"

Almost one could say that silence fell, just a few snickers coming from the twins' area of the room and murmurs from the numerous babies and young children scattered around made this an impossible conclusion. But hell Ron had a powerful bellow.

"Everyone, this is Alistair, he'll be staying with us as you know. I'm just going to introduce him to the important people round here, I figured the kids would undoubtedly take care of themselves. I think you all know James Evans as well," Ron said. Immediately the buzz of chatter built up again and Alistair was guided around. "My parents, Arthur and Molly. My oldest brother Bill and his wife Fleur; Fred and George - don't bother trying to tell them apart - and their wives Alicia and Luna and my younger sister Ginny, she's with Neville."

Alistair just looked at him, completely bewildered. James and Ron looked at each other, then steered him into one of the corners. James knelt down so he was on the same level as him.

"They don't expect you to remember everyone," he reminded the boy. "It's just to give you a start. As a general rule, if you call every red-head whose name you don't know 'Mr Weasley', you're almost guaranteed to get it right." That earned him a small laugh.

"Okay there?" Ron asked. "Do you want to go over to Simon now? Who knows, you could get Oliver to sign you some autographs."

Alistair nodded and dashed off as best he could through the crowd to the area by the Christmas tree where his friend had disappeared to after his own arrival.

"That kid's like a cat on hot bricks," Ron said seriously. "We're going to have to give him a lot of insulation against the Weasley chaos, I think, at least to start with."

"I wouldn't worry so much," Hermione said quietly. "Look, he's perfectly happy with Simon and Oliver, and don't they look like they might prank someone any moment. I think you've just overwhelmed him with sheer numbers, won't you agree James?"

"I'd say he's fairly quiet, but then so is Charlie compared to the rest of you. He's a little shy as well but I wouldn't tone things down too much. See if you can get Fred'n'George onto him. He's a first year, he'd probably appreciate their sense of humour more than the rest of us and they'd probably love an audience."

They watched him for another moment before turning away.

"How's your place going then?" Hermione asked eagerly - she'd obviously been dying to ask since
"You figured out how to get them through the wards?"

"Yes, and didn't that take weeks longer than it should have? All it requires is a wizard's oath taken by anyone over seventeen to a family member that they intend no harm to said family. The oath is sworn on their magic, so its not one they're likely to break."

"Does that mean...." Hermione began anxiously.

"Yes, and you can certainly come and look around sometime. I wouldn't hold your breath though, they weren't into libraries in quite the same way."

"Prat," she said, mock-whacking him in the head.

"Where's Percy then?" he asked. "Isn't he coming?"

"Where else," she said, pulling a face. "He's still at work. Of course, Arthur could get off early for the first day of the holidays but his Junior Undersecretary couldn't? I worry about him sometimes."

"Why do you make such a big deal about the holidays if you don't have any school age kids around?"

"We do now," Ron said with a grin. "Two of them, if you remember. It's mostly so you people can come and celebrate the first night as well."

"Hogwarts staff, you mean?"

There was a pause, "Yeah, in a way."

"Order members, then?"

"Well...."

"I'm joining over the holiday," James said quickly, to avert any suspicion. "Albus has told me a bit already."

"I guess it's okay then. Almost all of the Hogwarts staff who are Order members come today - generally at least one Head of House has to stay behind - and everyone is there for Christmas as well. We get even more people at Christmas," he said with a grin. "Not that we'll ever be lacking, with the way my family runs to kids. That's why we're here and not at Mum and Dad's place. Its large enough for me and my siblings but factoring in visitors gets a little difficult."

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The next morning, James apparated back to Hogsmeade in a fine mood. He knew that it wasn't quite
the same as when he'd been a kid - they didn't know who he was, for a start - but he knew enough of them as James that he'd felt welcome and comfortable. He sort of wondered how many grandchildren Molly and Arthur would end up with. Bill already had three kids, Percy one and Fred two. Ginny had surprised everyone with twin boys but Fred and George had looked at them, taken one look at her and said that if any of them could cope with twins it would be her. No one had any doubt at all that Neville would be completely helpless to their sweet smiles and pleas.

He met up with Severus in the staff room, already anticipating Abe's arrival at Hogwarts in time for lunch. Now that he didn't have a particular protégé at the University, he'd decided that it was lonely spending holidays alone and was coming to spend them with his brother and Order comrades.

"Have a pleasant evening?" Severus offered cordially.

"Not bad. I've always wished I had a family like that one."

"They are certainly . . . welcoming. Were you invited for Christmas Day?"

"Yes, actually."

"Finally, I have another Slytherin. Draco insists on spending the holiday at his own place. I think it's to do with his mother."

"You're going there for Christmas?" James asked, mock incredulously.

"I am not so antisocial as to miss it. A few school mates are also coming."

"Have you decided about the ball?"

Severus hesitated for a moment.

"I would like to take you up on that offer, if it is still amenable to you."

"Course it is. I'll dig out the costume for you sometime. I take it you'd rather size it yourself? Great, expect it tomorrow, probably."

He looked down at the huge pile of parchment on the desk.

"Do you really have that much marking to do?" he asked sympathetically. Then again, maybe he'd subconsciously decided to slacken off on homework to spare himself. Severus obviously had a great deal more self-discipline.

"Its mostly first year tests - multi-choice so they shouldn't take long to mark."

"Do you want a hand?" James asked, surprising himself with the offer. He hated marking with a passion. Severus looked just as shocked, though he quickly hid it.

"If you don't mind, it would be a great help."

"Abe's coming soon and I'm going to be jumping around doing nothing unless I do some work," he said, then looked at the first paper with resignation. "I think I might need an answer sheet though: I never was any good at Potions."

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That evening, James was sitting in the headmaster's living room with Albus and Abe. Claudius had also managed to worm his way into the gathering and was pottering around, chewing contentedly on some of Albus' luminous green socks.

It was a relaxing discussion, of a sort that James hadn't felt for a long time. He was with two people who he trusted with his life, both of whom knew his secret so the care was off his shoulder and he could just be himself. Not that there was much if any difference between 'himself' and 'James' but he didn't have to think about not giving anything away. Albus in particular had seemed very interested in his time in the Muggle world. James was no longer curious as to where Arthur had got his love of Muggle artefacts from.

"Lemon drop, anyone?" Albus asked, reaching over into his desk draw to pull out a well-stocked tray, which he held out. "I haven't doctored these ones, they're the ones I have myself."

"That's what we're worried about," James deadpanned, declining. Abe took one cheerfully and soon was even brighter than ever, almost matching his brother in merriness. James' suspicions were confirmed. He wondered whether Albus had a private supplier, produced the drug himself or bought it on the black market.

Claudius, attracted by the noise, came over and, before anyone could stop him, snagged one or three off the tray.

"Claudius!" Abe scolded. "You know you shouldn't eat pure sugar, its bad for your…….." He broke off, fumbling for a quill and parchment.

Indeed, a moment of so after consuming the obviously doctored lemon drop, Claudius had changed colour. It wasn't just to grey either, no, it was to an eye-burning shade of fluorescent pink that looked like something Dobby or Albus would select for their thriving sock collections. The goat was practically skipping around the room and his master wasn't much better. James was in hysterics on the sofa, while Albus was looking on in bewilderment, not knowing what the charm cast had even been.

"I knew it would work!" Abe exclaimed. "I'm a genius! This is my next thesis written already!"

"Would someone tell me what in Merlin's name is going on?" Albus asked plaintively, though not sounding too put out as he sucked absently on a lemon drop.

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James had to admit it - he was really looking forward to Christmas this year. It would be his first with a family of sorts that was mostly unsullied by darker overtones of the war. The two forces this time hadn't yet engaged in earnest and, for the moment, they would have the chance to celebrate.

In anticipation, he had already gone to buy presents. That had taken a great deal of thought. How well did he have to know someone as 'James' to buy them a present without suspicion? What about 'Harry's' friends that he longed to talk to again but didn't yet know?

In the end, he had decided to be sensible. Albus would be receiving two pairs of socks, one striped and one polka dots, both in the most garish colours he could find. Claudius had been given a new
feeding bucket (much to his disgust, he was being left at Hogwarts under the care of the house elves). Abe himself would get a new Muggle book on superstitions related to goats and Draco was getting a new dagger, complete with a poison bottle since James was a little concerned that he owned a weapon without a little extra bite. Very proudly, James had marched into a toyshop to buy little Harry a cuddly dragon as his first present from his godfather. He had even wrapped this one himself, or attempted too. It was lucky that Harry was not yet at the age to care about the quality of the wrapping.

Hermione received a new calendar and Ron a signed poster of the Cannons. One of James' housemates from University had joined them and it had been quite easy to get hold of. His reasoning for getting him one was supposedly as a thank you present for looking after Alistair. Hermione of course had spent a lot of time researching with and talking to him so it was known that they were friends.

Severus had been horrendously difficult. He didn't have any obvious hobbies in the same way that Ron did and James didn't think he'd appreciate a joke present in the same was as Hermione did. He was certainly harder than Harry! At last, Albus had pointed out that there was a perfectly good basilisk carcass sitting in the chamber of secrets which could be harvested for some high value potions ingredients.

After much discussion, Severus and James had decided that to Alistair they were now at least uncle if not father figures and as such a present would be a good idea. Severus had once gone to Grimmauld Place to consult with Simon and they thought they had a good idea. They had bought him a broom, a Nimbus 2001. It was not a particularly expensive broom or a particularly good one in today's market, but it was a broom of his very own. Of course, given school rules, one of them would have to look after it for him during term time.

Over the week and a half remaining before Christmas Day, James had also found the time to make the necessary alterations to Severus' costume for the ball and to obtain the necessary sweets to complete the disguise.

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Christmas Day itself came at last and James woke up at the crack of dawn. Given the time of year, this was about eight o'clock. He bounded out of bed, dressed in jeans and a green dress shirt and walked cheerfully upstairs to breakfast. For once, he was intending to be happy, even hyper maybe, and show it. When else could he do that, if not Christmas?

Unsurprisingly, he wasn't alone in the Great Hall. Five of the seven students, all of them Gryffindors, staying for the holidays were already there although none of the teachers had yet made an appearance.

"Happy Christmas!" James said cheerfully. He got a few mumbled replies from the Gryffindors. He was a Slytherin teacher, he wasn't meant to be being nice!

He helped himself to small portions of the bacon and toast on offer, knowing that he would undoubtedly be having a huge Christmas lunch later and wanting to be able to appreciate it properly.

The Dumbledores arrived ten minutes or so later.
"Merry Christmas everyone!" Albus said, beaming down at them, looking for all the world like a very skinny Santa Claus.

"Happy Christmas," James replied. "What time are we going?"

"Whenever you're ready, dear boy. Severus is probably already there."

"They won't mind me being so early?"

"Early?" Abe asked. "This is a house with small children on Christmas morning. Early would probably be about five. I'm sure nine o'clock would be very civilised."

"I'll go over now then, if that's okay. See you later everyone."

Going back down to his quarters, James packed the presents he was bringing into a bag and added a bottle of butterbeer as his contribution to the feast. He then wandered cheerfully up to Albus' office and lit the fire.

"Number 12 Grimmauld Place!" he said clearly and was sucked through the whirling passageways. He stumbled out, coughing and spluttering to clear his lungs of the smoke.

Someone grabbed his arm to steady him. He blinked a few times and opened his eyes.

"Hello Hermione," he said. "Um... thanks."

She grinned at him impishly, obviously trying not to laugh. Simon hadn't succeeded - he was snickering away in the corner where he had set up a game of Gobstones with one of the Weasley kids.

"I somehow didn't think you'd got any better at Flooing."

"Normally I don't have an audience," James said ruefully. "Still, it shows that learning early is the best and I obviously had a deprived childhood."

Simon perked up at this.

"But I thought you were a pureblood sir?" he stopped, realising this could be construed as a personal question. "If you don't mind me saying so, of course."

"I am, to the extent that anyone can claim to be these days. My mother was from a Squib line and when my parents died I was raised by her sister. I didn't even know what Floo was until I was twelve."

"I would have thought you'd be good at it though," Simon said, unwilling to drop it. "I mean you're bloody brilliant at flying."

"It just goes to show that you can't be good at everything, Mr Wood," he said, keeping his 'teacher voice'.

Then he smiled and kissed Hermione on the cheek. "Happy Christmas."

"And to you," she said quietly.

"Oi Evans! Watch it!" Ron said, coming in to see what was happening. James was fairly sure he was just joking.
"Watch what?"

"That's my wife you just kissed."

"So? I'm far more interested in you, truth be told," he managed with a completely straight face. He was actually not at all interested in either of them. Hermione was a girl and Ron was straight and completely not his type. No, he tended to go more for tall, dark guys. Simon was listening, ears pricked. Ron laughed.

"Happy Christmas, James. Are you coming through or were you two planning on staying here talking all morning?"

James let himself be pulled from the Floo room through to the living room. It was lit with a warm, flickering glow from the huge fireplace and seemed even busier than it had been the last time he saw it. One corner of the room was taken up by a huge Christmas tree, brushing the ceiling at around three meters in height and beautifully decorated. Under it was a huge pile of parcels, all unopened.

"We wait until everyone's here until we start, then it's a free for all," Ron said, almost shouting to make himself heard. "Here, give me that bag and I'll put them down for you."

James paused for a moment to look around the room. Yes, he knew everyone here. Severus was sitting on a sofa in the far corner with another man. Who was it? They had their back to him, so he could only see the neatly trimmed white hair. He turned slightly and James winced.

"Is that..." he said, trailing off. Hermione followed the direction of his gaze and nodded.

"That's Remus, if that's what you mean. Remember Ha - James, he's a werewolf, bitten as a very young child. Most werewolf children don't live to become an adult so every moment he survives has been borrowed time. In werewolf years, he must be something like two hundred. He's old, yes, but he's happy, and there would have been nothing you could do about it so don't beat yourself up about it."

"What does he do now?"

"He has a home in a werewolf pack. They've a small hamlet on the far side of the forbidden forest from Hogwarts. There's maybe forty of them, mostly young. Some are families but many of the children were abandoned by their parents. He's one of the elders and teaches the little ones their first lessons."

"That's the sort of thing he'd enjoy, isn't it?"

"I know you weren't planning on telling anyone but if you did, I think it should be Remus. He's accepted that you are gone but it would mean a lot to him to know that you're alive and happy and that you're well on your way to love."

"I never said anything about . . ."

"And nor did anyone else, but I can read you as easily as I can read Ron. Why don't you go and talk to them?"

"You mean that they're actually talking?!?"

"They get on very well now actually and Severus makes the Wolfsbane for all of Remus' pack every full moon. They can be remarkably similar actually. I think Albus was very relieved - apparently Order meetings could get very tense before they made up."
With that she gave him a gentle shove in that direction and picked her way through the crowd towards Ron.

On his way over, James passed Alistair. He was sitting on the floor, happily teaching one of the younger Weasleys how to play Exploding Snap. He smiled at James as he passed but didn't say anything. At least he wasn't looking sad, not hugely happy, but not sad. That was about all they could hope for.

Severus smiled as James approached. He looked around and decided just to sit on one of the beanbags on the floor so that he could take part in the conversation.

"About time you showed up," the older man said. "I was the only Slytherin in a room full of Gryffindors."

"You had Alistair," James pointed out.

"One should not expect an eleven year old to be able to stand with you against the masses."

"Well, I'm here now, and Abe is coming along soon," James said. Then he smiled broadly at Remus. "Hello, I'm James Evans."

"Remus Lupin. Severus has mentioned you a few times. I only feel it fair to warn you that I'm a werewolf."

"I know - you're quite the celebrity after the last war."

"You don't mind then?"

"Why would I? Its only a problem at full moon and only if you don't take the Wolfsbane. Given that you seem to be one of Severus's friends, I can only assume that he supplies you with it."

"If you knew the number of people who didn't think like that…. So, you've taken on the Defence position? You're not worried about the curse?"

James smiled, Remus seemed to be taking it about as seriously as he did.

"Not at all. Given how much Hogwarts seems to like me, I can't foresee any sort of problem with a curse."

"Too true the castle likes him," Severus said irritably.

"I assume you are the ward holder then?"

"He is indeed," Severus replied. "We held the ceremony about two weeks ago and there hasn't been a single fight since, not even a scuffle. Everyone's been walking around like their birthday came early."

Remus chuckled at this.

"I bet that has you worried. Imagine what they'll be like when it all calms down!"

There was a fresh burst of chatter over by the main door and they looked over.

"There's Albus," Severus said. "If you'll excuse me . . . ."

"We'll see you around, I'm sure," Remus said. "Mr Evans, if you would give me a hand upstairs, I
have something I need to pick up from my room."

"Certainly, and it's James. Too be honest, I'd rather forget that I teach some of the kids here. You'll have to tell me where to go."

Remus guided him up to the first landing and into a small single room. As James would have expected from him, the room was neat and tidy, the bed made.

"Thank you," Remus said. "I won't be a minute, I'm just meant to take my potion two hours after breakfast each morning."

James gathered his nerve. Hermione was right, it wasn't fair to leave his almost-godfather in the dark, especially given the fact that they were uncertain how much longer he'd last.

"Remus... Moony... can I talk to you for a moment."

Remus spun around, wand outstretched. James gulped as the wand swished. The door behind him swept shut and a series of locking charms followed. He himself was propelled into a chair and fixed with a leg-locker curse.

"Explain!" the werewolf demanded. "How do you know that name?"

"I don't suppose you have a damp cloth?" James asked, deciding it would be easiest if he showed him. This was supplied and he scrubbed at his forehead, patting his robes to be certain he still had his concealer with him. When he thought he was done, he moved his hand, holding any loose wisps of hair out of the way.

"Harry?" Remus whispered disbelievingly. James nodded and smiled.

"Ask me anything I should know. Constant Vigilance."

"Why did Sirius escape Azkaban?"

"It was the summer holiday between my second and third years at Hogwarts," James said, counting backwards on his fingers. "The Weasleys went to Egypt and there was a picture of them in the Prophet. Fudge gave him a copy when he visited Azkaban and he saw Wormtail sitting on Ron's shoulder. He escaped and made his way to Hogwarts because... because he thought Wormtail might hurt me."

"It is you then," Remus said with relief and awe, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "James Evans - that's the sort of thing Lily would have come up with. So obvious, yet so difficult to spot. I take it Severus doesn't know?"

"No. You, Hermione, Albus and Aberforth - that's all. I didn't know where you'd gone until today. Hermione pointed you out and said that I should tell you but I wasn't sure I'd get a chance to today."

"So you're Defence master at Hogwarts now? Sirius used to joke that that's where you'd end up. We could never see you playing professional Quidditch or becoming an Auror like the rest of the Order."

"I received some offers," James admitted.

"You would never have accepted them though, you couldn't cope with the media attention and I suspect by the time you killed Voldemort you had had more than enough of chasing Dark Wizards. Are you happy there?"
James nodded.
"It always was my home and . . . the company's good as well."

"Are you talking about Albus or Severus?"

"Why does everyone seem to think that me and Severus should get together?"

"You mean you aren't planning to?"

"Well, yes, but its not nice to tease me about it."

"It's a thin line between love and hate, Harry, and I think you've crossed it. You are remarkably similar, you know."

"Remus, what would Sirius have thought?" Harry asked timidly.

"It's not something we ever discussed, I admit, but I think I have an idea of his reaction. The first thing he'd do would throw a tantrum and yell at Severus for a bit. You would, of course, be completely innocent in his eyes and have been seduced by the evil dark wizard who'd put you under the Imperius Curse, or something equally ridiculous. After a while, he'd calm down and you'd talk about it with him and he'd see that you were serious about it and it would be what made you happy. Then he'd probably go and threaten Severus and say that if he ever did anything to hurt you, he wouldn't live to see the next day. After Severus convinced him he was serious, he would accept it. They wouldn't become best friends but over time I think they would come to understand each other."

"They did already know each other."

"Harry, they saw figments of their imagination. To Sirius, Severus was the living example of what his parents wanted him to be. He was a Slytherin, magically powerful, good in lessons, responsible and with a good knowledge of dark magic. Hating Severus was one of the ways he could rebel against his family. After a while, they'd escalated it so far that he believed he hated Severus as a person. Severus on the other hand knew only Sirius' worst side - the crueler pranks, the bullying, and the way the teachers favoured him despite his attitude in class. It was more or less like you and Draco Malfoy at Hogwarts - you didn't see past your houses."

"I guess. Thanks."

"We'd better go back downstairs again or they'll be wondering where we are." As they went back down again, it felt more like a son supporting his ageing father than a kindly stranger helping an elderly man.

There was a cheer as they came back into the living room. Everyone was sitting down now, the adults on chairs and sofas, the children and younger adults who didn't have seats on the floor around the tree. Small plates of appetisers were being passed around - smoked salmon, crisps and olives from what he could see.

"Take a seat over here, Remus," Molly said, clearing Ron off an armchair near the tree. He took this good naturally and sprawled on the floor instead, leaning against Hermione's legs. James took a seat cross-legged next to him. A few of the adults seemed to be giving the three of them wistful looks, perhaps thinking of the black haired boy who they thought had left them for the next big adventure.

"Now, for those of you who don't know the rules," Arthur said clearly. "One present each at a time and you can't choose which one. I'll give out the first round."
He went over to the tree and made a show of choosing the smallest presents there for each person and distributing them to his gathered friends and relations. A lot of the little ones looked a bit disappointed, eyeing a few large boxes they might have spotted bearing their name but pounced on the parcels none the less, ripping the paper and leaving it in shreds on the floor. James opened his to find 'A Guide to Wards and Warding', a thick book from Draco. Obviously he was considered backwards in this area. Looking around the room, several of the others had also discovered books. Alistair looked delighted to have found a box of chocolate frogs from the Slytherin third years.

When everyone had examined their present and thanked the giver, Molly chose a set of presents, again mostly small ones. James could see the logic in this. In building up the suspense, the children appreciated the large ones even more. He could imagine how curious they would be about the contents. Since presumably most of the adults were in on this, they would have to wait until the first kid's turn to have a go at it.

Soon each person had a heap of presents next to them. Clothes featured in a big way - everyone, even James, had received a Weasley jumped. James couldn't see properly, but he thought Severus had received one too. There were also large quantities of sweets and books. The floor was a complete mess, strewn with multicoloured and flashing paper so that you almost had to wade through it to reach the tree.

Oliver and Charlie took pity on the children - and a lot of the adults - when their turn came and deliberately selected the biggest present for everyone that they could find. James laughed when he opened his parcel to reveal a full set of Slytherin Quidditch robes from Severus and the present team. They were green and white, similar to the Merlin ones (green and black) but with a slightly different cut. The note attached informed him that he was now the official team coach and an honorary past member of the team.

He watched carefully as Alistair slowly unwrapped his to reveal his broom. A look of wonder spread over the boy's face. Simon, sitting next to him, also looked impressed. After a moment of him gazing awe-struck and the broom, James was unprepared when Alistair raced over and hugged him tightly. Awkwardly, he hugged back. He was a little uncomfortable with it, not having really had much physical contact with anyone beyond Ron, Hermione and Draco before.

"Thank you Professor," Alistair mumbled into his robes.

"It wasn't just me, it was Professor Snape as well." Alistair looked up just long enough to say, face red,

"He might kill me if I tried to hug him though." Then his head buried itself in his robes again.

James laughed. Severus certainly hadn't lost his touch. James himself would have expected to be hung, drawn, quartered (diced rather) and his body parts thrown to the Giant Squid should he even have thought of hugging the man during his own schooldays. Then again, as Harry Potter, he probably would have been.

"He might surprise you," he said with an encouraging smile. "Go on, I'll take full responsibility if he attempts to murder you."

More uncertainly, Alistair walked over to Severus and paused for a moment before clinging to him like a lifeline as he started to cry. Aware of everyone watching, Severus swung him up into his arms and carried him out. James followed hastily, gesturing that Simon should stay put.

He found them in the deserted library, Severus drying Alistair's tears with an uncharacteristically gentleness. James stood in the doorway for a moment, not wanting to intrude. When Severus looked
up and smiled at him, he came in and sat down next to them on the sofa.

"Okay there Alistair?" he asked. The boy nodded, sniffing. "Enjoying yourself?"

Much to his surprise, Alistair smiled through his tears.

"Everyone's really nice. I never expected to get so many presents!"

"Do you know Archie in seventh year?" Severus asked. "He's the one you should thank for that." Alistair seemed awed at that idea. To think that a seventh year prefect would do all that for him!

James looked at Severus over the top of his head, silently asking permission and receiving a pleased nod.

"Alistair, I know that you don't have any family left," he said bluntly but gently. "But, to be honest, neither do I and no one will ever be able to take the places of those you've lost. If you want, I'll your . . . uncle . . . if you will. That way you can always stay with me over the holidays, though it might be best if you stayed here for the rest of this one."

"Really sir?"

"If its what you want. We don't have to rush into things, you hardly know me as anything other than your teacher, but we can give it a go."

"You really don't mind, Professor?"

"Would I be offering if I did? No, this is something for you to think about. If, in a few months, you want to try, I'll see if I can't make it formal and adopt you. Until then, I'd like you to try to get to know me a bit better. One other thing, I don't think you need to keep on calling me Professor outside of school. My name is James, you're welcome to use it."

"Wow!"

"Think about it for me. Why don't we go back inside now? I don't think you've opened all of your presents yet. Tell them to start without us, there's a few things we need to talk about."

Alistair smiled shyly at both of them and dashed back through. The two men watched his departing back.

"That was kind but are you sure about it?" Severus said seriously.

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't. I've thought about it a great deal and I think its something that I have to do, in a way. I remember what it was like for me growing up without parents, and I had other relatives, even if they didn't like me. Its as much a chance for me to have a family as for him."

"And if you have children of your own?"

"That is very unlikely ever to happen since I have no interest whatsoever in women. I think that any partner I would be prepared to have a permanent relationship with would be as accepting as I would."

Severus looked at him for a moment, considering that.

"I think you might be right there, given what I have seen of your choice in friends. Have you thought about what to do in the summer holidays?"

"Not that much actually. It depends on what happens with Lucius Malfoy. If its all over by then, I'd
like to see about a permanent home other than Hogwarts. I was thinking that I might take a house in Hogsmeade. It's a magical community near to Hogwarts and there should be other kids there as well. It's near the werewolf place as well and I thought I might see if I can't help Remus with some of his teaching. I'm not sure that I'd want to be in a city."

"It sounds pleasant. If you want, I'll help you set up a room for him attached to your Hogwarts suite."

"Thanks," James said. It surprised him how much Severus' approval meant to him. He was a little scared at the prospect of being responsible for an eleven-year-old but this felt to him the right thing to do. Alistair's surprise at receiving presents had brought back echoes of his own eleven-year-old self and, while there was nothing he could do about his own past, there was so much he could do about Alistair's future. So far, they were getting on fine, already past the distant teacher-student relationship and he would build on that slowly. Hopefully, he was different enough from Alistair's parents that it wouldn't feel like he was trying to take their place. Maybe that was why, while he was obviously happy enough at Grimmauld Place, a permanent place in the Weasley family wasn't really for him.

They slipped quietly back into the living room together. All of the presents had by this time been opened and the floor was a sea of garish colours. As they came in, Molly rushed out with Ginny and Fleur in the direction of the kitchen where a remarkable dinner was being prepared. George slipped after them, supposedly to help. James made a mental note to watch what he ate.

James was drawn into a conversation Remus and Aberforth about the standards of students in his classes and what exactly he was teaching each year. Severus seemed to be trapped in a corner with Fred Weasley, looking resigned. He seemed relieved when Molly appeared again in the doorway.

"Lunchtime," she said with a smile. "Come through."

The older of the children dashed through, the younger ones being scooped up by parents and the very youngest being rescued by house elves and taken off for naps. James followed at a more sedate pace with the rest of the adults.

"What was all that about?" he asked Severus.

"Fred, you mean? He was trying to recruit me. They've been offering me a job in their business for years."

"He's only one of the best Potions Masters in the world," Fred said, joining them with his four-year-old daughter draped over his arm. "We're decent at potions but we could really do with a specialist."

"I think parents everywhere would be in trouble if your pranks got any more sophisticated," James said ruefully, thinking of the few pranks that had been tried in his lessons. He'd not been hit by any of them but one or two had come close and only quick reflexes had saved him.

As they reached the long kitchen, James found his seat at the table, marked by a place card. The table was beautifully set with a pristine white tablecloth and silver dishes. At intervals along the table were blue candles set in ornate silver candlesticks and matching crackers were stacked neatly in sixes. He was seated quite happily between Alistair and Hermione. James noted with approval that the children seemed to be mixed in with the adults. Sitting in twos around the table, each had an adult next to them to pour their drink and cut up their food should it be required. Maybe when they were older they would be given their own end or even their own table when their numbers increased but for now this seemed sensible.

His mouth watered as he took in the platters on the table. Turkey and stuffing, goose, roast potatoes and parsnips, sprouts, bacon, sausages . . . . the choice seemed endless. He heaped his plate, pouring
himself a flask of wine. Alistair looked at him for guidance when a jug of butterbeer was passed down to him. Simon had already poured himself a full mug and looked very smug. James knew that this was undoubtedly a treat for him - usually Hogwarts students didn't get it until they started visiting Hogsmeade. The other children all had pumpkin juice.

"Try it," he suggested. "Its butterbeer."

Alistair dribbled a little into his mug and tentatively poured it into his mouth. He paused thoughtfully for a moment as he considered the taste. For a moment, James thought he wouldn't like it, then he grinned and poured himself a mug that was nearly overflowing.

The main course was dealt with in short order, everyone probably eating far more than they should have. Finished, they leaned back in their chairs, stomachs full, and talked for a while as a few house elves popped in to clear away the plates. James had always the Hogwarts food excellent but this had surpassed all previous bests.

It didn't take too long before the kids started getting restless. The crackers were handed out and around the table everyone crossed arms and pulled together. There was a series of loud pops and items of every sort erupted from the cardboard. From James' own, a set of Weasleys' Wizzbangs (guaranteed safety within enclosed spaces) burst and showered sparkles down on them. Of course, all of the crackers would be from Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, where else? He put his admiral's hat on his head and read through the incredibly cheesy joke, donating the wizard's chess set he'd received to Alistair since he himself already owned one.

As soon as everyone seemed ready, the crackers vanished and new plates arrived on the table. There was a Christmas pudding, burning with a blue flame, in the very centre and various chocolatey desserts for those that way inclined. James, not liking fruit puddings, cut himself a generous slice of chocolate tart and piled this with ice cream.

When everything had been eaten and a satisfied quiet had fallen on the room, Ginny and Neville took the children out. Shortly afterwards, shrieks and giggles could be heard echoing from all corners of the house. Neville poked his head round the door after a particularly loud scream and said apologetically,

"No one's been murdered, we're playing sardines."

He left again as a series of reminiscences about Christmas Days of the past began. Apparently Ginny had always been the best at sardines in her youth with Charlie a close second. Percy had undoubtedly been the worst, disliking dirt and dust, and the twins were good but had insisted on hiding together, making things harder for themselves. It certainly sounded like they were having fun. James noticed, getting a little restless himself, that Oliver and Charlie were exchanging glances.

Five minutes or so later, a red head poked itself around the kitchen door, taking in the surroundings and ready to bolt if necessary.

"I'm allowed in here, aren't I?" Bill's eldest son asked boldly. When no objection was made, he came in properly and surveyed the room critically. With the cupboards full, there wasn't that much room for improvisation, so he slid under the table, hidden by the legs and the tablecloth, and stayed there, perfectly still and quiet.

Ginny came in a moment later, holding a toddler by the hand. They made a show of looking behind the door and in a few of the cupboard.

"Is he under the table?" the little girl asked loudly, receiving indulgent smiles from the adults.
"Why don't you have a look?" Ginny suggested. The girl crawled under.

"He's here!" she announced. "We've got to hide now." Ginny looked mortified at acting this way in front of her old teachers but crawled under herself, carefully ending up at Hermione and James' feet.

One by one the children trickled in and squashed in under the table until six year old Stephen came in.

"Sardine!" they chorused together. He looked a bit disappointed but ran off to hide as the others began counting loudly and not completely together since some of them seemed to be having problems after they passed twenty. When they began to leave, Charlie and Oliver stood up, obviously intending to join in. James shifted restlessly in his seat. Hermione looked at him and leaned over to whisper in his ear.

"If you want to, just go. Make the most of it while you can."

He needed no further urging and followed them out, fully intending to win this game on his first try. From the whispered conversations under the table, he had picked up a working understanding of the game even though he'd never played it himself.

It was late when James returned to Hogwarts. Severus, Minerva and Albus had gone on ahead to ensure that those students who had remained at school with Filius, Poppy and Pomona were getting ready for bed and not wrecking havoc around the castle. James had stayed and helped bundling toddlers into pyjamas and bed. He had then thanked Molly and Arthur for the day and said goodbye to Remus, promising to visit him at his home soon.

This was what Christmas should be like, he thought fuzzily as he climbed into bed. He didn't get any further than that, his eyes drooping shut as his head hit the pillow.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Severus met him in the Great Hall for breakfast the next morning. No, James thought, mentally considering the time, maybe it ought to be brunch . . . or afternoon tea. It was in fact about twelve o'clock, perfectly civilised really.

"Good morning James," Severus said, pouring himself another mug of coffee. "Weren't too late last night?"

"Not really - I got caught up in helping with 'bedtime'. I'd never have been allowed to stay up that late at their age."

"From what I understand, it's only twice a year - Hogmanay and Christmas. It does tend to give the adults a break on St Stephen's Day if the children sleep late."

James laughed, seeing the logic in that. He knew from watching Dudley that Boxing Day often seemed anticlimatic after the excitement of Christmas Day itself and the Weasleys' scheme sounded very practical.

"So, do you want to pick up your costume sometime today or shall I bring it round to your room. I've sized it approximately but I think you're going to have to do the exact stuff yourself."
"With your permission, I will call by your rooms later. I promised that I would teach you a little of how to manipulate rooms within the castle so you have a room ready for Alistair when he returns. I can easily retrieve the costume then."

"Sounds good to me - it isn't as if there's any pressing business I have to attend to, so drop by any time that suits."

* * * * * * * *

So by the time Severus did arrive, James made sure he had brought out the deep blue costume. It was simple enough, fashioned around common dress of the time and consisted of black tights (they probably had a fancy name but that was what they looked like to him), a black shirt and a blue doublet embroidered with black falcons. That, of course, was Wulfric's personal sign just as the eagle had been his sister's.

"That?" Severus asked suspiciously, eyeing the tights with reluctance.

"Yes," James said, hiding a smile at the look on his face. The number of time's he'd got this reaction . . . "I have one pretty much identical but in green. Oh, and I picked up the appearance sweets from the twins yesterday evening."

"Very well. Now, had you given any thought as to where you wanted to situate this bedroom?"

"On the other side of the bathroom from my room," James replied promptly. He really did not want to just have a wall between them when or if Alistair got into some of the popular teenage music that some of the older Slytherins liked. Severus's mouth quirked upwards slightly as he realised that that was the furthest from James' room it could get and still be in the same suite.

"And I assume approximately the same size as your own room."

"I suppose."

"It's quite a simple procedure but a little draining since Hogwarts doesn't quite operate in three dimensional space. The consciousness of the castle is what we have to ask to create the room. To do this is like the warding. Take a dagger . . . I brought one along that wasn't poisoned since you don't seem to own one . . . and make a small cut. Smear the blood along the place where you want the door to be."

"Me? Aren't you the one doing the magic?" James asked, eyeing the knife with a certain amount of distrust. "And are you sure that that knife isn't poisoned. I wouldn't have thought you had one given all your potions."

"An advantage of knowing all the poisons is that I also know all of the antidotes and sterilisation techniques. As to the magic, these are your rooms, therefore you must be the one to give the blood."

James sighed,

"Okay, here goes."

"Repeat after me: I, the Defence Master of Hogwarts School and resident of this suite of rooms, request that a second bedroom be added to them in this location to be used by a boy of eleven years."
James dutifully repeated this, surprised at the simplicity. There was a groan and a door appeared as the wall grew about a metre in length. When he asked about the wording, Severus seemed amused.

"The castle's consciousness is made by absorbing the magic and emotions of the residents. It is exposed to far more modern English than Latin, so that's the language we use. Besides, very few wizards could conjugate the Latin correctly as they would have to for this sort of thing."

"Could you?"

"Of course, I received a very . . . thorough education at home in addition to my Hogwarts one."

There was an awkward silence. Then James plucked up the courage to ask.

"Um, the room won't be furnished or anything, will it?"

"No, you'll have to do that yourself."

"I was sort of hoping . . . would you give me a hand. I really don't want to get it wrong and I'm not sure what he's like and . . . "

"Certainly I'll stay, if you want me to. Why don't you have a house elf bring some basic furniture down while we think of the basic ideas?"

A few moments later, there was the odd crack every few moments in the bedroom and Severus and James were sitting together on the sofa.

"I was thinking that he would probably prefer something other than green," James ventured. He hurried on, "I mean, he has green in his dormitory all year, so a change is probably good."

"Not Gryffindor colours, of course."

"Well, obviously not red or gold, so blue I guess."

"You'll want sky blue."

James was a little surprised by this revelation and the assurance. He'd never really thought of light blue being a particularly popular colour with boys of that age.

"According to Draco at that age, it's the best colour to mount Quidditch posters on because if it's well done, they'll blend in and it will be more like a mural."

"I should have guessed Quidditch would have something to do with it. Light blue for the walls then? And I suppose a darker blue for the furnishings."

"That sounds bearable to me. You can always change it if he doesn't like it without much effort."

"I suppose that's true," James admitted doubtfully. Thing was, he wasn't sure whether Alistair would tell him if he didn't like the room or just pretend to.

Severus stood up, putting a hand on James' shoulder in a sort of one-armed hug and scooping up the costume with his other hand.

"I wouldn't worry too much about it," he said, his expression understanding. "I can't see him not liking it and I doubt a single mistake with a colour scheme would make a difference in your relationship anyway."
As if embarrassed by the show of gentleness, he spun away and strode out, robes billowing behind him again. James raised a hand to his shoulder, watching him leave.

* * * * * * * * * *

A few days later, James found himself waiting outside a hidden room below the headmaster's tower that he knew to be the headquarters and council room of the Order of the Phoenix. In fact, unlike most recruits, he also knew exactly what was going to occur when he entered the room and it wasn't nearly as intimidating as they liked to make out. He had also taken the opportunity to plan out his responses to alleviate any suspicions as to his character.

When the doors opened, a man stepped out. He was tall, wearing a hooded white robe with a golden phoenix embroidered on the front, his face completely shadowed. Silently, he tied a strip of cloth around James' eyes and led him forwards.

Feeling uncertainly around with his feet as he shuffled into the room, he was guided carefully to the front of the room. They wouldn't have let him fall anyway - this was the Order, not the Death Eaters.

Once there, the blindfold was removed and James saw that he was standing in the middle of a circle made by four Order members garbed in the same way as his guide. This arrangement was particularly common in rituals because it symbolised the four elements, the seasons, the four houses at Hogwarts, the four stages of life and multiple other components and factors. It was also easier to balance than the less common circles of three or five.

The man standing in the North spoke first - this was usually how it worked.

"For what reason do you come before the Order of the Phoenix?"

"I come to become a member."

"To what purpose?"

"To help me to protect the lives under my care under the recommendations of those I trust."

"Very well. Turn and continue.

James turned anticlockwise. He thought this person, shorter than the other, was a woman and this was confirmed when he heard her voice. In fact, he was almost positive that it was Minerva, a powerful witch in her own right.

"Can you, a man wishing to join the Order of the Phoenix, state that you have never knowingly or deliberately harmed an innocent, someone disabled or someone wounded and at your mercy."

"I cannot," James admitted, knowing that a lie would be immediately detected. "I once killed a Death Eater who had murdered people close to me in cold blood when I found them disabled with a broken leg."

"We deem this to be a justified act of revenge as stated in the Statute of Reparations from 1754. Are there any other incidents?"

"To the best of my knowledge, no."
"Turn and continue then."

"Have you ever practised the Dark Arts?" the next interrogator demanded sternly. James winced inwardly, he bloody hated this part of the ritual. Even so, he wasn't entirely sure if it was admitting the attempt or admitting the failure that he minded most.

"When I was fifteen, I attempted to cast the Crucius Curse on a woman who had just killed a member of my family. The curse failed."

"A child will do many things in times of sorrow. As a mistake is made, the soul and magic grow and the mistake will not be repeated. Remember this and be free from guilt. Turn and continue."

The next and final stop was in front of a man who leant heavily on a staff and whose gentle voice was instantly recognisable to James as Remus Lupin’s.

"A member of the Order of the Phoenix must choose three things to mark his dedication to the light: an element, a former member and a present member of the Order to guide them on their path. Are you ready to make these choices?"

"I am ready," James said with a slight smile. His choices now were, with a notable exception, identical to those he had made when being initiated as Harry Potter. The last one in particular would no doubt cause a minor uproar. "For my element, I choose fire for its strength, power and purity. The deceased member I wish to remember in my initiation is Lily Evans, wife of James Potter, who bore my name and laid down her life for her family and her cause. For my guide I choose Severus Snape as a man I trust and respect for the care he gives to each child under his guidance. These are my choices, are they acceptable?"

"They are more than acceptable. You have been judged a worthy candidate for the Order and may proceed to the final stage of your initiation."

James swallowed slightly and looked again to his guide, who had stood next to him, a hand on his shoulder, throughout. Every candidate had a guide, normally but not always the one who had proposed them to the Order and always a volunteer. In this case, it wouldn’t be Albus because he had his own role to play. In truth, he was a little nervous about this stage because it was the one that could go terribly wrong if Albus hadn't managed to explain clearly to Fawkes what the situation was.

When they stopped and the blindfold was removed, they were standing within a ring of fire, the flames towering high above them though the heat was just pleasantly warm. Fawkes was perched on a post in the centre, flames pouring upwards from his scarlet crest. Next to him stood Albus Dumbledore, who smiled confidently at James.

"Your choices have been made and you have been deemed a worthy candidate. Are you ready to take the oath? Repeat after me."

"I, a man pure of heart and strong in power, swear to dedicate my life to fighting against the forces of darkness, to protect all those that I can and to sacrifice my life for others should this be necessary to help the cause,"

James repeated dutifully. In fact, the one time he had previously said them had been enough to burn them into his brain forever. "I furthermore swear never to practice the dark arts or harm an innocent or one helpless to my wand. Let my oath be heard and witnessed as true."

There was an agonising pause, both Albus and James wincing slightly. At last, Fawkes began to sing and they let out the breath they had been holding.
"Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix," Albus said, ending his part in the ritual. The flames around them died away to reveal the rest of the Order gathered around them, unhooded and welcoming. In a moment, James would go to be welcomed by them but for now he waited, watching curiously as his guide removed his hood. Severus smiled slightly at him, back to their audience, and leaned to kiss him gently on the forehead.

"Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix," he said softly. "Good to have you with us James. But now, the hordes await you - have fun."

With a gentle push, he propelled James out into the gathered group. There were about twenty five of them gathered, quite enough to make him embarrassed at being the centre of attention even though most of them he knew well, either as James or as Harry.

With an indignant squawk, Fawkes regained their attention. He fluttered over to James in a smooth glide and perched himself firmly on his shoulder. He then calmly proceeded to start preening his long hair. James looked to Albus for help, only to find the old man chuckling to himself as he watched. Indignantly, he ignored him and made the compulsory round of handshaking.

A while later, Albus called them rather reluctantly to Order and they took their seats along the long table to start the business they needed to attend to and hear the reports from the various operatives. Kingsley Shacklebolt, as the leader of the Aurors, was the first to speak.

"I assure you that the Aurors are taking the threat that Lucius Malfoy poses extremely seriously. Training has been increased and the recruit schedules are being fast-tracked so we should have another ten Aurors in the field by Easter. That will bring our numbers to seventy four, including those in managerial and support roles. So far, the Aurors have suffered no casualties, just a few minor injuries."

"And in terms of civilian casualties?" Hestia Jones asked.

"Twenty four and growing every day. We're keeping it as quiet as possible to avoid any alarm. If the press got hold of the figures and photographs, we would be in serious trouble. As it is, we are advising people to take precautions and avoid staying in a house alone, especially Muggleborns and half-bloods. We're doing all we can but we no longer have a spy and that's making it extremely difficult to prevent attacks."

Albus looked serious and everyone was a little shocked at how much people were being sheltered from the reality of the situation.

"Bill, what about Gringotts?"

"So far they are doing nothing openly, like the Aurors, they believe panic can't be a good thing and are toning it down to their customers as much as possible. If people don't feel safe, it has to be bad for business. Privately, they have us putting up as many additional wards as possible and we're running twenty four hour patrols in the maximum security areas. Personally, I don't think Gringotts is likely to be attacked, given how many Death Eaters have vaults there, and at any rate it's one of the safest places in the wizarding world."

"At least something's normal. Ron, how are the Hogwarts defences coming on?"

"We've blocked up all of the passages out of the school - I'd warn the kids once they get back from the holiday or they might get a nasty surprise. We've started negotiating with the centaurs and we think they'll at least give us a warning if they try to bring large numbers of troops through the forest. The mermen and squid are, of course, with us and doing all they can. Our most vulnerable approach
is the one via the main gate from Hogsmeade since we have to leave it open to let students and refugees through."

As the briefing session continued, James was reminded again how impressive the Order could be in a martial situation. They had people from all walks of life, working for many different organisations. There were spies in the Ministry, in Gringotts and in Knockturn Alley and seemingly innocent and humorous citizens like the Weasley twins who could be downright nasty when they put their minds to it. Though he hesitated to admit it, it certainly felt good to feel he was contributing again, it had felt odd as a 'civilian' of sorts.

Albus caught him on the way out.

"You are getting Severus to go with you, aren't you?" he asked quietly and urgently. "Its just, unless he's out the way, my costume won't and nor will Abe's."

"He's coming with me. Why, who are you two going as?"

"Our secret," the infuriating old man said, eyes twinkling. "I'll see you at dinner then."

* * * * * * * * * * *

On New Year's Eve, most of the students returned on the Hogwarts Express. Term didn't officially begin until the fourth, but the ball was considered an opportunity too good to miss and Albus had been persuaded to run the Hogwarts express early and allow them to cut their holiday short. The few students who weren't attending would arrive by Floo in Hogsmeade and walk up to the school with a teacher on the third.

The Hogmanay Ball itself was due to begin at seven o'clock but James was ready with half an hour to go, sitting fidgeting in his living room, wondering how girls put up with tights all the time. They didn't look too bad, he admitted, but Merlin they itched! There was probably a spell that they all used that he didn't know which gave them an unfair advantage.

He wondered if Severus' tights were itching as well. He also wondered what Severus would look like wearing the tights. He had carefully decided to give Severus the chance to change his face only and that would be weird enough. He already knew what Bertie's legs looked like, that wasn't at all what he was interested in.

James knew that he looked the part in his costume. It was accurate to the time period and because of his magic, his face was right. For the occasion, he had brushed his hair out so every strand was in place and applied an extra concealing charm onto his scar.

At five to, he stood up and spun around, making sure his green cape could billow freely to add to the effect. One of the guys he'd roped into going as Wulfric had walked around all evening with it tucked into his breeches and had looked like a complete idiot.

James took a deep breath. Now or never . . .

He stepped out into the corridor and waited, pacing anxiously up and down outside, ready to freeze as soon as Severus' portrait hole opened.

At last it did and James ran an appraising eye down his friend. The clothing was a perfect fit - he'd
never known Severus to be anything but accurate and it seemed that this applied even to sizing charms - and highlighted the slim, muscular figure that James had always guessed he was hiding. Okay, so maybe the man was a bit old fashioned but there had to be another reason for wearing those heavy black robes in the heat of summer, even with cooling charms. He didn't want to think how many girls (and boys) would develop crushes on Severus if they knew what he looked like in better clothing and to be quite honest, falling for him was entirely James' own prerogative. He recovered his composure and said,

"Shall we go up then?"

Severus agreed, looking slightly uncomfortable, though whether it was with the costume, the assumed identity or going with James that caused it, he couldn't tell.

When they arrived, the Hall was already full as students of all ages danced, talked and made fools of themselves as youngsters are prone to doing. The Weird Sisters - now quite an old band but still popular - provided a musical background that was traditional enough not to grate on an adult's ears. A prefect at the door, who was wearing a realistic costume of a veela, stopped them before they could enter.

"Who are you going as?" she asked, smiling at them. Apparently, the illusion was meant to extend to the veela charm as well and she was a little puzzled as to why it wasn't working. Of course, they were both perfectly certain in themselves that they only liked guys and their self-control was stronger than most.

"Salazar Slytherin and Wulfric Ravenclaw," James said, bestowing a dazzling smile of his own. She blushed slightly.

"Sorry Professor Evans, I didn't recognise you."

A wave of her wand and named badges attached themselves to their clothes and she waved them through into the Great Hall.

Looking around, they could see a huge variety of costumes, some more realistic or ambitious than others. There were a few that would be impossible to achieve without illusion charms, others that were clearly just clever costumes with the occasional WWW sweet. The twins must have done excellent business in the run up to this since illusion and glamour charms weren't taught until fourth year. Around the Hall were the occasional uncomfortable looking chaperone and, standing arms folded in the corner, Professor Snape. James looked curiously over at Severus, pointing the intruder out.

"Do you know who that is?" he asked. Severus followed his glance and looked a little surprise.

"It can't be anyone but a staff member or Slytherin, no one else would have the guts. Given that they are unaccompanied, a staff member would be the most likely and the only one with that sort of sense of humour is Albus. It won't be the first time either."

"That would explain why he was practically threatening to put Imperious on you so that you wore a costume yourself. He looks like he's having a fine time."

"Hufflepuff will probably be in negative points tomorrow," Severus said. He was relaxing into the occasion, perhaps enjoying the chance to exercise his acting skills, and his pose as he stood there was the slouching, defiant looking stance that Bertie was particularly fond of, one that he certainly needed a lot. "Or maybe not. Isn't that Albus over by the punch?"
"Albus informed me that neither his costume nor his brother's would work if you turned up as yourself. I guess Abe's putting in an appearance as Albus. Shall we go confirm it?"

They wove their way through the crowds towards the drinks table. A snatch of conversation made James pause.

"Did you hear that Professor Evans is gay?" a girl was saying to a huddle of friends, boys and girls amongst them. James wasn't sure exactly who they were but he honestly doubted Slytherins given the ease with which he was eavesdropping.

"Really?" another girl asked. "Oh damn, and he's so good looking as well."

James flushed an attractive shade of scarlet. He could tell that Severus was trying very hard not to smirk.

"Your loss our gain," one of the boys said smugly. James walked rapidly away, Severus trailing behind him. He was trying very hard to recover his composure. He knew that he was relatively popular but had always put it down to his character, not his looks.

"You mean you didn't know?" Severus asked incredulously. "You never noticed the way you always have about a dozen of them staring at you during mealtimes?"

"I'll never be able to eat at the staff table again," he muttered.

"Pull yourself together. I thought you wanted to talk to Professor Dumbledore?"

"Not after this I'm not. Can you imagine the teasing I'd get?"

"Too bad - I want a drink."

James groaned.

"Promise you won't say anything?"

"If you wish but if you don't want him to know you've been embarrassed, I suggest you come up with a believable excuse for being that shade of red. It clashes with your costume."

"Hello sir!" a goblin said suddenly, beaming cheerfully up at him from a diminutive stature. "Nice costume."

"Alistair?" James guessed. "Your own isn't too dusty. This must be Simon then . . . what exactly has he come as?"

He was perfectly entitled to ask, as anyone who beheld the boy would admit. He was wearing an extremely baggy pair of jeans and a T-shirt that was inside out and back to front. He was also wearing an oversized pair of glasses.

"Martin Miggs at your service sir," Simon said, a grin plastered onto his face. James could see a remarkably bad impression of braces on his teeth. "Howdy!"

"I tried to tell him we didn't really look like this but he didn't exactly listen," Alistair explained, looking slightly embarrassed. "Come on Simon, Jeff said there were Chocolate Frogs on the staff table."

When they reached the drinks table, set over by the far wall where the Hufflepuff table normal stood, James poured himself a mug of firewhisky.
"I don't normally drink but I think I need one right now."

Dumbledore - which one they hadn't yet confirmed - looked on curiously, eyes twinkling.

"My dear boy, what can the trouble be. Would you like a lemon drop?" He proffered a small dish of the Headmaster's favourite candy.

"Quit the act Abe, it was all very predictable," James said irritably, downing his glass in one and wincing as stream poured out of his ears. "Did Albus lend you the robes or are they your own?"

"You think I would have something like this in my own wardrobe? I appropriated some of Albus' for the occasion."

"I take it you forgot to tell him then," Severus concluded. "I hope you realise that now he'll think that you have similar taste in clothes and will start giving you the monstrosities as gifts."

"Hmm, I'll have to watch out for that. I'm so glad you found a date, James, I hope you took my advice?"

"Advice?"

"Never go out with anyone who wears their clothes back to front. It shows a lack of co-ordination and common sense."

This, coming from a man wearing the most atrocious canary yellow robes that had ever been made, sent the two younger men into hysterics. Well, James started laughing uncontrollably (later blaming it on the small amount of alcohol) and Severus chuckled discreetly.

As the evening wore on, James elected not to partake of the punch Abe was guarding, not being entirely sure what the man had added, and stuck to butterbeer. He had no wish to get drunk and make a fool of himself in front of Severus and his students. When twelve o'clock approached, James was hurriedly evicted from the castle by Abe and stood shivering in the cold night outside. Inside, he heard the students counting down the last minute. Dobby appeared with a crack holding a small basket and a note. He thrust these at James and vanished again.

Dear James, As a tall, dark man that was readily available, you are going to be first footing the castle. In the basket are a piece of coal, which you put on the fire, a flask of whiskey and some shortbread. You are also obliged to kiss any woman who asks for it, though I suggest you limit it to those who are of age if you don't want to be there all night. Remember not to come in until midnight

Abe

James stared at the note. First footing he'd heard of, though while he was at school they'd had bigger concerns and no party on New Year's eve for him to find out about it. If Albus was really that superstitious, he assumed that Severus had been pushed out every year. The bit about the kissing - that could get nasty. He made a mental note to absent himself as soon as possible.

"10 - 9 - 8 - 7 - 6 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1,..." he heard them chant. Then there was a cheer and a huge bang as hundreds of WWW fireworks went off inside. That was the beauty of wizard fireworks, that they were safe enough to be used indoors.

He walked in through the door. As he came into the Great Hall, he got another cheer. As he'd been instructed, he walked over to put the coal in the fireplace and deposited the whiskey and shortbread on the refreshments tables. He then looked at the watching audience and sighed. This could be a long
night.

With a certain amount of relief, he spotted Minerva over with Albus, Abe and Severus and went over to them. A number of the students lost interest in him.

"Happy New Year," he said to her, kissing her lightly on the cheek. She giggled slightly - too much whiskey for her this evening!

A couple of the braver seventh years came up to him and he dutifully pecked them on the cheek, being very careful to be as light as possible and trying not to grimace. If they liked him already, there was no way he was going to give them any more ammunition.

Severus had been sitting down, smirking at James' dilemma. As suspected, he had been subjected to this ritual a number of times himself, being the only member of the staff that had qualified before James's employment. Hagrid, while tall, dark and male, was also only half-human, and had therefore been ruled out. He might have been asked this year, except that he'd made his hair blond, ruling himself out.

After about fifteen minutes, James gave up. He retreated behind the table, grabbed Severus' arm and pulled him out of the Hall.

"Did you suggest that?" he asked.

"No, I certainly should have though. The look on your face was priceless."

"I think I'm calling it a night then, if that's okay with you. I've kissed a quarter of the seventh years - I'd hate to think what they'll be like in class next term!"

"They'll forget it quickly enough, it's not as if it was just one of them or, judging by the rumours, that you're even interested in girls."

"True," James admitted, then added shyly, "You know, if anyone's paying attention, maybe we ought to do this properly."

"What do you mean?" Severus asked, the smirk on his face showing that he knew exactly what James meant but was making him suffer all the same. James decided not to co-operate. It appeared that maybe Severus wasn't interested after all.

He sighed slightly and stepped forwards to press a quick kiss to Severus' lips before drawing back, looking at his face though he was nervous of what he might see. They looked at each other for a moment, then Severus shook his head slightly.

"That was pathetic, Evans."

He pulled James in and kissed him thoroughly and passionately. When they drew apart for lack of breath a minute or so later, they looked at each other. Words didn't seem necessary with the level of trust between them already so high and mutual understanding greater. They headed down to the dungeons together.

Albus and Abe Dumbledore watched them go, their costumes gone, replaced with normal robes when they left the party.

"That took longer than expected," Abe said relief. ":What were you doing all term? I told you that they'd be a good match in August!"
"These things take time," Albus said placidly. "Especially with those two. They needed to get to know each other before they'd get anywhere. Lemon drop?"

"Don't mind if I do."
James slowly regained consciousness the next morning, fingers absently clutching the pillow. After a few moments of denying that the morning had come, he sat up, eyes still firmly closed. This achieved, he slowly cracked one eye open. The other shot open a split second afterwards and he shot upright from his slouch, hand diving under the pillow for the dagger he kept there. He couldn't find it. This was most definitely not his room! It was, well, greener for one thing.

Slowly, the memory of last night . . . earlier that morning technically . . . came back to him. He turned his head to see Severus lying next to him, obviously awake and watching him with some amusement.

"Do you do that every morning?" he asked. James blushed.

"I'm not a morning person."

"It's about one in the afternoon."

"Oh. Right."

"The house elves have left some clothes out for you there. Now you're awake, I'll go and make breakfast - they aren't serving meals in the Great Hall today, just snacks. The idea is that the little monsters all ate too much yesterday and we weren't likely to see them until about now anyway."

With that, he swung out of bed and dressed quickly in his robes. James lingered a moment longer, watching appreciatively and putting off leaving the warm bed himself as long as possible. When it seemed inevitable that he would have to move, he cast a warming charm on his feet and padded across the stone floor to his clothes. After pulling his hopelessly messy hair back in an approximation of his normal style, he walked through.

As he'd surmised, he was indeed in Severus' rooms and now came to the familiar main room. The smell of bacon came from a room to the left and to his right was the room when the Malfoys had stayed during their time at the castle.

"Anything I can do?" he asked, leaning on the doorframe as he watched Severus deftly manoeuvring the various pans. His partner looked at him thoughtfully.

"Draco mentioned that your skills at potions were limited," he pointed out.

"That's potions, not cooking. I could cook breakfast decently age seven."

"Could you take over the bacon then while I find some bread and set the table."

James cancelled the hovering spells, uncomfortable with using the household magic he hadn't grown up with. With simple Muggle efficiency, he crisped the bacon nicely and dished it out onto the plate that was held out to him and turned to the egg. A moment later, he came to sit down. Severus tasted the bacon cautiously.

"Nice," he acknowledged. "What's your problem with potions?"

"Power level. I have problems controlling the magic flow and will completely throw any advanced
potion off balance. Maybe if I'd started earlier . . ."

A house elf popped into the room clutching a piece of parchment in its tiny fist.

"Professor Evans sir, there is a message for you from the Headmaster sir."

James read it hurriedly.

"Thank you. Could you tell the headmaster I'll take care of it as soon as I finish eating."

The elf bowed until its nose brushed the ground and faded away.

"What is it?" Severus asked.

"Apparently a couple of Gryffindors are duelling in their common room."

"Only Gryffindors. Still, that's Minerva's responsibility."

"She apparently drank far too much last night and is still out cold. He'd like you to find a hangover remedy for her while I deal with the brats."

"He's sending you - a Slytherin house master - to deal with a fight in the Gryffindor common room."

"Consider the alternatives. I imagine Pomona and Filius are busy enough controlling their little darlings, Slytherins being the only ones with any common sense, and that leaves you, me and the unaffiliated teachers in residence, namely Sybil Trelawney. He seems to think you making an appearance in the Gryffindor common room would scar the brats for life so I have to go."

"You've obviously been too easy on them. Why can't the headmaster do his own dirty work?"

"Because he can tell me to do it. There, that's me done. Thanks for breakfast."

James stood up and put his plate on the side by the cooker. Walking back towards the main corridor, he bent to kiss Severus soundly, tasting the bacon still lingering in his mouth.

"See you later," he said, "This shouldn't take me long."

Muttering about the unreliability of Gryffindors, he marched firmly upstairs to where the Fat Lady was hanging over the entrance to the tower.

"Valour," he said loudly and sternly over her humming. Looking, disgruntled, she swung forwards to allow him to pass.

Storming into the room with a face like a thundercloud, all for the effect of course, he quickly spotted the two miscreants. A boy and a girl, sixth years and quite old enough to know better, they were trading hexes from behind two of the sofas while everyone else had retreated out of reach. A solitary first year had been trapped on the floor between them and was huddled there, unable to escape while her friends looked on in horror.

"Silence!" he shouted. Everyone else became quiet but the two concerned continued. He scowled and moved to grab John Fancourt by the ear. Startled, he dropped his wand and James scooped it up and put it in his pocket. "You two, Professor McGonagall's office immediately!"

His own office being too far off, he appropriated their Head of House's, watched as they left for there, taking Miss Kegg's wand off her as she passed him. He then moved to pick the first year off the ground.
"Are you okay?"

She nodded.

"Twenty points to Gryffindor for keeping your nerve and being sensible. I have one question to ask the lot of you. A first year was in obvious danger of being hit by a stray curse, quite a nasty one at that from what I heard. What happened to Gryffindor honour and courage in terms of stopping an illegal duel and looking after someone who needed the help? If I ever find that this has happened again, one hundred points will be taken . . . from every person who I judge to have the ability to have helped who is present in the common room. Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes Professor," came the collective murmur. Several of them, the older years in particular, were looking flushed at that comment.

"Excellent."

Satisfied that he'd made his point, James left without a backwards glance. If he showed one sign of softness after that, the entire lecture would have been in vain. Now he only had to deal with the culprits themselves before he could go and relax.

As he came into the office, a flick of his wand had the door swing shut behind him with a crash. The two students jumped and sat up perfectly straight in their chairs, faces full of righteous indignation as he sat in Minerva's seat. It was considerably more comfortable than the one in his office - a point of dispute at the next staff meeting perhaps.

"I assure you that this is not the way I anticipated spending one of my rare holidays but Professor McGonagall is at present indisposed so I have been asked to clear up whatever petty dispute caused this spectacle and I am not in the mood to be forgiving. Mr Fancourt, you first. I want a full explanation of the events leading up to this . . . duel."

The boy shuffled uncomfortably.

"Well, I'd sort of decided to ask Jess out and I went over to where they were sitting. I asked her if she'd go to Hogsmeade with me in two weeks . . ."

"And then?"

"Then Olivia hexed me! I just defended myself."

"Very well. Miss Kegg, if we could hear your side of the story."

The girl thought for a moment.

"He had most of it there actually. He neglected to mention that he's been going out with me for the past month."

"And you never ended the . . . ah relationship?"

"Not to my knowledge, no."

"And you did in fact attack him first."

"I suppose so sir, yes, but it was just a prank hex - green hair. He retaliated with much more serious jinxes."

"So, you are saying that Mr Fancourt approached where you were sitting with the intention of asking
his girlfriend's best friend to go on a date with him?"

"That sounds right."

"And I had thought the two of you were mature enough to know better. Mr Fancourt, one assumes that you are aware of the convention that assumes that you only have one girlfriend or boyfriend at a time? It would be extremely foolish, were this not the case, to ask one out in front of the other."

"Yes sir."

"I would recommend that you think very hard as to what you meant by committing to these relationships and continue with only than one of them. Should I find you . . . double crossing a girl again, it is within my powers to prevent you from dating formally during your time at school. I very much hope that I am not called upon to enforce this."

"Yes sir."

"Miss Kegg. I admit that it must be somewhat trying to have your boyfriend attempt that in front of you but would suggest that the Gryffindor common room is not the place for such a dispute. While a prank against him might have helped him learn from the experience, this could have been done without inciting a fight. In duelling club, should you have wished to duel, you could have requested to be partnered where I could oversee the duel and make sure that it was fair and legal. I suggest you remember this in future."

"Yes Professor Evans."

"Now I would like to impress on both of you the school rules you violated - using magic outside of class without permission, fighting in the common room. These rules are in place for the protection of the students. There was one first year who was caught in your duel who certainly didn't have the skills she would have needed to defend herself and could have been badly hurt. A week's detention for both of you with Mr Filch and fifty points will be taken from Gryffindor. Do you agree that this is a fair punishment?"

"Yes sir," they mumbled. James smiled coldly, this way he couldn't be accused of favouritism. In actual fact, Gryffindor would only lose fifteen points from each of them thanks to the little first year.

"You may go. See that this doesn't happen again."

James watched as the two of them trailed disconsolately out and sighed, allowing himself a moment to recover before leaving. As he shut the door carefully behind him, knowing that Minerva would kill him if he left it open to pranksters, he turned to see Albus standing behind him, watching calmly.

"Thank you for handling that James," he said.

"I'm sure you could have handled it on your own. Why me?"

"I thought you might be interested in hearing something and it was in my interest for Severus not to know who gave you this piece of information . . ."

"Get to the point Albus!" James snapped. "I had other things planned for today, including spending time with Severus."

"It's his birthday on the ninth."

"Severus's?"
"Who else?"

James thought about this for a moment, then winced.

"I only just managed to think of a Christmas present! What in Merlin's name can I give him now?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something, my boy. Run along now."

He ambled off, leaving James staring after him.

"Why do I have the feeling he's manipulating me?" he sighed. Still, he knew all too well that there was no other place he'd rather be, no other person he'd rather be with, so Albus' and no doubt Abe's meddling would have to be let pass. It was a very useful piece of information after all.

Over the next week or so, James and Severus settled into each other's lives with an ease that surprised even Albus. They still maintained the formality of separate rooms but Hogwarts, ever willing to oblige her favourite, had opened an interconnecting door so it was impossible for anyone to tell in whose quarters they actually lived.

As yet, their relationship had been kept private, only the Dumbledores and Draco knowing for sure other than themselves. James had his own suspicions about a few others but they were keeping very quiet about anything they knew. Alistair did not know yet. They had discussed it and, if their relationship was indeed a long term one, Severus was happy enough with the idea of adopting him, but so far it wasn't his concern.

On the ninth, James tried very hard to pretend he had nothing special planned. In the afternoon, Albus invited Severus up for 'afternoon tea'. Of course, this was hardly an optional event. James hurried down to the kitchens to speak with the house elves about a special supper for them, then apparated off to pick up his gift.

When Severus finally returned, he looked surprised and a little irritated. In his hands was a pair of slippers. James stared at them in amazement: surely even Albus wouldn't... Apparently Albus was indeed the only person who would dare or even think to give Severus a pair of bright pink slippers with little white bunnies on top.

"Not a word," Severus said through clenched teeth. James tried very hard not to smile. Gently, he took the slippers from his lover and whispered a spell. They vanished.

"There you go."

"I might have wanted them, you know," Severus pointed out.

"I know. I think they ended up somewhere under the bed. You can burn them later if you want. I think he left you another present down here as well."

Satisfied with that, Severus looked at the room properly for the first time. It was candlelit and a small table sat in the middle of the room. In desperation, James had gone to Draco for advice. To be quite honest, he didn't have a clue what constituted a romantic dinner so he had allowed his friend to tell him. Draco seemed to be finding the whole affair extremely amusing.

"Happy birthday," James said shyly, pointing at a small pile of gifts on the sofa. It turned out that there were quite a few people who had discovered the date other than himself.

"You didn't have to..."
"But I wanted to."

There was a long pause.

"Thank you," Severus said at last. Then he frowned. "Who told you the date?"

"Albus," James said quickly, deciding that the slippers were reason enough to expose him to revenge. To his surprise, the other man laughed.

"Meddling old codger."

"Isn't he just. He's been throwing us together from the start. Here, this is from me."

Eyes lowered, he held out a large, flat package. Severus took it carefully and sat down on the sofa to unwrap it, pulling James down with him. He removed the paper very carefully, putting the ribbon aside and folding the paper. By the time he was ready to look at the actual present, James was practically squirming in his seat. In the end, he had decided to give Severus a painting of Hogwarts, showing the lake to the far left and the Quidditch pitch in the distance to the right. It had been enchanted, so there were players flying on the pitch and every so often you could see groups of tiny students emerging from the castle. There was a long pause as Severus examined it carefully, taking in every detail. For a moment, James thought he didn't like it and was afraid to say.

"Where did you find it?" he asked at last.

"There's a shop near Diagon Alley. I was looking around and saw it and thought that maybe you'd like it. If you don't, I can always exchange it for another . . . "

Severus cupped his cheek in his hand and lifted his face so he was looking at him instead of at his shoes.

"It's perfect. I don't think there's anything else you could get me that would equal it, so stop worrying." He dropped a gentle kiss onto his lips before continuing. "Do you know which enchantments are on it?"

"Not really."

"Let me try something, I've seen Albus using a similar picture."

He frowned slightly, as if chasing an elusive memory and said a few words in Latin. To James' amazement, the view zoomed in to the Great Hall, then wound its way through the corridors to the Headmaster's office. As they moved through the door, the canvas went blank.

"Oops," James said.

"He'll have wards up against any spying equipment," Severus explained. "He has one of these himself."

"So that's how he keeps track of everything so easily!"

"Indeed. I've warded my chambers in the same way as the office and I'd check your rooms as well, your bedroom in particular."

"You don't think he'd . . . " James exclaimed, blushing furiously. Severus raised an eyebrow.

"This is Albus Dumbledore."
"Point taken. If he thought it was for your own good, he'd do just about anything. Show me how to do the spells sometime. Right now though, it's your birthday, so shall we eat?"

They talked for a long while over dinner and afterwards. At James' reminder, Severus opened his other presents: from Albus, Minerva, Poppy, Draco and, surprisingly enough, Remus and Hermione. Each present was thoughtful and/or useful but despite James' worry that one of them would supplant his own as the best, none quite managed to equal it. Books were fine, as were Albus' slippers, however the emotional meaning wasn't the same.

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A few days later, their evening was surprised by a sixth year student, a boy by the name of Arnold Warrington whose father was a known Death Eater.

"Mr Warrington," James said with surprise. Few students bothered them in their quarters: there was an alarm in the common room for emergencies and they made rounds of the dormitories every night. "What can I do for you?"

"Is Professor Snape there sir?"

"These are his quarters. Come in."

Rather uncomfortably, Arnold took a seat perched on the edge of a chair. Severus and James took seats near him. There was a long pause before he began.

"What do you think about the Death Eaters, Professor Evans?" he blurted eventually. James thought about his answer carefully.

"I am opposed to them," he said candidly. "In fact, I'm an Order of the Phoenix member."

He seemed to relax, so presumably that was the right answer, especially when Severus confirmed it with a nod of his head.

"My father mentioned over Christmas that he might be withdrawing me from school so I could receive a proper education," Arnold said, talking more freely now. "He's a Death Eater and thinks I need to learn the Dark Arts so that I can join the Death Eaters in the next few months."

"I take it you are less than enthusiastic about the idea?" Severus asked.

"I'm not stupid sir, I know they're going to lose. Besides, everyone knows Lucius Malfoy is more than a bit mad."

Severus leaned back in his seat, a small crease appearing on his forehead as he seemed to consider his options.

"As I see it, there are three main options. The first is that you remain at the school in defiance of his wishes. You'll be easy for him to find and the governors would probably intervene. The second is that we send you to a safe house with a strong supporter of the Light who could continue your education. The last is that you go home and remain in your father's favour but we engineer some reason that you can't join."
"I think I'd better go home sir."

Severus thought for a moment. James wondered briefly if this was the first student who had come to him for help.

"Tell me, have you ever had Dragon Pox?"

"I don't think so sir."

"Then you'll be particularly vulnerable. It tends to lie dormant for about a week depending on your age and magic level - enough time for you to be withdrawn from school before you become infectious. After that, your magic becomes unstable and you will have to be kept fairly isolated. Obviously, you would be of no use to them until you healed, by which point you can only hope that the fight will have ended or at least be going badly enough that your father will reconsider sending you. Should this not be the case, I can give you an emergency portkey to escape with. Does that sound acceptable to you?"

"Yes sir," Arnold said quietly, looking very subdued and a little surprised that he was agreeing to be infected with one of the worst childhood ailments in the wizarding world. Most youngsters had had it by the time they started at Hogwarts but the more developed and stronger your magic, the worse the effects were and the longer they lasted.

"James, have you had it?"

"No," he said, a little startled by the question. "I was muggle raised."

"I think you had better return to your own quarters then. Should you catch it now, the effects could be disastrous. I will disinfect myself thoroughly as soon as I am finished."

James could see the logic of that, so he smiled reassuringly at Arnold and left via the connecting door. Severus came after him an hour or so later, looking tired and worn.

"And so it starts again," he said, sighing. "I'd hoped that there wouldn't be any new Death Eaters from this generation but apparently I was wrong. We will have to keep track of any odd absences from school and warn the rest of the staff to watch out for suspicious behaviour."

"I think all of our Slytherins have more sense," James said, trying to be encouraging.

"I'd like to think I haven't wasted my time. There's a good crowd of older students, Archie for one, at the moment who will report any suspicions, which makes things easier. Other than that, we can only hope."

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As predicted, Arnold was officially summoned home the next day. His trunk was packed and all of the house shook his hand solemnly as he left for what might be the last time. They weren't stupid, all of the older ones knew exactly what his father had planned for him, the younger ones knew at least that it was bad. He wouldn't be forgotten and they were all hoping for his safe return.

A couple of days after his departure, the school received an owl informing them that Arnold had fallen ill with Dragon Pox and they should be alert for an epidemic in the school. It was simple
politeness perhaps, trying to stay in favour with the leaders of the Light whilst toadying to the Dark. James sincerely hoped the teenager would be all right and that he would never need to use the ring portkey he'd been given.

The next weekend, James had invited Alistair down to his quarters for the afternoon. After making the decision to consider adopting, it seemed sensible to make an attempt to get to know each other outside the restrictions of the school day, where they tried to keep strictly to a teacher-pupil relationship.

They didn't talk about much, certainly not anything important. They discussed the different League Quidditch teams and how stupid Geoffrey in sixth year was acting over his new girlfriend. Not having grown into those particular hormones, Alistair found it immensely funny whereas James sympathised but was just old enough not to feel a little insulted. James also helped Alistair with his homework in some of the subjects he found difficult, not of course in Defense Against the Dark Arts but in History of Magic in particular. It seemed that Binns was as boring as ever, so he passed on the tips that he'd been given in his first year on how to make up convincing goblin names that would fool almost any examiner.

They were having tea and biscuits, curled up together on the sofa, when Alistair suddenly went slightly red-faced, squirming slightly in his seat. James looked on with interest - it was highly unlikely the boy could say anything that would embarrass or upset him and it would be easy enough to deflect if he did. He waited a few minutes, seeing if he'd say it without prompting. It quickly became apparent that he believed it far too embarrassing.

"Spit it out then."

"Well . . . sir . . . James . . . if you don't mind me asking . . . "

"I don't bite," James said, trying to help him out. "If I don't want to answer something, I'll just tell you and we can forget about it."

"Are you and Professor Snape together?" he blurted at last, face Gryffindor red with embarrassment. "I mean like he's your boyfriend?"

While that hadn't been quite the question he'd been expecting, James was highly amused, more than a little curious as to which of the older Slytherins had put him up to it. Alistair was a nice boy but a bit young to be reading the subtle signs of a relationship. He was also Muggle-raised, less used to the idea that two men could be involved just as seriously as a man and a woman. He wondered what Severus would think about being called his 'boyfriend' - it sounded a little too adolescent to him.

"Yes," he answered candidly, trying to keep a straight face despite the humour he saw in the situation, "though I wouldn't call him that if I were you. Does it bother you?"

"I . . . uh . . . well I didn't know that two guys could be together and . . . "

"And someone told you to ask so you could satisfy the gossips in Slytherin?" James guessed, knowing quite well what older students, Slytherins in particular, were apt to persuade the younger ones do to. "Don't worry, I was expecting them to try something like this since we aren't giving anything away to them."

"I don't mind sir, really," Alistair said earnestly. "Professor Snape is nice."

"How many Gryffindors do you think would faint if you said that?"

Alistair snickered, infected like all of his housemates with a feeling of great superiority over their
more immature counterparts.

"Well Gryffindors are stupid sometimes."

"True. Now, I was going to wait until you were a bit older before explaining things to you but I'll
give you a basic explanation. When you get a man who loves men rather than women, he's called a
homosexual."

"What about normal . . . I mean man and woman?"

"Heterosexual, though no one uses that either. I don't think anyone your age would use the word
homosexual, they might be more likely to say the man was gay or queer or something along those
lines. Either way, it happens in both the wizarding and Muggle worlds but people are more open
about it in the wizarding world. Here the idea is that you love a person for their personality, not for
their gender. You know about Charlie and Oliver, don't you?"

"I thought they were just friends," Alistair admitted innocently. "Like me and Simon. But you can't
have children without a woman, can you?"

"Um . . . well not in that sense," James said carefully, trying very hard not to be the one to explain
about the mechanics of sex. That task would fall to Madam Pomfrey for the girls and probably
Severus for the boys. Whatever happened, it wouldn't be him. "We can adopt though and there are
spells we can use so that it's like we're really a child's parent by blood as well. It means that there
aren't many children who have to live in orphanages."

"Are you going to get married?" Alistair asked, not seeming to realise that it might not have been
discussed.

"Wizards and witches don't usually get married. What actually happens is a ceremony called
bonding. As to Severus and myself, it's a little too early to tell."

"Will you still want me if you're living with him?"

James felt a surge of sympathy for the little boy who thought he was about to lose him so soon after
his parents. Feeling awkward, he put an arm around his shoulders.

"Alistair, I said I would look after you. Severus has also told you he'd look after you. Do you think
that the fact that we live together would make any difference? I've always wanted to have children
and I wouldn't give you up for anything."

"What brought this on? Severus asked from behind them. "I thought you were having tea, not a heart
to heart confession."

James jumped, he hadn't heard him come in. Alistair had gone bright red again.

"Someone told Alistair about us being together so I was explaining to him," James managed to say
casually.

"Who?"

"Older Slytherin I imagine, with suspicions but no concrete proof. We were just clearing up a few
misconceptions, that's all. Do you want some tea?"

"Now you sound like Albus. Milky if you would, please. Do you understand now, Alistair?"
"Y-yes sir."

"You're welcome to come to talk to either of us at any time," Severus reminded him gently. He then changed the subject to a less personal one. "What do you think of our chances for the Hufflepuff game? James seems to think we should be worried about their beaters."

"They aren't bad but ours are better and all of our team is better. Their seeker is a seventh year who's so slow I could beat him on a school broom!"

Alistair left again just before dinner and Severus burst out laughing. James stared at him. Severus chuckled on occasion and he'd caught him grinning a couple of times but this was just worrying.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked, getting a little scared.

"You really gave him the talk?!" Severus gasped, attempting to calm himself down. "The look on your face..."

James scowled. It had been very difficult for him without the chance to think about what to say and now Severus was laughing at him. Then he smirked slightly.

"About all I told him was that it was possible for two guys to be together and that we still wanted him. I left all the mechanics of it for you. I'll warn you that he's a complete innocent - I think his mother kept him very sheltered. He didn't even know that two men together was even possible."

Severus sobered up immediately, thinking of all the awkward questions he'd be faced with when speaking to Alistair and his male year mates in their third year. He'd become used to the wizarding children and outgoing, independent muggleborns that were more common in Slytherin. The fact that someone could be eleven without even knowing about sex was, quite frankly, astonishing.

"Sorry for laughing," he said, thinking about the teasing he'd get when The Talk came round. "You just looked so uncomfortable and serious trying to explain it to him and he was even worse than you."

"I was trying very hard not to get into anything specific. I wonder how long it will take for the rumours to spread."

"Do you mind?"

"Not particularly. At least if they know I'm exclusively gay and it's not just rumours I won't get the girls... oh dear."

"What?"

"Valentine's Day is in less than a month."

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The day of the Slytherin v. Hufflepuff Quidditch match dawned sunny and warm, much to the relief of the Hufflepuff team. They knew that the Slytherins had been unlucky in the timing of their training sessions and had had to cope with snow, hail and high winds. Besides, it was very uncomfortable flying in the cold - your hands tended to go numb whatever warming charms you
used on them.

James and Severus sat in the front row of the teachers' box, James clad proudly in his new Slytherin robes as befitted the team coach. He'd also obtained a Slytherin banner off Alistair and had hung it proudly and prominently above him, right in front of Pomona, who sat directly behind him. She appeared most put out by it but the others all seemed entertained. As the coach of the Slytherin teacher, no one could expect him to show professional impartiality and there weren't exactly any rules against it. Albus had suggested that Alistair could sit with them for the match but James had thought back to his own matches. It would be no fun for the kid if he couldn't boo the Hufflepuffs without Pomona or Minerva taking points.

The Slytherin team zoomed onto the pitch first, just as Madam Hooch brought the balls out onto the grass. The wash of green in the stands cheered, making a few of the older teachers jump. James was pleased to see a few of the Ravenclaws joining them as he tapped his wand on the banner and it began to boom out 'SLYTHERIN'. Pomona Sprout looked like she was about to be sick - while normally an amiable sort of person, she got very competitive when her house was playing.

When the Hufflepuff had joined them in their canary yellow robes, James saw the two captains shake hands, the Hufflepuff looking a little nervous as Archie squeezed his hand a little harder than strictly necessary. Madam Hooch gave the word, they remounted and took their places and the game began.

Hufflepuff caught the Quaffle as she tossed it up and James watched in amazement as their youngest Chaser shot down the pitch, the Slytherin Beaters moving to head her off while the Chasers remained towards the Hufflepuff end. James almost jumped out of his seat in horror: this hadn't been a tactic they'd discussed!

The Keeper caught the shot and used his broom to send the Quaffle shooting back down the pitch, well past the Hufflepuff team who'd moved forwards to support their teammate. The Slytherins were then able to move forwards and score in the confusion. James allowed a smile of approval to sneak onto his face as he watched the commentator flick the score panel and give ten points to Slytherin.

In an arrow formation, the Chasers shot around the stadium in a victory lap, quickly returning to their positions to meet the next offensive.

Five minutes later, a Hufflepuff beater was taken to the infirmary with a bludger to the head. The Slytherin beater responsible claimed it was an accident, his counterpart's ineptitude at aiming and was given the benefit of the doubt. It was certainly a shot that could have been countered even if it was frowned upon. The game continued, Hufflepuff a player down.

After five more Slytherin goals, Hufflepuff managed to score and the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor stands went wild. At last, something was going in their favour. The Slytherin teachers kept their faces blank as Pomona started babbling with relief to Poppy.

Suddenly Severus shifted in his seat, head swinging round. James followed his gaze to see a blur of yellow twirling around one of the boxes to their right, the Slytherin seeker close behind and gaining. For his first year on the team the kid was really doing remarkably well - this would be his second catch if he made it.

As they rounded the tower and came back into view, they were no longer racing as strongly, the snitch appeared to have vanished. There was a collective sigh from the stands. Chaser action was good but nothing could quite match the speed or the danger that came from the Seekers.

It was an hour later before the seekers moved again from their position high above the rest of the players. This time it was Davis in the lead, the smaller figure diving almost straight down, arm
outstretched, the Hufflepuff in his wake. Even the Chasers seemed to pause for a moment, watching. The Seekers neared the ground fifty metres . . . thirty . . . twenty . . .

A cheer went up from the stands, deafening everyone. Davis, the brave little thirteen year old, had caught the snitch and was standing proudly in the middle of the pitch, snitch held high in his fist as he turned to acknowledge the applause. A moment later, he was swamped by his teammates and swung up on their shoulders as they bore him, still holding onto his prize, back towards the castle.

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It was a month or so later when he next got any large period of free time. Weekdays he taught, with detentions and marking in the evenings. After that he spent time with Severus, cementing their relationship to the point where it seemed certain to be a long term partnership. At weekends, he made sure to spend at least one afternoon with Alistair. Unfortunately, as attack frequencies were increasing as the new Death Eaters became bolder, the number of Order of the Phoenix meetings and strategy sessions were more numerous and longer. Teachers and older students were walking around with more serious faces now and James was reminded of the impact every time he saw a Ministry Auror. They, of course, were right in the thick of it: tired, battered, wounded and heart-sore.

Revelling in the chance to take a break and unable to help Severus with his potions, James decided to visit the Malfoys. He hadn't been over to the castle for a long time and was curious to see what had been made of it.

He persuaded the house elves to give him a nice bottle of wine and bought a mobile for Harry's nursery before wandering down to the edge of the anti-apparition wards to leave.

As a member of the bloodline, he was able to apparate directly to the great Hall and did so with relief. It was deserted when he arrived but he looked around curiously. The floor underfoot was tiled with great stone flagstones like those used at Hogwarts and the tables and benches had been varnished and polished until they shone in the sunlight. The few slits that had been used for light and ventilation had been replaced with large stained-glass windows that depicted - as far as James could guess - scenes from wizarding history. In the light, he could see that the weaponry on the walls was also polished to an almost perfect gleam.

Spread out on the head table were a few rough maps and sketches. James poured over these curiously, noting the complete illogic in its layout and wondering how his friends had managed to map it in the first place.

"Master Evans is here!" came the high pitched squeal of a house elf from behind him. James spun on his heel to see what was unmistakably Dobby. Even the few other free house elves he had seen had better taste in clothes - wearing different coloured patterned socks on your ears wasn't a particularly reassuring sign.

"Morning Dobby. Do you know where Mr and Mrs Malfoy are?"

"Dobby believes that Master Draco is out flying and Mistress Blaise is in the nursery with Master Harry."

"Could you show me up to the nursery please."
"Certainly Master Evans. This way sir."

"How are you finding it here then?"

"Dobby is liking it very much. All of the other house elves are accepting Dobby's freedom and Dobby is liking Wat very much, even if he doesn't like Dobby's clothes. Dobby thinks Wat is a little bit old-fashioned. He doesn't seem to know what plumbing does."

"How many house elves are there here?" James asked, suddenly realising that he didn't know how many were needed for an estate of this size.

"Dobby is uncertain of exactly . . . "

"Just an estimate will do."

"Dobby thinks there are about fifty that work inside and a hundred that work outside. They is all very happy that Master Evans and Master Malfoy have come because it means they is working properly again. Master Evans has reached the nursery now," Dobby said, ending abruptly in that odd way that seemed unique to house elves.

"Thank you Dobby, I'll call you if I need you."

Dobby bowed deeply and vanished with a faint wisp of smoke. James' smile got even broader. He'd learned over time how to deal with a typical house elf such as most of those that worked at Hogwarts or the University. Dobby wasn't exactly typical, so he'd had to revise his approach a little and the elf seemed to appreciate a little more personal conversation as well as the clear orders and instructions. He quite liked Dobby - he was one of the few that were happy to chatter to him openly even if his grammar wasn't quite as good as say Wat's and grated a little on the ears.

James pushed open the wooden door they'd stopped in front of to reveal a large, sunny room with windows - charmed or not he wasn't sure - covering most of one wall. The floor was carpeted in a dark blue and a cot stood in the corner. The wall behind the desk was full of books that had presumably been gathered from around the house or salvaged from the Malfoy residence. Baby Harry was seated in a playpen with his toys around him like a prince with his subjects around his podgy self, while Blaise sat at a desk, looking over papers and making the occasional note on a sheet of parchment. Occasionally she glanced over at her child with obvious fondness, it appeared that motherhood agreed with her. Unusual in such large place, it seemed the room served as nursery, study and living room to them and he could see why.

He cleared his throat, feeling a little like an unwanted intruder with no right to be there.

"You're back early Draco," she said without turning or even looking up from her reading, knowing that there weren't many others who were permitted to be there and no visitors planned.

"I'm not Draco," James said, grinning. She turned hastily, looking embarrassed as she hastily stood up to kiss his cheek welcomingly.

"Sorry James. We weren't expecting you or I'd have met you downstairs."

"Don't worry - it isn't like I gave you any warning. I just came for a visit, nothing important."

"I'll send a house elf to flag Draco down and then we can show you what we've done here so far."

"Where is he?"
"Out flying. We're compiling an updated map of the area and of course he volunteered to do the
legwork. I have to say that it's been very interesting putting our abilities to good use."

"What do you mean?"

"All of us of a certain standing were trained in estate management and the like when we were kids
but the Malfoy property is mostly run by lawyers now and even the house itself is looked after by the
house elves. This is our first chance to really get into it."

Draco burst in five minutes later, hair unusually untidy and face flushed from the chilly air.
Obviously the time of relative relaxation had done him no harm whatsoever, quite the opposite
actually - both he and Blaise looked healthy and fit, comfortable in far more informal robes than the
unspoken rules of society required them to wear.

"James!" he exclaimed, smiling. "What are you doing here?"

Whilst waiting for an answer, Draco placed a kiss squarely on Blaise's mouth and scooped Harry up
to tap his nose with a finger, which the kid promptly grabbed. Draco laughed.

"I just felt like visiting," James replied, watching with envy their comfortable interaction.

Draco paused and took a long look at him. James shuffled uncomfortably but was unable to wipe the
grin from his face. It seemed to have been plastered there for a long time and reappeared whenever
he started thinking about his life.

"What's happened to you then? You're practically bouncing and for you that really is saying
something," Draco said, his smirk telling James that he had at least guessed it already. At University
it had always been Bertie and Draco that were the wild ones, with James often being dragged along
with them but rarely losing his cool. In fact, making him relax completely had been something of an
ongoing challenge for them. James personally felt that it was related to not getting drunk in case he
let slip his identity.

"How do you tell if you're in love with someone?" James asked, completely serious. He was a little
confused about the whole idea after seeing so many conflicting signs. Certainly he would never have
felt comfortable talking to the Dursleys about it and he wasn't sure theirs was an ideal relationship
anyway. Abe and Albus were both supposedly single and he wasn't sure he'd get a straight answer
from them anyway and Hermione would be likely to give him a textbook definition without really
helping him. Severus, one of the few other people he trusted, was a little too close to the issue to
discuss it with. As for Remus, well, he wasn't entirely sure that a werewolf was legally allowed to
marry or anything, so it might be a touchy subject.

Draco and Blaise exchanged a glance and moved together to sit down on a sofa, pulling James with
them.

"Do you respect him and his beliefs?" began Draco.

"Yes."

"You don't mind that he has some secrets?" Blaise asked. Obviously this was going to be like an
interrogation. James had to think a bit about that question, the answer not being obvious as he
confronted his feeling and applied logic.

"No . . . well a little but I have plenty of secrets that I wouldn't feel ready to tell him yet so I guess I
can accept it."
"Do you spend time with him when you're not shagging?" Draco asked bluntly, mouth quirking upwards. James wasn't sure if he was serious or just teasing.

"Of course."

"Other than when you're working, I mean."

"Yes, most evenings actually."

"You wouldn't be here if you didn't appreciate his body, so I won't even ask that. Besides, I don't want details. I'm supportive but completely straight and the mental image of you and my godfather is a little bit weird. Um . . . do you feel you could go to him for advice if you needed it and trust his answers?"

Yes.

"How about waking up to see him every morning for the next hundred and fifty years?"

"I could live with that," James said with a smile. "Supposing I live that long, of course."

"If there are no other things that we've forgotten, I think you're on the track for love then. It is Severus, isn't it?"

"Who else?"

"Congratulations," said Draco, smiling broadly at him. His face suddenly went stern. "However, if you hurt him I will personally hunt you down - and I'll be telling him this as well - my personal safety be damned. Do you want to have a look at what we've done so far then?"

James blinked a few times, muddled by the sudden change in topic. Draco was pulling out think folders and rolls of parchment. He spread one out on the floor and tapped it with his wand. Immediately a transparent three-dimensional image of the castle appeared. It was a little disorientating but he could see each individual room and staircase. Some areas appeared incomplete and they were merely solid blocks of completely clear air.

"This is what we've managed to map so far," Blaise said, looking at it with a hint of pride. "Most estates have them and it's what we're used to dealing with so we thought it would be a good place to start. With a place like this it's better than a map since there aren't proper floors - each area has its own system. We're here."

She waved her wand and a box-shaped area flashed red for a moment.

"That's been our main project - with the house elves help, of course - and it's been very interesting looking through everything. It's a little like being in a museum. You have some very obscure weapons lying around, you know. We've also been trying to do some modernising - thank you very much for sending Dobby along. He's a little odd but very helpful."

"So far we've done five bathrooms," Draco said, a little sourly. "Blaise insisted that that was the most important thing."

"People are happier sleeping on the floor than they are relieving themselves in the moat, especially ladies. You can't expect a man to really understand these things."

"I've been doing some work on the room designs as well," Draco continued, glaring mock indignantly at Blaise.
"You?" James asked.

"I'll have you know my sense of colour co-ordination has been trained into me from birth and I have excellent taste. My mother was famous for it - after all, it was her that used to set the fashions among pureblood society."

James wasn't sure it was something he'd be quite that proud of but let it slide. Draco was just a little strange sometimes.

"Since you're here, you can give me a hand with doing what we thought would be your bedroom. Wat said it was the first room you found, which means that the ambient magic there must suit you. Besides, it is one of the more accessible ones for the courtyard and the Great Hall and it is one of the Slytherin ones. Come on."

James stared at him. As soon as he thought he understood the wizarding world, they'd come up with something new to shock him with. Why couldn't they accept that it was just chance he'd picked that staircase, coincidence that it had been Slytherin's room? It wasn't as if anyone knew for certain if ambient magic even existed, let alone influenced your decisions! Shaking himself, he hastily strode after him - Draco might have a working knowledge of the castle but James most certainly didn't and was likely to get lost on his own.

When they arrived at Slytherin's old room, James noted that it hadn't changed much if at all from his first visit.

"Wat says that no one's used this room since Salazar Slytherin," Draco said, voice quiet and sounding more than a little awed by the idea despite his usually nonchalant attitude. Growing up in the lap of luxury obviously hadn't prepared him to view the personal items of one of the world's greatest heroes. "We thought you might want to keep most of the stuff in here and just give it a bit of modernising."

"I think I'll just go along with your suggestions," James said quickly. He had no experience whatsoever in this sort of thing. Draco's resulting smirk was very worrying and he wondered if he should retract the comment before deciding it would lose him face and be the coward's way out. It was strange how his Gryffindor and Slytherin sides meshed.

"What sort of flooring would you like?" Draco asked. "We can't do it all with magic but we can prepare it easily enough."

"Um... carpet?"

Draco seemed to understand that this wasn't a decision he'd ever been asked to make before.

"We've mostly been using wood, carpet or stone with rugs," he explained generously. "Carpet is probably best for your bedroom so that you won't freeze your feet off during the winter. Whatever you choose will mean we'll need to get rid of these furs - they smell too much to reuse but I suppose there wasn't much else they could use then and at least they'd be soft to tread on. Heap them up by the window and we'll portkey them somewhere harmless or see if the house elves want them. Wat can get just a little scary if you don't talk to him before you throw things out."

James had to try very hard not to laugh at the idea of Draco being bullied by a house elf given how most purebloods treated them. He wondered what had given him the wisdom to realise this and would probably have given a great deal to see it.

They dealt with that in short order and proceeded to inspect the bed. This consisted of Draco
gingerly climbing onto it while James watched and, when it didn't collapse immediately, lying down
after muttering a cleaning spell to get rid of the dust.

"Better than most I've found," he said with a superior air of professionalism. "But not exactly
comfortable - they simply didn't have the technology. We'll get the elves to get a new one for you
and you'll probably want to enlarge the bed if you're intending to share it. You tend to sprawl,
especially when you have nightmares."

James blushed but agreed, knowing that it had been Draco sent to wake him often enough during his
student days for him to know what he was talking about.

Very soon, Draco had asked a house elf to fetch them some cans of paint to allow them to finish off
what he called the preliminary work. Apparently it was indeed possible to spell your walls a colour
but unless you were in a sentient building such as Hogwarts, the effects weren't as good as you got
with simple manual labour. Despite having been all too used to this type of work in the past, James
found it oddly relaxing and enjoyable but a lot more tiring than he remembered. He was glad when
Draco called a lunch break and they returned to meet up with Blaise.

The couple ate in small dining room near to the nursery, a house elf taking care of Harry while they
dined. James could see the logic of it - if the Hogwarts Great Hall was uncomfortable with only the
staff there, this Hall - four times the size and not nearly so welcoming in design - would be even
more so for just the two of them. The food served up on the other hand was just as good as anything
the Hogwarts elves managed and probably better. The dishes were unknown to him though, given
that they were the foods that the elves were used to, centuries out of date.
Chapter 7
Chapter by jetsam

A week passed and James woke up as usual in his bed at Hogwarts. He blinked a few times and turned his head slightly to look at his dozing lover. It was rare for him to be the first awake or that Severus didn't stir when he did. Years of a strict routine had caused him to be jumpy even within the safety of the school although James thought this was gradually changing and would have liked to call responsibility for it. In sleep, the stern face was softer, the strain gone from it. Pressing a soft kiss to his head, he slid out of bed and padded through to the bathroom next door.

He showered quickly and thoroughly, dried himself and started to shave in front of the mirror to shave. He could have dealt with it with a wave of his wand but both Seamus and Dean had shaved manually on occasion from their fourth year onwards and he found it somewhat relaxing. Absently, he paused to cast a neatening and drying spell on his hair - if he didn't it would dry tangled and frizzy.

He smiled as the door opened behind him, welcoming as he looked for Severus in the mirror. Severus smiled easily back. Suddenly he froze and an unreadable mask went over his face. James frowned and turned to ask what the matter was when his lover spun and strode out, whole body shouting anger and hurt. A moment later, a door slammed loudly, the only outlet the harshly controlled man was likely to allow himself.

About to go after him, James glanced in the mirror to see if there was anything obvious that could have caused such a reaction.

He saw it immediately, glaring at him, adverse affects continuing to haunt his life.

His scar, red and obvious against pale skin and quite obviously something Severus would not have been expecting to see.

James' eyes followed the route Severus must have taken as he left, through this door into the main room and through the connecting door, which now appeared to have vanished. There was no way Severus would allow him to explain now, not after that, so he finished shaving mechanically, returned to his bedroom, leaving a note for Albus on the table for a house elf to collect.

Once there he buried himself under the heavy blankets, tears pouring silently down his cheeks, and hugged Severus' still warm pillow to him for comfort, breathing in the lingering scent.

What the hell was he going to do now?

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Albus Dumbledore knew something was wrong at eight o'clock the following morning when Severus Snape, Potions Master, Head of Slytherin House, stormed into the Great Hall for breakfast with a glare that any self-respecting basilisk would envy and a face like an angry thunderbolt. As students backed away, he contemplated for a moment the more delicate constitution that this generation had - James' bunch wouldn't have thought twice about their teacher acting like this, certainly not by their NEWT years. Of course at that point they were certainly more worried about
having a Dark Lord out for their blood than their school teacher being in a bad mood.

The question was, what had happened? James was the only thing he could think of that would cause such an extreme reaction, the idea being confirmed when he didn't show up himself, but what exactly was wrong? He watched poor Minerva innocently greet Severus amiably and be faced with the legendary 'death glare'. She turned away, put her chin in the air and pointedly ignored him as she talked to Pomona. Sinistra, on his other side, made a prudent choice not to venture a comment. Albus decided it might be a good idea to leave him alone until he had a better idea of the matter in hand.

After a rather tense breakfast, Albus retired to the safety of his office and sent a house elf down to check on James for him. It was back in minutes.

"Headmaster sir, the Professor has magicked his bedroom so Bubby couldn't get in but Bubby found a note for Headmaster Dumbledore sir."

"Thank you," Albus said, absently taking the note. It was blunt and to the point, infuriatingly so.

*Albus, I can't teach today, possibly for a while. My apologies. He found out. James*

Albus looked at it and sighed. The poor boy always had gone for extreme emotions whenever something happened. So Severus had discovered the child's identity, presumably by accident, and had reacted badly. Both of his boys were now so tied up in each other it was hard to think about this subjectively, being fair to both of them.

What would have happened? It was morning - they were fine certainly the previous night when he had called by their quarters for a drink. So, if he ventured a guess that it had just happened. Perhaps Severus had caught James in the shower and got a clear view of his forehead, perhaps James had merely been careless and forgotten to reapply his make up. Whatever happened, it would certainly have been the scar to give him away - he was too careful to make another mistake.

An hour's contemplation brought him to the conclusion that Severus would have to be forced to listen to reason and James would have to be gently brought back to an even keel again before he did something drastic like disappearing again. He had lost too much of his life already without losing him for a second time yet he wasn't close enough to him any more to really feel easy as mentor and comforter.

Albus tossed a handful of Floo powder into his fireplace and awkwardly knelt down to put his head into the green flames.

"Head of Merlin House's Quarters, Griffin University!" he shouted. It was strange how your habits stayed with you. After years of being told to 'say it clearly' and 'shout if you need to, dear' he still used a loud voice.

There was a peculiar sucking feeling and Albus found himself looking out into his brother's study.

"Abe!" he called imperiously. Of course his brother would come to him, he never called without reason.

Sure enough, a moment later, Abe himself rushed into the room, Claudius trailing along behind.

"Albus!" he said, sounding pleased. "What can I do for you?"

"Get over here immediately. We have big problems with The Project."

"Move your big head from the fire then."
"And leave the damn goat behind," Albus said as a parting shot before he moved back away from the fire.

"What exactly is the problem?" Abe asked, brushing down his robes and taking a seat in Albus’ favourite chair.

"Severus found out."

"Found out what?"

"Who James is . . . was."

"Oh dear."

"My sentiment exactly."

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure exactly but it happened between ten last night and breakfast this morning. Severus turned up looking like he did ten years ago but in an even worse mood and James has locked himself in his bedroom and I know for a fact that Severus helped him ward them against my painting a couple of weeks ago so I can't check on him."

"Doesn't he have classes this morning?"

"I was given a note saying that he was unable to teach today, perhaps for a while. Here, read it yourself."

"This really is serious, he's normally so conscientious, poor child. What do you want me to do?"

"First, we're going to hack through the wards on his chamber so I can keep an eye on him. You will then go down and see what you can do to cheer him up a bit and I'll call Severus up here for a serious talk and let him see exactly what an impact he's had. I don't want them in the same room as each other at any point in the immediate future - they're powerful enough for there to be some serious accidental magic, particularly on James' part."

Abe seemed to be thinking it over.

"For one of your ideas, it seems adequate. I'm not sure which of them will be hurting most right now but Severus is one of the most hard-headed men I know and James isn't much better. What's more, he has a guilt complex. If we leave him for long enough, he'll manage to convince himself that it's his fault Lucius Malfoy ever came to power and that's when we have real problems. Are you sure we can't send a house elf in to bypass the charms?"

"What do you expect?" Albus snapped. "I've already tried that. You taught him to ward things, so of course he's been thorough. At Hogwarts it's an obvious thing to do."

"Sorry, that was a little over-hopeful. Let's get started."

*****************************************************************

It took them two hours to break a chink in the impressively solid walls. Albus, tired and with aching
arms, made his way down to the Potions classroom, accompanied by Abe, who headed off towards James' rooms.

The class in progress was seventh years, one that required little supervision with a number of brewers competent to keep a check on the others while the teacher was absent. For that, Albus gave thanks to whatever power was guiding him - certainly everything else was going badly enough.

He knocked on the door to warn of his presence and pushed it open. It was never a good idea to interrupt the brewing process by walking in, his yellow robes in particular might startle a busy brewer long enough to cause an explosion. Slowly, he made his way down the aisle to the desk where Severus was seated, scrawling spiky notes onto what appeared to be student essays.

Severus looked up as he approached and when Albus gestured towards the door, he scowled and stood up.

"Until my return, Miss Fancourt will be responsible for general order. Continue as you have been until the end of the lesson," he said, voice icy as he moved towards the door. "If I have not returned by the end of the lesson, put a notice on the door telling all subsequent classes to go to the library."

As soon as they were out of the room, he shut the door firmly and turned to the headmaster.

"What in Merlin's name do you want, Albus?" he demanded harshly.

"If you insist on being difficult, I must ask you to come with me to my office where we can talk in a more civilised manner without being overheard by any curious students."

"Fine," he said and strode off in the direction of the staircase, not even glancing at the corridor leading to his - and James' - quarters. Albus hurried to keep up: the man really did have long legs, no wonder his robes billowed so magnificently if this was the pace he kept to.

As soon as they were safely in the small turret, Severus stood scowling furiously in front of the desk as Albus puffed in and took his seat behind the desk. He looked up, hiding amusement.

"Do sit down, you look like a stubborn student here to be reprimanded." Grudgingly, Severus perched stiffly on the edge of a chair.

"Lemon drop? Tea? Not this time, maybe. Now, I know you don't like me meddling in your private affairs but this is affecting the school and as such it is my responsibility to talk to you. What happened last night that has upset you so much? If I don't know, there is no way I can help you in any way."

Severus glared at him in silence, not a sound passing his thin lips as he pressed them together.

Albus sighed, it was going to be like this then. He stood up and came around the desk to take a seat next to Severus, facing a blank canvas on the wall.

"You do know that Professor Evans hasn't left his rooms today, don't you? My first thought was that you had had some kind of misunderstanding so I have broken through the ward he erected around his bedroom. And yes, I am quite aware of what his reaction to that would be. All I ask is that you observe." He drew his wand and pointed it at the canvas.

"James' quarters," he pronounced clearly and the image immediately formed. Albus' heart went out to the young man again as he caught sight of the scene playing out.

James was in bed, wearing the boxers he must have slept in. His hair, usually neat and tied back was
loose, tangled and sticking out in all directions as he curled on his bed, knees pulled tightly to his chest and head buried in his arms. The pillow from Severus' side of the bed was hugged as close as possible to him, arms resting on it. He was rocking slightly, as if so upset, so devastated, that even the release of tears wouldn't come.

Albus glanced sideways at Severus. His face was angled as if he was looking out of the window without a care for whatever was happening in the dungeons but every few seconds his eyes were flickering towards the image with hidden interest.

As they watched, Abe came in, wand still drawn from taking down the wards fully so that he could enter. He sighed, eyes closed for a minute as if silently praying for help, and came slowly and painfully across to the bed. James' head rose for a moment, a swollen red eye flicking open so quickly that it was as if he'd imagined it before vanishing again.

Abe sat down next to him on the bed and waited for a few seconds. When it became clear that his protégé wasn't going to move, he extended an arm and pulled James into his chest in an one armed hug.

There seemed to be no immediate change but slowly, gradually, James' arms relaxed from their white-knuckled grip around his legs and shifted slowly towards Abe until he was clinging to his robe, head buried in his side, body shaking with silent sobs now coming. The fear of rejection was clear in the exaggerated caution.

One glance at Severus told him that this had had an effect and, not wanting to intrude on such a private moment any more, Albus cancelled the charm and turned back to his other friend. He didn't say anything, leaving Severus alone with his thoughts until he was comfortable enough to look back at him to defend himself, confess or make his accusations.

"Is there anything you want to say, Severus?" Albus asked gently at last.

There was a moment's silence.

"You knew, I suppose," Severus said. He sounded defeated and Albus winced inwardly.

"Since the warding ritual," he confessed. "As far as I know, only Hermione, Abe, Remus and myself know, not even Draco does."

"Standard prejudice against Slytherins."

"No," Albus said calmly, knowing that wasn't true. "The man is as much Slytherin as he is Gryffindor and proud of it. He merely fears to be thrown back into a world that he wants no part of so keeps his identity to himself. He is quite happy being thought dead, happier than he ever was as a child."

"If he's so hating of the wizarding world, why is he here?" Severus asked harshly.

"I didn't mean magic - he wouldn't want to lose that for anything. No, I meant the life of a hero: the media following him everywhere, the political expectations, the attention, the lack of privacy. He's spent his whole life trying to escape it. Are you angry because he didn't tell you, because you didn't realise or because he's Harry Potter?" Severus shot out of his feet and towered over him.

"Why do you think, Albus?! He's bloody James Potter's son and he's probably just doing this for fun! Why should I demean myself for that?"

"And Abe's been saying you were more sensible than that," he said, disappointed. Obviously this
case required a very different tactic from the one he had been employing. Perhaps Severus was still carrying around most of his misapprehensions. His face hardened and he snapped, "Sit down Severus!"

There was a long pause.

"Now!"

Severus reluctantly sat down.

"Good. Now, take a lemon drop."

"Drugged, of course."

"Calming potion. I think you need it right now."

Severus obediently ate a single lemon drop.

"Now what?"

"I heard you insult and belittle that child throughout his school years and perhaps some of it he did deserve. He was indeed a little troublesome at times; so, might I point out, were you. What is more Severus, is that he is an adult, not an eleven year old. He knew perfectly well, or at least suspected, that you would react like this and dreaded it, risking it because he believed it would be worth it. You are going to tell me every reason you dislike him and I will take every single one of your reasons and tear them to shreds. You may begin."

Severus stared at him. The Headmaster hadn't treated him like this for years. Eventually, he grudgingly began to speak.

"He has no respect for his elders."

"Strange, I have always found him most polite, quite unlike yourself at that age as I recall. There was that one incident when I was called things I hesitate to repeat. Perhaps the only reason he didn't worship the ground you walked on as a student was that you never gave him a reason to. You started that battle in his first lesson and I cannot hold him responsible for the entirety of it."

"Very well. He is a rich, spoilt brat."

Albus lost it. That was an accusation that was so far from the truth it was ludicrous. He was very, very close to losing control and he honestly didn't care if Severus knew it and was scared. At the moment, he couldn't help but feel that he deserved it, hurting or not.

"Rich, I cannot deny but he didn't learn of the extent of his money until his sixteenth birthday, only a couple of his months before his disappearance. As to spoilt, with that I disagree entirely and I am ashamed that you should even suggest it. That is something I count as one of the worst decisions of my life. Think back to Mr Weasleys description of his relatives and multiply it by ten if you want an accurate assessment. Young Draco was spoilt, yet I don't see you bullying him for it, quite the contrary in fact. So far, dear boy, you only seem to me hypocritical and short sighted and I have no sympathy for you whatsoever. Right now I have a man downstairs who is so emotionally fragile that a rejection like this could easily have turned him to suicide had my brother not arrived. He is so insecure that he tells no one his feelings and what is more he has know understanding of them whatsoever. Draco tells me that he came to him a while back to ask him what it felt to be in love. What sort of man asks that? The most he has seen is Mr and Mrs Weasley for a short period aged twelve - hardly a good basis for deep understanding. Why the hell can't you get it into your head that
he loves you completely for yourself, sarcastic and reclusive as you are, and anyone else can go shoot themselves for all he cares. You are the first partner he has apparently ever shown any of himself to and I can't blame him if he doesn't repeat the experience. Right now, you will return to your quarters to think about what you have heard and seen before I lose my temper and hit you with some extremely nasty hexes. Move!"

Severus looked at him as if betrayed, his face expressionless as he spun and marched with great dignity down to his chambers. He was not going to act as if he was a rebellious ten-year-old who'd been sent to his room. As far as he was concerned, the headmaster was a biased, senile old man with more heart than brains and with obvious preferences for his Gryffindors. He had never expected sympathy, not for him, and had not received any. No one had ever bothered to give it to him because it would take so much effort to ram it through his prickly shields and he didn't want it. He was a Slytherin, completely self sufficient, and if the whole world turned against him, he would prove his independence.

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Two days passed before anyone saw James again. Aberforth had left just a few hours after his arrival, leaving behind him a calming draught, a particularly fluffy blanket that he'd liked while living at the University and a little cuddly goat toy. Anything after that, he had said, was up to James and no one could do anything else to help. The doors to the small suite of rooms had locked themselves after him and no one had managed to open them. Frustrated, Albus had fire-called his brother, to be handed a note by an assistant.

The password is in Parseltongue. You might as well give up now.

That had really not done any wonders for his temper. He shouldn't have given him a Parselmouth as a portrait, Slytherin or no.

Much to Albus' surprise, when he turned up at the head table that morning, he appeared perfectly well and cheerful, his cheeks slightly tanned and rosy as if he had spent the time on the beach instead of locked in his rooms. James was wearing a set of green robes, Albus had a feeling they were his favourite, and was perfectly groomed, not a hair out of place. After the worry he'd been through, it was a little irritating to say the least.

A quick glance at Severus that morning at breakfast showed him to be pale as ever, picking at his food and casting glances along the table beneath his shielding hair. He seemed a little disappointed if anything. He'd been remarkably quiet for the past few days: normally if something went wrong you heard about it in the staffroom, acidic little comments and jibes that were his outlet. There had been none of that. He had been thoughtful; once Albus had seen him skimming through an autobiographical book by Neville Longbottom of all people. Admittedly, it had been a best-seller, but Albus would have eaten his hat, point and all, if it was indeed young Mr Longbottom that Severus was interested in.

Poor Alistair watched from the Slytherin table. He knew something was up - he had spent too much time around them not to know and had been worried by James' absence - but no one was quite willing to explain the cause to him. They suspected he believed it was illness and Madam Pomfrey was ready to answer any query he might bring her. It was much easier to leave him with his
misconceptions.

A few students seemed to notice James' return and greeted him amiably as they passed the table, inquiring after his health. Albus had been the one to spread the contradictory rumours of an illness, a family emergency, of a mission for the order of the phoenix. The one thing they'd had in common was that Severus was the one picking up the slack, an obvious explanation for his present bad temper.

The two of them ignored each other all morning. It might not have been obvious to the students but to any of the staff it was as blatantly obvious as . . . as the way Severus and Sybil despised each other. They hadn't sat together at breakfast and talked over their toast, James - who had never bothered to get a subscription - reading the Prophet over his friend's shoulder. They hadn't drunk their coffee together in the staffroom at break, greeted each other in the corridors, vanished together when they had a shared free period. No, something was quite obviously Not Right and practically everyone seemed to have worked out what it was.

Nothing changed until lunchtime, when the breakfast fiasco repeated itself. James sat at one end of the table, chatting amiably to Rubeus Hagrid (though Albus would later swear he caught him looking at Severus) and Severus sat at the other end, glowering at his food and staring at his estranged lover. The tension was almost visible and all of the teachers save the oblivious Hagrid were treading carefully, eating faster than normal and hoping to vacate the vicinity before the fireworks started. Severus they knew to be downright scary when angry, no matter that almost all of them had taught him as a child. As for James, well, anyone who beat the headmaster in a duel was a little worrying if there was a chance they might lose control.

Suddenly Severus sat up straighter, frowned slightly and turned to his food with a slightly more enthusiastic approach. Albus watched curiously: what had the man noticed to be so, well cheerful, for him. The students poured out on their way to their lessons, shortly followed by the staff. Albus fidgeted uncomfortably for a moment then made a strategic retreat, giving them their privacy.

The silence was overwhelmingly loud. James stubbornly remained in his seat. Severus had rejected him, he wasn't going to be the one to make the first move. Still, if Severus didn't get on with it he would have to leave anyway to teach his next class, as it was he was going to be late.

Severus walked up to him a minute later. He was still glowering and James gulped inwardly: he'd been hoping so much that they could just make up but maybe it wasn't to be. He might retire and live with Draco and Blaise, that way he'd get to see plenty of his godson and feel busy and worthwhile looking after the estate.

"My rooms, straight after lessons!" he hissed. "Don't be late."

With that he spun and, robes billowing, he strode out.

James got up slowly, pushing a mostly untouched plate of food away from him. Had that been a good sign or a bad one? Quite frankly there was no point in dwelling on it: as it was he already felt like burning himself up in his own magic would be more comfortable. Three days without food, most of it spent crying or having nightmares was not good for the health by any stretch of the imagination.

He looked at the door Severus had just walked out of. Honestly, a simple invitation would have been sufficient! A fond smile flickered around his lips, not quite making it but fighting for its place: he could be surprisingly sweet sometimes, to the affectionate eye, putting on his mask whenever he felt threatened or nervous.

James shook himself out of that train of thought before it really started. He was a teacher, he was
already late for his class and he was talking to Severus later. This was no time to be daydreaming.

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He was taking one of his seventh year classes today and they were waiting anxiously when he arrived. There were definite benefits to teaching the older years, one being that they had a little more common sense and thought of him as a person rather than as some kind of mutant vampire set on destroying their lives. Come to think of it, he and Ron had said more or less that about Severus in their own schooldays.

"Are you okay sir?" one girl asked. James blinked, confused. Then he remembered that some of them thought he'd been ill.

"Absolutely, thank you, I was just held up for a bit," he managed, walking around his desk to sit in his chair with great relief. Pulling open the drawer, he took out a neatly planned timetable and put it on the desk in front of him. He paused for a moment to let his class prepare themselves and began.

"Now, as I'm sure you're all aware, the NEWTs start in just under four weeks. I'm assuming you know that you will have two sections - practical and theory - so I won't go into it. Your first exam is the theory, followed a week later by the practical. I suggest you get out a quill and parchment so you can jot down what we'll be going over during the next few weeks."

There was a muted shuffling sound as the few people weren't already poised to take notes hunted around in their bags for a quill that wasn't too blunt, cracked or falling to pieces.

"The NEWT course has been divided into four units, we'll cover two each week. For the remainder of this week - three lessons - we'll cover what I term the Dark Creatures: the magical animals essentially and the legislation surrounding them. We'll also cover Dark Beings - the vampires, werewolves etc. There's quite a lot of theory involved in that, so make sure you bring your notes along. Next week we'll be working through the various defensive and offensive spells that we've covered and the regulations applied." One boy raised his hand slightly.

"When will we be doing practical work sir?"

"Mostly just before the exams but I might ask you to go over something at any time, so be ready for it. I assume, of course, that you're doing a fair amount of revision out of class since I'm no longer setting you homework?"

A few of them looked a little guilty. James was unsurprised to see that they mostly numbered among them his best students. They were probably using the extra time to revise subjects they were weaker in and relying on duelling club and lesson time to keep their Defense Against the Dark Arts going until a few days before the exam. What Hermione would have said to that, he had a very good idea. There had been times when he decided that being organised was a curse rather than a blessing and when Ernie Macmillan had announced he was doing eight hours a day, well, that was never going to happen.

"Vampires," he said, turning to write that on the board with the end of his wand. "A quick summary, just call out the answers. Place of origin?"

"Eastern Europe."
"Correct, although you can find them almost anywhere now, they don't just stay there. Appearance?"

"Pale."

"Long teeth."

"Thank you, Mr Alderton, but a little more specifically?"

"Long canines."

"That's better. And?"

"Skinny."

"And how do you deal with one?"

"Sunlight, stake or beheading."

James decided to cover that point himself.

"Most things that kill a mortal will kill one of them, with the exceptions of old age and blood loss, though starvation will work. Hack it into enough pieces, burn it or put something through its heart. Specific to vampires is that many younger vampires have problems being out in direct sunlight or even in out of the shadows so you can use a charm to simulate the effect. Miss Higgs?"

"Solare."

"Exactly. Mr Alderton, what are the main parts of the law that relate to vampires?"

"Well, they're classed as Beings but there's no embassy or treaty with them like there is with the goblins. All vampires resident in the UK have to be registered with the ministry but technically they have no power over individual vampires and have to negotiate through the various clans. Turning a human without their permission or to prevent their um death is an offence that is punishable by immediate execution. I don't think vampires can hold any sort of public position here either."

"They also can't attend Hogwarts because of the risk of young, inexperienced vampires losing control and draining people. Then again, vampire children are kept very sheltered since they are the most vulnerable to sunlight and lack of blood to drink. Kill a vampire child and you have immediate blood feud with the Clan and you're likely to be killed in a matter of days, even hours. What can you tell me about their magic, Miss Walpotts?"

"They don't use a wand?"

"That's right. Can they do magic?"

"Well, I think some can and some can't?"

"Carry on."

"If you were a wizard before you were turned or come from a family with magic you can but if you were a Muggle you can't."

"Exactly. And vampire specific magic?"

"You mean they are practically immortal and have strong mental and healing gifts."
"That's what I was looking for. Now, werewolves."

James completed the lesson with no ill effects and felt inclined to dash straight down to Severus' rooms. He didn't. One, because he was too nervous; two, because he'd look like an idiot and three, because he had a headache and that would only make it worse. Technically as a member of staff he could request a potion for it from the resident Potions Master but since that was Severus, he didn't dare. He'd probably end up with either Veritaserum or a very nasty, slow acting poison.

At last, James knocked on the wall by Severus' portrait. Given the circumstances, it would have been extremely rude to walk straight in, and besides, he was sure Severus would have changed the password.

It opened a moment later.

James came through and sat down in the chair indicated. On a small table in front of him was a small vile of a slightly green-tinged liquid.

"A mild truth serum," Severus explained calmly, following his gaze. "I will drink half to prove to you that it is harmless and then you will drink the remaining half. You have the right to refuse, of course, but I would rather have the confirmation."

"Oh," James managed articulately. It seemed that maybe he was being given a chance, however slight. "Okay."

"And while we're at it, you can take down that ridiculous glamour charm as well."

James winced slightly. Bloody spies. Bloody Slytherins. It was not fair!

He dropped the glamour. He looked like a Slytherin seeker who'd just been dragged headfirst through the Gryffindor common room the night before a game and he knew it. His eyes were red and swollen, dark bags underneath them. His hair was pulled into a semblance of normality, though it was messy and uneven. What was more, he had a black eye from walking headfirst into the bedpost this morning as he attempted to get out of bed. Seeing it, Severus' face softened and he seemed to be about to move his hand up to touch it but jerked his hand back and sat down, abruptly draining half of the small vile. James gingerly reached for it and tipped the remaining drops down his throat. It didn't taste quite as bad as he was expecting.

"Question," Severus began. "What is your name?"

"Harry James Evans Potter," James said truthfully. He wasn't being forced to tell the truth, the serum didn't do that, but he had nothing to hide and, in this case, honesty would be the best advocate he could get.

"Were you ever intending to tell me that?"

"No."

"Were you ever intending to tell anyone that?"

"No."

"Have you ever told anyone deliberately?"

"Yes. Remus."
"Why don't you want to?"

"Who would want to be a poster boy for the entire wizarding world? I've never wanted the fame, the notoriety, the attention and this way I don't have to deal with it."

"What were your intentions in pursuing a relationship with me?"

James was starting to wonder whether he'd planned these questions about before hand. The man certainly wasn't leaving him any loopholes.

"I . . . I'm not exactly sure. I like you, admire you and it . . . well, it felt right. I've never really had anything long-term before, so I don't know exactly how to say it. It wasn't for anything negative, or as revenge or something. I don't think I'd be able to do that to someone even if I wanted to. I . . . I wanted this to last a long term, maybe even for ever but I guess I've blown that now."

"What have you done the past two days?"

James scowled.

"You would ask that, wouldn't you? I shut myself in my room, cried, had nightmares and sulked. That's about it."

"Try and lie to me now. Who is your best friend?"

"Sibyl Trelawney."

James sneezed furiously, only stopping as he managed to choke out the real answer,

"Draco Malfoy."

And suddenly Severus was there, offering him a glass of water, an arm around his shoulder.

"We're both idiots," he said. "Aren't we? I suppose I can cohabit with a Potter with a effort, even a half-Gryffindor."

James looked at him and a smile spread shyly across his face. That was as close to an invitation as he was likely to get. Certainly there wouldn't be anything like 'I was an idiot, I'm sorry and I'll do anything if I can have you back'. James didn't really care, this was all he needed, especially as Severus raised a gentle hand to feel his puffy black eye. He shivered slightly.

"I'll find you something for that," Severus said.

James kissed him, then pulled away long enough to say,

"Who cares about that?"

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Neither of them made it to supper that evening, nor breakfast the next morning. Albus noticed their absence with a smug little smile, shaking his head fondly at long past memories; the other teachers merely breathed a sigh of relief and a sent a prayer of thanksgiving to whichever kind deity had arranged the reconciliation. There had been moments when even the hardened war veterans amongst
them had feared for their skins.

James didn't come out of his rooms again for another day, though Severus taught his lessons as normal, returned to his relatively good humour and passing on cover work for the Defense classes. When quizzed on this by Albus, he had returned a piercing look and informed him that his partner was currently in their chambers, soundly asleep and with access to a strong sleeping potion should he need it. Albus had taken one look at him and not pressed the matter.

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The following Saturday afternoon, Albus called a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix in the chamber hidden within the castle. James, now fully recovered, made his way there with Severus, a heavy green cloak over his distinctive white robes. There was no ceremony this time as they passed through the door into the main chamber and approached the table.

Fawkes trilled a welcome to them, launching from his perch on Albus' shoulder and pulling James to the seat to the right hand of their leader at the head of the table. It was the seat he had always taken before, as Harry, the second in command of the Order. Now, it seemed that much less ceremony was attached to it, though a few members regarded the scene with interest: it was rare for the ancient phoenix to take this much interest in a relatively new recruit.

"Albus!" he hissed, glancing around to see who was listening. "This is too close - what if they recognise me!"

Albus twinkled at him, patted his arm and smiled.

"Gently there, dear boy, Fawkes has made his decision and who are we to question it when we all know who is really in charge here."

Severus slid into the seat beyond James and grimaced expressively at him.

"Now, I call the meeting to order," Albus said, looking sternly at them as they sat there pulling faces at each other like two first years. "Severus, I believe you have gathered some new intelligence for us."

Both of them became serious and Severus stood up to address the table. He paused for a moment, hands on the wood in front of him.

"As most of you know," he said at last, "since my . . . exposure . . . I have kept a small network of intelligence gatherers together and kept up with some of my shadier contacts. I will not disclose their identities, though some of you have asked, and will merely say that they have their own reasons for not being seated here with us. According to them, the next attack will be a large one on the village of Godric's Hollow."

James sucked in a breath and Severus' eyes flicked sideways to him for a moment before he continued.

"However, Lucius will not attend this attack himself. He has closeted himself away with his inner circle and is rumoured to be planning an even more ambitious raid, the target is unknown to me as yet."
"What forces can we expect from him?" Kingsley Shacklebolt asked, lounging back on his seat between Nymphadora Tonks and Mad Eye Moody. The Aurors seemed to have a small faction of their own and always sat together at the far end of the table.

"Exactly, it is impossible to say. However, I would estimate a small contingent of vampires, the least valuable of his Death Eaters with maybe a couple more senior to co-ordinate them and, if he can get them, a number of Dementors. Lucius is nothing if not resourceful and he used his time at the Ministry well. Many of the Dark Lord's allies have given oath to him and, as a pureblood from a respectable family, he has brought in recruits from across the continent. Already it is believed that his forces rival the Dark Lord's at their height, although they are lacking in both power and experience."

"Thank you Severus," Albus said, standing up and taking the few steps back that led him to a blank board behind him. A wave of his wand and a map appeared on the surface. "While Lucius is undeniably powerful, he is somewhat rash at times, very unlike his previous master. His prejudices will also aid us against him. A large proportion of the population of Godric's Hollow are half blood families, those without ancestral family homes and who are uncomfortable within a fully Muggle settlement. In fact, I have been able to contact, through Alastor, those of the retired Ministry employees who were competent in combat and alerted them to the situation. One such will be in charge of the alarm that will alert us as soon as he makes his move."

"Should it be in the near future, most of us who are employed at the Ministry must be ruled out," Arthur said, glancing down the table at the Aurors. "It wouldn't do for there not to be an official Ministry detachment.

Albus looked at him for a moment, then nodded.

"The strike force will be made up mostly from snitch squadron, thus Bill, Hestia, Ron, Hermione, Fleur, Neville. Minerva and Alastor will not be going. James, you will be leading this one."

There were a few murmurs from further down the table, as James jumped slightly in surprise. Snitch squadron had been his personal command during the last months of the previous war, after his 'death' it had since been usually under the command of Neville. Albus was undeniably taking a large risk in putting him back in control, highly skilled or not, he wasn't believed to have as much experience as the others.

Looking at his future command, he saw Hermione with a small smile on her face, not that he'd expected any dissent from her. Ron too was looking satisfied: they'd made friends quickly after their meeting in October and he was convinced of James' competency. The older ones - Hestia, Fleur and Bill - were looking slightly doubtful, though they hadn't said anything. As for Neville, well, he looked perfectly content.

Someone had once told James that the best leader you could find was one who didn't want the job. Both Neville and he were embodiments of that: young men forced into a position that no one else could quite fill. With his trust in the headmaster, Neville was more than content.

"If no one has any objections," James said quietly, feeling the burden of his true name beginning to settle on his shoulders once again, "I will accept."

There was a long tense pause. When it became clear that there were in fact no objections, it was as if the whole room breathed a sigh of relief. Albus, standing in front of them all, certainly did.

"Thank you, James," he said, smiling. "However, I must insist that you conceal your face so we can hold in 'in reserve' as it were. A mask is a little cliché but terribly effective. If you could somehow
contrive to look more like poor Harry, that might strike a little fear into the hearts of our enemies."

For a moment, James considered objecting. Then he drew his wand and thought for a moment. A scrap of paper from his pocket was moulded carefully around the top half of his face and charmed to stay in place. When he was satisfied, the others watched in fascination as he delicately transfigured phoenix feathers to cover it in the unmistakable crimson and gold with a level of hard won skill that made Minerva smile in delight: if only she had had the privilege of teaching him at Hogwarts.…

When they thought he must at last be done, Fawkes settled on his shoulder and dangled his tail feathers down James’ front. He grinned, reaching up to run a hand through the feathers as if preening them. He then settled on a small one and gently drew it out. Freely given, a phoenix feather was a great gift and would serve to augment his powers still further.

That done, he conjured a pair of scissors and turned to Severus.

"Hair, please," he said with only a hint of reluctance. This was only a demonstration for now - after this raid he would grow it straight back out again with a potion or using his innate gift for growing it. Until then, the loss would be covered with a simple illusion.

Severus looked equally reluctant but hacked roughly away at it, leaving it cropped unevenly short. It was jagged, ruffled, messy, sticking up in all directions, just as it always had. It didn't matter - that had been the method Aunt Petunia had usually used. There was no way they’d have paid for a decent cut.

James put the mask on and turned to face them. It was a little surprising that they'd all paused to watch him but then they knew almost everything about each of the others, he was still an enigma.

"I trust this will suffice," he said, well aware that there was nothing else that could resemble Harry more.

They considered him for a moment, a couple looked doubtful although Hermione, Severus and Albus looked a little wistful. Ron frowned slightly.

"I dunno mate, you look, well, older than Harry. His face was kind of rounder than yours was and he wasn't nearly as tall, poor little midget," he said, with a hint of the teasing that James remembered enduring for so long.

"Boys grow up," was all James said in reply before he removed the mask, cast an illusion on his hair and returned to his seat, looking to Albus for further instructions.

"Ah yes, thank you James, I believe that will more than satisfy. Now, the main apparition point in Godric's Hollow is located here, on the green. Since many of the Death Eaters will not have been there before and Lucius will be taking no chances, this is where they will appear. Snitch squadron will enter the battle from here," he said, pointing to a point where a derelict house was marked. "You will assemble at this point and enter the fray as a group. This means that you must familiarise yourself with those coordinates and location as soon as you can. As always, the infirmary available to you will be at the school, each of you carrying an emergency portly to the infirmary on a chain around your necks. All of you except James should already be carrying one; I will equip him tomorrow morning."

He returned to the table, and sat down, taking a sip of water from the glass in front of him.

"Now," he said, taking a deep breath. "Hogwarts. It is unlikely that Lucius will ever dare to attack us before he is killed, however we must consider the possibility and prepare for it. Lucius does not have
the natural caution and tactical ability of Voldemort and may take the risk. I will not leave the castle at all in the immediate future as this makes it instantly vulnerable. This being Lucius Malfoy, I would imagine that he would make his move during a mealtime where he has the largest audience and plenty of hostages who we must be careful of. Students will be informed of what they must do. Should I be killed...

"You, Headmaster?" Molly Weasley asked incredulously. Surely the man who had defeated the dark lord Grindewald and survived two rises in the front lines against the dark lord Voldemort was not seriously suggesting that this upstart Malfoy might kill him?

"Alas Molly, I grow old and my powers are waning as my body declines. I am content as things are and my death, whenever it occurs, shall be no one's fault but my own. Should this happen, and I sincerely doubt that it will, the wards will immediately transfer to James. The chances are that this will mean a slight increase in strength as what he lacks in experience will be made up for in the short run by his greater energy. Wherever he is, the will undoubtedly Apparate back to Hogwarts and I have a feeling that if anyone defeats Lucius Malfoy, it will be him. This means," he said sternly. "That I don't want the rest of you to do anything except defend the children and try and evacuate as many as possible. As well as keeping you safe, it will most likely have the added bonus of making our enemy extremely confused. I believe that is all we need to say for this meeting of the Order. Kingsley, Severus, if you could come up to my office for a moment."

Hermione caught James as he left the meeting and dragged him down to his own quarters.

"So Fawkes thinks you should be taking up your responsibilities?" she said, nursing a warm cup of tea in her hands. "Quite right too, though I think you can do it just as well as James Evans. The mask was inspired and did you hear Ron?"

"I'm not sure mate," Harry said, doing a terrible impression. "But you look a bit too old to be a sixteen year old boy. It's not right, you know."

Hermione giggled.

"It would have been perfectly serious with anyone else but telling you that… Priceless, absolutely priceless. I'll write it down in my journal and remind him about it when he can share the joke."

"I'm not intending on telling anyone else, Hermione," James quickly reminded her. After those days with Severus, he wasn't sure he wanted to take the risk.

"Fate does funny things with your life, Harry, and I don't think that you'll be able to manage for much longer now that the fight is getting more serious. You have a rather unmistakable style and I think Albus has a point. If anyone can kill Lucius, it's you, and since it is you, you'll do it quickly and thoroughly and blast him just the same way you did Voldemort and of course, that means that everyone will guess and I'm telling you, Mr Potter, that if you dare try and vanish again….

"I'm not intending to, not without Severus anyway."

"You got together then? Professor Dumbledore was telling me about how you two were tiptoeing around each other a few weeks ago. He thought it was extremely amusing. It's not something I'd even considered when we were still at school but it makes quite a lot of sense now."

"He understands me, I think that's one of the main attractions, and I can trust him implicitly. He's got a wicked sense of humour as well and he's well, nice really. It feels right."

"Does he know about…"
"Who I am? Yes, he found out a few days ago and had a fit. It was . . . rough. Still, I think we're over that now. I probably should have told him much earlier but I guess I was too scared to."

"I'm glad you found someone," she said, curled up in the armchair and smiling as if she understood perfectly. "Apparently Ron and I were always clearly each other's match but we worried about you - it's not everyone who could live up to your reputation."

"I suppose. I was always more concerned about surviving when I was at Hogwarts."

"From a teacher's point of you, your prime purpose in life seemed to be to cause trouble," Severus said from behind them, having entered soundlessly, curious as to what they were saying.

They jumped, startled, and suddenly James was very glad that they hadn't been talking about something really odd or some embarrassing story from their Gryffindor schooldays, especially one that involved stolen potions ingredients.

"Severus," he said, standing to kiss his lover lightly. "How did the meeting go?"

"Nothing of great import, merely instructions to continue as we have been and what in particular he wants us to discover. Good evening, Mrs Weasley."

"Hello Professor."

"You mean to say you aren't on first name terms yet?" James asked incredulously. "You've only been working in the Order together for how long - eight years?" Severus rolled his eyes and Hermione sighed.

"Very well, as long as you have no objections," he said, not sounding too reluctant. She grinned at him.

"I didn't like to be thought impudent. So, I hear you're now one of us who know."

"Indeed."

"And?"

"My questions have all been satisfactorily answered. He has grown up a great deal since we last met. Circumstances have led us to a greater understanding."

"You mean you're shagging and he's too hot to pass up?"

"Hermione!" James said, shocked. Hermione really had changed. He struggled for a moment before coming up with a viable objection. "Quit talking about me as if I'm not here."

"Sorry," she said, not sounding at all repentant. "I've got to go - Ron'll be wondering where I've got to. See you around."

She waltzed out, leaving them staring after her.

"Well, she's certainly changed a bit," James said after a minute. "I never expected her to come out with something like that."

"Quite likely she just said it to see our reactions," Severus said, amused. "It has an element of truth anyway. You have good choice in friends."

"As do you."
"And in lovers, of course."

"So sure?"

"Of course."

There was a pause.

"Are you sure you have to go on the raid?" Severus asked at last. "The others are all more than competent and you have... responsibilities here. With the mask, you'll be more of a target than any of the others."

James smiled, touched by the quiet concern he saw in his lover's face. No one had ever really been that concerned for him before: he'd been a weapon to those he'd fought alongside, his friends in Gryffindor hadn't understood what it really meant to be out there.

"Sev, I've been doing this since I was sixteen," he said gently. "No, since I was eleven really. I've had a hell of a lot of training since then. I can't possibly be more of a target than when I was out there as myself, can I?"

"Can't you let someone else take care of it, it's not your responsibility any more," Severus said but even as he said it, his face showed that he knew what the answer would be and that, in James' place, he would make the same decision.

"You know I can't because as long as I have the power, I have to use it to do what I can to help people. It might come that there was someone I could have saved but I wasn't there and they were killed. I don't think I could live with that and I know that you couldn't either."

"At least promise that you won't do something horrifically Gryffindor and life-threatening."

"The whole thing is life-threatening," James said with a morbid laugh. "Don't worry, I'm as Slytherin as you, I won't rush into a hopeless situation. I promise you that I'll come back every time that I have to go out there."

The next morning found James, prompted by their talk the previous evening, up in Albus' office struggling with a piece of parchment.

"Are you sure you need to do this?" Albus asked from where he sat at his desk writing letters to various important personages. James sighed.

"It was okay before because I didn't have anything to lose. Now I feel I should write a will so that Alistair and little Harry and Severus get what they should if I die. The problem is that I don't know where to start."

"Write down a list of everything you own and then start allocating it."

"The problem is that I don't even know half of what I own."

"Oh, how about thinking about it in terms of Alistair and Harry."
James thought for a moment.

"Tell me, is it possible to adopt someone into a family and have them join the bloodline, as it were."

"Yes, it's the most complete form of an adoption," Albus said, not sounding too surprised. "It's called a blood adoption, generally and all it would require is a vial of blood from you and your signature on some documents."

James nodded, turned his quill to parchment, thanking the gods that there was no particular legal language that was needed, just a clear statement, although it was generally expected that you use relatively formal language. It was a very weird feeling to be writing to people who would only read it after your death.

_The will of Harry James Evans Potter, Defence Master at Hogwarts School._

First, I would like to make clear that my death was likely no fault of anybody's. I put my life at risk in the hope of making a difference to other people and any guilt can fall only on my own shoulders.

To my godson, Henry Severus Malfoy, I offer a blood adoption into the family of Slytherin as my son and the inheritance of those properties that fall under the Slytherin inheritance in addition to those he will receive from the Malfoy line. These include those previously owned by the Black family that came into my hands upon the death of my own godfather, Sirius Orion Black. To take my place as godparent, I name Ronald Bilius Weasley, given the acceptance of Draco Cassius Malfoy and Blaise Genevieve Malfoy.

To my ward, Alistair Cai Macdonald, I offer a blood adoption into the family of Gryffindor as my son and the inheritance of those properties that fall under the Gryffindor inheritance. These include all those that came to me as part of the Potter inheritance. His guardianship I leave in the hands of Severus Melchior Snape and the aforementioned Draco Cassius Malfoy.

To Draco Cassius Malfoy, Aberforth Stephen Lyle Cuthbert Dumbledore and Bertram Everard Highcastle I leave any photographs and personal effects dating to my time at the University.

To Ronald Bilius Weasley and Hermione Jane Weasley I leave any personal effects and photographs dating from my time as a student Hogwarts.

To my partner, Severus Melchior Snape I leave my deep love and all of my remaining belongings, including the potions ingredients that are currently stored in the student's quarters in Aberforth Dumbledore's rooms at Griffin University.

I leave you now with some words that a wise teacher and friend once told me when I was a child. 'To the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure.' From an early age, adventures have sought me out and now I have begun a new one on which I cannot be accompanied. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, so move on and do not grieve overmuch for me.

James read it through and signed it with a sprawling script. Then he allowed the drop of blood to fall onto it and it vanished to wherever the wills of the magical populace were stored in the Ministry. Surprisingly, he felt better about what he was going to have to do, knowing that whatever happened, his belongings and wealth would go to good homes.

"All done, James?" Albus asked.

"Yes, thank you. I'd better go and talk to Alistair now, let him know that I'm about to embark on another mad scheme that could get me killed."
"You're more resilient than that, dear boy, I have every confidence in you."

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James smiled and sent a house elf to ask Alistair to meet him in his rooms. The boy was there when he arrived, looking confused and uncomfortable. They hadn't originally intended to have one of their 'family time' meetings that weekend because of the Order meeting and he was slightly apprehensive as to whether he was in trouble for something. Like most of the Slytherins, he had a guilty conscience. Most of his misdeeds were mild but he could think of no other reason.

"Morning Alistair," James said cheerfully as he came in. "Don't worry, you're not in trouble."

"There's not anything wrong with Professor Snape is there? Or you having to go away?"

"Well, do you know what the Order of the Phoenix is?" James asked. Alistair was Muggleborn, it was entirely possible that he didn't, despite spending Christmas with them.

"I think so, they fight against dark wizards, don't they? Professor Dumbledore's in charge and I think a lot of the teachers here are in it."

"That's right. I'm one of them and I've been asked to lead the defence of a village in the next attack. We don't know when exactly it's going to be but I didn't want you to be surprised when I vanished."

"But you might get hurt, mightn't you?"

"Yes but it's very unlikely. In the unlikely event that I get killed, I've asked Professor Snape and Mr Malfoy to be your guardians, unless you have any objections to that."

"No James," he said miserably. James lifted his chin.

"Don't worry," he said smiling, "I really don't intend to even get scratched."

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It was during a third year class on Tuesday morning when the tiny Order pin that he wore on the inside of his robes glowed warm for a few minutes to summon him to the battle. He had been waiting for the past week, wearing his tight black shirt and leggings underneath his normal teaching robes, his Order battle robes shrunk and carefully stored in his pocket and his favourite daggers strapped firmly in place, ready for use.

His wand hidden under his desk, James cast a quick glamour on his face to make it appear sickly pale and swayed a couple of times. A few of the students looked concerned.

"It appears that I may need to go and see Madam Pomfrey," he said quietly. "Finish the questions I set you in the library and hopefully I'll be back for your next lesson. Class dismissed."

As soon as they had gone, he cancelled the glamour and went through to the small prep room at the back of the classroom. He quickly stripped and put on his Order robes, carefully saved from his
teenage years. Similar to those of a standard Order member, they had crimson sleeves and a crimson sash over the white body. He removed the charm concealing his cropped hair and fitted his mask to his face, twirling his wand in his hand.

"Fawkes!" he called, touching the Order pin. There was a burst of flames and the phoenix appeared. Stuck within the wards, he couldn't afford the time it would take to go to Apparate. "I need a lift."

James took hold of the tail feathers and felt the familiar warmth as they were teleported through space to the battle site.

The rest of the squadron were there, waiting for him, harsh and unfamiliar in their crisp white robes, wands drawn, standing tensely in the prearranged place. Around them, James could hear the noise and shouting of a battle in progress, the hiss of Dark curses in the air. Strangely, he felt comfortable, at home, the adrenaline pumping into his blood. He was in his element here.

As they appeared, half a dozen wands were pointed at him, quickly dropped. A few of the others swallowed choked tears and exclamations, looking at him in Harry's style of robe, with Harry's hair, Harry's style of movement on a man who seemed practically a stranger to them.

"Thank you, Fawkes," James said, then turned his attention to his fighters, his small command to give them the instructions that they knew but he needed to say to reassure himself that he'd done all that he could to keep them safe. "Stay together, don't take unacceptable risks. You all have a few portkeys, give them to any wounded victims. Should you be wounded yourselves and your movement hampered, activate your emergency portkey immediately, I refuse to risk anyone needlessly and fighting with a gaping wound is dangerous and foolish. Ron, Hermione, you're in charge of driving away any Dementors, should there be any, since you two have the strongest Patronus. Bill, if possible, take out the vampires. Hestia, you're with him, take up a position on the fringe on the fighting. The rest of you, stay with me as far as possible. Good luck, everyone, let Merlin's power be with you."

With that, James led them around the house into the fray. As Albus had predicted, a number of people were desperately fighting the twenty or so death eaters that had appeared. They were being forced back, beaten down, but the battle was clearly not going as well for the death eaters as Lucius Malfoy would have liked.

James flung himself into the battle, aware of Ron and Hermione automatically taking positions on either of his shoulders as he cut into the Death Eater lines, the others behind them in an arrow formation. Bill and Hestia taking up a position towards the edge of the fray and sending more complex charms at the small vampire contingent surrounding what was presumably the leader of the attack. They cast only the so-called light curses to disable their adversaries, after all, they weren't death eaters, but it was as effective.

As they made their presence known, James heard a woman shout.

"It's Harry Potter! He's come back to save us!" He smiled grimly, reflecting on the truth in that and pressed grimly on.

James paused, dropped a handkerchief onto a young man's chest as he lay unconscious on the ground.

"Safe Haven," he whispered, the portkey activated and the wounded man vanished. A death eater closed to his left.

"Petrificus Totalus!" he shouted and the man dropped. They were approaching the vampires now.
The dark creatures, startled perhaps by the ferocity of the counter attack by such highly trained forces. James felt a sharp twang in his left arm and in response sent a dagger flying at the death eater behind him, throwing with frightening accuracy.

"Lumos Solarium!" he shouted and those in front of him cried out, blinded and some burnt by the light that radiated from his wand.

"Incendio!" Hermione cast from behind him.

Bill and Hestia finally got their main curse going and a golden net settled around the vampires: one by one they vanished, apparating to safety, leaving their leader behind. He knew all to well what would happen to him if he failed his master and was determined to try and salvage what he could.

"Avada Kedavra!" he shouted, seeing them approach. James ducked and it passed harmlessly over his head. Good, he wouldn't have the energy to cast that again for a while. The Death Eater was getting more and more frantic. "Protego!" he shouted, perhaps hoping that it would give him time to escape.

"Stupefy," James said, voice icy, charm cutting straight through the flimsy shield and knocking him to the ground.

He paused, looked around. Ron and Hermione were still with him, faithful and reliable as ever. Bill and Hestia were likewise still in their position. Neville was going around the wounded, giving them portkeys to the Hogwarts infirmary. Around the edge of the green, the Aurors were Apparating with the mediwizards with them. Fleur was nowhere in sight.

"Horus!" he shouted, codenames as ever in front of the Aurors, though most of them knew or guessed from their appearance who they were despite the nominal hoods they wore. Bill looked up. "Where's Flower?"

"Wounded, at Hogwarts," came the prompt reply. Nothing serious then, Bill had no doubt been keeping a close eye on his wife.

James sighed, relieved and turned to his companions.

"We're done here, I think," he said, taking into account the calmness in the disorderly field. A hand signal later, Hestia and Bill had vanished. James and the Weasleys went over to Neville who took his hand in a firm shake.

"Well fought," Neville said, a self-satisfied look on his face, "Commander."

"You too," James said, acknowledging the other man's skills. This was more than acceptance, this was formal recognition of his status in the Order, very reassuring to have. "The battle's over, the Aurors can take it from here. Are you wounded?"

"A couple of cuts, Ginny can help me with them. I'll not bother Madam Pomfrey."

"Go on then," James said, watching him Apparate. He turned to his friends. "You too, unless you need the Infirmary. I'll see you soon, I'm sure."

Hermione hugged him. When they too had gone, James summoned his knives back to him, activated his portkey and returned to Hogwarts, his home. The battle had lasted forty exhausting minutes, shorter than many. Most of the Death Eaters had seemed to be fresh recruits, being blooded in what had been supposed to be an easy fight.
The hospital wing was full when he returned, any headachy students hastily moved back to their own dormitories as the beds were taken up by dirty, blood-covered men and women with gaping wounds in legs and arms, delirious from a curse to the head, drained partly by a vampire. Around them, Poppy Pomfrey, Albus, Minerva and a few seventh year assistants. Severus was absent, presumably hastily brewing the necessary potions that they were about to run out of.

Fleur was in a bed by the door, her leg bandaged but otherwise unhurt. James hurried over, mask still in place. She was under his command, therefore it was his responsibility to check on her.

"Are you okay?" he asked. She seemed a little surprised to see him.

"Yes, thank you, just my leg and that will be healed by morning. The others?"

"All fine. Neville had a few cuts which he'll sort himself, the others uninjured."

"Bill?"

"He saw you leave but didn't seem overly concerned, so I imagine he knew your wound wasn't bad. If he doesn't turn up soon, he'll be waiting for you at home. I'll send him a message to tell him how you are. You fought well today, you got the one who hit you."

She flushed a little at the praise, quickly turning the subject off herself,

"Are you wounded?"

"A few cuts. I'll get a salve for them off Severus. Should you need me, just call."

James smiled and left, nodding to the other Order members as he went. A few of the conscious patients looked at him in wonder, trying to work out how their boy hero had returned from the dead and whether it was indeed him. The mask stayed firmly on.

He made his way down to his own quarters, removed the mask and slowly stripped off the stained, sweaty robes, unstrapping his sheaths. He wet a cloth in the bathroom and carefully cleaned the cut on his arm, making sure there was no dirt before tightly bandaging it. It would wait. He cast a cleaning charm on himself, took a long drink of water and put on a fresh robe and went to see if he could help Severus with anything. There was always chaos after a large battle, as the castle's supplies and staff were stretched to their limits. Even something like preparing potions ingredients would be making a difference.
"Are you sure Albus?" James asked one Saturday morning a couple of weeks later. He was standing in front of the desk in the Headmaster's office, earnestly trying to deny that, as Albus argued, he needed a holiday. The portraits around him were shouting out their own views, which both of them ignored with the ease of long practice. "I'm happy enough staying to help you keep an eye on things."

Albus smiled at him, the proud smile of a mentor who knows that his protégé is completely serious about this: his heart just as pure as it appears.

"My child, I have been Headmaster in this school for about fifty years now and taught at it for close to a hundred. Don't you feel that I can look after myself for less than two days?"

"Of course, but…."

"No buts, Harry. You go and take some time off to see your family."

"My family?"

"Aren't they among those you'd count? Family is a blessing you understand the value of. Go on, don't worry about me, the school will still be standing when you return."

"A large proportion of my family is here, actually, but okay, since you're sure you'll be okay" James agreed reluctantly. It wasn't that he thought Albus wasn't completely competent but he was getting old, even for a wizard, and if something happened when he wasn't there . . . James' eyes met the blue ones of his old teacher and they smiled, knowing and acknowledging the depth of their friendship. Content now, James turned and went back down to the dungeons.

Albus watched him go, his smile sad now. As with many ancient and powerful wizards, it was given to him to feel when his time was approaching and it was. He would have embarked on the next great adventure before the flowers blossomed again. At his age, it might even be in bed and he sincerely hoped it would be, if only to spare those he would leave the pain.

James meanwhile was soon down in the now familiar dungeons. His home, as much as the Gryffindor tower had ever been.

"Severus!" he called, coming into their quarters. He followed the scent of breakfast and took himself through to the kitchen. "Do you mind if I go and see Draco and Blaise for the weekend?"

"If you're worried as to whether I can manage to dress myself in your absence, I suggest you pull your head out of whatever hole you've buried it in and take that as your answer. If anything happens here, I'm fairly sure that Hogwarts will make sure that you know."

"She will?"

Severus sighed and his faced assumed the expression familiar of old that he used when dealing with a small child, first year or Harry.

"Hogwarts dotes on you, everyone has been walking around in peace and tranquillity as if it had been Christmas every day for months. There hasn't been a single fight bar the scuffle in Gryffindor at
New Year and you should know by now that the castle is half sentient. She has feelings, just like that car that Arthur Weasley animated. I am sure that if she feels threatened, you will find yourself in the Great Hall before you are even aware that there is a problem."

"Oh. Right

"Your things are over by the door if you want to leave now."

James looked back the way he'd come to see a small hold-all, packed while he was gone. Everyone seemed to think he needed a break, so he might as well go. Even Severus had gone to the Malfoys the previous weekend and came back looking refreshed.

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"Master James! Master James is here!" shrieked the house elf clinging to his leg as he approached the nursery. James looked at him and began the slow process of peeling off his over enthusiastic welcomer.

"Hello Dobby," he said, well resigned to the house elf's hyperactivity by now.

Dobby looked at him, beaming, then glanced from side to side as if checking for eavesdroppers.

"Dobby is looking after Master Harry," he half whispered, proudly.

"I'm sure you're really good at that," James said. He supposed Draco and Blaise knew best but Dobby?

"Dobby was looking after Master Draco when he was a little master so Dobby is knowing exactly what to do," Dobby said, still beaming. Then he said quietly and confidentially. "Master Harry is a much nicer baby than Master Draco was. Master Harry is clever."

James laughed. The thought of a little blond blob with blond hair and a pout struck him as amusing, as well as the pout the adult Draco would pull if the mention of him being a somewhat less intelligent baby than his son came up. Still, Harry was his godson after all, and with his influence, of course the child was intelligent.

"Where is Harry?"

"Master Harry is in the nursery with Mistress Malfoy," Dobby said. "She told Dobby to come here. Dobby can take you there now."

With an uncharacteristic abruptness for a house elf, Dobby took his arm and 'popped' them upstairs. While James was grateful at being spared the walk, a little warning might have been pleasant.

Looking around the nursery, he could see a number of changes since his last visit, one of being the state of messiness the room was currently in, various toys, towels and baby clothes being scattered around the room. Across the door was a firmly secured piece of cloth that rose to mid-thigh on him, presumably to keep the baby in as Harry now realised, seeing a little bundle of clothes crawling with remarkable speed towards him across the room. Blaise, lounging on the sofa, hooked him with practised ease and placed him back at her feet.
"James," Draco said with a smile as Dobby scooped up Harry and took him over to the far corner where they amused themselves by pulling faces at each other. Really, Dobby was nothing more than an overgrown toddler himself at times. "It's about time you came over. Severus told us you were in the attack and got wounded."

"Severus fusses sometimes," James said, somewhat irritated but mostly touched by their concern. "I was nicked a couple of times by cutting hexes, simple cuts that took an hour or so to heal up fully with a potion. I can assure you that the Death Eaters we were fighting are in much worse condition, including the vampires."

"They'd be in an even worse one once my father discovered they'd failed in what he'd thought was a simple task. That is, if you let any of them get away."

"A couple of vampires, that's it."

"You didn't lose anyone, did you?" Blaise asked anxiously. "Surely Severus would have mentioned . . ."

"He probably would have. No, everyone's fine now though Fleur was stuck in the Infirmary overnight. I notice that Harry's crawling now."

Draco beamed at him like the proud father he was; he looked much sweeter than James would have thought when he smiled that widely, like a five year old in a toy shop.

"Harry has been crawling for three weeks now, he can almost beat Dobby in a crawling race as well."

"A crawling race?"

Draco shrugged.

"Harry seems to enjoy it and it appeals to Dobby's sense of humour. Still, he's fast, isn't he? Just watch him go. He'll be a Seeker when he's older, mark my words."

"Especially with our careful coaching."

"Watch it, you two," Blaise warned them playfully. "I'm a Chaser and so is Severus. We'll be doing our best to stop you corrupting him."

"Corrupting! Seeking is the most honourable position on the pitch: the thrill of one to one combat, the speed, the talent, the skill . . . ."

"And so modest as well. Besides, he's not touching a broomstick, even as a passenger, until he's at least seven."

Draco looked horrified at the thought.

"Love, I had my first broom when I was three. You have to start early, else it isn't as natural. James, you'll back me up on that, won't you?"

"I didn't even see a broom until I was eleven."

"Eleven! And you're that good?"

"My first captain called me a natural. By the way, when Harry's older, I'd like to buy him his first broom. As his godfather it's my responsibility to encourage such dangerous sports as Quidditch,
duelling and dragon hunting."

"Dragon hunting? I assure you Evans, my son is not going anywhere near a dragon until he's at least seventeen," Draco said, looking paler than ever.

"I needed a third activity. Replace it with pranking, if you want. That can be dangerous, especially if he tries to prank us or Severus."

Draco and Blaise looked at him helplessly, then started laughing.

A couple of hours later, Dobby looked up from his game, picked up Harry gently with a practised ease and brought him over.

"Do Masters and Mistress want to have Harry now?" he asked. Without waiting for a reply, the gurgling baby was placed unceremoniously in James's arms and Dobby vanished.

"It's almost Harry's lunchtime," Blaise said by way of explanation. "I think Dobby's gone to get it ready."

James looked down at the chubby face and tapped the little nose gently with his finger. Harry gurgled at him, beaming and brought his short little arm up to feel James's forehead. Alarmed and suddenly remembering the last time it had happened, James distracted Harry quickly with a game of peek a boo. If Harry could see through the make up, or sense something, it was possible he had some sort of Seeing talent. If not, he was just a baby with a knack for scaring the hell out of his poor suffering godfather.

Suddenly Harry started whimpering and Blaise quickly scooped him up and started soothing him while James stared at them helplessly. One moment the baby was happy, the next minute he was upset. What had he done?

He got an idea a moment later. Pain shot through his body and he screamed, falling forwards onto the floor, writhing. It felt like his whole body was on fire, that his magic was being sucked out of him. Somewhere in the distance he could hear Blaise and Draco's concerned voices but he couldn't respond. There was a gentle mental nudge and it felt like the bottom of his mind had dropped out as he was sucked into a vision the like of which he had hoped never to experience again.

He was in the Great Hall at Hogwarts, there was no doubt about that, and it seemed to be lunchtime. That meant it was happening now or - as the presence within his mind seemed to negate it - a few minutes ago. The students were cowering, most under the tables, and the teachers were standing in the central aisle, wands drawn. At the front of them was Albus Dumbledore and opposite them . . . opposite them was Lucius Malfoy and what appeared to be his entire contingent of Death Eaters, arrayed neatly in their ranks, wands out and ready for their master's order.

"Lucius Malfoy," Albus said, his voice steady and calm. "I must ask you to leave the grounds immediately or I will be forced to take action.

"You?" Lucius sneered, his disgust evident. Obviously he was as lacking in common sense as he was in sanity, hardly a difficult association to make.

"I. You forget, Lucius, that it was I that defeated Grindewald, that stood against Voldemort in both of his risings."

"You old man? Without Potter you are nothing, and my lord finished him off. I have risen greater than either and your time is now over."
"That remains to be seen but I am not the last or the only defender of the light," Albus said. Maybe what he had said at the Order meeting had been correct, maybe he was resigned to death and was now trying his best to defend his school and put doubt into the hearts of the Death Eaters. "In my wake comes the Heir of Slytherin and Gryffindor and doubt not, Lucius, he will destroy you."

The self-proclaimed Dark Lord seemed a little concerned at that, then he sneered again.

"Lord Voldemort was the last of the line of Slytherin and Potter was the last of the line of Gryffindor. They are both dead, the lines are ended and if that is the best you can do, my complete victory is near. Stand aside or die!"

"I cannot back down when the school is in danger," Albus stated, still calm. James knew this to be correct, it had been part of the warding oath. He felt an itch to be there himself.

"So be it, old fool. AVADA KEDAVRA!" Lucius Malfoy shouted, green light spurting in a somewhat feeble approximation of the killing curse. Of course, it was fighting the wards, no wonder it was weak. It sped through the air none the less. Albus stood there, accepting it and it struck him in the chest. For a moment, James thought he had done the impossible but then his mentor slowly toppled. A number of students screamed, the teachers were pale and white. Severus in particular looked horrified: he had looked on Albus as a grandfather, also knowing that his fate as a traitor would be worse than any other's at Lucius' hands.

James tore himself from the vision, filled with the need to defend Severus and the school. His eyes snapped open and he leapt to his feet, already moving. A hand went up to brush his forehead to feel that the make up had been seared away by the magic of wards rushing through him. Draco and Blaise were staring at him; Harry clutched in her arms. Undoubtedly they could see the scar and he knew that with his anger, his eyes would be blazing with power, he could feel it roaring in his ears.

"No questions now. Hogwarts has been breached; Albus is dead. Lucius will be as soon as I get my hands on him."

A sweep of his wand had his hair once again at the familiar shoulder length, his robes were enlarged from his pocket and spelled on and his wand was drawn.

"This ends now," he said, did the impossible and Apparated into Hogwarts.

They stared at him - Death Eaters, students and teachers alike - as he stood there over the Headmaster's body, quite obviously furious. All except the Death Eaters had known James Evans, the Defence Professor, was a powerful man but nothing had prepared them for this. He looked more like a demi-god than a mortal man as the power spilled out of his body, making him glow with silver light. James looked down at the corpse of a man who he had considered one of his closest confidants. He looked his years as he lay there, frail and broken. Slowly, he knelt and straightened the body, closing the eyes and folding the arms over the wand on his chest. Satisfied at last, he rose to look accusingly at the Death Eaters who had dared attack one of his family.

"Who are you?" Lucius managed to demand with a semblance of his normal tone. He was the only one of them unmasked, dressed in black velvet robes that were quite obviously the best money could buy, hair immaculately groomed. Obviously life as a fugitive wasn't quite as harsh as the Ministry would have liked it to be.

"Your worst nightmare," James replied, sending stunning curses at two of the Death Eaters from his bare hands. Lucius glanced at them, dismissed them as unimportant and turned back.

"Your name?"
"I'm not answering that. This is your final warning."

"Do your worst, boy."

"I, the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, banish these uninvited guests from the grounds by virtue of my magic and blood," James said, the words coming to him instinctively. Nothing happened. A few Death Eaters were brave enough to laugh.

"You see, we aren't uninvited," Lucius said, sneering. "Your petty tricks won't work on us."

"Who was foolish enough to invite you?"

From behind the ranks of the Death Eaters came one slighter figure, similarly masked. With a bow to his 'Dark Lord' he removed his mask. It was Walter Smethley, a fifth year Ravenclaw and he looked like he was about to burst with pride.

"Traitor!" some brave student called out. Without looking, James wondered whether it was a Gryffindor or a Slytherin, certainly the voice was familiar.

"You know Walter, had you come to us, we would have protected you," he said sadly, knowing that the boy had done it willingly.

"I am proud to serve my master, mudblood."

"Language, language," Lucius chided lightly, mockingly. "As you see, you cannot be rid of us so easily. Now, will you tell us your name so we can put it on your grave?"

"Can't you guess, Malfoy?" James asked quietly, mockingly, putting his disappointment behind him as best he could. When no answer was forthcoming he said very slowly, very deliberately. "My name is Harry . . . James . . . Evans . . . Potter, heir of the line of Gryffindor by my father's grace, heir of the line of Slytherin through my mother's blood, Defender of Hogwarts and current Headmaster."

The Hall broke out into shocked mutterings. The students were cheering, he'd given them hope when they thought they were all dead. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the Slytherins hammering on the tables. Then James smiled a smile that made Lucius tremble in his tailored, handmade boots.

"Incidentally, I'm also your grandson's godfather."

"What?! Potter??"

"Actually, I discovered that I have something of a Slytherin side to me. I was in Merlin house at University and discovered that I get on quite well with Draco and he gave me the honour. You know he's named the child after me, of course - Henry Severus Malfoy."

"A traitor and a mudblood. How appropriate for the little blood traitor's bastard. He will be taught the proper ways after I have disposed of you and my worthless offspring."

"Says something about your skills as a father, doesn't it? The thing is that once I am dead, you won't be able to find him, unless you happen to be Gryffindor's heir?"

"Enough talk Potter. As I told your . . . predecessor, the rule of the light is over. I rule now."

"I would dispute that. I killed your master, the one whose feet you grovelled at for years, and I can't see you as presenting a greater challenge. Look who you've brought with you, the dregs of
wizarding society."

"Avada Kedavra!" Lucius said. Nothing happened, not even a spark of green light.

"You see," James said, teeth clenched with anger now. "Although Albus was technically brilliant and relatively powerful, in terms of sheer power, I outstrip him easily. The wards are stronger than before, your dark magic will no longer work."

"Light magic works as well."

James ignored him, turning his back to look at the staff table while silently erecting the strongest shield he could hold. His eyes met those of his lover and he smiled encouragingly when he saw the look of sick worry in his face.

"Severus," he said lightly, "I might need some of your potion after this, you know the one I mean."

"If you survive that is," Lucius said, shooting a spell at his back.

James spun, dropping into a crouch. Before he could even identify it, it had dissipated against the shield.

"Attacking when my back was turned, Malfoy? I'd have expected better from a pureblood."

"I'm a Slytherin."

"Are you indeed? Then I'll give you a taste of Slytherin's gift."

Lucius didn't answer. His face was flushed - with anger or embarrassment, James couldn't tell - and he shouted out another spell. James stood there, gathering himself, trusting in his shield. Slowly, he closed his eyes to concentrate and reached within himself for the shimmering core of magic that he had discovered, that his gift allowed him to touch and manipulate in its raw form. Slowly, he drew it out and opened his eyes again, aware that the glow around him was now blinding. Smiling with grim determination, he released the energy.

A pure bolt of silver-white light shot across the small gap separating them. It hit Lucius Malfoy in the chest. When the spots cleared from everyone's eyes, they saw nothing but a pile of ashes. James . . . Harry turned his gaze at the Death Eaters.

"That was for Albus," he said blankly. Then he continued with a little more of his normal control although he was still blazing in their eyes. "I could kill you but I won't. Unless you have a death wish, you will remain here until the Aurors arrive."

He turned again and smiled blissfully, swaying from side to side, his task accomplished.

"Oops," he said calmly as he collapsed and the light around him vanished.

They stared at him for a moment in shocked silence. Severus was the first to shake himself out of his stupor.

"Students, return to your common rooms immediately. Prefects, I am asking you to ensure that everyone remains there until order is restored," he said, the familiar voice perhaps the only thing that was keeping them from mass hysteria. They began to pour out of the Hall, many of them in tears, the prefects calling out to shepherd strays back into the columns. "Minerva, perhaps you could see to it that Albus's body is looked after and someone had better call for the Aurors to deal with that lot."
"And James . . . Harry?" she asked quietly from where she stood beside him.

"We'll be in our quarters," Severus said softly, suddenly seeming subdued and helpless. "From what he's told me, he's exhausted and burnt. There is nothing we can do, except treat his wounds and hope. If Draco arrives, send him to Aberforth."

"And Smethley?"

"Give him to the Order when the rest of them arrive and confine him to Grimmauld Place. I think Harry would be the best person to talk to him and there's no point in putting him back in the dormitories: even the Ravenclaws would lynch him."

"I'll take care of things," she said, putting a comforting hand on his arm. "You look after Harry and I'll keep them away from you."

"More precisely we'll be in James' rooms - his password is in Parseltongue and while I have free access no one else does. Send a house elf with food and any messages and ask them to bring Poppy in as soon as she has time."

She nodded and stepped away as the man knelt down next to his lover and, with a gentleness and strength few had ever seen in him, lifted him into his arms and pressed a chaste kiss to his forehead.

Severus sighed, focusing on the task in hand to stop his tears from flowing. Albus's death so soon left a hole in him that he didn't even realise had been filled. He made his way past the rest of the staff, heading down towards the dungeons. He passed the slow moving Slytherin column.

"Is he going to be all right sir?" Archie asked, genuine concern written in his face.

"I don't know," Severus said blankly. "We can only hope."

"Alistair?"

"Keep him with you. He'll only suffer if he comes with me."

The prefect nodded and continued to shepherd his charges away. Severus reached their rooms, the portrait wordlessly swinging open as he approached and laid James on their bed. Deftly, he stripped the unconscious body and spread the soothing liniment into his skin. At last he stepped back and looked at his work.

"You'd better recover," he half threatened, though the half-choked sound betrayed his bantering tone. "Because I don't know what the rest of us are going to do if you don't."

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Days passed.

Severus reapplied the burn potion methodically every four hours, looking anxiously for any signs of recovery. He paced anxiously around the room while waiting, learning the distances intimately: it was eleven paces to make a complete circuit of the bed, moved away from the wall for ease in potion applying, seven paces from the door to the wall, five from the chair to James's head.

James remained unconscious, his forehead creased with pain.
Two days after the battle, Ron and Hermione Weasley sat at the breakfast table. Ron was having his usual bowl of Muggle Frosties while Hermione nibbled her toast. He scooped the post owl out of the air with the ease of long practice, paid it and took the paper.

"Bloody hell!" he exclaimed, catching sight of the headline.

**HERO HARRY RETURNS!**

An exclusive press release from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry yesterday evening confirms the rumours that have been spreading like wildfire across the country and indeed across the world. Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, hero of the wizarding world is alive! Harry, now twenty four, is currently at the school where he has been teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts under the pseudonym 'James Evans' (James being his father's name, Evans his mother's surname).

On last Saturday evening, Lucius Malfoy, the Dark Lord, attacked Hogwarts School with a horde of Death Eaters. Students fled with only minimal injuries until a confrontation in the Great Hall led to the death of the great light wizard, Albus Dumbledore, felled by an Unforgiveable Avada Kedavra curse. "We thought it was all over" Ravenclaw student Jonathan Chambers told our reporter. "If they could kill Professor Dumbledore, who could beat them?" The answer came in the form of one Harry Potter, who Apparated directly into the Hall in a show of power that shocked many. Visiting his ancestral home for the weekend, he was alerted when the wards transferred to him.

"He was actually quite scary" said Hufflepuff Kathleen Greenly (13). "It was like he was glowing with power. We almost didn't recognise Professor Evans immediately but the Death Eaters looked terrified. We only saw the scar later". Potter proceeded to taunt Malfoy and then destroy him in a blaze of white light like that which killed Voldemort. Eyewitness accounts suggest that he called it 'Slytherin's Gift' and confirms rumours that he is the heir of Slytherin as well as the heir of Gryffindor. Truly a powerful young man.

However, power of this kind took its toll and we are now aware that he is hovering between life and death, concealed deep within Hogwarts' halls. This location is known only to mediwitch Poppy Pomfrey and the Hogwarts Potions Master, Severus Snape, who has led Slytherin House jointly with the young hero over the past year.

Should Harry Potter recover, we know that he will be welcomed back into the wizarding world with open arms. In fact, the holder of the Hogwarts wards is usually confirmed as the next headmaster of the school, though whether he accepts the position given his extreme young age remains to be seen.

At present, we can do nothing but send our good wishes for his recovery on the behalf of the Daily Prophet and the wizarding world as a whole and thank him for saving us again.

Hermione came to look over Ron's shoulder.

"They took their time," she said, sounding remarkably calm.

"Hermione!" he exclaimed. "Harry's alive, aren't you happy?"
"Of course I am Ron."

"You knew already, didn't you?" he demanded, eyes narrowed.

"Yes, actually. I worked it out at the Harry Potter Festival. The poor man was really quite obvious when you knew what to look for. I'm sorry I didn't tell you but he all but begged me not to tell anyone - I think he wanted to be anonymous for the rest of his life, if he could."

"He always did hate the media stuff," Ron acknowledged reluctantly. Then he groaned. "Hermione, please tell me I didn't ask him for advice on a speech about himself."

"You did, I'm afraid."

"And at the Order meeting?"

"When you told he looked too old to be Harry Potter? Yes, I'm sorry to say that one happened too. I wouldn't worry too much, he thought it was hilarious."

"He would," Ron muttered darkly. Then he beamed again. "Come on Hermione, we've got to go to Hogwarts!"

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On the fifth day, Madam Pomfrey was brought in by Dobby, Severus having altered the wards to allow her entrance. She was looking tired, her usually starched white uniform was covered in potion stains and the occasional spot of blood and her hair was tangled within its bun.

Despite her own condition, she looked at the bags under his eyes, the strained face and pulled a vial of a mild sleeping potion from the pocket of her apron and placed it on the coffee table. He scowled at it.

"As soon as I have finished examining James . . . Harry or whatever he's calling himself now, you are going to go to bed. I can apply potions just as well as you can and I assure he has nothing that I haven't seen before. You will do him no good if you collapse before he is better and he has to spend another few weeks nursing you."

Severus looked as if he might rebel and then sighed.

"He's through here," he said at last, gesturing that she should precede him into the bedroom."

She studied the still body carefully. It was levitated so it hovered a few centimetres over the bed and the naked form sparkled with the remains of the last application of burn potion. There seemed to have been no improvement on what she had been told his body had looked like before. Poppy took a deep breath and picked up the jar of potion left by the bed.

"He's not coming along quite as well as he hoped, so it's convenient that you've made a stronger version of the potion," she lied confidently, with the ease of long practice. "And I'll help the healing on with some charms. Severus could you help me apply the potion this time so that we are sure it is everywhere."

He nodded, looking confused and they smoothed it into his skin. As soon as they were done, he
dragged her out into the living room and folded his arms across his chest.

"Mind telling me what that was about?" he asked. She glared at him, looking affronted that her professional abilities had been questioned, and cast a local silencing charm around them.

"Didn't you ever wonder how he recovered so fast after his accidents? He'd be up after just one night when you or I would have been in bed for a week. It's because he was Muggle raised. He has no idea what potions can do in terms of speed so if he's convinced he'll be healed very quickly, he will be. After finding this out on him in his first year, I've since used it with good success rates on Muggleborns. He's using his magic to heal his body - I'd never even known it was possible before!"

"You mean that he's augmenting the magical properties of the potions with just his belief?"

"Exactly that. If you don't believe me, watch his progress after this. I think that's all I can do for him right now. You're doing as good a job as I could right now and I've got a few students in the Infirmary that ran into the Death Eaters before they reached the Great Hall not to mention the hysterics."

"Thank you Poppy, I can manage."

"And for goodness sake, go to bed Severus! You've four hours that you can sleep in now, so use it!"

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Severus kept watching, kept working and, as Poppy had said, after her visit the improvement in his lover's condition was marked and gave him great relief. The skin slowly healed; slowly but still faster than Severus could have hoped given his condition. A week after her visit, his skin was marred only by his numerous scars and a few traces of the terrible burns the crease was gone from his forehead.

As Severus applied the potion, he talked to James as Poppy had.

"Now you idiot, this is my very best potion, so you had better appreciate it and get well. I've been working on improving it and this is at least twice as good as the last one I tried on you yesterday."

He finished smothering the body in it and stood back to check his work. In front of his very eyes, he watched as the potion was absorbed into the skin and a wave passed over the body, the burns vanishing completely as it passed. He stared at James in wonder: was this what Poppy had been expecting from him? Had he done this with all of his potions before?

Severus leapt forwards to kneel by the bed as the hand nearest him twitched. Suddenly, James dropped the few centimetres to the bed and opened his eyes. He smiled.

"Ouch," he said ironically, his hand reaching out to grasp Severus's as he stared up at the ceiling, and promptly passed out again.

Severus stood there, stunned, for a few moments, then summoned a house elf.

"I need Madam Pomfrey here as quickly as possible," he snapped.

"It is one in the morning, Master Snape," the house elf replied cautiously.

"She won't mind. Get her now please."
The creature vanished with a pop and he waited for her, pacing impatiently around the room. They came within five minutes; Poppy was still in her nightgown.

"He woke up, Poppy!"

She smiled, delight and relief obvious in her expression.

"Did he say anything?" she asked eagerly.

Severus smiled, thinking back on how it was such a typical 'James' thing to say.

"Ouch."

Poppy laughed.

"I'll just take a look at him then and call me again when he wakes up - I assume he's sleeping now."

He nodded.

"That's what I would have expected. He's going to make it, Severus, he's out of danger now."

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When James woke again, Poppy was called almost immediately. She hurried down through the corridors and was let in by a remarkably cheerful-looking Salazar Slytherin at the entrance. Since there was no real urgency, they felt it was unfair to impose on the house elves any more than necessary.

When she came into the bedroom, he was sitting up in bed, listening carefully as Severus reported to him all that he knew of the recent events.

"Poppy!" James exclaimed. "How is everyone?"

"No one as bad as you, young man," she said sternly, hiding her inner relief behind a stern face that she knew that he could see through. "A number in hysterics, a few cuts and bruises but you were our real worry."

"Thank Merlin for that."

She smiled fondly at him: days unconscious, worrying everyone near to death themselves and he woke up and asked about everyone else as if he was no one of consequence.

"Now, how are you feeling James? Or do you want me to call you Harry now?"

He considered it for a moment.

"Either is fine. I suppose I'll have to use Harry now that everyone will know. I rather liked being James for a while."

"And how are you feeling," she prompted, refusing to give him any more time to consider his answer.
"A bit sore," he admitted. She sighed.

"'A bit sore,' the man says. Honestly! Is that muscles, burns, headache or something else."

"Aches, so muscles I suppose. I didn't think I'd done anything that strenuous."

"You've been in this bed for almost a week," she managed to say calmly, watching as Severus concealed a smile. "Of course you're stiff and tired."

"That means I can get out of bed then? I need to go and talk to Abe, who knows how he's taking it."

"You are staying right here for at least another twenty four hours," Poppy said sternly. "I am not going to have you ruining all the work Severus and I have put into you by letting you over tire yourself."

"I can get up tomorrow then?"

"You may walk to the living room and spend the day there. You may not leave these quarters."

"Poppy!" he moaned.

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"I'm bored Severus," James complained, managing to whine like a five year old stuck indoors on a rainy day. "I want to go play outside."

Severus smiled and thought a moment.

"We've played chess five times."

"And you beat me all five, no need to rub it in."

"You've read."

"Of course, I've read."

"And you even managed to catch up with your marking."

"I wasn't that behind!"

"And talk me into a game of Exploding Snap."

"Which I won. I'm quite proud of that one."

"Are you up to receiving visitors?"

Harry groaned.

"I don't think I'm even allowed."

"Now think. Did Poppy explicitly forbid you from having visitors?"

"No…. She just told me I had to stay in our quarters."
"So what's the problem?"

"Well, who would want to visit me? I'm sure they're busy with class work and their families and stuff."

"Ron and Hermione Weasley are upstairs, waiting for you to wake up."

"Really! Does Ron know?"

"It was in the paper a few days ago."

"Oh. Well, can I have them down here then?"

A few minutes later, the two Gryffindors burst into the room. Hermione leapt onto the sofa and hugged James. He however had no eyes for her, although he hugged back quite amicably, as he saw Ron hovering uncomfortably in the background.

"Hello Ron," he said, smiling. 

"Harry?"

"It's me alright. You okay?"

"Yeah. You?"

"I've been better," James said with a grin as Hermione smacked him lightly on the side of his head.

"You get into a duel - without us I might add - and get yourself so badly burnt that you're unconscious for a week and all you have to say is that you've 'been better'."

"Well I have and it wasn't as much as a week."

"I give up," Hermione said, marching through to find Severus in the kitchen.

James and Ron looked at each other uncomfortably.

"I should have guessed," Ron said, sounding embarrassed.

"Not really. I'd been hiding for four years Ron, I was quite good at being James by that time. Hermione only guessed by fluke because she was watching me rather than Draco when we first met again."

"Still."

"Not your fault mate. So, what's happening upstairs? I'm not allowed to go up and Sev refuses to let me see the paper."

"Well, everyone knows you're you, if that makes any sense. The papers got hold of it and by the end of the day, everyone who didn't already know did. The kids at the school spread it around for all they were worth."

"I guess that's the end of any privacy I might have hoped for. How are people taking it?"

"Happy, I guess. Draco was storming around at one point until Hermione cornered him. I don't know what she said but it seemed to shut him up. You might want to talk to him when you're allowed. You're little protégé Alistair is getting very uncomfortable in all the attention so he's been hiding out
in the Slytherin common room and the seventh years have been acting as bodyguards, much to Minerva's amusement."

"Oops."

"He'll live. He doesn't seem too shaken up about you being the Harry Potter though, product of being a Muggleborn first year, I suppose."

"That's one thing off my mind. Abe?"

"Aberforth Dumbledore? I don't think I've seen him at all . . . No, maybe I have. I caught sight of someone that might have been him with Draco a few days ago heading for the Great Hall. They've laid Albus's body out there - I think they're waiting for you before they hold the funeral."

"He seemed to be taking it okay?"

"Well, I'm not sure how well you can take losing your brother but he hasn't had a break down or tried to kill himself. There are people looking out for him at any rate."

"That's good. So how are the Cannons doing right now?" James asked, glad to get onto a subject where he was sure Ron would do most of the talking.

From the doorway into the kitchen, Severus and Hermione watched as they embarked on an emotive discussion of the Cannons' chances and latest games, moving around the mugs and pencils on the coffee table to demonstrate the various moves and tactics. Hermione sighed.

"Not again," she sighed. James turned to look at her and stuck out his tongue. She smiled as she saw Severus shaking his head ruefully.

"He's been like that since we told him he wasn't allowed to go outside. Apparently being 'grounded' requires that he reverts to his teenage years."

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A couple of mornings later, Poppy reluctantly agreed that James was just about recovered enough to eat his meals in the Great Hall so long as he followed her instructions, took it slowly, didn't go anywhere near a broomstick and didn't go chasing after any more dark lords.

However, departing from the security of their rooms meant that the issue in everyone's minds would have to be addressed: who would be the new Headmaster of Hogwarts. James invited Minerva down to discuss it with him and Severus, not wanting to take a job that he had always assumed would be passed on to her, as long-time deputy head and head of Gryffindor House. She came immediately, though James wasn't sure whether that was because she wanted to see him again for the first time after the battle or whether she had decided that it was his duty to become Headmaster and had mentally adapted already.

"Minerva," he said as she came through the portrait hole, smiling at her from where he sat enthroned on the sofa, leaning against Severus's shoulder. He pulled himself into an upright position.

"James," she said, eyes sparkling. "Harry."
"Either will do," he said, amused. "Please, take a seat."

"Have you made your decision yet?" she asked.

"I think, my dear deputy, that that is what I should be asking you."

She chuckled softly at that.

"I never had any intention of accepting the post. Without Albus . . . I will be retiring as soon as a replacement can be found."

James's mouth dropped open and he stared at her incredulously.

"You're retiring?" he asked. "But . . ."

"I assure you that I am quite old enough to be considering it. Unlike Albus, I have no wish to be thought immortal and while I love Hogwarts, enough is enough and my time is over."

"But who will be head of Gryffindor?"

"Whoever you choose, Harry, whoever you choose."

"Me?"

"He is being thick today, isn't he?" she observed to Severus, then turned back to the conversation. "You hold the wards, therefore you are headmaster. It is as simple as that. The only other one who could possibly take the post is Severus here, and I'm fairly sure that he loves his Slytherins far too much for that, don't you?"

"I have never wished to be Headmaster," Severus admitted. "I'm not diplomatic, I have a terrible reputation and to be quite frank I couldn't cope with the paperwork. Unless you can come up with someone more suitable, you're stuck with it."

There was silence for a moment.

"This is what Albus wanted, wasn't it?" James asked. The two older teachers glanced at each other.

"He had always hoped to leave the school in your hands," Minerva said at last. "This was just a little sooner than he'd anticipated."

"I suppose I'll accept then," he said reluctantly. "What about Filius and Pomona?"

"They won't leave their Houses and besides, Filius is too old to hold the wards - he's near two hundred now - and Pomona isn't magically strong enough despite being a master in her field."

"Don't the governors have a say in this?"

"Two words James," Severus said, smirking. "War hero. They won't go against you. You could decide to move Hogwarts to Alaska and they wouldn't object, not that I'm suggesting it. Scotland is quite cold enough for me."

"Fine, I'll be Headmaster. Minerva, you will stay until the end of term, won't you?"

"If you want me to, but no longer. I would rather pass on the responsibility of being Deputy Headmistress, though."
"Okay," James said slowly, thinking it over. "So that means I need a Defence teacher, at least a part time one, a deputy headmaster or headmistress, and a head of Gryffindor and Transfigurations teacher for next year. Defence, I can manage, I should think. What about deputy?"

"You should choose someone you trust implicitly," Minerva said, sounding amused. "Someone who is reliable and responsible and who you won't have serious disagreements with on a regular basis. They should be experienced and, since they would be responsible for a good deal of disciplinary action, they should be stern. Now, who does that sound like?"

"Sinistra," Severus said, straight-faced.

"Severus?" James asked, attempting to look pathetic. "I'd probably go soft on the Hufflepuffs if I had to cope with discipline."

"Merlin save us. If Filius and Pomona have no objections, I will take the post."

James and Minerva looked relieved. He really was the only plausible choice and with over a decade of experience as a teacher and house master, he had plenty of the skills necessary for dealing with the most troublesome of the Hogwarts students and indeed parents.

James smiled. That was it settled then: Minerva wished to retire and would at the end of the summer term, he had agreed to be Headmaster and Severus and been persuaded to be Deputy Headmaster in addition to his job as Slytherin head of house. Now he just needed to find a replacement for him as defence master and he'd be set until September. It wouldn't even need to be a full-time job, since he could teach some classes himself, at least in the short term.

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That evening, Severus helped James carefully into the long black robe and purple lined black cape that was the traditional garb of Hogwarts' headmaster. James smiled: it was one that Albus had seldom, if ever, chosen to wear and indeed he could hardly imagine him swapping his garish red, yellow and purple concoctions for the sober academic robes. Still, James wanted to make an impact, mostly so that he didn't have to answer so many questions, and the colours also worked for mourning clothes.

At precisely seven o'clock, he began to make his way slowly and painfully up to the Great Hall, Severus hovering next to him in case he should stumble. They had allowed half an hour, though the journey would normally have taken only ten minutes, as after so long in bed and with such tender skin, progress would be slow.

He paused outside, looking to his partner for reassurance. Severus smiled at him.

"Go on Harry," he said, using the seldom spoken name. "Only you could follow on from Albus."

James turned back to the doors and took a deep breath, closing his eyes and gathering his courage. He then stepped forwards into sight of the tables and slowly proceeded down the centre aisle between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables.

The Hall fell silent as the students caught sight of him, murmured pointers spread the word around the room as heads turned, all staring at him in barely concealed awe. James smiled: and that was only knowing that he was Harry Potter and had just killed a man in this very Hall. Even many of the
younger teachers would not know the significance of the robes, archaic as they were. The honour of telling them would be his alone and it was a responsibility that he both revered and dreaded.

When he reached the head table where, just a few months ago, he had first taken his place as a teacher, he moved to stand in front of Albus's chair. It was strange to think that he was the only other man to sit there in over half a century.

Seeing him there, his meaning clear, the Hall slowly burst into applause. The students were clapping enthusiastically, soon the teachers followed. After about a minute, the oldest Slytherins were standing, soon all the Slytherins and then the rest of the Hall. He allowed them to continue, a little moved by the standing ovation and not entirely sure that he deserved it. Still, if that was one way they would celebrate, let them have their fun.

At last, he looked to Severus, who had swapped places with Minerva to give him the seat at James's right hand. The Potions' master tapped gently on the side of his glass with a spoon and the sound rang out bell-like through the Hall, which fell immediately still.

"Thank you for that, everyone," James said, still stunned at the applause he had received. "The first thing I would like to say to you is that, as most of you will know by now, Albus Dumbledore was passed on. He was an old man and death came as no surprise to him. As per his requests, he will be buried in a private ceremony for his friends and family but there will be a memorial service this coming Sunday for those of you who wish to attend. He told me when I was eleven that 'death is the next great adventure' and, knowing him, he's probably loving it.

"With his death, a few changes in the school will be occurring. Professor McGonagall, who has served as Transfigurations Professor and Head of Gryffindor House for the past forty six years and Deputy Headmistress for the past twenty, has told me that she plans to retire at the end of the summer. As such, Professor Snape has, at her request, taken on the role of Deputy Headmaster and we are currently looking for a new Transfigurations professor with her help.

"According to tradition, I am your new Headmaster, and I have accepted this responsibility, though whether I will be able to live up to Professor Dumbledore, only time will tell. Like Professor Dumbledore, I can now be found at most times during the day in the headmasters' office and you are welcome to come and speak to me at any time: twist the gargoyle's ear and if I am there, I will let you through.

"Until a replacement Defence Master can be found, I will continue to teach you all and I assure you that anyone I select will have to meet very specific criteria. You need not have any fear that standards will slip.

"What else? Ah yes, Professor McGonagall has asked me to confirm the rumour that is currently circulating that I am Harry Potter. James Evans are my middle names and for now either Professor Potter or Professor Evans will be fine, whichever you find yourself more comfortable with. My house at Hogwarts, which has also been queried apparently, was Gryffindor…"

Loud cheers broke out from the Gryffindor table and the Slytherins looked very disappointed. James raised a hand to calm them down.

"However, I was one of those few children that the Sorting Hat has trouble with, and, to be quite frank, when I was eleven it could have been either Gryffindor or Slytherin. At University I was in Merlin House, which is their equivalent of Slytherin, although I was told I would do well in all four. This means that I will not favour any of the houses and will endeavour to be as fair as I can.

"That said, all that remains is to remind you that your exams will continue as normal and I wish you
He sat down, pausing a moment to consider the sensation of actually sitting in the hallowed chair, and waved his hand to signal to the house elves to send the food up to the hall. It appeared and chatter broke out again as they all dug into their meal. James smiled: maybe he could do this after all. He filled his glass and, catching Alistair's eye over at the Slytherin table, raised it to him. The boy flushed furiously. Hmm, maybe he wasn't quite so comfortable with being Harry Potter's adopted son that Minerva had given him the impression he was.

As they left the Great Hall, Severus cornered Alistair and ushered him quickly through into the antechamber off the Hall where James was waiting. This was likely to be an uncomfortable meeting, so they had decided to get it over with as quickly as possible.

"'Io Alistair," James said, smiling weakly at him. Truth be told he was rather nervous about the encounter himself.

"Hello sir."

"I thought you were calling me James, hmm?"

"Well, you said . . . I mean you're not . . ."

"You mean my real name is Harry, right? If you feel more comfortable with Harry, use it. To be honest, I don't mind."

"Oh. Okay."

"How are you getting on then?"

"I'm fine."

James sighed inwardly. The boy wasn't making it easy for him.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, to be honest I wasn't originally planning on telling anyone who I was. Maybe I should have, so you didn't find out like this, but all I can do now is apologise."

"That's okay," Alistair said, managing a smile himself. "It's just a bit odd, what with you being a hero and everything. Some people reckon you're training me to do something."

"I can assure that I'm not. My only motive was to ensure that you didn't grow up like I did. I'm actually hoping that I won't ever have to hear of any more dark lords in my lifetime but the chances of that are quite low. You're only twelve, you've plenty of time to make your own decision about what you want to do with your life. I doubt there's much you could want that would shock me."

"Even if I wanted to be . . . to be a Muggle . . . drain cleaner?"

"Well, I'd be a bit surprised about that one. You're intelligent enough to at least be the one who sits in the office and sends other people out to do that."

Alistair laughed.
"Are you coming down this Saturday like normal?" James asked after a moment.

"Why wouldn't I?"

James smiled at him. There was only really one other person that he had yet to speak to, and that was likely to be nasty. Draco Malfoy had never been a particularly forgiving person and while they had had a truce at school, being tricked by Harry Potter of all people was likely to be a sore point.

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Harry James Evans Potter, Headmaster of Hogwarts, twice Order of Merlin first class, Wizengamot member, High Warlock, Heir of Slytherin and Gryffindor and, most importantly to him, a proud adoptive father and godfather sat in his chair at the head table at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and watched the year begin.

It was nearing eight o'clock on the first of September 2005 and the new school year was beginning. Just a moment ago, the great double doors at the far end of the Hall had swung open once more to allow the mass of black-robed students to take its rightful place at the House tables in front of him.

That morning, James had carefully transfigured a plain black robe into a vivid purple. While he wasn't about to put on one of Albus's robes in their garish yellows and lime greens and pinks, he would, for old time's sake, wear something brighter and more cheerful than his preferred forest green. Besides, purple was one of the colours associated with Hogwarts headmaster, even if it wasn't quite that shade.

They were chattering, talking loudly in their excitement and he smiled: the end of the previous term had been strained and unusually quiet - it was good to see things back to normal.

Half way down the Slytherin table, he could see his adopted son Alistair, talking as eagerly as the rest. They had finally adopted him using the full rights early that summer and he'd added the name 'Slytherin' to his own. Just the thought of Alistair made a warm glow spread over him. He had a family now, a real one and it was every bit as good as he imagined and much more.

As his eyes roamed over the other tables, he was reminded of the missing Ravenclaw sixth year, Walter Smethley, the boy who had invited Death Eaters into the school. Removed immediately to the Order of the Phoenix Headquarters, he had been left there for two weeks under close supervision partly to allow him to consider his misdeeds but more importantly to allow them to get Hogwarts back on her feet before being distracted. When he had come to see him, they had had a long talk about purebloods and muggleborns and the genetics behind it all, and he had left behind a much quieter young 'pureblood'. After that, he had sought out Draco and asked him to take the brat in for the year in the hope of teaching him the error of his ways.

Dear Draco: their first meeting after the battle had gone surprisingly well, possibly because Hermione had stunned them, levitated them into the room and tied them securely to chairs. Restricted from magic use as he had been because of his injuries, he had been unable to free himself and the discussion had been civilised - mere shouting rather than cursing. In the end, he had grovelled, figuratively speaking, and Draco had accepted his apology. The next day, well out of Hermione's way, they had removed themselves from the castle to indulge in their punch up. She had not been happy when they returned.
Minerva wasn't sitting beside him though, and her loss was something he was constantly reminded of, despite the fact that all of her customary duties were being performed perfectly by her successors in her various jobs. After a rather tearful farewell party just after the end of the summer term, she had packed her bags and travelled back to her family home on one of the west coast islands. He had asked which one but she had looked at him and decided that with his admittedly rudimentary knowledge of Scottish geography, it would be safer if he kept in contact using owl post. She was now, apparently, contentedly enjoying her retirement and was considering opening a home for mistreated Kneazles with her childhood friend, Arabella Gooderson, now Arabella Figg.

Looking along the staff table now, he smiled at the two new staff members. Really it had been extremely lucky that they had been able to come at such short notice and he had told them as much, only to have them smile indulgently at him and say that both they and their previous employers would have moved mountains to make it possible. Ron, a relatively high ranking Auror, had taken on Defence Against the Dark Arts up to sixth year - the seventh years would be taken by the Headmaster himself - and Hermione had taken on Transfigurations. It had always been one of the harder subjects to find a good teacher in, partly because it wasn't as glamorous as the Dark Arts job or as technically simple as Muggle Studies. He was confident that she could handle it and had made them joint Heads of Gryffindor House, with himself acting as an advisor should they decide that they needed one.

The side door opened now and a much loved figure in long black robes strode in at the head of an endearingly timid looking line of first years. The older students fell immediately silent, probably already anticipating the feast they would receive when the Sorting was over. Severus Snape, despite objecting at the start, was turning out to be a Deputy Headmaster at least of Minerva's standard already, his careful organisation making life much easier for the both of them. He was also proving to enjoy family life much more than he would have anticipated as a student.

The Headmaster smiled as he looked at the tiny children, looking in wonder at all of the new things around them. Even those from wizarding families were unlikely to have seen something of Hogwarts standards, the ceiling alone was a hugely powerful piece of magic that, to his knowledge, no one had been able to replicate perfectly. In the flickering light from the candles high above them, they looked pale and wide-eyed.

As soon as they stopped, Severus easily retrieved the little stool from the end of the staff table and placed the Sorting Hat carefully on it: ragged or not, it was the very hat that Godric Gryffindor had worn and all of the teachers treated it with great respect. As he stepped back, the entire Hall began to stare at the hat, the first years slowly following suit, though looking confused as to why. For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth - and the hat began to sing.

The teachers listened intently, praying that there would be no warnings or ultimatums as there had been in previous years. As soon as it finished, James glanced down the table at Hermione, who he knew would be able to retrieve any important nugget from the song. She shook her head, relief clearly shown on her face, and they turned back to observe the first years, joining in the riotous applause from the students with a little more decorum. The hat bowed to each of the four tables and then was perfectly still again, looking deceivingly like a normal, mundane, old hat.

Severus now stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment covered in names that had been painstakingly copied out from the Book at the same time as the invitation letters.

"When I call your name, you will come forward and sit on the stool," he said, face solemn. "You will then put on the hat and be Sorted into your House. Brocklehurst, Jonathan!"
A tiny boy with a mop of shaggy brown hair stepped out of the line and edged towards the stool with a look of extreme terror. He sat down, put the hat on his head and there was a long pause.

"Ravenclaw!" the hat shouted and the boy's shoulders relaxed. He removed the hat and scurried over to the table which was beckoning him over.

The Sorting continued, the ancient ritual just the same as it was every other year and had been for over a millennia. When it was over, Severus moved the stool out of the way again and came to take his seat on James's right hand side, smiling slightly as he met his eyes. James stood up and clapped his hands. The Hall fell silent.

"Welcome! Welcome all, to another year at Hogwarts. Before we begin our feast, I am calling for a toast. To Albus Dumbledore, the greatest Headmaster Hogwarts has known for a very long time!"

"Albus Dumbledore!" the students chorused, downing their glasses of pumpkin juice as one. The older ones in particular were serious, the looks on their faces strange; the youngest, especially the first years, looked confused but went along with the rest of the school. James inclined his head to them and beamed down at them.

"Now there is only one thing left for me to say now: enjoy the feast! Thank you!"

He sat back down, smiling at the clapping and cheering. Waving his hand, over his plate, he signalled to the house elves that they were ready for the food and it appeared magically on the plates. If anything, the cheering got even louder, then fell down to a murmur as they tucked into the delicious Hogwarts' fare.

Down at the tables, the ghosts were introducing themselves to the youngest. On the Slytherin table, a couple of them were looking nervous as the Bloody Baron took his seat between them, the Hufflepuffs were already chatting cheerfully to the Fat Friar. The Gryffindors, while talking happily enough to Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington were eyeing the Bloody Baron with great interest.

At last, when they had eaten their fill, James waved his hand again and the remnants of the puddings vanished, leaving the plates completely clean. He stood up and the Hall fell silent once more.

"Just a few more words now that we are no longer likely to expire of hunger, and yes I do remember how it feels at your age. There are one or two start of term notices for me to give you.

"First years should note that the forest in the grounds is called the Forbidden Forest for a reason and is banned to all students. A few of our older students should also pay attention to this reminder. Mr Filch, our caretaker, has also asked me to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors. The list of banned items can, as always, be found on his office door and to the best of my knowledge, includes every item sold in Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes.

"Quidditch trials will be held this year in the second week of term and will be organised by our capable Quidditch captains. Should you be interested in playing speak to them and put your name on the sign up list that should be going up soon in your common rooms. First years are not allowed to participate in trials and will only be offered a place on the team in extreme circumstances and after due consultation between staff members.

"And now, before we go to bed, let us sign the school song!"

James inwardly sighed at this but it was a school tradition and had been one of Albus's favourites. It was no big deal for him to allow it to be sung once a year. He flicked his wand and a golden ribbon snaked out of the end to it, rose up and shaped itself into words.
"Everyone pick their favourite tune," he said, "and off we go!"

_Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,
Teach us something please,
Whether we be old and bald
Or young with scabby knees,
Our heads could do with filling
With some interesting stuff,
For now they're bare and full of air,
Dead flies and bits of fluff,
So teach us things worth knowing,
Bring back what we've forgot,
Just do your best, we'll do the rest,
And learn until our brains all rot."

The noise was terrible. Simply, utterly dreadful, there was no denying it. Whichever idiot had thought up the idea of a school song without a set tune had been completely mad, bonkers, dotty and cursed by every generation of teachers since him. Unless of course, he'd done it as a way of getting his revenge on those of his students to take up teaching posts themselves.

As always, everyone finished the song at different times. When the last children, a gang of sixth year Gryffindors, finished, the Hall burst into applause. Hiding a wince at his newly brought on headache, James joined in. As it died down, he spoke again.

"Bedtime now," he said with relief. "Off you go."

He waited, watching while the first years were shepherded off by the prefects and the others left in their threes and fours for their home away from home in their dormitories. James wasn't stupid, he knew that the older years would be up a couple of hours yet, but the little ones needed their rest.

When they'd all gone, he sat back in his chair and smiled. He'd made it without embarrassing himself or Albus's memory. Severus came to put a hand on his shoulder. James turned to look up and smiled at the promise of things to come. He'd never wanted a boring life and as Headmaster of a wizarding school, he was guaranteed never to have one.

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